

# The Story of the Whos

## Book One: The Valley

### Chapter One

The glow of the boy's flashlight bobbed around on the gravel road, casting shadows behind the rigid pines. Ahead sat a cottage, perched alone near a cliff guarded by a rickety fence.

Beyond the cottage, lay the orange lights of the city of Nalio, a field of sparks nestled on a canvas of black. A multitude of multicolored lights spread in a spiderweb across the valley floor, marking the wayward roads that ran through it. Along the rim of the valley ran an eerie glowing line; the Wall. In the distance, massive trees rose over the mountains.

The boy's numb knuckles rapped against the door. Muffled footsteps approached, and the door creaked in, leaking warm light into the cold night. An old man stood in the door way. His kind face creased with a frown at the sight of his visitor.

"Hi Professor Harling," the boy said timidly.

"Shouldn't you be at home, Peter?" the old man said sternly.

"I know," said the boy.

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to know something."

"What is it?" said the professor.

"I wanted to know why we're so perfect."

"What do you mean?"

"Why we never hurt each other. I read about the old people in that book you keep on your shelf. They lied and cheated and stealed from each other. Even... even killed each other."

The professor sighed, and looked up at the stars.

"That was a long time ago. Things are different now."

"Why?" Peter asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

"We learned," said Professor Harling, "We became better people."

"Oh," said Peter, looking behind him, his eyes drinking in the moonlight. "What's outside the valley, Professor Harling?"

"Nothing," said Professor Harling, "Forests, mountains."

"Then why can't we leave?"

The sound of gravel crunching turned their heads. A man in a black felt coat and top hat approached. Peter's heart sank; it was his father.

"Peter, come home with me, right now. And there will be no more sneaking out at night, or you won't go to play with your friends till the first snow."

It was so cold already, it couldn't be that long of a punishment. Nevertheless, Peter took his father's gloved hand, the felt enclosing his fingers. Peter's father glared at the professor, who returned nothing more than a knowing smile.

"Come on," said Peter's father, dragging his son along the path. Peter gave Professor Harling one last glance before the old man closed the door.

Three days later, Professor Harling died in his sleep. Peter went with his parents to the funeral, though his father had a strained look on his face throughout the entire ceremony.

When the local officials examined his will, it was found that he had left something to Peter. It was puzzling; Peter hadn't been one of Harling's favorite pupils. Nor were they related in any way.

It was a slender knife, ten inches long, its blade cleaner and shinier than any Peter had seen

before. Black leather encircled the grip, but it didn't fit well, as though it was newer than the knife. But he had only a few seconds to stare at it wonderingly, before his father snatched it up. His older sister, Rebecca, watched from the door to her room, her golden-brown hair framing her curious eyes.

"He's too young to have a knife," he said to Peter's mother, answering her questioning look.

"You let him use yours for carving wood," said Peter's mother.

"I don't care. This is different," said Peter's father.

"This is only because its Harling, isn't it?" Peter's mother said. Peter's father walked out of the room without a word. Peter's mother followed him, repeating, "Isn't it?" more insistently. Both of them walked into their room, closing the door firmly behind them so forcefully that the paintings on the walls shuddered. Peter sat on the couch, and examined the buckle he had so unexpectedly inherited.

It was about two inches wide and had the reddish shine of bronze. The metal was shaped into a star with two thick lines crossing through it. One had a circle at either end, the other had a triangle at either end. Peter stared at it, remembering the professor's words, trying to make sense of them. He stood up, and went to the small drawer that held his mother's string, Rebecca watching him as he did.

He pulled a two-foot length of the brown, crusty twine free of the bundle, and cut it on the sharp edge of the drawer. He threaded the twine through an opening in the buckle, and tied the ends of the string, then hung the makeshift medallion around his neck.

"There," Peter said to himself, "Now I can always remember him."

Thirteen years later, Peter Green stood at the front of an air sloop, the chill wind numbing his cheeks, as the ship soared hundreds of feet above the ground. It wove between the massive trees that lay beyond the valley, the roar of the engines behind him lost to the wind. The medallion still hung around his neck.

The air sloop, a fifty-foot long aircraft powered only by two strong engines attached at the back, relied on its wide, curved body for lift, and faintly resembled a sailing ship in flight, hence its name.

The landscape below looked like a rumpled green carpet to Peter's eyes; among the forests and hills, great gray trunks, a kilometer in diameter and at least a dozen tall, reached high into the sky.

"Bear right!" Peter turned and shouted in a loud voice that defied his normally quiet nature. He had dreamed of joining since age thirteen; but the urge to roam had been with him much longer.

His thoughts distracted him; Peter started when the ship turned again, flying tangent to the thick trunk of the titanic tree, following the curve around to the other side before breaking away. The gray bark whizzed by at dizzying speeds, providing a dazzling visual effect, like a monochromatic rain.

Now the ship began to descend, gliding smoothly toward a group of hills that the massive trees surrounding them dwarfed easily in comparison. A stream ran down the rocky slope, into a wide lake at the bottom, whose surface was punctured by the roots of one of the huge trees. Peter had always wondered what had allowed a tree to grow so far beyond normal natural limits, let alone a whole forest of them.

Peter's friend Thale, a senior member who had taken Peter under his wing since he'd joined, had jokingly said that they had all been exposed to too much radiation. Peter had seriously considered this, until he realized that there was no way this could be true; the trees had surely been grown before radiation had been invented – no, probably before his people had even existed.

His eighteenth birthday had been just a few months ago, the threshold of being allowed to actually leave the valley, not just help analyze artifacts the others brought back. His first "real" mission had been a few days later; his own personal victory over the wall that had confined him to live the first seventeen years of his life in an equal number of square kilometers. He had only seen it up close once, on a class trip. He had gotten nearly close enough to touch it, until he'd been stopped.

"The fence is electrified," his teacher had told him grimly, "One touch and we'll be prying you off so we can bury what's left."

That teacher had been fired a few days later for what he said; it had frightened the students, and apparently it was supposed to be a secret. But his lesson stuck in Peter's mind. There was no way in to the valley from the outside; that was good, it kept out the terrible creatures said to live outside. But this wall also prevented anyone from leaving. What kind of wall, Peter had wondered, was meant not only to protect, but also to confine? Prisons were unknown in the valley; rehabilitation or execution were the only punishments. Crime was rare, and thus much more terrible when it did happen.

"Peter!" a sharp voice interrupted his thoughts. It was deadened by the wind, but Peter could still hear the edge it carried. He took his time turning to look; he already knew who it was. Galwin was a large, loud member of the Expeditionary Battalion who irritated anyone he didn't find "worthy" of his acceptance. Peter knew the type well; they were best ignored when possible.

"If you want to daydream, that's fine, but do it somewhere else."

Peter did not answer, just turned back, looking out as the tree trunks rushed by.

"Not dreaming about Emily, are you?" Galwin continued with a grin, his voice faint as most of it was torn away by the wind.

Just ignore him, Peter told himself. Galwin was easily the most obnoxious living being in the world. Except perhaps for mosquitoes. Most likely the giant ones he'd been told lived beyond the wall, only kept out by the invisible laser fence above the city. Peter grinned as he imagined Galwin as a mosquito fleeing a flyswatter, before realizing what a stupid image that was.

Perhaps what irritated him most was that Galwin treated the Expeditionary Battalion like a joke when it was not. Peter knew Galwin thought he was an idiot for taking it seriously, as did many others. But while it wasn't really a battalion, it did explore. It went beyond the Wall. Why didn't they understand how important that was?

The ship lurched downward suddenly, interrupting Peter's thoughts once again. It was aimed directly at a small grouping of rocks near the top of the hill. In all, the descent took barely ten seconds, then the rocks were suddenly real, rather than simply a diorama viewed from the sky.

Peter covered his ears as two reverse thrust engines, to slow and steer the craft, fired up, slowing the ship as it coasted over the apex of the hill. They wailed as they rent the air, and Peter's knees nearly buckled under the deceleration. The ship lurched forward slightly, before settling on the ground, held up by a series of meter-long metal poles, like insect legs. Peter looked down, which wasn't very far anymore, at the rocky surface. A few clusters of scraggly trees grew here and there, but they were bare and dead. A few small pines sprouted in a circle at the top of the hill, dwarfed by their titanic cousins in the distant background.

"Odd pattern," Peter said to himself curiously. Trees didn't normally grow in such perfect circles. Not naturally.

The fading echoes of the engines left behind an eerie silence interrupted by the occasional twitter of a bird. The mouth of the cave looked arranged: two huge parallelogram-shaped rocks forming an upside-down V. Beyond that, sheer blackness.

Peter vaulted over the rail of the ship, the buzz of tinnitus still fresh in his ears. He landed, loosening his knees so that he rolled among the pine needles, perfectly and painlessly, before springing back to his feet.

A ramp let down from the side of the ship, a few feet down, and the other crewmen exited the sloop in single-file, led by the ship's captain, Nelc. He had twenty years, several inches, and about fifty pounds on Peter.

"That's your fifth violation of landing protocol this month, Peter," he chided, "If you keep this up, you can be dismissed, you know."

"Yes, sir," Peter said, attempting to look reproachful.

"Right," said Nelc, then turned to the other crew, "Galwin, get the lanterns from the storage room. Bring five."

"What should I do, sir?" Peter asked, trying to inject some helpfulness into his voice. He hated

“landing protocol” and “standard procedure”; he knew how to keep himself safe, and he didn't need any rules telling him otherwise. But it helped to stay on the captain's good side; getting kicked out of the Expeditionary Battalion would mean returning to Nalio to work, and would look bad besides.

“Peter, you and Galwin will be carrying lanterns. Try not to do anything particularly foolish with them.” Nelc's lips tightened in what Peter knew to be the closest he came to a grin.

“Yes, sir.”

As they approached the cave, Peter realized that the stones marking the entrance were larger than he'd thought; they were easily fifteen meters long, and five thick. He'd never seen a whole piece of stone longer than maybe three meters. By the time they had reached the cave's entrance, the stones seemed absolutely gargantuan.

“What's this?” said a girl whose name Peter did not know, pointing to what appeared to be markings on the inside of the stones. Nelc approached her, bending to look at what appeared to Peter to be a series of symbols. He squinted at them, then reached into his pocket and extracted a small pair of thin-rimmed glasses. As he slipped them over his eyes, he knelt next to the stones, leaning in close. Galwin suddenly started forward, motioning as if to push Nelc; but withdrew at the last second, falling back among the group to laugh with his friends. Peter glared at him.

“Galwin.” Nelc's voice was demanding, and Galwin straightened instantly. Peter smirked, thinking he'd finally gotten his comeuppance.

“Yes sir?”

“Photograph these markings for study back in Nalio. I want closeups of each set, and then a couple shots from further back.”

“Yes sir.”

“The rest of you, with me.”

They followed Nelc as he straightened up, leaving Galwin and his friends behind. The air cooled rapidly as they moved down the slope, deeper into the cave. Peter could see the faint outlines of what had to be stalagmites in the darkness.

“Flashlights,” said Nelc. Around him, a dozen or so lights clicked on at once, illuminating the cave with little spots of light. The walls were covered in slashes; after a few seconds of looking at them Peter realized they were some form of writing.

“Someone go tell Galwin he's got a lot more work to do,” said Nelc bemusedly. There was a bit of light laughter, but as Peter glanced around, he saw looks of uncertainty on many of the faces. He understood their feelings but did not share them. Always, he had felt that there had to be something beyond the Wall, besides monstrous creatures and wasteland. Here was some sort of solid proof, at last! There was *someone* else. All at once, the months with the Expeditionary Battalion felt fulfilled.

The cavern split off in several directions. Nelc looked around for a moment, before turning to face them again.

“Thale, Jeyin, Abby,” Nelc commanded, “Pick four others and go down one of these tunnels. Be careful, stay together, and do not disturb anything. I'll take any leftovers and go down the fourth tunnel. Report back in fifteen minutes. If you're not back, we'll assume you're in some sort of trouble and go look for you; don't make me have to do that unnecessarily. This has been a good day so far.”

There was some light chuckling as the group began to divide up; Thale walked over to Peter.

“Come with me?” he offered.

“Sure,” said Peter right away. He and Thale had been friends almost since Peter had joined, but recently he had ignored Peter more and more in favor of the other senior members of the Expeditionary Battalion. Peter was glad their friendship had not been entirely forgotten.

“Good man,” said Thale with a grin, “Be back.” He set off back into the crowd to find a few other companions. Peter relaxed a bit, breathing in the damp, salty air. Off to the side he watched Abby gathering her own group. She was barely two years older than Peter, yet she was already one of Nelc's lieutenants, and was respected by most of the Expeditionary Battalion officials. Another aspect of the

Battalion that had attracted Peter was the ease of advancement, and he had ambitions. Admittedly one could only do so much with a high rank in an all-but-unarmed paramilitary unit, but it served Peter's purposes better than any real military rank. He would be getting weapons training in another couple of months, anyway. It was required of all citizens, a requirement to graduate from school, to learn how to use guns that the Wall ensured they would never need. Peter savored the irony, as he always made sure to each time he thought of it.

From a distance, he realized Abby was quite attractive. Closer up, there was an off-putting sternness to her face. But from back here, her slender figure barely illuminated by the darting flashlight beams and the traces of sunlight that still permeated the cave, Peter realized she was pleasant to look at. Some faint sense of guilt overcame him, but he shook it away. He respected her as well. There was nothing wrong with a little objectification.

Thale's return startled Peter; he had two others in tow. Peter instantly snapped his head back to Thale, but he seemed not to notice.

"We'll take the second on the left. Looks most interesting. The writing seems to be all over the walls, but that one's the exception. We'll check it out."

The others nodded, and followed Thale as he led them over to the cave. The other groups had already left, except for Abby's, who was now integrating Galwin and his friends into her group. Peter smirked a little; if they tried any of their errant mischief around her, she would give them quite a surprise. Peter had once incorrectly tied a mooring knot for one of the air sloops; as a result it had tilted suddenly and precipitously. Abby had been in charge that day; Nelc had had more important things to do. The look she had given him made Peter wonder if he should be expecting a termination notice.

As the writings trailed off, shelves, carved into the cave wall, replaced them. A few pieces of broken pottery lay on them; in one place was a lopsided pot, tilted at a strange angle. Thale went in first, setting down a cloth bag as he did, drawing out a magnifying glass, and kneeling on the floor. A few brown objects were strewn amongst the bits of clay; Peter picked one up between his fingers, only to discover that it was iron, rusted almost beyond composition. Even in this dry cave, enough moisture had gotten in to slowly dissolve the metal. He made to set it back down, but it crumbled to dust between his fingers, and the two halves dropped to the floor.

"Peter!" warned Thale, "We weren't supposed to touch anything! Get a sample bag or something, don't put your fingers all over stuff."

A wash of guilt ran over Peter, but he reached into the bag Thale had set on the floor, and withdrew a pair of tongs and a plastic bag, picked up a few pieces, sealed the bag, then hurried after Thale and the others, who were already moving on.

The hallway ended in a strange chamber; though perhaps there were more of these, they did not know what the other groups had found. The chamber seemed to be bathed in blue light, despite no apparent source. Mushrooms covered the floor, the long tendrils of their thick roots – or mycelium, as Peter was fairly certain they were called – reaching around the edges of the room. Something like an altar, a flat piece of stone supported by two smaller ones, dominated the center of the room. On the ground in front of it were various pieces of metal; though, unlike the other artifacts Peter had found, they were not iron, as there was no rust. The pieces seemed to be bent wires of some sort, looking almost like a messy clump of twine. Peter ignored them, but Thale immediately reached for them with a pair of tongs, and bagged them.

"I think this was some sort of shrine or temple," Peter observed, though he was pretty sure that this was evident to everyone else anyway.

"Right," said Thale, who seemed transfixed by the remaining pieces of wire on the ground.

There was a quiet moment as one of the others who had accompanied them, someone Peter was fairly sure was called Derrick, snapped a series of photographs of the room and its contents, the flashing lights of the camera reflecting off the walls giving the chamber an eerie, otherworldly quality. Then they were finished, and Thale led them back to the main chamber.

There they found the group; little else of interest had been found. Nelc collected sample bags from them; Peter saw a few engraved stones and primitive wooden tools, distorted behind the wrinkled plastic. Nelc seemed more disappointed with each mundane item that was given to him, but Peter was excited; finally, it was proof that someone had lived outside the valley, a long time ago, somewhere that was not “officially sanctioned” or had to be reviewed first.

If this was the past, then it could be the future.

## Chapter Two

The sun was beginning to sink into its lazy afternoon color, that of an old tallow candle. Clouds dulled its light, cooling the air; Peter felt none of the sun's warmth on the back of his neck as the air sloop whisked through the air on the return journey to the valley. This was the fifth expedition he had gone on since he had joined at the start of summer; now, as traces of color crept into the leaves, the months of learning and searching seemed absolved at last. What they had found was nothing special; traces of civilization had been found outside the valley before. But to Peter, it was only now that he was sure that that "fact" had not just been another lie.

Resignation stole the edge from his happiness as he remembered he had to go to school the next day. Expeditionary Battalion members were expected to keep their marks high, and Peter had never failed to meet this requirement. Even so, school was not something he enjoyed as a whole, though there were certain redeeming aspects...

The valley came into view as the air sloop rushed over the trees. Peter had little to do now that they had left the large forest; there were no obstacles tall enough for the air sloop to have to worry about. Even from five hundred feet up, the Wall looked imposing. Peter looked disdainfully at it. He could defy it for a few hours, even a day, but like a knot around his ankle, it always ended up dragging him back.

Landing was always one of the least pleasant parts of flying; as the Expeditionary Battalion ships were old, they did not have any shock absorption on their landing struts. Peter felt his entire midriff jolt as they landed. His knees buckled, and he fell forward, catching himself on his hands. He pushed himself back up, scowling at Galwin's gleeful grin as he watched Peter's mistake.

Boots clicking metallically down the exit ramp, he looked around. They had landed at one of the smaller airports in Nalio, the largest city in the valley. Peter's father worked here, and usually picked Peter up from the airport on his way home on days when the Expeditionary Battalion was flying somewhere. But as Peter followed the others to the parking lot outside the landing areas, he realized his father wasn't there; he did not see his car anywhere.

At once he remembered; Emily was supposed to pick him up today. She had recently received her license, and as a result had driven as much as possible. His father had appreciated the news that Peter would not need a ride home; he was able to drive but his family only owned one car, and that was needed for Peter's father to go to work. His father had seemed eager to forgo giving Peter a ride today; he disapproved of the Expeditionary Battalion, though he would never admit it outright. Peter didn't know why; there was much about his father's opinions that he didn't understand.

Emily leaned against a sleek, black car whose form was at once both sharply angled and smoothly contoured; far more stylish than the old box Peter's father drove. Perhaps he felt a slight blow to his masculinity, having her drive him around from time-to-time, but it was better than walking. And worth it for the time he got to spend with her.

He smiled at her as he approached.

"I almost forgot," he admitted sheepishly.

"Like you would forget a relief from driving home with your father," she said, rolling her eyes with a grin. She skipped lightly around the front of the car, pulling the door open. Peter pulled open the other door, and allowed himself to sink back against the soft seat. Next to him, Emily swung her hips into her own seat, and gazed intently at the ignition, fiddling with the key. Peter watched her set her legs against the seat, foot against the pedal, as she started the car. This was much preferable to driving home in premeditated uncomfortable silence with his father.

After she had backed out of the parking spot, she relaxed a little, and began to talk.

"Today was the first trip in a while, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

“What did you find?”

“A cave full of rocks,” said Peter. Emily grinned.

“Sounds like a good day.”

“That and some old artifacts that suggest people lived there once.”

“Exciting.”

“You don't like this stuff?”

Emily's grin faded as she made a turn, onto a long winding road that led out of Nalio and toward the slope-side villages where they lived.

“It just seems ... I don't know, pointless to me. No offense,” she added quickly, though Peter's expression had not changed, “Maybe I just don't get it. What it means to you and everyone else.”

“It means we didn't always live here,” said Peter, a hint of firm belief stirring in his tone, “That we had a past, and, maybe, a future.”

“We have a future here,” said Emily coolly, focusing on the road.

*Maybe you do*, Peter thought, but decided to let the subject rest, and agreed.

“What about you?” he asked her after a moment of silence.

Emily sighed, “Things were pretty normal. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. I spent most of the morning having to remake copies one of the other interns lost, then when I brought them back in I was told they'd been found again, so...”

Peter tried to focus on Emily's words, but they bored him. Guilt hovered over his thoughts at his uncaring treatment of her story, but not enough to penetrate the dull layer of indifference that suddenly hovered over him. Emily thought his work pointless. And she was certainly not the only one. Perhaps controversy wasn't the right word for what surrounded the Expeditionary Battalion's operations, but there was always a suspicious eye cast toward it, and speculation over whether its returns were worthy of the investments put into it. Fortunately (at least to Peter), this speculation never got loud enough to bring the survival of the program into any serious questioning, but Peter had heard of some extraneous soil surveying programs having their funding cut by the council in Nalio, and was worried that their sights would turn on the Expeditionary Battalion next. Did everyone think the way Emily did? Did everyone see it as a meaningless waste of money, all for a few broken bowls and wide-area maps?

By the time he came back to his surroundings, Emily had all but finished her story. Peter desperately tried to gather the general idea from her last few words, but to no avail.

“... I just don't think that it's fair. I'll be able to get the degree whenever I want, taking all the classes is just a formality at this point.”

“Mmm,” Peter grunted in agreement. Emily turned to him.

“I wish my parents respected you more. At least *you* listen to reason.”

A small creature ran across the road; Emily swerved suddenly to avoid it. There were no other vehicles on this serene stretch of the winding route, and her drastic maneuvers barely roused Peter from his post-expedition torpor.

Emily glanced at him as she drove on, misinterpreting his tired expression as an offended one.

“You know what I mean. It's just with that whole Expeditionary Battalion thing, and your dad's a businessman, and everyone expects you to take after him, you know? Follow him in his footsteps. But now you look like the wayward son going down the wrong path.”

“Am I?” Peter asked, turning his head. Emily's hair always curled neatly behind her ears, as straight as the rest of it was, and those few strands that did broke free from the rest, tickling at the front of her delicate neck. He suddenly realized he had missed her answer.

“What?” he asked.

“No, Peter. I said no. Really I mean it.” She looked almost worried now.

“Oh.”

“You get to do what you want with life. I won't think any different of you, pretty much no matter what you choose to do. No one else should, either.”

"But they do."

"Of course they do. They're people. They judge."

"Well it's unfair," Peter said, feeling pathetically childish as he did.

He boredly rolled his head back to stare out the window. The late afternoon sky seemed strangely ominous now, as the sun ducked behind a group of clouds for a break from shining most of the day. The sky hovered between its normal cerulean shade, and the flat gray of an exhausted afternoon. The idyllic landscape before them seemed numbed and quiet; the warm purr of the engine the only comfort to them.

"At least tomorrow is a day off," Emily pointed out, hoping to lighten the mood.

"What do you want to do?" Peter asked at once, although the words still slipped out in a dull tone of voice. Emily glanced at him.

"I was going somewhere with Mary and one of her friends. Probably to the city for a while."

"One of her friends?"

"I don't remember her name, I've only met her like twice."

"So a girls' day out. I take it I'm not invited."

"I didn't say that," Emily said, a faint grin on her face, "But I figured you weren't interested."

"Yeah, count me out. Maybe next weekend."

There was a pause as a gust of wind swept leaves from the trees above; they had begun to drive through the forest that carpeted the sides of the valley, nestling the small, diffuse villages amongst the trees. A couple of errant leaves glanced off the windshield, fluttering in the rear view mirror before disappearing from sight.

"You really can come if you want. You know Mary's boyfriend, right? Thomas? Maybe you both can come."

A particularly sepulchral cloud, like a gray lump that had somehow hoisted itself aloft, dragged itself across the sky in front of them. Peter's eyes traced its smooth, curvaceous edges, at outline like that of a scrunched up loop of string.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"We have like, five minutes until you get home. You might want to think quick."

"Sure, I'll come," Peter said, leaning forward and lowering his eyes to look out the front window at the road head; as he watched it rush toward him, he felt as though his brain was floating freely inside his head, lubricated by some jelly-like substance. His skull was clenched with a sudden headache.

Emily smiled.

"Well, I'll come get you tomorrow morning then."

"Yeah."

They said nothing more until they reached Peter's house. The sun was slowly trudging toward the rim of the valley, now shining buttery orange through the clouds, bathing the grass and trees in sharp sepia light. Peter opened the door with a muffled click.

"Bye Peter," said Emily's sweet voice from behind him.

"Bye, Emily," he replied, climbing from the car and closing the door, a thick pane of glass now dulling his vision of her face. The engine's warm purr suddenly swelled, and it lurched forward, crackling along the gravelly road, further up the hill to Emily's home. Peter waved to her rather lamely, before starting up the driveway to his house.

As he watched his shadow swiveling in front of him, stretched out to tall, slender proportions by the angle of the sun, he suddenly felt like an idiot. Mary bringing a boyfriend, Emily bringing him, that was supposed to be some sort of hint, wasn't it? Or was it? He hated the subtlety of these things. He hated the subtlety of most things. He knew it was a weakness, knew the value of not blatantly saying or doing. But when it came to actually dealing with it, it tested his patience.

No matter what it meant, a day with Emily was a victory. He was willing to give, more than he would admit to, for that alone. He reached the door of the small cottage he shared with his parents. The frigid doorknob met Peter's hand with its familiar icy greeting, but he did not care. A day with Emily.

He pushed open the door with a familiar creak. His mother was seated behind the kitchen table, her eyes intent on whatever she was reading. She did not notice Peter until he closed the door.

"Hello, Peter."

"Hello, mother."

He walked past her, into the living room, where his father sat, similarly reading. Peter unhooked his belt, and hung it from the gnarly, wooden coat-hook stand that stood in the corner of the room. His father raised his gaze above his newspaper to look at it. His eyes seemed to narrow.

"What?" Peter said at once, almost accusingly. Every day for years, any sight of Peter's belt, holding the two gifts his old professor had given him, had been glared at by his father. Peter remembered his father had disliked Professor Harling, to put it mildly, but his habit wore on him.

"Just looking," his father said, eyes retreating behind his newspaper again.

"No you weren't," Peter said firmly. Somehow, today's events seemed to have vindicated the old man, and Peter felt a strange bravado coming, urging him to defend himself.

"Don't take that tone with me," his father replied, immediately lowering his newspaper.

"Stop glaring at my belt."

"I will 'glare' at what I want to. This is my house. If you want me to continue paying for you to live here so that you can stay in that Expeditionary Battalion, you had better not give me any mouth."

*Give me a few more months in it, and I won't need you,* Peter seethed inside. Higher-ranking members of the Expeditionary Battalion were paid. Not handsomely, but Peter knew Nelc and his wife had a moderately sized home; he had been invited there with Thale and a couple other members once for dinner.

"Yes, Father," Peter said softly. He sloped out of the room, then up the stairs, and down the short hallway to his room.

Sinking back on his bed, Peter relaxed. Here was something that gave way to every facet of his body; the soft, airy foam that formed the mattress underneath was more comfortable than anything Peter had ever slept on. He had never had much respect for the abstract trading his father did in Nalio as a businessman, but he could not fault its results.

His head lolled to the side, and he stared out the window, his mind wandering. His thoughts drifted away from tomorrow; that was a notion to be savored later. The view the window afforded him at night was unmatched. Peter had sometimes wished his room had a balcony; normally he disdained needless luxuries like that, passed them off, almost neurotically, as effeminate. But he often wished he could sit out there, the night breeze on his face, and dream of what lay beyond the Wall.

The Expeditionary Battalion was a very restrained operation. The government in Nalio kept it under its control. They had never gone more than half a day's trip away, never going overnight. Nothing left the valley for long.

Then he thought of his sister Rebecca. It was a rare day that he thought of her; when he did, it was often due to guilt that he did not think of her more often. Having barely known her, he supposed he could not fault himself, but there were pictures of her throughout the house, and on her birthday, which they still celebrated, Peter's mother usually cried at night. Rebecca had been part of the Expeditionary Battalion; one of the pictures featured her in her uniform, smiling proudly. Peter was sometimes struck by how much she looked like him.

When he had first joined, a year ago, there had been an argument between Peter's parents. Somehow he had ended up being allowed to enlist for another month. Even now, the memory was fuzzy, which puzzled him. A year was not long enough for such a memory to fade.

It was growing dark rapidly; outside Peter's window, the sun had already set behind the rim of the valley, a faint halo rising above it like a tiny, purple rainbow. The purple faded to mauve, which then faded to a dull, grayish orange. As he broke free of the rambling chain of his thoughts, it had become noticeably darker outside. How long had he been lying in here thinking? But then he normally had a good eye for such things anyway, able to discern a slight change in a shade, a slight detail altered.

“Peter, dinner!”

Peter heaved himself forward. He was tired. He did not want to sit and pick at food he had no appetite for. Slowly, he shuffled out the door. He remembered his father's stern glare, and picked up his feet more. As he descended the stairs, he wished Rebecca were still alive just to share some of the load of his father's displeasure. That was a horrible reason to want her back.

Dinner was potatoes, and some ham. There weren't many types of vegetables, and potatoes were among the most common crop in the valley, after corn and wheat. Much of what lay south of Nalio was farmland, flat and humid compared with the crisp slopes of the northern part of the valley. Any agriculture here was in the form of fruit trees, and there were several groves of apple trees within walking distance. As young children, Peter and his classmates had gone there to pick them.

Peter joined his family wordlessly; both parents were already engaged in conversation. He became aware of himself, his awkward place at this underpopulated dinner table. He realized his distance from those who sat just a couple feet away. How long ago had he been in the car with Emily, driving home? He hated himself for staring dully out at the road instead of enjoying her company, savoring the precious time he had with her. Resignedly, he picked up his fork and knife and sliced a chunk from the potatoes. After a few moments, his mind surrendered, allowing his father's words to filter into his thoughts.

“... well we've had that account for a long time, it seemed pointless for them to pull out of the deal and find someone else to do it for them. I don't expect loyalty from people I do business with, unless I've damned well earned it, but...”

Peter could never stomach business talk. At once, the despair of boredom beset him. How did he spend the hours he was here? Schoolwork, reading from time to time. Sometimes a walk outside. They had been more common when he had first joined the Expeditionary Battalion, when there had been many arguments about Peter's “future.” Often he had stormed from the house, to sulk alone for hours. Occasionally during these walks, he had considered seeking refuge at Emily's house; he knew where it was, and while some might consider it far, Peter knew he could hike there in an hour at most. But he never had; be it from shame or from strange need to separate his home life from her, he had never gone there. It felt like stepping over a line, mixing things that were not meant to be mixed.

Often he felt guilty for not trusting her with it.

As he had walked, he had always looked out the edge of the valley. Sometimes, in the twilight, the sun had sank beneath the edge of the horizon, the magenta rays smeared across the clouds serving as the only beacon of its presence. Other times, it was entirely dark, the dividing line between land and sky all but impossible to define. He felt alone as he walked, even with warmly glowing cottages within view from the road. The night wind would softly whisper through the pine trees, and the stars would seem like chilled dots of glowing ice in the tall sky above. The closed box of Peter's world felt diminutive.

Even when he walked back, muttered out apologies, or, more often, simply slipped past his parents, he fell into bed with the feelings of insignificance still haunted him into his sleep.

“How was your day today, Peter? Expeditionary trip again, got you a day off of school, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter replied, ignored his father's subtle jab. He remembered Emily's words; was that what he had trained and worked for months to gain, a day off of school? But he bit back that retort.

“Found a cave,” he continued, before sliding another spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. Immediately he wanted to spit it out and elaborate, realizing at once how stupid his words had sounded.

“A cave?”

Peter swallowed quickly.

“Signs of life inside. Not now, obviously, not for hundreds of years. But it proves there used to be settlements outside the valley that weren't government sanctioned,” Peter said, putting as much disdain into those last two words as he could.

“That's fascinating,” said his mother. Even Father seemed to be nodding in grudging respect.

“Have you carbon-dated the artifacts yet?”

“No,” Peter replied, surprised his father had known that. Peter took another bite of mashed potatoes, swallowed, and continued.

“Nelc will bring them to the lab and analyze them for us. Usually he brings a few assistants, but he doesn't need all of us just to analyze samples. Wasn't my turn this week.”

“Well, congratulations,” his father replied, returning to stir at his mashed potatoes.

Peter was almost in shock as the conversation turned away from him again. Had his words really melted some of his father's hardened attitude toward him? As much as he loved both of his parents, he had never felt much need for their approval; he had been brought up as such, he supposed, with almost as much freedom as he had ever wanted, provided certain conditions were met. He took advantage as much as he could... at once Peter remembered something else he needed to say.

“I'm going to see Emily tomorrow,” he interjected, interrupted his parents conversation. They looked at him. “With friends,” he added somewhat hastily.

“All right,” said Father expressionlessly, obliterating the final obstacle between himself and the promise of at least one more positive day. Peter allowed his thoughts to caress its prospects leisurely; his mind snaked tendrils far beyond the bounds of the invitation's potential. By the time he had cleaned his plate, he felt an eagerness to sleep.

“Can I be excused? I'm going to bed early so I can get up tomorrow morning.”

“Good night, Peter”

“Night mum.”

“Good night Peter.”

“Night dad.”

Slumber taunted Peter; frantic anticipative thoughts stole the haze of semi-consciousness from him each time he ventured near. He was not sure why. At one point he rolled over, gazing across the murky room to his desk, his knife lying solemnly on its side on the mahogany wood, his belt draped over the back of the chair like a flag on a windless day. Something beyond mere sentimentalism kept them by his side; he had never learned of the objects' origins, whether or not they had been made by his old professor, or found, or bought, or what they had even meant.

Slowly, Peter's mind floated away from them, into a sort of blissful state of mind that he always slid into before finally succumbing to sleep. He thought, almost strangely, of Emily following him on his next journey out of the valley. Then, at last, his exhaustion overcame him, dragging him into a wild land of confusing dreams mixed with errant thoughts.

## Chapter Three

His eyes cracked open to the stark, pale vision of his desk and chair, dust caught in the beams of morning light, twisting and dancing in the air. Sunlight forced itself harshly on his face; he squirmed under the blankets, rolling over to escape it. Then he heard a knock at the door.

Without hesitation, he was free from the covers, walking dreadingly down the hallway, down the stairs, to the front door. He inhaled, nostrils dilating, inviting wakefulness into his lungs. As his fingers grasped the handle and turned it, opening a crack to the world outside, Peter felt woefully unprepared and unpresentable. But it was already done; he all but flung the door open, the pine-tinted scent of morning flooding in, along with the aroma of whatever perfume Emily wore.

She stood on the step, Mary behind her, and a tall boy Peter recognized from school. He had to be Thomas. Peter smiled at them.

"I'll be out in a second," he said.

"Okay."

Peter closed the door and rushed back upstairs; he was only a couple feet into his room when he began to disrobe, quickly removing his rumpled sleeping clothes, and pulling clean ones over his legs and arms. He quickly combed his tousled hair, calming it, then rushed to the bathroom and furiously began brushing his teeth. Socks on, shoes on, shoes tied, back to the door.

He followed Emily and the others wordlessly to her car. Peter sat in the back, next to Thomas; immediately uncomfortable with an unfamiliar face. Thomas was large; not corpulently so, but his torso and arms were thick, and while they lacked definition, Peter had no doubts that the muscles beneath were powerful. He felt the words that had been rising in his throat forced back down.

In front of him, Emily swung her body gracefully into the driver's seat, and Peter suddenly felt the courage to speak again.

"What are we doing in the city?"

"I don't know, probably the movies. Mary and I hadn't decided, and then you said you'd come and Tom said he'd come, so we figured we'd leave it up to you."

"Movies are fine with me," Peter replied. The cinema usually played dry mystery or romance movies, occasionally something with action. It was rare that a movie would show something that happened outside of the valley; a few horror flicks would often involve travelers attacked by terrible monsters. Peter always had a faint feeling that they were meant as some sort of propaganda. The government had nothing to do with the production of the movies, but showing anything other than strife and danger outside the encircling clutch of the Wall was considered taboo.

"Which one do you want to see?"

"Orrick Ridge," said Tom at once.

"Four Nights," Mary said a second later.

Emily giggled.

"I vote for Four Nights, Eric Dalton is *very* cute."

A twinge of discomfort ran down Peter's leg. Perhaps he wasn't used to Emily acting girlish; most of his time with her was away from her other friends. He exchanged a look with Tom, who looked equally distressed, though Peter guessed it was more from the notion that he might have to sit through a two-hour romantic comedy.

"Orrick Ridge won't even be that scary," he protested childishly in his baritone voice.

"But they're all the *same*," Mary groaned, looking out the window, "It's all like, a bunch of people go on a mountain and get eaten one-by-one. It's not even scary anymore, it's just boring."

"Well what else is there to watch? If I have to sit through my girlfriend fawning over some Eric-whatever with a fancy haircut, I might just stay home next time."

"Aw, come on, don't be jealous, Tom," said Mary with a laugh. A grin cracked across Tom's face, which he vainly tried to suppress.

"What's it about anyway, some guy gets laid four nights in a row with the same girl, and then they immediately fall deeply in love and get married? *That* is boring. I'd rather be doing that than watching it," he said.

Peter glanced at him.

"What do you want to see, Pete?" asked Tom, sliding his arm over the back of his seat and reclining, looking bemused.

"What about *What Lies Beyond*?"

There was a brief pause. Tom looked most taken aback.

"Funny. But I was hoping for something that could actually be considered entertaining."

"I suppose you're right. It's pretty damn boring to someone who doesn't care what's out there."

An uncomfortable silence followed Peter's retort.

"Look, I didn't want to take a shot at your exploration stuff, cause Emily told me how into that you are. But we're not going to see a two-hour movie about it," Tom stated with finality.

The words did not sting Peter at all; he had simply been curious as to their reaction to them. The car slowed as they reached a stoplight; Emily turned back to look at them, and Peter caught her eye. Her mouth twisted into a tiny grin for a second, before she turned back to the wheel.

"So, Orrick Ridge or *Four Nights*?" Mary asked, her voice suddenly shrill.

"What the hell, we can go see this *"Four Nights"* movie. I might throw up by the end of it, but at least you guys will be happy."

"Don't be like that, Tom," Emily said, "I'm sure there's another movie we can find that we'll all like. It's not like we've kept track of everything new that's come out."

"There are like all of five movies there, at most."

"We'll find one," said Emily as she made a sharp turn. They were in the city now, coasting slowly past busy sidewalks. How many people lived in Nalio? Five, ten thousand? Twenty? Fifty? He couldn't remember; a life on the winding roads and sparse houses of the slopes had left him with no sense of population. In school, he'd found books mentioning cities with a million people. That simple fact had reeled his mind. The number had no meaning to him. A million people. He wondered how many movies they'd had.

It did not take long to find the movie theater, and to park amongst the clusters of cars. As they walked through the parking lot, looking up at the taller building that surrounded the movie theater almost menacingly, the sounds of the city soaked into Peter's ears, distant and confused.

Ahead of him, Tom slid his arm around Mary's back, Emily walking along on her other side. The thought occurred to Peter to walk up, slide his own arm around Emily, but for some reason he knew better. There would be a better time.

Inside, people milled about, waiting in line, the red carpet speckled here and there with brown stains, the dim lighting seeming almost smoky. The ceiling, lower than Peter remembered it, seemed to hover uncomfortably close.

"Look, there's one called *Half a Sky*," Mary said timidly, "It's a mystery. Can we see that one?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Tom, nodding, "But really, it's fine if you want to see *Fourth Night*, or whatever. I was joking about the throwing up thing."

Mary chuckled.

"Okay."

"Yeah, let's see *Half a Sky*."

Emily approached the counter.

"Four for *Half a Sky*, please."

Peter ignored the transaction, eyes tracing the forlorn-looking poster for *What Lies Beyond*. It had not been the Expeditionary Battalion's work, but a documentary compiled with their footage, and scientists theorizing about what was really "out there."

*Surprised you got past the censors*, Peter told the poster in his mind. He grinned a bit at the acrid,

cynical thought. Give it a few years, he would be finding the answer, and making his living off of it. His father's disapproval – *everyone's* disapproval – would be put to shame.

He followed the others into the darkened corridors that led to the theaters. Emily ahead, Mary and Tom behind them, walking side by side, and Peter last, trying to catch up without being too obvious about it. A sudden eagerness was filling him, one that could not be contained by the theater, by a simple mystery movie. He slowed his pace; maybe that would make it go away.

They filed into the theater, the dull screen panning between silent advertisements for various things Peter knew little about. A few other viewers sat scattered around; there was a brief, hushed squabble between Tom and Mary over where to sit. Peter skipped up two or three stairs, to the row, and watched as Emily sat down, furthest down the row, then Mary, then Tom, whose knees stuck out, filling the space between the seats, and making Peter want to punch him.

Mary and Emily were whispering to each other. Would it be too obvious to push through them, to sit next to her? He suddenly didn't care. He started to squeeze past Tom.

"Geez, hang on a moment."

"Sorry. You're fine," Peter muttered, feeling the blood compressed from his calves.

"No, I'm not," Tom grumbled, sitting back down. Peter stepped carefully past Mary, then Emily, to lower himself gingerly into the seat beside her, watching an ad for soda fade out, and be replaced by another for some kind of insurance. Beside him, Emily continued her hushed conversation with Mary, seemingly oblivious to him. Was this a good thing?

The movie began engagingly enough to distract Peter. A couple arriving at their new mansion, only to find that things were being moved at night. No one else around. Was this horror or mystery?

Halfway through, he felt Emily's fingers brush against his, then suddenly draw away. Had that been a mistake or an invitation? He reached his hand further out on the arm rest, hoping she would make another mistake, but none came, and he was against lost in the movie.

Yes, now it seemed even more suspicious. Was it something with magnets? This mansion was supposedly in the valley, so monsters could obviously be ruled out. Introducing a new character this late would be cheap. Peter enjoyed these movies; at least they were well-written.

Perhaps touching her now was too obvious, too clumsy. Perhaps it would be offensive, give her the wrong idea about his intentions. Maybe it was best to let things develop naturally. Yes, that was it.

In the end, it turned out that the couple had really been moving the things all along, and had been forgetting. Then the movie ended with an object moving, on its own, across a table behind their backs, while they continued talking obliviously. Peter smiled. A strange ending.

The credit reel began to slither up the screen, and the lights crackled back to life. Beside him, Emily was asleep, the tips of her hair barely inches from his bare arm. He reached out and touched her cheek. She flinched awake suddenly, eyes opening sleepily.

"How'd it end?"

"I can't tell," Peter teased.

"Come on, Peter," Emily muttered, straightening up. As she stretched, her shirt exposed a bit of her midriff; Peter's eyes lingered on it a moment too long.

"We'll get it when it comes out in a few months. It's not like there are that many other movies to get it lost among."

"Alright, whatever," said Emily, sliding her arms through her jacket sleeves, and brushing her hair back with her hand.

Ahead of them, Tom and Mary were already down the stairs, and walking back out to the hallway. Peter and Emily stood, waiting for the others to file out of their row.

"So where now?" he asked her.

"I don't know, we'll probably walk around the city a bit. We don't get to do that much."

"You're here every day."

"Yeah, to work," Emily said, sounding faintly annoyed.

"Okay, true," Peter conceded.

"At least I want to walk around in the city, when I'm in it," she said, with a grin.

"I didn't say I didn't want to," Peter said defensively.

"I'm kidding, Peter, I'm kidding," she said as they began to walk down the stairs, among the last out of the theater, "It's just ... your mind is out there, I guess. Not crazy, that's not what I mean, but like... it's not here, with waking up every day, going to a normal job, going home, living a normal life. But it's okay," she said, looking at him in the dim light, "It makes me think, is all."

"You said it seemed pointless to you."

She shrugged.

"Maybe. Maybe it just makes me wonder about things I don't want to wonder about."

"Why wouldn't you want to – "

"Because it's dangerous out there. Terrible creatures, and who knows what else. That wall is there for a reason."

"I've never seen a single 'creature,' besides a few birds and a deer or two," Peter said as they walked past the ticket desk.

"Your own sister died out there, Peter, you told me yourself," Emily insisted.

"In an air sloop crash!"

They were out the front door, and the sunlight threw the hurt look on Peter's face into harsh relief. Emily's expression melted into guilt.

"Peter... I... I didn't mean to," she stuttered, "I'm sorry I brought it up."

"No, it's fine," said Peter, kicking a rock as they made their way across the parking lot. Emily smiled back at him weakly.

"I guess every conversation we have lately is about this stuff," she said pointedly.

"Let's go to the city. We'll talk about something else."

She nodded.

"Are you two coming?" Mary demanded from the car. Tom leaned against his door, staring out into the distance expectantly.

"Yeah. Some of us take a moment," Emily shot back dryly. She walked around the front of the car, stabbed the key into the keyhole, and with a click, the doors were open.

As they drove back out to the street, Emily leaned forward to look for oncoming cars, before opening her mouth to speak.

"So how *did* it end?"

"Don't tell her!" said Peter and Tom simultaneously.

"I don't know, they were doing it all along themselves or something," Mary muttered, "I wasn't really paying attention that much at the end."

A wicked grin seeped onto Tom's face, then disappeared when he caught Peter's eye. He turned away, looking out the window, trying to keep Tom's suddenly shameful expression from making him laugh. The brick walls outside blurred by, and he let his eyes oscillate between watching a single brick, or keeping his eyes still, so that they melded together in a reddish-brown wash.

"Are the stores on Front Street okay?" Emily asked.

"Yeah, what the hell, you're both going to spend the whole afternoon looking at clothes anyway," Tom groaned, "I don't really care where we do it."

"That wasn't really our plan, Tom," said Mary, but Emily was grinning, and, Peter was pretty sure, so was she.

"Just stop at the records store for a few minutes, and I'll be happy," said Tom, rubbing his temple with an expression of mock resignation.

"Fair enough," said Emily. Mary giggled.

They parked along the side of the street. Peter climbed out onto the sidewalk. Bookstores, record stores, clothes stores, kitchen stores; things he rarely, if ever saw. He had never had to take care of such

things; his family had so many books already, and he cared about little else. His mother had always done the shopping, or his father on the way home from work. On the rare occasion Peter wanted anything, he asked them.

He began to wonder, as he walked with the other three, how exactly he would live on his own. There were so many things he had never contemplated; his mind so often on what he hoped to find next, outside the valley, that he neglected what was already here.

He watched Emily walking, a few feet ahead of him. She seemed content with her life here. He didn't understand. A business degree, or something. That was what she wanted from life. Now she seemed to repulse him. It seemed empty, all of it; her smiles, her enthusiasm when she talked about it. It was stupid.

No, it wasn't, he couldn't call her stupid. *Shut up, Peter*, he told himself. Maybe she was right, to find fulfillment in such a simple thing, a normal life. It certainly left her a lot better off than him, with his constant shifting, constantly itching to find something new to interest him. Or perhaps distract him.

"Let's go in here," Mary said, pulling Tom off to the side, through the door of a clothes shop. Emily followed them, shooting a look at Peter to make sure he was coming. Their eyes met; her lips twitched into a half-smile for a brief second, before she disappeared through the doorway.

Peter could barely stand clothes; he remembered being dragged shopping with his mother as a young child. Now and then, he would find something in green, or brown; forest colors, two of the few that appealed to him. Most of his clothes were one of those colors, but he didn't enjoy it the way Emily and Mary did, of course. Each memory of hours spent wandering among chrome racks, hiding within them, the scent of cleaner fluid and sweat always fresh in his nostrils, made him want to leave more and more.

Now and then, Tom would look at him with an exaggerated glare and shrug. The first time he ignored it; the second and third times he responded. Peter did not know why he felt so eager to please him. Other than Thale, his only real friend was Emily, and Tom was nothing like either them. What did he think? Befriended Tom would somehow bring him closer to Emily? His own mind puzzled him sometimes.

Emily came forward, draping a chocolate-colored blouse over herself.

"What do you think, Peter?"

"It looks great," he said with a smile. Emily's faded.

"You can say if you don't like it."

"No, I do. Really," Peter said. He wasn't lying. "Goes well with your hair."

Her expression brightened a bit.

"Okay."

She turned away, the dark brown hair swinging behind her. Sometimes she wore it in a ponytail, sometimes in some sort of complicated arrangement with some behind her ears, some bundled over her head, and some sticking out sideways.

Behind her, Mary was holding out some article of clothing for Tom's approval, who was nodding lukewarmly. A surge of hope ran through Peter's chest.

They took far less time than Peter had expected them to, making their purchases, and then back out into the brisk air, back along the brick sidewalk. Somewhere, a beat pulsed through the city, heavy and inaudible, but tangible. He could feel it through his feet.

A bookstore caught the girls' attention next. Tom seemed slightly less surly this time, but still stood near the door. Peter copied him for a moment, before succumbing to curiosity, and beginning to wander the shelves.

More than one shelf was dedicated to history books, but they lacked anything to sustain Peter's interest. He had learned again and again the events that had shaped this place; he knew nothing of what had come before. Either no one knew, or someone was stopping them from writing about it.

He paced quickly out of the history section, remembering Tom's comment. He found Emily and

Mary poring over romance novels; he ignored them. Perhaps something to do with astronomy. Sometimes he had taken his grandfather's telescope outside, to peer through the tiny lens at the heavens above. Focusing on each tiny pinprick, barely expanded. They came in different colors; blue, white, red, orange, yellow. Gazing at the moon, eyes tracing the patches of craters, the gleaming, butter yellow of the sun-bathed surface. He knew enough about astronomy to know that, but there had to be more to learn. Maybe someday they could go up there. He refused to believe it hadn't been done, by someone, somewhere in the past.

Emily and Mary were slowly making their way to the front. Peter spotted something on the shelf a few feet away; *Finding Constellations*. Without hesitation, his fingers closed around the spine. He fumbled in his pocket; he had little money left over from the movie, but it was enough. He made for the front desk.

Tom watched him as he paid for the book, but Peter no longer cared. He counted out the exact number of coins, then slid them across the desk to the middle-aged man who ran the store. A grin cracked on his aging face.

"Thank you," Peter muttered.

"You're welcome," the man nodded, slipping the coins into his register. Peter followed the other three out with the book tucked under his arm.

"What's that, Pete?" Tom said coolly as Peter rejoined them. "Finding Constellations," he read out loud, "If you're going to play connect-the-dots with stars, you might as well come up with your own, or it's gonna be pretty damn boring."

"Tom, shut up, that's mean," Mary said, pushing him almost playfully. But she looked back at Peter with an apologetic look.

Emily lost ground with them, slowly falling back to Peter. He looked at her; she was looking at the book.

"What's in it?" she asked.

"Dunno. Haven't opened it yet."

"When are you going to?" Her wide green eyes looked curious.

"Tonight, maybe. My dad has a telescope."

"He does?"

"I do," Peter corrected, "It's my telescope."

Emily chuckled.

"All right."

"Maybe once I find them all, you can come and I'll show them to you."

Her gaze flitted up to his for a split-second.

"Okay."

Some overwhelming instinct came over Peter to shut up, to stop talking any more, before he ruined something, but a moment later the silence became unbearable.

"So are we going to the record store now, or what?"

"I have no idea," Emily admitted, "Mary!"

Ahead of her, Mary and Tom turned back to look, slowing.

"Record store?"

"I think we owe Tom a visit."

"That's right you do," Tom said seriously. Mary smiled nervously.

"It's right around the corner, Em," she said.

They followed the other two around a corner drugstore, past a diner and model repair shop. The record shop emanated music, fast and tense at first, before fading away into something different, something soft and even.

Inside, he watched Tom and Mary flick through stacks of records, Emily doing the same a few feet away. Peter copied them, but paid barely any attention. For something that had been so looked

forward to, Tom seemed disappointed now, and a moment later they were leaving.

"You can't expect them to have everything, Tom," Mary said as they left, annoyance in her voice. Tom looked sullen.

"What a load of crap. I've been waiting for this for six months."

"Maybe they'll have it next time," she replied, "Don't be a child."

"I'm not."

"You *are*."

Emily hung back as the pair descended into argument.

"They're like that sometimes," she muttered to Peter, "Don't worry too much about it."

"I don't," Peter said, "Everyone's like that sometimes."

"Yeah, I guess," she said, looking up at the rooftops. She paused as they followed Mary and Tom, still bickering, back around the corner.

"So when are you leaving next?" Emily asked him, eyes leveling with the street again.

"I don't know. I never learn about these things until the day before, most of the time."

"Where are they planning to go, though? When they do."

"Probably another promising-looking site. They do these great big surveys, getting lots of images, and maps, then they pick a few places that look good, and go there."

"I know, but what are they looking for?"

Peter stopped.

"Emily, why are you asking?"

She started walking again, and motioned for Peter to follow.

"Don't tell anyone this, okay?" she said as they walked. Peter nodded.

"My dad's been telling my mom some things, something about how they've lost a lot of funds all of the sudden, and there might be... you know, cuts, soon. Budget cuts."

Peter stared at her.

"So all I'm saying is, maybe... I guess you guys should hurry up. Find something. Something they think is important. Because I don't want anything to happen to this Expeditionary Battalion. I know how much it means to you. It ... maybe it's just different for me. But that doesn't mean it's not important. And I wanted to tell you. Only... I'm not allowed to know this. So... yeah," she said, shaking her head distractedly, "I don't know what else to say."

Peter stared at her for a moment longer before speaking.

"So they're going to shut it down?"

"Maybe. I hope not. But you know they've always looked at it as something disposable."

"I know."

"So maybe you ought to ... look, I don't know much control you have other things."

"Basically none."

"Okay. Still. Maybe if you find someplace habitable out there, or –"

"We've found plenty of habitable places. The whole area out there is habitable. It's just that they're arrogant idiots who want to keep us trapped here for some reason, and –"

"Peter."

"Sorry. It frustrates me, is all."

She nodded.

"Well, thanks for telling me about it," he said.

"No problem," she said, "I don't know how much you can do."

"Probably not a lot," he said bitterly.

Tom and Mary had drawn far ahead; Emily broke into a light jog, hoping to catch up. Peter copied her.

"We ought to do this again," Emily said suddenly.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure."

She drew ahead of him. Eventually they caught up. Peter wanted to say more, but she was already lost in conversation with Mary again, while he and Tom exchanged occasional bored glances. Peter sighed. Maybe next time, he would try to hold her hand.

His parents passed over the subject quickly that night.

"How was your day with Emily and her friends, Peter?" his mother asked sweetly.

"It was fine."

"Good."

"Council meeting tomorrow night in Nalio," his father interrupted, as though he could not care less – and probably didn't. "They'll be voting on the budget."

"Oh, very interesting," Peter's mother replied. Peter himself nodded, before stirring at his mashed potatoes some more. The day had left him with little appetite for food, but a hunger for something more, and he could not draw out what it was in his mind.

"Possibly opening a new department, which would mean some more jobs in the city."

Peter ignored the bait. He was staying with the Expeditionary Battalion. He had a plan; finish school, get a part-time job that could support him, and move into one of the military apartments near the airport if he had to. From there, he could work his way up.

Across the table, Peter's mother frowned.

"More jobs? But I thought they needed to make budget cuts, they said just the other day that they were short on money."

"Oh, they will be making budget cuts, all right."

Peter resisted the urge to drive his fork into the table.

"What kind of stuff will they be cutting out?"

"Probably the arts endowments, a few other non-essentials. Might cease working on that mine for a couple years. We've been trying to consolidate our services in the government, and these new departments will be replacing a lot of old ones. Centralize management, that sort of thing. Do more with less, because when you have a bunch of people doing only one thing, they tend to spend a lot of time sitting on their hands."

"They're stopping the mine?"

"That and ... a few other things."

There was no proper course of action here. Silence just made it more obvious, speaking up would make him look desperate to change the subject. But something akin to courage swelled in Peter.

"Like what?"

Peter's father sighed.

"I'm afraid they're looking at cutting out the Expeditionary Battalion."

"Like hell they are."

"Watch your mouth, Peter," his father muttered, but sympathy hung under his words.

"They won't."

"They might. That's why I was looking to see if you would apply for a job in the city. It's well past time, and it would make you some money."

"I don't want money."

"You need it if you don't want to starve eventually. Your mother and I love you of course, but you can't stay here forever."

"I know. I won't. But ... they can't shut down the EB. It'd be like blinding ourselves."

Another sigh.

"Well, son, I'm sorry, but I don't know if there's a lot you can do. It's a lot of take without a lot of return."

Peter stared intently at his plate, which was now all but clean. Where had the food gone? He

barely remembered eating it.

“I'll show them the return.”

The conversation turned away to other things; chores that needed to be done, a mention of grandparents coming to stay in a few weeks. Peter's mind faded away from it. He needed to be alone.

“May I be excused?” he interrupted.

“Yes, you may,” his mother replied. Peter got up, washed his plate, and retreated to the stairs. His fingers slid along the railing, almost brushing one of the pictures of Rebecca that hung in the stairwell. He paused for a moment.

“I'm going to make them keep it,” he whispered, “They're not going to get rid of the Expeditionary Battalion.”

He turned away from the picture, continuing up the stairs.

“I'm not going to let you have died for nothing.”

## Chapter Four

Vector geometry bored him, but he forced himself to keep alert. He knew it would be important for flying one day, for knowing how to repair ships, build them, direct them, anything. Perhaps it got better over time.

Emily sat to the right, her legs hooked tightly around the legs of her desk. She bit her lower lip, probing it occasionally with her pen, in between bouts of furious scribbling. Sometimes she let him copy her notes. Sometimes he let her copy his. For all her attention to writing down every possible detail, Peter could not believe she had somehow missed something in the class, but she always wanted to check some detail or fact. It usually filled Peter with a faint feeling of despair; how would he ever learn it all, when neither of them could even write it down correctly?

That said, both of them were solidly passing the class. Peter had no idea why Emily was taking it. She had plans for business, something her father had set up for her. Nepotism ran wild in the valley, at least among those with parents working in the city. Peter wondered where Emily would live. Maybe an apartment in Nalio. Maybe he could find a way to live there too...

A full thirty seconds had passed, a dangerous lapse in vector geometry. Desperately, he began copying the board, his pencil scratching loudly enough to draw vague attention from the other students. He quieted himself, slowed down, and glanced at Emily, who was grinning, though trying valiantly to cover it up. She probably knew the cause of his daydreams, but if so, she never let up to it. Occasionally she would uncross and recross her legs, sit up a bit straighter when she knew Peter was looking at her. The subtlety frustrated Peter, but that didn't mean he wanted it to stop.

The lecture winded down slowly, more and more students watching the clock, watching the minutes, then seconds tick by. The kind of students such an advanced class attracted were not the type to hang on the bell, but they were normal people like anyone else. And two hours of angles and cosines and velocities wore on anyone. And lunch was waiting in their lockers outside, a beautiful day beyond the dusty windows of the classroom.

When it finally ended, Peter closed his notebook and stood up, following behind Emily toward the door. Another student, tall and heavyset, stepped between them; in his mind, Peter pictured punching him, hard, in the small of the back, but the impulse faded away quickly.

Outside the heavy scent of pollen and grass swarmed into his nose. He glanced at the distant mountains, across the valley, as he always did, watching them scrape the clouds. He spotted Emily, already sitting with Mary and a few other friends. Tom was there, too, his arm around Mary. For once, Peter was glad of his presence. It would make approaching them much smoother.

He strode confidently over to the little group, sat on the log next to Emily. She looked at him.

"Hi."

"Hey."

Why was it so impossible now? He could spend hours talking to her alone, yet around her friends he became an awkward mute. No.

"What have we got after lunch? I forget."

Tom groaned.

"Come on, Peter, it's a nice day out. No one wants to think about class."

"History," said Emily. She reached into her lunch bag and drew out an apple, biting into it without hesitation. She looked up at Peter, before her eyes grew wide and she reached back into the bag. Her hand came out holding another apple, which she offered to him.

"Courtesy of the orchard down the road," she said.

"Thanks. You bought two?"

"Well... not exactly," Emily said with a mischievous grin. Mary looked at her reproachfully.

"Oh come on, it's two dumb apples. Who's going to miss them?"

Peter felt the skin give way between his teeth, the sweet, bitter juice flowing over his tongue. He

leaned back a little.

"Thanks, Em."

"Yeah, no problem."

"So when's your next flying thing, Pete?" said Tom. Peter felt a twinge of annoyance, but ignored it.

"Soon."

"Maybe not," he said. Peter could not tell whether the sad tone to his voice was sincere or not.

"Yeah, I know. But it's not going to happen. The ship's already all fueled up. We'll at least get one more flight."

"But after that..."

"If they canceled the program, they'll reinstate it. If they didn't ... well, they'll never consider it again."

"You sound confident."

"We're going to find something tomorrow."

"How do you know?"

"Because I decided we would."

Tom shrugged, letting the point fall.

"Oh," said Mary from beside him.

"What?"

"I just remembered we have weapons training tomorrow," she said, looking crestfallen.

"Oh yeah," said Tom, "We get to miss like a whole day of classes to go shoot guns. Sounds fun to me." But both Mary and Emily looked uncertain.

"What?"

"I don't know. Seems a bit pointless, doesn't it?" Mary muttered.

"What does? Learning to shoot?"

"Yeah," said Emily, "When are we ever going to need it?"

"Well," began Tom, "It's a legal requirement that –"

"– all citizens, at age eighteen, shall undertake personal defense training," recited Emily, "Yes, I know. But why? Nothing's ever come through the Wall in all these years."

"That's because there's nothing out there to come through," said Peter, "Unless you count a thousand potential places to live. I've gone out there a dozen times, and the most dangerous thing I've seen? A few squirrels. A deer. A hawk. Normal animals."

"Don't they come out at night?" said Mary curiously.

"What do?" Peter said.

"The monsters."

"There are no monsters," Peter said.

"Well my father told me that –"

"He's wrong. *That's* the real reason they want to shut down the Expeditionary Battalion. They don't want anyone to know that they're lying."

"It's all a conspiracy, huh?" said Tom in mock sympathy. Peter glared at him.

"Not really. There just have to be enough dumb asses like you willing to believe it."

"Peter..."

"Oh come on," said Tom, "You're just pissed off that they're going to take away your special field trips, right? They make you feel special, or something."

"Say that to my face."

"You think you're special just because you get –"

With a thud, Tom was on his back, Peter standing over him.

"Son of a bitch..."

"Peter!"

Tom sat up, groaning, narrowing his eyes at Peter. Then, in a flash of motion, he drove his fist into Peter's stomach. Peter stumbled back, forcing himself not to double over, and swung his leg around, sweeping Tom off of his feet and onto his back again.

"What the hell Peter?" Emily said.

"Don't ... give me ... anymore bullshit ... if you can't take it," Peter growled at Tom's prone, groaning figure. He began to realize that Tom's blow had knocked the wind out of him.

The bell rang for the students to reassemble inside for class. Mary helped Tom to his feet, then swept past Peter and Emily with nothing but an angry glare at the pair of them. Emily turned to Peter, a hurt expression on her face, before walking away from him, alone, into the growing cloud of students.

The stitch in his chest was fading, but the bitterness wasn't. They were wrong. He was going to prove it. Soon. He wiped his mouth, realizing that an angry glob of spit clung to it. He strode after Emily, back into the schoolhouse.

Peter would have expected discipline, but he doubted any authority figures had actually seen it, and he certainly didn't expect Tom to report it. He had more pride than that. They both did.

The afternoon class focused on how ships flew, something the vector class had not covered. But that had been math; this was conceptual. Ancient aircraft had been small, winged, and powered by gasoline. They had been fast, but could barely carry anything. When land rails had become too slow and inefficient for the economy, they had been replaced by airships, powered by nuclear energy, that could lift themselves by the intense thrust generated by them.

They always hinted at something before, but never revealed. Sometimes, cruisers flew through the valley, but rarely. He and Emily had spotted one, on the way home from school one day. A great, looming stick in the sky, metal covers arcing over cargo bays, holding in bus-sized cargo crates that were stacked four-high, in triangles, in each. It must have been five-hundred meters long. The shadow had taken a full thirty seconds to pass as it rumbled by overhead. The valley was too large to see one end from the other, but Peter could not believe that it was moving within the valley. It had to be leaving. But he had no evidence.

The next class was history. Peter spent half of it hanging on every word, for a vital clue the professor might let slip. The other half, he spent suppressing an outburst at what had to be lies, an outburst he desperately wanted to release, one that surely earn him months of detention. There was a time and a place, but this was not it.

Lunch had not been the time, either, but Peter ignored it. It was done.

Today's lecture was on Brasme, the valley's industrial city, responsible for most of their manufactured products. Little about its founding, which had happened hundreds of years ago. Most of it covered the great people of the city's history; a woman named Uliya Ingram, who had been the first to discover oil deposits in the valley. A man named Terrence Velloe, who had started a steel foundry, creating the basis for Brasme's booming economy. And his brother, Irnest Velloe, who started a coal mine not far away.

They were lucky, the professor said, to have so many resources in one place, so that we did not have to venture outside the Wall to seek more. It was because of these people, he said, that they were safe. Velloe Steel and Ingram Oil still stood, and though they held a monopoly on their respective products, they worked carefully with the government to make sure both metal and fuel were offered for a fair price.

A chemical fire in Brasme a few years ago, came up. Peter remembered it, but he rarely thought of it. Other disasters had struck the town, but small ones, and before Peter had been born. Today, Brasme stood as the beating heart of the valley, giving Nalio the freedom to be a cultural gem, and the rest of the valley to farm and live in peace.

They were lucky, the professor said.

Peter didn't believe it.

After school, Peter found Emily, her arms crossed, hugging a book to her chest, walking away from him, unaware of his presence. He jogged a bit to keep, and drew alongside her.

She shot him a quick glance, then swung her gaze back to the floor.

"Am I walking you home?"

She did not answer.

"Em?"

Silence.

"Look, I didn't ... you saw what he was being like."

"You were an ass, Peter. There's no other word for it."

He sighed.

"I'm sorry. I just ... it's important to me. He was getting all smug, it pissed me off.

She kept walking a few seconds more, until her tight expression loosened.

"It's fine, I guess. We can still hang out, and all. Just ... I think I'll be splitting my time between you and Mary, now. It might be better if you don't ... you know."

"I understand," said Peter.

"I hope so," said Emily.

They kept walking, out of the school, into the diffusing tide of liberated students.

"Interesting class, huh."

"Mm."

Along the road, up the moist gravel, the sunny noon having melted into a vaguely gray afternoon, the blue sky still visible through a few lapses in the clouds. Peter slid his hands into his pockets, thumbs sticking out. He looked out to his right, across the road, where the tide of pine trees descended for many meters below.

"Who are we, Emily?"

"What?" she said, suddenly pulled from her own thoughts.

"That's what we call ourselves. Whos. Because we don't know *who* we are."

She shrugged.

"No one knows, for sure, Peter."

"Why doesn't anyone ask?"

"Because *no one* knows."

The gravel crunched under their feet, grinding and tumbling as they climbed the shallow slope that led away from the school. Looking back at it, it seemed so small, though the building measured easily fifty meters long on each side.

"Doesn't it *bother* you?"

"No," she said, "Because even if we *did* know what came before, Peter, it'd just be asking what came before that, and before that, until you run into a wall, because it had to start somewhere."

He shook his head.

"No. There are pieces missing. The wall is the missing pieces. The wall is ..." Peter said, swiveling his finger to point at the distant, blinking lights that lined the valley rim, "*That* wall. The one keeping us in here."

She nodded, but Peter could tell she didn't believe him.

"Forget it," he muttered, "Let's talk about something else."

Her smile told him that it was the right thing to say.

"Did I tell you I got a job offer? Assuming I finish all the classes this year."

"I'm sure you will," said Peter. He could not remember Emily failing a class.

"Thanks," she said, "Anyway, they'll start me out managing databases, and give me some pretty

intensive training. Should last two years at most, a couple hours at night, three times a week. But once it's done ... I should be in a good position. Helping run one of the largest insurance companies in Nalio. If not *the* largest, by the time I'm finished," she joked.

Peter eyed her curiously.

"Well, not really. But it'd be a nice, stable position."

"You'd have pretty much everything, wouldn't you?" said Peter.

"Well, not everything," she said, glancing at the ground, "But most of it."

"You gonna live in the city?"

She looked up at the sky.

"I don't know. Lots of people in the city. I won't be lonely."

"You wouldn't be lonely, anyways."

She shrugged again, sending ripples through her hair.

"It's just ... big out here. Makes me feel small."

"I like it out here," said Peter, "Probably for that exact reason."

They were almost at Peter's house.

"You want to come for dinner?" Peter asked her, "I was going to dig out my grandfather's old telescope, in the basement, and try to find some constellations."

"Oh, right. I did say I would," she said. Her eyes narrowed, and she grinned. "I thought you said it was *your* telescope."

"It is. Or my dad's, technically. But he's never gone to look at the stars. I don't think he cares."

"You should try to get him to."

"You help me get it set up," said Peter, "And I will."

She smiled.

"Deal."

A few minutes later, she left him at the dirt walk leading to his house. He waved to her.

"See you in a few hours," she called back.

"Yeah."

He burst through the door, sliding off his shoes, and trotting up the stairs with his schoolbooks. He wandered into his room, and set them down heavily on his desk.

There was homework; it would be best to do that now. It would take an hour at most; then he could tell his parents about Emily. They wouldn't say no. She was his only friend outside the Expeditionary Battalion, and while they didn't outright dislike his other friends, they certainly would prefer Emily over them.

He wanted to take her with him, outside the valley, into the strange forests that lay beyond, the caves, the distant mountains. He couldn't; the Expeditionary Battalion would never let him, and he doubted she would come. But he could show her stars. They were the next best thing.

Slipping his homework – a mercifully-short essay on the historical figures of Brasme – out of his notebook, he grabbed a pencil and set to work.

"Emily's coming tonight," he told his mother when he went downstairs an hour later.

"You should have asked me, Peter," she reprimanded him, "It's not your house, you can't just invite people without asking us."

"If she can't come, I'll go over and tell her now. But I had to answer before she went all the way home. I figured it was okay."

His mother stared at him for a moment, sternly. She had always been warm, but with little patience for disobedience; at least, what she found out about.

"I'll help with the cooking," Peter offered.

"Fine. But no more of this."

"Never again."

She turned back to her reading.

Peter got up, wandering for a moment, before heading for the door to the basement. His fingers gripped the brass knob, twisting it with a creak. He descended the dusty steps cautiously, flicking the light on as he went.

A couple old tables, a few old books. That was all there was. Peter's father had few hobbies. Woodworking, but it had been months since he'd done anything. His work table sat on the other side of the steps, a place off-limits to Peter. He had built much of the house's furniture on his own, a feat Peter found impressive. Not that he'd ever told his father that.

He dug through what he could, carefully sliding tables around. Surely there was nothing wrong with what he was doing, but all the same, he didn't want to alert his mother. He didn't know why.

At last he found it, a black metal tube, a musty scent clinging to it. The wooden tripod, spaced out, standing it up behind an old, unused lamp and a small table with books stacked at least a dozen high. Peter glanced at them as he cautiously extracted the telescope. Old accounting texts. He shook his head.

One of the legs brushed the side of the table, making the stack quiver ever so slightly, then topple before Peter's eyes, spilling across the floor, some of them out of sight.

"What was that?" came a faint voice from upstairs.

"Nothing, mother!" he called back. Gritting his teeth, he yanked the telescope free the rest of the way, then knelt down and set aside re-stacking the books.

When he was finished, he dragged the telescope up the stairs, shutting off the light, and closing the door carefully beyond him. In better light, he examined it. Turning a couple knobs collapsed the legs, and he did so, folding it up, and tucking the compact result under his arm.

Outside, the gray mid-afternoon sky left the air cool and comfortable. He wandered out the middle of the yard, setting up the telescope carefully, sliding off the lens caps. For a moment, he held them in his hand, uncertain, before spotting a small cloth bag, tied to one of the legs. He smiled, sliding the caps inside. His grandfather had thought of everything.

Fiddling with the knobs, he peered through the sight until the distant pine tree tops came into focus. He could almost count the branches. Beyond them, he could see the faint, dark line of the distant Wall, its lights off in the weary mid-day.

Suddenly, a black shape moved through the sky, through a break in the clouds. He swiveled the telescope toward it eagerly; but in his shock he pushed it too far. Panicking, he fumbled with the knobs, slowly panning it back to where it was, the trees coming back into view. But the shape was gone.

Peter stood rigid, feeling the tingling of hairs on his neck. What had it been? Peter knew there were drones up there, circling in the sky, invisible, protecting the valley. But little was said about them, other than that they were there. Peter had never seen one before. But he had seen *something*, just now. It could not have been a bird, it had flown too fast. It had not been his imagination. He knew that much.

He wondered if he should tell Emily. No, no, she wouldn't believe him. Especially not after today. But already he felt the urge to say something, to confide it in someone. His mind whirled, trying to remember more about the shape. It had had form, a wide front that tapered, then flared out again. Something about it seemed sinister to Peter. But of course it would, when he had no clue what it was.

Sliding his eye back to the eyepiece, he scanned the clouds again, looking for another sign of it, muscles tensed, his heart pounding now. Perhaps it was gone, never to reappear. But perhaps it would show up again, and Peter would not miss it again.

He watched for several minutes, before the sound of the back door slamming shut startled him.

"You're not going to see anything right now, you know."

It was his father.

"It's for when Emily gets here, later," said Peter.

"You're going to ... what? Stargaze with her?"

"Yeah."

Peter looked up at his father, who was just staring at him.

"Hm," he said, "Didn't seem like that kind of girl."

"Well," said Peter, "You haven't exactly seen much of her." He twiddled with the focus knobs impatiently. Every second he spent talking to his father, was one second less he could spend looking for that ... thing.

"I know her father. In Nalio."

Peter surrendered. The blurred shape was gone.

"What?"

"Yeah," said Peter's father with a faint grin, "Apparently she talks about you quite a bit."

Peter's heart leaped, but he kept his face passive.

"That's nice."

"It is. It's good that you have good influences in your life."

Peter's eyes narrowed at the odd statement, but he shook it off. Perhaps his father was trying to connect with him better. It had been four years since his sister's death, in the Expeditionary Battalion. Four years since he'd worn black, stood for hours, cried over a podium about how he missed his sister, a speech his mother had helped him write. But not his father. He had stood, rigid, white-faced, throughout the entire ceremony.

Perhaps when Peter had grown up, his father had given him up for dead, too.

"You ever look at the stars, Dad?"

"No. Never went outside much."

"I'll learn where they all are. The constellations. We can build a place and look at them, together. Father-son thing, okay?"

For all he knew, his father was shocked. His face revealed nothing.

"Sure."

"Alright."

He bent over the telescope again.

"Dinner's in an hour," said Peter's father one last time, before turning and walking back toward the house. Peter grinned, reached for the knobs, and went back to scanning the sky.

He gave it up after another few minutes, this time for good. He strode back into the house, up the stairs, into his room. There was a small mirror hanging on the wall; this had once been Rebecca's room, before she had died and Peter had taken her place. His old room was now filled with forgotten junk. His memories of it had faded all but entirely now.

His own brownish-green eyes greeted him, roving over his own face. He brushed some of his hair off of his forehead, sweeping it to the side. Would he have time to shower before she arrived? Dress in better clothes? No, she would notice it, would chide him for getting all dressed up over her.

But he needed water on his skin, down his tired back, over his furrowed brow. The black blur hung ever present in his mind, swinging slowly in and out of awareness, his vision of it growing fainter each time he thought of it.

In the bathroom, he stripped off his clothes, reached for the metal handle for the faucet, pulled it, felt the cold sprinkle of water in his hand. He stepped in carefully, bracing himself against the wall as the chilled droplets splattered against his chest. As he stood there, he sighed.

Somewhere downstairs, the doorbell rang.

"Damn it!" Peter muttered, shutting the water off. He staggered out of the shower, nearly slipping on the wet porcelain. He wrapped a towel around his waist, desperately drying off, before pushing out

the door and into his room.

"Hi, Emily," came his mother's sweet voice from downstairs.

"Hello, Mrs. Green. Where's Peter?"

"Upstairs, I think."

There was no time to decide, he simply flung on what clothing he could find. As he fumbled with his belt, his shirt still lying on his bed, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he said without thinking.

The door opened slightly, and Emily's face slid in.

"Need a minute?" she said with a soft grin.

"No," said Peter, grabbing his shirt and pulling it over his head. Accidentally, he slid his arm through the neck hole of the shirt, ending up with it clumsily wrapped around his chest like a toga. Emily still watched him, still grinning.

He fixed it, and patted his hair down.

"Nice walk?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Emily, "No bugs, should be a nice night."

"Bugs or not, it'll beat sitting up here by myself," said Peter, walking toward the door. Emily stepped back to accommodate him as he walked by.

"You could do something with your father, you know," said Emily. Peter stopped, and turned on his heel.

"Like what?"

"Are you two coming down for dinner?" came Peter's mother's voice from downstairs.

"Yes!" called down Peter. He looked at Emily.

"Look, I asked him to help me build a platform for the telescope. He said yes. Who knows if it'll happen?"

She looked at him, her eyes holding a sad quality Peter could not interpret. He sighed.

"Let's go eat."

The stairs creaked under their feet; it was an old house. It had belonged to some family friend of Peter's uncle, or something. Apparently Peter was set up to inherit his grandparents' house, on the other side of the valley, but he doubted it would ever happen. At least partly, because he doubted his grandparents would ever die.

She was one-hundred-one, he was ninety-seven. John and Marianne. He had not seen them in eight years.

Peter sat next to Emily, facing his father, his mother on his other side. His parents had never moved Rebecca's seat after her death; surely Emily didn't know this. He had told her about Rebecca; he remembered his detached tone. He had been somewhat close to her, they had done sibling things together, yet now she seemed to have faded from his mind almost entirely. Life had gone on.

He dug into the potatoes in silence. He talked to Emily all the time; one of them would think of something to say in a few moments. Quiet spots never bothered him.

"Emily, your father tells me you're doing a business internship."

Peter gripped his fork. *Scare her off from the first sentence, Father. That's the way to do it.* He remembered their brief moment of bonding early, but this steamrolled over it immediately.

"Yeah," said Emily, her voice soft and polite. It reminded Peter of a dove, or some other kind of bird. Poetic accuracy wasn't very important to him.

"What is it?"

"Accounting of some kind. I mostly just deliver stacks of papers to people."

"Well, that's where you start," said Peter's father with a warm smile.

"It might be," said Emily, "Might do something different. Maybe in Brasme. They need plenty of people there to track mining profits, I'm sure."

"That they do," said Peter's father, "And the experience will be good for you no matter where

you go from here.”

It was cloying; something akin to nausea rose in Peter's chest. The worst part was that she seemed to be taking it seriously. A life spent shifting numbers. That was what she wanted. Checking how many thousands of kilograms of iron they extracted, to keep records in case anyone else cared. She seemed almost repulsive now, but then he remembered her smile, her jokes, the quiet girl he could coax little bits of her thoughts from with enough effort. That was what mattered.

Their conversation had drifted into something else now. Peter's mother turned to him.

“More potatoes?”

“Yes, Mother,” he said, taking the bowl, “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she said with a sweet smile.

He ate slowly, carefully, trying to count out twenty chews for each bite, to distract himself as long as possible. This would be a long dinner.

By the time Emily and his father ran out of steam, their plates were nearly empty. Peter stood up first, collecting his dish, then Emily's, then walking into the kitchen with both of them. He stuck them under the sink, and turned it on, washing them clean. He reached for the soap, pouring a little on each plate, and beginning to scrub it clean.

“Hey,” said Emily from behind him. He turned.

“We gonna look at the stars or what?”

“Yeah,” said Peter, “Just let me finish the plates.”

“Sure.”

He rinsed them clean, set them on the drying rack, then headed for the back screen door. He pushed it open, stepping out into the cool night air. Emily followed behind, the old door creaking, then snapping shut behind them.

They sloshed across the grass, to where the telescope stood waiting, on its old wooden tripod, angled up at the stars.

“This something you do with all your friends?” said Emily as they sat down in the cloth lawn chairs. A mosquito buzzed onto Peter's nose; he slapped it away before answering.

“No. But you wanted to.”

She shrugged.

“Maybe I'll get lost one day, have to navigate by the stars.”

“Maybe.”

“You ever get lost out there?” she asked, clasping her hands and sliding them between her knees. Peter turned to her, saw her hair hanging down over her ears, framing her pale face, easily visible even in the darkness.

“A little,” he said, “Nelc doesn't let us stray too far off course.”

“You want to, though. Don't you?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Peter, “Who wouldn't?”

Emily sighed.

“Most people?”

Peter began searching for a constellation to look at. One with an interesting color of star.

“My dad's a bit like you,” said Emily, “Used to love hiking. Said it made him feel like an explorer, like he was going somewhere.”

“Why'd he stop?” said Peter.

Emily shrugged.

“Ran out of places to go.”

Peter looked at her, then back at the telescope.

“It should be pointed at a constellation called Sagittarius. An archer. It's a rough stick-man shape

with a five stars making up a bow.”

“Archery,” said Emily, “He used to do that, too. He taught me to shoot a bow.”

She peered into the eyepiece curiously.

“Were you good?” said Peter.

She chuckled.

“No. I don't think I ever hit the target once.”

“Can't see my dad ever getting into anything like that. He used to do woodworking, but he stopped. Who knows why? Not like he'd run out of places to go with that.”

Emily nodded slowly.

“Hey, I'm sorry I talked to your dad the whole dinner. Kind of ignored you.”

“It's fine. We talk a lot anyway. You and I.”

“Yeah.”

In the woods, crickets chirped. Peter swore they were all around him, ever present in the air, by some special quality of the sound they made.

“You know,” said Emily, eyes on the stars, “When I told my parents I was coming over here, they thought you were asking me on a date.”

“Right,” said Peter, “Dinner with my parents, interrogation about our futures, and now stargazing in a buggy backyard. Quite a date.”

Her lips creased into a frown. Peter sighed.

“Okay, Emily, I didn't – ”

Before he could stop her, she rolled over and kissed him. The surprise faded quickly; he touched her face gently and drew her closer, her warm lips contrasting sharply with the chilly night air. He realized his parents might be watching from the window; but suddenly he didn't care.

She released him after a moment, drawing back, looking at him. Even in the dark, the deep blue bushes rustling in the background, he could see the green of her eyes somehow.

“Okay,” he said softly, “Okay.” He nodded.

He kissed her again, for another few moments, before leaning back into the chairs. The stars seemed pointless now. He reached for Emily's hand, clutching it, clinging to its warmth. He rolled toward her. The feelings he had refused to admit to himself flooded forth, a haze that seemed to brighten the night, but taking none of its crispness.

She pointed up at the sky, at a distinctive cluster of stars, just above the treeline.

“Which one's that?” she asked him.

Peter squinted at it.

“I think it's Arcturus,” said Peter, “It's dark, I don't have the book.”

“What's the winged V shape?” said Emily, pointing at another one.

“Cassiopeia,” said Peter, “An angel, I think.”

“That's a nice name, too,” she said softly.

“Yeah.”

A moment passed.

“Who came up with all these names, anyway?” said Emily.

“I don't know. People a long time ago.”

She nodded sleepily.

“Makes sense.”

Her head sank against the back of the chair. They were still for some time. Peter lost track; he realized he had not heard Emily speak for several minutes. Her breathing sounded deeper.

“Hey, you can't fall asleep here, Em,” said Peter.

“Walk me home,” she said, eyes closed.

He pulled his hand away from hers, and helped her to her feet. They walked back toward the house. Emily's fingers traced his palm.

“Not in front of my parents. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“They’ll think you’re a tramp or something.”

“Me?” said Emily, laughing, “I doubt it. I think I convinced your dad that I’m well-adjusted enough.”

“Next time,” said Peter. She looked at him.

“Alright,” she conceded. They walked in, apart.

Both parents were reading in the family room. Peter heard their voices.

“ – third time it’s made that noise.”

“The mechanic in Nalio charges way too much. I’m not paying a full one hundred for something I used to be able to do myself.”

“Well, learn to do it yourself again,” said Peter’s mother.

“I’m walking Emily home, okay?” They paused at Peter’s voice.

“Fine,” said Peter’s father, “Good night Emily.”

“Good night, Mr. Green,” Emily said politely, “Good night, Mrs. Green.”

“Bye Emily.”

Peter pushed open the front door, and they stepped back out into the night, down the driveway, and along the gravel road that led uphill. The cold air only made Emily’s hand feel warmer in his. The tree rustled with sinister whispers, from wind too high to be felt on the ground. The stars were starker out here, away from the light of Peter’s back porch. No cars went by; it was far too late for anyone to be driving. In the quiet, Peter was sure he heard an owl hooting.

They did not say anything for most of the way, simply being together in the darkness. The silence broke when a glowing red point, dimmer than the stars, caught Peter’s eye. It traced its way across the apex of the sky, barely visible.

“Em, look.”

“What?”

“Up there.”

“Where? What is it?”

“It’s ... something. A red light. It’s moving.”

Beside him, she gazed up at the sky. Her eyes wandered fruitlessly for a second, before she, too, saw the red dot.

“What is that?” she said, her voice laden with uncertainty.

“I don’t know,” said Peter, “The transport cruisers don’t fly that high.”

“Maybe it’s a drone,” said Emily, “Who knows where they patrol?”

“Could be,” said Peter.

“That’s probably it,” said Emily, sounding more certain of herself now.

They continued on; Peter’s eyes fell back to the road, so he could see where he was going. When he glanced up again, he could not find the red dot. A shiver ran down his neck.

The golden lights of Emily’s house glowed through the black trees. The crunching of their feet quieted as they stepped off the road and onto her front lawn. At the front door, he could see her face again, her cheeks reddened by the cold.

“Night,” said Peter.

“Night,” said Emily, “Thanks for the dinner.”

He leaned in toward her, and paused for a moment as she did not respond; then she slid a hand around the back of his neck, and kissed him.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, her thin lips smiling. Then she opened the door with a creak, and went inside, leaving Peter to walk home alone.

Peter awoke groggily the next morning. His first thought was of the night before, his second of the day's firearm training. He heaved himself out of bed.

The cold shower water was the next thing he was conscious of, spraying against his body. His father drank coffee, but Peter could never stomach the taste. Chilled water had brought him to wakefulness since early adolescence, and it continued to do its job well.

He towed the wetness away, though it still clung to his thighs and armpits. He surrendered, hung the towel, and dressed. In his room, he grabbed his identification card, something he rarely needed. But he would today. He slid it into his pocket, and headed downstairs.

His father was already awake, dressed in his work clothes, busily digging into a trio of pancakes, newspaper spread out on the table. He never seemed more fatherly than now, Peter realized.

"Good morning, Peter."

"Good morning, Father."

He sat down at the table, in front of his own serving of pancakes. They were a rare treat. Perhaps his mother knew it was gun day, and had made the pancakes to celebrate.

"Did Emily make it home safe last night?" Peter's father asked, not looking up from his newspaper.

"Of course," said Peter.

His father glanced up, for a split-second, before looking down again.

"You've got that gun practice today, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Peter, chewing on pancake.

"I remember that. Wanted a gun afterward, thought it'd be great for hunting. Put eight out of the ten bullets into that target from ... what? Fifty meters back? But I never did. Too expensive."

"Mm," said Peter, "I guess they think its important we learn, just in case."

"Case of what?"

"Nothing," said Peter.

"Well, you're right. Mostly pointless, the whole thing is. But its not exactly treasury-draining, and most of the hunters out in these woods start learning to shoot at this thing."

Peter nodded, and went back to his breakfast. When he had finished, he grabbed the lunch he'd made the night before, said goodbye to his parents, and pushed out the front door.

They had been told to meet at the school. Peter set off through the morning. It was already too bright, and too warm. Peter had hoped for a brisk, sober day, the gray kind that lingered on the edge of rain. Not a depressing gray, a light one that took the edge off of the sun and left the air cool and crisp and comfortable.

At the school, he found Emily in the crowd clustered in the yellow morning sun. She was standing alone.

"Where's Mary?" Peter asked her as he got closer.

Emily just looked at him.

"Sorry," said Peter hastily, "I – I didn't mean for it to be ... like that."

She shrugged.

"Whatever. They'll get over it eventually."

She looked over her shoulder to where they stood, with another group, laughing about something. Then she looked back at Peter, and smiled.

"You're worth it," she said softly.

She reached for his hand, and Peter took it. The warmth of it was different from the warmth of the sun; its was a drying heat, hers was a pulsing beacon. He felt the pulse in her thumb. Suddenly, he was not quite so eager to shoot the guns.

"You ready for today?" he whispered to her.

Her smile crimped.

"Not really," she said, "But I guess we've got to do it at some point."

"That's the spirit," said Peter.

The other students chattered excitedly; Emily seemed entirely glum by comparison.

"Hey, I did get some good news the other day," she said.

"Oh?"

"They accepted me."

"Bandhurth? The business college?"

"Yeah," she said, "Forgot to tell you last night."

Peter looked out at the distant treeline. It was so strange to think she was going away, when away wasn't that far. She would be in the city. He could still see her.

"It's still not until the winter, but still. It's in Nalio, right by the river. They'd be paying me by that time, so I'd have enough to live there while I take classes."

There would be other men in the city, ones closer, not miles away. Better ones, perhaps...

"That's great news," said Peter, forcing himself to smile. It came easier once his thoughts faded from jealousy to happiness for her. Yet it still lingered, dormant.

The rattling sound of the approaching buses caught his ear, and the ears of the many students clustered about. As the buses shuddered to a stop, they began to swarm forward excitedly, boarding them, feet stomping up the crimped metal stairs. Peter walked next to Emily as they followed the river of bodies, sitting with her. The sun was shining. It would be a beautiful day.

"My name is Atocor, and I will be your weapons instructor," the man said gruffly, "When I say, you are to approach the firing line, and stand in front of the weapon on the table, but do *not* touch it. If you do, you will be asked to leave, and not return."

He looked around the students, as though daring them to disobey him. No one moved.

"Forward."

In rough unison, they stepped up to the thin tables that stood at the end of the long roofed firing shelter. Beyond was the gray sky, a treeline some fifty meters away, and a line of paper targets hanging from posts at about half that distance. On the table sat a rifle barely a meter long, its barrel no thicker than Peter's finger. The military used more powerful weapons; or, at least, they had them. These were for practice. Beside it sat three small metal boxes; magazines of ammunition. Peter saw the top bullet sticking out of each one.

"Now, when I say, carefully pick up the rifle directly in front of you, as I do. Watch me carefully first. Do not, under *any* circumstances, point it at another person."

Atocor carefully raised the rifle, the stock against his shoulder, and turned, not raising it until it pointed downrange. The weapon looked much smaller in his hands.

"After you do so, load a magazine into the weapon. Slide it in so that the pointy end of the bullet points down the barrel."

The students copied him now, carefully lifting the rifles, pointing them away, and inserted the magazines. A clatter from down the line alerted Peter; one of the girls, three people to his left, had dropped her rifle onto the table, her face wide with fear.

"I – I can't do this," she said.

Atocor looked at her.

"Hold on a moment."

He stepped down from the platform, approaching the girl. She seemed to shrink as he approached her.

"You ... do *not* ... drop the weapon under *any* circumstances. Certainly not unless it's in some kind of goddamn firefight, do you understand?"

"It wasn't loaded," she said.

"All guns are loaded. All the time. Is that clear?"

She nodded.

“Good,” said Atocor, pointing at the rifle where it lay askew on the table, “Now pick it up.”

“Please ... I – I can't.”

“Why not?”

“It's ... it's a gun. I don't like it. It bugs me.”

“Why?”

“Cause it can kill people?” she said, sounding a bit less timid now.

Atocor grinned.

“Lots of things can kill people, miss. You ever cook your own food? Use a knife? Hell, you write with a pencil in school, I'm sure you could do some damage with that if you wanted.”

“Yeah,” she said, “But a knife's for cutting food, a pencil's for writing. A gun's for killing.”

Atocor shook his head.

“Gun's for defending yourself.”

“Why do you need it? We don't have to defend ourselves from anything. Why do we even have to learn how to – ”

“Because the goddamn law says so,” said Atocor with a rough, barking chuckle, “And it's my job to make sure as hell we don't have a bunch of spineless cowards for a population! So get back in line, and suck it up. Your car can burst into flames, your house can fall in on you, your stove can explode, but I don't see you trembling in front of those. Gun's not gonna bend its barrel back and blow your pretty face up, girl. It's a weapon, it goes where you point it.”

The girl's face held a petulant glare, but she got back into line, and picked up her rifle again. Peter turned to Emily, whose hands quivered slightly. She looked at him.

“Next step,” said Atocor, now returning to the platform, the two attendants still standing motionless behind him, “Charge the weapon. Chamber the first bullet. There's a bolt on the back of the barrel. Turn it counter-clockwise, pull it back til you hear a click, push it forward, turn it clockwise back. Should be easy.”

Peter copied Atocor. The bolt did not turn easily at first, but with a little more push, he got it to work. Emily had a bit more trouble; her hands were visibly shaking now. But she pulled the bolt and pushed it back, twisting it resolutely, turning back to look at Atocor, lips pursed, her green eyes waiting for his next instruction.

“Now,” said Atocor, “This is the important part. Your weapon is now ready to fire. Some guns have a safety, yours does now. On a semi-automatic weapon, you would need to switch that off. Take careful aim at the paper target down range from you. You need to line up the thin post at the end of the barrel in the center of the notch closer to you. Then center that over your target; in this case, that lovely black and white circles at the end of the field. When I say, you will fire your weapon. Gentle, even squeeze on the trigger. Pulling hard will throw your shot off.”

Peter lined up the sights carefully, each one sliding in and out of focus. The steadiness of his hand surprised him, barely a tremor to his arms as he took careful aim.

“Fire!”

The command surprised him. The cracking of gunfire from all around made him flinch. He glanced to Emily; she was shaking badly, and her gun went off a full second after the others, a wild shot that surely went into the trees. Her face contorted with discomfort.

“To chamber another round, repeat the bolt action. You have ten shots. Make them count. Fire until you're empty.”

Emily shot again, another wild miss. Peter imagined some beast, thick and stubby and horrible, something that he had never seen. It charged across the field, eyes hungry, jaws slavering. It was going to tear her apart while she shot at it, her shaky wrists throwing off every shot.

Something took hold of him, an awareness of where everything was. He lined up the sights on the target. His entire body was still as he squeezed the trigger. A sharp crack snapped at his eardrums,

and a black dot appeared on the paper target, right in the center circle.

He lowered his rifle, and set it on the table, the cracks of gunfire all around him. Emily had finally hit, a small hole just outside the largest circle. She gripped the gun tightly, her knuckles white, but her face relaxed, no longer quivering. Calmly, she lowered her weapon too, frowning.

"Nice shooting," she said in a low voice.

"You too," said Peter. Emily shook her head.

"I would've been dead if it'd been real."

"That's the point of practicing."

She smiled wistfully.

"There's no point in practicing," she said.

"Don't let Atocor hear you saying that," said Peter, his eyes bulging in false warning. She looked surprised for a second, then recovered, and laughed. Peter laughed too.

After an hour they stopped for lunch, sitting on the sun-bathed hill a short walk from the range. Peter sat with Emily on the grass. The blue sky and fresh seemed to wash away the scent of gunpowder that still gripped Peter's nostrils. Each of them had used up about ten magazines. He had fired one hundred bullets. So had the other forty or fifty participants. Peter knew it had to be a lot of money, wasted on what almost everyone considered a needless ritual.

But it was necessary enough to still happen.

Peter gazed out at the Wall, in the far distance, nothing but a gray line from here, weaving behind the trees in some places. What was out there? He had been out there, a privilege few had, yet he realized he had learned nothing. The journeys had not sated a drop of his curiosity. And now they were gone. No; the government, the leaders had taken them. All while they built walls and forced their people to shoot guns to fight some invisible fear. He gazed at Emily, who chewed slowly, a sandwich dangling from her limp wrist, her eyes lost in the distance. It had bothered her. It suddenly angered Peter to think about Emily forced to shoot a gun, something he had not minded the night before, had even teased her about. But not now; now it seemed like it had affected her somehow.

The petulant anger seemed childish, but Peter felt justified in indulging it. But what could he do right now? He nudged Emily gently.

"Hey."

She turned, looking at him blankly.

"You okay?" said Peter.

She looked at him for a minute; not meeting his eye, looking at his neck.

"I guess so," she said, before turning back to her sandwich.

"Is there something I don't know?" said Peter.

"There are a lot of things you don't know, Peter," said Emily, her voice tinged by annoyance.

"Alright," said Peter. He touched her hand. "Can you tell me?"

She shook her head.

"It's nothing. Really."

"Yeah it is," said Peter. He reached for her face, pulling it to face him, "Look, if we're going to do this, you've got to tell me what's going on. Otherwise we stop telling each other stuff and it all falls apart. I know that much."

She considered him for a moment. Then she turned away again, looking down at her clasped hands in her lap.

"I ... I just ... he barks at us like soldiers. Like he's a drill sergeant. We're not soldiers. He yelled at that poor girl. I thought she was about to cry."

"I thought *you* were."

"I don't know... it just doesn't belong in our lives, Peter. I shot at that target and saw the paper rip

out the back, and thought, what if that had been a person? Is that we're supposed to learn? To do that to people?"

Peter watched her. Emily looked at him, then off into the distance, shaking her head slowly.

"It's just pointless."

Peter couldn't think of a way to respond.

Lunch ended, and they were brought into the pavilion again. Except, this time, the floor was covered with padded mats.

"What's this?" asked one of the students. Atoctor stood, holding a well-carved wooden knife in his hand, across the maze of mats.

"This is knife training," said Atoctor, gesturing to the tables, where the rifles had been removed, and replaced with many wooden knives, blunt but realistic looking.

"What if we get a splinter?" asked one girl. Atoctor cackled again, almost cruelly, and ignored her. He stood tall, gazing out at the crowd of students, and pointed to Peter.

"Come here," he said commandingly.

Peter froze, but then walked forward, numbly, feeling the eyes on him, following him, pitying him. Atoctor pressed a knife into his hand.

"Here, take that," he murmured gruffly. He turned Peter around to face the others. Emily's eyes caught his, and he met her gaze. Her face held no trace of amusement.

"Now," called Atoctor, "If someone attacks you with a knife, you are to block their limb. Do not try to parry their knife with yours. That is foolish."

"Can we stab their arm?" came a voice that sounded vaguely like Tom. Two others behind him laughed.

"Would you like to miss, and have their knife drive into your chest?" said Atoctor, his voice dead serious by contrast, "Such maneuvers are reserved for *experts*, for those who have practiced, who can strike precisely, and reliably."

"Oh."

"Continuing," said Atoctor, "You will want to cross your limb with theirs. Then, if possible, grab it quickly. If it is a non-lethal fight you will want to do this. May I have a volunteer?"

Emily nudged Peter jokingly.

"No," he muttered.

"Come on," she whispered in his ear, "I bet you can take him."

Peter found himself raising his hand. He had been looking forward to this, after all.

For the first time that day, it seemed, Atoctor let a smile onto his face. It was weak, but it was there. He beckoned to Peter.

"Ah, yes, good," said Atoctor, "Don't usually get a volunteer. What's your name, son?"

"Peter."

"Got a last name?"

"Green. Peter Green."

Atoctor looked puzzled for a second.

"Never heard of them, then," said Atoctor.

"We live out on the edge of the valley," said Peter, feeling like an idiot even as he said the words, "Along the slopes."

"Right," said Atoctor. He held out his hand, a wooden knife dangling from his grip. Peter reached for it, and took it cautiously. Its tip was rounded, its edge blunt. It was certainly meant to be for practice.

"It's not sharp, so don't worry about that," said Atoctor, "Worst injury I ever had from one of these was a few bruised ribs, and maybe a couple splinters where the finish wore off. Nothing serious."

Atoctor stepped back onto one of the mats.

"It's always important to be ready for your enemy," said Atoctor. He motioned for Peter to come closer, and Peter obeyed. They stood facing each other.

"Now, when someone swings overhead at you," said Atoctor, motioning for Peter to demonstrate, "You block with your arm high and across. Almost like a salute."

Peter felt solid bone meet his wrist.

"Then you grab," said Atoctor, wrapping his fingers around Peter's arm. "And twist." Peter felt flaring pain run up his arm. His fingers opened involuntarily, and the knife clattered to the floor.

"Just like that, your enemy is disarmed."

Peter suppressed a glare, forcing himself to straighten up graciously, and meet Atoctor's eye. His wandering gaze found Emily, who watched with an expression of faint amusement. He stooped to pick up his knife, keeping eye contact.

"Now let's try it again, a little faster," said Atoctor, as Peter turned back to him. He fell into a ready stance. Peter copied him, his knife loose in his fingers.

Something glinted in Peter's mind, as though he were lost in thought, and only now coming back to his senses. He saw Atoctor's hand shifting, darting low toward him, saw his own hand move to intercept it, as if imagining it instead of seeing it.

Then his fingers were around Atoctor's grizzled wrist, feeling the rough skin, and twisting it. With a sharp grunt, the knife fell free. In a flash, Peter jabbed his own knife into the side of Atoctor's ribs. Furiously, Atoctor threw Peter off, and he staggered back. The man straightened up, glaring at Peter with a mix of disbelief and fury.

"Right," said Atoctor, "Well, I was going to say, always be ready for your enemy. Even their most ... unexpected actions. But it seems Peter here has ... already learned the lesson well."

Peter still had not recovered his composure. What had happened? Had he fainted? He felt as though he had suddenly wakened, though he did not feel tired. And he'd been awake since the early morning.

"Have you taken self-defense lessons before, boy?" Atoctor asked.

Peter simply stared at the wooden knife in his hand, and at the faded teal practice mat at his feet.

"Answer me!" said Atoctor, suddenly loud and commanding.

"No," answered Peter, raising his eyes.

"Right," said Atoctor, "Another volunteer please? Someone else?" He still looked at Peter as though he were insane.

A girl, taller than Emily but shorter than Peter, raised her hand. Behind her, a boy, slightly taller than Peter, with dark hair and a sharp chin, volunteered as well. Atoctor pointed to him, and he stepped forward. Peter held out the knife to him as he approached, and he took it, expressionlessly. Peter stepped off of the mat, and walked back to join Emily.

"What happened?" Emily whispered.

"Lucky guess."

"What?"

"I'll tell you later."

They watched Atoctor demonstrate several more basic attacks and counters. The boy introduced himself as Darren. He had to be barely a year older than Peter, if that.

"I know him," muttered Emily, as Darren was knocked to the floor by one of Atoctor's demonstrations.

"How?"

"I had a class with him. Last year. He took Mary to the dance last year, before she started dating Tom. It was just the one time."

Peter remembered the dance clearly. He had not gone, but he had remembered seeing Emily after school, in a dark-blue dress, one that clung to her waist, the thin fabric strained around her slender form. He had turned as she had passed, just for a few seconds, but for enough to imprint the memory. He

should have invited her then. He had certainly thought about it.

"I had to go by myself," said Emily, "No one asked me."

"Probably too nervous," said Peter.

"Maybe."

Their attention turned back to Atoctor now, who had finished with Darren now, and was talking to them again.

"All right," he said, "So you have seen these basic maneuvers now." He gestured to a table behind him, upon which lay many more pairs of blunt, wooden knives.

"Pair off, and practice. First one to touch their knife to the other wins. Use what I have taught you. Practice, and test yourself. Remember, failure here means nothing. Failure against a real enemy means death."

Emily poked Peter in the side, as the others around them swarmed about, finding partners.

"We gonna fight each other?" she asked gently.

"Of course," said Peter.

They walked over to the table, each picking up a knife. Emily examined hers for a moment.

"Why don't you fight with something bigger, I wonder?" she said, "Like a hatchet. My father uses it for splitting firewood."

"I don't know," said Peter, "Probably heavier. Slower."

She shrugged, and walked toward one of the unused practice mats.

"Here good?"

"Yeah, why not?" said Peter.

They turned, and faced each other. Emily gripped her knife tightly, her knuckles white. Their eyes met for a moment.

"Ready?" Peter asked.

"Yeah," said Emily, "Go. Whatever."

Peter loosened his legs a little, staring at her for a few seconds. Then, without warning, he swiped at her, aiming low, away from her face. She sprang back, swinging her arm wildly in front of her. Peter almost laughed.

"I wasn't ready," she said shakily, stepping forward again.

"Are you ready now?"

She lunged at him suddenly. Peter's arm caught hers, but she lurched to the side, tearing herself free. Peter tried to counter, but her knife jabbed into his ribs painfully. He winced, and staggered back.

"Sorry," muttered Emily.

"Fine, fine," said Peter, "That's one for you."

They fought again, a swift encounter that lasted barely five seconds, and ended with the dull edge of Emily's knife against Peter's throat. She smiled.

"I'm almost good at this."

"You are," said Peter, feeling faintly emasculated. But he stepped back to face her again.

Two more fights, both for Emily. She looked proud now.

"Someone's talented," said Peter as he knelt to pick up his knife again.

"Yeah, maybe," said Emily, "If there was any use for it. Or maybe you're just bad at this."

"I beat Atoctor. Tore the knife right out of his hand."

"Maybe my prettiness is distracting you."

Their eyes met. She looked curious.

"How *did* you do that?" she asked.

"I ... I don't know," said Peter. But it felt wrong to lie to her, "Wait, I'll show you. Do something unexpected."

"What?"

"Do something unexpected."

“Like what?”

“I don't know. Feint. Try to trick me.”

“Um. Okay.”

They watched each other for a moment, Emily readying herself. Peter saw her eyes dart to his midsection several times, and then her muscles tensed suddenly. Peter saw the wooden blade spring forward, but angling upward, toward his shoulder instead of his stomach. He brought his arm across fast, barely aware of it, but knowing he had made the right decision. It all seemed so slow, yet it was happening quickly. In a flash, he swept the knife out of her hand. He heard a startled shriek from across the room, followed by the sound of clattering. Emily winced, then turned to stare at Peter, her mouth hanging open in shock.

“That ... you knew.”

“Somehow,” said Peter, turning to the side, where a girl with blond hair was approaching them. She wore a scowl. When she reached them, she held out Emily's knife.

“I believe this is yours.”

Peter took it.

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, glancing at Emily. The girl walked off, leaving Emily facing him. Her eyes held curiosity, but the kind that a grotesque animal would inspire. Not admiration. Something more distant than that.

They practiced together four more times, before Atoctor called on them to stop. Peter did not feel the sensation return; he was glad it was gone. After it was over he and Emily spent some time joking about Atoctor and his sternness, the look in his eye that made them think war would break out any second. It was almost ludicrous, once they were away from him.

The rickety old bus lurched back along the road, students chattering, Emily sitting next to Peter, holding his hand in his lap as she leaned against his shoulder. Peter stared out the smeared window at the gray sky. The clouds had swept in from the north tip of the valley, covering the brilliant sun that had shined earlier that day. Now a sepulchral shadow fell over the carpet of trees that ran through the belly of the valley, cool but tranquil. Peter watched a few patches of sunlight on the opposite slope, shifting as the clouds did.

He and Emily were among the last off the buses. The wind brushed against their faces, a suddenly gust that tossed Emily's hair over her face. She grimaced and brushed it away.

“Walk me home?” she asked Peter.

“Sure.”

They broke away from the mess of students, who were already filing off in different directions, and began to walk up the gravelly road that led home.

“You're parents aren't going to wonder why you're late?”

“I don't care,” said Peter.

“Well, thanks,” said Emily. She gave his hand a squeeze as they walked. “So are we going out now, or what?”

“You think that was our second date back there? Shooting guns and wrestling with knives?”

“I don't know. You didn't seem to mind the first one.”

Peter glanced at her.

“I'm *joking*,” she said, “But it's not like we can go out for fine dining in Nalio once a week. We have to take what we can get.”

“No you don't,” said Peter, “We'll do that someday.”

She smiled at him.

“Really?”

“Really. I ought to have done it a long time ago.”

"Well, thanks."

"You'll be the one driving. You've got the car, right?"

"For driving to work!"

"Well, misuse it for once."

She took his hand.

"I'll do it. Once. For you."

She leaned over and kissed him on the nose. A wet crackling sound surprised them, and they sprang apart. A second later, a car came around the bend in the forest road, rolling over the gravel. Peter peered at the driver, but could not tell who it was. Someone young.

It passed, and Emily stopped, and turned around.

"He looked familiar," she said.

"Who was he?" asked Peter.

Emily stared after the car for a moment, a quizzical look on her face, before turning back to Peter again.

"No one. Nothing."

"Okay..."

"Let's just keep walking."

"Who was it, Em? Come on. You had a look on your face."

"Okay. Fine. It looked like one of the councilmen my father is friends with. Enot Ryans."

Peter snorted.

"What kind of name is that?" he said.

"He's got pretty popular in Nalio, Peter. You should watch what you say about him."

"Has he got microphones everywhere?"

"That's not the point. He's in charge of funding to government agencies. Like the military. And the Expeditionary Battalion."

"So I should have followed him with a can of spray paint?"

"Peter, stop. It's not his fault. There's lots of other councilmen." She looked over her shoulder again. "I just don't understand why he's up here. The only houses up here are yours, and mine, and a couple others."

"Why would he be at your house?"

"Because he's friends with my father. They might have been talking about something. He might have been delivering news. But he's never done that before, except over really big things."

"What really big things?"

"Remember the chemical explosion in Nalio? Remember when they thought it *wasn't* an accident?"

"Yeah."

"That's the last time we had him over for dinner."

Peter heard the tenseness in her voice.

"I wouldn't worry. It's probably just a friendly visit."

Emily reached for his hand again.

"Probably."

He left her at the door with a short kiss, and a promise to see her at school the next day. Most times he would linger, and they would talk for a few minutes, but for some reason he wanted to get away from her now. Something about her tone of voice had unnerved her. What did she know that he didn't?

She would tell him, of course she would. Yet he had told her of his strange foresight. Maybe she no longer trusted him. Maybe she *knew* something about it. Maybe someone else knew about it. Maybe that was the purpose of that mysterious visit. Had this Enot Ryans been visiting Peter's own parents?

His paranoia mounted as he reached his own front door, opening it wide, and heading upstairs. He had some homework to do before dinner; that would take his mind off of things. History homework, something he could revel in the hypocrisy of. They said so much when they knew so little.

The phone rang. Peter almost jumped out of his skin, his knee visibly jerking. He froze in the staircase as he heard his mother walking to answer it. Peter strained his ears, trying to hear the muttered voices, fruitlessly. Then his mother called up to him.

“Peter! It's for you!”

His heart pulsed audibly in his ears as he descended the stairs, rounding the corner, walking toward his mother, who held the receiver out to him. As he approached, he tried to discern something from her facial expression. Was it good news? Bad news? A summons? He took the phone and put it to his ear.

“Hey, who is this?”

“Peter? It's Thale. You all right?”

“Yeah,” said Peter, “What's going on?”

“Nelc's got the ship for one last trip. One last try.”

“What?”

“They cut our funding,” said Thale, “No more fuel. No more trips. Nelc's had to find another job, and it doesn't pay well. He's a lowly mechanic in Nalio fixing up cargo cruisers. But he's managed to get enough fuel for one more journey. This one spot he's not gone yet.”

“And?”

“And it's our last shot, Pete! One more chance to prove we're worth it.”

Peter looked over his shoulder.

“Who else?”

“Jeyin, Abby. A couple others,” said Thale, “Galwin, probably.”

“Of course,” said Peter.

“Hey, it's not an official trip. You want to bring your friend along, you can.”

Peter realized he was talking about Emily. Besides Thale, who else was he friends with?

“Emily?”

“Sure. We need all the help we can get.”

Peter sighed.

“I'll ask her. When is this happening?”

“Weekend. Only time everyone can get away. Nelc is using up a sick day for it.”

“They're riding him hard, aren't they?”

“That's what happens when the people you elected turn around and piss on you,” said Thale bitterly. Peter nodded in agreement, before realizing Thale couldn't see him.

“Well, I'm in.”

“Another thing,” said Thale, “It'd be better to keep this under wraps. Nelc's getting things squared away with the air traffic control people, but I don't want it getting out til we're out there, really. So don't let anyone know except Emily.”

“Damn it, Thale, you're piling on requirements here.”

“Yeah, sorry. Can you get into Nalio on the weekend?”

“I don't know.”

“With Emily?”

“I said, I – ” Peter paused. It felt dishonest to do, but suddenly he had an idea. One that might actually work.

“Actually, I can, I think, Thale,” he said, “I think I know exactly what I'm going to do.”

“Alright, good,” said Thale, “See you on the weekend. Same place we usually meet. Eight in the morning, sharp.”

“Will do.”

"Bye, Pete."

"Bye, Thale."

He hung up the phone, and walked carefully out of the kitchen, past his mother, who was reading in the den.

"Who was that?"

"Emily," Peter lied, "Wanted to know the assignments for tonight."

"Can I ask what's going on with you two?"

"Nothing," said Peter, "Can we go into Nalio this weekend? Just for the day."

"Where are you going?"

"A movie."

Peter's mother looked at him, not answering. His fist tightened.

"Fine, it's a date. We'll be home before midnight."

"All right," said Peter's mother, turning back to her reading, "But you're going to have to get a job to pay for all these outings, Peter."

"I will," said Peter.

"By the way," she said, "Your grandparents are coming to visit tomorrow. Just to let you know."

"Oh. Right," said Peter, trying to sound thrilled.

"It's been a while since they've visited."

"Eight years," said Peter.

"Mhm," his mother replied, turning the page in her book.

She seemed to have no more words for him. He turned, and headed up the stairs.

The next day he told Emily.

"Outside the Wall?" she whispered incredulously as they sat under the tree at lunchtime. Peter nodded, watching Tom and Mary, who sat across the clearing. Between them, scattered in small groups, sat at least forty other students, yet Peter felt as though Tom were watching him.

"It just seems... surreal. I don't know, Peter, I'll have to think about it."

"We'll have dinner after. In Nalio. By the river. I've got enough in my savings for it."

"That's a lot of money, Peter! I didn't think you were serious."

"I never buy anything. And I am."

She shifted uncomfortably, her slender thigh crushing pine needles as she did, and reached for her sandwich.

"I don't know," she said, before taking a bite.

"It's our last chance," said Peter, "I ... please, Em. Do this for me?"

He looked at her pleadingly. She met his eye.

"Why do you even need me along?"

"Because..." Peter paused, his words foundering, "Because I want you with me. If we find something. *When* we find something."

She gave him a faint smile, but it faded quickly.

"Isn't this trip illegal?"

"Well, no, not really," said Peter, "Why?"

"Look, I don't want to risk my reputation over ... this, Peter. I know it means a lot to you."

"It does. But it would mean just as much to you, if you went out there. Picture it, Emily. Something you've never seen before. Mountains, enormous trees..."

"You've told me," said Emily, "It sounds amazing. I ... I just."

"I swear you won't get in trouble. If we get caught, I'll say I blackmailed you into it or something, all right?"

She sighed.

"Fine. Alright."

"You won't regret it."

"You *are* taking me to dinner, after all. I guess I have to make it up to you somehow."

"Well, there are other ways you could do that," said Peter with a wry grin. Emily gave him a sidelong look, then leaned against him.

"Have you talked to Mary since..."

"Yeah," said Emily, "And Tom, too. Just not when you're around."

"I guess I ought to apologize to him," said Peter.

"No," said Emily, "He was a jerk, to be honest. It's not your fault that they canceled all that. You shouldn't have punched him, though."

"Yeah, well, that's me," said Peter flatly, "Thinking with my fists."

Emily glanced at him.

"Well, maybe we can let it go this once," she said. Peter chuckled.

They finished their lunches in peace, until the bell rang. Emily sat forward, brushing pine needles off of the back of her legs. Peter stood up and followed her into the school.

The afternoon classes seemed to slip by in seconds, with Peter's mind whirling and churning, thick with thoughts of what they might find. The last place that Nelc hadn't looked. Of course, there were places further out, but those would require more fuel, and likely a journey that wouldn't fit into one day. Perhaps that was why the Expeditionary Battalion had gotten the ax. They had never spent the night outside of the valley.

Peter wondered what it was like out there at night. Perhaps that was when the fabled monsters came out, he mused. Fierce predators who left gut-wrenching screams and shredded entrails in their wake. The stories had terrified Peter as a child. They still tinged the world outside with a faint aura of fear. Yet, with each venture, it had faded, until Peter wondered if there had been any truth to them at all. All he knew, was that someone knew more than he did.

He took notes when his mind was not wandering, struggling to fit in the most important tidbits of information. He'd read the rest later. Or ask Emily to fill in the blanks. She had more concentration than he did.

What if they didn't find anything? What if that was it? There was nothing out there? There *had* to be, and yet, there was always that chance...

He met Emily outside after the last bell, took her hand, and greeted her with a short kiss. They started on their way home.

"Interesting lesson, I thought," said Emily quietly.

"I guess so."

"You disagree?"

"Wasn't really paying attention."

"What *were* you paying attention to?"

"I don't know. Other things."

"Thinking about the trip?"

"Yeah."

She sighed.

"You're always thinking about it, aren't you?"

"What?"

"What's out there."

"Not all the time. But a lot."

She shrugged.

"I guess that's what I found ... I don't know, alluring about you. Most people, they just ... they

think these things, but they let them go.”

“Why?”

“Because they have a life here, Peter. Families. Work. Homes. Friends. They don't need to know what's out there.”

“But there *is* something out there. How can they go about not knowing?”

Emily stopped at the note of agitation in Peter's voice. He looked up at the sky helplessly, shaking his head.

“How can it not bother them, day after day? Where we came from? I just ... I don't understand it. They might have lives here, but how can they just ... not know?”

“You're different than a lot of people, Peter.”

“So you're telling me you don't care either? You can go until you die, not knowing what's outside that wall? It's never going to itch at you, until it gets to be too much to bear?”

Emily met his gaze as he turned back to her, and her cool eyes chilled his indignation. He gulped, while she exhaled slowly, looking out at the carpet of evergreens, rolling in submission.

“Maybe it does. Maybe I just didn't want to admit it to myself, Peter.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. It's like ... it's safe here. It might not be safe out there.”

A gust of wind hissed through the pine trees, which shifted and swayed. The stiff, cold air sent an unpleasant shiver over Peter's shoulders.

“I worried about you, Peter, every time you went out there. I know you say it's fine, but they never let you stay out there at night. They didn't seem to want you to go at all. And I always wondered. And eventually I realized how much I was frightened something would happen to you. And I realized... how much I cared for you.”

The late afternoon sky seemed weary, as Peter looked at Emily's honest eyes, green like the pine trees behind her.

“I love you, Peter.”

She bit at her lip. Peter heard something from behind, a car perhaps, climbing the slope-side roads. Yet he could not turn away, his eyes locked on Emily's face, pale but for rosy cheeks.

“I love you too, Emily.”

He meant it. Really and truly he meant it. Something warm and thick spread in his chest, burning away the hopelessness he felt, trapped in this sliver of the world. He reached for her, hugging her tight to him. He heard the car roll by, but could not care less.

When they broke apart, her face held a weak smile. No, just a nervous one. The words had come out too soon. Instead of building up on solid ground, they had leaped from a precipice, and Peter did not know where to go. But he hadn't been lying.

They kept walking, without words, hand in hand, shoulders brushing together from step to step. His forehead felt light, as though he was being carried to a different reality. The sky above darkened, and misty rain, almost ethereal, descended onto them. But the droplets grew thicker, and by the time they had reached Emily's house, it was a steady rain.

“You can come in for a while if you want,” Emily offered, her pink lips curling invitingly.

“I can't today, Em. I've got a lot of homework.”

She frowned.

“Tomorrow. I promise.”

“It won't be raining tomorrow.”

“Still.”

“You're *sure* you want to walk back in the rain?”

“You know it doesn't bother me.”

“All right. Night, Peter.”

“Night, Em.”

They embraced again, sharing another long kiss. Peter began to turn away, then stopped.

"Ah, damn it..."

"What?"

"My grandparents. Coming to visit this afternoon. I'd forgotten about it 'til now."

"What's wrong with that?"

He paused.

"Nothing really, I guess."

"Well, good luck with them."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Bye."

She closed the door behind her, no longer willing to stand in the rain. Peter turned, walking back along her driveway, back to the road.

The walk home soaked his hair thoroughly. When he arrived home, he spotted his grandparents car in the driveway. Something clicked in his mind; he realized it was one of the cars that had passed he and Emily on their way home. As he walked to the door, he hoped they hadn't seen him with her.

He braced himself as he walked in, hearing the clink of glasses from the next room. He closed the door as quietly as he could, and sneaked up the stairs. In the bathroom, he toweled his hair dry, looked at the mirror, and sighed. He couldn't avoid greeting his grandparents, but he could at least have a moment to prepare himself first.

Surrendering, he left his schoolbag and coat in his room, and descended the stairs again. They met him in the kitchen, a pair of wrinkled faces, with warm smiles, embracing him and commenting on his growth. He smiled back. It wasn't so bad. Not yet.

"It's been so long, Peter," said his grandmother.

"Yeah it has," said Peter politely, "How is Brasme?"

"Oh, you know," said his grandmother, throwing her hand out as though it should be obvious, "All that smog, it can't be good for an old lady's lungs."

"Sounds awful," said Peter sympathetically.

"Well, we've got a good air filter. Isn't that right, John?" she called into the other room.

"Right," said Peter's grandfather, out of sight, "Put it in myself, just a month ago. Air's much cleaner now. Though I doubt it was much of a problem before. If it was that unhealthy, they wouldn't let people live there, would they?"

"I suppose not," said Peter's grandmother, "Now, who was that girl I saw you walking home with, Peter? On the way here?"

Peter clenched his fist behind his thigh, out of sight of anyone else.

"Emily. Her name is Emily."

"Ah," said his grandmother with a knowing smile, "She seems nice."

Peter simply nodded. He felt his cheeks reddening slightly. He changed the subject, to their apartment in Brasme, to what they had been up to lately. Anything to get them away from Emily.

She was more than welcome to ramble on for an hour, and Peter smiled and nodded. He listened, but not completely. It wasn't as though he needed to listen to every word of her stories to get the general idea of them.

Finally, he escaped to his room for a while, under the guise of having homework to do. He did, but once he closed the door behind him, he could find little motivation to do any of it. He slumped onto his bed, on his back.

His words to Emily came back, and the sensation and sight of her with them. He hadn't lied. And yet he felt unsafe, as though any moment his words would come back to haunt him. Emily was home now, with her family. He wondered if she was thinking about him right now. Or when she would next.

Finally, the thoughts became too much, and he forced himself into his homework. He made it through four of the eight vector problems he had been assigned, before a voice called his name for

dinner. He stared down at the paper, the heel of his hand black with graphite from rubbing it on the page. Then he sighed, got up, and headed downstairs.

As they dug through potatoes and chicken, Peter tried gamely to keep the subject away from his future. But it was inevitable. He would be forced to explain how he had no plans, nothing but a fading dream. There was nothing he wanted to do in the valley. Beside his family, and Emily, there was nothing for him here.

He murmured some excuse when he had cleared his plate, to slip upstairs. They let him go without protest.

One more day of school, then one more night with his grandparents, then he would be free again. If only for a few hours. The excitement was too much; he spent two hours on the final four vector problems. The first four had taken half an hour, but Peter was distracted every few moments by daydreams; of abandoning the valley entirely, living in the woods with Emily, finding more people out there somewhere, waiting...

He slid his homework into his backpack. He sat down on his bed for a moment, before flopping onto his back and staring at the ceiling. The urge to know, now so close to being sated, was overwhelming. There *had* to be something there.

He found a book, one about forestry, one he had never read, but his mind kept slipping from the words on the page. It was only when his father came in, that he realized how late it had gotten, and how long he had spent in the miasma of daydreams.

"Night, Peter."

"Night, Dad."

Peter's father stood there for a moment.

"Are we going to build that telescope platform at some point?"

"Sure."

"This weekend?"

"Sure, that'd be fun."

"Okay. See you tomorrow, Peter."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

The door closed, and Peter sighed. He put the book on his nightstand, not even bothering to mark his spot. He slid under the covers, flicked off the light, and spent two hours trying to fall asleep.

The next morning, at breakfast, they ambushed him. A sheet of paper slid next to Peter's bowl of oatmeal. He picked it up and looked at it; a form of some kind. His eyes had barely glanced past "Application" when his father spoke.

"Your grandfather brought that," he said, sipping orange juice, "The library in Nalio is hiring. I figured, what with having nothing to do on the weekends, you'd like to work there."

"Sure," said Peter, eyes focusing on the paper. His forehead felt hot, and he stared narrowly at the words, refusing to look at his father.

"You can finish it, and I'll bring it in to them tomorrow."

"No, that's fine," said Peter, "I'm going into Nalio with Emily tomorrow, I'll drop it off then." He fully intended to leave it on the street somewhere; but then he had an idea. His brow loosened.

"Thanks, dad," he said.

"You're welcome, Peter. Why are you going to Nalio?"

"Emily and I are going to a movie," he said.

"You seem to spending a lot of time with her," said Peter's father.

"Yeah."

"Anything I should know?"

"No," said Peter. He shoveled another spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth.

"Hmm," said Peter's father, who stood up, folded his newspaper, and washed his dishes. Peter heard him heading upstairs; he took the opportunity to polish off what was left of his breakfast, grab his backpack, and hurry out the door to school.

He walked fast, hoping to get onto a side road before his father drove by on his way to work. It was hard to resist avoiding him. But any guilt went away when he spotted Emily, hair bobbing behind her, a few hundred feet ahead. He sprinted to catch up.

She turned as he closed the last few feet; he sent gravel skittering as he slowed.

"Hey, Peter," she said quietly.

"Hey, Em." He leaned in to greet her with a kiss, but she pulled away.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head, then kissed him back. The warmth of it was dampened by a strange look in her eye.

"What's wrong?" said Peter, when they finally broke apart.

"Nothing," she said again, even less convincingly. She looked at him for a second, and frowned, "I just don't know what's happening. With us."

"It's a good thing, right?" said Peter.

"Maybe," she said, "Look, I don't know if it's ... if it's real, or I just feel trapped here, too. And you're the one who ... isn't. Or don't want to be."

They stopped walking for a moment, eyes on each other.

"Does it matter?" said Peter.

"Why would it not matter, Peter?" said Emily shakily, "Look, things have happened quickly, okay? I just need ... time. To think."

"Are you still coming with us?"

"Outside the valley? Is that what matters to you?"

"No, Emily. I want you with me when I go, though."

"Why?" she said, "Why me?"

"Because ... hell, I don't know, Em. Because it's you, okay? That's all it is."

"You don't even have a clue, do you?"

"No, Emily, and I don't think you do, either. That's part of what this is. Not knowing why."

Peter hands in library application when he goes into nalion

Peter and Emily go into nalion under guise of going to a movie. Go on eb last flight, find ancient battlefield / village that was attacked, in one place that nelson hadn't looked yet

make sure enot ryans' visit is not forgotten

Emily's been accepted to Bandhurst business college, bring that up more later

Peter's mother tells him that the gun training frightened her as a girl

Peter begins building platform on tree to stargaze, wants to look at stars with father

father dodges falling tree branch somehow

peters grandparents visit

mention a job opening at the library in natio

peter ends up working there

Thale has a sister, but peter never meets her

Eventually EB leaves valley further... emily and peter's dad dont want him to go.

The lice attack – Peter has fight with father the night before over EB. Emily has friend Mary. Peter has gotten new shoes. Peter had older sister, Rebecca, who died in EB ship crash before Peter was born. Peter buys new shoes for the expedition, as a way to say that he is going, Brasme is a city in the valley, very industrial, not large population. Peter's father finds employment for Peter in Nalio. Peter keeps promising he will take her on a trip outside the valley one day. It is autumn when the lice attack. Thale has a sister but Peter never meets her.

The atmosphere seemed to reflect Peter's mood that morning; a sepulchral gray, as if the world was roofed in concrete. He did not speak to his father at breakfast; instead, he departed as quickly as possible once he had scraped the last bits of oatmeal from his bowl.

The sky was the color of dull silver, and a sepulchral mist seemed to hang in the air. Up on the edges of the valley, Peter could see clouds passing through the fir trees that stood like sentinels, just beyond the wall. Beneath his feet, the gravel of the road had a satisfying crunch to it, and the cool air, while damp, was not humid enough to be uncomfortable. It was the kind of gray day that Peter liked, from time to time.

A kilometer down the road he met Emily. They walked together, as usual, but there were no words between them, other than silent smiles in greeting. It was only when they reached the schoolhouse that Emily spoke.

"There should be more mornings like this one," she said wistfully, looking across the valley.

"What does that mean?" Peter said, "We hardly said anything today."

Emily's face darkened.

"Peter, you know I didn't mean it like that."

There was a pause.

"Sorry. I know what you meant."

"Is something wrong?"

"I had a bit of a fight. Last night. With my dad."

"Was it bad?"

"I hope not."

Emily gave him her best optimistic smile, before walking up the schoolhouse stairs. Peter followed.

"Is this about the Expeditionary Battalion again?" Emily asked, an edge of weariness on her voice. Peter ignored it.

"Yeah."

"Peter, you have to understand him. Your sister died in the Expeditionary Battalion."

"In a ship crash! It could have just as easily happened here in the valley!"

"I know that. But—"

"I was young," Peter cut her off, "It was years ago. He thinks he's the only one hurt by her death, he's wrong. And it doesn't give him the excuse to force me to stay here."

Emily looked at him, an indiscernible emotion stirring in her eyes.

"Peter, I don't want you to go either," she admitted, "It's dangerous."

"It's the only future we have," Peter said firmly, "I don't care about the danger. I'm not going to be an idiot, but I sure as hell am not going to hide in this place the rest of my life, either. It's like a prison. I need to know where we came from. Who we *are*, and what was here before us."

The door to the classroom opened.

"We have history..." Emily began, but trailed off, knowing as she said it that it was a pathetically weak retort. Peter just shook his head, and walked swiftly into the classroom, in front of the other students. Emily followed, a worried look creasing her mouth.

By the time their morning classes were ending, the sun had boiled away the grim clouds, bathing the landscape in warmth. Moisture from the air evaporated, leaving the air humid and muggy. Peter reclined, next to Emily, on one of the logs outside, the other students around them busily chattering. Peter carefully cut his sandwich down the middle, and handed one half to Emily.

"Are you looking forward to another round with Atoctor tomorrow?" Peter asked Emily with a grin. She simply rolled her eyes.

"How hard is it to load a gun and shoot it? Particularly one you'll never use."

"You don't know that."

Emily looked at him.

"Do you hope you'll have to?"

"No, but if I do, I'd like to survive the encounter."

She chuckled, but her smile quickly faded. A man had appeared at the door; one of the teachers that Peter had never had a class with. He suddenly realized he didn't even know the man's name.

"I think that's Professor Alcomb. Mary has a class with him."

"Students," the man said, "Professor Mershin has gone home sick. Anyone in his afternoon vectors class, you have the rest of the day off."

Several students cheered. Emily rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Thank god, I hate vectors," she said.

"We couldn't fly without them," Peter said reproachfully, "Just because they're boring now..."

He stopped when he saw Emily's expression.

Around them, chattering students milled about.

"Want to go for a walk?" Peter asked Emily as they both sat watching.

"Sure," she replied without looking at him.

"Now?"

"Yeah, why not?" Emily shakily got to her feet, gathered what was left of her lunch, and swung her bag over her shoulder. Together they followed the swarm of students leaving the schoolyard. Safe amongst the crowd, Peter gingerly slipped his hand around Emily's. They followed the others for a moment, then slipped off to the side of the road and into the forest.

It was barely a few hundred meters into their walk that Peter's feet began to grow tired, probably due to the uncomfortable grip his new shoes had on his feet. He had purchased them as a sort of ultimatum, and now he was paying the karmic price for his spiteful move. Emily didn't know about the shoes; he had passed off her notice of them with an explanation that the old ones had worn out. He winced as he stepped over a root, and the leather tightened around his foot, driving all the blood back into his ankles.

He remembered the last winter holidays, when Emily had worn a long blue dress and shiny, black, high-heeled shoes. He remembered her complaining almost constantly during the dance about them, similar to his current plight.

He looked at her now, her eyes drifting among the trees as she walked next to him, dressed in green shirt and brown pants, clinging to her alluringly in some places, fluttering freely in others. He wondered if living out his life in the valley could be so bad. He had Emily, he had promise of employment in Nalio, thanks to his father – and now regret washed over Peter for the words he had flung at him blindly the night before. He hated his own hotheadedness.

"What's wrong?" Emily said suddenly. Peter looked at her, then realized, in his anger at himself, he had gripped her hand very tightly; he relaxed his hand, then withdrew it.

"Nothing," he said with a smile. He looked around him. The forest was truly beautiful; tall, thin pines standing amongst a bed of needles, the sky leaking through in some portions of the canopy,

leaving warm yellow spots to dance on the forest floor when the wind blew. The valley was a beautiful place. He could die here.

"This looks like a good place," said Peter.

"For wh—" Emily started to say, but Peter interrupted her words with a kiss, taking both of her hands in his own. For a moment she was surprised; then she reciprocated. Peter pushed her back against one of the wider trees, and continued to kiss her. She put her arms around his waist and neck; he slid his around the curve of her back, knuckles scraping roughly against the tree bark. His other hand went to her hair, warm from the sun, and always plentiful. His fingers began to get lost in it; then there was a deep booming from somewhere in the distance.

"What was that?" Emily said curiously.

Another boom, followed by a vicious cracking sound like nearby lightning, bit through the air. Peter flinched, pulling his hands away from Emily. A warm, sinister trickle ran down his back; something about the sound shook him.

"Let's go see what it is," said Emily, her brow furrowed.

They sprinted through the forest, agilely avoiding looping roots and scattered stones. A sort of thrill came over Peter as they ran between the skinny trees, as though something exciting was happening. He watched Emily running alongside him, a few trees between them, her hair flying behind her head, and hoped that it was nothing, simply a stray lightning bolt or something else, so that he could return to the clearing with her...

They came to a break in the trees, where a few rocks sat like sentinels on the edge of a steep slope that fell into a field below, and as Peter looked out over the valley, the sight pushed all other thoughts away.

Peter stared in shock at the armada approaching the valley. There must have been dozens, all several hundred meters long, sheer charcoal black, shaped like bullets, with rows of hook-like shapes hanging underneath. Smaller dots clustered around the larger forms like crumbs around a slice of bread. As the ships grew closer, Emily's grip became tighter and tighter. He released her hand, continuing to stare.

"We have to get out of here," he said blankly, eyes still locked on the spectacle of the approaching ships. He turned to Emily, whose eyes were suddenly wide with fear, filling up with the vision of the approaching black ships. Peter shook her, snapping her out of her reverie. She followed him as he sprinted back down the road. The sloshing tempo of their footsteps among the wet leaves soon was overpowered by the deep hum of the approaching engines.

A sudden, warm wind sent their clothes into a frenzied dance as the first ship passed over them. Peter changed direction suddenly, making a dash for the cover of the forest, dragging Emily with him, nearly slipping on the wet leaves as he tried to get away from the roadside. Anywhere but the roadside.

A shock wave pulsed through him, his heart stuttering like a skipped record. A split-second later he became aware that something had exploded behind them, as gravel and dirt stung his back and rained down on him. He heard a cry of pain from Emily; her hand pulled away from his. He stumbled against the trunk of a tree; without thinking, he wrapped his arm around it and pulled himself past it, then threw himself to the ground behind it, face-down, shielding his head with his arms. Another explosion shattered a tree not far away; sticks and shreds of bark skittered over his back.

Panic gripped him suddenly. He'd left Emily! No, she was there, her breath warm on his partially-covered face.

"Peter, where do we go?" she cried in between desperate gasps for breath. Another explosion went off somewhere behind them; Peter's eardrums twinged with pain; he forced himself down, struggling to shelter his head with his arms.

"Anywhere is better than here!" he roared.

She helped him to his feet, and they began to run again. Somewhere behind them, there were more explosions, each one feeling like a dull blow to the midsection. Peter heard a staccato snapping

sound; a tree was falling somewhere behind them.

Nothing registered in their minds but the need to flee, and they sprinted on through the forest, coming to a clearing that sloped down to a stream. Following the thin squiggle of water with his eyes, Peter could see a culvert where the stream flowed under the road.

"There," he said, pointing. Emily looked at the culvert, then behind her. Her eyes widened, and she nodded. Peter turned to look.

A small landing craft, looking much like a helicopter, had set down on the road behind them, about one hundred meters away. It was arrow-shaped, and the body appeared to be molded with the wing. Its jagged, angular shape made Peter wonder how it even flew. In the sky above, more of the oddly-shaped aircraft flew in cross-shaped formations, by fives. There had to be dozens of them.

A distant shout brought Peter's eyes back to the landing craft on the road. The front had opened, like a jaw dropping, and soldiers leaped out, one-by-one. Their orange-tinted goggles, strange gas-mask-like face plates, and jet-black, shiny suits immediately struck fear into Peter's heart. They looked like firemen, but a hundred times more terrifying. They carried what appeared to be some type of gun, but Peter could not tell what exactly they were from so far away. As they exited, they immediately fanned out, moving swiftly along the road. One stayed near the landing craft, barking orders in a strange, distorted voice. Further up the hill behind the road, another landing craft touched down on a flat area.

They both watched as five or six of the soldiers exited. Peter suddenly spotted a house, up the hill, forty meters away. A man opened the door, looking out; a second later, he fell from the doorway, a wave of bullets slashing across the front of his house. The soldiers lowered their guns, and turned back to the road.

"Peter..."

"Go for the culvert."

"Now?"

"Yes, now!"

They sprinted over the grass, wind rushing by their faces. A distant popping sound behind them confused Peter; a thrill of terror seized his muscles when he realized it was gunfire. He ran faster.

The fifteen seconds it took to run to the stream seemed like an eternity. Then their feet were splashing in the water, and Emily was ahead of him, running into the dark tunnel without another thought. Peter followed close behind, his heart pounding. His lungs pulled in air faster than he could handle, but he couldn't stop now. The earthy smell of the water filled his nose; unpleasant, but he barely noticed it.

"Where do we go?" It was dark; he couldn't see her.

"If we stay in here, they'll get us. We've got to go out the other side and make for the forest. Just keep running."

Their feet made wet splashing sounds as they slapped against the metal floor of the tunnel. It wasn't that long, and as Peter gazed out into the forest from the other end, he realized how unwilling he was to leave its dark, protective confines.

"Woods ... then where? Get back to the road?"

"They're everywhere, Em, you saw all the ships. We'll be lucky to –"

Suddenly a black form dropped down in front of them from the road above. It kicked Emily in the side as it swung down, knocking her back onto the floor of the tunnel with a gasp of surprise and a rough clank. Peter reacted instantly as the soldier rose his gun, grabbing the barrel, pivoting it out of the way. There was a sharp burst of gunfire, the sound echoing around the thin tunnel to deafen Peter, the muzzle flash stunning him. Panicking, he slammed the heel of his other hand into the soldier's faceplate. Pain flared up his arm, but the soldier staggered out of the tunnel, and fell on his back.

Ears ringing, Peter dove forward, tackling the soldier before he could get up, stomping down on his gun arm with one foot. The whole helmet was metal; there was nowhere he could punch without breaking his hand.

He jammed his elbow into the soldier's throat; suddenly a knee came up and slammed into his back, propelling him forward and onto the ground. He rolled over, struggling to get up. The soldier was faster, staggering to his feet and drawing a knife. Peter stumbled again, looking at the thing. Up close they were no less terrifying. Peter could not see anything of its face; only its bowl-shaped helmet, goggles, and breathing filter were visible over its metal mask. It looked like a pig, but with a face of black steel, and no eyes, just orange lenses with no emotion, and no mercy.

The knife flashed; then a burst of gunfire tore open the front of the soldier's vest, spraying out blood. The soldier raised his knife as he fell to his knees, swiping futilely at Peter, before collapsing to all fours. Emily, with the soldier's gun still in her hands, drove her heel into the side of the soldier's neck, knocking him to the ground.

Affection for Emily washed through him. He wiped a fleck of the deep crimson blood from his cheek as he got to his feet. She was staring at the corpse with rapt curiosity.

Behind them there was a shout, sounding almost like a mechanical bark. They turned around to see another one of the soldiers, at the other end of the tunnel. Emily opened fire, spewing bullets down the tunnel with a rapid tattoo of metallic plunks.

"No!" Peter shouted, tugging her away. She struggled, and both of them fell onto the grass.

"What the hell, Peter!"

"Go, go," whispered Peter, pushing Emily deeper into the forest, "They will have heard that." She ran further into the trees, her feet padding on the pine needles that covered the forest floor. Peter gave one more looking around, then followed.

They had run barely twenty meters when bullets began to shear leaves off the trees around them.

"Keep running!" Peter shouted. He heard a suddenly crescendoing whine as a particularly close shot whizzed by. A bullet struck the ground a few meters ahead of him, aerosolizing a mixture of pine needles and dirt. Around him, holes punched through bark, occasionally pruning branches.

Thirty seconds of frantic running later, the shots tapered off. Peter estimated they'd run about three hundred meters away from the soldiers; he hoped that was enough distance to at least catch his breath and decide what to do next.

A couple meters in front of him, Emily was leaning against a tree, her chest heaving from the exertion. She had a hand against her forehead. Peter went over to her.

"Where to now?" he asked.

"Cannot... believe... you're not more... out of breath," Emily gasped between breaths.

"You all right?" he asked, genuinely concerned. Normally she was the faster runner.

"Yeah," she said, brushing her hair back a bit. Her cheeks were intensely flushed. She looked at him, "I don't know. I think we ought to head for Nalio. They'll know what's going on."

"What if they don't?" Peter replied.

Emily stared at him blankly.

"Never mind," Peter said, "Let's head for the road."

A few minutes later they reached the edge of a steep slope. The road was twenty feet down; beyond that, they had a clear view of the valley. The air was filled with ships. Plumes of smoke reached up like ethereal hands into the air.

"The school is something like ten or eleven kilometers away from Nalio, and we ran at least two. Maybe three."

Emily nodded, "We need to find some sort of transportation, though. We won't make it on foot."

"Maybe *you* won't, if you're so suddenly out of shape. But I—"

Peter stopped. Emily was pointing into the valley. Black shapes dotted the landscape.

"Landing craft. Even if we were better armed than one captured submachine gun between the two of us, I doubt we'd be able to make it through hundreds of soldiers."

"We could sneak past them," said Peter.

"One mistake, and we're dead," Emily replied, shaking her head. She looked further down the road, then pointed at a small house and garage about thirty meters down the road.

"Might have a car," she said.

"If we can find the keys," Peter said.

Emily gave him a look.

"Alright, alright, let's go," he said.

They began to make their way down the slope, keeping low so as not to lose their balance.

A blinding white light broke free from one of the looming air cruisers, and traced its way through the late afternoon sky with a sudden roar, trailing smoke; Peter lost his balance, sliding down the slope on his rear before tumbling into the gravel at the bottom, scratching his arms and elbows. He pushed himself up just in time to watch it crash into a cluster of buildings on the opposite slope of the valley, the flames spreading like water poured from the sky. Even from twenty kilometers away Peter could see the conflagration writhing, as though in ecstasy, as it vaporized its victims.

Beside him, Emily reached the bottom of the slope much more gracefully, and together they ran along the road, the wet, crunching sound of their footsteps instantly muffled in the moist air.

"Must have rained," said Emily.

"Didn't notice before," Peter replied, jogging to catch up.

The windows of the house were shattered when they reached it. Bits of glass lay around the outside of the house like a halo of sparkles. The door was slightly ajar. There were cracks in places on the door frame. Some of the paint had cracked and fallen off.

"Let's check the garage," said Emily.

Peter walked over, wrapped his fingers around the garage door handle, and heaved it up. A myriad of dust particles greeted his nostrils, and he pulled his head back, frantically rubbing his nose, before sneezing violently. When he straightened up, Emily was laughing.

"It's not like you would have done any – what?" Peter stopped short as Emily's expression cooled from warm laughter to shock. He whipped his head around.

One of the larger, bullet-shaped ships was passing overhead. A moment after Peter turned his head, its shadow passed over them; not particularly sharp on such a cloudy day, but all the same Peter could tell that his surroundings had grown darker.

Up close Peter could see, underneath the thing, a roiling, undulating purple membrane held in place by a huge metal ring, as if it were the ship's navel. Occasionally, smaller landing craft would emerge from the behemoth's underbelly, and their exit would warp the membrane like a soap bubble.

The rest of the ship reminded Peter of a wasp with backward legs; two great towers hung down from the back, curving forward. The ship seemed almost segmented, like an insect's body. In some places small fins jutted from it; in other places, smaller, bubble-like shapes that seemed to be constructed from some oily organic material appeared to contain weapons. The entire thing was so massive Peter could not fully judge its shape; it took up most of the sky above them, and it was at least a hundred meters up. He knew he should run from the thing, bolt inside so that he would at least have some concealment or protection from whatever weapon hid inside those black bubbles, but he was transfixed by the intrusion of this dark black giant into the idyllic valley he inhabited.

"It must be at least a kilometer long," Emily said from beside him, similarly in awe.

Another landing craft exited the from the strange violet portal on the ship's underside; rather than divert its path to follow its fellows, it began to descend almost straight down, toward the road ahead of Peter and Emily.

"Get inside," said Peter. Emily stepped back out of sight and ran, and a moment later Peter heard the door of the house opening. He watched the thing until it was maybe thirty meters above the ground, then followed her, sprinting over the threshold and into the cozy, wooden antechamber of the house, before spinning and shutting the door behind him. And twisting the bolt into place with a snap.

Further inside he found Emily crouched behind a finished wood counter in the kitchen, between

her and the door. Behind her was a wide, sliding glass door, through which was a back deck and a grand view of the valley below.

"Defensible hiding spot you've picked," said Peter dryly, as he walked past her into a hallway that led to several smaller rooms. Emily got up and followed him.

"You think he has a weapon here?" Emily said curiously, trailing behind Peter as he peered into each room. A bathroom, a small bedroom, a third room with no identifiable purpose other than to hold a number of unpacked cardboard boxes.

"Nearly everyone this far from Nalio has something for wild animals. I just hope whoever lived here was fond of keeping something lethal in reserve."

He poked his head into the last room. Somewhere behind him, he heard a thump.

"Was that you?" he asked, turning his head. Emily shook her head.

Another thump sounded. Emily's eyes grew wide.

"They're trying to get in," she whispered fearfully.

Peter looked back into the room. He saw a tall wooden case with a glass front, almost like a grandfather clock without the clock, leaned against the back wall of the room between two short bookshelves. If there was a rifle anywhere in this house, it had to be in there. He grabbed Emily's hand and pulled her into the room as two more heavy thuds sounded in quick succession, followed by a crack, and the sound of wood splintering.

Peter went to the display case immediately, rushing around the double bed that took up most of the floor area. Inside he saw a double-barreled shotgun, with a rubber-lined pistol grip. He almost grinned. Never had the sight of a firearm been more welcome. He tugged the brass handle of the display case, then when it refused to open he brought his foot up into the glass. It shattered with a soft tinkling noise. He reached inside, gingerly sliding his wrist past the exposed broken glass, and pulled out the shotgun. He pumped it once to see if it was loaded. A spent shell sprang from the side of the gun, landing on the wood floor with a soft, hollow thunk. This would do.

"Peter!" Emily shouted alarmingly. Peter wheeled around just as the door opened. Reflexively Peter fired the shotgun into the door, shredding the wood and likely taking a decent-sized chunk out of whoever was behind it. He heard a distorted cry of pain. Immediately he dropped to a crouch, and shifted over behind the bed, taking careful aim at the doorway. The door opened slightly further. Peter fired again, this time the top half of the door gave way, its shredded remains folding over and falling off. There was a flurry of motion as a black arm reached suddenly into the room. Peter pumped the shotgun again and took aim, but the arm was gone. Then he looked at the floor.

Lying on the dark polished wood was a strange object, looking almost like a thin metal can, with some sort of nozzle at the top. He inhaled with sudden anticipation.

"It's a grenade! Emily get down!" Peter threw himself around the other side of the bed, so that he was lying next to her, and grabbed the corner of the mattress and pulled it down over them.

The grenade exploded just as the mattress covered them, muffling the sound but not the shock. It felt as though a thousand needles were stabbing through the fabric of the mattress to prick them. Peter yelled out with pain, and beside him he could hear Emily scream as well. Tinnitus whined irritatingly in Peter's ear as he threw the mattress off of them. He got to his feet, bringing the shotgun back to bear just as the first soldier entered the room.

Peter squeezed the trigger before he was through the door frame, sending a withering spray of lead pellets tearing through the soldier's abdomen, knocking him back against a dresser, and spattering both the wall and his fellows behind him with blood. Peter quickly pumped the shotgun, and fired a second round into the two who followed. One crumpled, his face torn off; the second raised his gun. Peter threw himself to the ground, behind what was the left of the bed frame, and chambered another shell, as the soldier speckled the wall behind him with bullet holes. Barely taking aim, Peter rolled back to a prone position and fired from the floor, taking out the soldier's legs. He reloaded the gun with such force that the expelled shell pinged off the ceiling before falling back onto the tattered remains of the

mattress.

The entire room was devastated; it looked as though someone had taken a hatchet to every square centimeter of the walls. Great chunks of plaster were torn out, and an acrid burning odor wafted through the air, sifting through their noses in unpleasant waves, along with scattered particles of plaster dust. Behind Peter, Emily shakily got to her feet, then sneezed. Her face was covered in small scratches, and her clothing was torn in several places, but she was alright. Peter glanced at the brutal chest wound he'd dealt one of the soldiers, who was slumped against the dresser next to the door. She could have been much worse off.

Shotgun barrel leading, Peter emerged from the room, back into the hallway. He went back, through to the kitchen, checking every corner as he went, before reaching the door that led to the garage. He pushed it open gingerly, his gun tucked under his arm, and peered into the garage. It was empty, but for a few battered shelves holding musty glass jars and tools, a couple stained paint and oil cans, and a work table that had enough old papers piled on it that Peter was fairly certain it had not been used in many years.

"No car!" he called back to Emily, then muttered "Damn it!" He vented his frustration on a box near his foot, sending it skidding along the concrete floor. A moment later, Emily was behind him.

"What do we do now?"

"I think going through the valley's our only option," said Emily, "Maybe we can meet up with someone else and find out what the hell is going on here."

Peter noticed Emily had one of the soldiers' submachine guns hanging at her side, her slender fingers wrapped tightly around the black rubber grip. She looked down at it.

"Figured I might as well have something. Just in case."

Peter nodded. There was a moment's pause as they looked at each other.

"Let's go," said Peter finally, "There's probably a path out back that will lead down the slope into the field. There's got to be some trees, or something. Anything is more sheltered than walking along the road where there are landing craft everywhere."

"Yeah," said Emily, then turned and walked back through the kitchen, Peter right behind her.

About twenty meters down the road, they came to a small gravel path that gradually declined, doubling back several times, before finally coming out to a field edged with spruce trees about a hundred feet below. With one last look at the home that had been their temporary shelter, they began down the path.

As they walked, Peter noticed a bumblebee settle on one of the many lilac flowers that grew by the side of the path. He raised his gaze, looking out at the smoldering buildings and columns of smoke that dotted the valley, along with the huge ships that hung in the air like iron storm clouds. It seemed like a strange contrast.

Without warning, a strange aircraft, about the size of one of the landing craft, rose into the air from behind a cluster of trees in the field below. It turned almost silently in air, then flew toward them terrifyingly fast. Emily dropped the ground, pushing herself against the slope and covering her ears. As it passed over them, the wind from its rotors forced Peter to the ground as well.

After it had passed, Emily carefully pushed herself back to her feet.

"What the hell was that? It was like a hornet mated with a helicopter."

Peter chuckled, trying to settle the fear that pulsed in his chest like a lead drum beat. He leaned forward to pick up the shotgun, which he had dropped, when he heard the noise of engines growing louder again. The thing was coming back.

"Get back down!" Peter shouted, his voice barely audible over the crescendoing tempo of blades slicing air. There was a strange chattering sound, and suddenly the grass around them was shredded, and gouts of gravel leaped into the air.

"It's shooting at us!" Emily cried. Peter could barely hear her.

The ship passed overhead again, flying out slowly over the valley like a majestic bird of prey.

"We need to get down this cliff, and fast!" Peter shouted, "Or that thing will tear us to shreds!"

Peter peered down over the edge. The path doubled back, in a slowly-descending zig-zag, but the next pass was easily a ten-foot drop.

"We'll have to risk it," said Emily, "A sprained ankle's better than a body full of bullets."

Peter nodded.

"Ladies first," Emily said grimly, crouching at the edge, putting out her feet, and sliding down. A second later, there was a muffled landing, and "mmpf," and the sound of scattering gravel, before she called back up, "It's alright, you can come down now."

Peter looked out at their aerial attacker, now a small dot in the distance. But it would be back. He went over the edge without hesitation.

They exited at the roadside a few minutes later. Peter's heartbeat had slowed somewhat. He looked across the road; a ditch, for water drainage, ran alongside it. Beyond it, open field. There could be more soldiers, and they could be anywhere.

"Go across the road, into the ditch," he said to Emily, "It'll be good cover."

Emily ran down to the road, across it, and down the ravine on the other side. With a look from side to side, Peter followed. A deep, distant booming made the ground quiver, but the sounds carried little fear with them now, merely a resigned, growing dread.

Halfway across the road, a pair of headlights swung around the corner. Peter froze, raising his hand to protect his eyes from the glare. The truck began to slow; as the headlights cut out, Peter saw it was an army vehicle. Were these soldiers coming to their aid?

The truck slowed to a stop in front of them, then the headlights dimmed, and as soon as Peter's eyes adjusted to the change in light level, he saw the two people sitting in the front seats.

"Darrel?" Emily said, as the driver got out. Peter's muscles relaxed. So these were friends.

Two others exited the truck, a young man and woman Peter had never seen before. The man was tall, taller than either Peter or Darrel, and had short, spiky brown hair. The girl was similar in appearance, but her hair reached to her shoulders, and she was a few inches shorter than him. Both held smaller guns, looking around at the forest nervously.

"What are you two doing out here?" said Darrel, a stern edge to his voice. Peter and Emily were his friends, and he rarely acted official with them. Even so, his eyes, reflecting the lights that flickered throughout the valley, demanded an answer.

"We went for a walk," Peter said, trying his best to hold Darrel's gaze and not let his eyes sink with guilt. Darrel's eyes went from Peter, to Emily, then back to Peter, and a wry grin of comprehension dawned on his face.

"It's not what you think," Peter said unconvincingly, trying to keep Darrel from reaching the conclusion he was sure he'd already reached.

"All right, then," he said, smiling now. But his smile was quickly replaced by the same grim expression he'd worn before.

"Do you know what they are?" Peter asked.

"I was hoping you could answer that question."

Darrel's face twinged with a hint of disappointment. Then he straightened up.

"Get in the truck, let's get to Nalio."

His eyes swept the landscape one last time, then he turned back to the truck. Peter and Emily followed. Peter sat in the back, on the left side, Emily in the middle, next to him. A chill wind blew across the lonely road as Darrel reignited the engine, and with a low purr they set off up the winding road. Emily leaned her head on Peter's shoulder, and Peter reached down to grab her hand. It was cold,

and Peter wasn't sure that it was all from the air temperature.

After the road doubled back, it began to descend further into the valley, toward the huge network of lights that formed Nalio, the center of the valley and the nucleus of the settlements there. The truck jumped and jolted slightly on the uneven dirt road, but a smooth paved road waited at an intersection a few hundred meters away, intercepting and interrupting the dirt road, continuing down the valley's edge in a curve that brought it down to the forests below.

Fighter aircraft sped through the air overhead, leaving trails of white exhaust through the night, the red and yellow tones of the lights on their wingtips contrasting with the eerie green and cyan on the enemy ships. Glowing bullets traced through the night, slamming into enemy landing ships, opening great glowing fireballs in the sky. Peter was reminded of a fireworks show. Emily tapped him on the shoulder.

"Look," she said, pointing to the slopes across the valley. The sparsely forested hillside had become a battlefield. Bursts of light flew back and forth between two groups of soldiers. Trees burned. Even across the valley, faint echoes of gunfire and cries of pain could be heard over the rush of the wind, and the rough purr of the truck engine.

They reached the intersection. With a grunt and a twist of the steering wheel, Darrel set them on the road going left. They sped up, now on a smoother road, and the trees whipped by as they came closer and closer to the settled parts of the valley. Questions raced through Peter's head that instinct to survive had kept from distracting him before. Questions he hoped would be answered once they got to Nalio, talked to someone in charge, who knew something. What were these things? What did they want? Why were they waging a war when none had been declared?

Finally, the road leveled, and they were riding through the plains just outside the city. Beacons every hundred meters marked the path of the road, and the headlights shone frantically on the road ahead. Peter stared up at the sky, at the confusing dance of lights high above, at the explosions and trails of smoke, and heard the haunting echoes through the night air. The wind was cold, and when he turned to face forward again, it roared in his ears. Finally, they began to pass buildings, and warm yellow lights began to dance on their faces. A fuel stop, a restaurant, a few homes rushed past, as did a school, but not the school Peter had attended. He had lived his entire childhood and never visited this part of Nalio. How condensed his life had been; the valley was barely forty kilometers from end-to-end, and yet there were parts of it he had never yet visited.

A jolt ran through Peter; the air was suddenly excruciatingly hot, the world around him bathed in red light, the seat beneath him rattling, his eardrums surely punctured. Or simply overwhelmed with noise. It was only as he could sit up again, the searing pain on his neck flaring down his back, his ears whining, his hearing dulled, that he realized something had nearly hit them. The other girl's hair was on fire; Emily reached forward and frantically swatted it out. Peter slapped his own neck to make sure he was similarly extinguished, a decision he immediately regretted; it was as though he had slapped a sunburn.

They came into the city, still shaken from the near miss. The girl accompanying them began to give Darrel directions; looking across at her, Peter recognized the eagle badge she wore on her black blouse. It meant she was a government worker, and probably knew the city well. What was she doing so far from the city in the first place? Where had Darrel found her? More questions.

Finally, they found a huge gathering in the city square. Civilians panicking, looking for lost loved ones, soldiers trying to keep order, armored vehicles and trucks rolling out of the square, people running frantically back and forth. Orange light covered the crowd, making their constant, flurried movements even more disorienting. The truck came to a stop, the engine fading out as Darrel withdrew the key. The clamor was even more grating without the noise of the truck engine to dull it.

"Where do we go?" Peter shouted to Darrel as they exited the truck, shutting the doors with a muffled thump barely noticeable through the roar of the crowd. Darrel glanced back and forth, craning his neck, and pointed at a canvas tent in the center of the throng. "There!" he called back. Peter nodded,

and followed, Emily grabbing his hand, and the two others in tow.

The crowd tore them apart, each struggling to push through the mad, confused torrent of bodies. Darrel reached the tent first, his two companions right behind him. Peter and Emily caught up a few seconds later, panting from the ordeal.

Even over the roar of the crowd, the sounds of war boomed in the distance, a low frequency that traveled through the ground rather than the air. This drew shrieks of fear from the crowd, and the cries of children could be heard everywhere as the ground struggled to steady itself, as though the entire world had stumbled momentarily.

Peter heard a cry of surprise behind him and turned to see that Emily had fallen backward and was propped up on her elbows, trying to get to her feet. Peter realized many others were doing the same. Meanwhile, a few feet away, an officer was talking to Darrel, and he listened carefully to him, arms crossed. Peter turned around again to someone in the crowd shouting "Look!"

Behind them, over the valley, from the direction they'd come, a glowing blue form roared low over the valley, the sound of its engines dulled by the shouting but deafening nonetheless. The landscape shuddered as it impacted, immediately setting hundreds of trees alight. A minute later, the shock wave rolled over them, like a gunshot, all-encompassing. Peter flinched reflexively.

The light of the fire reflected in the terrified eyes of those around him, locked in awe on the distant carnage. A cliff face, easily a hundred meters tall, crumbled in the far distance where the blue fire had struck. The ground purred beneath his feet.

Suddenly, around the square, the dark screens on the sides of buildings flickered to life, showing the giant face of a military leader Peter recognized the face of, but whose name he could not remember. Looking at the blue bar at the bottom of the screen, he saw the name "Commander E. Ratham." Peter's eyes darted back up to the man's face as he began to talk.

"Citizens. I am aware of the alarm you are all feeling. I urge you to remain calm in this time of crisis. We have recently come under attack by a group we neither recognize, nor whose motives we understand. An evacuation is underway. Please make your way as directed to the air sloops located further downtown, at the airfield. Military and police personnel will direct you when you arrive. Do not return to your homes. Do not collect your belongings." The screen went blank.

Around Peter, chaos rose. The commander's speech had not had the intended calming effect. The mob immediately surged in the direction of what Peter had to assume was the airfield. He struggled against them. He had to find Emily.

An evacuation. Motives not understood. Remain calm. The words ran through Peter's head, the commander's face blinking in and out of it, as he scanned the chaotic swirl for Emily. An evacuation.

The term generally implied a place to flee *to*. But his people had never known anything outside of the valley. It had been their one, eternal home since time immemorial. It was without precedent. But, Peter realized, so were tonight's events.

A memory flitted through his mind. An old teacher of his. What had he said? His face, kindly in his mind's eye, spoke. But there were no words, only the blank wash time had put over his recollections. But there was no time now. Glancing frantically back and forth, he eventually saw the telltale wave of Emily's hair. She jumped as he lay his hand on her shoulder.

"Stick to me," Peter said. She nodded. They let the crowd sweep them along.

A hundred feet ahead, a flash blinded Peter, as something slammed into the crowd. The screams of those in its path were quickly overrun by the grinding roar of the impact. Smoke billowed toward them. The screaming was deafening now.

Some were overtaken by others, stumbled, fell, were trampled by the mad herd of people, now reduced to their animal drive to flee. Peter ran along with them, pulling Emily along, resolving in his mind not to lose her, even as the crowd tugged at their grip on each other.

Peter entered the lime light of the complex to find it just as chaotic, people running to and fro, desperate to secure their place on one of the escape ships, fearing there wouldn't be enough room for all

of them, although Peter knew, in the the tumult of his mind, that Nalio's transport economy ensured there would be enough air cruisers for the entire population of the valley. Or at least what was left of it.

The swarms carried them along the hallways of the terminal. Over his shoulder, Peter saw two people fighting, the flashes of their blows barely visible, but the results all too clear. The professor's words tingled in the back of his mind, but the roar of the crowd threw them away as it swept them into a side terminal. Through the window, Peter could see it; a hundred meters long, bullet shaped; not much different than the ships that loomed in the night air, spewing fire down on the valley.

Inside the ship was no less crowded; men with worried eyes, women hushing crying babies, children terrified out of their wits, many of whom were crying as well. Peter was shocked he and Emily found not only a seat together, but one by a window. Peter sat in the first red-cushioned chair, only now noticing how tired his legs were. Emily sat across, facing him, both of them next to the window. Their eyes met, then they both looked out the window.

Outside, people were still flowing through the streets, heading for the airport. As Peter watched, a blinding streak of light struck a building that he guessed had to have at least twenty stories. It imploded like a crumpled can, then crumbled into the crowd below.

A second streak immolated a smaller building, bursting out the other side to burn a hole in the crowd, surely leaving hundreds dead. Unable to bear the sight anymore, he turned to Emily, to see that she was crying. He reached for her, and she accepted, burying her face in his shoulder. Her fingers dug into his arm.

A moment later, the lights inside the ship went out, except for the ominous red safety lights that lined the walls and floor. The ship became quiet, but for the few babies crying and a few worried voices who still dared talk. The ships engines rumbled to life, the floor shook, and they left the ground. As the ship rose above the surrounding buildings, Peter saw one of the ships already in flight struck down in a flash of fire. It broke in half with a horrible straining sound, the pieces slowly plummeting to the city below. Peter could feel nothing but numb disbelief. Before today, the worst disaster he'd ever seen had been a gas explosion in Brasme, nearly ten years ago. He'd been nine. The memory of the news report on the tiny square television screen, the red letters that spelled out the death count of the disaster, and the worried eyes of his mother as she watched, flooded through him now. They paled in comparison.

Peter felt certain that it wasn't real. Surely, soon, he would snap out of whatever delusion he was lost in. But the ship continued to fly, undaunted by its fallen sister, until it was high above the golden city lights, halfway to the level of the valley rim. It hovered, momentarily, seeming suspended in time, as a huge red glow flared up from below. Peter strained to see what had happened, but he couldn't. The ship hung in the air a moment longer, before lurching forward.

Flames dotted the forests, the towns, and the fields, sending great plumes of smoke barely visible in the night floating skyward. Emily, next to him, watched the fires too. Peter could see them reflected in her still-moist eyes. As he watched her, Peter felt his shock turn to anger. He didn't belong in this ship, fleeing the valley, leaving hundreds of dead men and women unavenged. He belonged back down there, shooting, scorching, and stabbing every last invader until either they were all dead, or he was. Caught up in his emotions, he stood up suddenly. Emily broke her gaze from the disaster below and looked at him.

"Bathroom," he murmured, trying to explain his abrupt motion. She nodded, and turned back to the window. Peter began to walk along the deck. He needed to stretch his legs anyway.

He felt stares following him as he walked along the aisles between the seats. While nothing forbade walking around while the ship was in flight, nearly everyone else was too terrified to do anything but remain glued to their seats. Babies sobbed in their mothers' arms; their mothers' faces, above, mirrored their children's. For many, their bewilderment had stumbled beyond tears; they simply stared blankly into space. Peter tried to ignore them, trying to focus on the questions pounding in his head: *Where will we go from here? What were those things? Why did they attack us?*

The first question seemed to be the most prevalent. Other than a few, non-permanent settlements the Expeditionary Battalion had set up, there was no other place outside the valley where his people

lived. With thousands to support, with nothing but the supplies in these ships' cargo, they would have to find somewhere new within a few weeks, or people would starve. Not to mention, there was no telling if their attackers would pursue them. Peter doubted they had struck simply to drive them out of the valley; for whatever reason, they seemed to want every last one dead. *They've gotten off to a very good start*, he thought.

He had no idea if his parents were still alive, if they had reached the ships, or, if they had, if they had chosen the right ship to board. The only person he knew he had was Emily. Darrel and the other girl had been separated from them in the crowd. He had no idea where Thale was. Galwin was likely dead; his family lived near the hills where Peter had seen the fireballs hit first. As much as Peter despised him, he couldn't help feeling a pit in his stomach at the thought.

Soon he had circled the cabin of the ship twice, his mind whirling helplessly. The scuffling of his footsteps, and the frantic whispers of those around, began to wear at him. When he finally sat back down beside Emily, she was gazing out the window, into the blackness beyond, her eyes glistening in the dull light that lit the ship's interior.

"They're all gone," she said blankly, a swelling note of desperation in her voice, as another tear slid down her cheek. Her breath came in soft, shuddering gasps.

"We don't know that," said Peter firmly, trying to reassure himself as much as her. He turned and met her gaze. Emily was one of the strongest people he knew, and the sight of her losing her calm demeanor shook him. He sat down heavily, looking into her eyes. She looked back for a moment, then blinked, squeezing out another tear, before turning back to the window. They had left the valley far behind now, save for a few orange dots visible on the distant horizon. Peter took her hand.

"My mom, my dad, my sisters, everyone. I don't know where any of them are," said Emily, her speech becoming quicker and more frantic, "We just had to *leave* so suddenly.... we don't even know what's going on."

Peter was at a loss for words to comfort her. Survival instinct had ruled their every thought since the moment the attack had started. Now it was gone, and a great uncertainty was flowing in to take its place.

Outside, a blast shook the ship, and the lights flickered. Shrieks filled the dark air around them. Peter tensed as the floor plummeted suddenly. He could feel the entire ship jolt from side to side. Emily gasped desperately, then, her composure broken entirely, began to sob.

Another deep rumbling explosion, like accumulating thunder, rocked the entire ship from side to side, nearly spilling Emily and Peter from their seats. There was a muffled clattering from somewhere below the deck. The lights blinked on and off, before going out for good. In the intermittent darkness before the dull red aura of the emergency backup lights filled the ship, screams of panic filled the air, and Peter felt a twinge of fear, one that shocked even his shattered nerves. On the ground, he could run, or hide, but in the air, in this ship, he was a helpless passenger.

Peter looked at Emily again. Tears still trickled down her face; they looked like drops of blood in the dull crimson light. He squeezed his eyes shut, in the tense silence.

The terrible explosions finally ceased, and a few hours passed with little sound but Emily's muffled sobs. The fear, with no distraction from it, made each second seem to hang in the air.

Yet, after a while, Peter was surprised how much time had gone by. Emily had finally gone to sleep, and Peter took off his jacket and put it over her as a makeshift blanket. Then he leaned back in silence, trying to clear his mind. As his eyes began to slide shut, the ship's speakers crackled to life with a gravelly voice.

"We will be descending in approximately ten minutes. Food will be served after we land. We are still appraising the situation. Keep calm and do not panic! The situation will be explained at a later time. Thank you."

Beside him, Emily awoke slowly, looking at Peter with her eyes open barely a crack.

"We're landing?" she asked sleepily.

“Soon,” said Peter.

“Where?”

“No idea. They've found someplace, apparently.”

“Wake me up when we're down,” she replied, before sinking back into sleep.

When the ship began to descend, Peter felt a suddenly uncomfortable jolt in his midsection. The rest of the descent was smooth; even when they finally landed, Peter could not tell until another announcement came over the intercom.

“We have landed. Please remain where you are. We will bring food out in a few moments, as well as someone to explain the situation. Again, remain where you are. Please do not leave your seats.”

Peter turned his head to look at Emily. She was awake, but her vacant gaze barely shifted. In the red light she looked pale; Peter couldn't help but notice how dead she looked. He himself was all but drained of energy, willpower, strength; anything, really, other than a desire to sleep.

But they were sending someone out to explain things. The possibility of at least some answers as to what had happened, was enticing enough to keep Peter from dropping off altogether. He slid his arm lower on Emily's back, curling his hand around her hip. She squirmed a bit, and leaned her head into the crook of his elbow. Her movement seemed to fortify him.

A moment later, a woman who appeared to be the ship's captain appeared in the doorway, wearing an olive-green military uniform. The bends and folds in the fabric made her look like an angular sculpture in the dim light. Her worried expression, behind a thin veneer of formality, betrayed her to be just like them all. Peter guessed she was about middle-aged.

“Hello citizens. I understand how you all must be feeling. We have limited knowledge as to what has happened, but we do know several things. First of all, it is not likely we will be able to return to the valley in the near future. The force that attacked us was of unknown origin, but we estimate it numbered approximately one hundred thousand soldiers. About thirty ships made it out. We do not know what happened to those left behind. In the interest of saving lives, we are not planning to return; returning ships could be traced back to us.

“Second, we will be able to sustain those aboard each ship for a period of about three weeks, given current provisions. It is imperative that we locate further supplies. We are working on this now. Please do not panic, or hoard supplies. We want to avoid this at all costs. There are certainly reasons to be fearful, but I ask you to put those behind you and do your best to help us move forward and survive.

“Third, we have made contact with the rest of the fleet that made it out of Nalio. We have landed separately tonight, but we plan to rendezvous within the next few days. You will be able to look for lost loved ones then. We are compiling a list to be transmitted between the ships at next safe opportunity, so that you may look for their names.

“Lastly, and finally – and this, if anything, is most important – we do not know the truth of anything that has happened here, short of what we have already told you. Please do not speculate or create any kind of legends or rumors, that might lead to a climate of fear. We will do our best to learn what has happened in a timely matter. Until then, you are safe here. Good night.”

The woman turned and walked back through the door she had come through. Several men and women came in after her, spreading out and distributing food packages. Orion was tossed a dull tan package, about the size of a brick, that turned out to be contain several dried fruits, jerky, and bread, as well as a can of juice.

Emily began to stir next to him. Peter passed her a handful of dried fruit. He bit into the tough jerky, chewing on the precious little information the woman had brought out. They knew nothing. A phantom army had come from nowhere, and, in the space of hours, had forced them from the home that they had known for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

All at once it seemed suspicious. Thirty ships had escaped? Peter knew there were several large

ships used for moving about the valley, but thirty ships as large as this one; he had never heard of that many existing, nor could he think of a use for them within the small valley. Had they known this attack was coming?

He felt like voicing his fears to Emily, but she was picking at her food, cautiously. Peter watched the contour of her jawline as she chewed, the motion returning some of the shape to her curved cheekbones. It was best not to trouble her with anymore distressing thoughts. Peter's mind reached back to what the woman had said just a few moments before, that they shouldn't speculate or create a "climate of fear."

*And she said that we were safe here, Peter thought. But we aren't. If today proved anything, it's that we're not safe.*

He looked at Emily again. Her face was entirely pale. Peter slid his arm around her neck; she seemed to relax a bit, pushing her head back against his arm, pulling Peter's jacket further over her as she nestled deeper into the seat. Cracking open the can of juice with a sharp snap and hiss, Peter brought it to his lips and took a sip, before handing the can to Emily, who drank deeply.

"Where are we?" she said blankly. Her voice sounded dry.

"No idea," said Peter, "How would I know anyway?"

"Hey," Emily grinned faintly, her weary face struggling with the effort, "You were the Expeditionary guy. For all I know, you've been here before."

Peter chuckled a little, even if it wasn't particularly funny. Emily's grin faded as she turned to gaze out the black portal. Nothing was discernible outside; if it were not for the utter stillness of the ship, Peter would have wondered if they were still aloft.

"Em," Peter said. Emily's head turned back to look at him, eyes half-open.

"Hm?"

"Why don't you try falling asleep looking in instead of out?"

She closed her eyes.

"Alright."

She slid her head against Peter's shoulder. He leaned over and rested his cheek on top of her head, staring at the back of the seat in front of him.

*Maybe when I wake up, none of this will have happened.* Peter didn't have time to shake away that foolish thought before sleep overcame him.

The next morning Emily was crying. Peter awoke to find himself leaning back, and Emily next to him, elbows on her knees, face in her hands, breathing shallowly as she wept. The events of the previous night flooded back all at once as he watched her, filling in the oblivion of sleep, and suddenly Peter wanted to hammer the seats around him with his fists.

Looking through the small window, Peter could see a flat, dirty clearing in a great forest, where they had landed. He had no idea how far they had traveled, or even if today was the first day since the attack, or the second, or the fifth. Sleep had seemed to last forever; he could not remember his dreams. It was as if his mind had tried to savor the escape from reality for as long as possible.

Eventually, he rose and searched out breakfast, which was served in an adjacent room from the passenger area. Eggs and orange juice. Peter took two servings of each, and returned to his seat, where he handed one bottle of orange juice to Emily, who took it from him with a shaky hand.

Tears had carved stained trails down her crease-less cheeks; her eyes were glassy, her hair matted and unruly. Slowly, she sipped some orange juice, and eventually Peter was able to coax some eggs into her. Then she fell back in her seat, staring without expression out the window.

"Maybe we should go outside," Peter said, hoping for anything to revivify her. Not that he could possibly fault her for her current state. He knew the only reason he was not sobbing with her was the numb denial that stood between him and reality like an impenetrable glass wall.

Emily did not answer; Peter asked again, and she nodded faintly. He took her hand and got her to

her feet, and led her carefully to the door of the passenger room. Her face, still drained and vacuous, brightened somewhat as she saw the stairwell, the bottom of which was bathed in light from the sun. Her feet rested on each step gingerly as she descended.

The ship had come to a rest near the brink of a cliff. Beyond it, Peter's eyes followed the black, shifting outline of a bird floating on the air. A wisp of cloud passed overhead, barely a hundred feet above the ground, before breaking against the towering pine trees that lined the edge of the clearing, the sharp needles tearing it into shreds of diffuse vapor. The air was chilled and moist; Peter guessed that it had rained recently. The shell-shaped rocks beneath their feet slid easily over each other as they walked; it felt as though they were on a rocky beach, but from which any sea had drained long ago. Perhaps this had once been a river, and the cliff a waterfall.

Next to him, Emily's face was entirely drained of color, tinted white from the light reflecting from the gray clouds. But there was a hint of a spark in her eye as she looked around, her mouth small and timid, lips grayish-blue as the ancient river stones beneath their feet.

Slowly they progressed to the cliff's edge, where an intrepid few had ventured to gaze from the precipice. The earth below was obscured by mist; or perhaps the accumulation of miles of air, for the cliff side did not seem to meet the ground anywhere near. Beyond it, the terrain was smooth and homogenous, barely textured, the mask of moisture hanging in the air between them blowing coldly and forbiddingly against their faces as they stood precipitously near the very edge, the sharp drop into misty nothingness sending a shiver of vertigo through Peter's spine. His legs quivered; he drew back, leading Emily with him.

"I think it's ocean, down there," Emily said.

Peter stared in awe into the strange mix of deep turquoise smeared with gray. He had never seen an ocean in his life; the valley had had a lake, but an ocean was something more. It was water you could not see to the other side of. Even in the valley, it was not hard to see the edges of it from most places; the rim was lined with small points of light, yellow and observant, marking the Wall. But here there was no Wall. Had he a glider, or, better, an air sloop under his command, he could fly anywhere, set off for the other side of the ocean, not slowing up until he had conquered its unfathomable breadth.

Then the presence of their mysterious enemies yanked his thoughts back like a leash. He lazily kicked a rock that it skipped over its fellows, rolling side-over-side before leaping over the edge. Peter heard nothing more from it. He stood with Emily for a few more moments, watching the empty gulf before them, then turned and walked back to the ship.

Around the metal hull, people clustered, some with blankets wrapped around their heads and bodies, coats with hoods drawn around them, daring to expose only their faces to the cold air, peering around cautiously, suspiciously, fearfully. Peter ignored their distressed expressions; he felt a sudden disgust for the huddled mass. Were these really his people? Hate swelled in him. Inside he resolved to get his hands on a weapon as soon as he could. If there was a second encounter with these beings who had attacked them, he was going to bring a few of them down with him.

Even away from the heavy, icy air outside, Peter threw off chills as he slumped back in his seat. Around him, in the dim light that filtered through the windows, people spoke in hushed tones, glancing furtively around them as they did; or slept, finding refuge in oblivion for at least a few hours; or played games or read to pass the time.

The previous day seemed stale in his mind now, as though it had happened months ago. A stringy pain shot through his leg as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Great gaps of time had already sank away from his memory, and the impenetrable gray cast a misty blanket over the others. He struggled to retain a few details: hiding from the wasp-shaped helicopter, sliding down the slope to escape it; the shattered lenses and torn mask of the soldier he had shot; the ride into the city, pressing through the crowd, losing the others. He could not even remember their names. Where had that shotgun gone? He remembered putting it in the back of the truck, but nothing beyond that. They must have left it behind. It was gone, then.

It struck him suddenly that the attack had left him with none of his possessions; save the clothes on his back, he had nothing now.

*No, that's not true*, he reminded himself, reaching for his belt. There was the knife Professor Harling had given him all those years ago, a lump under his coat, and the belt buckle that had been willed to him also. He turned the name over in his mind, surprised he remembered it, like feeling the texture and contours of a strangely-shaped stone.

Emily's head shifted, sliding down against his elbow, her warm hair slipping down the side of her face to tickle at his wrist, as if to remind him of what else he had. He smiled; she turned her head, eyes already sleepy, and smiled back. Gently, he began to massage her neck, suddenly becoming aware of his stiffness in his own.

After a while, food arrived, sandwiches wrapped in clear plastic. As he tore the covering away, Peter shifted his arm, waking Emily, who had drifted into a light sleep. Her eyelids clicked open, then narrowed again. Slowly, she rose, shaking hair out of her eyes, and began to eat.

Peter wracked his mind for something to say, something to talk about, something to distract them from the attack, from their uncertain future, something not obviously feeble. He found nothing. They ate in silence.

As they finished, the tiny sections of light down the corridor disappeared. Peter noticed with a gentle jolt of surprise that everyone seemed to have filtered back into the passenger area; a glance out the window confirmed his suspicions. An inaudible but definite murmur signified the ship was coming back to life.

"We're taking off," he whispered to Emily, who was chewing the last bite of her sandwich. She nodded, looking at her hand boredly.

Peter's mind slipped into a sort of equilibrium, caught in between many thoughts but never settling on one, as though his brain were caught in a web. After a few moments, the seat below him shuddered, and he felt himself pressed against it as though by an invisible hand. He turned his head to look out the window, the cliff side they had landed on retreating into the mist below them, fading away. Soon, they were lost among a world of gray; bright, colorless light flooded through the window, shining on Emily's pale cheek. She was slipping into sleep again, as though she were trying to escape the changed world they now lived in. Peter leaned his head back, setting one arm around her relaxed shoulders, and looked for a place inside him to hide.

Each new day seemed to solidify what had happened; it had changed from indeterminable present to definite past. Peter lost count of the days; waking, eating, sleeping, eating, landing for a few hours to allow the engine to cool. How much fuel did they have? He remembered the ships using some sort of fusion core to fly; supposedly they could go for months. Where would they stop? Where was there to go?

Each of the places they landed were wild and strange. The ship spent one night perched at the edge of a cliff, but here the precipice did not look down at a misty nothingness, but a forest that seemed to be an illusion, barely a hundred feet down; yet when Peter approached the edge, he nearly lost his footing, realizing the trees were titanic, the slope going down hundreds of feet to a small past, after which they continued down farther than Peter could fathom. He remembered the trees he had seen with the Expeditionary Battalion; these dwarfed even those. How did something grow so large? How did oxygen, gravity, and soil support them?

Another night, he spent next to Emily, sitting atop a boulder amongst a field of tall grass. They had wandered hundreds of feet from the ship; it was not visible behind them. Lost amongst the pale grass tinted by the orange streaks in the sky above, Peter wondered if they could find their way to the ship again.

He leaned back, feeling the cool stone through his shirt. Emily had pulled off her coat, was lying

on her back as well, resting her head and shoulders upon the soft felt. She turned to him, as his head sank against the rock, the grit scratching his scalp gently, eyes still peering over his nose and cheeks at the sinking sun in the distance.

"It's almost okay out here," Emily said quietly.

Peter sighed.

"I guess so."

"All these questions, about where we're going to go. I'm almost... happy here. It seems like I can pretend it's all a nightmare, we just left because... well, we wanted to, or something. Of course we didn't," he said, her head nodding to the side in acknowledgment, "But I can pretend."

"It's fine to pretend, Em. I ... who would blame us?"

"Then I remember those things are still out there. They're following us, surely. We have food, but for how long? When does the fuel run out, Peter? When do we have to confront what happened?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I," she said, "But not right now."

She reached down, and took his hand. Peter looked down at it, then back up at her face. She was smiling widely. He leaned in to kiss her, cheek scraping on a rock.

"I know I won't lose you," Peter said.

"You don't."

He kissed her again, this time more purposefully, raising himself up, propping himself on one elbow, and wrapped the other arm around her shoulder, before sliding it down to her waist. She gave no resistance as he fell atop her, lips barely parting as they stripped the clothing from each other, carried out the act in its entirety. The ship was far away, through trees and tall grass. Even the boulder had barely been visible from the other side of the field. No one would interrupt them.

At last, he collapsed in her arms, exhausted, his fingers grabbing blindly off to the side before finding his coat, hooking it, and dragging it over them. Several minutes passed before Peter could find the will to pull away.

In the distance, a klaxon sound blared across the open terrain, barely echoing, but carrying a somber, cavernous quality all the same. The last sliver of sun was peering out over the tops of the distant trees. Peter turned to Emily.

"We've got to get back."

"I wish we could just stay," she said, still looking wistfully out at the dimming horizon.

Peter began to redress, pulling on pants, refastening his belt. He paused when he saw her expression, almost lost in wonder, her pale skin bathed with the reddish light of a setting sun. It was a face he hadn't seen in so long, the face that had drawn him to her. Hatred rushed through him as the impatient horn sounded again.

"Come on, Emily," he said sadly, pulling his shirt over his head, muffling his voice.

Surrendering, she began to dress as well. He took her hand, and led her down from the boulder, through the grass, back to the ship.

There, they found a scene different than they had expected, one bustling with activity rather than resigned shuffling of the passengers returning to the ship, into its cold confines from the beautiful evening. Soldiers, clustered around crates, were slinging rifles and shotguns over their shoulders, while the unarmed civilians clung to the edge of the ship, against the walls, looking uncertain. Somewhere amongst them, a child was crying loudly.

They quickened their pace as they closed in on the chaos, Peter's eyes searching wildly for some clue as to what was happening. As they joined the group milling about, a man approached Peter, holding a bundle of rifles in his hand, his thin, crest-like shock of brown hair sticking up as though each hair were a needle. He wore an olive military uniform, weathered and frayed. Peter shrank back slightly. The man stuck out his hand, a rifle hanging from his grip by its strap.

"Take it. You're coming with us."

“What?”

“The enemy have been spotted in the woods and hills on the other side. We're sending a group to take them out.”

The man did not look much older than Peter, if at all, but his flat, precise voice made him authoritative. A wave of questions ran through Peter at the news, but suddenly each question seemed stupid. He nodded, and turned to Emily, whose expression looked strained.

“I'll be back, Em,” he said shakily, taking the rifle, feeling the dark, polished wood in his hands.

“I ... I'll ... okay,” she said, turning away.

“I love you,” Peter called after her.

She turned, her expression pained.

“Finished with your goodbyes? If we don't spend all day on them, we might actually have a chance at beating the damned things.”

Peter turned away from her, overwhelmed and confused. He looked at the rifle. Around him, the other soldiers were loading theirs.

The man handed him a clip of ammo. Peter slid back the lever, and inserted it, hearing it grip against the weapon's innards with a satisfying click. He was handed several more, which he clipped to his belt.

“Let's go! Form up!” the man shouted.

Helplessness nearly overcame Peter as he followed the other soldiers around the side of the ship, into the woods. Around him, he could see other conscripts, fear evident on their faces. Several men, a few women. He thanked the Revenant that Emily had been spared.

“Spread out!” the man shouted as they moved amongst the trees. Peter shuffled about, as did the others, until they formed a rough line, about five meters apart and ninety meters long. His feet skipped and slid over roots and pine needles, his nerve putting a tremor in his step. Where were they?

The forest went for about two hundred meters, before coming to a clearing where the land sloped upward, the grass short and scraggly. Peter knelt behind a tree, peering down the sights of his rifle, scanning the edge of the lonely moor.

A dull thud shook the tree trunk, spraying shreds of bark. Peter flung himself back down, needles of fear twisting under his skin. He opened his mouth to shout something, but was interrupted as the crackling of gunfire began.

He crawled low along the ground, not daring to raise his head. Finally, he reached another tree, where he worked himself back into a crouch, and peered around the thick wooden column, hoping it would offer better protection.

A single soldier, no different than the ones they had seen in the valley, ran between the trees, a sub-machine gun clutched tightly in his gloved grip. He was barely ten meters away.

Peter lined up the sights of his rifle and fired. The shot alerted the soldier, who turned, looking around wildly. Peter started to aim again, but the red goggles suddenly glinted as the soldier's head swiveled, locking on his position. He raised his weapon.

Without hesitation, Peter squeezed the trigger, one, two, three, four times. With each shot, the soldier's body jerked oddly, like a puppet tugged on strings, staggering backwards before dropping as though the strings had been cut entirely. Peter stared, mouth hanging limply open, cautiously examining his handiwork.

As he turned back to the group, he saw three or four of his own people, hiding behind trees or boulders, as at least half a dozen enemies closed in. The fighting was fierce; the submachine guns furious but clumsy, his own people's rifles deadly accurate. Two enemy soldiers dropped to the ground as they approached, flung backwards by the force of the powerful shots, but the other closed in, keeping the whos cowering, giving themselves time to advance.

Something suddenly hauled Peter to his feet; a second of shock passed before he realized he had risen of his own volition. He broke into a sprint, firing again and again at one of the flanking soldier's

backs, missing twice before a third shot connected, spinning the soldier around as it tore into his hip. Beyond him, Peter saw the others close in, watched them fire at one of the women who had come with them, striking her from two sides. Without breaking stride, Peter leaped onto a boulder, vaulted off it, and sprang onto the enemy soldier, closing the distance between them.

Stunned, the soldier fired a few wild shots from his gun, but they were clumsy, missing even at point-blank range. Peter swatted him across the face with the butt of his rifle, a dull clang barely registering with him as blood pounded in his ears. With another swipe, the soldier's submachine gun was on the ground. Peter dropped the rifle, tearing his dagger from his belt, the one he had been given so long ago. Jamming one elbow under his enemy's chin, he plunged the tip up and into its throat.

It became rigid suddenly, then limp, suddenly dead weight in Peter's arms. He grabbed onto the thing's strange, pig-like mask, struggling to keep the body from collapsing atop him, pinning him. As his arms strained, desperation washed through him, and he suddenly pushed upward with what remained of his strength. He heard a cracking sound, then his muscles gave way, and he fell hard on his back, something still in his hand, the enemy slumping to the ground next to him.

Shakily, he rose to his feet. He realized he had torn off the mask that the soldier had worn. With a twinge of trepidation, he realized he would catch a glimpse of what lay beneath. Something made him avert his eyes, but then he forced himself to look, to gaze down at his defeated enemy.

Its gray-skinned face was not so different from his own. Two strange, mouth-like gashes in the sides of the creature's cheeks oozed blood, and it had no eyebrows, no iris, or perhaps no pupil, just two smooth black orbs, as though his eyeballs had been filled with mercury. The face was devoid of any trace of hair, any sign of being warmblooded, though the fluid oozing from the wounds was blood the same as his; perhaps a bit darker, but blood all the same. It looked like a maggot, a sightless, helpless creature that wriggled beneath the earth.

Around him, the sounds of battle quieted, save for a few hushed cries of agony. Peter stared, transfixed by the warped face. He reached down, picking up a lens that had broken off from the creature's goggles. He held the translucent disk in between his thumb and forefinger, turning it in his grip, examining it, before tucking it in his pocket. Then heard brush crunching; he turned to see the same man, the same rigid, almost spiky hair.

"What's this?" he grunted as he approached.

"I don't know. It's one of them without a mask."

"It looks like a goddamn louse," the man replied, probing the thing's cheek with his toe. He chuckled. "Good kill."

Peter whipped around, watching him go. He stared at the corpse a moment longer, before getting up and following him.

Clustered around the ship were the worried loved ones of those that had gone to fight. Wails of denial broke out as some saw that their family, or friends, or lovers, had not survived. Peter shut his eyes. He found Emily near the stairs leading back into the interior of the cruiser, sitting on a tree stump, looking poking at the sand in front of her with a long, thin stick.

She looked up, seeing him, then her eyes were downcast again, focusing on this stick as it bent against the resilient earth.

"Are they dead?" she muttered.

"Yeah."

"What about ours?" she asked, looking up at him again.

"I don't know."

"Let's get inside. I don't want to be near it."

She got up, turned away without looking at him, and began to ascend the stairs, her long hair trailing loosely behind her. Inside, they walked through the almost-empty passenger bay, to sit down

heavily in their seats. Emily sighed as she looked out the window.

"I saw its face," Peter said, staring at the tabletop. When he raised his gaze, he saw Emily watching him intently now. Their eyes met.

"Whose? The soldier's?"

"The louse," Peter said, as if correcting her.

"Louse?"

"That's what that man said. The one who got me to go with them."

As if on cue, people began to filter up the stairs, back into the passenger bay.

"He called it a louse?" Emily asked.

"No. But he said it looked like one. Gray-skinned, black eyes, completely smooth, no iris, no pupil. Just a black marble in its eye socket."

Emily's face twisted.

"Is that what we're going to call them?"

"What better name do we have?"

There was a pause as Emily slowly traced a spiral on the table with her fingertips.

"So ... how many lice did you kill?"

"Three. The last one, I ripped the mask off of."

She closed her eyes, sliding her palms over her forehead, hiding in her hands. When she emerged, her eyes were limned in moisture.

"So they've found us again. Already."

"I don't know what happened. Maybe we just ran into more."

"Then we found them."

"Em, don't."

"Don't what, Peter?" she said, anger rising in her voice.

"We're safe. We're going to be safe. That's what matters."

"How can you say that?" she said, "If one bullet had been an inch off out there, you might not have come back! How can this be happening? You're telling me you never saw any of this on your goddamn expeditions?"

Peter let a hurt look cross his face, but Emily's expression did not respond; she looked positively livid now.

"Of course not."

"Well how does no one know about these things – these lice – if they're everywhere?" she said, a note of hysteria entering her voice.

"Calm down."

"No."

"Calm down, Emily."

"Shut up, Peter. And don't you dare ever leave me like that again."

"I won't. I swear I won't. I – "

"Damn you, and damn your 'lice'. I don't want anything to do with you right now."

"My lice?"

Emily's glare melted under Peter's words.

"No. Not yours. This isn't your fault, I know, I'm sorry. I'm just... being stupid."

Peter's anger sank away at the helpless look on her face.

"You're scared. So am I. All of us are," he said, "It's... it's okay."

"This couldn't have been a coincidence."

Her words sunk in uncomfortably. What had been kept from them? She was right; maybe it wasn't Peter's expeditions, but this was too much for them not to have known. Unspoken accusations flew wildly inside Peter's head, each new one dissolving as it became more outlandish than the last.

"Look, thinking about it is just going to drive us nuts. Or we'll end up doing stupid. We can't

draw any conclusions. Let's just... sit down, go back to sleep."

"How are we supposed to sleep?" Emily asked, the shrill note reentering her voice.

"I don't know."

Suddenly, the prospect of the coming hours, trapped in the semidarkness of the cabin, a distant infant sobbing, the walls made of worried eyes, pondering their fate with nothing to help them, seemed a loathsome sentence.

Finally, the space after Peter's last words grew unbearably long, a gulf blocking any further conversation. He sank back into his seat, Emily's head on his shoulder a few moments later. He glanced down, watching her eyes stare into the distance. What was she thinking about? It could be nothing good. After a while, though, a bemused grin grew on her face.

"What?"

"I just remember ... you kept promising you would take me outside the valley, one day. I don't know, it's strange how I got my way."

Peter searched for words to respond, but found none. Her grin faded as she continued.

"Where do you think we *are* going?" she asked.

"Who knows? They're probably trying to figure it out right now.

"If there's more of them, maybe there are more of us."

The floor rumbled a bit. Emily's lips tensed suddenly.

"Turbulence," Peter muttered.

"I hope so," she replied, relaxing.

They drifted into silence again, but Peter kept thinking about her words. The valley couldn't have been the only place. There had to be others.

*But why?* Peter's mind asked, building a faint structure on the few clues he had, then knocking it away with those words. Why would they lie to him, lie to Emily, lie to everyone else. How had they benefited? Why did the lice want them all dead? Why was that soldier's face so... different?

At last, he grew tired of the speculation. His earlier exertions had left his muscles stretched and sore, and in the haze of exhaustion, short circuits in his thoughts that led to odd places left his mind spiraling in a useless loop. Next to him, Emily was asleep, peaceful in an oblivious refuge. It was time to join her.

Four more days passed, blurred together into a bland continuity by their confinement. The ship did not land any more. Peter found small tasks, helping with cooking and maintenance, to occupy him, but even they did little to break the monotony. The ship's engines were powered by nuclear fusion, and on one of his trips to the storage hold, Peter saw just how much food and water the ship carried. They could stay aloft for months.

Emily always ate with him; she had no one else. A vacant stare often possessed her face; Peter tried to reach her, but before long his words began to roll over one another, saying the same thing over and over. And no matter how many times he said something, he could not change the truth.

She had always been this way, Peter realized, but it had never had reason to surface until now. And it was not long before he realized he wanted the closeness, the complete honesty with feelings, for himself as much as for her.

Dinner brought mashed potatoes to their plates, looking almost no different than the oatmeal they usually had, perhaps with less of the sickly gray color, but as Peter let the warmth and butter slide over his tongue, he felt possessed of a happiness that seemed out of place, like a flame in a downpour. It was strange that food could change his mood so suddenly, but it had been a few days since the firefight with the lice in the woods. The name had spread; already, Peter was sure, embellished stories spread through the corridors of the ship, each painting their enemy more terrifying than the last.

The absence of further encounters had at last begun to have a calming effect. Every night of sleep was like another wall, between what had happened and what might not have happened, what might have

been a dream after all. In knowledge it was a lie; in feeling, it could be true.

Out the window, Peter could see the fin, on the ship's side, lit by the red light that clung to the end. Like a sentinel, it sat in the whirling wind that roared, silently, outside. He watched it, imagining what it would be like out there on the wing, until Emily reached for his arm. She pointed a man standing near her, the same man who had torn him from Emily, to lead him into battle. The same man that had stood over the dead soldier Peter had killed, and called it a louse.

"Peter," he said with a grimace that might have been intended as a smile, "I don't think we have properly met. I am Lieutenant Myron Brown."

The rank meant nothing to Peter, but he shook the offered hand.

"We'd like you on the bridge," he said, "We require your assistance with something."

"What is it?" Peter asked.

"Something important."

"I need a reason."

"Not here," Myron replied, the friendliness gone from his voice, replaced with sternness. As Peter stared at him, he realized that Myron was barely a year older than he was, if that.

"Then I'm not coming."

"You will come, if you don't want to be arrested."

"Threatening me with arrest? Go ahead, do it. In front of all these people. You'll have a mutiny on your hands before you know it."

"You would be extremely selfish to want something like that."

"I'm not the one threatening to arrest someone."

Myron looked at Emily, then let out a huff that could have been a sigh.

"Fine. Both of you come with me. It has to do with the lice. I want you to see something."

Peter glanced at her; her eyes were now alert and curious, a quality they had not had since they had left the valley. She nodded.

"All right," Peter said.

"Good," said Myron, with the air of having finally convinced a recalcitrant child, "Follow me."

A mix of fear and wonder jolted Peter with each step through the corridors, up the stairs he had passed by before because he was not authorized to go up them. Through a door onto the bridge, where serious men and women in uniforms gathered intently around screens, pointing at something on them. Myron led Peter and Emily past them, to a larger, green, gridded screen at the front of the bridge, a thin yellow line tracing around the outside like a clock hand.

He pointed to a pair of smudged dots, which advanced with each pass of the line.

"These are unidentified. They are moving towards us at about twelve hundred kilometers an hour. Their direction has altered several times, each time to put them in line with meeting us. They're about three hundred kilometers out right now, but that gives us—"

"Fifteen minutes," Peter interrupted, nodding.

"Yes. Now, I have already questioned several others —"

"Questioned?" Emily asked, "You think we had something to do with this?"

"Not you, him," Myron replied.

"What?"

"I saw you take something from that louse you killed. For all we know, it could have been a tracking device."

"It was a plastic lens! From its goggles!"

"Show me."

He drew it from his pocket, and waved it at Myron, who took it and examined it.

"Fine. I suppose I was mistaken."

"That's what you brought me up here for?"

"We don't know how they found us, and we're running out of options. This ship has little in the

way of defense. A few missiles, a couple of anti-aircraft guns. The rest of the fleet has spread out, and we don't have any contact with them right now. We're on our own, and if they were following some artifact that you picked up, it was imperative that we knew about it."

"Sir!" came a shout from one of the crewmen; Myron whipped around, but it was not addressed to him. The ship's captain, a thin but sturdy man who looked to be about middle aged, turned from his seat, ahead of where Peter and Emily stood.

"What is it, Theyven?" the captain asked.

"Something's split off those two craft that are approaching us."

"Missiles?"

"Can't tell. Probably."

"Damn it. Arm the flares." He turned to Myron, then Peter and Emily, "Myron, what are these people doing on my bridge?"

"They might have had useful intelligence, but I have questioned them, and – "

"Then get them off!" he commanded, turning back to his screen, and hurriedly typing at it. Myron turned back to Peter.

"Time to go," he said, leading them away.

"No!" Emily shouted, "I'm not going back down there, just to sit around with no idea what's happening. People have a right to know we might be under attack! What if they have to be ready to evacuate?"

Myron chuckled almost cruelly.

"Evacuate? From this altitude? They're better off down there not worrying about it."

He took her arm and began to lead her away; she threw him off.

"You're interfering with our operations at a time when there is no margin for error," Myron said, emphasizing each word, "If you don't clear off, you'll be arrested."

She looked at Peter helplessly.

"Em, let's just get out of here."

She glared at him.

"Two hundred kilometers," said one of the crewmen, a note of worry in her voice.

Emily looked at her, then turned back to Peter.

"Alright."

Their footsteps clinked on the stairs, a dull pit of anxiety forming in Peter's chest with each step. Myron's words tumbled over in his mind. If they were hit, they might not even know.

"We have to say something, Peter," Emily said as they walked back toward their seats.

"We can't, Emily. It'll cause a panic."

"They have a right – "

"No. Emily, it doesn't matter. How are they better off knowing? We're like cattle, in a slaughterhouse, this far up. The people who can do something about it, already know about it. Anyone else is just going to spend their last minutes miserably."

Emily shook her head, staring at the walls.

"I can't take this."

"We'll be..." Peter began. "We can't change anything. We just have to wait it out."

She bit her lip, then slid her arm around his back. He reciprocated, glancing around at the other people who sat, oblivious to what was coming. In the aisle, barely fifteen feet away, a pair of children played with what few toys that they had salvaged from their home. Their parents watched, smiling faintly as they held hands. Perhaps the last intact family aboard the ship. They had no idea they were about to die.

Fear pulsed with every heartbeat, but Peter felt a strange detachment from it, as though he were not in danger, it was simply the sort of dreading that came before a test he had not prepared for, or a lecture when he had misbehaved as a child. What more had he known? Even when the lice had attacked

the valley, they had had a chance at a way out, something to do. Sitting here, dreading the first impact, those around them unknowing, it was impossible. Emily had been right, they should say something, but how could they? These people's last minutes ought to be peaceful, oblivious.

There was a simmering roar, that grew louder and louder, and suddenly Emily's grip on him grew tighter, each heartbeat suddenly sent a cold spike through his chest. His leg began to quiver involuntarily, his feet tapping against the floor, but he did not hear the sound. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to run to.

The first missile roared by, a light visible reflecting off the wingtip out the window, but its source invisible to them. One, two, three heartbeats, then the second tore into the cabin behind them. Emily screamed, but it was barely a shrill accent over the torrent of noise behind them. Peter forced himself to the floor, hands over his eyes, reaching for Emily's hand, grabbing blindly, before catching it, feeling its warmth. There was a sudden rushing of wind over his back, then the floor sank.

"No!" he grunted to himself, out of sheer panic more than anything else.

The ship was plummeting, the floor jerking side to side. He could not tell if he was really falling, if he was unconscious, or already dead, as the wind roared. Something heavy glanced off of his back, and a warm surge ran through his forehead, pinpricks of static forming in front of his eyes as he dared to open them. Then he felt like he was spinning, and a gray mist greeted him as he slipped away from the chaos around him.

Something wet covered his leg. The stench of oil, and his own sweat, clung to him. A gust of wind blew over his back, frigid air running over the sheen of moisture that covered his skin, chilling him into wakefulness. His eyes opened, greeted by darkness, and the faint, blurry orange tongues of distant fire in his groggy vision. Someone was screaming.

Emily was unconscious nearby, lying on her back. Her chest rose and fell, in long, deep breaths. Her head was turned to the side, the vulnerable flesh on her neck exposed. Her pale skin seemed glaringly bright in the darkness.

Blearily, Peter extracted himself from the wreckage. A sudden jolt of pain panicked him. A length of creased metal had torn at his pants, leaving a jagged, half-dried scratch under the torn cloth of his pant leg.

They had crashed on a slope, in a field; the almost indiscernible silhouettes of the tops of pine trees, swaying in the night wind, caught his eye. A long, rolling gully led down to a river maybe a kilometer away; nothing like the valley they had come from.

He staggered forward, to Emily. Her chest rose and fell steadily. There was a dark stain on the front of her coat, just above her waist, but just as the terrible thought struck him, a droplet of oil from the wreckage above fell onto it, spattering thickly. He sighed in relief, then bent to lift her.

She awoke as he began to move her, shifting and mumbling, before her eyes opened, and she started, her fingers suddenly gripping Peter's arm tightly.

"What?" she asked, panting. Her eyes were wide, and even without much light, save that from the flickering flames somewhere nearby, Peter could see the fear in them.

"We're okay," Peter said, "I think."

A scream, close and urgent, punctured the air. Emily got up, grabbing onto a loop of metal above their heads to pull herself up. She tested her feet, wobbling back and forth, before taking careful steps over the uneven wreckage toward the sound.

A woman lay on her side, her husband dead nearby. With a bitter jolt, Peter realized that it was the family he had watched just moments, maybe seconds, before the first impact. Next to the woman, who was screaming, was one of the young children, on his back, not breathing. The woman scrambled to reach for him, but her leg was trapped under a crushed seat.

"No," he muttered, rushing to the child, pushing against its chest with even pumps, pressing his

lips against the boy's, trying to force air into unmoving lungs. Behind him, the woman still reached for her dying son.

"Stop," said Emily, "You'll hurt yourself, just hold still, we'll get you out."

The screams ceased, and were replaced a moment later by sobbing.

Peter worked fiercely, and nearly thirty seconds passed until he began to give up hope. Then, abruptly, a fury came over him, and he kept going, thirty compressions, two breaths, matching the rhythm with his own heartbeat. At last, he felt the child's chest rise on its own, then fall, then rise again. He sat back, slamming his fist into a nearby piece of wreckage, exhaling and inhaling, the air more sweet than ever. A moment later, the child began to stir.

On seeing her son brought back to life, the woman began to sob even harder, and reached to embrace him. But Emily stood next to the folded seat that pinned her foot, a concerned expression on her face.

"I don't know how we're going to move this."

Peter got up, feeling blood soak back into his feet.

"We'll lift it on three. It just needs to move a little."

"What if we destabilize something, and a whole bunch of metal comes crashing down?"

Peter's eyes traced the crumpled metal, up to the ceiling, which was lined with the windows that had once been on the walls.

"It won't," he said. He looked down at the mother, who held her child's hand, tears streaming down her face.

"When I get to three ... hey!" The woman stopped sobbing, and looked up at him.

"On three, we lift, you crawl out. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Alright. Ready Em?"

"Yeah"

"One ... two ... *three*."

Driven by his success at reviving the child, Peter's muscles strained, then he felt the metal give way, inching upward.

"Crawl ... out," he grunted, teeth gritted. A twinge ran through his back. He heard shuffling, but couldn't look down.

"Are you out?"

"Yes," came the woman's voice.

He let the seat go back down.

"Thank you so much," she said, embracing Peter, then Emily. Then she staggered, and almost fell; Emily caught her.

"Sit down," she said, "Your foot needs a rest, it's had the blood squeezed out of it for a good half an hour. You don't need a clot or anything like that, right now."

"Alright," the woman replied, gingerly sitting down.

"What's your name?" Emily asked calmly.

"Melissa," she said, before looking at Peter, "Where's my daughter?"

"I'll look for her," said Peter, trading a glance with Emily before setting off through the wreckage.

The block of seats had collapsed firmly upside down, breaking free of the rest of the cabin. Peter stepped over an exposed arm, squeezing his eyes shut as he passed. He had to find Melissa's daughter, it would somehow make things right, even when there was no way they could be.

She was dead behind another curtain of debris. Peter suddenly realized he could not tell her. He wanted to vomit, seeing the dead child, but couldn't. He stared down the hall, where the long, burning, hulking wreckage was strewn, dotted with little fires that bathed the cold metal in warm light in some sort of sick irony. He sank to his knees, staring at the moonless sky, the tiny stars that seemed to mock

his misery. He put his hands against the cold grass, sliding down, as if bowing.

A flashlight glinted across his eyelids; he snapped them open, only to be blinded by the light.

"You alright?" came a familiar, gruff voice. Suddenly, rough hands were helping him to his feet; the light fell away, and Peter could see that it was Myron.

"Where's the girl you were with?"

"Emily," Peter said, "And she's right back along there, with this woman, Melissa, and her son."

"They're okay?"

"Her daughter isn't," Peter said, nodding his head toward the corpse he could not bear to look at again. Myron did, and his face fell.

"I'm sorry."

"Let's just find them, fast," Peter said, beginning to walk back, "What's happening?"

"We just crashed," Myron said, "What the hell do you think is happening? Chaos. The lice think they've finished us, though; they flew back once and didn't come back."

"Maybe sending for reinforcements," Peter suggested.

"They don't need them."

Melissa was still sitting when they returned, her son leaned against her leg, staring blankly at the rubble in front of them. Emily was examining something on her arm.

"Where's my daughter?" Melissa asked immediately as they entered. Peter's lips locked in place, but Myron stepped forward.

"She didn't survive, ma'am," he said sympathetically, "I'm sorry."

Melissa nodded, as though she expected it, then her face crumpled, the grief overwhelming any wail of distress she might have emitted. Her silent tears unnerved Peter; all of the sudden he couldn't watch anymore, and turned to Emily.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she sighed, watching Melissa, "Just a scratch."

She took his offered hand, and got to her feet.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked.

"Survivors are gathering at the bottom of the hill. A lot of injuries, but for the most part people are either dead or alive. We could use your help."

"Of course," said Peter.

"I'm staying here with Melissa until she can move," Emily said.

"That's fine, but once she can, get to the camp. We don't have tents up yet, but we will once the wounded are stable. That's if we can find any time for sleep before dawn."

"Alright."

Myron led Peter away from them, down the hill, through the grass. Peter had never appreciated the size of the ship until it lay on the hillside, broken and cracked, like a beached whale. His feet were tired, and slid through the dewy grass easily. The night was chill, away from the fires, and Peter shivered. The camp, a collection of white lights, tables, and bustling activity, grew larger and larger.

At last he was among them. Moans of suffering from what had to be at least thirty dying people, some with blood all over them, others with no visible injuries, but groaning or screaming just the same. Most were on tables, being treated; some had families clustered around them, crying. Here and there, a few were abandoned, eyes closed, as if forgotten.

"Help me," came a gruff voice from behind him. Peter turned to see Myron, at one end of a stretcher that held an unconscious man, whose face was obscured with blood. He bent immediately, taking the other end, and lifting.

"One of the clear tables," Myron said, and Peter nodded. They set him down, and Myron immediately went to his side, thumbing at his neck, feeling at the unflinching vein.

"No pulse!" he shouted urgently. He placed the heels of both his hands over the man's chest, pushing down over and over, grunting with each pump, trying to bring the pulse of life back to him with

his sharp jabs. Peter stared helplessly at the dead man, whose face hovered between young and old. In the dark, Peter could not see much of him through the blood on his face.

At last, Myron stopped, stepped back, surrendered.

"Damn it," he muttered, before slamming his fist onto the tabletop with a sharp growl. The corpse quivered. Peter averted his eyes.

"Come on," said Myron, "There are others we can save, and they need our help."

By dawn, Peter's hands were covered in blood. He had assisted in a dozen rudimentary surgeries, half of them successful. The survivors were being helped to the tents being set up in the nearby woods. He hoped he could find Emily there; he needed to lay with her, nestle himself in her arms, try to forget what he had witnessed, what he had had to do.

They would not be able to stay there long; the lice would be back, searching for survivors, hoping to finish the job. The fresh morning sun blared on his left side, reminding him constantly of his weariness. Their work was almost finished; there was little else they could do.

He stumbled toward the refuge of the trees. Sleep, something he had had so much of the last two weeks, now somehow beckoned to him more than ever. Myron had long since disappeared amongst the bustling of activity, but Peter was no longer necessary; he circled the makeshift medical camp twice without a nurse grabbing his arm, insisting he help hold someone down for an amputation, or a doctor begging him to watch a patient so that he could attend to others.

Already he felt himself sinking into the haze of sleep. His mind, alienated either by exhaustion or disbelief, felt disconnected from the warm, dewy morning that surrounded him as his feet sloshed through the wet grass. At last he was among the solid gray trunks, his feet padding quietly over the orange pine needles, toward the gray canvas tents, the movements of many, where he might find Emily.

She was with another family, around a fire, cooking breakfast, a dried scratch on her cheek. She noticed him as he approached, now tottering on his feet, and smiled. She muttered something to a woman sitting on a log, and walked toward him.

He met her arms as though they were a finish line, feeling his muscles go limp with relief. She started to lose her balance.

"Hey!"

Peter forced himself back up, and offered a sleepy smile.

"I've been up all night, I just couldn't ... I'm sorry."

She was laughing.

"Come over and sit. You want some breakfast?"

Her question took a few seconds to process.

"I ... no, I just need to sleep."

"Dinner, then?"

He chuckled.

"All right. You gotta catch me if I fall asleep, though."

"Deal."

She helped him down onto a log, before handing him a steaming bowl of oatmeal. In semi-consciousness, it repulsed him, but he ate it anyway, ignoring his lack of appetite.

"Do we have a tent?" he mumbled. She sighed.

"Yeah. Got one just for us, by the edge of the woods. You can look down on the ... river."

"Nice view, I bet."

"Sort of."

"Once we get over some of this, it will be nice."

"Will we?"

He turned his head, an action which suddenly required exertion. As he met her eyes, he saw a trace of anger in them, and immediately his words felt wrong.

"I don't mean all of it," he said hastily, "Maybe none of it. Just ... that it will get better. How can it get much worse?"

"We still have each other, Peter," Emily whispered, "It can still get worse."

"It won't."

"You don't know if—"

"I won't let it."

A sudden firmness took hold of his voice as he remembered the woman, Melissa, sobbing over her dead daughter. It suddenly struck him that his mother and father were dead. He felt tears surge dangerously close to fruition. Was it true grief, or guilt at his lack of it?

One of the children began to cry; she had fallen and bruised her knee on a rock. Peter felt the log shudder as Emily got up to go help her, leaving him alone with his oatmeal. He stirred at the blank paste, gathering some more onto his spoon, sliding it into his mouth, feeling his stomach churn at the child's wails. The family was complete, a mother, daughter, father, and son. The son sat boredly picking at twigs as Emily helped his sister to her feet, her parents looking on.

She led the girl over to the log where she had been sitting, kneeling next to her, reaching for the child's knee, peeling back cloth to examine the bloodstained skin, prodding it gingerly, before going for the first aid kit. She bent over, pouring a generous amount of disinfectant on the wound, ignoring the single, shrieking note that pierced the morning air as she did so. Then on went the bandages.

Peter watched her as she worked, watched her from behind as her body flexed, the faded blue denim that clung to her legs holding his eyes transfixed. He wanted her now, wanted to get lost in her body, lost in her hair, lost in her eyes, careless of who might be listening. It was an escape, one he desperately wanted. The sweet smell of the rain-drenched pine forest around him reminded him of her scent, something mixing sugar and petrichor. Something, anything, to combat the sanguine stench of blood that clung to him after the long night.

He hid the impulse. The forest still held a faint mist, one sinister and tempting, like a dark figure beckoning him forth. His clothes were dry, but in the moist air they felt crusted, clinging to him. Suddenly, the air's saccharine smell seemed cloying. Memories, recent but faded, ripped through his head, suddenly fresh. Maybe he was dreaming; he watched his family gunned down, out of the corner of his eye, as he fled through the crowded city with Emily. He made eye contact with the woman shot dead in the skirmish in the woods with the lice. Emily was beside him; but dying, the light fading out her eyes.

"No!" he hissed suddenly, but quietly. His eyes refocused on the pine needles at his feet. He looked over to her, watching her finish bandaging the child, before setting her hands on the bark by her hips, and leaning back on the log, gazing into the fire. Then her eyes darted up, watching something behind Peter.

He turned his head to look. Myron was walking toward him, a rifle slung over his shoulder. Behind him were a few others, some young, some older, all similarly armed.

"Hunting," Myron said simply.

"So?" Peter asked, looking away, back into the fire. He wanted nothing to do with it.

"Come on. We're rounding up whoever we can who looks like they might stand a chance of catching something."

"Isn't this something better with just a couple people?" Peter muttered bitterly.

"You can bring her, if you want," said Myron, ignoring Peter and pointing at Emily.

"Her name is Emily," said Peter, teeth slightly gritted.

"Emily," Myron corrected himself, "If she can help, we can cover more ground, and hopefully bring more back."

With Emily along it wouldn't be as bad. Peter did not want to leave the fire, the only warmth and light in this somber forest, but he knew he had to. Maybe it would be good, to have something else to put his mind to.

“Fine.”

He got up from his log, nodded to Emily, who wore a frown as she got up to follow him. They began after Myron and the others, along the leaf-caked trail, into the forest beyond.

Away from the camp, the stark, disturbing silence replaced the tranquil burbling of distant conversation, and the crackling fires. Occasionally a bird chirped, or a soft gust of wind hissing through the trees and riled the leaves, but in between them, a gulf of silence tugged at Peter's mind, opening a void of peace that left questions in its wake.

What now? What would happen, now that they had crashed here, alone, forgotten? Would the lice come back for them? Could they start a new life out here, alone?

The crack of a gunshot startled Peter; his legs jerked, and he nearly fell. It came from up the trail, where rough laughter was now filtering back to him. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Emily.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Peter, looking at her, then craning his neck to see further along the trail, “Just startled me.”

“You seem jumpier than normal.”

“I think I've got good reason to be.”

Emily nodded.

Myron was walking toward them, a freshly-killed rabbit hanging from his grip, a great gaping hole in its side. Perhaps, back in the valley, the killing of a small animal would have had no effect on Peter. Now, he could only see all of the people he'd watched die, reflected in the creature's shiny, lifeless eyes. He gulped.

“Good shot,” Peter said.

“Your turn,” Myron said, “Quick hanging out back here playing lovebird with Amelia.”

“Emily,” Peter said firmly.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Myron said, the apology so uncharacteristic Peter felt a grin stirring at the corners of his mouth. But he held it back.

“Alright, we'll come up and help you. But if I'm going to hunt, I'm going to need a gun.”

Myron unslung his rifle and handed it to Peter. From a holster on his waist he drew a revolver, black with silver chips in the paint. With a buzz and click, he spun the chambers around.

“Knock yourself out. Everyone's going to need to learn to hunt if we're going to survive here.”

“Yeah.”

“Includes your friend. Emily,” said Myron, nodding to her, “So make sure you give her a shot at this, too. The rest of us get bumped off protecting you from these goddamn lice, we need to make sure you kids can take care of yourselves once we're gone,” said Myron with a chuckle, turning away.

“I'm older than you,” Peter shot back.

Myron whipped back around, staring at Peter, who glared back at him.

“Let's you and me be pals, huh?” said Myron, “Peter, right?”

“Yeah,” said Peter, his face unchanged.

“Ought to not be looking down on you, anyway,” Myron said as they continued along the trail, “You helped us kick ass in the woods. Ripped one of the masks right off, didn't you?”

“Yeah,” said Peter. The rifle strap was biting into his shoulder.

“The name's spread, you know. Lice. Lice. Damn stupid, but it fits. Bastards are crawling everywhere, aren't they?”

“Not here,” Emily murmured.

“Yet,” Myron said, “But if they do, we're going to have one hell of a surprise for them.”

“What's that?” Peter said. Myron paused for moment; the shuffling of leaves ceased as Peter and Emily stopped with him.

“I don't know,” Myron admitted, “But we'll think of something.” And then he continued walking. Peter turned to Emily, who shrugged, before following again.

The little group drew further and further out into the woods. Now and then they fired at a squirrel or two. Peter wanted to make them stop; wasting their bullets on small game, and the sound surely frightened off anything worth eating. But he would show them.

At last they came to a brook, where most of them splashed through, rocks clacking over each other as they were sent tumbling by errant footsteps. Peter slowed as a brown blur of movement caught his eye. He grabbed Emily's arm.

"Deer."

She nodded.

"Hang on."

He unslung the rifle, checked to see that it was loaded, and raised the stock to his shoulder. He guessed seventy-five meters, which would be a difficult shot, but certainly not an impossible one. A clean head shot would be all but out of the question. He did not want the creature to suffer, but it beat starving. It beat starving by a lot.

A crack, a feeling like a dull punch to the shoulder, and the deer sprang into action, cantering wildly, rocking back and forth, water splashing around it, tearing leaves from the bank as it desperately clawed for safety. Peter lined up another shot. A second crack, and the creature stiffened, and fell.

"Sorry," he whispered. He turned to Emily, nodded, and they left the trail, making their way through the woods toward where the animal had fallen. The needles slid like a film under Peter's feet, and Emily slipped more than once, each time catching herself on either a tree trunk, or on Peter's arm.

It lay on its side, half in and half out of the water, with red ribbons running through it. Peter knelt next to it, reaching for the knife on his belt, before seeing the complete stillness, and realizing it was unnecessary.

"How are you going to carry this thing back?" Emily asked.

"With help. Hey!"

Peter hoped his voice carried well enough; on the trail, a few heads turned.

"A little help?"

A couple peeled off to help. Peter turned to Emily, who was staring at the dead deer.

"Maybe that's what they think of us as," she muttered.

"What?"

"Maybe they – the lice – they just think we're animals. Something to hunt and kill. For fun."

"Em, no..." Peter said immediately, "Not now..."

She looked at him, then an apologetic grimace crossed her face.

"Forget it," she said.

There was a splashing nearby as the group dashed into the river.

"This'll feed a few of us," Myron said, surveying the kill, then nodding approvingly at Peter.

"Yeah well we still have to drag it back," Peter said.

"Not a problem," Myron said, "You and I can carry this. Emily can come with us."

Peter glanced at Emily, who shrugged.

"Alright."

Peter stooped and wrapped his arm around the limp body, feeling the still-warm fur in his hands. Together, he and Myron lifted the creature, and started back toward the trail, trying not to slip with such heavy cargo. Emily followed next, the other hunters milling about behind her.

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" said Myron.

"I paid attention at weapons training."

"So did I," said Myron, "I couldn't have made that shot if you gave me ten tries."

"Maybe I just got lucky," said Peter.

"Maybe. Or maybe you're just a damn good shot."

Peter chuckled despite himself.

"I guess."

"You'll be needing that soon."

"Yeah."

"Make sure you take care of her. Emily," said Myron, "She's going to need it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I see her. She's not like you or me."

"She does all right. But –"

"I gotta rest," Myron said. He slung the deer off of his shoulder. Emily and the others were still far behind. Myron straightened up, and leaned against a tree, his face and neck glistening sweat.

"I don't mean anything bad. But next time something happens, you've got to ... make sure it doesn't happen to her."

"What are you talking about? Of course I won't," Peter said, "Why –"

"Because we've got to repopulate the whole damn world!" Myron shouted, his face suddenly animated, "They kicked our asses out of our valley, our own home. We're gonna build up and take it back, if it's the last thing we do."

"The leaders are planning this?"

"I am."

Peter watched Myron uncertainly.

"That's a fine-looking girl you have there," Myron said, "All I'm saying is, watch out for her."

"I will," said Peter.

They bent to pick up the deer, just as Emily and the others reached the trail.

The way back seemed longer than the way there. By the time they were rejoining the camp, twilight had settled on the forest, with invisible roots at their feet, and the faint campfires like orange beacons sitting between the indigo trees. The ragged, rhythmic whistle of crickets lulled Peter into realizing his exhaustion. Their desperate refuge seemed idyllic now, like a family camping trip.

Gathered around the campfire with their new neighbors, a family that Emily seemed to have befriended in the hours Peter had been absent trying to save lives, the warm feeling began to fade. A single deer, a few rabbits, and whatever food they could salvage from the ship. Peter watched the hungry children eat, watched Emily talk to them, a wide smile on her face. He could not bear to think of the future.

"John and Rylee," said Emily as they sat alone by the campfire later, the other family having retreated to their tent, "Those are the kids."

"They seem nice," said Peter. He slid his hand over hers. She took it, then turned to him with a warm but uncertain smile.

"They are."

She sighed.

"I don't know how we can feed them, Peter," she said, "It's not like we can support ... what? A hundred? Two hundred people? Off of hunting?"

"We'll make a farm, Emily. We have enough food to last until we can grow something."

"And then what? They'll see us from the air. They can find us. We either starve, or die from –"

"Em, stop."

Her breathing was shallow, and fast.

"Why does it matter? I'm not going to lie to myself."

"No, just forget it for now. Maybe we'll die. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in six months, maybe in a year. I don't care. The fact is, we're here, together, now. We're not letting them have that."

There were several heartbeats of silence.

“Okay.”

Peter tucked one arm around her shoulder.

“Let's look at the stars,” he whispered to her.

“We can't leave the campsite.”

“No, I mean here. You can see them between the trees.”

“Okay.”

They slid off the log, down in front of the dwindling fire, onto their backs. Her hair tickled his cheek and they drew close.

“Overhead, that's Orion's belt,” said Peter, pointing up to four bright, close stars.

“Where's the rest of him?”

“I don't know.”

“Who is he?”

“A hunter. Something from some ancient legend no one knows about anymore.”

There was a pause.

“If I ever have a son, I want to name him Orion.”

“I'm okay with that,” said Emily.

Peter turned and looked to her. She laughed.

“Maybe a little too soon,” Peter whispered.

“Maybe.”

Wind whispered to them, gently agitating the treetops, a calming rustling that sent a few branches swaying in front of the stars.

“We should have done this years ago,” said Peter.

“Stargazing? We did.”

“No. Just laying together. Like this.”

“Your father would have killed us.”

“He would have killed me.”

She shifted over, onto her side.

“I ... I miss them, Peter. My family. But I'm glad you survived. I mean, if I had to choose... no, no, that's not what I mean. But – ”

“Don't say it, Em. I know what you mean.”

Somewhere else in the campsite, people were laughing. A distant but comforting sound.

“I don't even miss my parents,” Peter admitted, “I don't know why. I loved them. They were my family. But ... I always felt lost. I almost feel more at home here.”

Emily just watched him.

“Maybe because you're here,” he said, “But it still feels wrong. Wrong for ... I don't know. I just don't know, Emily.”

“Neither do I.”

He rolled over, burying her face in her shoulder.

“We need to get away,” he muttered into her ear.

She held him for a moment. Peter slid his arms around the back of her neck, then down to her waist. Before he could move any further, she pushed him away.

“Now? Here?”

“They won't hear, Em. We deserve it. We almost died. We deserve to live.”

“Okay.”

He fell back into her arms, pulling her coat away, letting the warmth, the joy, the anticipation push away his thoughts. It had only been a few days, but her body felt unfamiliar now. He pressed himself against her, hoping the feeling would return.

Even when they were finished, Peter felt disconnected from her. So much change, so fast, had left him trailing in its wake. A month ago, sleeping with Emily had been a distant dream. But now it was

real, almost too real.

When their breathing had returned to normal, the chirping crickets audible again, they slowly made their way to the tent, redressing minimally. They curled against each other. Peter looked into her eyes, barely visible in the dark. She smiled as he touched her cheek gently.

He fell asleep before he finished closing his eyes.

The next few days held little but work, building more permanent shelters, salvaging what could be salvaged from the wreck, struggling against the weight of hopelessness. Flung from home, lost, alone. Little to look forward to.

Peter spent most of his time helping to cut trees in the forest. It was hard work, leaving his fingers sticky and his hands callused. Emily worked elsewhere, and he only saw her in the evening, when they returned to their camp for dinner.

The captain had died in the crash. A man named Frederick Theyven had been the first mate, and he quickly assumed command. A bearded man in his mid-thirties, he had twinkling blue eyes that seemed trustworthy, to Peter at least. But no one else was stepping up, what other choice did they have?

Sawing branches from a thick, long tree trunk, alone, Peter reaffirmed for the hundredth time that he would rather sleep in a tent than go through the work necessary to build a log cabin. The others were hard at work on other trees, hacking at them with hatchets, scratching at their bark with saws. The ship had held few such tools; fewer still had survived the crash.

A shout from further up the hill, back toward the camp, caught his ear. He ignored it, until a second, then a third cry, emitting from the village edge, demanded his attention. Looking around, he saw that he was not the only one to notice. Laying his saw against the fallen tree, Peter began up the hill to see what it was.

Barely thirty-five meters from the tents, a small crowd had gathered, worried and pained looks on their faces. Someone was crying. Peter pushed his way through heedlessly.

The sight shocked him; a girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, lay on her back, her face unpleasantly pale. Someone knelt over her, someone familiar.

“Thale?”

He did not seem to notice Peter, seemed lost in the dead girl's face.

“Thale? Thale, come on.”

“Maya. My sister,” Thale muttered. A single tear broke free from the corner of his eye. The words hit Peter like an iron weight. He had never met the girl.

“There's nothing we can do. Let's just... just try to get her away from everyone. Come on, man. Let's just get – ”

“No. Just... just stop.”

Peter backed off, helplessly. People began to leave, but most stayed put, rigid with curiosity.

“I'll carry her,” Thale croaked finally. He reached down and scooped up the limp body, letting the hair hang from her arms. He pushed his way past the people, Peter following in his wake.

“Thale, I had no idea you were on the ship. I never saw you...”

“Cause I was with her the whole time,” said Thale, his voice cracking.

“I'm sorry. I know that doesn't help, but I – ”

“Yeah,” Thale interrupted, staring into space. He seemed to totter on his feet for a second.

“What ... what happened?” Peter asked, regretting the question immediately when he saw the look on Thale's face.

“Suicide.”

Peter felt numb.

“What?”

“She killed herself, Peter. Took enough pills to kill someone twice her weight. Must have... must

have stolen them from the medical station. She'd gotten cut up a bit in the crash." His voice, already shaky, began to crack.

"I found her, half-dead already, tried to save her, but I barely had a chance to promise her, tell her, 'I won't let you die,' before ... she went."

Thale's face crumpled. He sank to his knees, gritting his teeth.

"There was nothing I could do!" he roared, "Nothing but watch her die! From herself! And then you all just come and watch!?" he cried to the slowly-dispersing crowd, "Like half of you aren't thinking of doing the exact same thing. Home gone, life gone, trying to build a bunch of log cabins out here. Don't stare at her like you don't know!"

Peter felt almost dizzy now. His eyes met Maya's dead ones.

"Maybe we should close her eyes, Thale."

Chest heaving, Thale nodded. He reached down, sliding his fingers down her forehead. He turned to look at Peter, a tense expression on his face, before turning back to his sister. Then, finally, he broke down, sobbing. A taste of bile rose in Peter's throat as he watched, helplessly, wondering who would be next.

"We'll bury her at the top of the hill," said Thale, "Past where the ship crashed. Somewhere she can ... can watch the sunrise every morning."

Another day had passed. Emily had been shocked to hear the news. She'd come with Peter, carrying a handful of flowers. She hadn't known Maya either, but as Peter turned to look at her now, he saw her eyes holding back tears, as she watched Thale lay out plans for the funeral.

A few other friends, both Thale's and Maya, followed them up the hill, Maya's body wrapped in cloth, and laid on a spare board that had been recovered from the wreck. Peter and Thale carried her, Emily close behind, the others behind her.

Atop the hill, the wind blew swiftly, battering a lone tree that rustled in the golden grass of the sunlit field. Under the tree, there was no grass, and it seemed like a good place to bury her.

In the shade of the tree, one of Thale's friends produced a pair of shovels, and Peter and Thale began digging, the others standing in a circle sinisterly reminiscent of the one that had surrounded her body the day before.

The ground, tough at first, gave way swiftly under continued effort. They dug far enough way from the tree so that they would run into roots, but its branches stretched so far that they were still in its cool shade, the wind broken up by the rustling leaves. A peaceful resting place.

Sweat stuck Peter's shirt to him, chilled by the breeze. Across from him, Thale's forehead dripped, a twisted, worrying expression gripping his face. Shovelful after shovelful of soil joined the pile nearby. Time blurred, until Peter's forehead was level with the edge of the hole. The sun had sunk noticeably, the grass tinted orange now, the fading light illuminating the hole they had dug. Peter stopped, and looked at Thale, who paused, then nodded. Together, they climbed up out of the hole.

Emily whispered a prayer under her breath as they lowered the body in. Thale's arms quivered as he did, and just as he let go of the linen-wrapped corpse, he began to cry again, sinking against the tree, sobbing. Emily slid an arm around him; he wrapped her in a bear hug, and sobbed harder, leaning on her. Peter sighed, and began to drop dirt into the hole, one shovelful at a time. Behind him, the sun sank lower and lower.

The sky had darkened to a deep indigo by the time they were finished. The others had found stones to mark the grave with, and one of Thale's friends, the one who had carried the shovels, had lashed two sticks into a cross, which they stood up firmly in the freshly-turned dirt. Thale cried for another few minutes, his arms around both Peter and Emily, before they could finally coax him away from the grave. Emily let him lay the flowers she had gathered on the rocks, before they began back down through the grass, the brightest of the stars twinkling in the early evening.

And yet, not of all of them were stars. No, they couldn't be; they were lights, in a line, in the far

distance, lime-green, red, and white.

"What is that?" whispered Emily. Thale paused, looking up, and his red eyes widened, transfixed in shock.

It could not have been closer than fifty kilometers, yet if it was, it was taller than the tallest mountain Peter had ever seen, and stretching across nearly the entire horizon. The faint outline of a structure, roughly rectangular, shimmered through the mist, the real stars twinkling above it.

"What is that?" said Emily again.

"It ... it's a city of some kind," Peter offered uncertainly, "Or a fortress."

The shock of seeing such a thing quelled Thale's grief, if only for a few moments.

"Who lives there?" he wondered aloud.

"Who knows?" said Peter, "But ... I wouldn't be surprised if it were the lice. Who else?"

"Us?" said Emily.

"Too good to be true."

"I can hope."

They stared a little longer. Behind them, the others watched as well. Then, with a final shrug, Emily began down the trail again, her hair bouncing behind her as she headed down the slope. Peter followed, then Thale, then the others.

"We'll have to tell someone back at camp," said Emily, "Theyven. He's in charge, he'll know what to do."

"And what is he supposed to do?" said Peter.

"I don't know. But he'll know."

"And what makes him better than the rest of us?"

"I don't know, Peter," said Emily, "If you have an idea what we're supposed to do about... that... then I'm sure he'll love to hear it."

Peter watched the structure, whatever it was, drift out of view behind the trees as they reentered the forest.

"Not yet. But we'll think of something."

By the next morning, rumors of the louse fortress had spread through the camp. Peter wondered whether it was even worth going to Theyven.

"Yes, Peter," Emily insisted, "He has to know what happened. It's been spread around so much, he needs to know what's true and what's not."

"He can just go up on the hill and look for himself."

Emily just looked at him.

"I can't believe she did that," she said, looking away from him.

"Who?"

"Maya. Thale's sister."

"I saw her maybe two or three times, ever," said Peter, "I don't know what she was like."

"No one was like that!" said Emily, her voice suddenly distraught, "No one should be like that!"

Peter reached for her hand, but she pulled it away, shaking her head.

"Who's next? Who's going to give up next? How long before it's all of us?"

He could not find any words to respond with.

"It's not going to be all of us. It's not going to be any more of us."

"You don't know that," said Emily.

"I know."

"No you don't," Emily shot back, her voice quavering. He turned to her, and saw her eyes, limned with moisture.

"Every single goddamned night I cry. Ever since we left. My parents are gone, my sisters. All I know anymore is you. And I love you Peter, I swear I do, but it's not enough. They took our whole

world from us, what are we supposed to do, try to start anew, hope we can fight back? We can't. I... I just want it to be over. I don't care what else happens anymore.”

She sniffled again, almost violently this time. Her face crumpled; Peter leaned his shoulder into her, trying vainly to comfort her.

“I love you too, Emily,” he said softly, “And I swear to you, we're going to be fine. It's going to be different here.”

But even as he said it – even later that night, when Emily's tears had dried, and they retired to the small tent they shared, letting the drone of the crickets lull them into sleep – he knew it was a lie.

The clouds broke apart over the hill, brightening the bleached crops on the ground. The rays found a few gaps in the forest canopy further up the hillside, speckling dancing dots among the pine needles on the forest floor, and among the roofs of the clustered huts that sat sheltered under the trees.

Away from them, and the cover they provided, Peter Green hunched over a long hoe, dragging it through the soil, gouging the earth in which he would soon plant the seeds that would give his small village life. The first season had already passed; the winter had been long and cold, but only a few had succumbed to the frigid snow. Stores of food aboard the ship had sustained them. No one had been particularly well-fed, but they had survived, and had spent most of the spring building the village. The hills and plains around the forest had looked ideal for farming; now Peter and about twenty others worked the fields throughout the day, hoping that it would enough to keep them alive.

Peter looked down the slope, to the slow river in the valley below, all but still from his perspective. It was for that river, the pale grass the wallowed in the water, that they had named their village Westreed. It was the end of the day; the sun bounced rays off its surface to glare almost painfully into his eyes. He turned away, looking up the hills behind him.

The ship they had arrived in had crashed halfway up the slope on one of them; Peter could see its black outline, off in the distance, muddled by clusters of foliage. Already vines and weeds rose to embrace it, and the wreck slowly crumbled under its own weight, like dry crumpled leaves.

His arms ached for rest, but he pushed them onward. There was a satisfaction in this, beyond the number-pushing his father had done back in the valley. He would struggle with the earth beneath his feet, wrestle with it, ply it until it had surrendered the nourishment he needed to live. But then he remembered his father was dead.

Rusted though it was, each time the blade struck the packed soil, he felt it resolutely bite at it, and a wide wound was opening. It looked pitiful next to the other, long rows, but it was a start. Setting his feet, he began to drag it through the soil again.

Peter's wondered whether his sore muscles would be able to bear him home, and it was only once he was within sight of the plain wooden box cabin that he was certain. In front, Emily crouched before the siding, a faded blue dress wrapped around her, clinging to her body in some places, hanging free in others. She had done something; there were logs laying on the ground, in a sort of outline. And flowers in the dirt; as Peter drew closer, it looked like a garden.

He crushed a fallen branch under his foot; Emily's head turned, and she offered him a light grin. Peter wasted no time catching up to her. She stood up, admiring her work.

"I brought in some flowers from the tall grass on the hills on the other side. I thought they would look nice."

"They do," said Peter, and he slid his arm around her. She tried to speak again, but Peter interrupted her with a warm kiss. He held her for a moment. They drew apart, but Peter's hand still lingered on hers.

"I spent most of today feeding cows," said Emily disdainfully, lips drawn tight, "And finishing their pen. Melissa helped me. She said when she was young, her uncle had owned one of the ranches in the valley, and that she and her brother would spend a whole day herding them."

"Why are ours in pens?"

"Well there's only a few right now. I mean, god forbid they wander off. It would be a disaster, especially after all the effort we went through to catch the things. Give it a year, we'll have enough to let them out on the open fields."

"That reminds me, tomorrow we're going to scout out the next ridge. It's mostly Myron and his gang, but I figured you would want to come? We're not expecting any sort of trouble. I mean, of course it's armed, but --"

Emily rolled her eyes.

“Myron.”

Peter chuckled and squeezed her hand. His grin faded as he continued.

“I don't blame him though. We've seen nothing of the lice since before we landed here, but we can never be too careful. I think we'd have seen them already, if they had followed us.”

Emily's nose wrinkled at the mention of the lice. The name had caught on since their last encounter with their foul enemies. She had been by his side when he had shorn the terrible mask from the creature's face, looked on its gray flesh, ruined nose, shredded lips, and its smooth, achromatic eyes. Pupil-less, iris-less, soul-less. They had watched together as the creature's last rattled breaths through its punctured lungs ran their course, before the creature had sunk back, still. It still haunted Peter; each time he looked to the sky, he remembered the thing, and knew that more might be watching.

“So do you want to come?” Peter asked, trying to keep his voice casual even as the terrible image flashed through his mind once again.

Emily shrugged.

“Why not... it will beat cows, right?” Her expression was genuinely curious.

“I hope so,” Peter said. They both smiled, then he cupped her hand around her back and led her inside. As he did, he felt as though he was being looked at; he turned and saw another man, a bit older than Peter, looking disapproving as he passed.

It got to Peter more than it should have. He should not be sharing a home with Emily without marrying her; at least not for so long. At once, thoughts within him lashed back out at the man. *I have no one else!* Peter's mind shouted at the scandalized face. But that was not the reason; he knew, even had his family survived, he would have kept Emily in his life, as close to him as possible. Was he frightened of commitment? So much had happened so fast. The threat of the lice still hovered invisibly, like an ether in the air.

He would keep her close, but claiming her for himself, and himself for her, seemed like a step too far, as if inviting disaster. Semantics, maybe, but it was as if Emily dying as his wife would be far worse than her dying as his mere companion.

The confusion and regret at those stupid thoughts overwhelmed him, he backtracked, trying to delete his reasoning. It was all wrong. He simply needed time to make the decision. Reality blurred from the intensity of his thoughts; he found himself sitting at the table in their cabin, Emily cooking on the small stove. The pot bubbled contentedly; probably the pasta that had composed most of the ship's supply hold. Peter was entirely sick of the stuff now.

“So does it look like we'll have something other than noodles come fall?” Emily said, boredly stirring the pot.

“I sure hope so. I'm getting tired of eating this crap for dinner every night.”

Emily's face froze.

“It's not you,” Peter said hastily, “You make them more tolerable than they should be.”

She returned a strained smile, then turned her head back to the pot.

“I thought you liked noodles,” she said flatly.

“Until we ate them every night.”

She poured them into the tiny sink that clung to the wall next to the stove. The drain was a pipe that led out the side of the wall, pouring whatever excess onto the ground outside. The spigot ran from a pump, connected to pipes that ran through most of the houses. The village had several wells, with pumps that dragged up enough water to supply the village with at least a decent ration. They had even purified it; Frederick Theyven had done an excellent job on Westreed. The spring had been a frantic time; felling trees, sawing them, forging them into shape to build the small but sturdy cabins.

Emily set a deceptively small bowl on the table; as Peter began to overturn the noodles, he realized there was a very generous helping before him. Emily sat down with her own, much smaller portion. Peter looked at her.

"You need it," she said as she began to eat, "Particularly since you're so sick of them," she said with a teasing grin. Peter began to eat, suddenly realizing how ravenous he was. Occasionally, he glanced up at her, watching her mouth fluctuate between grin and frown. At last her lips quivered, and her face crumpled.

"Emily?"

"Today's the day. Six months since... since the things attacked."

"Em... it's not a holiday."

"I still miss them, Peter," Emily insisted, her voice more like a loud whisper now. Her eyes seemed dangerously close to moist.

"I miss them, too, but—"

"Do you want me to forget them?" Her voice quivered, as though something trapped inside was about to break free.

"No... but you can't..."

Peter's voice faltered; it dawned on him that Emily had likely been counting down to this day, looking forward to it, as though it would bring her some release. Once something terrible happened, it was always in one's instinct to look for the day that it would be undone. Surely Emily had not deluded herself that everything would somehow go back to the way it had been? She had cried every night for the first month they had been there; he had held her until she had fallen asleep, wiped tears from her sleeping face, squeezed her tight against him, as if he could crush the grief within her. Eventually the crying had subsided, but her sorrow had not. Maybe she was just more emotional... no, that was not it. She had lost far more than he had, that day. She had built a bridge of hope that was only now beginning to crumble.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," she said, squeezing her eyes shut. A tear formed, round on her eyelashes, clinging to them for a second, before dropping onto the table, a small dark spot forming where it landed. Peter watched, helplessness flooding through him.

"We're surviving," he said, "We haven't seen any of them in months. We have a different place to live now. I know it's not the same..."

"You're right it's not the same," Emily said, her voice elevated with desperation, "They found us before, it's only a matter of time before they find us here. There's nowhere else for us to run. Everyone else has just moved on, they've built this place as if it were some natural progression of things, as if this is the way things are supposed to be going, and it's *not*, Peter, this *isn't* where we belong."

"Where else are —"

"I *know*, Peter, but it doesn't matter. It's never going to feel right here."

"Emily, I swear one day we'll go back. I swear. I mean it."

Something akin to iron seemed to harden around Peter's mind, as if his words were dragging him into a cage, cold and unforgiving, but necessary. As her eyes gazed into his, he forced sincerity into them, then found it came naturally. Suddenly, he was eager to find what lay over the ridge on the other side of the river, eager to take any step in the direction of progress. Someday, he could reclaim what had been taken from them.

In the present world before him, Emily had set her face against his shoulder, rubbing her eyes against the cloth of his shirt. She sniffed, the sound muffled. Peter slid his hand along her hair, feeling it glide easily over the smooth strands that made up her generous mane. What little composure stood between their new life in Westreed and their old life in the valley, cracked, and a tear leaked down his cheek. He wiped it against Emily's hair, watching it rapidly absorb the moisture. It was a long time before he spoke again.

"I mean it. If it takes me my whole life, I'll make sure we go back."

"But it will," Emily said, her voice shuddering from suppressed sobbing, "We'll live our whole lives out before we can take that place back. You saw the ships, Peter, you were right next to me. There

were hundreds, like every cloud was replaced with a ship, just floating there.”

Her last few words wavered dangerously; a heartbeat later, she was sobbing, no longer clinging to Peter for comfort, but not drawing away from him either.

“We have ships, too. We don't know what happened to the others, but they were near us when we went down, and they heard about it. For all we know, they might be nearby.”

Even to his own, sympathetic ears, the words sounded weak. He surrendered with a sigh.

“Let's go to bed.”

“Okay,” said Emily heavily, a distinct lump in her speech.

He smiled, took her hand, and led her over to the thin bed they shared. It would have been a somewhat-spacious cot back in the valley; here, it was a double bed. Peter appreciated the closeness it provided, but it was comfortable to have room to stretch his legs, to draw away save for clasping hands or touching heads. This inadequate substitute gave only worry that, should he roll away from her, he would fall off the bed. Not to mention the skinny frame creaked constantly; whenever he moved, Peter felt it's frailty strain against his weight. He had no idea how the thing held up.

It would not be a problem tonight, however. He couldn't blame her; the suddenness with which her temperament collapsed frightened him. Calm, level-headed Emily; sensitive, warm, even vulnerable, but not like this. And though Peter missed the valley, sometimes with an ache so strong he felt compelled to stand up from his contemplation, pace about, as though driven by the memory like a puppet on strings, he would admit to himself that their new life was satisfactory. Here, he could truly be with Emily, and truly see what was outside the valley, what lay in the world beyond.

Then a memory, or maybe just an invention of his imagination, shot through him; only a few months had passed, but already his recollection wavered between what was real and what was not. He saw the faces of the dead, saw a fleeing cruiser, like a bird breaking free from underbrush, struck with a fireball, snapped like a stick, the ends dropped into the swelling throng below, the red glow of emergency searchlights and explosions tinting the smoke into billowing clouds that were unnerving in a way nothing else was. Of distant lights extinguished by a wave of fire. Of the gray days that often covered the valley, casting a pall over the myriad corpses below. Of the sleek shadows that stood in the sky, unmoving and unspeaking.

How long would it be before they came here?

As he lay next to Emily, knowing she still wept, he felt the cloth rub at his cheek as he shifted in an effort to find a comfortable position, and he thought. The cruiser that bore them here had traveled about seven hundred kilometers an hour, and they had traveled for thirteen days. Peter remembered. He also remembered the ten-hour stretches of flight, sitting with Emily in silence, finding some task to help out with, or simply lying in languid malaise, staring at the cloudy world outside.

It added up about ninety thousand kilometers. For a moment, Emily was forgotten, the lice were forgotten. He stood at the brink of a distance he had never known. Had every meter in the valley been a kilometer, himself a grain of sand... even then he could not span the length of their journey. It was hundreds of millions of square kilometers to search.

They must have traveled a significant portion of the world. Peter wished there were still someone in the valley, for some sort of parallax experiment. He learned about it in school, gauging the distances of stars at different points in the sky, at different locations, to determine how much curvature separated them. Someone had done it long ago, but none of the teachers had ever told Peter what the answer was.

The thought reached out and grabbed him: it would not be long before the lice found them here. Hundreds of ships had attacked; a few dogged their path from the valley for days. Even a week or so in, they had met with a group of the soldiers. Their enemy was present everywhere. Just a single louse ship would sear Westreed into ashes, burn it so far that the trees, the houses, the people, would have no time to crumple, simply flash-burned in place, like withered, cracked, blackened sculptures.

There could be no more running. They covered the land, and there could be no escape from the ground itself. There could be no more running. And it made Peter wonder.

Where were his own people?

The sun startled Peter into wakefulness before he wanted anything to do with it, and he was already alert even before he had sat up. Beside him, Emily stirred, awakened by his shifting. After freeing himself from the covers, and sniffing to dispel the stagnancy in his latent lungs, he went over to the sink, washing his hands, splashing water on his dry face. He filled a cup, gulping it down eagerly, then let out a long sigh.

As he turned around, he saw Emily sitting up at the edge of the bed, rubbing her eyes, then turning her bleary gaze on him. She stood up, her nightclothes trailing behind her, the cloth lopsided. She reached for the small chest of drawers that held their clothing, and began to change. Peter stretched his back, sliding his hand down under his shirt, massaging each vertebrae until he could reach no farther. His muscles still longed for the indolence of sleep; he coaxed them from their indifference, carefully. He turned back to Emily.

Her eyes were ringed by red patches; she had been crying again. As the realization sank into his chest, discouragement washed over him. Should he be bringing her along? But staying behind wouldn't help her any more or less than going. She was not unstable, Peter reminded himself, almost chidingly.

Emily slipped her brown jacket around her arms and shoulders, pulled her long hair out from under the hood, then turned to face Peter. They looked at each other for a moment, Emily looking at Peter, still in his nightclothes, with incredulity.

"Breakfast first?" Peter said. Emily nodded, looking slightly abashed. Peter went to the cupboard, and pulled out two plastic packages that held cereal. Behind them sat a few others, lumpy and deformed, looking pathetically small in the almost-empty space.

"This farm had better give us some food come autumn," said Peter as he sat down across from her, pouring some cereal into each bowl that Emily had set out. She dug in eagerly, Peter watching her eat as he poured his own portion.

"Hungry?"

She nodded as she chewed.

"Good."

She looked up at him curiously.

"Means you're feeling better, right?"

She swallowed.

"I'm okay. Just... I'll be fine."

"Em, I'm here for you. You know I am," he said, hoping his words showed his sincerity, "You just... you just caught me off guard last night. I know you need to talk. I... I *should* need to talk, but I don't feel like I do. Which is probably worse."

"I mean it, Peter, I'm all right."

"Okay."

They finished in silence.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

The front door of their dwelling creaked open, the cool air of the chill spring morning, the pine-needled forest floor glistening with dew.

"Did it rain yesterday?" Emily asked.

"No."

"I was in the forest a lot of the day."

"I thought you said you were helping Melissa."

"I was, but we were feeding them over by the woods mostly. The pens are close to the woods, give the animals some sun, and enough room to graze, but keep them as hidden as we can."

"I've never been to see them," Peter said. He paused, noticing his shoes were now moistened with dew, "I just realized that."

"You've been busy in the fields," Emily said, "*Those* will be what give us away, if anything."

"Well, we need food. If we have a farm, there's a chance we'll be found and killed. If we *don't*, it's a near certainty..."

Emily nodded, her mouth shrinking. Peter knew her expressions well; she was deep in thought, and he didn't want her there, not thinking about the lice.

"I hope it *does* rain soon," he said, hoping to change the subject, to anything he could.

"Hmm?" Emily replied, turning to him as he dragged her from her thoughts.

"Rain. I hope it rains," he said again.

"Oh."

"There should be enough food for all of us come fall. The stores are supposed to last another winter, so I'm not worried like I was."

"Yeah," said Emily, gazing out past the forest's edge at the distant, crumpled hull of the cruiser they had arrived in. Along the trail, maybe a hundred meters away, Peter could see shapes and movement that he guessed was the scouting party gathering and preparing.

"We never found the other ships, did we?" Emily asked as she looked out at the wreck.

"No. There's no reason to think they ended up any differently than we did. It's likely they ended up something like this."

"Maybe," she said.

The rest of the walk was silent, until they came to the clearing where six or seven people gathered around a truck, their conversation and movements overwhelming any other woodland sounds. Thale was there, leaning against a tree and examining his rifle with affected interest; other than Emily, he was perhaps the only person Peter knew from the valley. Myron and five other soldiers, three male, two female, were carefully loading metal cases onto the truck.

"We're taking a truck?" Peter's words slipped out as though drawn from his lips on a string.

"Theyven's idea," said Myron as he hefted another metal case.

"What, reconnaissance in force? Except bulky, noisy force?"

Myron shot a look at him. Peter bent, gathered one of the metal cases, and lifted it onto the splintering wood of the truck bay.

"It's just over the hill," Myron explained, "There's nothing there. If there were lice there we would have died months ago."

"We don't know *anything* about where they are," Peter insisted.

"Like I said, Theyven's idea."

"What the hell is in the crates that means we have to take a truck?"

"Food. Tents. He wants a camp there. Like a lookout or something."

"So he *does* think there's something there, and he's sending us in a truck, so every single living thing can hear us coming from a kilometer off!"

Now finished with the boxes, Myron hoisted his rifle onto his knee, pulled back on the bolt with a snap, and indicated it with his other hand.

"We'll take whatever they have. Just like last time."

Then he turned and walked to the cabin, stepping into the passenger seat, leaving Peter at the back, a confusing mix on anger and agreement coursing through him.

"What's wrong?" came Emily's voice from behind him. He wheeled around accusingly; she almost leaped back.

"Nothing, Em," he said, "They gave you a rifle, right?"

"Yeah," she replied, still staring at him, "Peter, what is it?"

Peter glanced around, and sighed sharply.

"It's just... going there in a truck, with a bunch of boxes, like it's a family vacation or something."

We don't know what's right over that hill.”

“I don't think there's anything there, Peter, we would have seen it by now. We've been here six months.”

Her mention of six months sent Peter's mind back to last night. A vision whipped through him, cruel and unwarranted, of her weeping amongst the ruins of Westreed. His resolve hardened.

“Look, if we run into something, just ... just get the hell away from it as fast as you can.”

“What about you?”

“I'll be right behind you.”

They gazed at each other for a moment, as the words soaked into their minds. Then Peter's eye caught Thale, standing barely five feet away.

“Fear-mongering amongst the troops, Peter, that's an executable offense, you know,” he said sternly. A thread of panic shot down Peter's back, before he realized his friend was joking, as the rigid expression he had put on contorted into a more familiar grin, which he now felt safe returning.

“As if we would have a gallows in this town. Probably need the wood for another chicken coop or something.”

“I didn't say a gallows. I meant more like, *p'kew*,” Thale mimicked a pistol shot with his outstretched finger. Peter rolled his eyes.

“Whatever.”

But he was grinning. Beside him, Emily was not.

“You all right, Em?” Thale asked.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding, her hair bobbing as she did, “Just nervous, a bit.”

“Understandable,” said Thale, grunting as he heaved another case onto the truck. He bent for another, “I doubt we'll find anything interesting, but at least you're ready for it if we do.”

“Need any help?” Peter offered.

“Sure.”

There were only a few cases left now, and they made short work of them.

“Who are all these other people?” Peter asked as he straightened up, adjusting his belt.

“Well, one of the women is Alice Botney, she was with Myron in the military. The other one I don't know at all, but I heard her being called Olivia. The blonde one.”

“Right,” said Peter.

“One of the other guys is one of Myron's military buddies, and the last two were hand-picked by Theyven. I heard Reneil and Collin, but I don't know which name goes with who. Honestly,” he said, flipping up the metal fence on the back of the truck, “I didn't think to get to know them. We're not going to be manning this lookout, just helping set it up.”

“Why are you here, then?” Emily asked. Thale shrugged.

“Same reason you and Peter are here. I guess they don't have enough soldiers, they have to start picking civilians. Figure they might as well pick ones with something akin to military experience. Peter and I were in the Expeditionary Battalion together, and you were...” Thale trailed off for a moment, “Well, you're Peter's girlfriend, and they need all the help they can get.”

Emily smiled a little. Peter took her hand.

“Did Myron say when we were leaving?” he asked.

“Pretty soon,” said Thale, looking around, “Truck's loaded up, he seems to be having a conversation. Hey! Myron!” he shouted. Myron turned. “We going anytime soon?”

Myron nodded.

“Still can't believe we're taking a truck,” Peter muttered.

Thale shrugged.

“Way I figure it, if there was something over there, it would have come over and slaughtered us when we crashed. Not to mention all the hunting. Gunfire would have attracted them.”

Peter nodded, uncertainly.

"Alright," called Myron, walking over to the cab of the truck, and swinging the door open, "Into the back, sit down. We're going."

Thale nodded to Peter, and they climbed into the back of the truck with the others. Peter looked at them, sitting on the benches, rifles in their laps, the stern, unmoving expressions of soldiers on their faces. Peter shuddered, even though he knew there was no reason to. It was the looks on their faces, completely unafraid.

The truck shuddered to life, turning slowly out of the clearing, and onto the pine-needle-coated dirt road. Peter suddenly realized how amazing it was that a truck had survived the crash. He had seen it before, carrying supplies, carrying harvested grain, but he had not thought much about it until now.

It rolled out of the forest after a few minutes, the bumpy ride becoming somewhat smoother as the many roots that snaked through the forest trail were left behind. The morning sun hit Peter's face, bright and intrusive, but he blinked it away. The distant structure was visible today, as a slightly-darker outline in the distant mist, like a shadow behind a blanket. Peter stared at it curiously as they drove, not breaking his gaze until they began to descent.

The slope led down to a small river, maybe thirty meters across, flanked by slender sandy beaches, and floored by smooth stones. Reeds grew in the less-sandy parts, tall and thick, easily able to conceal someone. Peter expected them to stop, look for a ford, but Myron pushed the truck straight through, a clattering, watery grinding filling their ears as they rolled through the rocks. Emily put her hands over her ears at the cacophony; her eyes darted to Peter's, and she grinned. This was still fun to her. Vastly more interesting than another day in the fields.

Droplets of water splashed up onto their faces and necks as the truck trundled through the shallow stream and onto the other side, the tires spinning fruitlessly in the sand for a second before gaining traction again, past the little beach and back into a sparse forest. They drove another thirty meters, up the beginning of a slope, before slowing to a stop, the truck's engine fading into silence.

There was a click as the cab door opened. Myron stepped out, slung his gun over his shoulder.

"It's on foot from here!" he called.

They filed out of the back of the truck.

"Just up the slope," said Myron, "Let's check it out, find a good place for a lookout. If we do, we'll bring the truck back with supplies tomorrow."

"How?" said Peter, "If we can't get it up the hill any farther."

"We'll chop some trees down," said Myron, turning up the slope, "Let's go."

They followed slowly. The others Peter didn't know, the soldiers, fanned out slightly, probably reflexively. Like someone was waiting at the top with a giant boulder to bowl them all down otherwise.

The rifle felt strange in his hands; he was not used to carrying it. It's heaviness, the power he knew it held, made it seem to shrink away from him, as though it were distant, even in his grip.

After a couple of minutes, they neared the top of the slope; Peter could tell the trees cleared out up ahead. Myron paused suddenly.

"Peter, Emily," he said, pointing, "Go up that way," he said, pointing to a small cluster of boulders about fifty meters away. They stared at him.

"Why?" said Emily.

"Just do it," said Myron, "Follow orders. You'll get a better view, anyway. Cover more ground that way." He walked over to Peter, and pressed a small radio into his hand. "Here. So we can meet up again. Just go up and take a look around."

Peter looked at Emily, then they both set off through the woods toward the boulders. Peter turned to look at Myron, who was now leading the group up to the top of the hill.

"What was that about?"

"Dunno," said Peter, "Probably just wants us away from him."

"It'd make sense," said Emily.

They wove between the boulders. Emily stopped, suddenly, and turned, springing onto one of

them, landing tentatively partway up, shifting to regain her balance, then scurrying up further.

"Emily, what are you doing?"

"Climbing a boulder," she said as she cautiously progressed to the top. She looked down at him.

"What?" she said, "Come on up."

"No," said Peter, "We've got to scout out the top of the hill, like Myron said."

She rolled her eyes.

"Oh, who cares. It's a bunch of trees and grass and whatever. Better do something fun," she said, turning around and sitting atop the rock. "Bet you can't get up here," she teased.

"I bet I can," he said, reaching for the rock.

"Yeah, well we'll see – " Her voice trailed off. Peter looked up at her; she had turned around, looking over the rim of the slope from her boulder-top perch. She had frozen, unmoving, mouth agape.

"What?" said Peter.

"Don't come up here," she said, her voice suddenly urgent. She moved carefully down the rock, before dropping down to land at Peter's feet, stumbling.

"What is it?" said Peter, catching her by the elbow before she fell.

"I don't know," said Emily, "I saw tents."

Peter felt a chill on his arms.

"Up there?"

"Yeah. A clearing, a little ridge, then tents. I don't know what they are, I couldn't see much."

There was a pause. A bird chirped somewhere in the trees, a gentle, warbling song.

"Let's go," said Peter. Emily nodded.

They dashed up the slope, keeping their heads down, peering up carefully. A small drop on the other side, a grassy ditch, then a small dirt ridge rising up about five meters, a few small boulders scattered here and there.

"Over the top," whispered Emily, "They're over there."

Peter peered out of the trees, down the ditch, to where Myron and the others should be. He didn't see them, but they could have been behind the dirt ridge already. He couldn't tell.

"Let's sneak up there," he said, "Take a closer look."

"Peter, no," said Emily, "We don't know what they are."

"We'll be careful," said Peter, "What if they're other people? Other whos? What if the valley's not the only place?"

Emily's face held a frown, but she nodded.

"Alright. But go up carefully. Peek."

"Okay."

Their feet tore the packed dirt away, but they managed to make it up the ridge. Peter rested his cheek flat against the dirt, barely a foot from the top, looking at Emily, who lay in exactly the same position beside him.

"You look first," said Emily.

"Why?"

"I'd rather hear it than see it."

Peter rolled his eyes, then slowly, carefully raised his head.

On the other side, at least a dozen gray tents clustered around a larger one. They were small, with room for maybe a couple people each. Peter did not spot any people at first, but what he did see held him transfixed.

Tassels blowing behind it in the wind, the grit-colored creatures strutted confidently on four spindly legs, their plump bodies hourglass-shaped in some sinister parody of a woman's form. Four claws sank into the base of the creature's abdomen; three long chrome gun barrels hung from them, bundled together. A glazed black circle, whose iron rim seemed to bite into the flesh around it painfully, appeared to form a solitary eye, which glanced back and forth watchfully, its gaze indiscernible beneath

the reflective lens.

“What is it?” whispered Emily urgently.

Peter pulled his head back, almost face down in the dirt, his face all but paralyzed with shock.

“I don't know,” he said finally.

She raised her own head, slowly, watching for a few seconds. Peter watched her wide, shiny green eyes flit about, taking in the scene, before ducking back down again.

“What the hell? What the hell are those?”

“I don't know,” said Peter.

As he sank his chin deeper into the dirt, Peter struggled to figure out what to do next. It was only a matter of time before they spotted him, and Emily. There were three of the things, with at least fifteen louse soldiers amongst the tents behind them. Myron, Thale, and other five were further along the slope; had they seen these yet? Peter wanted to reach for the radio on his belt, but his eyes met the solitary orb of one of the creatures.

Had it spotted him?

His face was concealed behind a curtain of tall grass, and they were easily fifteen meters away, but Peter felt a jolt in his midsection as the thing stared him down. If it saw him for what he was, wouldn't it call its fellows? Wouldn't they already be cowering behind the heap of dirt, praying no bullets found their way through?

Beside him, Emily's breath was slow and shallow; controlled. What little of her face Peter could see out of the corner of his eyes, was absolutely and perfectly still, frozen in a mixture of potential fear and curiosity; he dared not turn his gaze to see better.

At last the unyielding eye swiveled away; Peter rolled onto his back, sliding back down the slope a bit, grasping the radio, pulling it from his belt, bringing it to his mouth. As he did, the grass rustled slightly.

“Be ready to run,” he whispered to Emily. She nodded, her face rigid.

“Myron!” Peter hissed into the radio.

“I'm here,” came a familiar voice; Peter exhaled in relief.

“We're at the top of the slope on our side. It's like you expected, a squad of lice and three... spider things.” Peter had no idea what to call them.

“Yeah, we see 'em too. Thale's drawing a bead on those walking spider things.”

“What?” Peter exclaimed in disbelief, barely keeping his voice a whisper.

“No way we'll be able to get out of here without being detected. Might as well fight them while we have the high ground.”

“Myron, no,” Peter said firmly.

“What's wrong, Peter?” Myron said coldly, “They killed your family. Those things took our home from us, they took our fucking lives from us, and you just want to leave them?”

“No, but we don't have a—”

“You have two choices. Take revenge on these bastards with me, or don't back me up, and they'll kill you once they're finished with me.”

“Myron...”

“You're out of time to decide, you've got two of those gun-pods walking toward you as I speak.”

Peter rolled over again, craning his neck above the grass; indeed, two of the things were ambling toward him, bodies bobbing back and forth over their thin legs. He threw himself back onto his side.

“Damn it, Myron!” he growled into the radio, but from far away he heard the echoes of gunfire. He peered back up just in time to see the third gun-pod flung to the ground, pale-green blood spattered on the tent beside it. A cold trickle rushed around his neck. This was not going according to plan.

Beside him, Emily raised her rifle, aiming carefully down the sights. Peter mimicked her. She nodded at him.

“On three, we hit the left one, then the right one.”

Peter nodded.

“Three...”

With a crack and a whine, a column of dirt leaped into the air, sprinkling their backs with soil.

“Now!” Emily shouted.

Peter flung himself upward, sliding back down the unsteady slope as he did, feet digging easily into the loose soil to stop his descent. He squeezed the trigger, rifle barking and pulsing against his shoulder. The first few bullets merely dented the gun-pod's sand-colored carapace; it returned fire, missing Peter but spattering dirt into his eye. He blinked reflexively, forcing the distraction away. Stubbornly, he battered the creature with bullets, until at last it staggered and collapsed under the furious deluge, speckled with ichor-laced holes.

“Down!” Emily shouted. Throwing himself back onto the dirt, Peter ejected the clip and slid in a new one. He turned to Emily.

“Ready?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yeah.”

“Alright.”

Again, they sprang to their feet, spraying bullets until the second gunpod was collapsed in a spindly heap.

Further away, gunfire had riddled the tents with holes, shreds of canvas undulating in the wind. Four louse soldiers lay visibly dead; those who were still alive, and visible, were crouched behind tents or trees, returning fire wherever Myron and his soldiers let up. Without hesitation, Peter lined up the sights on one louse kneeling behind a tent reloading. With a single burst, he knocked the soldier against the side of the tent, its fall knocking over the poles, so that the canvas fell over it, billowing, like a makeshift funeral shroud.

Beside him, a fierce stutter of gunfire stung his ear. Emily shot down another soldier who leaned out from a tree to fire at them.

“They've noticed us.”

“You think?”

The ground was soon peppered with holes, the turf torn and soil overturned. Within what seemed like minutes, Peter could no longer shoot back, his head forced down instantly, instinctively, by the intense storm over his head.

“They're moving in on us. They've got our heads down, they can go where we want. We've got to get back, get over to Myron and them.”

Emily nodded.

“Okay, go, now.”

They both half-crawled, half-slid down the embankment. As they reached the bottom, two louse soldiers came around the side of the slope. Peter shot one instantly, using up the last few bullets in his clip. The other returned fire, his submachine gun spraying bullets around him. Dirt sprang through the air; Peter writhed in a vain effort to shelter himself. Then there was a crack, and a growl, and the relentless assault suddenly ceased.

Emily joined him, helped him to his feet, and they sprinted around the side of the hill. There was a dull thump as a small bush in front of them was splintered by a stray bullet. Peter dragged Emily's hand off to the side, against the slope, for a moment, never ceasing their movement.

They found Myron up the slope further around, one of the female soldiers lying on her back on the ground behind him, a bloody puncture just above her breast, leaking over her shoulder. Beside her, Thale desperately pushed against her wound with bandages.

“Peter, give me a hand!” he shouted. Emily went to his side, and gathered another wad of bandages from the open kit next to Thale's knee. Peter watched for a second as she pressed down fiercely, and a fresh gout of blood greeted her efforts, before realizing the urgency of the still-brewing firefight, of the cracking and whirring of machine-gun fire that still filled the air. He scampered up the

hill, toward Myron, little landslides of dirt trailing behind him.

"What were you thinking?" he shouted. Myron's head did not turn, but he suddenly straightened up, fired off three shots, then dropped back to a crouch.

"Got the son of a bitch!" he snarled.

"Myron!"

"Either start putting bullets down there, or they'll overrun us in a minute. They're moving up!"

Again, he sprang up, firing off rounds until a sharp click interrupted him.

"Damn it," he muttered, stooping to reload.

Peter rose to cover him, realizing as he that his own gun was empty, and flung himself back to the ground, fumbling with a fresh magazine.

Behind Myron, the other soldiers still fought, necks craning furiously, trying to gauge when it was safe to take a shot, before a hail of bullets forced them down, withering away at the slope they knelt on. One of them looked at Peter questioningly.

"We've got to get out of here, Myron, we weren't supposed to get into a fight!"

"Can't change that now!" Myron roared back, firing off a few staggered bursts. From behind Myron there was a sharp cry, and dirt could be seen tumbling down the slope. Peter peered his head around, and saw a man lying on his back, blood running from a fat gash in his throat.

He turned, and raised his head over the brim of the hill; to find himself face to face with a louse soldier. Startled, Peter fired, and the louse's body snapped back, losing his balance and rolling back down the hill. One of the gun-pods took notice, the gun swaying menacingly beneath it like a blade on a pendulum. It squatted, and shot at him. Peter threw himself back down.

Switching his weapon to single-shot, he took a breath to steady himself, and crab-walked carefully along the hillside, away from Myron, to pop back up from where the gunpod would not expect. He took another breath, deeper, and closed his eyes, attempting the impossible feat of shutting out the surrounding firefight. Then, swiftly and soundlessly, he rose to his feet, rifle leveled.

The gunpod was already dead; louse soldiers were moving around the sides of the hill, thirty meters down. Disoriented, it took Peter a second to react.

"Myron! They're flanking us! Coming around the side!"

But Myron was already a step ahead of him. The troop moved down the slope, back among the bushes at the bottom on the other side, and fired at the lice as they came around. Two dropped right away; a couple more fired off a feeble retaliation before retreating with their comrades.

It seemed too easy: Peter spun around, his suspicions confirmed with a jolt of shock as three more soldiers came around the other side of the hill. The impulse to shout ran through Peter but instantly sank from his mind as the soldiers opened fire.

He dashed for cover, spotting Emily, rushing for her, grabbing her by the shoulder where she still knelt over the dying woman. They slid behind a rock, shoes scraping against the gravel. Peter turned; Thale had just stood up, realizing what was happening, just tearing his concentration from his desperate efforts to save the woman at his feet. Peter's mistake was just sinking in as three sharp pops rent the air, and Thale was jolted backwards, droplets of blood flung from his shoulder blades, arcing through the air to spatter as red flecks on the sand.

Peter did not respond. He moved around the rock, lightning fast, gunning down one of the lice before they could shift their focus. The surprised look in Thale's eyes flashed in mind again and again; then the rapid stomping of boots approaching drove a spike of necessity into his mind, and he turned to Emily.

"On three."

She nodded.

"One..."

There was a sudden series of shots from the side of the hill; a muffled groan from just behind the rock, and a rough clanking as someone collapsed. Not daring to miss the opportunity, Peter sprang up,

and fired one, two, three, four shots into the second soldier, who stopped and was then flung backwards by the force of the impact. He fell to the ground, and all sound of gunfire ceased.

The rifle suddenly felt heavy in his hands. He did not want to look at Thale's body. Myron was coming over, the other survivors behind him. Something tore Peter from his place next to Emily, supporting her as she shakily got to her feet. Her blanched expression as she stared blankly at no one, unnerved him. He strode towards Myron as he approached.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded.

"What the hell was what?" Myron shot back. He flung his arm out. "We *killed* all the bastards. Don't tell me you have a problem with that. Wh – "

"You killed my fucking friend, too!" Peter shouted as Myron began to turn away. He wheeled back around in a flash, and Peter almost flinched.

"They killed *all* your fucking friends, Peter! Your whole family, *dead*! I got a shot at taking some of them down, too, and you're pissed that I took it? What was I supposed to do, let – "

"You were *supposed* to just *look*, not shoot the goddamn things!" Peter countered, his rage driven by his inability to look at Thale's body, "If there are more, they'll find *this*, and then they'll find *us*..."

"Good!" Myron growled, "Let them come! Cowards like you can take the first – "

Before he even decided to do it, Peter hooked a fist across Myron's cheek, spinning him to the ground. He rose instantly, rearing back to retaliate, but Peter grabbed his arm, twisted it, kneed him in the stomach, and drove him to the ground, kneeling over him. He reached for his knife, in a blind rage, fingers fumbling at his belt.

"Peter, no!" came Emily's almost shrilled voice. Peter's head whipped around. She wore an expression of shock; the other soldiers stood completely still, not daring to intervene.

Peter leaned back, hands up in a gesture of resignation, a brutal scowl still plastered on his face. He got up roughly, and walked back over to Emily. Myron got back to his feet with a grunt, wiped a smear of blood from under his nose, and massaged the stone-gray bruise on his cheek.

"Just stop it!" Emily cried. She looked on the verge of losing control herself. Myron glared at Peter, shot a sharp breath out of his nose, as though he were a bull ready to charge, but made no other motion. A savage glee shot through Peter, as if he had achieved some victory, bested an enemy. Then his wayward eyes spotted Thale dead on the ground, and the hot anger sank away slowly, like a shroud pulled from his body.

"Who's going to carry him back?" another soldier asked.

"I will," Peter offered, his voice still thick with anger, "He was my friend."

Myron's eyes narrowed at his pointed words. Peter bent down, heaving the body over his back, suddenly feeling the urge to vomit. He had never held a corpse before, never carried the limp remnants of someone he had been talking to just a moment before. Hatred gathered in his stomach, like a sickness, but the snout-shaped mask flashed in his mind, and he knew it was just as much their fault, as Myron's.

"Let's get back to Westreed before the sun goes down. And before more of those things can show up," Emily said.

"Yeah," Peter said dully as he slung the body onto the back of the truck, averting his gaze.

"I got his gun," said Emily softly, putting it down on the seat with a hollow clack. Peter looked at her; her eyes grew wide.

"Oh no, Peter, I was just... damn, I didn't mean it that way."

"It's fine," he replied, scratching at the back of his head.

His pallid thoughts followed him on the return journey, as the sun's buttery glow lit the fields and forest on the surrounding hills, casting long shadows off of the truck's frame, creaking as it jolted side to side along the rough trail. Now and then, he caught Emily looking at him, a concerned expression on her face as she sat across from him, but he refused to let his eyes linger very long on her, lest they wander to the corpse that lay at her feet.

Finally, the truck pulled in amongst the trees, parking in the small alcove as twilight darkened the

forest. Peter got off first, turning back to help Emily down; he could barely see her in the dim evening light. The others exited after, coming around to the side to meet Myron.

"I'll made the report to Theyven. The rest of you can go home," he said simply.

"What about Thale?" one of the soldiers asked.

"I'll take care of him," Myron said heavily, "You all will need your rest. Go home, rest."

They turned away, some wishing him a good night as they did. Peter said nothing. He gripped Emily's hand, and led her back along the trail they had traversed just a few hours earlier... no, it had been this morning, but it felt like barely a few minutes ago now, as though the sun had suddenly sank below the horizon in the time in between.

"I'm sorry, Peter," said Emily, her voice quivering, her face a pale beacon in the darkness.

"No, it's..." He couldn't bring himself to blame Myron right now. "Let's just go home and go to sleep. We'll figure it out tomorrow."

Emily sighed.

"I can't believe we found those things again."

"The lice?"

"Yeah, them," she said, sounding vaguely offended at Peter's words, "It's just... we've been here months, and they're right over the next hill? Are they everywhere?" she wondered, her voice rising shrilly at the last of her words.

"I think it's that structure," said Peter, turning and pointing off into the distance. Between the trees, a faint trace of light could be seen behind the mist that clouded the horizon. "That's probably their home."

Emily scoffed.

"Great. So we come thousands and thousands of miles, just to land outside their city?"

"Might not be the worst thing. Imagine if we could get in there, find out who's in charge. Figure out what their whole deal is. Maybe—"

He stopped. In the darkness, he could not judge Emily's expression, but something told him it was not a good idea to continue his speculation.

"What do you want for dinner?"

"I'll make something."

"All right."

He realized his hand had slipped away from hers, and took it again, feeling the warmth against his numb fingers.

"Sure doesn't feel like spring."

"Maybe we flew so far, we ended up someplace with faster seasons," Emily said sarcastically. Peter chuckled, rubbing his thumb against hers, letting their hands swing back and forth gently as they walked. They drew closer to the houses; as they did, the buttery glow of the few lanterns lit Emily's pale face. She bit her lip, frowning.

"Remember this time last year?" she asked, "What were we worrying about?"

"I don't know. Something stupid compared to this?"

She shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess that's the right answer. It's just, all those years, I never cared much what was outside the valley. It was like the stars. We know they're out there, we know we'll never go there, it's just... we don't care. And then after a while, we don't even remember. It's like I forgot there was a whole world past that wall," she said, looking at Peter's motionless eyes, "And don't you dare say it was worth it, that it somehow 'freed' us. Because it didn't. I wish we were back there, not knowing any of this. I don't care if we miss out on seeing some forests or mountains, it's not worth what we lose."

He had no reply, simply staring blankly at her. They had stopped walking.

"What even happened today, Peter?" she said, a waver in her voice, "We shot at them, they shot back, we just... acted. And Thale's gone now, just ... just like that." She sank against the wall of one of

the houses, sliding her hands over her cheeks, pulling them down, fingers out like claws, pulling at her face as though it were a mask she were trying to remove. At last they slid away, revealing a face entirely drained of energy.

"I just want to go to sleep," she said, staring into space.

"Let's go home," said Peter.

As they walked on, in silence, something invisible began to well up inside Peter, but he refused to confront it, to see what it was. He nearly tripped over a root near their doorstep, almost stumbling into the flowers Emily had planted yesterday. Ahead of him, she opened the door with a ratcheting creak, and walked in. A moment later, their light bulb flickered to life. Peter followed her into the house; she was already by their bed, undressing, reaching at the covers. She fumbled with them for a moment, before stopping, looking at her hands, then turning and sitting down heavily on the edge, staring at the floor. Peter left her alone; words could not help her right now.

He went to the small cupboard and pulled out a few potatoes, wiped off the knife that sat on the counter, and began to peel them. A moment later, Emily came to join him, pumping water into a pot and setting it on the stove. Small blue flames curled around the grate as it warmed, a soft hissing in the background.

"Are we going to mash them?" she asked calmly.

"You bet we are," said Peter, not turning from the potatoes. At last he finished them, and turned back to her, to see her staring into the pot blankly, her expression one of dull despair.

"Go lie down, Em, I can take care of this."

She nodded, watched a moment later, then slipped away back to bed.

Dinner did not last long; there were not many potatoes to begin with, less when split between them. The meal awakened Peter's appetite, but ended before sating it, leaving his stomach gurgling and clenched, wanting more. There was more food, but they would need it for breakfast, and the pain settled to a manageable twinge as he began to digest what he had eaten. He followed Emily to bed, slid under the cool covers with her, listening to the crickets outside. Now, beside her, he felt strangely distant from her. His head ached, and inside he felt entirely hollow. He burrowed into the pillows, hoping to force himself into sleep faster, hoping a night away from reality would dull the sensation.

Soon Emily was snoring, but it was almost dawn before Peter joined her.

The days after Thale's death, restless as they were, seemed dim and distant by the time a week had passed. There had been an emergency council meeting, where Theyven decided that the lookout camp would be established, and was more important than ever. They waited for a louse retaliation, but it never came. Perhaps they didn't care. Peter hadn't see a radio on any of the soldiers. Perhaps they didn't even know.

Peter spent the days working in the fields, thinking of Emily, thinking of his childhood, thinking of the valley. The place sat uncomfortably in his memory, as though he were remembering a shameful phase of his life. The valley had truly been a prison. But was freedom much better?

Each night, he found the semi-lit flowers outside his cabin, found Emily within. They made small talk about the day, then slipped into silence. With little else to do, they went to bed early, and often woke up while it was still dark; Peter would come out onto the field to a sunrise that tinted the pale stalks of corn orange.

He saw little more of Myron, and was glad of it. He had been assigned to command the outpost. The outpost Thale had bled for. Peter sometimes imagined his smug face as he looked into the distance, waiting for another surge of lice. He hated as it as much as he hated their bitter foes.

What more was there to do? Perhaps this was what truly mattered, simple routine: eat, work, sleep, waken. No movies, no books, no telescopes here to distract him from the monotony. Peter sorely missed his astronomical outpost; he would love nothing more than to gaze up at the stars. His mind ran

in loops, sometimes spiraling into odd places, before slinging back, as though drawn in by the fishing line of sanity. Did Emily even go anywhere during the day? Was it really her he shared his cabin, his bed, his thoughts with? The same Emily he had known in the valley?

It had been a separate lifetime, one that often awoke him in the middle of the night, breaking through the ice of complacent acceptance as his mind broke free of the bulky, frigid waters of sleep. Sometimes he wondered if his dreams had replaced reality; he dreamt of few things other than his early life, visions that blurred the line between memory and speculation. A cracked picture frame, blood running through the creases in the glass; a midnight walk with Emily through the empty streets of Nalio – but they were being watched from half-opened curtains; the first time he fired a gun, and turned to watch Emily do the same – but as soon as she had, he looked past her to see a pair of orange lenses, a grated mask, a thick black handgun leveled against her temple.

He screamed, he was screaming, he pushed her down, she was falling, the strange clip of motion accelerating. Something flickered. He kicked at the black thighs, but they did not yield. A crack, and his mother lay dead on her back. His father. Emily's father. Her sisters. Thale.

The room around him was dark now, the dream suddenly a distant memory. But it had just happened. He clawed at Emily, grasping at her body. He could not remember if she had survived. A scream from next to him sent a spear of terror through his heart.

"Peter, what the hell?" Her soft voice was edged with acrimony, as she sat up blearily. His legs were crossed, his back bent forward, his elbows on his knees, fingers loosely grasping each other. Panting, he felt the breath chill the sweat on his forearms.

"Peter?"

He turned to her. She was watching him, lips quivering.

"It's fine, just a dream."

"You were scratching me."

"I'm sorry. I haven't had a chance to trim my fingernails," he joked weakly. She gave him a heavy look, then slowly slid back under the covers.

"I dreamed something was killing you. A louse soldier, I think. I just had to make sure you were there. It seemed so real."

She rolled over.

"Peter, there's ... I'm sorry about Thale."

"This isn't about Thale. I ... I miss him. He was a good man," he said, "But this is different."

"Peter, I'm not going to die," she said solemnly.

"I know, Em."

"No, I mean it, Peter," she said, "And you're not either."

"It doesn't matter. I keep having these dreams. I can't tell what's happened and what hasn't. They're getting in my head, screwing with my memories."

Emily sighed.

"Look, I don't know," she said, her gaze growing distant, "Just try to get some sleep."

Her cheek slid over the pillow, rustling, turning away. Peter reached for her shoulder, drawing her back. Her shoulder curled under his chin, and he held her, clung to her. He would find refuge in her, the lice couldn't corrupt that. They could take his sleep, but they couldn't take Emily.

Eventually, he drifted off.

Morning seemed both a relief and a fresh torment. He ate a paltry breakfast, slipped on his work clothes, and opened the door, leaving Emily fast asleep in their bed. Outside, a chipmunk waited at the base of a pine tree, among the roots, head cocked to the side, an almost plaintive look on its tiny face.

Peter walked past the creature, barely noticed as it fled in skittish terror. Another day in the fields, planting seeds that would one day grow into nourishment. He realized that he should have woken

Emily, but she needed the sleep. He didn't want to wake her up again.

Now, as he listened to Frederick Theyven read out work orders, the normal drudgery had an edge of fear tinging its dull tedium. Theyven had headed up the farming efforts himself. Usually, Emily went straight to Melissa's home to work with the livestock, but Peter, along with the others who had volunteered for farming duty, stood to receive orders.

Peter had to respect Theyven. He had taken control almost seamlessly, stepping up to get a grip on a scared, desperate group of people who had been falling apart fast. Apparently the man had grown up on a farm, though that had not been his occupation in the valley; he had been some kind of politician. Peter remembered his father complaining often about them, calling them corrupt and selfish. Whatever second-hand cynicism Peter had picked up, Theyven's actions in the months since they had crashed had all but dispelled it. There were no elections to win here.

Around him, the others seemed just as uneasy as he did, though perhaps they did not do as well at hiding it. One woman shifted uncomfortably when Peter caught her eye. Maybe she recognized him as having been part of the group that encountered the lice. Peter wondered if concealing the truth would have been wiser; letting the general population know that Thale had died in combat with lice, had not helped the villagers' morale. Terror, fear of a death that could come any time, was a seed already planted deep in their minds, and it took little to reawaken it.

He barely heard Theyven read out his assignment.

"What?" he said awkwardly.

"Peter," Theyven boomed behind his short-trimmed beard, "I said you are to help Melissa today, as Emily appears to be... missing?"

"She's not feeling well," Peter said. Maybe it would do her some good to spend a day resting.

"Well make sure she visits the medical station if it gets any worse."

"She will, sir."

Theyven nodded, then continued to read out work orders.

When he was finished, Peter split off from the rest of the group, walking along the thin road that led to Melissa's woodland animal farm. He barely knew the woman, other than a faint memory of rescuing her son from the wreckage of the air cruiser, whereas her daughter had not survived...

The compact log cabin, animal pens surrounding it, sat alone, nearly a hundred meters from any other structures. What comfort Melissa found here, she must have found in solitude.

She stood by the edge of the pens, feeding several hogs from her hand. A black pail hung from her other hand. She picked up another bucket, and opened a small gate in the side of the fence, slipping through while the pigs were distracted with what food she had given them, and pouring the bucket into a weathered-looking wooden trough on the other side of their pen.

Peter's foot snapped a stick. She straightened suddenly, and whirled around.

"Where's Emily?" she called to him.

"Not well. I'm here to help instead."

She smiled.

"Ah, Peter. She's told me a bit about you. Do you know what to do here?"

"No, but I'll help however I can."

"We've all been doing a lot of that lately, haven't we?"

Peter nodded. Melissa opened the gate, trudging over the damp mud around the pig pen, out to meet him. She smiled at him, and walked past, heading back toward the cabin. He followed her.

On the porch, he finally opened his mouth.

"So, um, what am I supposed to do here?"

"Not a lot. Feed them, but that doesn't take long. You can feed the cows. They're penned now, so we don't need to herd them or anything."

"But then what do we do here?"

She smiled again.

"I have a vegetable garden out back. You can help me plant tomatoes once we're through."

"Okay."

She handed a bowl of tan, thumb-sized pellets to Peter.

"They eat the grass mostly, but this is some enriched food I salvaged from the ship. I'm going to make my son breakfast, then I'll join you out in the garden."

"Okay," Peter said, nodding.

He stepped back down the front porch as Melissa closed the door behind her, walking down the front path, back around the side of the cabin to the expansive cow pen, which extended out of the cover of the trees, into the field beyond. Several of the animals sat contentedly in the shade of the tall pines, but most of them ventured out into the fields beyond. Peter had never seen one up close before. Most of the farms in the valley had been on the other side of Nalio, past Brasme, and he could not remember ever going there even once.

The fence gate clicked as he unlocked it. One of the animals started immediately, startling Peter; but then he realized the creature probably recognized the sound as a sign of impending food. He walked inside, offering the wood before him at first, before seeing a trough across the pen.

As his feet squished over the soft grass, something caught his eye that made him pause. One cow slumped against a tree oddly, its breathing, even from back here, visibly fast and shallow. Immediately Peter felt unnerved; he had no experience with the creatures. What was he supposed to do? Was it dying? Giving birth?

He poured the food into the trough almost distractedly, before approaching the slouching cow cautiously. Partway between laying down and leaning, its eyes were glazed, but its head still swiveled to face Peter as he approached.

Telling Melissa would be the right thing to do. He backed away from it, and went for the gate. He walked swiftly to the back of the cabin, where a small, screen-lined structure enclosed a healthy-looking vegetable garden. He came up to the back door just as Melissa emerged from it.

"Ready to plant?" she asked.

"There's something... wrong with one of the cows," Peter said.

Melissa's expression grew dark, the lines in her face seeming to grow deeper.

"What do you mean?"

"It's... it's leaning against a tree. Like it's sick." Something clicked in Peter's head. "It's sick. I think. I don't know much about cows," he admitted.

"Show me," Melissa said. She followed him back to the cow pen.

The creature still lay on its side against the tree. Melissa went to it at once; an urge rose in Peter to say something, but by the time he gathered the nerve to open his mouth, Melissa already knelt by the creature's side.

Peter followed her carefully, not wanting to get too close to the cow. Illnesses were contagious – most of them were, at least – and he did not want to end up with that glazed look in his eye, not caring what happened around him...

He spotted a red patch running along the cow's side, only the edge of it visible, between the cow's body and the tree it lay against.

"What's that?" he said, pointing. Melissa craned her neck to see it.

"Probably a rash, from rubbing against the tree. Or maybe he was trying to scratch an itch."

"Maybe," Peter said. Melissa looked at him, before turning back to the cow.

"I don't know what's happened to him. I think I'm going to move him to another pen, keep him away from the others, just in case. Thanks for showing me this."

"Yeah, no problem," said Peter, eyes still on the black orbs that seemed to stare into space. He wondered if the cow was in pain.

"Go inside and get washed up, and I'll be inside in a moment, so we can plant those tomatoes."

"Alright," said Peter, more than happy to leave the pen. The sick animal unnerved him.

He walked back along the path to the house for a second time, skipping up the steps onto the porch, and into the small cabin.

The cool water felt refreshing, but Peter barely noticed. All he could think of was the animal's glassy eyes. It reminded him of death, and he had seen enough death the last few months to last him far longer than he could hope to live.

Outside, Melissa was already at work on the tomatoes. Peter walked over and unhooked the gate. He knelt next to her, where she was digging out little holes with a trowel, a box of pots holding tiny green seedlings beside her.

"Dig a little hole, maybe the side of two of your thumbs. Then carefully set the pot in," she said, lifting one of the pots out of the box and setting it into the hole she had created, "They're made of peat, so they'll rot as the roots expand, and provide food for the plant. The other boxes are right outside the pen. We've got about three dozen seedlings all together."

"Alright," said Peter.

She handed him a trowel, and he reached over the gate, grabbing a box of pots, the baby plants inside quivering as he lifted them, barely an inch tall. He carried it over to a bare spot in the dirt, where he set to digging holes right away, spooning away soil carefully, and gingerly setting the little pots inside.

"So is she sick?" said Melissa as they worked.

"Who?"

"Emily."

"No," said Peter, "She ... she just needed the rest."

"So do all of us."

"Her especially," said Peter firmly, "She's been through a lot."

Melissa turned to him.

"You care about her a lot, don't you?" said Melissa.

"Of course I do," said Peter, "She's my ... my ... I love her."

"They've qualified, you know. My little sister's friend was married a few months ago. He presided. Wasn't much of a ceremony, but given the circumstances ..."

She shrugged.

"I ... I'll keep that in mind."

"You should," said Melissa, "Who knows how much longer we'll last here? Could be any day they find us again. Not to push, of course," she said with a knowing smile.

"No, of course not," muttered Peter.

"My husband didn't survive the attack on the valley," she said, smile turning to frown, "Nor did my daughter. My son barely lasted, and he's out in the little school they've got set up. He's all I've got left. And from what I can tell, she's all you've got."

"Yeah," said Peter, "She is."

"Just a thought," said Melissa.

They worked in silence for another half-hour, until all the tomatoes were planted, the boxes empty. Peter watched as Melissa watered them. Then she turned to him and sighed, the watering can hanging limply from her fingers.

"Not much else to do around here," she said, looking at the other vegetable pens, "Emily knows more of what she's doing, but really it's not essential. It'd take longer to show you than to do it myself."

"Oh," said Peter.

"No offense," said Melissa, "So, you can go if you want. It's a healthy harvest this year, from what it looks like. Taking an afternoon off isn't going to ruin it."

"Alright," said Peter, "Well, thanks."

She nodded.

"I'll ... see you, I guess."

He turned and walked down the path, away from her cabin, back along the trail, back into the

small village, his feet shuffling through the pine needles. Partway along, he stopped, leaning his shoulder against the rough bark of one of the pine trees, resting his head against it. It scratched at his scalp, but not unpleasantly.

At once he realized he did not want to marry Emily, but he didn't understand why. He loved her more than he had anyone or anything else. The thought of her in a white dress, a veil over her beautiful face, the scent of pine in the air as he held her hand and tied himself to her forever; what could be better? But it felt wrong. All of it seemed wrong. It did not belong. She belonged, but that ... that didn't. He pushed himself off the tree and forced himself to keep walking.

How old was he? Barely nineteen? Maybe twenty now? Someone knew the date, surely, but calendars had been a secondary commodity. Six months. It should be around his birthday now. And he was considering getting married.

Too young, maybe? But that wasn't it. His parents had married at twenty-one, his father's friends mostly around that age. No, it was the change in his life, he could not accept it. Marrying Emily meant accepting that changed world. And he couldn't. Not yet, not now. Not until things got better.

Besides, he thought as he approached their cabin, what did it matter. It didn't change how he felt about her, what they had. And he knew Emily well enough to know she certainly wasn't hanging on a proposal. No, she understood.

She was sitting at the table when he opened the door, reading a book, a novel she must have borrowed from someone. Maybe Melissa. He strode into the room and sat down across from her.

"Where were you?" she muttered boredly, her eyes on the page, but still and unfocused.

"I was with Melissa, helping her with the cows and vegetables and all that," he said. He reached for her forehead, "You feeling okay?"

"Stop it!" Emily cried, swatting his hand away.

"Sorry..." said Peter.

"I just ... I'm tired."

"Let me feel your forehead."

"I'm fine, Peter, I'm tired because you woke me up with your stupid –"

"Just let me!"

She lowered her book, glaring at him. Peter lay his hand against her forehead.

"It's warm. You've got a fever."

"It's warm because I'm alive, dumbass."

Peter froze with shock. Emily's glare dissolved.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice still carrying annoyance.

"It's fine," said Peter, "You're sick. I wouldn't be in the best mood either."

"What am I supposed to do? I was just resting it off."

"Go see the doctor."

"They need the medicine for other people."

"They have plenty."

"Not for long! What if it runs out when we really need it?"

Peter sighed.

"Either go to the doctor, or I'll go get one for you."

She leaned back in her chair, her eyes drooping shut.

"Fine," she said, "Go get one."

"What's wrong?"

"My stomach burns."

"Go lie down," said Peter.

"Carry me," she said with her eyes closed.

Peter stood up, and lifted her carefully, arms hooked under her knees and armpits. He carried her to the bed, set her on the edge, and pulled back the sheets. She lay back as he draped them over her,

laying her head on the pillow. Peter noticed her cheeks were rosy. He brushed some of the hair off of her eyes, then kissed her on the forehead.

"Don't do that," said Emily weakly, "Or you'll end up like me."

"Be back," said Peter, striding out the door.

He could not remember where the medical station was. He knew that a few doctors had survived the crash, and they kept medications in a small hut that served as a makeshift pharmacy. It was locked, and the nascent Westreed was far too feeble to spare doctors full-time. They would be at work somewhere else, maybe in the fields. Peter had no idea where. There wasn't exactly a message board he could read it off of, or signs on the doors of the huts.

It would be close to the center of the village. He headed for it, stepping over roots, around the backs of cabins, pausing as a chipmunk scurried by in front of him. He chuckled at the creature as it dashed away, but Emily still weighed heavily in his mind. In the valley, there had been a huge hospital in Nalio, with medicine for every possible ailment. Out here, their supplies were limited. What if Emily had something they couldn't cure?

He thought of Melissa's cow, the one with the glazed eyes. Emily worked with them every day. It had to have come from them. Peter considered running to warn Melissa, but it wouldn't matter. She lived alone, and if the cows had made Emily sick, then they surely had given it to Melissa too.

The center of Westreed was a cluster of slightly-larger cabins, some small huts, a few wheelbarrows and tools strewn about, and an open-air pavilion with tables underneath, meant as a meeting area. Thale's funeral had been held there.

Peter glanced around, looking for anything that might have medical supplies. There was one other person here, a tall man sitting in a chair, his short black hair reminding Peter of a swarm of ants. He intently worked on a piece of wood, carving at it with his knife, oblivious of Peter's presence. He walked over.

"Hey."

The man looked up.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Do you know where they keep the medical supplies?"

"You trying to get high?" the man asked, not looking up from his work.

"No," said Peter, "Do you know, or not?"

"No idea," said the man.

Peter turned away, then stopped.

"Any idea who does?"

Finally, the man looked up at Peter, expressionlessly, his blue eyes narrowed.

"My wife, Kierra. She's one of the doctors."

"You could have led with that," said Peter pointedly, "Where is she?"

The man shrugged.

"Out working on some water pump, is what she told me. No idea if it's true."

"Why wouldn't it – never mind," said Peter, "Why aren't you out working?"

"I'm carving wood," said the man, "Making a paperweight."

"Paper doesn't exactly figure heavily into our lives right now," said Peter.

"Yeah, well, when it does, you won't want it blowing away on you," said the man. He held up the woodcarving, a section of tree branch about as thick as his thigh, and maybe eight inches tall, which bore a misshapen engraving of what Peter guessed was some small animal.

"That look like an owl to you?"

"No," said Peter, "Look, my friend is sick, and I need to know where they keep the medicine before she gets any worse."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yeah," said Peter.

The man snorted.

“What, you worried you gave it to her?”

“Shut up,” said Peter, “Look, did Kierra ever tell you where the medicine is kept? Because if she did, I'd like to know. At least then – ”

Peter stopped. The man was pointing at a shed between two cabins on the opposite side of the square. A padlock hung from the door.

“It's locked, though,” he said.

“Yeah, I can tell,” said Peter, “When is Kierra going to be back?”

The man shrugged again. Peter sighed in annoyance.

“Who are you, anyways?” he asked.

“Name's Tark.”

“Right. Well, I'll be back later today, probably in the evening. Tell Kierra I'm coming, alright? Don't wander off somewhere.”

Tark threw up his hands, knife in one of them, his carving wobbling as it balanced on his knee.

“Where are we gonna go?” he said, laughing, “Like there's someplace exciting in this town.”

“Whatever,” said Peter, turning and walking off. The town was almost abandoned, everyone in the fields, or working somewhere else. He felt as though he should be out there with them, but missing one man for one day couldn't hurt. He headed back to his cabin.

When he knocked on the door, he heard coughing, dry and forced. He pushed open the door, immediately heading to where Emily lay in bed. She coughed again, into her arm, a fierce fit that left her doubled over, her hair hanging over her face like a mop, the sheets rumped around her legs. She slammed her fist into the tiny table that served as their nightstand, frustrated.

“The doctor's out,” said Peter calmly, “She'll be back by the evening.”

“Damn it,” muttered Emily weakly.

“Sorry,” said Peter sympathetically, “Can you survive til then if I make you hot tea or something?”

“No,” said Emily.

“Soup?”

“No, that's not it.” She held out her arm; red flecks dotted her wrist and elbow.

“Is that blood?” said Peter, aghast.

“Yep,” Emily croaked.

“That's serious,” said Peter.

“I hope not,” she said. She flopped back against the pillow, and sighed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Peter reached for her hand.

“There's only the one doctor?”

Peter shrugged.

“There might be more. I couldn't find anyone in the center of town. I found the medicine, but it's locked up in a shed, and obviously I'm not a doctor.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Emily tiredly, “It's fine. Just – I don't know how I got this.”

“One of Melissa's cows looked sick. Eyes glazed over. Not moving around a lot.”

Emily's red-rimmed eyes widened.

“Melissa might be sick too?”

Peter shook his head.

“If you got it from the cows, she's definitely got it by now, too. No point in running over there. She lives alone. You're the only person she has regular contact with.”

“Peter, you've got to get her, make sure she stays in the house, keeps people away from the cows. There's medicine, but not enough for the whole town if this thing starts to spread!”

She was right, he realized. Why hadn't he thought of that? His whole life, he had never had much to do with illness. A few childhood colds, the flu once; but little else.

"Alright," he said, "Alright. I'll go tell her."

He sat up off the bed, releasing her hand.

"You gonna be okay here?"

She nodded, her eyelids drooping now, her face sagging. A pang of worry shot through Peter's chest. She was coughing up blood. Was she dying?

"Bye," she said as he walked to the door. He stopped, and turned back to her.

"I love you," he said.

She smiled through dried, cracked lips.

"I love you too," she said.

He pushed the door open again, took off at a jog, back down the path toward Melissa's house.

As he came around the bend in the road, her cabin coming into view, his eyes darted around, to the cows in their sheltered meadow pen, to the sunny tomato patches, and then to the porch. Nothing.

He jogged up the front steps, and knocked lightly on the door. No response came. He knocked harder, knuckles rapping almost painfully against the weathered gray wood.

"Come in," came a withered voice from within.

"Melissa?"

"Yeah, it's me. Not feeling so good," she rasped.

Peter almost flung open the door, to find her laying on her back, a blanket drawn over her, her face pallid, the blood almost entirely drained from her cheekbones.

"What ... you were fine an hour ago!" said Peter, but his voice held little surprise. It must have been the cows.

"Is Emily still sick?" said Melissa.

"Yeah."

"Did you find a doctor?"

"Kind of," said Peter, "Look, you have to stay here for now, okay? Emily said it could spread really fast otherwise, and that we wouldn't have enough medicine for everyone."

"Okay," said Melissa, "I assure you, I won't be getting up anytime soon."

Peter frowned.

"Anything I can get for you?"

Melissa shook her head.

"Find the doctor, and get him here."

"Her."

"Her, then," she said, "Hell if I know. I've been here by myself since we crashed. Quarantine won't be a lot different. But hurry up."

"I will," said Peter.

Melissa stared at him for a second.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, sounding agitated for the first time.

"Right," said Peter, turning and rushing back out the door. He dashed down the steps, and sprinted back toward the town.

The run winded him, and his legs begged for rest as he hobbled back into town.

What little sun filtered through the piney canopy faded from white to muted gold as the day grew late. Peter set out again from their cabin, leaving Emily alone again. Her pallor, in the late-afternoon light, was almost terrifying, and her strained eyes, watching him pitifully, filled him with restlessness. Waiting. He could not stand to wait.

He should have gone to find her, he thought as he walked between the towering tree trunks,

should have not stopped until he had. Whatever she was doing, farming? Carving wood? Helping build houses? Whatever it was, it could wait. It couldn't be as important as two people being sick.

He swallowed, feeling a sudden dryness in his throat. He had drank almost half a gallon of water, and coaxed almost that much into Emily. He had known, since his early childhood, that it was important to drink a lot, that hydration combated illness. But that left only one explanation.

A headache grew in him as he again came to the center of Westreed, the little circle of cabins and sheds. A few milled about, walking in and out of their cabins. Peter didn't see Tark in front of the house anymore, but he could hear someone inside. His knuckles tapped the door, the sound seeming to resonate inside his skull.

It creaked open, to show a youngish woman, barely thirty, wearing a faded gray blouse. Her eyes were hawk-like and serious. Peter searched for her name; Tark had told him.

"Hello," she said, pleasantly but suspiciously.

*Kierra, that it*, he thought when he saw her face.

"My friend, she's sick," said Peter, "I ... I talked to your husband. Tark. Earlier today. He said you could help."

"I suppose I can. Where is she? What's wrong with her?"

"She's coughing up blood," said Peter.

That did the trick. Immediately Kierra's eyes widened, and she turned to go back inside, muttering something to her husband. The door opened again, and she was back, clutching a small leather bag.

"Bring me to her," said Kierra, stepping out of the house.

"Right," said Peter, turning and walking swiftly back down the path, Kierra trailing behind him. With each step, his forehead seemed to pulse, and his throat felt drier.

Peter opened the door, and gestured for Kierra to go in. He followed after her, looking back at the sun, where it set slowly behind the distant, mountainous structure on the horizon. He felt a tingling in his neck. He turned back inside, and closed the door.

Kierra was looking at Emily, where she lay, half-asleep. Peter started with panic, until he saw her chest slowly rising.

"Your 'friend,' right?" said Kierra, looking at the double bed, and its empty half.

"Right. That's her. She felt sick this morning, and I went to Melissa's, where she usually works, and one of her cows was sick, too. And then so was Melissa."

"Two people are sick?"

"Yeah, it seems like."

Kierra shook her head.

"I don't know if there's much I can do. If it came from a cow, it's likely not something I've got the medicine for."

Peter's stomach lurched as the words sank in.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Kierra, "Any medicine that will fix this is back on the ship. Where it crashed. There was limited space, so a lot of the more specialized stuff was left behind. Priorities were food and water, not obscure medicines that we thought we'd never need."

"Well we need them now," said Peter, feeling a rasp in his voice, "Are they still any good?"

Kierra shook her head.

"I don't know. Most likely. Those preservatives last a pretty long time."

She walked toward Emily.

"Let me take a look at her. Some cheek swabs. Blood samples. I can do a few tests with the equipment I have. Once I know what it is, we can go to the ship and look for it."

As she crouched next to Emily, she opened her bag, pulling out a cloth mask, which she strapped around her face with elastic. Next she took out a wooden tab, and a small pad of cotton.

"Okay, honey," said Kierra sweetly, "I need you to open your mouth a bit."

With a gasp and a small cough, Emily's lips slowly parted. Kierra reached in, probing the inside of her cheek with the cotton, then drawing it out. She examined it for a moment, then shook her head, dropping it in the tiny trashcan next to their nightstand.

"No," said Kierra, "I need to take some blood. Can you come over here and hold her arm, Peter?"

He joined her next to Emily.

"Just press her wrist down, just liked that," said Kierra, guiding Peter's hands with hers, "There. Just like that. Hold it."

From her bag she drew a thin syringe, pulling off a tiny plastic tip, and dropping it on the floor. Carefully, she slid the needle into Emily's arm. She whimpered in protest, her wrist tensing.

"Hold her," said Kierra.

Peter gripped Emily's hand, watching as Kierra drew out a marble-sized quantity of blood, then pulled the needle away. Emily winced again, then relaxed.

"This should be enough," said Kierra, "Take care of her. I'll return in the morning with results."

"Morning?" said Peter, "She could be ... it could get worse!"

"Hey, be grateful it's not the old days," said Kierra, "When I first started out you needed a whole hospital lab full of chemicals to test for everything. Now you only need a few with the sequencing fluids we've got. It shouldn't take more than eight hours."

With that, she swept out, closing the door behind her. Peter turned back to Emily.

"Who was that?" she whispered weakly.

"Kierra. A doctor," said Peter softly, stroking her arm. There was a little pinpoint of blood where the needle had gone in, but nothing else.

"It hurt," said Emily.

"I know."

"No, more than a regular needle."

"That's cause you're sick, Em."

"No," she said, her eyes still closed, "When you squeezed my hand before, it hurt, too. It never hurt before."

"Does it hurt now?" said Peter.

"No," said Emily, "But any kind of pressure, or anything ... it's painful."

"Kierra said she'll know by morning. We'll find the medicine. Make you better."

Her lips curled into a pained smile.

"How is Melissa?" she croaked.

"Fine. Well, no, she's sick too."

"By herself?"

"She'll be fine."

"No, Peter, you have to go find her!"

"Kierra will send someone," Peter said. Right now he could bear to leave Emily's side.

"Okay," said Emily, "I just can't ... not her, by herself. She's lonely enough without being sick on top of it." As she spoke she began to cough, a sudden fit that racked her whole body. Her shoulders shook, and she moaned from the exertion of it.

"Don't try to talk, Em. It'll make it worse."

"I don't think it matters," she whispered, but then fell silent. Peter stayed with her, stroking her arm, and her back, until at last she sank back into sleep. He leaned forward as he got up, and softly kissed her on the cheek. He was sick, too, already. What did it matter?

He woke to the sound of knocking on the door. Immediately he rolled to the side, laying a hand on Emily's neck. Still warm. He sighed in relief, then cursed himself for thinking she was dead. She would not die.

As he rose, soreness pounded in his muscles. His lips, tongue, throat; his whole mouth was dry. Groaning, he walked over to the door and slid it open. Kierra stood there, the early morning forest behind her. Birds chirped somewhere in the trees.

"Good news and bad news," she said, bleariness tinting her sharp voice.

"What?"

"I've identified the infection, and we've got a bit of the medicine for it here."

"What's the bad news?" asked Peter, leaning his forehead on the doorframe.

"This morning I woke up to three more people sick. It's spreading."

Peter rubbed at his forehead as he straightened up.

"So what do we do?"

"There might be some more medicine in the cruiser," said Kierra, "The problem is, Theyven thinks there might be more lice out there. Anyone going out there has got to be armed, and he's hesitant about letting any of his soldiers go out there, and leave the town unprotected."

"Damn it," Peter muttered under his breath, "How long does it take this medicine to work?"

"I've got three doses. Enough to get three of you clear of the stuff in about six hours. Why?"

She looked at Peter, who struggled to clear his parched throat.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked.

"No," Peter rasped, "Get that stuff here as quick as you can, give it to Emily, then Melissa. They're the most far along. Then me. We can go with you to the ship."

"You can shoot a gun?"

"Yeah, and I have," said Peter, "I doubt we'll need them, but if Theyven's got a rule, he's got a rule, I guess. Can't say I disagree –" Peter broke into a fit of coughing. He felt something wet on his hand. Dreading the sight, he looked down, spotting red flecks.

"Please hurry, and get the medicine," said Peter. Kierra nodded.

"Be back in a few," she said, heading off at a swift trot. Peter slid down the doorframe, leaning on it, sinking to the ground. He groaned, laying for a moment, before standing again.

He made soup for himself and Emily, and carefully woke her. Her green eyes were miserable, and he had to cradle her head to sit her forward enough to eat.

"Emily, try, damn it, I'm sick too!"

"I am, Peter! I can't!" she spat, straining to sit forward. Her chest heaved with the effort, and by the time she was propped up on a pillow, she was breathless.

"I'm sorry, Em."

"It's fine. It's fine," she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "It just hurts."

A knock came from the door.

"That's Kierra with the medicine," said Peter, standing up, setting the bowl of soup on the nightstand, "I'll be right back."

He went to the door, and flung it open. It was not Kierra, it was Myron. Immediately, Peter felt a rush of anger. Whatever he wanted, it was not important right now.

"Good morning, Peter," said Myron.

"It better be the end of the world."

"I've got word from Theyven," he said, ignoring Peter's jab, "Kierra told him about the illness, and he found out pretty quickly anyway when half a dozen people didn't show up at roll call this morning. He's sending me as escort for Kierra, to go back to the ship and find the medicine. The thing is, I just saw her and she said once you were rested up, you'd like to come along as well."

"Yeah," said Peter, "Is that a problem?"

"No," said Myron, "It's not a problem at all. Tomorrow morning."

"Right," said Peter.

"Once you're all rested up," said Myron, turning on his heel before Peter could retaliate. Peter closed the door behind him, and went back to Emily.

By the time Kierra returned with the medicine, Emily had finished the entire bowl of soup, and color had returned to her cheeks and forehead. Peter was eating himself when Kierra knocked on the door. He held Emily's hand as Kierra injected the indigo fluid into Emily's wrist, then Peter's.

"Now for Melissa," said Kierra, "Where does she live?"

"The road at the end of ... um, it's past the end of this road, and then –"

"Peter, just go along and show her," said Emily.

"I'm not leaving you."

"I feel better already," said Emily. Her voice did sound stronger. Peter glanced at Kierra.

"It won't start to take effect for about thirty minutes," said Kierra, "Probably a placebo effect."

"A what?" said Emily.

"Your brain believes you should be feeling better, so it makes you feel better."

"Oh."

"I'll go then," said Peter.

"Good," said Kierra, standing up to leave. Peter looked at Emily one last time.

"I'll be back in less than an hour, okay?"

"I'll be fine, Peter," said Emily, "You worry too much."

Peter followed Kierra out the door.

Melissa's house looked eerie when abandoned. The cows mooed plaintively, denied their morning meal, though they sure still had plenty of grass to consume. Kierra walked straight up to the door and knocked. No reply. She waited ten seconds, then tried again, before opening the door.

"Melissa?" Peter called. He turned to the couch where she had been the day before. Empty. He turned around, to the stairs across the room.

"She's got to be up there," said Peter.

"I don't hear her."

"Let's check upstairs."

His feet clomped up the wooden stairs. Halfway up, his pace quickened as he spotted a collapsed form at the top. Melissa lay on her side, lips limned in dried blood.

"Kierra!"

"What?"

"She's up here! Passed out!"

Kierra dashed up the stairs.

"Give her the medicine!" he cried.

She dropped to a crouch, reaching into her bag and drawing out the first vial. Carefully, she inserted a syringe, and began to draw out some of the liquid.

"Hurry up, damn it! She's dying!"

"You want me screw this up?" Kierra asked, "Wrong dosage, she's definitely dead!"

"Just ... hurry," said Peter, abashed.

Kierra drew out the needle and stuck it into Melissa's limp wrist.

"Is she breathing?" Peter whispered.

"Barely," said Kierra, leaning her ear down near Melissa's nose, "Shit. No. Move back."

"What happened?"

Kierra heaved Melissa onto her back, and knelt over her, one fist over the other, slamming down

on her chest, trying to revive her.

"Shock, from the medicine," said Kierra, "It can happen, especially with this stuff."

She paused, to pinch Melissa's nostrils, lock her lips over hers, and exhale hard. Peter saw Melissa's chest rise slightly, then fall. But Kierra did not watch; she was already back to chest compressions.

Three more repetitions, by which time Peter felt numb, half in disbelief that Melissa was dead, half in acceptance of yet another corpse on their hands. Then, Melissa jolted. Peter started.

"What?" Melissa said loudly.

"You almost died," said Kierra calmly, leaning back and sighing.

"Oh," said Melissa weakly, as if now realizing her condition, "God, I felt sick."

"You were," said Kierra, "Still will be for a while. But it'll get better."

"Is Emily okay?" said Melissa.

"She's fine," said Peter.

"Oh, good," said Melissa, "I figured she would get sick, too."

"She did," said Peter, "But she's okay now."

"She is, and you are," said Kierra, "But it's spreading around."

"There's something you can do, right?" Melissa's wrinkled face twisted with worry.

"Yeah," said Peter, "We're going to go get more of the medicine off the ship. Emily, too."

"When?"

"Tomorrow," said Peter. Kierra nodded in agreement.

"Look," said Kierra, "You should probably come with me. Observation."

"Okay," said Melissa, curling forward. Peter helped her up, and together, they made their way back down the stairs, out of the house, and onto the road leading back toward town. As they left, Peter spotted two more cows on their sides in the pen, unmoving...

Before long, Melissa could walk fine on her own, though she was still a bit slow. Peter's stride had taken on a sort of post-illness vigor, and he wandered far ahead of Melissa and Kierra. When they reached his cabin, he waited up for them.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said to Kierra.

"Yeah," she said, "Bye, Peter."

He nodded in farewell, and pushed the door open. Emily sat on the edge of the bed inside, her head cocked to the side, staring at the floor. She jolted when Peter entered the room.

"Melissa was ... she was okay. We're going off with Kierra and Myron tomorrow to the cruiser."

"I hope we can find the medicine," said Emily.

"So do I," said Peter, "I ... I don't know if we will. She didn't make it sound incredibly likely. You feeling better?"

"Yeah, a lot," said Emily, "I can move again, without it hurting like hell."

Peter laughed.

"Well that's an improvement. Want me to make dinner?"

"I can do it," said Emily, getting to her feet suddenly. She tottered, and nearly fell.

"Let me do it, Em. You've been sick the worst of anyone."

"Okay, okay," she said, sinking back down.

Peter went and sat down next to her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and leaned in to kiss her. His hand closed around the back of her neck. Then he drew back.

"Something we can do again," said Peter, "Now that you're not infectious."

She giggled, her deep green eyes meeting his.

"I'm so glad you're okay," he said.

"I'm glad, too. I don't know what I'd do without you."

He smiled a bit, but the weight of her words seemed to hang on the inside of his chest. They drew his eyes down to his lap. When he looked up again, she had a coy expression on her face.

“Maybe dinner can wait a bit,” she said.

He slept soundly that night, as did Emily. A sliver of moonlight, thin as a splinter, fell across the pale skin on her back. He lay his hand near her face, and felt the slow, even breathing. He closed his eyes. Warm, content life; not strained, oozing death.

He wondered if the lice had created the disease. If they had released it into the air, to infect the cows, and eventually the people of Westreed. But that made no sense. If the lice wanted to take the village, they would simply march in and overwhelm it. Surely they had enough troops.

Peter had rarely been ill in the valley, and serious ailments had been rare, except among the elderly. But Emily nearly dying, and Melissa coming within an inch of it; it was different out here, and as many times as Peter awoke, hovering between wakefulness and sleep for a few moments, imagining he was still in the valley, he could not change the fact that he was not.

It seemed almost believable, with Emily laying naked and beautiful beside him, the idyllic forest cabin and distant sounds of night crickets to lull him into sleep; he had dreamed of something like this for a long time.

If only it hadn't cost so much.

Myron and Kierra arrived just as they were finishing breakfast, with a rifle for both Peter and Emily. Kierra had her own Myron held a shotgun, and had a grim look on his face. Peter felt a twinge of annoyance. Would he spot another louse patrol? Decide to attack it? Get someone else killed? Maybe Emily?

*I'll kill him first*, Peter promised himself.

“Remind me why Theyven won't send anyone else?” said Emily, “It has to be four people, two of whom were sick a day ago, and aren't even real soldiers?”

“It's not a military operation,” said Myron.

“Twenty other people are sick,” said Kierra, “It's important enough.”

Peter felt a swoop of guilt in his stomach, even though he knew it wasn't his fault.

“Theyven needs people working on the town. Plus, it's not like we need that many people just to search a cruiser.”

“What if we get attacked?” said Kierra.

“I doubt that will happen.”

“Then why do we have guns?”

“A precaution,” said Myron, eyes narrowing at Kierra now, “Any more questions, or can we move out?”

“Yes sir,” said Kierra pointedly.

They started to walk through the village. Peter slung the rifle over his back; already he felt the strap biting into his shoulder.

“Are we taking the truck?” asked Peter.

“No,” said Myron, “It's only a few kilometers. We'll go on foot.”

Go back to shipwreck to find antibiotics – Kierra is a doctor sent with them.

“Break it open,” said Emily, shouldering her rifle. Peter looked back at Myron, and shrugged. He slammed his heel into the rusty metal. The bulkhead crumbled, the dust barely lit by the beams of light that filtered through the cracks in the wall behind them. He peered inside.

“Looks like medical storage to me,” Peter said, eyes darting back and forth over the shelves of tiny bottles, “What do we need?”

“Morphine,” said Kierra, “azrimycin, cyvimycin. Penicillin,” she said, nodding to herself.

“Alright,” said Peter, gingerly stepping through the jagged portal he'd created. His eyes scanned the shelves for familiar names, but they were foreign to him; he was not even sure how to spell the names she'd just said.

“Maybe you'd better come in here and look,” he called back.

“Damn it,” he heard Kierra mutter. He heard rustling behind him, a grunt, then a shout of pain.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, the rusty metal scratched my forehead. I'll clean it once we get out.”

She was behind him now, looking at the shelves, plucking bottles one at a time as she found them. Peter suddenly became aware that she was at least three inches taller than he was.

“Look,” said Kierra, pointing to one of the bottles, “*That's* penicillin.”

“Okay,” Peter said, nodding.

“It's better if you know what it looks like. I can't be around all the time to point these things out for you.”

“Right. Well, I didn't go to medical school, so – ”

“You think that will be an excuse when you're dying?”

“No, but–”

“These were simple items that I –”

“There's a reason we brought you along!” Peter cut across, agitated. They stared at each other for a minute. Then Kierra's cheek relaxed, and she backed off slightly.

“I cannot be the only goddamn doctor in the whole village,” she muttered, shaking her head and turning back to the shelves, “Someone else has got to be, and just isn't saying anything because he doesn't want a load of responsibility all over his ass.”

Peter knew better than to argue the point. He waited until she had finished gathering what she needed – what they needed – and carefully slipped through the hole again, back into the tilted hallway. Emily wore a faintly amused expression.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing.”

They headed back the way they had come.

“Right back to Westreed, right?” Kierra said.

“You in a hurry?” Myron asked, stepping under a thick, bare wire hanging down from the shattered ceiling like a vine. He paused for a moment, looking at it.

“Keep your heads down.”

They ducked under the wire, one by one, Myron first, Kierra second, and Peter and Emily bringing up the rear.

“I *am* in a hurry. People are dying.”

“Maybe.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Kierra demanded.

“Myron,” said Emily firmly, “Cool it with the pissing contest. We're all on the same side here.”

They came back to the stairs. Myron heard a creak as he reached for the door. He froze.

“What the hell was that?”

“Probably just the ship settling,” said Peter.

The echo of a door closing, somewhere in the distance, sent a cold chill up Peter's spine.

"Did they send someone else?" Kierra said, looking around.

"No," Emily shook her head.

A creak came from the other end of the hallway.

"Shit!" Myron hissed, "Down!"

They huddled against the door. Myron was making motions with his hands.

"What the hell?" Peter whispered, "Just say it!"

"You and Kierra go down the stairs, Emily and I will stay here and hold them off. We'll meet by the back of the ship. We've got some extra medicine, too, so we can bring it back if you don't make it."

"I'm not leaving Emily."

"Not the fucking time," Myron growled.

Peter glared at Myron for a split-second, then grabbed Kierra's hand, fear pumping through his heart as he led her through the door. As it opened, there was a sudden shuffle from down the hallway. He looked back, caught Emily's eye. She offered a smile, before unstrapping her rifle, and raising it to her shoulder.

Down the stairs, one foot over the other, as gunfire broke out behind them, muffled by the door, but each shot sent a stab of worry through Peter. He forced back speculative visions, forced himself to focus, but it was barely any use. He heard the clinking of glass in Kierra's bag behind him. That was what was important. That was what they had come to do.

He opened another door at the bottom, sprinted through, relying on a wavering memory to guide him. Down another hallway, around a corner. What was happening to Emily? Out a door, onto another hallway where the ship had been torn open, then cracked in two; as the fresh glare of the sunlight faded away, the chirping of birds suddenly distinct in Peter's ears, he sprinted along the wet metal, nearly slipping when he reached the gap where the floor had cracked apart.

Behind him, he heard Kierra nearly slip, skidding to a halt.

"Go," Peter urged, "I'll catch up."

Kierra looked back once, then ran, leaping over the gap. As she landed, she slipped suddenly, tumbling back. The bag slipped from her hands, smashed against the side of the ship, then fell the full ten meters to the ground. She followed, not even screaming, landing on her side with a sickening crack, and rolling down the hill.

Peter did not have time to react; he whirled around, just as the first louse soldier leaned out from the corner. He fired blindly, forcing him to duck back, and dropped to crouch, moving to a smashed column of metal for cover.

The louse's rifle chattered, plunks and whines surrounding Peter as the bullets skittered about. He drew his feet back. The shooting ceased. Peter listened carefully; he could not hear anything.

Write more in here

Then he turned back to the gap.

She lay in the grass, one leg bent strangely, sticking out to the side. The other was bent under her. The bag, in a lump by her side, was stained now, and a sickening lump hardened in Peter's chest. He had to get to her.

Looking down, he saw a ledge about ten feet below him, where the ship had broken apart in the middle of a room. Chunks of twisted metal and plastic covered the floor, along with a generous layer of dust. It didn't stick out very far; Kierra had missed it on the way down.

A noise behind him forced his hesitant muscles into action; he would have to risk it. He sprang from the edge, plummeting, the heels of his feet slamming hard against the floor. His limp knees gave

way, cushioning the impact; he rolled over, bruising his elbows, before stopping on his side. For a minute, he lay still, panting, then got up again. Looking across, he saw another ledge, ten more feet down, another room split in two.

He sprang from the edge, driven by the muted sound of boots tromping above him. A shock ran through him as his feet, then his fingertips missed the edge; time seemed to slow. Then he landed hard on the grass. A wet coolness, pressed against his cheek, did little to soothe the searing pain that radiated from his feet, from his knees, from his hips. As he opened his mouth to groan, he flexed his arm; a sharp, burning twinge flared up it, and he gritted his teeth, sucking in air between them. His head was pounding.

They were up there, somewhere, and they would shoot him when they found him. He tensed, bracing himself for the pain, then turned his head to the side. Kierra's face was pressed against the dirt, eyes open in shock. A fly had already landed on her cheek, where it roved about curiously.

Panic gripped him tightly. He tried to move, drag himself to cover, but the agony overwhelmed him. He could hear the distant firefight still continuing; for now, they were alive. But when the barking of gunshots ceased, he would have no way of knowing whether or not Emily was alive.

He stared at Kierra again. A dark splotch wrapped around her neck, a deep, unpleasant indigo color. The bag was next to her; surely some of the bottles had survived the fall?

Heaving himself forward, grunting with each movement, his teeth ready to crumble to dust, his eyes watering, he made his way over to it. His fingers reached out for it, hoping to save himself another agonizing tug forward. At last, it was in reach. He took it, and yanked open the flap to peer inside.

The stark sound of gunfire interrupted him. Clods of dirt and grass exploded around him. He screamed. Rolling over, he saw, atop the ledge Kierra had fallen from, ten meters up, stood a louse soldier with a submachine gun. Off in the trees to the left, barely twenty meters away, he saw two more, charging forward eagerly, ready to pounce on a defenseless foe.

He looked into the bag, trying to drag himself to cover as he did. One, maybe two unbroken bottles. The rest had spilled their contents into a useless mix.

A mix of keen sting and dull punch flung him to the ground again; the wind had been knocked out of him, and he couldn't breath. He looked down and saw a bloody crater in his chest. The pain began a split-second later, excruciating, the agony of his broken bones thoroughly washed away. He barely felt his head touch the grass again, suddenly feeling light-headed as he stared up at the sky.

He woke up, wondering for a few seconds if he had died, before reassuring himself that he had not. The bright sun glared on his face; his entire body seemed to pulse, as though each heartbeat were thrumming through his entire form.

Something clung to his chest, a dried, stiff mass. Pain twinged from his wound with an even tempo, but he was not bleeding anymore. He tried to shift himself into a more comfortable position, to look around and see who had saved him. Suddenly he remembered Emily and Myron, and immediately his body jolted upright. He was greeted by a wave of crisp agony, reprimanding him.

"Don't put too much strain on your bandages," came a soft, deep voice, "I don't know if I can put them back."

He whipped his head around, eyes straining to catch a glimpse of the speaker. Slowly, a hooded figure, wearing a brown jacket and tan pants, a black vest over his chest, and a mask over his mouth and nose, came into view. Peter guessed that he was a hunter of some sort. The man pulled the mask from his face, and slipped it into his pocket. A skitter of excitement ran through Peter; this was certainly not someone from Westreed.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Where are your friends?" the man replied.

"They... I don't know. Why?" Peter asked, suddenly not trusting the stranger.

"My people are circling around the back. If they are still in the cruiser, we will not find them."

"Your people?"

"Yes."

"So you've come to save us?" Peter said weakly.

The man grinned. He was older than Peter, by ten years at least, but certainly younger than Peter's father had been.

"No," he said gravelly.

"Then why did you bandage me up?"

"You were bleeding to death."

"And the louse soldier?"

"Louse?"

"That's what we call them," Peter said. The man nodded, then his eyes darted away. Peter heard sloshing through the grass; a moment later, the man grinned again, and walked away, out of sight. Peter tried to crane his sore neck to follow him, but could not.

"Jeya. Are there any left?"

"A young woman, shot in the stomach. She might make it, assuming it missed the organs. There's an exit wound, so it's hopeful."

Peter suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

"And the Dhomezi?" the man continued.

"Dead."

"Good."

"No casualties. At least not of ours," the woman, who must be Jeya, replied. Peter suddenly remembered Kierra, dead, just a few feet away. They had to be looking at her. The man sighed.

"Alright, Jeya. Clean up, we'll meet with the others in a few minutes."

"Yes, Ivrid," said Jeya; in his mind, inexplicably, Peter saw her nodding respectfully, "Will you carry this man back?"

"No," Ivrid said, his voice suddenly somber, "I will carry back the dead woman. Spare you that experience."

"I've had it many times."

"And it was never a good one, was it?"

There was silence. Peter let his eyes slide shut. Emily was dying. Emily was dying. A shot of rage pierced his chest, fury erupting in his mind, barely held in by his weakness and his fear. She was dying, and they were here arguing over carrying a dead body? Who was with her? Was she alone, her life slipping away, while these people stood over him in some strange resignation?

Strong arms gripped Peter; the scent of pine filtered into his nostrils. He felt himself hoisted up over Jeya's shoulder, his arms hanging free, occasionally tilting against her back. He realized he was probably able to walk, perhaps should, but when Jeya started moving her momentum showed she had no intention of stopping.

Peter tried to raise his head, but could not, so he settled for turning to the side, to gaze out at the grass and ruined ship. A depression among the many rising blades caught his eye; he watched it as they passed, and his stomach jolted as he saw the body of a louse soldier, helmet shattered, dark blood staining the grass around it.

"I don't like it, Ivrid," said Jeya as her shoulders bobbed along, "Dhomezi so close to this village. They are expanding their territory; either they consider us an insignificant threat, or their numbers are expanding, or they are trying to look reckless on purpose, to draw us in, dare us to attack Woebarren."

Peter wanted to stop her, to ask how long they had been watching Westreed, what their plans had been, what they knew of the lice; certainly if they knew enough about them to give them an actual name. But he thought better of it.

"I doubt it," came Ivrid's voice from ahead of them, "Dhomezi lack subtly. It's one of our few

good weapons against them.”

“Maybe,” said Jeya, stumbling a bit on a rock; Peter winced with pain as her shoulder blade cut suddenly into his chest. “Maybe they’re learning.”

Ivrid did not reply; Peter realized suddenly he had not gotten a good look at either of them. The bullet could have taken his life; he knew that he was lucky, but eagerness filled him already, eagerness to be back on his feet.

They came to a clearing, just a few meters into the woods, where sleeping bags had been rolled out on the ground. There lay Emily, on her back, eyes shut, face expressionless, lips limned with blood. Something cold gripped Peter’s innards, hopelessness that filled him up entirely. He would have nothing to live for, if she died.

There were a few others standing around, men and women holding rifles, wearing brown or green, each face half-covered with a strip of cloth. Peter watched them; he was seized by a swoop of panic as Jeya suddenly lowered him down onto one of the sleeping bags. He grimaced as his body curled, then uncurled onto the soft fabric. As he leaned back, he could see her face. She caught his eye, and smiled at him. He watched her as she turned back to Ivrid and another man, a serious look creasing her wide but pleasant face. Her black hair fell just past her shoulders, the sunlight glinting off of it in the few places it pierced the forest canopy. She was sturdily built, and Peter guessed she was about the same height as he was. The curve of her cheek reminded him of Emily...

He looked over at her; two of the masked people were kneeling beside her, on opposite sides, busily working on injecting something into her. Peter had no idea what it was. Her front was wrapped in bandages, and already a dark stain seeped through them, faintly but visibly.

As the needle went in, she shrieked suddenly, her legs spasming. Peter yelled for her, but his dry throat closed on him, and barely a crackle of noise escaped. He fell back, panting, helpless, wanting to escape. He squeezed his eyes shut as another scream washed over him. What was happening to her?

A few minutes passed, and her screams subsided. Peter opened his eyes as he heard pine needles crunching nearby; his terror mounted as he saw Ivrid approaching, his countenance grim. He did not want to know.

“That woman was with you, right?” he asked.

*Was.*

“Yes,” Peter muttered.

“She’s stable, for now. Your other friend, he seems to be fine. But she won’t be, if we don’t get back to Unconhic as fast as we can.”

“Unconhic?”

“Our home,” Ivrid explained, “Please. We must hurry.”

Around them, there was a fast-growing bustle of activity. People were getting up, slinging packs holding equipment over their shoulders, wrapping sheets around sticks to create makeshift stretchers. Peter saw Emily being transferred to one of them, her entire body quivering.

“Alright,” he said, getting up carefully.

“Don’t bend your midsection for a while,” said Ivrid.

“Okay.”

Ivrid smiled.

“Our ship awaits.”

Peter followed him shakily, through the woods, others rushing past him. The ship was close; so close, Peter was shocked he had not seen it from where he had been laying. But perhaps, that was what had kept these people alive for so long. It was barely thirty meters long, with an open ramp at the back that led to a passenger bay. The wings, punctuated by twin rotors embedded within them, shaded nearly the entire clearing where it had landed. It reminded Peter of the aerial drones that had patrolled the valley; for all the good they had done, he was suddenly hesitant to get aboard.

He hobbled up the ramp, collapsing in one of the few remaining available seats, sinking back into

the semi-soft cushion. A few feet away, Emily lay on her back, someone still tending to her, wrapping dressing around cuts on her arms and shoulders. Her eyes were closed again; what little energy she had left, had been drawn from her by the screaming.

Ivrid sat down beside him, following his gaze.

"I understand how you feel," he murmured, "A few years ago, my wife and I... we were out on a raid. Dhomezi pinned us down. Gun-pod came over, to clean us out. She shot at the thing, ripped it's leg off. It fell, spraying like crazy as it died. One... one of the bullets caught her. In the thigh. Hit the femoral artery," he sighed. "She didn't last two minutes."

Peter felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry."

Ivrid shrugged.

"Another few inches, another few split-seconds, she would not have died."

"I don't want Emily to die."

Ivrid offered Peter a watery grin.

"Neither do I. Nor do I think she will. She is strong. I can tell."

There was a long pause. The engines started; Peter expected a roar, but the sound was barely louder than that of an automobile, with the doors closed and the ramp up.

"How long have you been watching us?"

"We haven't," Ivrid replied, "We have our own affairs to attend to. That's not to say we didn't know of your presence; we saw the fiery comet crash months ago, guessed it was a ship. Saw the village a few times. No offense, to you or to your people, but we didn't think you were strong enough to aid us in our fight against the Dhomezi."

"Dhomezi?" Peter asked.

"It's what *we* call them," Ivrid replied, grinning faintly, "There are many of them. There are many of us. But there are always more of them, and that is why we are losing."

"That girl... Jeya... she mentioned an attack."

"There have been many attacks," said Ivrid, gazing at one of the wounded men laying on the floor, his companions desperately holding a bag over his body, letting it drip medicine into him through a thin, winding plastic tube. He sighed.

"On Woebarren?"

"No, not on Woebarren. That is a fantasy."

"Why?"

"When we arrive, I'll show you."

Peter suddenly remembered Westreed, the medicine, their entire purpose in coming here.

"I can't go to ... Unconhic," he said, "I have to get back. My people are dying."

"Not tonight. You can't go back tonight. The lice will spot us easily."

"When?"

"A day or two. Your friend is badly hurt. I don't how long it will take to heal her wounds, or even put her on the mend. If we hadn't found her, she certainly wouldn't have survived."

The words hit Peter strangely, and he did not speak for a few more minutes. The cabin held no windows, nothing but dim, crimson emergency lights, which tinted worried faces blood-red. Occasionally, the seats rattled; Peter realized that it had been a long time since he had been in the air. No one else seemed to notice; whenever it happened, Peter's eyes went to Emily's head, which bobbed from side to side with each jolt of the aircraft.

Maybe it took a few hours, maybe barely one; the ship began to slow gradually, almost imperceptibly. But Peter had had experience in the air, and he could feel it. A thrill stirred in his stomach; what would this city look like? Be like? Did they know more about the past than his people did? So many questions, but Peter knew he'd look foolish if he asked them all so suddenly.

So he sat in silence, occasionally glancing at Emily, before firmly telling himself that obsessively worrying would do her no good, not to mention himself. He sat back, wondering where Myron was. Perhaps he was dead, left behind. A vicious feeling clamped on Peter for a moment, before he pushed it away. No, it was not his fault Thale was dead. Or maybe it was. How much longer would it matter?

The doors hissed open, and dim, ambient lights in the distant slowly revealed themselves as the landing ramp descended. A long walkway stretched out a hundred meters before meeting with a cliffside, to which a matrix of multicolored lights and skeletal structures clung, punctuated by great towers, like columns, rising into the night, the starry sky washed away by the bright lights into a muted gray.

Peter took a few tentative steps down the ramp, before gingerly peering over the edge of the walkway. How could there not be a railing? Behind him, Ivrid and Jeya's footsteps clanked on the metal ramp. They walked past him coolly, uncaring for the hundred meters of empty air that surrounded them. Taking a deep breath, Peter forced himself to look forward and walk onward.

The doors were easily twenty centimeters thick apiece, and there were three of them, layered behind one another, at least three meters tall and wide, closing behind them like jaws. Inside, the first chamber was spacious, well-lit by white, funnel-shaped lights hanging from the ceiling above, with supplies stacked against the walls. A few soldiers milled about, dressed much like the ones that had rescued them. Solid, dark-brown chest plates and armor clung to some, and they all carried assault rifles, some holding them loosely in front of them, others hanging them from their shoulders.

Peter's awe slipped away as he remembered why he was here.

"Where's Emily?" he asked Ivrid, jogging to catch up to him and Jeya.

"They've taken her to the infirmary. She'll be alright, it just might be a while before she's on the mend." Ivrid looked pained under his veneer of confident calm. Peter had no idea why he would lie.

"So why am I here?"

Jeya looked at him as they walked, passing out of the atrium and into a smaller side hallway.

"Because your people are in danger," Ivrid said.

"Yeah, I didn't have a clue," Peter said.

"Well you soon will," Ivrid said. Peter wondered if they were somehow immune to sarcasm.

"The Dhomezi are spreading," Jeya said, "We're hoping to launch an offensive against them soon, but we can't be worrying about your village."

"So? Why do you need to worry about us?"

Ivrid glanced at him sidelong.

"Have you ever seen a real war, Peter Green?"

"I saw my whole valley overrun and half the people I –"

"A war, Peter. Westreed would be destroyed, and your people would have little chance of surviving the battle. It might even come at our hands."

"So ... what? You're going to move us out."

"Actually," said Ivrid, "I was planning to bring them here. We have more than enough spare accommodations, I'm sad to say, and your people would stand a far better chance fighting alongside us than you would on your own."

"And you assume we want to?"

Ivrid stopped. Jeya slowed her pace behind them, watching cautiously.

"Peter Green, we are of the same kind. If we do not stand together, we will be torn apart, alone. As allies, we might stand a chance."

"Eighty people are going to make a difference? You must not have much of an army."

"You miss the point."

"Maybe. Where are we going?"

They resumed walking.

"To meet with our leader. Such a mission, to retrieve your people, might be dangerous, but I hope to convince her it will be a profitable endeavor. So try to seem formidable."

"I'll try," said Peter, looking around at the narrow tunnel. It was wide, enough for several people to walk abreast. Above him, tubes, pipes, and wires snaked across the ceiling, sometimes meeting in concert, often branching away out of sight.

"So is this your city?"

"This is Unconhic, yes."

"And it's the only one?"

"Oh no," said Ivrid, "There are nearly a dozen others. Not to mention our armies spread out through the forests and hills around Woebarren. No, to have lasted this long, we needed to be quite more than a tiny guerrilla cell."

"So you have ships?"

"Hundreds of cruisers. The ones we need are out fighting now; the ones we don't are hidden underground, in our cities, safe and ready."

*Hundreds*, Peter thought.

They came to stairs. Peter glanced upward; the staircase seemed to go up forever. He groaned under his breath, suddenly realizing how tired he was.

"We are going up only a ways," said Jeya, apparently noticing.

Peter resisted the childish urge to dash ahead of the others, but the slow ascent wore on him. They had taken ten of them when Ivrid turned away from the stairwell, toward a side door, and opened it. Jeya followed, glancing back at Peter to make sure he was following.

The corridor here was smooth and thin, lit from the floor, blue light showering the walls. It was dim, but still enough to see by.

"I don't know if she will be there," Ivrid muttered to Jeya as they walked. Their hushed voices unnerved Peter; they sounded almost frightened of "her," whoever she was. Jeya had no response.

They came to a door, which led to a nicely furnished room, the lights in here warm and incandescent. A pair of guards stood against the wall, their faces entirely masked, sturdy helmets over their heads, and impenetrable goggles over their eyes. They did not move when Jeya and Ivrid entered; Peter almost jumped when they spoke.

"You are here to see Emeya?"

"Yeah," said Jeya.

The guards' helmets swiveled, barely discernibly. They seemed to be looking at Peter, but with those goggles over their eyes it was impossible to tell for sure.

"Alright. I will ask her."

One guard pushed a button on the wall.

"Visitors to see you, Miss Dumir."

"Send them in at once," came a cool female voice.

The door slid open, with a soft hiss, the black slab sliding into the wall, revealing a dark, circular office whose walls and floor glinted with polished stone in varying shades of gray and black. A woman sat at a desk against the back of the room, several screens on the wall behind her, poring over a computer and several papers.

Jeya and Ivrid bowed their heads. Peter saw them, and hastily did the same.

"Ivrid," the woman said, her lipless mouth curling into a warm smile. Peter could not tell how old she was; her heart-shaped face held no lines, but there was a firmness to the set of her chin that told him that she couldn't be too young.

"I have a matter that may be of concern to you."

"Speak."

"The settlers we spoke of before. A disease has afflicted their village. Curable, I think. But they will not last much longer, especially not with our planned offensive. I ask permission to take a few ships to bring them here."

"Why?"

“Because they can fight. Because they are dying, they will die otherwise. Because... they are our people.”

“And you propose taking such a risk, risking important ships, important soldiers, before our great offensive?”

“Compassion is the only thing that separates us from the Dhomezi,” Ivrid said, his voice suddenly cold.

“Stupidity will be the one thing that kills us if I allow you to go.”

A pause hung in the air for several long seconds. Ivrid's body tensed, but Peter doubted that Emeya could tell.

“Is that one of the villagers?” she asked, pointing at Peter. A chill ran through him.

“Yes,” Jeya said softly.

“What is your name, settler?”

“Peter. Peter Green.”

“Explain to me, Peter, why you think we should go through so much risk to take you in?”

“I ... I don't know. I didn't know any of this was happening. I thought we'd found a ... safe place. Somewhat.” The words sounded so stupid...

“His people are fighters!” Jeya insisted from beside him, “When we found them, they had lost one of their number, but only four of them killed at least a dozen Dhomezi soldiers. You can pass them up and leave them to die, but it will be a mistake.”

Peter felt a twinge of affection for Jeya as she defended him. Emeya looked vaguely impressed.

“If they are such intrepid warriors, why can't they take care of themselves?”

“Because,” Ivrid cut in, his voice sounding authoritative now, “Alone, with their meager weapons, they will easily be overrun. But if we bring them here, we will have eighty more people willing to help.”

Emeya said nothing, drumming her fingers quietly on her desk, merely watching Ivrid, as if expecting more. Which he provided.

“Look, I will use my own ships, my own troops, to get them. I have a plan. It will not provoke the Dhomezi, the nearest camp to their village was already wiped out. By them.”

Perhaps those last words did it. Emeya's fingers froze. She clasped her hands.

“This is a great risk, Ivrid. I give my permission, reluctantly.”

“Thank you.”

“But if you provoke the Dhomezi into striking us now, ending this lull in the fighting that we've been relying on, it's on you. All of it.”

“I understand,” said Ivrid.

“Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to finish.”

“Yes, of course.”

They left Emeya's chambers quietly, wordlessly passing the guards outside, back into the elevator. As they descended, Ivrid's face held a slight grin.

“You are lucky, Peter Green,” Ivrid said, “I think, by tomorrow, we can have you here, in the safety of Unconhic.”

“Until we have to go back out and fight again, you mean.”

“Well, yes. But you'll stand a better chance in here.”

“And you assume we want to stand a chance at all?” Peter demanded, “You are in there, making plans for my people, as if we want to join your war. If you didn't have to bomb this whole damn place, we could stay right where we were!”

Ivrid and Jeya both looked taken aback.

“We spent *months* building that village, making a life for ourselves, and you want us to just pack up and come fight for you?”

“We want you to come fight for yourselves,” Ivrid said.

Peter had no retort. Shame washed through him, for being angry at them, when they planned to risk their lives to rescue him and his people. But it should not be their choice.

“What kind of 'offensive' is being planned?” Peter asked, after a few seconds had passed.

“All kinds. Cruisers and fighters first, to bomb any targets into submission. Then, the armor brigades will move in, sweep up the hill, destroy what's left. Then our troops move in, and clean up. We hope to take all of Gazae Canyon in one clean sweep.”

“Gazae Canyon?”

“It's between here and Westreed. The cliffs are full of louse outposts, with tunnels leading all throughout it. Some even say that there are tunnels leading to within Woobarren itself. Of course they would be sealed off if we captured it. But even so, digging through a collapsed section would be far safer than trying to get into Woobarren any other way.”

“What's inside Woobarren?”

Ivrid shook his head.

“I don't know. No one really does.”

Peter's mind was filled to the brim with questions, but only one begged an answer.

“Where's Emily?”

“She'll still be in the infirmary.”

“Can you take me there?”

“Okay. Perhaps then I will show you to your quarters. Tomorrow we will go back to Westreed.”

A thought glanced across Peter's mind, and immediately it angered him at himself. Something that seemed agreeable. Agreeable to being abducted to this place. But then they had saved his life. And Emily's life. And they had far more of a fighting chance than him and all the other people in Westreed did. Especially with so many of them sick or dying...

Peter wanted to punch Ivrid now, but gratitude and fury clashed in his mind, leaving a confused mess in its wake. How many people had died because they had not brought the medicine back? That had been Peter's job, and he had abandoned them. But what choice had he had?

His tangled thoughts brought him to the infirmary. Ivrid opened the door, and he and Jeya walked in swiftly, purposely, past the other beds. Peter glanced from one to another: a man lying on his back, all of his face obscured by bandages, save for his chin, which wore a resigned grimace; a woman laying on her side, no injury apparent, but still staring into space. Another man, with what appeared to be a missing arm...

The burning night, the tangy taste on his tongue. The struggle to save as many victims as they could from the smoldering ruin of the ship. Blood all over Peter's hands. He blinked the memories away as he approached Emily's bed. Ivrid and Jeya nodded to him, then walked off, leaving Peter alone with her.

“Hey, Peter,” she murmured weakly.

“Hey.”

He brushed her cheek gently, then took her hand and squeezed it. She smiled, then frowned.

“Where are we?”

“Some city called Unconhic.”

“How long have I been out?”

“A few hours.”

Emily squinted at her surroundings.

“A city?”

“Yeah. They've been fighting the lice for... a while, I guess. They're planning to rescue everyone at Westreed and bring them here.”

“What about the disease?”

“They have medicine.”

She nodded cautiously.

“What's the catch?”

“I don't know. They expect us to help them fight.”

“No.”

Peter looked at her; her eyes were wide now.

“No more war. We'll stay in the village if we have to, but – ”

“That's what I said, Em. They're going to launch some ... some new offensive or something. It'll destroy Westreed.”

“Well tell them they have no right to do it then!”

“I tried.”

She sighed, before looking down at the bandages wrapped around her.

“I got shot... I remember that...”

She jolted suddenly.

“Where's Myron?”

Peter shook his head.

“I don't know. I think he's okay. He wasn't on the ship that took us back.”

Emily withered at the words.

“Oh, Peter,” she said, gripping his hand. Her face crumpled, tears leaking from her eyes.

“Em, he's fine, he'll be fine.”

“We don't know,” she whispered, leaning forward now, her hair hanging over her cheeks, “We don't know any of it.”

Peter held her as she began to sob, staring at the blank white wall behind her, trying to be strong for her, no matter how much of a lie it was.

Jeya and Ivrid returned a while later, to take Peter to dinner. He didn't want to leave Emily alone in the that room; as he looked back at her, already yearning to return to her side, guilt gripped him. Even as Ivrid and Jeya began to talk again, it did not dispel those thoughts.

“The mess hall is upstairs. It'll be a good chance to meet the other soldiers.”

The subtext was not lost on Peter; he remembered Emily's angry words, and they bit into him.

“It's good food,” Jeya added, “I don't know what you had there in that village, but...” She trailed off, rolling her eyes blissfully.

“It's the city's way of showing gratitude to its servicemen,” said Ivrid.

“And servicewomen,” said Jeya.

“What happened to Myron?” Peter interrupted. Both Ivrid and Jeya looked at him.

“Myron?”

“He's ... tall. Broad-shoulders. Short-cut brown hair. He was with us when you found us!”

Ivrid and Jeya shook their heads. Then Jeya paused.

“I thought I saw a man running into the woods at one point, out of the corner of my eye. But he wasn't Dhomezi, so I left him alone. He had a bag on his shoulders.”

*So the medicine did make it back to Westreed, thought Peter, That bastard. He left Emily.* But even with that anger to contend with, a broader feeling of relief stirred underneath. He wanted to go back now, and tell Emily, spare her the worry. She worried about him, when he left her to die.

They got into an elevator. Civilians milled about through the subterranean hallways, more than a few soldiers among them. It reminded Peter of the valley.

A pair of soldiers, both male, got into the elevator with them. The smell of sweat and sulfur clung to them as they seemed to tower over Peter, though neither was more than a few inches taller. Guns hung from straps around their necks, bobbing against their stomachs. It heartened Peter. If these people knew how to fight, they might be worth fighting alongside.

The elevator doors opened, and both Jeya and Ivrid exited. Peter hurried to stay behind them;

here, more soldiers swarmed about. They walked past a room that had to be a gym of some sort; men and women, the sheen of sweat sticking to them, struggled with weights that would surely defeat Peter.

A cacophony greeted them as they opened the door the mess hall. Confusion, disorientation swarmed over Peter, but he decided to copy Ivrid and Jeya, who immediately headed for the food. Peter followed them, his eyes darting across the room. There were about seventy people in here, busily eating. Not all were talking, but those who were more than made up for those who didn't.

Mashed potatoes, apple slices, a tan meat that had to be chicken; Jeya had been right. Peter took some of each, and followed them to a slightly empty table in the corner. Its occupants wore the same, lighter clothes that Jeya and Ivrid wore.

"Our unit," Ivrid said to Peter as they approached, pointing to the three who sat there, "They were with us today, but they don't have as patient stomachs as we do. That's Vell," he said, pointing to a stocky man with beady eyes but a friendly face. He did not acknowledge either of them, busily chewing on a piece of chicken, his silverware laying forlorn beside his plate.

"Millie," Ivrid continued, pointing at a young, ash-blond woman. As he did, Jeya slid in next to her. Freckles dashed across Millie's face. So far she seemed the most cheerful of the group.

"Krick," Ivrid finished, pointing to a tall, broad-shouldered man, with buzz-cut, spiky black hair, with biceps as thick as Peter's thighs. Krick was the only one to pay attention to them, and he nodded with a clenched jaw. Peter nodded back, unsure of how else to respond.

They sat with the others. Jeya and Millie were already lost in conversation. Vell ate silently, with an expression that showed no interest in doing anything else. Krick was the first to speak up.

"Where'd you find him?" he said, his voice gravelly but articulate, and nothing like the dull grunt Peter had expected.

"Village. The one we've been watching," said Ivrid, "Found them picking for medicine in their crashed ship."

Krick's thick brow furrowed.

"They sick?" he asked, before pushing a spoonful of food into his mouth.

"Yes," Ivrid nodded, "But we'll get them here, take care of them."

"Better," Krick muttered, "We can't afford any sort of epidemic here, cutting into our medicine supplies, right before a big assault."

"It won't," Ivrid reassured him.

"So who's this?" Krick said.

"Peter," Ivrid muttered.

"Hello," said Krick, his mouth full.

"Hi," said Peter. He turned to Ivrid, his confidence rising suddenly, "So who are these people?"

Ivrid sat back a bit, opening his mouth, but Krick cut across him before he could say anything.

"They call us ... what, the 'choppers'? The 'cutters'? Something like that. Anyway, our job is guerrilla warfare. Break the louse supply lines, that was our main job. Of course, they have ships, but it's cheaper to distribute it on trucks, at least to the infantry. We'd hide in the woods, Vell and Millie here are the best goddamn snipers you'll ever meet. Shoot the drivers in one shot, stop the trucks. One truck of infantry, sometimes two, goes with them. We ambush the hell out of them, move in, take what supplies we like, and destroy the rest. Or sometimes if we're close enough to a camp, we'll just drive 'em back, and boom, a couple free trucks," he said, grinning.

"We were so effective the last year or two, they started moving the supplies in armored cars and tanks," said Ivrid.

"Yeah," Krick said, "We were so good, they invented a special kind of truck just to keep us off their asses." He chuckled.

"We also occasionally raid louse camps, outposts, whatever we can. We draw them away, distract them, whatever we can. Technically, we're called 'Tactical Diversion,'" said Ivrid, "But Krick is right, they usually call us something else."

"So what were you doing by our ship?" Peter asked.

"Scouting for supplies," Ivrid said simply.

"Why? You don't have enough here?"

Ivrid's expression became grave.

"No."

The food seemed to disappear seamlessly from Peter's plate. He listened to Jeya and Millie whenever they were discernible over the din of dozens of conversations. They were talking about someone; not him, some name kept coming up, but Peter could not tell what it was.

Before long, the mess hall began to empty, as those around them finished eating, and left for whatever else they had to do. Peter wondered what these soldiers occupied their time between meals with; cleaning weapons, exercise, standing guard perhaps? He had never really thought about it.

He felt suddenly lonely as he followed Ivrid and Jeya from the mess hall.

"What now?" he asked them as soon as they were far enough from the crowd for his words to be heard.

"We have a spare bunk in our quarters. You can sleep there for tonight. Once the rest of your people are here, we can make other arrangements."

"You'll have room for them?"

"More than enough, I'm afraid," said Ivrid.

Peter did his best to let that unpleasant thought pass.

"And we're going to get them ... tomorrow?"

"That is my plan."

"And you came up with this ... when, today? When you found us?"

"It's been in our plans for quite some time."

"Yours, you mean," said Peter.

Ivrid gave him a sidelong look.

"Yes, mine. Emeya was kind enough to finally listen to me today. But she knows the value of not wasting life."

"Yeah..." said Peter, "Well, that's good at least."

"Which bunk are you giving him?" Jeya asked.

"Evereck's" Ivrid replied softly.

"Oh," said Jeya, her face quivering. She turned away, and began to drift behind them. Peter turned to look at her, shocked at the sudden tears in her eyes. He began to slow, to go back for her, but Ivrid grabbed his arm, firmly but gently, and drew him along.

"Evereck was her boyfriend," he said, "Died three weeks ago. We were out trying to blow up a cluster of missile launchers the Dhomezi had hidden in the forest. They shot Evereck in the leg and stomach. He ... he knew he was done. He stayed behind and set off the demolitions just as Dhomezi reinforcements were arriving. Covered our escape. Saved our lives."

Something akin to guilt rose in Peter's chest, but different. Suddenly, he wanted to return to the infirmary, spend the night with Emily and hold her hand. Even if it meant kneeling on a cold floor for hours; it was better than sleeping in the bed of a dead man.

Ivrid looked at him.

"He was no different than any of the rest of us. Any of the rest of us would do it, and he knew it."

Peter's gut felt laden with lead now. As they reached the barracks, Ivrid pushed through the door first. Peter counted six bunks; two against each wall, with none on the wall that held the door. They were alone; the others had not come from dinner yet.

"There," said Ivrid, pointing to the bottommost bunk on the left, "That's where you'll sleep tonight."

Peter nodded, and obeyed, walking over to the bunk.

He climbed into it, rolled over, laying on his back, realizing as he stared at the ceiling barely a

foot away, that a man had lay here, hours before his death, thinking about ... what? Peter shook his head, shaking the thoughts away.

He had found them, his own people. Finally. And they were at war with the lice! They were going to take the fight to them. It seemed too good to be true. And yet Peter could feel nothing but numbness to the place around him. He wondered how long this had been happening. If there were other louse strongholds like Woebarren. Other who cities. So many questions, and they overwhelmed them. Yet he did his best to force them away, to restrain himself, as if each answer would be a delicious treat once it finally came. If he survived that long.

The others sat around a table in the center of their quarters, chatting busily, playing some sort of board game. Millie, Krick, Vell, and Ivrid. Something with words, maybe something like what Peter would have played as a child in the valley. Yet they were so many thousands of kilometers away, in another world, over a hundred mountains and a thousand rivers. It was different here, yet it seemed almost the same as it could have been.

Jeya lay on her bunk, on her side, cheek propped on her hand, hand propped on her elbow. Watching the others. Her eyes darted to Peter; he met her gaze for a moment, her blue eyes seeming to bore into him, her lips pursed as she watched. Then she rolled away, onto her back, facing the inside of her bunk, drawing her blanket up over her shoulders.

Peter stared at the game a while longer, watching Krick slowly win; or at least, that was what it looked like, until Ivrid shouted with victory, all the veneers of military discipline lost. The others abused him playfully, until at last the raucous laughter began to fade. He lay on his back, closing his eyes, only listening to the noise now.

"Hey," came Millie's voice, "Ought to get ... what's his name? Peter? Get him to play."

"Let him sleep," said Ivrid, "One of his friends is dead, one's hurt, one's missing, and tomorrow we're gonna go get the other eighty-or-so of them."

"You just don't want anyone else to stand in the way of you winning again," said Krick.

"Yeah," said Ivrid, "He'd sure as hell do better than you."

"If he got as lucky as *you* do, he probably would."

They began into another game. Peter's thoughts drifted to Emily, to her laying in that bed alone, trying to sleep with the pain, with the stiff bandage clinging to her middle, while he slept here alone, with strangers. He should have stayed with her, should have spent the night by her side, holding her hand, talking in soft voices about their lives in the valley, making her laugh with stories, washing away all the despair.

But he would need his rest for tomorrow. He wondered how many people would agree to leave Westreed, abandon the half-grown farms that they had worked on for months, to a place where food was plentiful, in so much excess that they could afford to bring in eighty newcomers without batting an eye. They would find it insulting. Yet when fire started to rain from the sky, Peter knew it would be safer here. Inside this stronghold city. He remembered the attack on the valley, streaking lights striking the ground, blinding flashes throwing chunks of soil and rock far into the sky, scalding the ground, burning it all. That would be the war, ships in the air destroying each other, crashing against each other with a sound like thunder, that shuddered the ground beneath their feet, sent a cold trickle down their backs even from many kilometers away.

Was this what he wanted? He just wanted to hide from it, to go back to the valley, prison that it had been. He wanted his life with Emily now, preferably just outside the Wall, in a cabin, where he was no longer restricted by the valley's rim, but still close to its warm safety. His dream equilibrium; safety with freedom.

But freedom had a cost.

For the first time since he had left the mess hall he thought of Myron's fate, of whether the medicine had made it back. If lice were crawling all over the cruiser, surely they were closing in on Westreed now. Might they be attacking it now? Would he and Emily be the only survivors?

His eyes flashed open. He had been nearing sleep, but now a sudden restlessness filled him. Tomorrow might be too late.

But even if they left now, it would be too late anyhow. He sank back against his pillow, rolling onto his side. Emily was safe here. Who else did he really care about now?

Sleep plunged him through a swarm of strange visions, half-formed, resonant hisses as he watched the valley burn again. But this time, it was far larger, and the fires burned in the sky, as well, the distant streaked sunset shining mournfully as pillars of smoke drifted down from the orange sky, billowing black, slow like a funeral procession.

Then he stood with Emily, on the cracked black rock, and she was crying, sobbing as he had seen her sob whenever a memory of her parents returned to her, or someone else died. He saw her sick, and suffering, her skin pale, her lips cracked, her eyes red-rimmed and her pupils shrunken. He held a gun. They were coming, and he could shoot himself, or shoot her and spare her.

He felt the cold metal probing his chin. He couldn't kill his beloved Emily.

Wakefulness, sudden and vivid, freed him.

"Come on," muttered Ivrid, "Up already. Breakfast, then we're going to go get your friends."

Peter rolled, nearly falling from the bunk, before carefully lowering himself down, groggily. He had slept in his clothes; but then, he realized, so had the others. Only now were they changing, simply sliding new uniforms over their old ones, the cloth clinging tightly to their bodies. Jeya met his eyes as she pulled her shirt on, straightened her rumpled hair.

Peter changed as well, finding a pair of olive-green pants, long-sleeved shirt, and jacket in the drawer next to his bunk. Black socks. A green cap.

"No clean underwear?" he asked as he rifled through the clothes. Krick and Ivrid simply stared at him. He met their blank gazes.

"We've got to change and move," said Ivrid, "No time. We eat, we gear up, and we haul ass down to the hangar. Ten-hundred, we take off."

"Ten-hundred?"

"Ten o'clock," said Ivrid.

They flooded into the mostly-empty mess hall. Only a few others, all clustered at one table, made the room seem larger than it had the night before. Peter took food from the lone server, a generous portion of mashed potatoes and vegetables, and joined the others to eat.

"Meal briefing," said Ivrid as they ate, "We get down there, get into one of the Albatrosses. Nerri will fly us there, I'm sure she and her mechanics are already checking up the thing, getting it ready. When we get ten clicks out, we start circling wide, land on that hill where that louse camp used to be. If that's clear, we move down into the village, clear it out, get everyone together, then we'll call Nerri and she'll move the Albatross to the edge of the woods for us to get everyone. Big damn ship. Ought to hold everyone."

"What if there's lice?" asked Millie, "There were near a dozen in that camp, and a dozen at that ship yesterday. They're all over the forest out there, swarming around. It's closer to Woebarren. By now there might be more. They were on that ship for a reason."

"Probably were... I don't know," said Ivrid, "Maybe they left detectors the last time they cleared it, and Peter and Emily tripped them off. Or maybe the lice just didn't notice the ship when it landed, and finally found it after Westreed destroyed their camp. How along ago did you attack that camp, Peter? And please tell me it was you and your friends. I hate lying to Emeya."

"It was," said Peter, "A couple weeks ago." He thought of Thale. What would he think of this, were he here?

"See? They probably thought it was one of our raiding parties moving around out there, didn't bother to check for a while because they knew we'd melt right back into the woods anyhow," said Ivrid proudly, "Then they ended up actually finding the town, and were scouting out to attack it."

"Why would they bother scouting it out?" said Krick, "Why not just bomb the thing to hell and be done with it?"

"Maybe they're scared of provoking us," said Millie.

"Finally," muttered Jeya, picking at her food.

Ivrid looked around at all of them.

"I don't know," he said, "I just know that, lice near that town, especially when its got a lot of sick people, is not going to be good. We should be ready for anything. The Albatross is well-armed, and so are we. I have a good feeling about it. Shouldn't be more than a dozen at the most, and even if there are, we can get out before they give us too much trouble."

There was a pause around the table as everyone stared at Ivrid.

"Ivrid, just tell Emeya to give you more troops," pleaded Millie.

"No," said Ivrid, "We can do this. We've done it before."

"I don't think she intended you to say you'd do it with just us," said Millie, "I'm sure if you went back and asked, she'd –"

"That's enough, Millie," snapped Ivrid, "We're following our orders."

"Yes sir," Millie muttered, looking not at all abashed.

Ivrid scooped the last couple of spoonfuls into his mouth, then stood up. Peter glanced down, realizing with shock that his own plate was almost empty.

"Armory in five," said Ivrid, before turning away, and heading for the door. Peter watched him go, as did the others.

"Dumb-ass bastard wants to get us all killed," muttered Millie once he was gone.

"You don't honestly think that," said Jeya.

"He's doing this out of pride, to prove he can take care of himself, and he's risking the rest of our lives by going off half-cocked. All because he thinks he's got a shot at sleeping with her," said Millie. Vell scoffed.

"You think so?" he said disbelievingly.

"Wouldn't be surprised," said Millie bitterly.

"Look, at worst, it'll be another adventure," Jeya offered weakly. Millie glared at her.

"Another 'adventure'? That's what this is? No, 'at worst,' his entire village gets slaughtered!" hissed Millie, pointing at Peter.

"Look, we've got to follow orders," said Krick, glancing at Peter, then at Millie, "Maybe we disagree with his decision, but Ivrid *is* right, we've faced worse. And if we spend time trying to get more troops out of Emeya for what she considers to be a pointless pity mission – no offense Peter – then we're losing precious time. Time that might be worth more than more soldiers."

Millie puffed air out of her mouth, pushing a stray bit of hair away from her cheek.

"Whatever," she said, "Let's go get our guns."

She stood up and walked off. Krick looked at Vell, and they both shrugged and followed her. Peter glanced at Jeya, who was still eating, before getting up and walking after them. He glanced back at her as he left; she met his gaze with a glare. Surprised, Peter turned away, and followed Vell and Krick, who were talking in low voices about something. Peter couldn't hear them.

The armory sat at the end of the hallway, past the gym Peter had seen the night before. Inside, racks of black guns lined the wall, hanging from hooks, sitting in cases, clips of ammunition set in slots on the wall.

"Knock yourself out," Vell said to Peter when they entered. He turned to look at Peter, who was staring blankly at the vast assortment of firearms.

"You *do* know how to use these, right?"

"Yeah," said Peter, eyes still tracing the many guns, "I just don't know which one to pick."

Vell reached over to the wall, where a shorter rifle hung from a hook.

"This look familiar?" said Vell.

“Vaguely,” said Peter.

“VKR carbine,” said Vell, holding it out, barrel pointing to the floor. Peter took it in his hands; it was lighter than he had anticipated, like a smaller version of the automatic rifle they'd given him when they had attacked the louse camp.

“Thirty round magazine,” said Vell, handing Peter three of them, curved and lined, a bullet peeking out the top of each. “Grab an ammo belt,” said Vell, now scouting for his own weapon.

Peter looked around, finding a loose belt draped over a bench with a few pouches attached. He picked it up, sliding it through the belt loops on his pants, carefully moving the pouches around so that they did not catch. He carefully slid each magazine in, uncertainly.

Ivrid came over, and laughed.

“Whoever told you to do that is an idiot,” said Ivrid, “Wrong belt pouches, for the wrong type of magazine. But what the hell, it doesn't make much of a difference anyway.”

“Impressive equipment,” said Peter, examining his carbine.

“It is,” said Ivrid, “Have you used one of these weapons before?”

“One like it,” said Peter.

Ivrid took it from him.

“Fire selector switch on the side. “S” is semi-automatic, one shot at a time, okay? Automatic is “A”, that'll spray out bullets fast. Careful, because the recoil's going to ache if you shoot like that for long, and it'll be inaccurate, plus you'll run out of bullets fast. “X” is safety. Gun won't shoot at all when it's on that.”

Peter nodded as Ivrid flipped the gun sideways.

“Magazine release is this switch behind it. Pull back on it, magazine drops out. Put in a new one, cock it,” said Ivrid, pointing to a hook on the side, “And once you pull it all the way back, let it flip forward, and it should be ready to go again.”

“Okay,” said Peter. It was explained so calmly, as though it would be a simple task, to reload this weapon while bullets skittered all around him. At least Emily wouldn't be coming today, he thought. No one that he really cared out to watch out for.

“Let's get going,” Ivrid called to the others, “I'm sure Nerri's already waiting on us.”

They left the room, assembling by the elevators across the hall. Ivrid pushed the button, then stood back, waiting for it patiently. Peter glanced around at his fellows; Ivrid, holding a submachine gun Peter had never seen before, but recognized as such. Krick held a longer rifle, with a drum hanging from the bottom; Peter guessed it was a machine gun. Jeya and Vell held the automatic rifles Peter and Myron had carried when they had attacked the louse camp; larger versions of Peter's gun. Millie clutched a long gun, with a scope attached to the top. A sharpshooter's rifle.

A soft tone, and elevator doors slid open with a hiss. They clambered in, Jeya ending up next to Peter, but then crossing to stand next to Millie. Peter stood between Ivrid and Krick, a sweaty smell already emitting from the latter. Peter glanced to his side. That gun looked heavy.

The descent, smooth though it was, pulled at Peter's already-nervous stomach. Something about standing here, among the soldiers, clutching a rifle like they did, make him feel out of place, incompetent, inadequate. As though he had bitten off far more than he could chew. His mind glanced back to his horrible dream, to the sounds of gunfire he only saw in memory of it. He didn't belong here. He was as tall as any of them, and he had survived three fights with lice, killed his enemies; yet still he did not belong among these soldiers.

Another tone, and the doors slid open again. Peter followed Ivrid out of the elevator, into the atrium they had entered through the day before. But this time they took a hallway to the right, long and tall, many others already walking back and forth through it, past them, minds set on their destination, not even bothering with a greeting or even a brief glance. Ahead, Peter saw the hallway open suddenly into a huge room that had to be a hangar; he gazed in awe at the rows of aircraft, some at least thirty meters long, going far back into the distance. The great, cavernous hangar had to be at least half a kilometer

long; as they entered it, Peter gazed up at the ceiling, the crossed and diagonal metal lattice that held it up, at least thirty meters above him, gray, bleached white by the rows and rows of lights that hung up there, high above.

He nearly drifted away from the group; he jogged a little to catch up. They were heading for one aircraft in particular, one with several people clustered around it in gray jumpsuits. A middle-aged woman with shoulder-length blond hair waited for them.

"Hello, Nerri," said Ivrid as he passed.

"Good morning for flying," said Nerri.

"I wouldn't know," said Ivrid, "You're the pilot."

"You would if you watched weather reports, Ivrid."

"I don't have a lot of time for that, Nerri. We ready to fly?"

"Sure," said Nerri, "Get on in."

They clambered into the open back passenger bay, feet clomping on the hollow metal. Peter sat next to Ivrid, Millie on the other side. He hoped they didn't argue again, but he doubted they would. They might disagree, but they were soldiers, and they certainly wouldn't risk the lives of those in Westreed over their bickering.

The ramp hissed shut slowly, squeezing the light from the cabin. The engines began to whirl outside, the cabin now lit only by a dim red light that fell on the pale faces of Peter's companions. Confident faces, yet Peter saw a twinge of uncertainty in each of them.

His stomach pitched as the landing ship rose, moving forward, sliding Peter's body into Millie. He strained his back, curling to the side, away from her, to counteract the inertia of acceleration.

"Sorry," he muttered, but over the roar of the engines he could tell she didn't hear him.

He glanced at the door at the end of the cabin, the other empty seats between it and him. Could eighty people fit on this ship? There had to be another passenger room behind that door, to carry them all. Unless they would be packed in like cattle, into this little room, struggling to keep their feet as the ship rocked back and forth.

The journey seemed much shorter this time around. Perhaps it was knowing Emily was safe in the city behind, no longer bleeding to death at the mercy of strangers. Peter spent most of the ride planning exactly how he would punch Myron, and what he would say before and afterward. He had left her behind. He could have taken her with him. He had let Thale die, and he had left Emily for the same. He would pay.

With a slow, crescendoing whine, the ship began to descend. Peter felt it lurch as it neared the ground, then landed, though the actual landing was far more smooth than Peter expected.

The ramp began to open again, a growing sliver of bright light that blinded Peter.

"Go! Come on!" muttered Ivrid urgently, pulling Peter up. The others sprang to their feet, sprinting out into the sunlight. Peter held up a hand to shield himself from the brightness, squinting as he stepped out into it. Slowly his vision adjusted, and he glanced around, recognizing the hill from which they had attacked the louse camp. His hatred for Myron returned.

"Down the hill," said Ivrid, motioning for them. They moved down the hill, spreading out into a line, moving between the leaves and roots masterfully. Peter followed, stepping gingerly over the rocks on the hillside, trying to walk softly, so as not to crinkle the leaves that littered the forest floor, to copy his stealthy allies.

Suddenly he slipped on a patch of pine needles, sliding at least three feet before he caught himself. Millie glanced back at him, but only for a second.

"Damn it," Peter whispered. What was around here anyway, to be so quiet for? There were no lice here.

They came to the open field at the bottom of the slope, continuing across the field to the river, crossing it at a ford. Peter felt the cold water soaking through his boots as he sloshed through the water, feeling the gravel shift uncertainly under his feet. The others strode on confidently, not seeming to

notice. On shore, sand stuck to Peter's boots, coating it thickly.

Peter could see the hilltop forest that held Westreed. Nestled safely inside the pines, hidden from view; he understood how it had evaded detection for so long.

They began to climb the hill; as they neared the top, Peter could see the cabins at the outskirts of the village, faintly. It was only when they got into the trees that they saw people; a man and woman, holding rifles, who stopped, and swiveled on them, opening fire. A round buried itself in a tree behind Peter; a shred of bark somersaulted past his eye. He dropped his gun onto the ground, glancing at the others. They stood unmoving.

"Who are you?" the woman barked.

"Friends," said Ivrid firmly, "Lower your weapons."

"Where are you from?" said the man, "We've got a fight on, and you show up from behind us, expect us to lower our weapons?"

"Yes," said Ivrid.

"Stop," said Peter, stepping forward, "I'm from here. I'm Peter Green," he said.

"Peter Green? Sounds familiar," said the woman.

"Yeah," said the man, "They said you were dead."

"Who did?" said Peter, though he already knew.

"Myron, I think his name was," said the man.

"He came back, made a big announcement."

Peter seethed. Ivrid stepped forward and interrupted.

"You say you're under attack?" said Ivrid.

"Yeah," said the woman, "Lice down on the other side of town. Shot the hell out of our cow farm. Theyven's calling in everyone to help."

Peter's heart stopped dead. Melissa.

"Let's go, then," said Ivrid.

"Whoa, whoa," said the man, "Who said you were coming with?"

"Like I said," said Ivrid, worn patience in his voice, "We're allies. Friends. From a city to the north called Unconhic. We plan to take you there, once we can get everyone to our ship."

The man and woman looked at each other.

"Sounds like a trap to me," said the woman.

"Look," said Ivrid, "We don't have time. We'll prove our loyalty in the best way possible; risk our lives for you. Let's go."

They set off, following the man and woman through the village, between the cabins. They passed Peter's cabin; he resisted the urge to hang back, slip away, gather a few personal possessions. He threw the impulse off. There would be time later, wouldn't there be?

As they came up to Melissa's cabin, the crack of gunfire startled them. The group scattered, Peter dashing to the corner of Melissa's cabin, Ivrid following him. The others huddled behind trees. Peter turned back to see the man who'd led them here sinking to his knees, a great red stain in his chest. The woman hooked her arms under his shoulders, and tried to drag him away. A split second later, another burst of gunfire knocked her onto her back.

Across the path, he saw Millie and Jeya face down in the underbrush, with Vell and Krick further back. Peter met Millie's eyes; they bulged with fear.

Ivrid pushed past Peter, sliding against the wall of the cabin. He peered out the corner, like a hawk ready to pounce. Then he fired two shots.

"One's dead!" he yelled, "Get into the cabin, I'll cover."

The bushes rustled as the other four dashed across the road. As they did, a louse leaned out from behind a tree, twenty meters away. Ivrid fired at him, ripping bark from the tree. The louse ducked back. Peter heard clomping footsteps as the four made it onto the porch, and into the cabin.

"Go," said Ivrid to Peter, "I'll cover you."

Adrenaline strung high, Peter staggered forward, dashing around the front of the cabin. Suddenly, he felt something, a sensation in his neck that he couldn't describe. He spotted another louse behind another tree, out of sight of Ivrid, taking aim at him. His rifle rose, unbearably slow, the sights lining up perfectly as he skidded to a stop. Three bullets left his gun; two hit the tree, but one struck the louse squarely in the throat. Peter kept running, suddenly aware of every detail of the wooden steps that led up to the cabin. He saw every splinter, every grain of wood.

Then he was inside, on the floor, an inch from Millie's foot. A strong arm hauled him to his feet. "Get upstairs," she said, pushing him toward the narrow staircase a meter from the door, "We need a vantage point."

Still dazed, Peter left the others as they took positions by the windows. He staggered up the stairs. Where was Melissa?

Peering out the window, he spotted the louse Theyven had shot at. From up here, he had a clear view. He took aim, and shot the louse in the shoulder. He ducked back down as bullets struck all around the window, some punching through the wood, leaving little glowing holes. Peter shivered, suddenly realizing what inadequate protection he had up here. He crawled along the floor as the gunfire continued. From downstairs, he heard the barking of automatic fire. His friends were shooting back.

Twenty petrified heartbeats later, the shooting ceased. Slowly, Peter returned to the window. Three more lice lay dead in the field, strewn among the corpses of half a dozen cows. He turned back toward the stairs, when the sight of Melissa, on the floor, leaning against the opposite wall, froze him in place. She was behind the stairs; he would not have seen her coming up. She was certainly dead, crusted blood pooling on the floor around her. She held a revolver in her loose grip, and something in her face told Peter she had staggered away, wounded, and died later.

Numb, he descended the stairs. Outside, he could hear shouting. When he got to the bottom, he saw Ivrid outside, pointing a rifle at none other than Frederick Theyven. At least two dozen other Westreed villagers stood behind him, armed.

"Who the hell are you?" Theyven barked.

"I already said, my name's Ivrid."

"What are you doing here?"

"Don't you see? We came to help."

"How did you know where to find this place?"

"Me," said Peter, stepping out from the porch.

Theyven's eyes narrowed.

"We found him and another, wounded. We brought them to our city—"

"Your city?" said Theyven incredulously.

"Yes," said Ivrid, "We brought them there. We are waging war on the Dhomezi, and from what Peter told us, you'd make valuable allies. And from what I've seen so far, coming with us is a safer bet than remaining here."

Theyven glared at him.

"You think we can't defend this village?"

"Not against a thousand lice, you can't," said Ivrid, "And I guarantee you, these dozen-or-so interlopers are just a precursor."

Theyven looked at him, long and hard.

"Fine," he said, "Let's get back to the town, then."

Ivrid nodded, and followed Theyven as he began to walk back along the road, toward the village. Peter fell in behind the others, trailing back a bit. He threw a glance over his shoulder as they walked away, watching Melissa's cabin as they turned the corner. It drew out of sight, and Peter had the feeling it would be the last time he ever saw it again.

In the town, Theyven's group split off, running throughout Westreed, gathering as many as they could. Peter did not see Myron; each time he thought of him, his grip tightened on his gun. But in between spurts of angry anticipation, his mind wandered to the strange daze he had been in. The louse he shot seemed to have died in slow motion. Somehow, he had seen it, before his eyes had been high enough. It puzzled him. Perhaps he just had good peripheral vision.

"Nice job back there," said Millie as they walked through the village, Ivrid and Theyven leading, "You drew their fire up there, you know? Flushed them out."

"Glad to know I make good bait," said Peter.

Millie smirked.

They reached the town center, where at least eighty people were gathered. Theyven strode through the crowd, parting it, until he reached a man out of Peter's sight.

"Anyone left?" said Theyven.

"No one," said a familiar voice, "They're all here. No one left behind."

Someone moved out of the way, and Peter saw who Theyven was talking to; Myron. Hate filled him as he pictured him abandoning Emily.

"Citizens!" Theyven roared, so loudly that Peter's ear twinged uncomfortably. The worried tittering of the crowd quickly faded.

"Citizens! It is not safe here any more!" Theyven announced, "These people here, they are from another city. They have come to take us there. They say it is safe! I do not know whether it is for certain, but I do know it is safer than here!"

There was murmuring.

"Follow me!"

The crowd surged after Theyven as he walked back toward Ivrid.

"Lead on," said Theyven.

They left the forest, down the long grass slope, toward the river. Theyven strode in front the Westreed villagers, in his element. Peter had all but forgotten that he had been a military man, an officer on the ship that had brought them here. Ivrid, Jeya, himself, and the others followed on either side, flanking the crowd for protection. Suddenly, as they grew close to the river, Jeya perked up.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" said Peter.

But a shout came from somewhere among the crowd. Jeya pointed, and Peter saw two black shapes in the sky, from the direction of the distant Woebarren.

"Scorpions!" Ivrid roared from near Theyven,

"What are Scorpions?" Peter asked Jeya.

"Louse air fighters," said Jeya, "Get down!"

She dropped to a crouch, running off the trail, into the tall grass. The knowledge of what was happening began to spread through the crowd, and they scattered, running for what little cover there was. Dread grew inside Peter.

As the fighters drew closer, a stuttering began as they opened fire. Shredded grass and dirt leapt into the air. Peter flung himself face down, hearing a rapid series of hollow thuds from behind him. Cheek pressed to the ground, he watched a fleeing man struck down with a strangled cry. He closed his eyes as the Scorpions flew past. The dull roar of their engines seemed eerie to him, fading as the fighters flew toward the horizon, leaving cries of pain in their silent wake. Peter made to get up, but Jeya pulled him back.

"Stay down! They come back!"

And they did, arcing wide, until the sound of their approach was punctuated by more gunfire. It ripped through the brush, and Peter heard screams. Then the sound of the engines faded again as the

fighters withdrew, and all Peter could hear for a moment was Jeya's breathing.

Slowly, shakily, they rose to their feet, as did the others; but far less than Peter would have hoped. As he staggered back to the trail, he saw the unlucky ones; clusters of two or three, dead, gaping holes ripped in their bodies.

Ivrid was alive, as was Krick and Millie and Vell. Peter spotted Myron helping a woman to her feet across the field, but his anger faded in place of shock. There was a scream.

"Theyven's dead! Theyven's dead!"

Peter made to dash over, but instead stumbled to the ground. Myron and another man made it first, to where a girl who could not be older than Peter knelt over the corpse. Peter got up again, and made his way over. It was indeed Theyven. He felt no grief, only hollowness that he could not describe to himself. The lice had taken away all but eighty, and now they dared to take those, as well.

Peter watched as Myron helped hoist Theyven's body onto his friend's shoulder. Then Ivrid called to the others to return to the trail.

"Leave the dead!" Ivrid shouted, "We have no time."

Around him, Peter saw brothers pull sisters away from the bodies of dead parents; and likewise for the parents, a man trying to coax his dead wife away from a dead boy who could not be older than twelve. Peter wanted to shoot something as he watched, but he felt helpless, knowing his rifle would be useless against those war hawks in the sky.

"Twenty-two dead," said Millie as the withered group continued along the trail, Ivrid far ahead and in the lead, Myron behind him, carrying their previous leader's body. Peter watched Theyven's arms dangling over Myron's shoulders, and said nothing.

"We got most of them, Peter," said Millie sympathetically.

"Yeah," said Peter, "I ... just wish we could have saved more of them."

"If we'd known, we'd have told Nerri to land right outside the woods. It's just ... we figured it'd make less noise. Or something. I don't know."

Peter looked at her.

"We didn't expect this," she said, shaking her head. Her eyes went to the ground. They kept walking. Peter tried to ignore the sobbing and other sounds of grief from behind them.

They found the ship where they had left it, Nerri outside inspecting some panel with a wrench. At the sight of Ivrid, she quickly finished her work, and walked over to him.

"All ready to go," she said. She gazed past him, to the tattered-looking Westreed villagers.

"What happened?"

"We got ambushed," said Ivrid solemnly, "Killed a lot of people."

"Soldiers?"

"Scorpions," said Ivrid.

Nerri bit her lip.

"Damn. I thought I heard something."

Ivrid nodded.

"Let's get these people on board."

Peter watched them get the others aboard; he felt certain the passenger bay could not hold all seventy or so, but it did, with room to spare.

"They take up less space than you think," said Millie, as though reading his thoughts.

Peter just nodded, and took his seat.

The ride back was dark, and full of crying that echoed inside the metal ship. By the time they reached Unconhic, Peter felt entirely drained of both energy and life. The white lights of the hangar include orientation for the new people

Jeya keeps avoiding peter, feels like he has replaced Everick

peter angry at myron for leaving emily

millie angry at ivrid for almost getting them killed just to prove to emeya that they didnt need more soldiers

First Battle of Gazae Canyon – myron is somewhere else, but this is after the whos have moved to Unconhic

The sky was bright the morning they set out for Gazae Canyon. Perhaps it was just because Peter had been underground for nearly a week, but the sun seemed to have a renewed edge to it, puncturing the thin clouds.

Breakfast had been all but silent. Peter's mind had hummed with things he should say to Emily, but none of them reached his lips. What good was it, to say something, to try to change it? They were in a war now, and they would have to swallow their fear.

His heard pounded as he ascended the steps to the landing platform. They would be flying in a small attack craft, one that would hold about fifty soldiers. Peter had begged Ivrid to seat him next to Emily, and he had agreed. She was behind him, the bulky combat vest and helmet unbecoming of her slender body. But she was there.

Krick, Vell, and Millie had been assigned to another aircraft. Peter did not know why. Ivrid said they would rejoin them inside. If they were still alive.

Feet clanking on and off the metal, then onto the landing platform, then across it, the sun warming his cheek with its golden morning glow, the dew long since boiled away, Peter forced himself not to anticipate the vertigo that would flood through him as soon as the attack craft leaped away from the platform like an eager bird. He didn't have to fly it. He just had to jump out of it and fight.

As he walked into the cooler, darker interior of the attack craft, finding his seat, strapping himself into his harness, and watching Emily do the same beside him, he felt a pit in his gut, bubbling, as thought wondering if breakfast had been a good idea. But it didn't matter now. He could not turn back.

All too soon, the doors were closing, leaving them with a few heartbeats of total darkness before the dim red cabin lights brightened to life. With a fear-inducing thrumming the engines started. Peter's stomach lurched as the attack craft broke free of the gravity's confines, wobbled in the air for a second, then accelerated.

Beside him, Peter watched Emily bite her lip, her face tinted dull red by the shadowy light. She looked at him. He reached for her hand, but the harnesses were too tight. He shifted his knee over, touching it gently to hers. She smiled, but in a strained way that faded away a moment later. He could not blame her for being nervous. He felt like he was going to throw up from fear alone any moment.

It was the waiting. Every other time he had been in battle, it had surprised him, happened so fast that he was thrown into it with no time to fear. Now, with nothing but the drone of the engines to comfort them, Peter wondered how many of the other soldiers felt exactly as he did.

A half-hour, maybe an hour of fear turning over and over in his mind like a stone in a river, the edges filed down, and Peter began to feel ready. But then the ship dropped suddenly, throwing a wave of nausea through him. A jolt ran through his whole body, adrenaline already slipping into his veins.

"Prepare to land!" a rough voice shouted over the intercom.

The soldiers around him tensed, straightened up, staring straight ahead.

Outside, the cracks and booms of anti-aircraft fire had already begun. Peter was sure the cruisers were already engaging in a brutal fight with the louse defenses. Each noise was like a dull blow; as they went on, they began to shake him, crack the veneer of bravado he had slowly been assembling for the last hour.

A whimper escaped his lips as the ship touched down, the landing ramp hissed open, light flooding into the cabin, and the sounds of war outside suddenly became much louder and crisper.

The harnesses were off; they had to move. Peter grabbed his assault rifle from the rack across from him. Beside him, Emily did the same. They followed the other soldiers.

A sharp plunk alerted Peter; he glanced upward, seeing a dent in the ceiling. Already they were being shot at. He heard a cry of pain from somewhere in front of him; the helplessness inside the cabin

was too much. He almost pushed forward, but instead he flattened against the wall, hoping for some cover, and made his way toward the ramp.

He ran by a dead soldier laying at the foot of the ramp; he ignored him, and sprinted past. The landscape before him was a maze of sandbags and crates, among them batteries of anti-aircraft guns. Past those, the great black cliff wall, and where it met the giant platform, a pair of doors. That was their target; get past the defenses, and get inside.

"Ivrid," said Emily, coming to a crouch behind him. She pulled him down behind a stack of barrels, automatic fire still peppering the now-empty attack craft behind them. "We have to find Ivrid," she said. Peter shook his head.

"We've got to push forward."

He raised his head up, spotted a louse soldier running between the sandbags, only his chest and head visible like a shark fin cutting through the waves. Peter raised his rifle, squeezing the trigger and gunning the soldier down.

"Follow me," he said to Emily. They both dashed out from behind the barrels, looking for another place they could hide and shoot from.

The chaos of the battle around them seemed to fade away suddenly. Peter felt as though he were passing out, yet his mind held a sudden clarity, the lines of the world immediately sharper. He distinctly spotted a gray tube, a grenade, moving impossibly fast yet also impossibly slow. His hand was on Emily's back, pushing her to the ground. He felt as though he were moving through water, every second blending together.

Then they were both on the ground, the echoes of an ear-splitting blast ringing in their ears. Thick smoke hung in the air, the sun barely penetrating the gray. There was screaming; some of it Emily's. Desperately, he clawed at her, searching for wounds, but she pushed him away, scrambling back up, her hair hanging lankly over her face as she sat forward.

"What the hell?"

"Grenade. Get up, we have to get out the smoke."

They pushed forward blindly, staggering back into the bright sun, and falling against a stack of crates. Peter sat, sweaty, struggling to breathe. A few feet away, another soldier staggered out of the smoke, head hung, coughing violently, before, with a whine, a trio of bullets struck his head and splattered it against the sandbags.

Peter rose, fighting back nausea, cautiously aiming down the sights. He caught the glint of a black helmet twisting behind a line of barrels; he fired wildly, spraying the barrels, punching holes in them, watching a thick black fluid leak out. The soldier ducked back, but Peter kept firing, toppling a few barrels. They fell away, revealing the louse's exposed back. Peter did not hesitate before shooting his exposed enemy dead.

The magazine was empty. Peter fumbled with a new one desperately, fear pumping evenly, making his fingers thick and numb. The sudden slowness of things had unnerved him.

"Ivrid" Emily shouted. Peter looked over to his other side, where Ivrid and Jeya were crouched behind a wall of sandbags, huddled down. As he watched, Jeya twisted her shoulders, raised her rifle over her head, and fired blindly, until the weapon was almost jolted from her hands.

"Go!" she shouted. Emily sprang to her feet and ran, leaning forward, staying low. Peter followed, staggering a bit, but keeping his footing.

"Got to keep their heads down," Jeya muttered as they slid down beside her. She grinned, but it looked more like a grimace. "You see any on your way over here?"

Peter shook his head.

"Once we get inside and regroup, it'll be easy. But the fleet can't spare enough firepower to tear up the infantry. Waste of ammo. So it's our job."

"We're better at it, anyway," said Ivrid, fitting a new magazine into his gun. Jeya grinned.

"Damn straight."

Emily slowly peaked over the edge of the sandbags; a split-second later, she flung herself back onto the ground, bullets tearing along the tops of the bags, spraying their hair with grit. A spike drove through Peter's chest, until he saw Emily raise her face timidly, saw that she was alright.

"You noticed we're pinned down?" Ivrid said, "We've got something to deal with that, but we needed more people."

"Why?" Peter said. Ivrid ignored him.

"On three, spring up and fill that bastard with lead. Count out two seconds in your head, then get back down."

"What the hell?" Peter said, that's insane."

"One... two..."

"Three," said Jeya.

Almost in unison, they rose, guns blazing. Hot, spent cartridges catapulted over Peter's shoulder, clinking on the ground behind him. One glancing off the side of his neck, searing the skin. He winced.

The combined automatic fire of the four of them startled the two louse soldiers waiting for them. One fell instantly, the other backpedaled in surprise, stumbling away in retreat, before the wave of bullets cut him down.

"Now! Go!" Ivrid shouted.

They ran forward, Jeya vaulting over the sandbags, Peter clumsily copying her. They ran for the sandbags, then past them. Peter spotted the dead lice on the ground, but averted his eyes. His midsection had become a knot of solid iron, immovable. His lungs begged for air, his heart thrummed like a hummingbird's wings, but he could not hear them, could not feel them. They sprinted through the maze of sandbag wall and stacks of crates, the firefight blazing all around them.

A louse soldier sprang out from behind a pair of barrels as Jeya ran past them, kneeling and taking aim at the small of her back. Peter was not far behind her; he slammed the butt of his rifle into the louse's head, knocking him to the ground. Peter kicked the gun from his hand, sending it clattering, before leaping on the louse soldier like an animal, pinning him.

An iron gauntlet slammed into his cheek, sending shuddering black blinking through his vision. He ignored the dull pounding pain, rolling off the soldier, staggering to his feet as another powerful blow caved into his stomach, doubling him over. He wrenched himself upward, as the louse drew a knife from his belt, and grabbed the knife arm, pinning it against the ground. Peter reached for the louse's throat, just a bullet blew apart its head, shattering the slick goggles, spattering Peter's face with warm blood. He pushed the body away, revulsion rising in his throat, and watched it fall heavily to the ground. Turning, he saw Jeya, rifle raised.

"What the hell was that for!"

"He was going to stab you, Peter. I saved your life if nothing else."

"You just as easily could have blown *my* –"

"Not now!" Ivrid shouted, watching one of the louse towers crumbling, above them on the cliff rim. "We've still got a battle to fight."

Jeya glared at him, running after Ivrid. Peter fell in behind Emily, and they kept running.

They encountered barely any resistance on the way to the doors. Emily got a kill, shooting a louse soldier who was concentrating on another group of Whos, further away. Ivrid and Jeya led the way, gunning down any lice that waited to ambush them. But, oddly, when they did meet lice, they were in groups of one or two, spread out, as though they were lone stragglers instead of an organized army.

"They're delaying us," Jeya said as they reached the door, "They want us inside, but not yet. Those soldiers were just to slow us down. I didn't see any gunpods, and I'm guessing there were barely thirty soldiers defending that platform when there should have been a hundred. Watch yourselves."

Peter panted, struggling to return his heart rate to something manageable. As soon as a few more

soldiers caught up, they would be going inside, and from Jeya's alarming predictions, he would need his steady hand back if he was going to survive.

The needed reinforcements arrived much too soon. The doors were opening, revealing dull white lights that did little to alleviate the dimness within. Jeya's rifle barrel led the way, as she moved swiftly and silently into the blackness. Ivrid was right behind her, then Peter and Emily, then six or seven other soldiers. Containers, held together by spindly black X-shaped struts, sat against the walls, and steam hissed sinisterly from vents in the floor.

Jeya swiveled her gaze back and forth, like a bird, faint rustling as her body shifted. She peered behind every container, her hair reaching out loosely each time she swung her head. Peter tried to match her steps. As he did, he suddenly noticed a black puddle on the floor. He made to step over it, but lost his balance, ever so slightly, and his foot slapped on the floor as he stumbled.

A burst of gunfire stopped his heart. He fired wildly into the blackness ahead. His eyes spotted movement; without a second's hesitation he mowed it down. Beside him, Jeya jerked oddly, and dropped to her knees.

Panic rushed through Peter; he dashed behind one of the containers, his breath audible. A hiss of steam provided a deadly soundscreen for whoever was out there; he couldn't hear a thing. Across the hallway, Emily and Ivrid huddled behind another container. Heart pounding, Peter slid out his rifle's magazine. At least one bullet left. He replaced it with a click. One would be all he needed.

He heard a strange clinking on the ground, just a little bit further along the hallway.

"Get down!" he shouted.

The blast stunned him; he felt as though every inch of his body had been pummeled. His solar plexus had shattered, and he gasped for breath. He flung himself forward, onto his feet, around the corner of the containers, gunning down one, two, three louse soldiers as they rushed forward in the wake of their grenade, hoping to catch Peter and his friends while they were reeling.

The enemy dead, Peter sank to his knees. Jeya lay on her back just a few feet away, a surprised expression solidified on her face. Blood blossomed from the four holes in her front, the highest one trickling blood down her neck.

Something rough and raw clawed at Peter's throat, but he could not speak. Behind him, Emily was pulling him up, her arms under his shoulders.

"No..."

"Peter we have to go."

He couldn't go on. It could be Emily next. No, they had to leave, while they still could...

"Peter!"

"No!"

He scooped up his rifle.

"First door's right up here," said Ivrid, his voice shockingly even. Had he even cared about her?

"We'll open it, chuck a grenade in, then go."

"Just like they tried to do to us," muttered Emily.

"Exactly," Ivrid replied.

They moved up to the door, swiftly but cautiously. Ivrid unhooked a grenade from his vest, and slid his finger into the pin.

"On three..."

"One, two, *three*," Emily shouted, slamming her elbow into the door. Ivrid's arm curled around the barely-open door, hurling the grenade inside. They stopped and tensed, waiting for it to detonate, then, ears ringing, burst inside, rifles swiveling wildly.

Four muzzle flashes glimmered from the corner, the harsh barking of automatic fire forcing Peter to the floor, crawling desperately for cover, finding it behind a sleek black desk. He saw one of the soldiers run past him, only for the louse bullets to catch him, stopping him dead in his tracks as they punched through his body, then dropping him to the floor. Peter could not watch this. It could happen to

Emily any second. It would happen to Emily any second.

He sprang up, spotted a louse crouching behind some sort of computer console. A trio of bullets burst from his gun, then another, and the louse went down, arms flailing. He ducked down, then peered out of the side of the desk, and gunning down another one as he ran from cover to cover.

"They're dead!" came a shout.

"Up, come on, come on!"

Peter got up slowly, eyes darting around rapidly in search of Emily. She was there, getting back to her feet, shakily meeting his gaze.

"Come on, next room," Ivrid shouted, already lining up against the door. Emily's eyes fell away, as she hurried to join him. Peter sighed, and followed her.

The next few rooms were devoid of lice, and Peter began to feel himself being lulled into complacency. But a harsh edge of fear lingered in the back of his mind, unwilling to let him lose his vigilance ... or paranoia.

*Perhaps all these soldiers are insane*, Peter thought to himself. Insane for wanting to come out here, even if they had to. Insane for continuing on, even after one of their comrades had been spattered to bits a second before. Grim and methodical.

How many rooms could this place have? Finally they broke into a hallway, and moved down it slowly, checking each room they passed, gunning down a few errant lice. One ambushed them, gunning down a man standing behind Ivrid, before he returned fire, throwing the louse against the wall and leaving a thick black stain of blood on the concrete.

The hallway led to an open hangar, empty of aircraft but full of fuel tanks, fuel hoses, barrels and boxes, and plenty of louse soldiers. Already, a firefight raged across the hangar floor, echoing in the cavernous chamber, the whos toward their left, the lice toward their right.

"Get into position," Ivrid ordered, "Start giving them some flanking fire, take out anyone you can see. Give our troops relief so they can move up."

They obeyed, Peter following Emily to crouch behind a small truck. They peered out, taking careful aim down the sights, and picking off a pair of lice across the hangar. Others turned; the sudden stutter of gunfire had announced their presence, and Peter and Emily had to duck back down as a hail of bullets clinked off the hood of the truck.

"Em..."

"What?"

"This is a fuel truck."

"I know," she said coolly.

"What if it blows up?"

"Shouldn't."

"But what if—"

An explosion sent tremors through the floor. Cautiously, Peter peeked out, hoping to spot the source. His eyes widened.

The ceiling had torn open, the titanic nose of a cruiser poking through, but still growing wider by the second.

"Holy shit."

"What?"

"We need to get away from this thing. As fast as we can."

"Why?"

"Because there's a goddamn battlecruiser coming through the ceiling!"

It was at least fifty meters up, but that still did not give them a lot of time to get out of the way. Peter had no idea what would happen when it hit the "ground"; maybe it would simply keep going, tearing through floor after floor of the stronghold.

They found a column, an I-shaped beam of metal that ran from floor to ceiling. Any second it could buckle under the failing ceiling, but Peter figured that it beat taking shelter behind a thousand liters of highly flammable fuel.

The louse soldiers scattered, running to escape the descending cruiser. Peter gunned one down, then two, as they fled. Emily raised her rifle and shot another. Then they huddled against the column again, as the floor shook.

A snapping sound, like nearby lightning, sent a tremor through Peter's chest. As he turned his head, he caught a glimpse of the cruiser's front half, now in free fall, before Emily pulled him back into cover. A heartbeat later, it struck the floor, and the shock wave almost collapsed Peter's spine. He felt heat on the back of his neck, saw red tint the wall across from him. Then a wave of billowing smoke overtook them, leaving him coughing for breath.

"Peter!"

"I'm right here."

"Grab my hand."

Her warm fingers wrapped around his, and tentatively, blindly, they rose to their feet.

"I can't see a damn thing, Em, where do we go?"

"I don't know. Just ... head back for the door."

Her words ended with a vicious fit of coughing, and her fingers almost slipped away. He reached for her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder, and led her in what he guessed was the direction of the door they had entered through. Panic shot through him, as he realized that they might be headed the wrong way, but he reassured himself; at least the lice couldn't see any better in the smoke than he could.

Bullets skittered and whined around them; too close for comfort. Peter threw himself onto the floor, pulling Emily down with him. Something had seen them. He pulled himself along, not knowing if Emily was behind him. The smoke thinned near the floor; Peter spotted a pair of black boots, ten meters away. Without thinking, he fired at them, striking its ankle. A shock shot through Peter as he realized that it might be one of his own; but then the red eyes and black helmet lolled to the side, and Peter saw it was a louse soldier. His eyes fixated on the goggles.

"Heat vision," said Peter, "They must be seeing through the smoke with it."

Emily did not respond. Peter looked over his shoulder. She was nowhere to be found. The smoke began to clear.

"Emily?" he called, starting to stand up. Bullets suddenly pinged around him, ricocheting about, and Peter dropped back to the floor. His rifle clattered from his hand. One struck the ground inches from his nose, spraying sparks. Peter flinched, but tried to hold still. Playing dead might save his life.

Something grabbed at his front roughly; Peter reached for it, before realizing a bullet had grazed him, buried itself inside his vest instead of him. He rolled over, and forced himself to lay still. He counted in his head, out to ten, then to twenty. A dead body didn't cool that fast, and in the fervor of combat, a soldier wouldn't check too thoroughly that his target was down.

Carefully, Peter drew himself up to a crouch. The smoke had dissipated, and dead bodies lay strewn about on the floor, mostly lice. He turned around, to see the stripped form of half of a battlecruiser, at least thirty meters of it smashed through the ceiling of the great atrium and into the floor, fire grumbling, whipping at its sides. Someone was stumbling from the wreckage, toward a couple of who soldiers, but collapsed after a couple feet. The two soldiers ran for the crewman, but after a moment, turned away, dejectedly.

"Peter!"

He turned around again. Emily was rushing toward him, a black smear of grease on her beautiful cheek, sweat beaded on her forehead. She buried herself in his arms, and for a moment they clung to each other.

"Where's Ivrid?" said Peter.

Emily shrugged.

"Right over there," came a voice from behind them. It was Millie, pointing to where Ivrid, Krick, and Vell stood by the door, talking busily.

"Where are we going now?" asked Peter.

Millie shook her head.

"No idea. Probably further in once we can. We've got good momentum. Ivrid waiting to hear from the commander."

"Who?"

"Nathan Crole," said Millie, "Actually, he's an admiral, but he's the only leader Emeya trusts enough who isn't otherwise occupied."

The name meant nothing to Peter, but he realized that whoever he was, he would be the one deciding if he and Emily lived or died, where they were sent, and how they were used. Something akin to respect for the man washed through him, with a touch of resentment. But they had agreed to this, volunteered to fight. And it was far better than fighting the lice on their own, alone in the forest.

"I'm sorry about Jeya," said Peter. Millie's face twitched.

"It doesn't matter," she said, "Happens to everyone eventually." She forced a grin onto her face, "But thanks."

"Yeah," said Peter. *Happens to everyone eventually.* It was not going to happen to Emily.

When they reached Ivrid, he was talking into a hand radio. Vell and Krick stood at ease, glancing around at the other soldiers milling about in the atrium.

"Understood, sir," said Ivrid, "We'll move out as soon as I've got everyone together. Out." He slid the radio back onto his belt.

"Where next?" said Krick, his machine gun hanging from his hands idly. Peter glanced at it, and wondered whether he could even lift the thing.

"Forming up by a double door down the end of the larger corridors. The ones you three helped breech," said Ivrid, pointing at Vell, Krick, and Millie.

"Is that where you were?" Peter asked.

"Yeah," said Krick gruffly, "They decided to split us up and stick us three in the middle of hell. Millie's a damn good sharpshooter, I have my machine-gun, and Vell... well, I don't know why they decided to assign us there. Usually they let us fight together."

"This is a real battle," said Ivrid, "Not one of our little raids in the woods."

"Well, it ought to be," said Millie, "That's where we fight best. They let Jeya die here, but this wasn't where she belonged. She belonged in the forest, helping us smash those bastards on the road. Not in here ... in their stronghold ... who even cares about this place?" she said helplessly, her voice quivering. Ivrid gave her a sympathetic look.

"Point is, we're together now. We're going to meet the others at that door, break it open, and give them hell. Understood?"

"Yes sir," said Millie. The others echoed her.

"Let's get going, then," said Ivrid, "Everyone's accounted for."

They moved back out in the hallway, along it, other soldiers moving in groups of four or five, ahead of them or behind them. One carried a long rocket launcher over his shoulder, walking just a few meters in front of Peter. He watched it bobbing as the man walked.

The hallway fed into a much larger corridor, easily large enough for a tank to drive through. Perhaps several abreast. It extended down to the right, at least one hundred meters, to the exit, where the daylight shone in. Who troops walked toward them from outside, in scattered clusters. A few small open-top cars, guns mounted on the back, each manned, drove slowly among them.

To the left, Peter saw the hallway end after barely another twenty meters, in a pair of doors as tall as the hangar had been standing guard at the end. Soldiers clustered around them, against the walls, behind crates, behind trucks. Ivrid led them forward, toward a man wearing a black beret, who looked to be about forty, with a bristle of black hair running down the sides of his face, a slender chin, and dark,

serious eyes.

"Lieutenant Kerritch," said Ivrid as they approached, saluting.

"Ivrid," said Kerritch with an amused grin, returning the salute, "Glad to see you made it."

"So are we," said Ivrid, "What's the play?"

"We're waiting for the armor to roll in, give us a nice push up the middle. Got a couple armored carriers with plenty of machine guns. Pretty sure its a big room in there."

"What do we do?"

"Flank them. Go around the sides and corners, kill anyone with a gun, and especially anyone with a rocket. The carriers aren't aluminum cans, but more than a couple of those rockets, and they'll be seriously hurting."

Peter glanced at Emily; her face looked scared and small among the others' stern, hardened expressions.

"And if you see any of those gunpods," added Kerritch, "Blow the fucker to bits. Things tore up half my men out there, I swear."

Ivrid sighed.

"Sorry, sir."

"Nothing we can do about it," said Kerritch, "They're tough as hell, that's all I can say. Took a full mag out of my gun to finally take the thing down. Shot at its legs, but can't hit worth a damn when they're skittering around like a tap dancer."

"Yeah," said Ivrid.

A grumbling came from behind them. Both men turned, and so did Peter and the others.

"There's the cavalry!" said Kerritch, his face holding a satisfied grin.

Four wide, treaded vehicles trundled toward them, olive-green, their turrets holding a cluster of thin barrels. They drove between the other troops, up to stop just short of Kerritch. The engines shuddered, and faded. Kerritch looked toward the top expectantly; a hatch opened, and a woman rose from inside, a cap on her head, blonde hair curling around her ears.

"We going in?" she called down.

"Yeah," said Kerritch, "All right, form up!" he called to the others, "Get ready! We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that every damn louse this side of the stronghold's behind that door, hoping to stop us dead here. And we're sure as hell not gonna let them!"

Around Peter, the soldiers cheered, shouted angrily. A rush of elation ran through him. He felt his hand shaking involuntarily from the anticipation; he tried to hold it firm, but he could not.

"Those charges set?"

"Yes sir," came a voice from the doors.

"Alright!" Kerritch shouted, "On three, we blow those doors, the carriers roll in, and then you move in on the sides. Push through to the other side, and don't let them turn you back!"

He turned to Ivrid. Behind them, the carrier's engines roared to life again.

"You ready for this?"

"Definitely."

"One, two, three!"

A boom shook the ground, and a clang as the doors rattled and bent. Peter turned to look back at the woman atop the armor carrier, but she had disappeared back into the hatch. With a fierce growl it rolled forward, past the waiting soldiers, against the door, the tracks screeching, the engine purring with effort. Already bullets were flying through the hole, plinking off the carrier. One ricocheted high up into the ceiling.

"Stay close, Em," he whispered.

"I will."

Finally, the doors gave way, creaking and bending back. The carrier opened fire, the machine guns blaring in unison. The noise shook Peter; he wanted to run, confusingly, but not yet. Ivrid and the

others were still.

The second, then the third, then the fourth rolled in, consumed by whatever was behind the splintered gap in the doors. Peter craned his neck, trying to see.

"Let's go!" Kerritch roared, and the soldiers ran for the door, sprinting. Peter followed, feeling confused. As he ran through the gap, he saw a wide room, barely lit, full of parked trucks, storage crates, and barrels. He spotted a louse soldier crouching behind a truck, peering out with its submachine gun in hand. Peter swore he met its eyes, before he dashed behind a crate, and dropped to a crouch. He turned around, seeing Emily slide down next to him.

"Peter, there's hundreds. There's hundreds of them," she said, her voice shaking. The sound of gunfire was deafening. Peter could barely hear her.

Two soldiers ran in behind Peter and Emily; the first one was struck by a stream of bullets, slamming him against the wall. He slid to the floor, a dark streak of blood left on the wall behind him.

"Peter, what are we going to do?" said Emily desperately, "We ... we can't ... I can't ..."

"Keep it together, Em," said Peter, as another soldier was struck down, barely three meters away. Peter watched as the body fell, the helmet falling off, long hair spilling out. For a second Peter thought it was Millie, but it wasn't, it was another woman he didn't recognize, her eyes wide and surprised.

"We have to fight back," said Peter, "We have to, come on Em."

He eased up carefully, peering around the crate, barrel leading. He spotted one louse soldier crouched behind a truck; the same one he'd met eyes with running in. It was firing steadily at the door; then, it stopped, dropped out its clip, and reached for a new one.

Peter lined up the sights and shot it, jerking it to the side. It fell on the floor, curled up in a half-fetal position. A wave of bullets shredded splinters from the crate. Peter ducked back, looking at Emily. She had all but frozen, her eyes wide and glossy. Her mouth hung open a little, and she was breathing, slowly and steadily.

"Em?"

She did not respond.

"Em! Emily!"

She shook her head, leaning back.

"I can't do this. We have to get out of here."

"Emily ... damn it," Peter muttered. He peered out again, spotted a louse soldier dashing from one cluster of barrels to the next. He shot at it, the rifle vibrating jarringly in his hands, kicking hard against his shoulder, spraying bullets; but he missed, and the louse soldier dropped down behind the barrels, out of sight now.

He swiveled his aim, and fired at the another louse soldier who was peering out from behind some sort of cart. It ducked back. Suddenly feeling exposed, Peter did as well. He turned to Emily again.

"Look, we have to do this! Okay? You think I'm not scared as hell?"

She stared off into the distance, as more soldiers still flooded in. It seemed like every other one was being shot, falling to the floor, the ground thick with blood and bodies already. Peter didn't want to watch it, didn't want to believe it, but it filled him with fury.

"We've got to fight back!" he shouted at her. She shrank away. Peter ignored her; he thought of Jeya now, dead on her back so suddenly. He thought of Thale, taken away from him. He remembered Myron's words, as much as he had hated them at the time, that he had a chance to kill those bastards, and he was going to take it.

Peter sprang out from the other side of the crate, stepping over Emily, who didn't even flinch. He saw a louse gun down a soldier who had run around the wrong side of a crate, watched him stiffen and fall flat. He spotted Ivrid behind the crate, on the other side. He might be next.

He aimed carefully, and fired, short crisp bursts. They pinged off the barrels behind the louse, and it looked around bewilderingly, ducking back, but exposing himself even more. Peter stopped, steadied his aim over the louse's chest, then fired again, ripping a hole in the soldier's chest, and flinging

him against the wall.

Glancing around, he looked for any other lice, but they were all dead.

"We've got to move up," said Peter, still checking to make sure the path was clear to the next stack of crates. He didn't see any lice, but that didn't mean there weren't any ...

"Emily!"

She finally sat forward, and got to a crouch, clutching her rifle. Peter could hear her hyperventilating. Off to the side, someone called to move up. A second later, Peter heard a sudden stutter of gunfire, and a cry of agony.

"Let's go," he said softly, "Me first."

He peered out from behind the crate one last time, then ran for it, dashing across the floor, resisting the urge to dive behind the crates. He dropped to a crouch, peering out; immediately, a wave of bullets forced him back.

"Emily, don't!" he shouted, but it was too late, she was already running, scared and desperate, like a small animal scurrying for safety. Bullets skipped around her feet, whizzed past her, but they all missed, and she dropped down beside him a second later.

Adrenaline churned in his head now; he popped out, spotted the louse who had shot at Emily, then gunned it down. On the other side, Peter heard more gunfire; he turned, and saw Emily shooting, too, a long, steady stream of fire that ended when her magazine ran empty.

She rolled back, panting, forehead sweaty.

"We were supposed to shoot at the ones with rockets, right?" she said in between breaths.

"Yeah," said Peter.

"Good ... because I think I ... got one."

"Alright," said Peter, "We should try to move up more, along the walls."

"Yeah," said Emily, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just ... it was too much all the sudden. I don't know what happened."

"It's fine," said Peter, "I didn't mean to yell."

She looked at him solemnly.

Peter turned away, peered out from the crates.

"One louse, watching us I think. I'll pop out and shoot at him, keep his head down. You run for those barrels up there, where Ivrid was a moment ago."

"Okay," said Emily.

"Now!" said Peter, leaning out and spraying at the louse. It ducked back, but Peter kept firing, until he heard a click. Then, the louse nowhere to be seen, he dashed forward, spotting Ivrid and Emily behind a line of barrels.

"We've pushed them back," said Ivrid, "Think that's the last one."

"What do we do about him?" asked Peter. Ivrid stood up suddenly, and fired over the top of the barrels, before crouching down again.

"That's what we do," he said, "He's dead. I got him."

Peter sighed with relief. The sounds of battle were waning now; he could hear the engines of the carriers as they rolled through the room, firing at anything that moved, all but invulnerable. Then he heard an explosion.

"Damn it!" shouted Ivrid, "Rockets!"

Drones were used to guard valley

“Drones can be jammed. When you're the eye in the sky, and your enemy's just an annoyance on the ground, ready to be stomped, that's one thing. That's how it used to be, just stamping out agitators whose only mission was menace. It saved lives back then, and it saved lives in the valley. Here, the enemy can reach anyone. A drone's no safer; all they have to do is hit you where your controllers are, and just as many people are dead. It's risk consolidation at best, and painting a target on your forehead at worst.”

Emily and peter finally get married after peter realizes how close he came to losing her. Also peter starts learning about chosen.

Peter starts learning how to fly

“We're dropping!” Emily shouted.

The *Wrangler* wobbled dangerously, throwing people to the floor.

There was nothing left to do. Four engines out, none left. The *Wrangler's* dive left it aiming at a spot in the black desert barely visible through the fog. Peter saw where they would crash. He knew it. He knew where he would die.

He reached for Emily's hand. It snapped away as he closed his fingers around hers, then relaxed, and gripping him firmly. The seats rattled, the straps biting into their waists and shoulders. Peter fought the urge to curl up in a fetal position, spend his last moments comfortably.

Emily's hand touched his cheek, pulling it towards her. She enveloped him in a strong kiss, one punctured only by the pit of boiling fear in Peter's stomach. When she released him, Peter's eyes swiveled involuntarily to the window. He could not tell how far it was now, but it was close. His arms encircled Emily, and drew her close, almost crushing her against his body, and he leaned against her, head sideways on hers, watching the details of the blackness growing larger, counting down the seconds until death.

End

Macalavay – Whos crashland in ship called the *Ethereal Wrangler*

His mind swam in a fog, a miasma of vicious clashes between what was real and what was speculation. Across a great gulf in his mind, he saw a thin line of orange lights, like a distant highway in the foggy night. Their keen glow refracted oddly in his vision; out there somewhere were his friends, or perhaps his enemies. In the world of buried motives bursting fresh from the soil of subconscious, any enmity was embodied, and a despair broke over the landscape before him.

Searchlights swam through the sky, sweeping over the gray clouds above, like trees swaying in an urgent nighttime wind. A sharp moan, great and resonant, dug into his ears, as if the sound were a real physical presence within him. He rolled over.

Pain greeted him, sending a jolt of cold fluid down his leg. He was awake. All too fast, he realized he had slipped from the world of dreams. Looking down at his leg, he realized it was not punctured; he had simply rolled against an iron strut, bent and broken so that sharp shards poked out at odd angles. He recoiled from it, rolled back onto his side, head swiveling around, eyes squinting into the darkness. Could that be Emily's head, long hair spilling over the sides, lying in the corner? He needed a flashlight.

Fists straining as they wrapped around a couple of makeshift handholds in the mess of metal, Peter slowly dragged himself free of the twisted iron that was draped heavily across his legs. At once his feet went limp; slowly the warm trickle of blood refilling tissue replaced the cold numbness that had been there before.

Arm over arm, Peter began to move through the dark chaos of the wreck, toward the shadowy form that looked like Emily. As he did, he crawled past a gaping hole in the wall, beyond which could be seen the sparkling night. The sight transfixed him; outside, across the great rocky plains, lay a structure that looked eerily like Woebarren. Despair, futility ran through Peter, gripping him beneath his bleakness. His dry lips tensed. He crawled on.

He found her, a sharp chunk of metal the size of his own body sunk into her back, dried blood crusted around the wound. Peter frantically groped at her face, feeling for a pulse. She was dead. She was dead. She could not be dead, but she was.

Peter smashed his fist against the metal above her. A wail escaped him, the sound nothing like his own voice. He punched the metal again and again, until his vision blurred from the pain, and he felt his knuckles on the verge of cracking, and he fell onto her shoulders, sobbing, until at last sleep found him again.

The umber dawn faintly lit the floor. Dried tears had crusted around his eyes; he rubbed them away, a dull pit in his stomach. He wanted to hide, back in the safe realm of sleep. But the pain held him back, suspending him above unconsciousness now, as light broke through cracks in the wreckage to shine on his face.

Outside, he heard movement. No, there could not be others.

"In here," came a gruff voice Peter realized belonged to Myron. So he was alive as well. The thought brought him no joy.

Something peeled back the thin sheet of metal that formed the wall of Peter's little cell; with an unpleasant screech, it bent and snapped free. Myron flung it to the side with a hollow clang. Peter could not see him, but saw his shadow move, and felt him near him.

"Emily's dead," he moaned. Myron paused, then moved again, kneeling next to Peter.

"It's not Emily, Peter, it's someone else. Emily's alive."

Peter looked down at the blank face of the corpse he had clung to; in the light, he could see a face so much different from Emily's. Something akin to hope flooded through him, but he could not accept it.

"I need to see her," he said with sudden clarity.

"You will, soon enough," said Myron, slowly hauling Peter to his feet. His muscles ached from

lying still for so long. He wasn't sure he could walk; he took a few tentative steps forward, following Myron as he continued speaking.

"We need to clear out of this place. The lice are out there, they know we crashed here. A pair of Scorpions already flew over once, dropped a couple bombs. I sent out a scout, he found a decent-sized cave along the cracks that run through the desert. It's only about three miles away, so we're gathering as many supplies as we can and heading there."

But the droning of Myron's voice barely penetrated Peter's groggy mind as he shuffled behind him. Off in the distance, the second structure stood, easily twice the size of Woobarren, mocking them. He had never expected another one; at least, not one even bigger than the first. Were there more? If so, how many? And how much larger could they get?

Myron led him to a small cluster of tents, where a mix of soldiers, crewmen and civilians were hurriedly passing crates and packets of supplies to each other, filling backpacks frantically. The bustling activity was uncomfortable to Peter; a dull hopelessness set over him. They had escaped, they had defeated the lice at Woobarren after so many years of fighting. Was it all to happen again, when he was so weary, when his people were all so weary, from the first war? With their fleet scattered or destroyed, they would have no chance.

"Ten minutes," said a man who approached Myron. Peter recognized his squared but friendly face, the trace of an auburn beard around his chin; Warrick, one of the ship-men who had helped Peter fix his damaged fighter. For what good it had done, now that their ship was splattered in pieces across the black rocks around them, at least he remembered the man.

"We'll be lucky to have that," said Myron, his voice tense and grim. His head angled to the side, looking into the sharp morning sun.

"I can tell if they're coming," said Warrick instantly, "I had one of the crewmen pull out the radar system. He's got it on a cart. We'll have warning if anything comes."

"Where's Emily?" Peter interjected.

Warrick's face tightened.

"She's going to be okay, Mr. Green, but it probably won't help you to see her right now. Once we get to the cave there will be plenty of time to see her."

"I want to see her now, Warrick," said Peter impatiently, "And give me a backpack. And if I ever hear you calling me 'Mr. Green' again, I will kick your ass."

Myron chuckled, and handed one of the packs to Peter.

"This is just going to be for a few days, we're only bringing essentials, and the most valuable equipment. We'll cache the rest and come back for it, once we get settled," Myron explained as Peter slung it over his shoulder.

"All right."

"I'll take you to see Emily," said Warrick.

He followed him to a smaller tent around the side of the wreck. A cluster of injured and dying lay within. A fly buzzed above them, hoping for a small helping of fresh meat. Off to the side, lying on a makeshift bed of a sleeping bag over two crates, Emily stared at the ceiling. Bandages encircled her arm and shoulder, and her hip and thigh. An IV bag hung on one of the tent poles above her head, the needle taped neatly to her wrist. Peter knew she was better off than she could have been; next to her lay a man whose face had been reduced to a bloody, burned mess. A woman Peter recognized vaguely as one of the ship's doctors worked carefully on him, applying some sort of salve. He averted his gaze.

"Peter, you're okay," came a weak voice. Emily looked at him, a smile on her face that barely hid the pain she had to be in.

"Yeah, Em, I am," Peter said, trying to keep the hurt from his face at seeing her like this.

"I'll be fine, too," she said feebly, "Something punctured my shoulder pretty deep, and I think one of the tables hit my hip just right to crack it. Or go into it. I don't know, I was unconscious until I woke up here. But it's not infected, and they told me it was healing fine."

"Thank god."

"Did you see it? The other... thing?"

"Yeah. I don't know what we'll do."

"We always find something, Peter. We'd be dead by now if we didn't."

"I love your optimism, Em."

Sudden shouts alerted Peter. Warrick, who had been waiting outside, suddenly rushed into the tent, a panicked expression on his face.

"Peter, we have to get out of here now," he shouted, beckoning furiously with his hand, "Come on, follow me!" He turned to look outside; something exploded maybe ten meter away from him, nearly knocking him from his feet. He threw a hand over his face to protect himself. The ground beneath Peter trembled.

"Peter, *now*, damn it!"

"I'm not leaving Emily here!"

"We can't move her when she's like this! We have to get to the cave, we can come back for her later. There's nothing we can do for her, for any of them, staying here!"

"I'm not leaving them behind," Peter shouted, resolutely.

Warrick stared at him a heartbeat longer; another explosion rocked the ground, not much further away, and he ran off.

"Peter, go."

"No, Em, I'm not leaving you here. No way."

"I'll see you in just a couple days."

"I don't know that."

"I do."

Peter felt something tear him from her, haul him to his feet.

"We can't get her out of here without killing her, Peter," Myron growled, wrestling Peter back; refusing to be manhandled, he responded with a vicious elbow to the ribs. Myron grunted, and staggered back. Peter righted himself, looking at Emily; at once her pleading eyes cracked his resolve. He closed his eyes.

"Fine. But we're coming back for her. Before anything else."

With one last pained glance at Emily, he followed Myron from the tent.

"The bombers are circling around," said Warrick, when they met him by the trailhead. It sloped down about one hundred feet into a crevasse in the rock; the crack ran for what appeared to miles. About forty others had gathered around him, backpacks strapped tight to their shoulders. Some had rifles hanging from their arms or backs.

"We've got something like five minutes to get far enough down into the canyon to be out of angle of their rockets. Keep spread out, don't give them a target to square up on, and move fast," said Myron.

He looked around at the gathered men and women.

"All right, let's go."

They moved at a brisk pace down the dusty, rock-cluttered trail, shooting occasional worried glances into the morning sky. It was not steep, but more than once someone braced themselves against one of the smaller boulders strewn about. The black rock was all but scalding in the intense morning sun; Peter tried to minimize contact with them. Pain hung in his heart at leaving Emily. He watched the woman in front of him, her ponytail bobbing care-freely, even as death circled overhead, and missed her even more.

As they reached the bottom of the canyon, a shadow blinked overhead; a slowly rising rumble Peter had dismissed as wind suddenly burst into a roar. Overhead rushed a solitary bomber, its profile black in contrast with the bright blue sky. Its passage stirred dust from the edges of the cliff above; it slowly floated down the sides, tilting gently off the walls as it fell.

Most of the people around Peter ducked, expecting an impact of some sort; as they straightened up, they slowly re-shouldered dropped packs and weapons, and continued on, their pace noticeably more cautious. More than one carried their rifles now, rather than leaving them slung over their backs.

Perhaps a mile had passed, by the time the walls of the canyon curved gently, bringing them shade. Myron stopped them, where they drank from canteens, resting their legs for a moment, before pressing on. Peter looked around him. Families huddled together, children clinging to their mothers. He never envied their closeness; having Emily to worry about was enough to keep him from sleeping at night. Her independence was the only thing that kept him from the relentless torment of worry.

Confidence brushed through him, barely soothing but enough to cling to, that she would be fine. With every rock a potential threat, every footstep a potential mistake, he had always, and would always keep her close. Something leveled out his paranoia in that moment, even as they hurried through the canyon.

He sent a rock skittering along the ground ahead of him, watching it tumble end over end, until it was suddenly gone, a speck of dust in his eye, screams around him as the whines of passing bullets whirled past his ears. Flinging himself sideways, he landed awkwardly, rolling over and over, a rock jamming into his hip, then another into his ribs. He pushed himself over and over, until at last he felt his body flush against the canyon wall. The fading drone of engines then drowned out the screams of terror, bathing the ground in another vicious barrage. Peter felt something sharp sting his arm; he pulled away, his other arm over his eyes. No matter which way he rolled, his back sheltered, or his stomach sheltered, he was vulnerable.

The noises began to fade; Peter looked up, the bright sun reflecting off the dust that hung in the air, and saw the outline of a body laying on the ground. He began to get up, rubbing his eyes, planting a leg under himself and straightening, looking down and seeing the dead around him. Unconsciously he began counting; seven, eight, nine, no, no. He sank against the wall of the canyon, the rough stone scratching at his back. For some reason, the only thought that ran through his head was: had Emily been here, the attack would have killed her.

*And I wanted to bring her,* Peter thought, his selfishness stinging him as much as the pain of seeing more of his people dead. They had fled Woobarren, only to be slaughtered anew.

Within a minute, Myron had found him.

“Let's keep going. We'll come back for the bodies.”

Peter nodded, simply staring at the girl he had watched before, the one who had made him miss Emily. She was on her side, eyes squeezed shut as though trying to force away the world, her body bent oddly as though the bullets had pinned her to the ground.

“We'll go get Emily,” Myron said, watching him. Peter nodded again, then walked past him, to the people gathered ahead. Several cried over the bodies of loved ones; others clustered against the walls, in shock. He glanced down at his wrist, where his skin was scored by a fragment of rock. Probably shattered by a bullet. Peter picked it out, wiped away what little blood there was, and trailed behind the slowly advancing group.

The cave was just around the next bend in the canyon, fifteen feet up a slope, the irony of its proximity biting at Orion. He was second into the cave after Myron, who raised a shotgun, looking side to side, pointing it at every square inch of wall, before moving further inside.

A few feet in, a square of light defied the darkness; as Peter walked into it, he looked up, seeing a slender, winding passageway leading all the way to the surface, barely three feet wide.

“If we put some sort of curved mirror here, we can reflect the light into the rest of this chamber,” Peter said.

“What?” Myron asked, turning around, his shotgun barrel swiveling dangerously close to Peter's chest.

“Up there. The light coming down. We can spread it around with a mirror.”

“Where are we going to get one of those?”

"Don't our shields use a dispersal system something like that?"

"Yeah, I think." Myron paused, "Good idea, Peter."

Behind them, others filtered into the cave, flashlights and lanterns throwing white beams around the darkness, illuminating the sides of the cave in flashes. Occasionally they would shine on each other, revealing fearful faces for a split-second. The image stuck in Peter's head, for some reason.

"The cave goes further back," Myron said, his own flashlight, attached to his gun, now clicked on. Peter turned to see the light glinting off wetness on the walls, which curled like curtains, lining a passageway that led on, past the range of the flashlight.

"At least twenty meters. This was a good find."

Something slammed into Peter's neck. He reacted instantly; already alert in the unfamiliar darkness of the cave, but a second later it flung him to the ground. Behind him, he heard Myron scuffling with someone. The sound of nails scratching metal abraded his ears; there was the sound of blows landing in rapid succession, and a thud. Something thick and heavy landed on Peter's back; he wriggled out from underneath it, his throat now pulsing with a dull ache. The fallen figure leaped at him, its hands suddenly around his throat. Peter launched a brutal punch into the side of its arm; its grip weakened, and he flung another sideways blow, connecting with its jaw. Peter broke free entirely, and sprang to his feet, his knife now hanging loosely from his grip, swinging back and forth.

The figure came at him again; in a flash of movement, Peter spotted Myron lying on his back, motionless. He lashed out, kicking his attacker in the stomach, then withdrawing as it... *she* landed on the floor hard, rolling over, her face pale enough to be seen clearly in the semidarkness.

Feet scuffling against the floor, she got up again, going for a weapon on the ground, something long and thin. Peter slashed it from her hands. It landed with a hollow clatter; as it rolled away, Peter placed his knife delicately against the woman's throat. She froze.

"You kill me, and there will be another ten in the cave in seconds. They're already here."

Behind him, Peter heard a shriek, and his confused mind rushed to figure whether it was a shriek of surprise or pain. He pressed the flat side of the knife against her.

"You tell them. Stop them. If they hurt any of the people I brought here, I will slaughter every one of them."

The woman hesitated. A strand of her dark hair fell over her forehead, probing her eyebrow.

"Tell them!" Peter insisted.

"Yyrick, stop!" she shouted, her throat bulging against the blade.

"What?" came a deep growling voice from another corridor.

"Don't hurt any of them," called the woman. Her eyes shifted suddenly, to something off behind Peter, to the right. She pushed forward suddenly; Peter's hand flashed, reaching out to gash her throat, but suddenly hesitating, and drawing back. She dashed away, into the darkness.

"Damn it!" Peter grunted, throwing the knife to the floor. He stooped next to Myron; he was breathing, stable. The weapon next to him; a spear. She had planned to kill him with a spear. Feeling more confident, Peter scooped up his fallen friend's shotgun, pumped it, watched it spit a shell onto the floor. He almost smiled, but there was nothing as dangerous as overconfidence. Planning each step, he moved back toward the mouth of the cave.

He encountered the first one as he came around the bend. A short man, that was all he could tell in the near-pitch-black. Hot breath on his neck, then a sudden jolt as something slammed into his ribs. Peter flung him off, turning, flinging the shotgun backwards, firing it into the ceiling. He immediately regretted his decision; the sound reflected off the wall to attack his ears again and again, and bits of rock spattered his shoulders. The man scurried off.

Peter continued, vowing not to use the weapon if he did not have to. A ricochet off the ceiling could have killed them; one stray pellet of buckshot through the brain, and he would be as dead as if he had stuck the gun under his chin.

At the mouth of the cave, he found the rest of the group, two more men holding them at bay with

submachine guns. Their backs were to Peter; he could sneak up and kill one, easily, with a well-placed blow. But gravel coated the floor, and as he took a step forward, a plan only half-formed in his head, the crunching sound his boots made alerted them.

As they whirled around, Peter froze; he couldn't shoot without risking hitting his own people, innocent civilians. Families.

"Don't move!" Peter shouted. They obeyed, but did not lower their guns. Peter let his grip go slack, the barrel of the shotgun reaching for the ground.

"I put down my weapon, you go get your leader. Yyrick," Peter said, his mind slowly calming as he realized he was not going to be shot. Yet.

The two men nodded. Peter slowly lowered his shotgun to the floor.

"Go," said one to the other, who moved off through the tunnels. He stood firm, staring at Peter, who did not break his gaze.

A moment later, a man and woman returned, along with several others, all holding weapons Peter recognized as louse submachine guns. Their faces were pink, though pale in the darkness; they did not have the sallow hue of the lice.

"Yyrick, right?" said Peter, trying to keep his voice even and free of anger. He remembered Myron, still lying unconscious in the chambers behind him. Worry could not control him now.

"Yeah," the deep voice replied. Yyrick was a tall man; near the entrance, what light filtered in revealed him as a broad-shouldered man. Something akin to armor rested over his shoulders, and he held a longer rifle. The woman, the one Peter had struggled with, held nothing but a knife now, though Peter noted a pistol strapped to her belt. Her face was thin, heart-shaped, with short black hair reaching barely past her ears, and curling around just above the depression where her slender neck met her shoulders. Her eyes were dark and analyzing; even now she seemed to be trying to think of a way to kill Peter.

"We're not here to hurt anyone," Peter said.

"We don't know that," the woman spoke, "You can't prove that."

"I laid down my weapon. It is only myself, and a few other of my people, who are armed. There are families with us. Children. We only have these guns to protect them."

"Children are a weakness," boomed Yyrick, "They consume but do not provide."

"Listen," Peter insisted, "We didn't come here to attack you. We came when our ship crashed and we had nowhere else to go. We have supplies. We can help you."

"Why are you here?" Yyrick demanded, ignoring Peter's other words.

"We... we fight the lice."

"You mean the Dhomezi?"

"Y – yes, them," Peter replied, desperately hoping they meant the same thing, "The Dhomezi."

"They shot you down?"

"Yes. We –"

"Then you have brought death to us! They will follow you!"

Peter had no answer to this. A variety of weak excuses pranced through his mind, each more feeble than the last, dissolving as they skittered by.

"Are there more of you?" Peter said.

"Everywhere," the woman said, "Thousands. But you coming here will –"

"Do they fight, too?" Peter interrupted, "Against the lice? Dhomezi?"

"Better than you could ever hope to," she hissed back, looking affronted at being cut off.

"I have a friend... many friends, still at the crash site. By now there will be probably be soldiers there. I need to go get them, bring them here to these caves. We have supplies. Food, water, medicine, ammunition, tools. We'll share them with you, if you come with us."

Yyrick's face seemed entirely incapable of motion. He did not appear unintelligent; none of these people did. Peter saw shock in their expression that mimicked his own, the day the valley had been attacked, the day his entire world changed. He wondered how long these people had been here, for

visitors to be such a shock.

Yyrick was whispering to the woman at his side, their companions still staring down Peter. He held their gaze, but did not narrow his eyes. Showing hostility could only backfire.

"Here is a deal," Yyrick said at last, "I'll take your people back to our living chambers. You'll bring Lyvri with you, and four more of my people. You return by dawn tomorrow, and I will keep your people safe. If you do not, they can leave to feed themselves."

Peter's mind raced. If he couldn't get those supplies, they would be good as dead anyways.

"Deal."

Lyvri stepped forward, sheathing her knife.

"I need to get my friend," said Peter, "Wait here. I'll let you pick who comes with us, you know them better than I do."

She nodded.

Peter walked back through the dark caves, his leg muscles feeling like frayed ropes. The entire encounter had taxed his energy, but he had gained tentative allies, and shelter. He reached Myron, rolled him over, and began to gently shake him. He did not stir; Peter gave up, and slapped his chin.

Myron's eyes snapped open, staring widely at Peter, before he rolled to the side, clutching at his head, face scrunched up.

"Son of a *bitch*."

"She hit you good," said Peter, cupping his arms under Myron's shoulders and hauling him to his feet.

"She'?"

"Yeah. I think I've made some sort of peace with them, at least for now. They're bringing everyone to the lower chambers, where they live, and sending that woman and a few others with us to go get Emily. And the supplies."

"Now?"

"Now."

"Goddamn it. Where's my gun?"

"Up by the front."

Myron stumbled along behind Peter, taking precarious steps over the uneven stone. When they reached the mouth of the cave, Lyvri stood, carrying a long rifle incongruous with her slender form. Four others, all taller than her, but for a shorter man Peter guessed was the one who had attacked him in the cave earlier. Myron had barely stepped down into the chamber before she began speaking.

"It's early afternoon. We have until dawn. We attack now, we don't have much time to plan, but if we attack at night –"

"They have the advantage," Peter cut across, "With those goggles."

"Right," Lyvri replied, handing him one of the submachine guns, with a few extra sticks of ammo bundled in the same hand. Peter took it, and continued.

"We attack now. The soldiers will be at that wreck soon, if they aren't already." Panic shot through Peter as he remembered Emily, defenseless, and a sudden urgency shot through him.

Lyvri nodded, then motioned to the other soldiers. They began to file out into the bright sunlight, the edge only taken off by a few passing clouds. Myron followed them, glancing back at Peter as he did. Peter hung back; as Lyvri passed, she caught his arm, her rifle swinging in the other.

"Don't think this makes us allies. Or friends. These had better be some damned good supplies."

"They are," Peter answered, his brow furrowing.

"It's the least you can do for leading the Dhomezi to us like this."

*It's the least you can do after I didn't slash your throat open*, Peter retaliated in his thoughts, but he followed her in silence. It would do no good to have tension between them, when reclaiming Emily would be so dangerous already. And he felt no enmity for her, nor any of the others.

The air was cooler now, as though providing them a brief reprieve. The wind chilled the sweaty

sheen on Peter's forehead; the prospect of needing his body to move quickly, and effectively, again so soon, sank into him uncomfortably.

A jolt ran through Peter's stomach as they passed the bodies of those killed in the strafing run before, then memory of the attack keen in his brain.

"Are these yours?" Lyvri asked Peter as they passed.

"Yes," said Peter.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, and there was suddenly tenderness in her voice.

They continued until the wreck of the ship was visible, sticking up oddly like an empty can squashed against the earth. It could have been a fairly large hill.

"There it is," said Peter.

"Stop," Lyvri commanded the others. They turned to look at her.

"We need to get at it from above. I know another way up onto the plateau. Come on."

Peter followed her as she led them on, to an intersection they had passed earlier, maybe two hundred meters from the wreck, from the earthen ramp they had descended to get into the canyon. Rifle trailing behind him, he traded a look with Myron. He was unsure how much he trusted these people, or whether they would keep their promise of hospitality. They were survivors, and survival left kindness a luxury. But necessity had driven them together, and at the very least Peter could use this shaky, perhaps temporary alliance to get Emily back.

She led them to the top, a great, flat desert of black rock and sand. Clustering around them, an endless field of boulders, some pale and smooth, some dark and speckled, wind whipping between them like water flowing through a stony riverbed.

As Peter came around one of the larger ones, he saw Lyvri, on her stomach, peering over a rise in the sand and gravel, down maybe thirty meters onto the plateau where the wreck of the *Ethereal Wrangler* lay, twisted and stretched, her belly ripped open, sunlight glinting off the bent, exposed ribs. Peter spent a moment lost in admiration of the beautiful ship she had been.

"It'll be hard to get at them," Lyvri said, face rigid with concentration as she examined the wreck, "If we keep going along the edge here, we can circle around to a natural bridge, which leads to a clearer section. Someone can keep watch from up here. I have –"

A shadow blinked over the group. Peter looked up; like a bird of prey, he saw the wide, tapering wings of a louse landing craft soaring overhead, turning with a grace that belied the crude, vicious beings that sat within. It lost altitude rapidly, sinking toward a clear part of the plateau, away from chunks of the broken ship that lay scattered over the rocks.

"That complicates things," Lyvri said, her eyes darting to and fro. A second later, another flew overhead, almost silent, the noise of its engines all but drowned out the wind.

"Damn it!" Lyvri cried, fumbling with something in her pocket. She tossed it to Peter; a small, dark plastic thing. A radio.

"Go! I'll cover you from up here!" She unslung her rifle, looking through the sight as the dropship touched down. Peter watched as, in the distance, a tiny door open, and little black dots leaked out onto the ground, spreading out quickly into formation. There was a sharp crack and Lyvri fired her rifle; the shapes reacted, moving frantically to and fro.

Peter followed Myron and the others, dashing amongst the rocks, following the shorter man as he led them on a winding trail toward the bridge. It was only a hundred meters away, but Peter's knees ached by the time they reached it, the faint, brisk snapping of Lyvri's rifle keeping an even tempo. He felt a rush of worry for her, suddenly, realizing there was no one there to watch her back. Regret washed through him at his earlier thought. She was risking her life to rescue Peter's friends.

The barking of automatic weapon fire drew Peter back to reality. He dashed for the nearest rock as bullets skittered off the ground from across the bridge, cleaving fist-sized stones in two. Peter felt a

fleck glance off his cheek with a tiny sting; he turned, and moved slowly around the other side of the rock. He spotted a louse soldier lining up a long rifle; if it was one of their rare snipers, it would be a deadly threat.

Centering the sights over its head, he squeezed the trigger, sending a burst of bullets screaming into its side. It was easily thirty meters away, crouched on one side of a boulder, but Peter watched bursts of stone, like raindrops hitting the ground, and watching the soldier flung back against the boulder, rifle falling to the ground, leaving a dark stain on the stone behind him. Another noticed his kill, and swiveled to fire back; Peter ducked back as bullets began to land, but heard a distant crack, and they suddenly stopped. He peered out, just in time to watch the soldier, on his knees, flung to the ground as a spray of blood leaped from his neck.

Peter exhaled, and gave a silent, mental thank you to Lyvri. He aimed at another soldier, flicking the switch on the side of the gun to switch it to selective firing, and squeezed off carefully aimed shots. After a few, the louse noticed him; Peter fired three times in quick succession, dropping him onto his back.

"We're clear! Move up!" came an echoing shout over the wind and recently fading gunfire. Peter staggered to his feet, and caught up with the others at the front of the bridge. The shorter man led them, gun barrel leading, and the others followed behind, spreading out as best as they could on the narrow bridge. Peter would have marveled at it; it was almost an arch, molded with the sides of the cavern as if made from clay, carved by the wind over thousands and thousands of years.

It would have beautiful at another time.

Something punched a bloody hole in the short man's cheek, snapping his head to the side. Another bullet whipped into his shoulder, spinning him to the ground. Peter jumped over his fallen body, following the others. Bullets dogged his steps, uncomfortably closely, as he brought up the rear, running last five meters of bridge as quickly as he could, before diving behind a rock. He drew another clip of ammunition from his belt, let the other one fall to the black sand, and slid it in, cocking the weapon with a short snap. He turned to Myron.

"Where?"

"I don't know! I have no idea where that came from."

Peter looked from side to side, feeling his own hot breath against his wind-chilled cheeks as he spoke in the shelter of the rocks.

"Alright. We'll hunt him down."

He drew the radio from his belt.

"Lyvri," he said, trying to speak evenly over his furiously-working lungs, "Lyvri we need you to spot one of them. He got... he got one of your people. One of us," he repeated, "We need to know where he is."

There was silence for a moment, then a reply crackled from the wire-mesh speaker.

"I don't see any. Eight came out of the first one, you killed all those. The other landed on the other side of the wreck, they're moving in."

"What?"

"They're still far away from the tents. You have time. But if there's someone shooting at you, he's not down there."

"What about the opposite rim? Anything there?"

"There might be, I –"

There was a sharp crack Peter heard simultaneously, faintly over radio, and echoing crisply through the air in the distance.

"He's got a bead on me!" Lyvri cried frantically, "I don't know if I can move anywhere." There was a panic in her voice that unnerved Peter, too; her deadly calm had been shattered.

"Never mind," he replied, "Just stay where you are, keep your head down, kill him if he comes any closer. We're going to move in the shadow of the wreck, get the supplies."

“Okay.”

Peter made to turn off the radio, then stopped himself.

“Wait,” he said.

“What?”

“Get ready. I’m going to distract him.” Peter turned to the others. “When I say, go for the first tents, stay against the wreck, but shoot as you run, at the opposite rim.”

“Tell me when you move,” said Lyvri, her voice steadying somewhat.

Peter paused for a moment, adjusting his grip on his gun, then shouted, “Now!”

They sprang from behind the rocks, peppering the distance cliff with rapid fire. A single bullet sparked off a sheet of metal that had fallen off the crashed ship, spinning it like a flung top. Peter skipped out of the way, running for the tents. They were thirty meters away; it had seemed like so much less behind those rocks. At twenty meters, another bullet skipped off the ground, inches from his foot. At ten meters, he heard a shout of pain. He stopped, turning to grab the fallen man; realizing an instant later the stupid mistake he had made in stopping, staring almost blankly at the distant sniper he could not see. Then there was a shot from behind him. A second later, the radio on his belt fuzzily purred to life.

“Got him.”

Relief swam through Peter. He scooped up the injured man in his arms, and ran for cover.

When he reached Myron, he slid among the gravel, almost falling. He set the wounded man down gently, leaning against the metal walls that sheltered them from the sun. Above him, the great wreck creaked uncertainly. Peter knelt next to him, his knee barely inches from a sharp chunk of metal.

“Shoulder wound,” he said as he examined the man. He reached into his pack and pulled out bandaging and alcohol.

“Hold still,” he said, then poured some alcohol on the wound. The man screamed, but the wind was picking up, rolling over the plateau, blurring out all other noise, and Peter doubted anyone heard. He began to wrap the bandages around the wounded shoulder; it was barely bleeding. The bullet might still be inside, but it would have to wait.

“You’ve still got like eight more coming your way,” Lyvri gurgled over the radio, “No, nine. I can try to pick off a few, but you’ve got to confront them, make them stop moving.”

“Got it,” said Peter. He turned to Myron, “We’ve got to leave him here.”

Myron nodded, and handed the wounded man his handgun.

“Shoot anyone who gets too close. We’ll be back for you.”

The man nodded, then suddenly grimaced with pain. Peter forced himself away from him, to continue along the wreck after the others. Myron took point, his feet clipping fast over the uneven gravel, loosening a stone here or there, or narrowly skipping over a bent beam or cluster of broken glass. Peter followed, the rest of the squad behind.

“Spread out!” Lyvri hissed, “You’re getting close.”

“Spread out!” Peter echoed to the others. They ran for chunks of rock and wreckage, taking cover behind them before peeking out. Peter heard gunfire, and the sound jolted him; he wasn’t ready, he was not even sure his gun was fully loaded. He leaned out to fire, spotted a louse soldier firing at someone else, and lined up the sights carefully. As he squeezed the trigger, the gun clicked anticlimactically.

“Damn it,” he muttered, fumbling with a fresh clip. By the time he had reloaded, and leaned out again, the soldier was gone; but another, crouching behind a cigar-shaped boulder barely ten meters away. In sudden panic, Peter fired wildly, wasting about ten rounds that pinged wildly off the boulder and the side of the ship, before ducking back. A moment later, he leaned back out, but the louse returned fire, driving him back into hiding.

He sat for a second, panting, fear rushing through him. If he couldn’t hold up the flank, they would be hard-pressed to win. They had already lost one man wounded.

A distant, sharp crack threaded through the surrounding cacophony like a needle through cloth. Lyvri was still shooting, but he couldn’t count on her to take this one out. His head swiveled to the side;

and in a split-second, he had an idea.

He swiveled his gun around the corner of the rock, firing at the side of the ship at as shallow of an angle as he could, firing short bursts, shallow dents skittering into being along the hull. One of them had to bounce off just right...

"You got him," Lyvri said over the radio, her voice faint now. But Peter heard her, and peered out to see the louse soldier lying on his back, blood pooling around his chest. He moved up, heading for the boulder. Another louse saw him, the porcine mask swiveling to stare right into his eyes. Peter shot as he ran, a pair of bullets clipping the soldier's stomach and hip, doubling him over. He heard a wet splat; looking down, he saw bloody footprints behind him.

Kneeling behind the boulder, Peter reached for his belt and realized he was out of fresh clips of ammunition. This one would have to do, and it had at best six or seven bullets left. Around him, his comrades were doing well; Lyvri's well-placed rounds had done their job, thinning the louse numbers. Peter heard almost continuous fire; peeking up, he saw a heavy machine gun, on a tripod, placed on a boulder furthest back, manned by two lice, a third covering with an assault rifle. A large chunk of rock sat on the other side, easily five meters tall.

"What the hell is going on behind that rock?" Lyvri demanded. It dawned on Peter that the boulder was blocking her line of fire to the machine gunners that kept the others pinned down. Peter almost smiled; he had advanced further than any of his comrades, and the lice weren't shooting at him. He had a chance.

"I'll take them," he replied, straightening up and aiming. He fired a short burst, maybe two or three bullets, before the gun clicked empty. One of the soldiers manning the machine gun stiffened and fell, but the chattering fire continued, shaving chunks of rock from the boulders Myron and the others hid behind.

"I'm out. I have no ammo."

"What are you going to do then, just sit on your ass?" Lyvri cried, her voice fuzzy.

Peter glanced around, spotting a crude hole gaping in the hull, a few meters away.

"No."

Twenty meters away, Myron ducked back from a fresh hail of bullets.

"We've got to move!" he shouted to the others, "We'll run out of ammo before they do, and they'll tear us to pieces if we keep this up either way!"

He pointed to the two nearest him, a man and a woman, both with thin faces and sandy hair. The thought flashed through his head that they might be siblings, but it was lost in the tumult of his mind as he shouted to the others.

"Everyone but these two, give us suppressing on my mark. I'm going to try to move up along the left flank. Peter has the right, we'll try to take down that gun! Ready?"

Without checking to see if they were listening, or even if the other two were following, Myron sprinted out from the boulder he'd hidden behind, to a long, thick beam of metal he had already been eying for several minutes. He ducked down behind it, and began to belly-crawl around its length, the rough gravel scraping at his stomach even through his thick jacket. He glanced behind him; the other two were crawling along with him, terror evident on their faces.

It was at most forty meters, but it felt like a mile. His thighs and stomach were raw by the time he got up, now among the burnt-out lattice of one of the *Wrangler's* wings, shreds of cloth hanging from the beams like moss from a willow tree, and the edges of the rusted beams charred. He moved quickly, relying more on speed than stealth. He skittered across a pair of rocks; the louse with the assault rifle turned, barely eight paces away, and fired. Myron threw himself to the ground, and heard a grunt of pain from behind him. He straightened up, and fired six rounds into the soldier's chest, each one jolting him back like a string had been yanked. Before he hit the ground, Myron turned to the other louse, who had already withdrawn from the submachine gun, and was holding a shotgun, the barrel swiveling fast.

Myron fired twice, missed, then a sharp click sent a jolt of panic through him. He dropped the gun, reached for his belt, feeling for his pistol, finding nothing. The memory of handing it to the wounded man they'd left further back occurred to him as the louse aimed carefully at Myron, and blood suddenly pounded furiously in his ears, blocking out all other sound.

A dull snap, sounding as though it had been heard from underwater, sprayed the louse's face mask with blood, knocking him back against the machine gun. Myron turned, feeling light-headed. The sandy-haired woman lowered her rifle slowly, the man lying on his back beside her, a brilliant red stain spreading across his chest. She followed Myron's gaze down to him, and then screamed.

Within the empty corridors of the ruined ship, Peter found some solace from the constant noise that hammered at his eardrums. The faint, mosquito-like whine of tinnitus teased his ears, only heightening his tension as he made his way through the corridor.

Echoes reached his ears, their sources mysterious, but Peter assumed the ship was settling, and that the scratching and clanging came from pieces of metal scraping against one another. He hopped nimbly over an overturned desk, trying to ignore the dark stains on the wall. Without a flashlight, he couldn't know for sure anyway.

Thirty meters along, he began looking for an opening, branching off from the skewed hallway into a small tool room. Here there were lockers full of shovels, hoes, saws, hammers; tools that would be essential to surviving here. But there was also a window, and Orion rushed to it. Peering out the dusty, cracked glass, he saw Myron's soldiers advancing forward. They had won without him. Peter turned back to the tool closet.

A scrabbling sound outside alerted him; he spun around, Quicksilver in his hand just as a gunpod came through the door, its gun swiveling around curiously.

Peter froze. The thing could easily detect him if he moved. Instead, he watched it slowly begin to advance into the room, claws digging among the paper and garbage among the ground. An itch sprang to life across Peter's arm, and it twitched, but he forced himself not to move any more.

The thing came to the window, the gun quivering as it lined up its sights on someone out there. Peter sprang into action, slashing at a leg. It snapped almost like bamboo, a pastel green fluid dripping its thick, viscous droplets onto his wrist. The gunpod screeched, losing its balance on the uneven floor, falling to the ground, firing wildly. Peter evaded the flailing gun barrel as the bullets shattered the window and sent shreds of paper aloft. He wrapped his arm around the gunpod's body, and plunged quicksilver into the thing's single black eye. It stiffened, then went limp.

As he straightened up, Peter realized someone was screaming outside. A cold chill ran through him; it didn't sound like Myron, of course, but what if it was Emily, and they had found her, and she was dying? He wanted to climb through the window and find her, now.

He groped at the tools, tossing them through the window in bundles, before slithering through himself, ignoring the pinpricks of broken glass scratching eagerly at his stomach. On the other side, he touched his feet to the gravel carefully, not wanting to step on the tools, then took off toward the screaming, praying as he ran that it wasn't Emily, that it was someone else.

Under the burnt-out frame of one of the *Wrangler's* small wings, lay one of the men who had accompanied them. The woman next to him, looking uncannily like him, wailed in grief, her face hidden by her hands, and by her dead brother's chest. Peter wanted to avert his eyes, but he could not.

"You all clear down there?" the radio crackled from his belt.

"Yeah. Thanks, Lyvri."

"Get your people and get back here. The Dhomezi are not slow to retaliate."

"I know."

He motioned to Myron.

"We've got to find Em," he said, "And the others."

Myron sighed, still watching the sobbing woman.

“Yeah. Let's go.”

They found them further around the *Wrangler's* wreck, huddling under a hunk of metal.

“We left the tents,” said the female doctor Peter recognized from before, “I saw the ships land, I thought they were ... I thought they were going to find us there. So I moved everyone here,” she said hastily, “I hope I didn't aggravate any injuries. I don't think I did. But I had to move them, or the lice would have killed them.”

“Where's Emily?” said Peter.

“She's asleep. But she's fine. We have to move everyone quickly.”

Peter glanced around at the stretchers; at least twenty.

“There are only a few of us...”

“Well what do you want me to do, draw straws?” the woman said, her hair hanging lankly over her eyes as she rose to face him. “If we can't take them all back, we'll just move them further into the wreck and wait for a better opportunity.”

“There's not going to be a better opportunity,” said Peter, “The lice are going to surround the wreck and clean it out. They'll stamp us out like bugs if we stay here.”

All the woman offered was a helpless shrug.

“What's your name?” Peter demanded.

“Thriya Kellen,” the doctor said.

“All right, Thriya, well I see one of two options. Either get the patients ready to move, or sit here so we can all be shot by the lice. Up to you.”

Thriya glared at him, before busying herself with the stretchers. Peter reached for his radio.

“Lyvri, we've got a bit of a problem.”

“You're telling me,” said Lyvri, “There's ships landing everywhere. *I'm* going to be lucky to get out of here alive, let alone you – ”

“I know that, I know that,” said Peter, “We need another way out.”

“Hmm,” she said. The tranquility in her voice infuriated Peter, but he controlled himself.

“We need something, fast!”

“You might be able to get to one of the caves nearby.”

“Caves?”

“You think we go through this all the time? Hell, no. There's a whole system of tunnels and caves going under the desert. Move through the wreck, to the other side, there ought to be an entrance somewhere.”

“Somewhere”? Damn it, Lyvri, I know we – ”

“Just do it! They're moving in on you!”

“Where – ” Peter began, but he was cut off by the crackling of gunfire over the radio, and Lyvri's scream of surprise.

“Lyvri!” Peter shouted into the radio. All he could hear now, was the sound of footsteps, and wind, and ratcheting gunfire. He shook his head, switching the radio off.

“We've got to go through the ship,” he said to Myron, who was watching Thriya preparing the stretchers to move, “Lyvri said there's a cave entrance on the other side.”

“So I heard,” said Myron.

“What's the problem?”

“Well,” Myron said, turning to Peter, then back to the stretchers, “There are twenty patients, and barely half a dozen of us.”

“We'll move them a few at a time,” said Peter.

Myron just looked at him.

“We have to do something, Myron!” Peter roared. He turned to the others, “All right! Come on! Grab the first few stretchers, we'll move them through the ship, then come back for the rest.”

"Who's going to guard the ones we leave here?" Thriya asked. Peter looked at her, paused for a moment, before reaching for his belt and drawing out his sidearm.

"You are," he said, pressing the pistol into her hand. She looked bewildered, but Peter ignored her, tromping past her to where the stretchers were laid out. He found Emily, on her back, a bit of dust on her face. Across from him, Myron nodded, and they stooped to lift it. Around them, the others grabbed two other stretchers, and began into the wreckage of the ship.

It had broken open against the stone, large pieces of the hull sheared away. In some places, Peter walked on the ground; on others, on tilted metal grates partially embedded in the rock from the sheer force of impact. Every now and then he felt as though he were going to lose his footing; with a stab of panic, he righted himself. He would not drop Emily.

At last they made it to the other side, to a small area sheltered by rocks. A flat plateau descended in steps, one every thirty meters or so, until the bottom one, at least three hundred meters away, where a pair of louse landing craft sat, black dots clustering around them, but moving away, growing closer ...

"Hurry, let's go back for the next group," said Peter.

"Who's going to guard them?" said one of the others.

There was a moment of silence.

"No one," said Peter, "There's no time."

He led them back, sprinting over the scattered debris in the wrecked ship's dim, cavernous interior. Guilt washed through him at leaving Emily. He thought of Lyvri; on the run, possibly dead. Probably dead. She had barely known them.

When they returned, Thriya still stood guard, her hands shaking.

"What?" Peter whispered.

"Them," she said, "The lice. They came by here, just a minute ago."

Peter shook his head.

"Come on!" he hissed to the others, "Grab another three."

The second journey went more smoothly. Peter's eyes had acclimated to the dark, and he stepped nimbly over the rubble, avoiding the jagged strips of twisted metal that seemed to stick out everywhere. Emily and the others still lay unharmed when they reemerged by the rocks; the sight of her heartened Peter. They began back again.

Halfway back, a bundle of wires caught Peter's foot, dumping him onto his hands and knees. As Myron helped him to his feet, a sudden burst of gunfire sounded from across the wreck. Myron turned to him.

"Go!" Peter shouted. And they ran, unslinging their weapons as they ran.

A louse soldier came into view, kneeling behind a rock, not far from where Thriya was supposed to be, guarding the stretchers. Peter, Myron, and the other four opened up simultaneously, the lone louse crumpling under a hail of bullets.

Two more waited around the corner. Peter shot one in the chest; the other raised its submachine gun, just as Peter's ran empty, with a click of finality. A sudden thrill of terror tore through Peter's chest.

Then the louse's head jerked forward, its mask shattered, falling to the ground with a gory hole in its face. Thriya stood there, holding Peter's sidearm aloft in both hands. Her grip quivered as she lowered the weapon.

"Thanks," Peter nodded, feeling the adrenaline slowly fade.

"You're welcome," she managed shakily.

"Let's go!" said Myron, "Grab a third group, let's head for the other side."

"No," said Peter, "They found us here, it's not safe now. We've got to move them all further in first. Otherwise we won't come back for a fourth group."

Myron paused for a moment, before agreeing.

They moved the remaining stretchers to a small alcove a few meters inside the wreck, tucked out of sight. Oil dripped from somewhere above, splattering the ground next to where Thriya crouched now,

still holding the pistol Peter had given her.

Peter watched her as they drew away, with a third group of stretchers, fearing he might come back to find her dead. But she alive for a fourth, then a fifth, then a sixth group. When they returned for the sixth time, there were only two stretchers left.

"You're coming with us this time," said Peter to Thriya. But her eyes were lost, gazing out at the light outside.

"They've been so quiet," she said, "It's like they're sneaking up on us."

"Hope not," said Peter, brushing away the ominous thought, "Come on."

Back at the rocks, staring at the twenty meter gulf of open space between where they huddled in safety, and where the true refuge of the cave lay, Peter felt as though the worst was yet to come.

"Who's going first?" Myron asked, pushing new shells into his shotgun.

"We are," said Peter, "We move these into the cave, then come back and get the others." He turned to Thriya, and handed her his submachine gun, pulling the sidearm from her grasp. She gulped.

"You cover us. You see anyone shooting at us, shoot back. Try to keep them off of us until we can get the stretchers safely inside."

She looked fearfully at him.

"Got it?"

She nodded hastily.

"Good." He went to where Myron and the others were lifting stretchers. He saw Myron wrapping his fingers around the grips on Emily's stretcher.

"No!" he said.

"What?"

"Not... not Emily. Not yet."

"Why?"

Peter sighed.

"If this doesn't work, I don't ... I don't want it to be her."

"So you want it to be someone else instead – "

"If you had a wife, you would understand!" Peter growled.

Myron glared at him a second longer, before shaking his head and grabbing another stretcher. Fear washed through Peter; if something went wrong, if they died, it was his fault for putting them out first. But if he took Emily out first, it would be his fault if she died. Better Emily survive than the others. It was wrong, but it was true.

The submachine gun quivered in Thriya's grip as they dashed out from the rocks, veering for the cave. Nothing yet. Relief began to wash through Peter.

Then a single crack of gunfire sounded, and one of the men behind Peter and Myron, carrying the other stretcher, cried out in pain, and collapsed to his knees, a crimson stain spreading across his chest as he fell forward, a shocked expression gripping his face.

"Shit!" Myron shouted, "They've got a sniper somewhere, they've got a sniper!" He nearly overturned the stretcher they carried as they ran. The other man desperately tried to drag the stretcher along singlehandedly, with a second crack, another bullet bit into him and flung him to the ground.

Peter ran for the cave, now barely ten meters away, but so much farther within the space of time it took to twist the bolt and reload another bullet. Wherever the sniper was, he must have had a limited range of view, because Peter did not hear another gunshot.

They almost flung themselves into the cave entrance, but instead set the stretcher down near the wall. Further in, the passage sloped downward, gently enough to be walkable, but enough to be certain that it descended deep underground.

He thought of Lyvri again, and the thought of her death hit him like a punch in the gut. As he turned back to the bright world outside, his heart began to pulse like beating wings, furiously. He could

barely feel his hands.

Carefully, he drew out his sidearm, and slid out the clip. Eight bullets. A pistol would do nothing at the range a sniper would be shooting from. They would sitting ducks.

He turned back to the cave. Here it was safe. They could just turn around, make their way deeper into the cave. His conscience could allow it.

No, Emily was still back there. The others, too.

"When I say go," he muttered to Myron, "You run out first. I'll follow. Zig-zag, stop randomly, anything to throw off his shot. You move at one speed, he'll line you up, lead you, pick you off. You've got to be as confusing as possible."

"You cannot be fucking serious," Myron growled, his eyes wild and his teeth gritted.

"I am! We have to get the others."

"They're screwed," Myron spat, "We got one out here, I'm not sticking my head back out there."

"Fine," said Peter, "At least go to get the stretcher they dropped."

Myron glared at him.

"You're insane. Goddamn insane."

"Yeah, sure," said Peter, "Just do it. When I say go."

There was a beat as a Peter peered out into the light, his eyes squinting to adjust, sizing up his surroundings.

"Go!"

Myron dashed out into the light, skipping from side to side almost comically. Peter followed, trying to copy him, at the same time his eyes scanning the distant bluffs, the pieces of the towering wreckage, in an effort to try to find the sniper. Whatever good that would do.

The first shot came right as Myron reached the stretcher, and its two fallen carriers. Myron yelped; for a second, Peter thought he had been hit, before he saw the bullet had struck the wounded person on the stretcher, whoever it was.

"Go for the rocks!" shouted Peter. He thought he had seen something; but it could only have been a glint off of the hull. Or could it?

Another gunshot, spattering rock barely a meter in front of Peter. He wove back and forth, his legs pumping, his lungs racing.

Myron reached the cover of the rocks first, Peter barely five meters behind him. Then something grabbed his arm, flinging him to the ground. Peter cried out as a sharp sting burst to life in his shoulder.

"No!" he growled, staggering to his feet, but falling again onto his back.

"No!" he shouted, yanking the sidearm from his belt, bringing it to bear, firing one, two, three shots at the distant glinting, from the top of the wreckage, where a crumpled bow in the ships metal formed a perfect little balcony...

The gun jerked back again and again, before hurling itself from Peter's weakened grip. He struggled to get up; then two strong arms reached around his shoulder, dragging him away.

In the shade of the rocks, the other stretchers still laying there, Peter felt like passing out. A warm fluid swam in his forehead.

"You're good," said Myron, setting him down against the rocks, "You're good."

"He didn't shoot."

"Maybe he missed."

"He didn't shoot!"

Thriya still stood, cautiously watching.

"What do we do now?" she said.

"There's got to be a reason he hesitated," said Peter.

"Like what?" said Myron.

"Maybe he thought he'd draw us back out, thinking he was dead."

"The lice aren't that cunning."

“We're in a different place! Thousands and thousands of kilometers away! How do we know?”

Myron shook his head.

“There's no way,” he said.

“What, you think I somehow hit?”

“Maybe!” said Myron, “But it sounds a hell of a lot more likely than one having mercy on us. We know better than that! We both –”

“I know we know!” Peter shouted, “But that one could be out there tricking us. It's not mercy, it's playing with us!”

“Only one way to find out,” said Myron, carefully bending down to lift Emily's body. He draped it over his shoulder, her arms dangling limply, her hair draping down his back.

“No. Not with Emily.”

“It's dead! He's dead, Peter. We're wasting time. The other lice are probably not far off.”

As he spoke, Peter heard a sudden rough clank from behind Myron, in the darkness of the wreckage. A warm trickle ran down his spine.

“Go!” he shouted to Myron, “Go, go!”

Myron sprinted back out into the sun, still carrying Emily. Peter turned to Thriya.

“Give me the other gun.”

She handed it over.

“Grab one of them, follow Myron to the caves. Don't come back. Make sure he doesn't come back.”

“What about the others?” she whispered fearfully.

“We can't do anything now. Just go.”

She carefully lifted one of the unconscious bodies onto her shoulder. She was not as strong as Myron, but she was strong enough, and she followed him at a slower, but even pace.

Peter turned back to the darkness, setting his jaw. He moved over against the hull, flattening himself against the wall, tense and ready. He heard gentle, crunching footsteps. They were there, he just had to wait.

A pair of red goggles loomed out of the darkness. Peter fired, and they flashed, then disappeared. A moment of silence, then the air came alive with automatic fire, bullets screeching past Peter. He fired back, retreating to where the stretchers lay, scooping up one of the bodies, and backpedaling, away from the rocks, into the sun.

The lice emerged from the darkness before he made it ten meters. Seven of them. Without a second of hesitation, they opened fire. Peter ran; a series of solid punches slammed into him, nearly knocking him over, but he kept running, turning and firing back, a long chattering stream of bullets that only ended when the submachine gun ran out of bullets.

He flung it away, drawing out his sidearm, firing as he ran. A wet sensation stuck to his leg; looking down, he realized the unconscious man he carried was riddled with bullet holes. The stubby, slow bullets the lice used had slowed down quickly in his body, and had not made it through.

Peter realized the man was dead. He had saved Peter's life, posthumously.

He let the body slip to the ground, raising his pistol, taking careful aim, and firing a single shot. One of the louse soldiers jerked back, and began to fall. Peter did not dare to shoot anymore, instead he sprinted for the cave as fast as he could.

It was only in its chill darkness that he finally allowed himself to slow, where Myron and Thriya waited with Emily, and the two other patients they had been lucky to save.

The lice had moved out from the rocks now, into the open sun, advancing confidently down the slope toward the cave. Myron opened fire with his shotgun, firing shell after shell, but the lice advanced, heedlessly, spraying the cave opening with automatic fire. Bullet pinged off the walls, chipping stone. Thriya ducked down with a shriek. Peter instinctively crouched near Emily's limp form, propped against the wall, her head hanging to the side, her neck exposed.

"Stop shooting!" he shouted to Myron, "Let's get into the caves."

"We don't have a flashlight!" Myron cried.

"You don't," Thriya muttered, pulling a small one from her pocket, "I had to search the wreck for survivors. It was dark."

"They're still coming!" Myron shouted, "Those bastards can see in the dark! We can't!"

A crack from outside silenced him. One of the louse soldiers fell to the ground.

"That wasn't us," said Myron.

Another shot, another crumpled. The other noticed now, spreading out, looking around fearfully. A third shot missed; Peter saw a rock shatter from the impact, but a fourth hit home, splitting a louse soldier's helmet as it backpedaled.

"Whoever it is, they've got us covered for now, let's get into the cave," said Peter.

"Everyone grab someone," said Thriya, slinging one of the bodies over her shoulder. Peter grabbed Emily, relief flooding through him as he felt her warm skin. Myron lifted the last one, and followed Peter as Thriya led them both into the cave, the white beam of her flashlight scanning the damp walls.

The cave descended evenly for at least half a kilometer. At first, fear, fear that the lice would follow them down here, held them, but before long, that danger seemed less and less present, compared to the danger of getting lost in the caves.

"I have no idea where we're going," said Thriya, "Are you sure Lyvri said to follow these caves?"

"Yeah," said Peter.

"Anything else?" Thriya's impatient tone annoyed him, but he held it in. They were all frustrated.

"No."

"Great."

The passageway kept going. At one point, there was a grinding sound, and the clattering of scattered gravel.

"Damn it!" Myron grunted.

"You okay?" said Peter.

"Yeah."

Eventually, Thriya's light began to reflect off of something more distant, then not at all, before she scanned the light down to reveal they had reached a wide, circular chamber, the floor here thick with stalagmites.

Something chittered from above. There was a sharp click from Myron, and the flashlight turned to him. He aimed his shotgun toward the ceiling, looking from side to side. The light drew upward, onto the ceiling, moving around, until it fell on a small winged creature, wringing its two tiny claws, its beady eyes glinting in the dark.

"It's a bat," said Peter.

"It's gonna learn about skeet-shooting if it startles me again," said Myron darkly. Peter chuckled. They continued on.

At the other end of the chamber, they heard a crunch of gravel from somewhere ahead. Peter froze; they were footsteps.

Thriya shone her light around, looking for the source, but Peter saw it first, behind the other two, a pair of crimson eyes hovering in the blackness.

Then Myron saw it too.

"Don't move!" he shouted, raising his shotgun again.

"Relax," said a familiar voice, and as Thriya brought the flashlight around again, they saw Lyvri standing, a pair of stolen louse goggles wrapped around her face, her rifle at her side, a long scratch on her cheek.

Peter almost hugged her, but Emily's body was heavy on his shoulders, and he could not bear risking to drop her.

"Who'd you get out?" said Lyvri, approaching them.

"Em, a couple others, and our doctor," said Peter, motioning to Thriya.

"Em'?" said Lyvri.

"Emily. My wife."

"What about the others? I thought you said there were twenty or so."

Peter shook his head.

"The lice, they ... we couldn't go back."

Lyvri put a hand on his shoulder, her red eyes looking into his, a sympathetic grimace beneath them.

"I hear you."

"How far back to where we were? The other cave?" said Myron.

"About an hour," said Lyvri, "We follow this cave back to a canyon, then follow the canyon along back to the other cave. Simple enough for you?" she said, the hint of a grin creeping onto her face.

"Yeah, whatever," said Myron.

They followed Lyvri now, Thriya right behind her, shining the light about for the benefit of those not wearing louse goggles.

Lyvri still wore them even when they emerged into the sun.

"So, how did you beat them?" Peter asked her, "The ones who attacked you on the cliff. On the radio. I thought –"

"I ran like hell," said Lyvri bitterly, "I'm pretty used to that. Pretty much all of us are, here."

"Who are you?" Peter asked.

"Us? Oh, the 'Denarra' or something like that. That's what the country here was called, years ago, before Macalavay came."

"Macalavay?"

She gestured off into the distance. The cliff walls obscured their view, but a memory swam back to Peter, of the night before, laying on his back, seeing the distant orange lights.

"The fortress?"

"Yeah."

"Macalavay?"

"That's the name it's always had," said Lyvri, shrugging.

A distant boom echoed from the far distance.

"Denarra?"

"Forget it," she spat, "It's not who we are anymore. Goddamn Dhomezi blasted the country into dust two hundred years ago. Yyrick thinks keeping the name is like a fucking memorial or something."

As they continued, Emily's weight began to wear against his shoulder. The exertion of the battle, both mental and physical, took its toll, slowing his pace. The sun sank lower in the sky, a swollen, glowing tangerine straining to burst through the gathering clouds.

The bend in the canyon stood out in Peter's mind; it looked familiar. Lyvri began up the short slope to the cave they had entered hours ago, full of tentative fear. Now, a similar feeling, with more finality, sank in.

Myron and Thriya followed, sending torrents of gravel tumbling away behind their weary footsteps. Peter struggled not to slip, at last reaching the top, his knees sore from the exertion.

Inside, warm lavender light lit the roomy chambers in the cave. Whereas before, it had been filled with impenetrable darkness, now it was easily navigable. They followed Lyvri through the twisting hallways, past side-chambers with curtains hanging over the entrances, past rooms with stone tables and alcoves full of tools or crates. A few men and women dressed similarly to Lyvri sat cross-legged on the

floor in one of them; Peter slowed, hoping to catch a glimpse of what they were doing. But ahead, the others had already disappeared around a corner, and Peter had to hurry to catch up.

They passed into a darker hallway, with fewer rooms. Peter saw no one else here. At the end of the hallway, Lyvri stopped.

"These will be your rooms," she said, "At least until we can find a better place for you. You can join us for dinner in the center chambers. Just follow the others there."

"You're letting us live here?"

Lyvri sighed.

"Yyrick will decide your fate for certain. Were it up to me..." she trailed off.

"What?" grunted Myron.

"I'd keep you," she said, looking at Peter, "You can fight. You proved that today, that you can fight as well as any of our soldiers. We need that, we need more fighters. They tend to... run out, after a while."

Her eyes ran along the walls, sadly.

"It will be a couple of hours until dinner. I have other matters to attend; telling Yyrick what happened, for instance." She pushed her way past them.

"Oh, another thing," said Lyvri, pausing and turning, "I will need your weapons. To keep in the armory. Merely a matter of security."

"No," growled Myron.

"Yes," said Peter, with a meaningful look at Myron. He reached for his belt and handed over his sidearm. Myron glared at Lyvri for a moment, his body rigid, before surrendering his shotgun.

"Thanks," said Lyvri. Peter nodded back to her, before turning to the curtains before them. He pushed through the first, to find a small room with a double bed, a chest of drawers, and a pair of small lamps. Immediately, he went to the bed, and lowered Emily's limp form onto it.

Her pallid face, tinted purple by the dull light, twitched as he stroked her cheek gently, worriedly, sitting beside her. The bandages on her hip and shoulder made her look swollen, and her lip occasionally quivered, fearfully. She was not the warm, loving Emily he had always sought comfort in. She was sick, wounded, dying Emily, and now she needed him the way he had needed her.

He lay his head on her chest, his arms around her back, before rolling over and carefully drawing her closer to him. They had come so far, fought for so many years, only to be shot down again, to crash barely a few miles from another Woobarren. Only for Emily to be hurt, and most of his people dead. Living in a cold cave, with all their effort for nothing.

How many were there? Macalavay, this one was called? Their ships had wandered just a few weeks from Woobarren, how had they found another one already? Question after question rose inside of Peter, overwhelming him.

He wondered if any of the other ships had made it here. The *Wrangler* could not have been the only survivor. But there would have been other smoke plumes, other signs. As he lay, he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper inside himself. They had fought a hopeless war for so long, finally risen to victory, that the plunge back into defeat was crippling. Peter curled against her tighter, hoping to bury himself in her, in oblivion.

The minutes passed in tense but resigned speculation, until he heard the curtains brushing by the door. He looked up, seeing Lyvri standing there.

"It's probably a good time to get some food," she said.

"Now?" Emily's warmth faded when he pulled away.

"Now."

"Okay," said Peter, getting up slowly. He followed her out the door. A few others wandered through the crude, winding hallways. For living in a glorified cave, they seemed remarkably healthy. But then, they were soldiers mostly. They would have to be.

He caught some strange looks from those around him. But that was to be expected. It probably

wasn't every day that a ship crashed nearby, full of newcomers. At least, hopefully it wasn't every day.

Lyvri led him to an amphitheater-like room, where stepped stone formed crude benches, where actual chairs sat strewn in the center, where a crowd of people, dressed mostly in black and brown, ate busily, their collective conversations overrunning each other into a calming babble. Peter realized how much he had missed the sounds of people's voices. Not just one or two, but many. A reminder that he was not alone.

He sat down on one of the benches, a few feet away from the nearest group, setting his elbows on his knees, watching. He wondered how many people lived in this cave. Where these caves went. Lyvri's mind seemed to have cataloged them pretty well.

She sat down next to him, holding two plates of stew. She handed one to him.

"Thanks," said Peter, "Got no one else to sit with?"

Lyvri started eating.

"No friends? Boyfriend?"

She turned to him, her hawkish eyes glaring.

"It's not wise to get attached to anyone here," she said, "People die."

"Well, okay," said Peter, the grin disappearing from his face. He picked at the stew. Some sort of vegetables. "So, those tunnels. How many are there?"

"Hundreds," said Lyvri, "Kilometers long, in many places. We and the other cells have weapon caches everywhere."

"What kind of weapon caches?"

She looked at him suspiciously for a moment.

"Guns. Rockets," she said, "A few tanks, but not here."

"Spears?"

She finally smiled.

"No."

"So where did you get it all?"

"We've had it for years. Ever since they forced us down here, into the caves and the cracks. Used to be mines, or subway tunnels. Now its home."

Peter looked around the walls. He saw none of the trappings of a mining tunnel, or the smooth edges of a subway tunnel. There had been some in the valley, back in Nalio; clean, crisp, tiled things. Nothing like the grimy cave he sat in now.

"Who's in charge? Yyrick?"

"Here. But further along the canyon there's a larger cave system. In some old uranium mines. Don't worry," she said, seeing Peter's face twitch, "It's not radioactive anymore. But it's where the power cells are stored. And there's a saltpeter mine not far away, so we can keep getting gunpowder. At least until the Dhomezi put some effort into clearing us out of there."

"Have they?"

She grinned.

"Occasionally. But we beat them every time."

Peter returned her smile.

"How?"

"The caves. Their bombs can't penetrate that far down. At least not yet. So we draw them into the caves, confuse them, fight them in tight quarters where they can't overwhelm us. They could nuke us, I suppose, but they don't want to. I think they know there are still resources down here, and they don't want to risk ruining them."

Peter chewed on the words as he chewed on his food.

"You said their bombs can't penetrate ... yet?"

Lyvri's lips thinned.

"Well, that's the thing. The Dhomezi might not be much for individual achievement, but they've

got brains somewhere. They've developed some kind of missile, rams itself into the ground at high speed. Like, crazy high. Rail gun high. Burrows down about a hundred meters, then blows up. Saves them from having to nuke anything. Precision strike.”

“I assume that means they've used it already...”

“Yeah,” said Lyvri, sighing, “Couple weeks ago, cave about fifty klicks from Macalavay. Took out about three hundred soldiers. One of my friends, too.”

A pause.

“I'm sorry,” Peter muttered.

She shook her head.

“Doesn't matter. Sorry can't help her now,” she said, “But thanks.”

She went back to her food; Peter was almost finished. The food had surprised him, pleasantly. He hadn't tasted anything like it since they had left Woobarren.

“So are we next?” he asked, but stopped at the expression on Lyvri's face. The room had grown quiet, and Peter turned to see Yyrick, accompanied by two equally-large men, standing in the center of the chamber, their pale faces dimly lit by the fluttering electric light.

“Fighters, and citizens,” Yyrick announced, “We've ourselves some visitors. Survivors from a cruiser crash. They'll be staying here until they are strong enough to find their own way. I want them to feel welcome until then.”

“You're kicking us out?” came a loud voice from across the chamber. It was Myron. Peter winced, anticipating conflict.

Yyrick wheeled around to face Myron, who had risen. Peter shook his head desperately, trying to warn him off, but Myron did not see him.

“When you have had adequate time to heal your wounds, then, yes, we will – ”

“Kick us out to die in the desert?” Myron growled.

“We cannot afford to take care of any more people,” said Yyrick, “It is difficult enough for us to care for our noncombatants, and children.”

“We're 'noncombatants,' eh?” said Myron. He sprang forward before Peter could say anything. A woman shrieked as Yyrick's two escorts moved to intercept him. Myron swept the feet out from under the first, who landed hard on the stone floor, and shoved the second hard. As he came back, Myron grabbed him by the shoulders and flung him to the ground. He rolled over and over, coming to a rest barely a meter from Peter's feet.

Yyrick raised his arm to block Myron, but Myron simply grabbed him, jammed a knee into Yyrick's stomach, and doubled him over, letting him stagger to the floor. Without a second's hesitation, Myron was on him, his forearm across Yyrick's throat like a bar, applying pressure.

“Are we 'noncombatants' now, asshole?”

Even from across the chamber, Peter could see the fury contorting Yyrick's face. He held his breath. The next few seconds would determine whether they were kept or left. Or, more likely at this point, executed..

The two groaning escorts slowly clambered to his feet. Myron got up, and offered Yyrick a hand. He accepted it, and Myron hauled the large man to his feet. Peter relaxed a little.

“We can fight,” said Myron, “We brought our own wounded back, didn't we? And anyone who's not a soldier, can farm, or make weapons, or learn how to do something else.”

Yyrick groaned, still reeling from Myron's fierce blows.

“Where did you come from?” he said, wincing as he moved.

“A different part of the same damned war.”

Beside him, Lyvri's mouth hung agape.

“He's good,” Peter muttered to her. She nodded, still staring.

Yyrick never officially accepted the wayward Woobarren whos into the caves, but Myron violent

example seemed to have cemented it solidly enough. The next day, at breakfast, the newcomers were given jobs. Peter was assigned to making ammunition.

"It's easy," said Lyvri, as she led him through the cave passages, "Even kind of fun. I'll show you." She had claimed to be a practiced hand at this.

Left, right, another left, down a short staircase, then another right... Peter quickly surrendered all hope of learning his way around. He knew a confusing maze gave defenders an advantage in battle, but what was the point if they got lost, too?

The ammunition stores sat at the end of a particularly long tunnel, at least thirty meters, and alone. It made sense; were it to go off, it would be important that it not take the rest of the cave complex down with it.

"You'll be measuring, I'll be mixing. We need eighty magazines of six-twelve by forty-five."

"CK-Ms?" Peter asked.

"Why, you've got something better?" she asked. Then she saw his expression, and grinned, "Yeah, that's what we've got mostly. Few KF-45s, but they have too much kick for a firefight. We save their ammo for the long rifles, like the Grasshoppers." Her grin faded. "You know your guns pretty well," she said, nodding respectfully.

"Necessity, nothing else," said Peter. Lyvri smiled knowingly.

"Oh, so you're one of those types," she said, "You can't tell me you don't hate the bastards."

"I do," said Peter, "But... I'd just as soon leave them alone. Forget about it."

"Where did you *actually* come from?" Lyvri asked, curiously.

"A valley," he said, "Far away. But that was years ago."

"You were born there?" she asked, brushing aside the curtain that led to the ammunition room. It seems too frail a cover, for a room so full of explosive potential. The sight of the room brushed Lyvri's words from Peter's mind. Crates, stacked from floor to ceiling. One was open, half full, holding curved magazines in neat rows. A device that resembled a sewing machine with a funnel set in the top, sat on a sturdy table across the room, as did a clay jar that reminded Peter of a wastebasket.

"That's for heating the lead. Sometimes we get louse bullets, and have to re-size them."

"Where do you get them from?"

"Bullets that miss us. Bullets they pull out during surgery. Bullets we –"

"You *use* those?" said Peter incredulously. Lyvri shrugged.

"Waste not, want not," she said sanctimoniously. Peter could not tell if she was serious or not. She crossed the room, taking a seat behind the strange machine.

"A man named Hennitt invented it for us a few years ago. He was a whiz with machines. Too bad he always wanted to go out fighting with us. Stupid risk. Now we're stuck with one of these damned things, where we could have had more."

"No one else could figure out how to make it?"

"Nope. Cause we're a bunch of idiots," she said, already busy fiddling with the machine.

"What does it do?" Peter asked.

"Crimps the casing to the bullet. And a few other things. If we had factory-made bullets, that'd be one thing, but the only factories left are way off."

Peter nodded, hoping it looked like he was keeping up.

"I'm measuring?"

"Yeah," she said, pointing without looking at a small metal tin with a gritty gray sand Peter's recognized as gunpowder, "Measure it out with the spoon. Make sure you top off each one. Too much won't fit, but not enough and it might not throw the bolt back all the way."

"Okay," said Peter, sitting across from her and beginning to measure uncertainly. The first couple required several retries; by the third he felt as though he knew what he was doing. Or at least he hoped so.

"So you never answered my question. You were born in that valley?"

Peter sighed.

"Yeah. Grew up my whole life not knowing about any of this. Then one day they... came. And we had to run. And before you know it... we're... well, this is how it's been since then."

"You ever wonder why?" she asked, shaking her head a bit, tossing her short hair, flipping her bangs away from her eyes.

"Wonder why what? Why they came? It's because they hate us. They want to kill us."

"There has to be a reason. There must have been something before. A world that didn't have these bastards in it. It can't have been happening forever."

Peter shrugged.

"The only other thing I ever knew was the valley. And it was a lie. Even when I was there, I knew it was a lie, that there was something more. I just never expected... this."

Silence held him over the next three bullets. He grew faster at it.

"You think it'll ever end?" Lyvri asked him, though she could have just as easily been wondering aloud. Peter stopped, and slowly tilted the spoon he held, letting the gunpowder slide back into the tin like sand through an hourglass.

"Someday," he muttered, watching the gunpowder tin blankly.

Lyvri chuckled.

"Someday never comes, does it?"

Peter did not answer.

By lunchtime, they had put together twenty magazines worth of bullets. Peter felt as though he would go blind if he spent another second at it. Lyvri's neck glistened with sweat, even in the dim light they worked in, and her beady eyes betrayed the wear of concentration. But when she turned to him, she smiled.

"Is Emily doing all right?" she asked suddenly.

"Emily?" said Peter, surprised, "Um, yeah. She's fine. Alive, at least. On the mend. Why?"

"Just wondering," said Lyvri, "You two make a cute couple and all. I just wanted to make sure she was pulling through."

"Yeah. She'll be fine."

"Good," said Lyvri, nodding at him with a lukewarm grin. She dropped the bullet into the pail at her feet with a clink, "Well, that's it for now. Time to get some food, take a break."

"All right."

Peter rose uncertainly, and stumbled as he realized his leg had fallen asleep. The weight of the work, which had seemed so simple, took its toll as he began to walk. His legs felt thick and rubbery, and his eyes blurred as they tried to focus on something far away for the first time in several hours.

The meeting chamber was already busy with chatter and eating by the time they arrived. Peter did not see Myron, nor did he see Yyrick. Or Warrick, for that matter. He knew Emily still lay in her bed, in the throes of recovery. His eyes danced around the room, looking for a familiar face, but he saw none. He felt suddenly alone.

Lyvri returned with a plate of food for him.

"Last time I'm getting food for your lazy ass," she teased, sitting down next to him and sliding a spoonful of stew into her mouth.

"Is this what we always eat?" Peter asked.

"Why? It's not good enough for you?" she said. Then she shrugged, "Could be worse. We end up eating trail rations if our supplies get cut off. So don't gripe."

"I wasn't," said Peter, "Just asking."

They kept eating.

"You know, it's not all bad. There's fun around here, from time to time."

"What could be more fun than sitting in a grimy cave all day?"

Lyvri looked vaguely hurt.

“Sorry. What kind of fun?”

“Games. Gambling. Music, from time to time.”

“Great acoustics in here, I would bet.”

She glared at him, then hid a grin, shaking her head.

“You're alright,” she said, “Last boat we rescued were a bunch of the most goddamn uptight, sanctimonious... well, let's just say they were boring as hell.”

“Other ships have landed here?”

“Nine in the last year. I think an old trade route went through here or something. Most of them are from this place called Kamenia. Some old nation built on a mountain, maybe a thousand kilometers away. We've been hoping to get a ship together with enough fuel to pay them a visit, see if they might be interested in the fight. But judging by the assholes we've picked up, it looks like it'd be a waste of gas. And time.”

“Kamenia,” Peter said, a trace of longing in his voice. All at once, he wanted to hear more about all the different nations of whos, all of the places the refugees had come from. But it felt too fast. He had to slow down, and savor it.

Lyvri nodded, turned her gaze away, and continued eating.

“Do they have a fleet?” Peter asked.

“No idea.”

“Well, they had to have something, if you rescued some of them from a crashed ship, right?”

“Probably,” said Lyvri.

Peter paused a second.

“What is it?”

“They died,” she said, “In less than a week, they were all dead. Disease or something. And the ones who lasted longer, were less than worthless in a fight. Broke down and hid, or got pumped full of lead the second they popped their idiot heads up.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” she said bitterly, “If they were some sort of fucking fix-all, don't you think we would have thought of it already?”

Peter stared across the chamber for a second, then nodded.

The chamber began to empty out, as people returned to work. For what had seemed like a grimy group of self-proclaimed resistance fighters, Peter had to admire how busy the place was. Before long, Lyvri stood up, finished; Peter had cleared his plate long ago. He followed her back down the hallways, to the ammunition room, and worked in near-silence for another five hours.

He ate dinner with her, carefully coaxing tales of her childhood out of her as they ate. She had grown up in a village in the forest further out, before the lice bombed it into a smoking ruin, and landed, gunning down any survivors. She had made it to the evacuation cruisers; her parents had not, and she had not seen them since.

Life had been better out there, she said, and as far as she knew, the forest was still thick with lice, battling with what few scraps of who resistance remained out there. She remembered a creek in the woods where she played as a child, a few friends who had long since been scattered to the winds, either dead, or hidden in other caves, or simply lost.

Barely a hint of sadness registered in her voice. Peter wondered if she still cared.

She said that Yyrick was the only person from her youth she still knew. He had been the leader of these caves for six years now. He had taught her to shoot her long rifle with pinpoint accuracy, and had trained many of the others as well. They had carried out a steady stream of raids on the lice out here in the desert, hoping to keep them from cementing their presence too strongly.

“But why?” Peter had asked.

"Because some day, we're going to have a shot. Something's going to happen, and when it does, we'll be ready for it."

"Oh."

"To be honest, what the hell else are we supposed to do?"

Peter could not find words to disagree.

She spoke more of the weapon, the burrowing missile, that was the latest focus of their disruptive efforts. She said they had located the launcher.

"It's not based in Macalavay?" said Peter, feeling strange to be using the fortress's name so easily, as though it had been a part of his life for years. Like Woobarren had been.

"No," said Lyvri, "Macalavay couldn't care less about us. It's like out here, in the desert, we're a whole separate effort. Or maybe, they figure they can lure us out if they put it in the desert, get rid of us that way."

"They must not think much of their missile, then," said Peter. Lyvri grinned.

"Maybe not. But one way or another, that thing can burrow down pretty damn far. Not a lot that we can do if they get it operational. They would still have to find us, but it wouldn't take them that long. Who knows how many troops they have? I'm sure they could just sweep the whole desert, shoot a missile at wherever they lose."

"So... when are we going to go after it. Attack it?"

Lyvri chewed her lip.

"Well, it's pretty well-fortified. We're going to need a lot of soldiers."

"I guess that's why Yyrick let us stay, instead of kicking us out?"

"Part of it," said Lyvri, "How many of them can fight?"

"All of them," said Peter, "They've been doing it for years."

They finished dinner a few minutes later; Peter left for his quarters, exhausted, while Lyvri lingered behind with the others. As he wound through the corridors, Peter heard soft music playing behind him, muffled by the stone. His fingers were numb and chafed, and each time he blinked, he saw the image of the gunpowder measuring cup, pressed firmly on the inside of his eyelids. Hopefully sleep would relieve the aftereffects of work. If not, he would have no choice but to request a different job. It would drive him insane.

He found Emily where he had left her, still unconscious. Thriya had said she should waken in a couple days. He slid in next to her, his arms sliding around her thankfully still-warm body, cheek on the pillow, her head against his chin, slipping into sleep to the distant, echoing chords from the meeting chamber a hundred feet away.

Fortunately, his fingers and eyes felt normal again by the morning, and so he joined Lyvri for breakfast. He felt Emily stirring when he awoke; it filled him with a surge of hope. She did not respond when he shook her shoulder, gently, but he did not care. He walked to the meeting chamber, heartened.

Lyvri sat waiting for him.

"Where's my food?" he asked as he approached.

"Told you I wasn't getting it for you anymore," she muttered.

He turned, and went to where a man and woman were cutting open cans, carefully serving vegetables onto plates. He joined the line, behind a pair of sturdy-looking men, pistols strapped to their sides. Peter felt out of place, but fought the feelings as best he could. He listened to their conversation; gambling, then girls. He did not hear Lyvri's name mentioned.

The line moved quickly, giving Peter little time to hear where their muttering went next. He received his food, and wandered back to his seat with Lyvri.

"Emily's waking up," he said as he began to eat.

"That's good."

"I've been worried about her since... well, since we landed."

"I'm sure she's fine," said Lyvri curtly.

Peter looked at her.

"You okay?"

She turned to him, her bangs hanging lankly in front of her intense eyes.

"Yeah," she said, turning back to her food, "I'm fine. Just tired."

As they continued eating, a scuffle erupted from across the room.

"Get out of here, this is my seat."

One of the large men Peter had stood in line behind towered over a timid-looking woman who sat before him, picking at her food. She shrank from him, then stood up hastily. The man plopped down heavily, laughing.

"That's right, fuck off, crash lander. You can't just have your big guy muscle his way around, and think that buys it from the rest of us."

Peter watched, a sinking feeling creeping into his chest. But then, it wasn't a surprise. It *was* foolish to think Myron's violent display had not left some malcontents.

He got to his feet. Each man had an easy six inches on him, but that had not stopped him before. Besides, this would not be a battle of fists, but of words, and Peter hoped to win.

"Let her have her seat back," said Peter as he approached.

The man cackled. His friend, leaning against the wall a few feet away, spooning food into his mouth, watched in anticipation.

"What the hell are you going to about it?" the man spat at him, "Yyrick might have said –"

"This isn't about Yyrick," Peter said calmly, "This is about you and I."

"Oh, is it?" the man said, a grin spreading across his square chin. He got up, and took a step toward Peter.

"Yeah," said Peter, not budging an inch, "What's your problem with us?"

"Rooners always die," the other man said from a few feet away.

"Rooners?"

"Yeah. Idiots like you who crash here. Trapped. Marooned," said the man in front of Peter, "They all want to reason with us, move in, steal our food, put together a few bullets or a tend a bit of farming. Then they turn out to be worth shit in combat, and end up dead."

"Why do you care, then, if we'll all be dead in a few days anyway?"

"Because I want my damned seat."

The man went to sit, but Peter grabbed his arm. Something flashed in his mind, and he ducked the man's other arm as it flailed over his head. Peter slammed his fist into the soft place between pelvis and ribcage. The man reached to grab him, roaring in frustration, but Peter jammed his foot into the man's ankle, then the back of his knee, staggering him. He dropped to a crouch, flailing wildly. Peter sprang back, keeping his feet.

"Now, I hate to be a rude guest," said Peter in between breaths, "But all these people who crashed, have fought. And survived. Not to mention *destroyed* one of those superfortresses. Seeing as this one is still standing, I don't think you've been that successful."

The man looked up at him, face bent with rage. He sprang at Peter, easily two hundred pounds of airborne fury. Peter sprang out of the way, but the man's hands still caught his foot, twisting him onto the ground. Peter's other foot sprang reflexively into the man's nose, flattening it. His grip weakened.

"Ahh!" he growled in pain, "Damn it!" He rolled away from Peter.

"You don't want to respect us, fine," said Peter, "But at least respect *that*."

He straightened up, looking around the at the others in the room.

"Anyone else got a problem with us?"

Wide eyes greeted him. Beside him, the man staggered to his feet, nose dripping.

"Let the bitch have her seat," he muttered, staggering from the room.

Peter looked around once more, watched the woman sit down again, nodding a thanks to Peter almost imperceptibly. He strode back across the room, and sat next to Lyvri, picking up his plate and resuming eating.

"For the record," muttered Lyvri, as the atmosphere in the room slowly returned to normal, "I've never had a problem with you here."

"You knocked out Myron," said Peter without looking up from his food, "Then you tried to stab me with a spear."

"Well, okay, I didn't after that," she said.

"Right."

She shook her head. Peter smirked.

The thought of Emily awake dragged Peter through the day's work like a tether. He crimped casings, measured powder, pushed finished bullets into their magazines, and thought of her, her hair, her voice, the woman that had kept him going for so many years, when he should have given up.

It seemed strange that she was in her mid-twenties, as was he. Her face had not a single line to it, not a single sign of age. Her smooth skin was as it had been the day he had met her. And her smile, her soft words that calmed him; none of it had changed, even when so much else had.

He was sure it couldn't last much longer. His dreams had been so much more; a family, a life with her, once without the lice, without fighting for acceptance by brutish cave-dwelling soldiers, sliding back to square one after climbing so far, shedding so much blood, so much sweat, so many years off of the precious shortness of life. He longed for a cabin in the woods, where he could raise their children, teach them to hunt, to farm, to live. Chill spring nights with crickets, late summer sunsets, huddling next to the fire in the winter. Watching autumn leaves. The future he had planned, unconsciously, in the valley. A future he had not dared to hope for then. And, now that he had Emily, it seemed as out of reach now as it had back then.

Time was withering her, though her body did not show it yet. It wore at him, too. The dream lived on, but he was not sure he had the strength to sustain it. He needed it now. An escape, somewhere the lice couldn't find them.

For a few minutes, he entertained the thought of stealing a ship, making for the distant hills, far from Macalavay, somewhere in the woods, and living there with her. But it was just a foolish dream; how would he and Emily survive, alone, in the forest?

The presence of two soldiers in the doorway interrupted his thoughts.

"Yyrick would like to see you," said the first.

Peter looked back to Lyvri, who shrugged. He stood up, and walked toward them.

"What does he want?"

"He didn't say. He simply instructed us to retrieve you."

They were tall, broad-shouldered – but, Peter noticed with satisfaction, neither were the men who had tried to intimidate him that morning.

"All right."

"Follow us."

Peter let them lead him down the hallways, across the currently-empty meeting chamber, into a corridor down which Peter had not yet ventured. He passed a room where several soldiers were sitting around talking.

*Why do they get off working?* he wondered, but kept it to himself. Save it for later, as ammunition if either of the two came back for more.

Yyrick's chamber lay at the end of the hall, guarded by a simple curtain. The first soldier brushed it aside, and they filed in, Peter last. He took it as a sign of trust that he had not been surrounded.

He stood before Yyrick, and inclined his head gently. The man's shock of black hair rolled

forward as Yyrick returned the gesture.

"Leave us," he said to the soldiers, who left silently.

"Is this about this morning?" Peter asked as soon as they were gone.

"No pretense with you, is there?" said Yyrick, a hint of refinement behind his booming, gravelly voice, "But yes, partly. And partly about a few other things."

"I'm sorry," said Peter, "What things?"

"Are you their leader?"

It was a straightforward question, yet one Peter could not answer.

"I suppose."

"Hmm," said Yyrick, looking amused, "I guess you take a sort of ... backseat philosophy to leadership then."

"You mean Myron?"

"If that is the name of the man who subdued me, then yes."

"He's as much a leader as I am."

"No," said Yyrick, "You are. I can tell. Your actions betray it."

"It wasn't a secret."

"Forgive me. You weren't very forthcoming about it."

Peter paused, then nodded.

"I suppose," he conceded.

"The thing is, I cannot force my people to accept you completely. I can, however, give you an opportunity to prove yourselves to them."

"We don't need – " Peter began hotly, but Yyrick cut him off.

"To them. For reasons of morale and cohesion. You should understand."

Peter sighed.

"Yes. I understand."

"I assume you don't want any more confrontations like the two that have happened already?"

"You started the first one."

"Well, yes," Yyrick admitted, "I cannot deny that. But we've had little luck with those we've taken in before. And your friend's sudden reaction ... caught me off-guard."

Peter chuckled.

"All right," he said, "What do you propose?"

"Well," said Yyrick, "We have plans to attack a louse missile complex in the next few days, hoping to neutralize a new technology they've gained. A type of missile that – "

"Lyvri's told me this," said Peter.

"Well, did she give you details of the plan?"

"Only that it was well-fortified."

"It is. That's why we need someone to find a way in."

"I think I know where you're going with this."

Yyrick smiled.

"We have little to no air power. That means no reconnaissance planes. But we think there are sewer drains that come out a half-kilometer away from the complex. Honestly, we don't know what they are, only that we spotted them."

"You want us to do something your own soldiers aren't willing to do."

Yyrick frowned.

"You catch on quickly. Yes. Our plan is to lay low in the surrounding rocks, and only attack once we know you're inside. From within, you can attack the missile complex. Even if they come against you in force, that leaves far fewer troops for us to face. One way or another, one group should be able to get close to the missile silo to destroy it."

"Unless the lice have enough troops to stop both groups," said Peter.

"Well, that is a concern," said Yyrick, "This is easily the largest attack we've ever attempted. Before, it was always ambushing fuel trucks, shooting down supply cruisers. Small ones."

"It can't just be a concern. Don't you have artillery or something?"

"A few mortars. Mostly small ones, a few heavy ones. Trust me, we will be using them."

"And what will my people be using?"

"Guns. Grenades. We can give you a decent portion of the demolition sticks. Maybe one or two of my men who can use it."

"What if they're killed?"

Yyrick shook his head.

"You'll have to improvise. Don't your soldiers have experience with explosives?"

"Some do. Some don't."

"Look," said Yyrick, "Twenty caves worth of soldiers will be participating in this attack. The others are mostly larger than us, it's nearly a thousand soldiers. We are offering you and your soldiers a chance at the most glorious part of the assault."

"Or the bloodiest."

Yyrick sighed.

"There is little difference out here," he said, "Look, do you accept or not?"

Peter stared at him for a moment.

"Yes. But it will be up to my soldiers, as well."

"Good," said Yyrick.

"When?"

"Within the week."

"Does Lyvri know how to use the explosives?"

"Fairly well."

"Then I have one condition."

"You want her?"

"So far, she's the one I trust most out of all of you."

Yyrick smiled faintly, and nodded.

"Okay. Fair."

They shook hands.

"I'll be getting back to work, then," said Peter, turning to leave.

"Thank you," said Yyrick.

Peter paused, and turned back.

"You're welcome."

He pushed through the curtain, where the two soldiers waited to escort him back.

They worked through lunch; Lyvri claimed it was urgent that they finish their quota today.

"We can reward ourselves with no work tomorrow, if we finish today," she said.

They talked as they worked, and this time, it was Peter's turn to share. He told her of the valley, but mostly talked about the war at Woobarren, the many people he had known there.

"That must be depressing," she said with a smirk, "Peter Green, once a great war leader, now reduced to sitting in a cave, making bullets."

"A little."

"You could fly, though?"

"In a fighter. Yes."

"I've always wanted to," she said wistfully, dropping another finished bullet into the bucket by her leg with a plink, "What's it like, up in the air?"

"Feels free. Exhilarating. Then the enemy show up, and it's terrifying."

"It must be."

She picked up another of Peter's finished cartridges, and set to work on it.

"If we ever get fighters, will you teach me?"

Peter hesitated, taken aback.

"Maybe. I – I don't know if I'm qualified to teach someone."

"Oh, shut up," said Lyvri with a grin, "You said you shot down a battlecruiser all on your own. If that's not qualification, what is?"

"All right," said Peter, "Maybe someday."

"Deal," said Lyvri, accentuating it with a plink.

Their conversation drifted away from flying. Peter's promise turned over and over in his head, strangely. She had never left the ground, always been here. She was, as he had been in the valley, trapped. Yet even more so, forced onto the ground by a relentless enemy.

Inside, he promised himself, more strongly than he had promised her, that he would teach her to fly someday.

By dinnertime Peter was starving. A dull, wanting ache clung to his insides. It had been a long time since he had known much hunger; even through all the hardships of the war, food supply had mostly been a constant.

He had wolfed down almost his entire portion, with barely a few words to Lyvri in between bites, when he noticed Warrick approaching.

"Who's that?" Lyvri asked, attempting another to revive their fragmented conversation.

"Warrick," said Peter, though it came out sounding more like "Wahwick."

Lyvri nodded. Warrick crossed the center of the meeting chamber.

"Emily's awake," he said, "Wondering where you are."

A deep breath escaped Peter.

"When?"

"I don't know. She was awake when I walked by, and stopped me to ask where you were."

"Thanks, Warrick," said Peter, "Where's Myron? I've barely seen him since we got here."

"They've kept him on watch, on the surface. They figure he's a danger, at least he's out there instead of in here."

Peter grinned.

"I have to go," he said, turning to Lyvri, whose lips had drawn close together. She nodded, and Peter got up, and headed back down the hallway.

He wove between a pair of soldiers, down the narrow hallway, then squeezed between another two that followed. As he found his chambers, he drew back the curtain without hesitation.

Emily sat perched on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor, lost in thought. As the curtain brushed shut behind him, it rustled; Emily's eyes darted up, meeting his. The color had returned to her face, her eyes no longer had the glossy sheen they had before. Peter sat next to her on the bed, embracing her as she leaned into him, resting his chin on her scalp.

"Em," he whispered.

"Peter," she replied, chuckling, "I'm okay, you know."

He drew back.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Some place called Macalavay."

"Macalavay?"

"It's another superfortress."

"Another Woebarren?" said Emily disbelievingly.

"No ... no, not another Woebarren. But ... but yes, like it."

Her eyes, wide with shock, ate at Peter's heart. He gave her a helpless look.

"We'll find a way out. We'll find..."

"It's okay, Peter. It'll ... it'll be okay."

"Maybe."

They were quiet for a few minutes.

"Warrick said it will be a couple weeks before it heals entirely. My hip."

"At least you can move your arm again."

"I can move my legs, too, Peter."

"Can you run?"

She smiled wistfully, and leaned back against his arm, staring at the draping cloth that separated their little room from the rest of the caves. Her feet brushed against his.

"Hopefully here I won't need to."

"Yeah."

Peter wished he could share her optimism. Something within his mind refused him comfort; perhaps it was the idleness of the past few days, the omnipresent fortress barely fifty kilometers away, always visible towering above the horizon when they did venture above-ground. An uncanny instinct borne of warfare, was the fear of silence, when your opponent was surely moving in to strike where you were most vulnerable, to make the killing blow from which you could not defend. Even with the radar watching the skies, the scouts watching the rocky wasteland around them, fear wallowed in his thoughts, undermining any feeling of security the cave might offer.

As he waded amongst his thoughts, Emily watched his face; he was only intermittently aware of her gaze. At last she touched his arm, dragging from his mind, back to reality, where she waited patiently. Her wide smile greeted him; his worries slipped from the surface. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her, gingerly at first, then strongly, pressing her back onto the bed.

On the surface, Myron sat cross-legged atop the cluster of boulders surrounding the cave entrance, watching the distant, foggy horizon, and the dark shadow of Macalavay behind the low-hanging clouds. He ignored the drizzle around him, tiny pinpricks of water clustering on the rifle draped across his lap. Lights, far-off and faint, occasionally shone through the thick curtain, like fireflies glinting the twilight. An itch ran persistently up his arm; he pulled his sleeve back, exposing it to the cold air and rain. He smiled as the chills soothed it.

He knew someone was there before the sounds of his approach registered, a reflex honed by years of necessity. Then the strange mix of gravel and sand that filled the space between the boulders, crunching under the man's feet, identified him.

"How are they, Warrick?" Myron asked without turning his head. He was not close with the man, but knew his particular gait well.

"Fitting in well, I think. They're playing cards together, eating together. Probably even sleeping together, who knows? I'm figuring we're in with these people for a while."

In the back of his mind, Myron had slowly begun to reach that conclusion, but Warrick saying it aloud seemed to solidify it.

"They're good people," he said, nose dripping from accumulated mist.

"They're the only people we've found so far."

Myron finally turned to meet Warrick's gaze.

"Lyvri said there were other groups, living in other places along the canyon. She wasn't sure how many, but she knew of at least two within about a ten klick radius."

"She said ten?"

"I inferred it," said Myron, pointing to a hill in the distance, "See that? It's about eight kilometers out. She said they live near the other side."

"Underground?"

"Underground," Myron confirmed, "And the other, you can't see the other canyon from here, we're too low. But she said it's there, and there are another twenty or so people living there in another

cave. So that's two. That they know of. She said they don't explore much."

"Where do they get food, though?"

"Apparently fungi live off the nutrients that are washed down here, and they shot down a louse supply ship a few months ago, gave them enough for a while. Far enough down, it's cold enough to refrigerate the food. She said they also would steal food from the farms further out, where the lice grow grain to supply Macalavay."

"I see."

"You never asked before."

"We were offered food and shelter. I knew better than to question that."

Myron smiled, and turned back to watch.

"How long do you think it will be before... you know?"

"What?" said Myron flatly, eyes focused on what little sight the fog afforded him.

"Before we get on with the war."

He turned back again. Warrick's expression looked almost penitent as Myron turned his gaze on him. The wind hissed softly in his ear, a fresh blast of cold air reddening his cheek.

"I don't know. Without ships, without troops... what can we do? Besides the little raids they carry out. I have no idea what happened to the rest of the fleet."

"We're starting afresh, again?"

"I sure hope not. Woebarren had forests, hills, open plains around it. This black desert... it goes on for a hundred kilometers in every direction. We could make for those mountains in the distance," Myron continued, pointing at the lumpy, wave-like outlines in the distance, "but what would we find? Short of maybe more caves to hide in?"

Warrick followed Myron's gaze. By now, his face was coated with a thin, slick layer of water, dribbling down his cheek and dripping from the bangs in his hair. There was little the man missed; Myron was glad that he, more than anyone other than Peter and Emily, had survived. They were intrepid, as was he. But behind every maverick stood a brace, a support, and it was people like Warrick who were as responsible for their survival as they were.

"I'm glad you made it this far, Warrick," Myron said.

"Me, too," said Warrick with a chuckle, which Myron returned, "Need a relief?"

"Nah, I'm good on watch for a couple more hours. Then Lyvri will be out here."

"Oh yeah. Her. The girl who knocked you out and nearly clocked Peter, too?"

"That's her. She's a good fighter. She helped us get Emily back, risked her own neck for it."

"If you say so," Warrick said, eyes still scanning the monolithic clouds for what few clues they might betray.

"I trust them. Either way, I'd rather die at their hands, than at those of the lice."

"Hmm... agreed." There was no mirth in Warrick's voice.

The rain grew heavier; Myron could feel the individual drops as they spattered against his forehead. He sighed.

"Might as well go in, Warrick. Not much an extra set of eyes can do."

"What about that?"

Myron's eyes snapped to Warrick, then followed his extended, dripping finger off to a point, nearer than the horizon, where a magenta light crisply pierced the rolling gray blanket. The halo glinted off the mist as it swung side to side, brightening then fading, then at once gleaming so intensely that Myron had to raise his sopping palm to shield his eyes.

"What the hell is it?"

A klaxon blared eerily through the cold air, the noise but an echo when it reached Myron and Warrick, seemingly magnified by the great gulf of air it had traveled through. Myron shuddered as the sound washed over him.

Behind them, Lyvri dashed up onto the plateau.

"Seeker cruiser," she said as she came up behind them.

"Will it find us?" Warrick asked.

"Never has before."

"Why are you up here?" Myron asked her.

"I like to watch them."

Myron swiveled back to look at her curiously. Lyvri shrugged.

"At night, in the fog, the sound is beautiful. Terrifying, but beautiful." Already, droplets of water and mist were clustering on her hair, forming larger ones that slid down onto her forehead. She blinked them away.

A low rumbling grew to support the horn-like noise, and the fog began to undulate in the distance. There, a dark shape began to take form, before a triangular ship, easily a thousand feet long, with many small protrusions extending from each side, like a floating centipede, broke free of the fog, purring quietly over the flat terrain.

Confusion gripped Myron as he watched the thing. It was a spectacle that surpassed almost all else he'd ever seen in his nearly forty years of living. And yet it was a louse cruiser, the enemy. They were hated, they were evil. They killed children. Yet here this thing floated, the magenta lights that clustered at its hips blinking sporadically, and Myron could not deny its beauty.

It was slow, and took nearly a full minute to pass what Myron guessed was barely two kilometers, before another lump of fog absorbed it.

Beside him, Lyvri stood, still gazing at the murky air, eyes wide but unsurprised. Her hand slipped away, and she turned to Myron.

"They are rare. They usually only come out when they have found one of us."

Myron looked back out into the cold void beyond, imagining the fear that one of those lumbering behemoths would inspire in battle. Behind him, Lyvri was whispering something indiscernible.

"I'm going inside," she said, turning back to the stairs.

Myron watched her go. She was attractive, her hair framing her shoulders, her wide hips swiveled as she walked. Much too young for him, of course. But still nice to look at.

"She's weird," said Warrick, his arms crossed. Myron cackled.

"Living out here her whole life? Can you blame her? I'd be weird as hell, too."

"You already *are* weird as hell, Myron," Warrick said flatly, "Probably weirder."

A plaintive echo from the now-invisible seeker cruiser rippled through the rain.

"Can't believe we found another one," said Myron, shaking his head, "More damn lice."

"At least we found more whos to go with it."

"You think it's all like this? Everywhere?" said Myron, shoulders swiveling to look back at Warrick, who shrugged.

"Lyvri said it used to be a country. Denarra. My guess is, it's like with the Enkarra. Lice come in and take over."

"But from where?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Myron sat staring out at the fog, hoping, though he wouldn't admit it, that the strange cruiser would reappear.

"You ought to go after her, Warrick. Girl looks like she could use some company."

Warrick shook his head, though Myron couldn't see him.

"No. She's got a thing for Peter, I think."

Myron let out a noise of derision.

"They've been eating together every day, every meal."

"Peter's married to Emily. And trust me, Warrick, after the shit those two have been through together, he's not about to change his mind."

Warrick shrugged.

"Won't help my chances."

"Well, there are other women. Probably been stuck with the same old set of choices for years now. Go down and spice up the palette a bit."

"Spice up the palette?"

"Whatever the hell," said Myron. Warrick chuckled.

"You trying to get rid of me or something?" Warrick asked, wiping a thick bead of water from his eyebrows. The rain was loosening its gray curtain, leaving impenetrable black behind.

"No."

"What then?"

Myron sighed.

"Figured we'd find a city. Somewhere to start over. Thought we were through with this war bullshit."

Warrick did not laugh, merely nodded slowly.

"Knew as soon as I saw all those ships on the radar, that'd we'd just pissed on the hornet's nest. But I didn't want to admit it to myself," Myron said, "Obviously."

"No one would," said Warrick, "I don't think anyone knew where we were going."

"If they hadn't shot down the damned ship, we could have found somewhere better."

"If there *is* anywhere better."

Myron turned, giving him a hard stare.

"I sure hope so. Hell of a waste of time if there isn't."

Warrick stood for a few moments longer, before the rain began to reach its cold fingers under his clothes. Then he turned, wordlessly, for the stairs, leaving Myron to his cold, long, dark vigil.

Above, faint rumblings trickled through the stone, barely audible to Peter as he lay next to Emily. She curled against his chest, her hair tickling his neck, one hand tucked around the back of his head. Years later, he ought to be familiar with her body, but it never bored him. Nor did the rest of her. Simply laying together after lovemaking was a pleasure they had not had for long months.

She squirmed against him, her legs brushing against his. He heard the noise above, but did not want to ponder its meaning. Right now, he didn't care. The lice could storm these caves, shoot him and Emily where they lay, and it didn't matter. What did matter was lying here with her, stroking her hair, the one person he could truly feel at peace with.

"I can't believe it, Peter."

"Neither can I. And I've been here four days longer than you have."

She turned her head to look at him, her cheek pressing on the pillow.

"I mean, awake. You weren't."

She smiled.

"Are they good people?"

"A few of them are. Most of them, I think."

Her face looked curious.

"They weren't overly fond of outsiders. They called us 'rooners', or something like that. Myron took care of it."

"How?" Emily's voice was soft.

"How do you think?"

Emily laughed weakly.

"How'd you get me out of the ship?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"We didn't, right away. We had to leave you with Thriya Kellen. I didn't want to," he insisted, "But Myron pretty much dragged me off. Then we met these people, there was a confrontation, and we ended up allies somehow."

"That's usually how it works out. What other choice do we have?"

"They seemed to be considering their option for a few minutes. I wasn't sure."

"It's weird," she said, "This war's made us better people, among ourselves. We had wars so long ago, and now we can't afford to fight each other, because of the lice."

"Yeah," said Peter, "Philosophy aside, though, we ended up going back to get you. This girl, Lyvri, came with us. Saved our asses a couple times, shot from the cliffs while we moved in and got you. She was... I'm glad she was with us."

"Oh," said Emily softly, "Is she pretty?"

Peter nudged her.

"Shut up," he muttered. Emily giggled.

"I'm kidding, Peter, I know you wouldn't," she said, "It's just nice to hear it, over and over."

"Whatever," he said.

"So the ship's gone?" she said.

"You think? We crashed headlong into the desert. I don't know how any of us survived. Warrick guesses there was an explosion under the floor, and it was like a cushion, slowed us down a bit. So a decent number on the bridge made it, and the ship crumpled right in a few places, let a few in the back survive. But who knows what happened to the rest of the fleet?"

She shrugged.

"Why?"

"I don't know," said Emily, "Maybe I thought, we could just fly out of here."

"And go where?"

"I don't know," she said, frustratedly, "Somewhere else."

Peter sighed.

"There must be other valleys, right?" she said, "Something like them?"

"Probably," said Peter, "But we're not going to find it for a while."

"You want us to stay here, and fight? Again? For another eight years? I want a life, Peter," she said shakily, "What if one of us dies this time? What if both of us die?"

"That won't happen," said Peter immediately. But he could only speak for himself; the strange jolts of intuition that occasionally visited him, swam to the surface. Had those been what kept him alive for so long?

"What if it does? Or Myron? Or Warrick? We've fought our war."

"We just leave them?"

"What are forty of us going to do?" said Emily, "Fill their ranks for a while, until we die off, and then they just forget about us?"

"No. Look what a hundred of us did, living in Westreed. Look what just a few of did, in all those battles. Look at what you and I have done, Emily. We can do it again."

"I don't *want* to do it again! What is *wrong* with you, Peter? Don't you want ... peace? A family? Something more than crouching in trenches our whole lives, clinging to ships, never being able to sleep half the nights, wondering if we'll die tomorrow?"

"But..." Peter began, but he stopped, trailing off. She was right. They owed these people nothing. Why did he want to fight more? He rolled away, gazing up at the ceiling.

"Okay," he said, "Okay. I promise. We'll do what we can here, then we'll find a ship and get out of here. We'll find a city. Hell, we'll just make our own way. A village somewhere, who knows? A farm, a family, whatever you want."

"What about Myron? What about Warrick?"

*Stop adding things, this is what you wanted*, Peter seethed inside.

"They can come with us, or they can stay. It's their choice."

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry, Peter, I'm sorry. I just can't ... I can't anymore."

Peter reached out his arms again, drew her in close. Her head lay a few inches from his, her

shifting sending a wave of cool air over his damp skin. He closed his eyes.

"Neither can I," he whispered softly into her ear, "Neither can I."

He fell asleep to the sound of her breathing.

The curtain brushed aside loudly, tearing him from his sleep clumsily. He bolted upright. It was Lyvri, in the doorway, her face red and sweaty.

"Oh," she said, "Sorry. Peter, do you know anything about babies?"

Peter scratched his head, still bleary.

"I guess? Not particularly."

"Can you help?"

"With what?"

"Delivering a baby."

"I don't know," said Peter, looking at Emily.

Lyvri blew an annoyed puff of air out between her lips.

"Forget it," she said, withdrawing and closing the curtains as forcefully as she had opened them, leaving them swinging gently in her wake. With a groan, Peter lay back. Emily was still asleep, back moving softly, slowly, as she breathed. He did not want to waken her right now. Instead, he lay there, watching the skin on her bare back slowly expand and contract, wondering if she found any refuge in sleep, in dreams.

He did not. He never did. All of them had something to do with his waking life. He wanted to escape, take nothing with him. Maybe Emily. But a clean Emily, one without the vestiges and memories of the long, brutal war they'd fought. She had proposed an escape, he had tentatively accepted it. But would it be enough, to draw away, to make a new life, with the old one simmering behind it?

Eventually, he hauled himself out of bed, began to dress, leaving Emily behind, still asleep. She was still recuperating, it would not do good to take well-needed rest from her. He brushed through the curtain, heading for the meeting chamber, his mind set on breakfast. Maybe it would be something delicious, for a change.

He heard a sharp groan of pain, and the voices of several women. With it, the deeper voice of a man, muttering something. Then there was a scream.

"Of course," Peter muttered to himself, "The baby." He kept walking. He was no good with them, he never had been. He had almost dropped the infant daughter of a family friend, back in the valley. This was a fact that he had never shared with Emily.

How could someone think to bring a life into this world?

He ate alone; Lyvri was likely occupied with the birthing, Myron was probably still asleep, and who knew where Warrick was?

The memories of the previous days began to thaw, and, mixed with the heavy, groggy feeling in his forehead, left him eating in misery. Perhaps he should have woken Emily, for the company. But what more was there to talk about? To plan their daring escape? If these people hadn't found any ships so far, it was a good bet Peter and Emily wouldn't do much better.

As he scraped the last few vegetables from his plate, he saw Lyvri, then Myron, walking through the meeting chamber. Myron stared at his hands, which were covered in blood; Lyvri shot Peter an unkind look as she passed. They wandered down another hallway. Peter returned to eating, finished, then discarded his plate. As he was walking back, he ran into them again.

"All the fingers and toes?" he asked, trying to be cheerful.

"Like you would know," Lyvri shot back.

"Sorry. I was tired."

"We're all tired," she muttered.

Peter pointed to Myron, "He helped?"

"Yeah," said Myron, "They made me catch. Apparently I had to fill in for you."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, now that I've washed my hands."

"Navria," said Lyvri, "That's her name."

"Cute name," said Peter, "Does it mean 'sunlight deficiency' or something?"

Lyvri rolled her eyes.

"If you'd been here more than a few days, you'd know we go up on the surface plenty."

"But only once every few days."

She swept away, annoyed. Peter watched her go.

"How the hell do they take care of a kid, anyway? I've barely seen any since we got here."

"Maybe they live somewhere else," Myron muttered, "It'd make sense. Send them to someplace with more noncombatants."

"I don't think anyone stays a noncombatant around here for long."

"True," said Myron, "I'm getting something to eat."

"Go ahead," said Peter, stalking off to follow Lyvri. He assumed today would be another day of making bullets, and he doubted serving as an impromptu midwife was going to keep her from work.

The night before the attack, Yyrick called a meeting in the main chamber. Peter had told Emily of the plan that morning. Now he sat next to her, Myron on the other side, Warrick and Lyvri on the other side of him. Myron's steel eyes fixed on Yyrick as he paced slowly, waiting for the last few soldiers to filter in. Faded olive and muted brown, grays and blacks clung to them. There were no uniforms, simply a mass of pale, determined faces, which seemed to shine in the interior twilight.

"Peter Green and the newcomers have volunteered to take a very special part in our attack," said Yyrick as soon as the last group of three entered, "They and my sister will head down the tunnels one kilometer west of the main target. We hope ... hope that it leads to the interior of the structure."

He pulled on a string, releasing a map tied to one of the clotheslines, letting it unfurl, flanked by a pair of drying shirts. It showed a rough outline of the fortress, blank in many places. Peter spotted a cluster of buildings, several rows of trenches, set apart at least a few hundred meters, if the scale was worth anything, and a pair of large hangars. Far from them, off in the bottom right corner, was an X marked along one of the canyons. Peter could guess what it was.

"If they can breach the louse defenses, and take out these three towers, we will hopefully be able to overwhelm the louse trenches. We have enough climbing equipment to easily scale the cliff walls, surprise the enemy where he would not expect us to dare to attack. I am guessing that fifteen hundred lice defend this complex. About one thousand of us are in this attack. Thirty in Lyvri and Peter's group. The rest of us are attacking this northern section," he said, tapping two blue arrows on the map.

"We have plenty of radios to coordinate the attack. I have given your commanders their individual orders."

He looked around the room. Peter followed his gaze. Fear showed on their faces, but they stood motionless, unyielding.

"May the Revenant bless us," said Yyrick in a low mutter, but one that carried through the chamber clearly, "Good night."

They got up and shuffled out, wordlessly. Halfway out of the chamber, a hand grabbed Peter's shoulder and pressed him against the wall.

"Tomorrow," said Lyvri, "You must listen to me. I know you are their leader, I know they will listen to you only. But I am asking you, please, to trust my judgment."

"I will," said Peter, but Lyvri shook her head.

"You don't understand," she said, her breath hot on his face, "If I tell us we must press on, even against suicidal odds, even with half of us dead or wounded, you have to promise you will. Even if I say

you must leave Emily dying, and follow me, keep fighting, you must promise you will.”

Peter's face twisted at the thought of leaving her in some grimy tunnel. He wanted a ship, he wanted to flee, before it could happen. But he forced himself to straighten his expression.

“I promise,” he lied.

“Good,” said Lyvri with a grimace. Then she let go of him, her fingers sliding down his arm as she turned and pushed back into the crowd.

Peter turned, let the others sweep him into the side hallways, following Emily and Myron. Others split away, until it was just the three of them. Myron reached his room first, pushing through the curtain. Peter stopped Emily, turned her back to face him.

“I'm sorry I got you into this,” he said.

“It's fine,” she said.

“No,” said Peter, “You're still sore, and I'm asking you to fight another battle. I should be finding a way out of here for us, a place to hide.”

Emily shook her head.

“There's nowhere to hide, nowhere safe, Peter. I knew it when we crashed, the second before I went out. We just have to fight our way through it, now, and win. Then we can live again.”

Peter smiled, and reached for her face, slowly tracing her cheek with his fingers.

“Hell yes!” came Myron's excited voice from his room. Peter sprang back a little, surprised. Emily closed her eyes, then grinned nervously.

“What is it, Myron?” she called.

“Gave us our damned guns back! Finally, too!”

Emily rolled her eyes. Myron burst out of his room, shotgun in hand, cocking his head to the side when he saw them.

“You two lovebirds have got each other, I've got this, right?” he said, holding his gun aloft.

Peter and Emily just stared at him with lukewarm grins.

“Eh, maybe not that funny,” said Myron, “Point is, we're not being restricted anymore.”

“Yeah,” said Emily, “Hey look, Myron, it's late. I'd like to get one more decent night's sleep before I die tomorrow.”

Myron's eyes darted between the two of them, and he nodded.

“Alright, well, you two have fun. I'll just cry alone in my room with my gun.”

“Night Myron,” said Emily sweetly.

“Night,” said Peter.

“See you both tomorrow,” said Myron, throwing the shotgun over his shoulder and turning back through the curtain.

Peter turned and glanced at Emily, who shrugged, and they walked into their own room. As soon as the curtain swept shut, Emily lunged at him, their lips meeting, Peter grabbing her hair messily, pushing her backward as she pulled him backward. His legs bumped something; the side of the bed. They flopped over clumsily over.

Emily shrieked, forcing him off of her. Peter rolled over, onto something hard and sharp jamming into his spine.

“Damn it!”

He sprang clumsily onto the floor. Emily stood up too, before wheeling around furiously and ripping the covers off of the bed. Peter got shakily to his feet.

“Our guns,” said Emily, “Of course.”

“Who left them *there*?” said Peter indignantly, rubbing his sore back.

Emily reached forward and pulled the first free. An assault rifle. Peter had lost the one he usually used in the crash. Emily pulled forth a second weapon, a shorter carbine. She set them both on the small, low table in the corner. Then she turned back to the bed, ripping the covers away. A metallic clattering made her pause; she tore out magazines, four for each weapon. With an angry grunt, she sent them

clattering to the floor. She turned to Peter.

"Come here," she said. Peter took barely a step toward her before she grabbed him again, arms around his neck, pulling him down onto the bed. Kissing him fiercely, she tugged on his shirt sleeves, taking it off in a messy tangle of limbs. Peter tossed it across the room, and fell on her again. He pressed himself against her, a gentle groan escaping her lips.

"Peter?" came a soft voice from the door.

He rolled off of her, landing on his feet, leaving Emily on her back, eyes wide with shock. Peter brushed hair out of his face before looking up. It was Lyvri, standing in the doorway.

"What the hell is it?" Peter demanded, a little louder than he'd intended to.

"Sorry," said Lyvri, looking genuinely embarrassed. She held out a folded sheet of paper.

"Orders. From Yyrick. You're in charge, apparently."

"Thanks," said Peter, stepping forward and taking it.

"Yep," said Lyvri, her eyes on Emily, "Sorry to interrupt."

Then she scurried off. Peter turned back to Emily.

"Hope that didn't spoil the mood," he said. She nodded, then flopped, disgruntled, back onto the bed. Peter sighed, looking back at the curtain, before resignedly joining her.

They woke almost simultaneously. Peter had barely rolled over to rub his eyes before Emily began to stir. His muscles felt drained of blood, and Emily was already dressing by the time he forced himself to his feet.

She buckled her belt just as Peter reached her. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against him, tucking his nose in the side of her neck. He clung to her.

"We got to go," he whispered in her ear.

"Not now," she whispered back.

She kissed him, warmly and gently, and across his dried, bleary body, her lips felt like an oasis. As his arms began to slide around her slender waist, he heard the curtain brushing open behind him. He spun around, swearing to himself that if it was Lyvri he would kill her. But it wasn't, it was Myron instead. Already dressed, he stood in the door way, shotgun in hand.

"Ready to kick some ass?"

Peter grinned; behind him, Emily managed a nervous smile.

"Sure," said Peter, "Just give us a minute."

"Whatever," said Myron, "Just don't be late for breakfast."

"Won't," said Emily.

As soon as Myron walked off, she turned to Peter.

"I don't want to go," she pleaded, "Neither of us should. Let's just ... let's just stay here. Plot our escape. Something. I don't know. Please."

"We have to help them, Emily. They need us."

"No they don't! This is their choice, their choice to fight like this!"

"Like it was our choice?" said Peter solemnly.

Emily froze. Then she sighed.

"I don't want to seem like a coward, Peter."

"You don't. You're not," said Peter, drawing her close to him again, "You're a wonderful woman who's tired of fighting for her life. But if those Enkarra hadn't helped us eight years ago, we would have been dead. Maybe it's the same with us and these people. We have to help each other, or what are we?"

Emily looked at him, offering a grimace.

"You have to stop being so persuasive," she said.

"I'm not being persuasive," said Peter, "It's the truth."

She looked at her rifle, leaned against the wall.

“All right,” she said.

She lifted it, slung it over her shoulder, and followed Peter through the curtain.

Breakfast went quickly. Peter ate with Emily and Myron, avoiding Lyvri, who sat with several similar-looking men and women across the room. Every once in a while their eyes would meet; Peter tried to hold her gaze for a second or two. Perhaps it would dispel the awkwardness a bit. It would be better than noticeably avoiding each other.

His plate was only half-empty when Yyrick burst into the room, holding a powerful Kehrlich assault rifle in his hands, one that Peter distinctly remembered loading several clips for just a day ago. He raised his hands.

“Alright!” he shouted, and the conversation faded quickly, “We’ve got to be up top in five, and at the rendezvous with Hyryll in half an hour. So get organized, quickly! Up the stairs, form up around the rocks.”

Immediately, there was a bustle of activity. Yyrick ducked out of sight. Peter stood up.

“I guess this is it,” said Emily.

“Yeah,” said Peter, “Well, apparently I’m in charge of the group we’re sending in through the sewers. It’s been a while since I’ve led soldiers in combat.”

“You’ll do fine,” said Myron, mouth half-full.

“I’d better,” said Peter, “Where’s the rest of our group?”

He unfolded the paper Lyvri had given him the night before, still in his pocket.

“Says you two are with me, Lyvri, Warrick, and three others: Jiara, Orlo, and Erick. Then we meet up with Hyryll – I’m guessing another leader from another cave – and there we will get Umber, Marle, and four more ... goddamn, these are some convoluted orders.” He craned his neck up.

“Jiara! Orlo! Erick! Over here!”

He spotted a brown-haired woman he vaguely recognized, who turned her head at her name. He waved to her. She headed over.

“Orlo! Erick!”

There was a hand on his shoulder. He turned. It was Yyrick.

“You know, we’ll sort everyone out upstairs, right?”

“Didn’t know that,” said Peter, “Alright, I’ll wait then.”

The woman, who had to be Jiara, sauntered up to them. Her short brown hair curled around her head like claws, probing her earlobes, combed across at the forehead. Her thin face enunciated round cheekbones, and she smiled pleasantly.

“Good to see some other Woebarren veterans,” she said. She had a Cerovich-Kalahan rifle slung over her back, the green strap biting into her shoulder. Peter smiled back at her.

“Yeah, it is. You’re with us for today.”

“Put me in the crack team, didn’t they? I should be flattered.”

“Death sentences have a way of doing that, don’t they?”

“Ah, not with you, Peter Green,” she said, “Never served directly under you – well, then, I suppose everyone did after a point. But if you can’t win a battle, it can’t be won. I’m confident of that.”

“Well, thank you,” said Peter, “Keep sharp, though.”

“Always do,” she said cheerfully. She turned, “This is Emily?”

“Yeah,” she said. Jiara stuck her hand out. Emily offered her own, and they shook.

“An honor to meet both of you,” she said, “Really. The heroes of Woebarren.”

“We’ve been here all week.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be pushy. Looks a bit sycophantic, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“I figured you got enough worship and admiration as it was.”

"Any is too much for me," said Peter.

"So modest," said Jiara, "Me, I'd soak it all up, you know? Much as I'd like to say otherwise..."

"It gets old faster than you'd think," said Emily wearily, "We should get up the stairs, so we can get everyone else together."

"Sure," said Jiara.

They made their way down the hallways to the stairs. They were wide and spiraling, enough for at least two to walk abreast, three if they were passably agile. Peter and Emily went first, Myron behind with Jiara. Peter knew that Lyvri was in their group, but she had not joined them yet. Peter did not blame her for waiting; she would be the only one from the cave as of now, would be an outsider.

Up top Yyrick gathered them, called out names for each group. Erick was a slender, pale, blond man who was left his wife behind in the other line; she held his hand until it slipped from her grasp, watching him sadly. She was split up as one of the few Enkarrans to fight with the others, the main attack force. Peter watched her hold her weapon; he could tell she had not been a soldier before, and certainly was not suited to be one now.

Orlo was slender, and dark, his hair parted oddly on both sides. Peter did not recognize him from the ship, though Erick and Jiara had both looked vaguely familiar. Warrick joined them a moment later, finishing off their group. For now.

Once assembled, they followed Yyrick to a trail down the cliffside, then into a thin crevasse that split off from it, barely four meters wide. Peter stared up the dark walls, at the glowing, jagged crack of sky high above, and wondered what had happened to form this maze of canyons. They were too small, too rough to be from water, whose wearing down over years would smooth the rock. It had to be earthquakes, yet Peter had not felt a single tremor since they had arrived.

The crevasse linked two canyons, though this one, Peter realized, was different, and he had not been here before. Surely this was what led to the rendezvous point.

But no, this led to a far larger canyon, one that had to be nearly eighty meters from edge-to-edge, and about as deep. They must have walked for miles, yet if Macalavay looked any larger, the change was imperceptible. The high morning sun warmed the sand around them, and the wind began to blow. A scent of oil, weak at first, met Peter's nose. As it grew stronger, he felt his stomach shift uncomfortably. No, it wasn't oil. It was something else.

"What's that smell?" he said to Lyvri, who was nearby. She looked at him distantly for a second, before answering.

"Gas. Dunno what kind. It's not a good smell, but its mostly harmless at this concentration."

"What do you mean, 'this concentration'?"

"Poison gas. You know why they wear those gas masks, right?"

Peter said nothing, merely nodded, and kept walking. He tried to breathe as little as possible.

As they neared the first rendezvous, the stench began to fade, and Peter sighed. A small group, clad in brown and tan, waited at the mouth of a cave under an overhang. Yyrick strode forward immediately, ahead of the rest. Another figure, hooded, walked out from their group. They greeted with a brief, over-the-shoulder embrace, and stood talking for a moment.

After a brief conversation, Hyryll and his soldiers joined them, falling amongst the group. Peter counted about a dozen and a half, and guessed he had only half of them, before they mixed in enough to make any further counting impossible. Their brownish clothes made them distinct, and they carried mostly Kehrlich rifles of different makes, but their pale skin made it clear to Peter that they, like Lyvri and Yyrick, were cave-dwellers.

They continued along. Eventually, the sun hung high in the sky, directly overhead. Peter's shadow shrunk, hiding under his footsteps.

A faint whistling began to grow, and it drew Peter's eyes skyward, into the almost-blinding sunlight. He turned to Emily, whose eyes were widening.

"Scorpions!" came a cry from further down, and suddenly people were scurrying toward the

canyon walls. Peter and Emily followed them, dashing for cover. As Peter ran, a flash in his mind distracted him. He saw Timeless, that curled, fanged face, and a knife. Then reality came back, and he had stumbled, staggering to fall hard against the wall.

"Peter, you okay?" Emily asked.

"Yeah, fine," said Peter, "Just tripped."

The roar of engines drowned out the wind now, and looking up, Peter could see them, the wide winged body, the fins and gun-guards curling in front of it like claws. They passed, in seconds, but Peter remained still.

"They'll circle back."

And they did, the whistling sound fading almost to silence, before growing again. The two Scorpions flew back; at least, Peter could only see two in the faint sliver of sky visible to him. As the sound faded again, Peter hastily got back to his feet. Yyrick called to them, and they continued on. As they walked, Emily wandered over to Peter furtively.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"Nothing," said Peter, "I just tripped."

"I saw your face, Peter. Something was wrong."

He sighed sharply.

"I ... I saw him. Timeless."

"Here?"

"In my head."

Emily looked at the ground.

"I thought you killed him."

"I thought I did, too, Em. But it wouldn't be the first time I was wrong about that. Not even close to it."

"You think he's here?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"Could have followed us."

"I know, but *why*, Peter?"

"Because we're all but the leaders? Because Woobarren is a smoldering ruin now, and it's our fault? He could want revenge."

She shook her head.

"No. I think it's more than that."

"How so?"

"No idea. But it's got to have something to do with those visions you have, Peter. If you had some sort of mental illness ... but that's not it."

"You feel it, too, Emily."

"Yes, but why us? Why just the two of us, and *nobody* else?"

"I think my father had it," said Peter.

"I think you told me about this."

"When he dodged a tree branch? Before I even heard the crack? There *was* a split-second there, Emily. I don't know how to explain it."

They kept walking, in silence, muttered conversation around them.

"I don't believe in the supernatural," said Peter.

"Neither do I," said Emily, "But something is different about you. And me. And I *know* that's why Timeless hunts for us."

"What could be so dangerous about it?" said Peter, "It doesn't even work all the time. Hell, you've been hurt. I've been hurt."

"But not killed," said Emily.

"No," said Peter, "You think he thinks – Timeless, that is – that he's the only one that can get past this, and finish us off?"

"No," said Emily, "But it could be, for all we know."

They reached another junction, Yyrick going right, into a slightly-smaller canyon, the others following.

"How many more rendezvous do we need to go through?" Peter wondered aloud.

"I think it's just two more," said Emily.

"Who had the orders?"

"Jiara."

Peter's eyes scanned the crowd, until he spotted her, and walked over, weaving between walking soldiers.

"Jiara," he said, "Jiara!"

She turned, a sheet of paper tucked under her arm.

"What?"

"Let me see that," said Peter.

"What?"

"The orders."

"Oh, these?"

"Yeah. Give them here."

She held them out. Peter took them and unfolded them.

"Yeah, two more stops."

"Next one's a big one," said a nearby soldier, one of Hyryll's men. Peter turned.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see," said the man, grinning under the shadow of the bill of his grimy cap.

"I know we're meeting a lot of men there," said Peter.

"No," said the soldier knowingly, "That's not it."

Peter glanced back to Jiara, who shrugged. Peter handed the paper back to her, and headed back to Emily.

The soldier had not lied.

The third rendezvous site was spectacular. Peter did not see it until they rounded a sharp bend in the scraggly canyon, seeing a titanic boulder wedged in between the two rims of the canyon. Easily a hundred meters in diameter, it hung over a small cluster of tents, safe in its shade, where Peter saw hundreds gathered.

As they reached the tents, Peter could see several different kinds of uniforms, and realized that many other small groups must be meeting here; hence why there were surely five hundred armed men and women wandering about a camp that could have tents for more than seventy.

"This is the staging ground," said Yyrick to Peter, as they drew closer.

"The base is nearby?"

"No, no, not yet. But we're closer," said Yyrick. He drew ahead, to meet with several gathered men and women, older looking. Peter could tell they were the leaders. Hyryll walked by as well, to join them, and they conversed for several minutes, exchanging greetings. Peter looked past them, as Emily came up behind him. His eyes darted about, occasionally meeting with one of the soldiers. They appeared well-armed, dressed in various earth tones, or black. Some wore cloths over their faces. More than a few had alarmingly-colored goggles strapped around their foreheads; then Peter remembered Lyvri taking louse goggles for herself, to see in the cave. For a moment, Peter's mind was absorbed by the thought of pulling goggles away from a dead louse soldier, seeing those inky marbles of eyes staring back. How could you tell if they were dead or alive? They had that glassy finality to them, as though

they were already corpses.

Before long, Yyrick and Hyryll returned.

"We're the last group here. Everyone's getting ready to move out of here, up to the front line."

"Where's that?" said Jiara from among the crowd.

"About five more kilometers."

"And we're all moving there at once? The lice will see us for sure, pick us off from the air."

Yyrick's face held a faint grin. Hyryll spoke up, for the first time to all of them.

"You're implying we're going above-ground. We're not."

Off of the side of the camp, against the wall of the canyon, lay another cave entrance, like a knife wound, slender and tall. Peter was sure he would convulse from the claustrophobia. More than once, his rifle brushed against the wall, scraping loudly, and he walked single-file behind Emily and Jiara. Yyrick, and the other leaders, were far ahead. Peter did not know where Myron was. He had not seen him since they had met with Hyryll's group.

Slowly, thankfully, the passage widened, into a sloping tunnel, leading down, past many rounded chambers, replete with stalagmites and stalactites. Flashlights switched on, scattered amongst the group, shining helpful beams about the cavern. Many of the soldiers wore louse goggles over their eyes now, glowing almost imperceptibly in the murky darkness, like fluorescent plastic.

The scent of damp stone and mud grew thick in Peter's nose, but it was a pleasant smell. The cool air occasionally rushed through the passages, chilling his skin. His arm hairs bristled, and a tingle ran down his back. Suddenly, his foot slid on a patch of wet stone. A flashlight flashed in his direction, to shine off the thin film of water beneath his feet, just as he caught himself.

"All right there?" came a voice from behind, kind but annoying to Peter.

"Fine," he said, a bit more hostility in his voice than he'd intended. He vowed, in his mind, to never enter one of these caves again. But he doubted it'd be a promise he could keep.

After what must have been hours, the passage began to slope upward again. Peter marveled at the number of intersections they had passed, how these people knew which way to go almost instinctively. They must have grown up down here, some of them. Peter could see plenty of room for settlement down here, though he had spotted a trace of even one. He also had not seen any of the underground mushrooms they claimed to live off of; perhaps that was why.

Suddenly, a light came into view, one Peter swore for a moment had to be a particularly annoying flashlight beam. But it lingered, staying in place. A grin grew on his face. Daylight, or what was left of it. Slowly, they ascended, his arms and legs becoming visible to him again. Before long, he could see the floor, the bleak light reflecting off the shattered stone, the thin trickles of water that ran between them. Then the entrance was twenty meters away, then ten, then five.

He stepped out into the twilight, the orange sky and bluish-gray clouds of dusk. As he looked around, he saw all manner of military equipment: mortars, rocket tubes, heavy machine guns, and dozens of soldiers, clustered behind massive boulders, or simply among the jagged rocks. Beyond that, a canyon circled wide around a cluster of buildings, with a pair of skeletal iron towers rising from them, probably eight meters tall each. Crimson lights topped them, blinking slowly, evenly, watchfully. Peter suppressed a shudder. Beside him, Myron stood next to Yyrick, who was watching through a pair of binoculars. As Peter surfaced, Yyrick turned to him, and offered him the binoculars.

"Thanks," said Peter. Yyrick pointed to something.

"Look to the northern part. You should see a tube-like thing coming out of the side of the canyon, same part of ground as the whole base is on."

Peter twisted the knob, bringing it into focus. Before long, he spotted it, where Yyrick was pointing. He nodded.

"Is that where I'm going?"

"Yes," said Yyrick, "You, and Lyvri, and a few other squads we picked for you."

He reached into his pocket, and drew out a watch, one jet-black and plastic. Peter noticed it was identical to the one Yyrick wore himself.

"When this shows nineteen-thirty, you should be in position and ready to go. Lyvri knows the target best, but she'll fill you in as you head down there. There's a tunnel. She knows where she's going, just follow her."

"If she knows so much, why isn't she in charge of this mission?"

"Because," said Yyrick, "You're a leader. She's not."

"Right," said Peter.

"Keep her alive."

"Of course I will," said Peter, "I won't know what the hell I'm doing if I don't. Good bit of insurance for her, isn't it?"

"That's not how we meant it," said Yyrick.

"I know," said Peter, "Where are my soldiers?"

"Further down the slope," said Yyrick, "Find Lyvri, you'll find them."

"Of course," said Peter, "Thanks, Yyrick."

"May the Revenant let you prevail."

"Yeah, you too," said Peter, before turning away.

He turned to Emily and Myron, who were behind him now.

"Let's go."

They followed him down the slope, past soldiers crouching next to mortars. Peter noticed that small groups wore the same color uniforms. Keeping the individual squads together, Peter thought, was a good idea. Perhaps these people knew what they were doing. He knew little about the success rate of attacks like this, but if they were still doing it, it had to have worked before.

He found Lyvri at the head of a path, that descended to the floor of the canyon separating their forces from the louse complex. Peter had no idea how the others planned to reach it.

"So what's our target? Where is it?" Peter demanded as he approached. Lyvri turned.

"It's an ammunition store in the basement. Might be accessible through the underground shipping tunnels."

"I thought they were sewers," said Peter, "And I thought we were attacking the missile silos. I just had no idea how."

"Well, they're *not* sewers," said Lyvri firmly, "And we're blowing up the ammunition store because it's right under the silo. Should blow the missiles sky-high."

"No one told *me* this, damn it. I'm the one leading this damn thing."

"Maybe because we didn't know some of this, 'til barely an hour ago," Lyvri retorted.

"You still knew before me."

"Because I'm one of these people, and you aren't!" spat Lyvri, her voice quivered on the edge of shouting. Beside them, Emily and Myron stared.

"Never mind," said Peter, turning to the others, "Where's the explosives?" he called.

Two men and a woman raised their hands.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Nerok," said the tallest man, "There are Imiri and Savrenn."

"Good," said Peter, "You stay near the back. You have rifles?"

"They gave us submachine guns."

"You'll be shooting from the back. Take a rifle. One of the long ones. Aim well. Once we get inside, you can pick up a submachine gun from a dead louse soldier. Trust me, there'll be plenty."

The three stared at him.

"Go!" said Peter, "Trade! Find someone with a rifle, unless they're one hell of a shot with it."

Hastily, the three of them went to those around them, asking for something longer. Peter turned

to Lyvri again.

“What kind of defenses around that tube?”

“A couple machine gun nests,” said Lyvri.

“Didn't see those through the binoculars.”

“They're hidden,” said Lyvri, her voice strained, “Look again.”

She handed him a smaller pair, wrapped in leather. Peter held them up, scanning the rock wall around the tube. Then he spotted them; two cubbyholes, dug in the cliff-face, built up with concrete. Like little balconies. He handed the binoculars back to Lyvri.

“I'm sure they see us already, but not all of us. If they did, they'd be fighting back right now. Or getting Scorpions down on our tails.”

“Concealing your true numbers,” said Peter, “Always good.”

He looked around at the soldiers, then down at his watch. Nineteen-ten.

“You know your way down?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, let's go. Get into position.”

“Right,” said Lyvri.

Peter raised his voice.

“Let's move! Fall in behind me. When we get down there, split into three groups. Three squads. We've got twenty minutes.”

He headed down the trail, staring straight at the towers, at the machine guns nests that were still faint dots in the distance. He remembered standing at the helm of his flagship, leading the final assaults against Woebarren. He had commanded an entire fleet, crushed louse battleships, watched them fall from the air like crumbling mountains. Now he let a few grimy guerillas against a missile silo?

With ten minutes to spare, the soldiers split up into three groups of fifteen. Peter gave one to Emily, one to Myron, and kept the last for himself and Lyvri. He met with them, as the soldiers huddled in the trenches.

“We're going to have good momentum going in,” said Peter to Emily, “I'm trusting you and Myron to hold the flanks for me. Go in as strong as you can, and we'll try to keep their firepower on us. Once we get inside, go for that silo. The three with demo charges – Nerok, Imiri and Sarvenn – they said they can work alone, and they know about where they're going. So you each have one of them. I've got Nerok, you've got Sarven, Myron's got Imiri. And there's a few rocket tubes for each of us, to take out those machine guns. Hopefully.”

He handed a radio to Myron, and a radio to Emily.

“Keep in touch,” he said.

They nodded. There was nothing else to say. They split up, moving to their individual squads. Peter followed Lyvri, glancing at his watch. Nineteen-twenty-eight.

“Is there kind of signal for starting this? Yyrick gave me a time.”

“The mortars will start firing,” said Lyvri, looking up at the cliff-wall, and the towers poking their blinking tips out above it. Peter followed her gaze, then lowered it back to the dark tube ahead. There were lights, somewhere inside. He could see little else.

“Hand me your rifle.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

She unslung the long rifle, and Peter raised it, peering through the scope.

“Tire tracks around the front. Yeah, it's a shipping area.”

He shifted, looking at the faintly-lit interior of the tunnel.

“Columns inside. A sort of grid of them to hold up the ceiling. Probably lots of shelves. Maybe

offices, for whatever scientists they have. Plenty of places to take cover.”

“Yeah,” said Lyvri, “I think that – ”

Like crisp thunder, a series of mortar shots cut her off. Peter's eyes sprang to his wrist, just in time for twenty-nine to become thirty.

“Let's move!” he roared.

The first shells crashed into the complex, blossoming into fire and smoke. Immediately, the crackling of gunfire leaped to life. Peter sprang from behind the rock, and ran, assault rifle in hand. The two machine gun nests lay silent for a few seconds, out of surprise, then chattered to life. Bullets skipped off the sand as Peter sprinted toward the tube.

“Get into the tunnel!” he shouted to those around him.

About a dozen soldiers were close behind him, when the lead scythe of bullets swept close for the first time, catching a man behind Peter in the shoulder and arm, flinging him to the ground. Peter fired back as he ran, as did some of the others.

“Where are those rockets?” he shouted, turning as he did. Lyvri sprinted past him. He spotted a slight woman scurrying desperately toward the tunnel, a rocket tube over her back. As Peter opened his mouth, a bullet gashed her throat, and she spun to the ground. Peter sprinted over to her. She lay on her back, gurgling; Peter grabbed the strap of the rocket tube, unhooking it, and yanking it free. He looked at her wide eyes, as she thrashed about.

“I – ” he began, but the blood was too thick, already soaking into the sand, saturating it. He turned away, gritting his teeth. He aimed carefully, as bullets skipped in the sand around him. One whizzed past his ear, striking the back of the rocket tube, and jolting it off-center. Growling, he stood up, and kept running, bullets rained where he'd just been. One struck the dying woman in the chest, and she stiffened and froze.

*Small mercies*, thought Peter as he ran. He could not see Lyvri anymore; there was no time to look for her. Another soldier ran past him, stopping to shoot wildly.

“Keep running!” Peter shouted to him, but before the soldier could react, he too was struck down, four bullets hitting him, directly center mass. He was flung onto his back. Hastily, Peter stopped, dropped to a crouch, and, panting, raised the rocket tube again. His lungs constricted as he tried to control his breathing. He had one shot; the other rockets were ten meters back, with the dead woman. The rusty sights centered over the cluster of sandbags and concrete, and, slowly, he squeezed the trigger. The hiss and rush kicked up sand behind him, and he felt the tube jolt back, nearly out of his grip. As soon as it was clear, he sprang forward, leaving the empty rocket tube behind. Stopping for even a second longer than necessary would kill him.

He heard the impact, but did not see it. He did see the tunnel now, and two louse soldiers around one corner of the interior. The tunnel was at most fifteen meters in diameter, but the faint lights within barely lit a quarter of it. Peter aimed at the glowing eyes with his rifle, and fired a short burst. Sparks flew about the corner, and the lice ducked back. Peter kept running.

Swiftly the who soldiers converged on the tunnel, and when the lice reemerged, a wave of bullets put them down almost immediately. Peter looked back across the sand; at least a dozen bodies lay sprawled there. His heart sank, as it always did, yet he knew it could have been far worse.

“Get inside, push toward the ammo store!” said Peter, moving up the ramp. Most of Emily's soldiers were already inside, and he heard the snapping of automatic fire echoing painfully within the tunnel. It widened now, into a low-ceiling room with columns spread about in a grid pattern. Peter dashed toward one, and stopped behind it, peering out. He spotted a louse soldier firing at something off to the side. He raised his rifle, and put a pair of bullets into its side. As it dropped, he dashed to another column, further in.

He saw Lyvri in the faint red light, crouched behind a column further up, shooting at another louse soldier further up. She lurched back, pulling out one magazine, and inserting another, and leaning back out to fire again. Then she dashed away.

Peter peered out, spotting two more lice running down the corridor between columns, toward where Lyvri would be. He opened fire, his rifle pulsing against his shoulder as he emptied his entire magazine into them. One stiffened, and fell under the weight of at least five hits, and the other, wounded in the arm, staggered back behind a column.

Reloading furiously, Peter dashed to the next column, where the louse soldier was barely visible. Bullets skipped about, tearing bits of concrete from the columns. Peter waited a second, then leaned around the other side of the column and fired back, catching the louse soldier in the chest, spattering the wall behind him black. Peter did not pause for a second, sprinting forward again.

The room ended in a similarly-lit hallway, the flickering red foreboding. The other soldiers clustered about here. Emily found him, and ran over.

"Three other hallways," she panted, "One right, one left, one forward."

"I'll take forward," said Peter, "You take right, Myron left. Keep pushing in. Use the radios."

"I will," said Emily.

"They'll be focused on fighting the guys upstairs," said Peter, "They're confused. Take advantage of it."

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"Love you, too."

She sprinted off, back to her squad, leaving Peter with Lyvri. She held a louse's submachine gun now, her rifle hanging from her shoulder again.

"Where's Nerok?"

"I don't know," said Peter.

"Shit, well look for him!"

Peter bit back a retort, and sprang back through the columns, Lyvri close behind. Peter's eyes whirled about, until they caught a limp form slumped against the wall. Peter rushed forward.

"He's dead. Damn it!"

He turned around.

"Emily!" he shouted. "Myron!"

They had already moved on; echoes of gunfire sprang to life, filtering back through the hallways.

"We just have to hope the others make it," said Lyvri from behind him.

"Why the hell didn't you make him stay back?" Peter demanded.

"I did! It went to hell once we got in here. Everyone was everywhere!"

Peter stooped over Nerok's body, tugging at the straps of his bag.

"What are you doing?" asked Lyvri.

"Taking the explosives."

"You don't know how to use them."

"Better than not having them," said Peter, slinging the pack over his shoulder, "Let's move."

He strode forward, back toward the center hallway, the others falling in behind him cautiously.

"I take point," said Peter, checking his magazine, then heading into the hallway.

They met a few stray louse soldiers as the hallway wound and curved, running wildly about, disorganized. Peter gunned them down; or, if he missed, Lyvri did. Few of them lived long enough to shoot back; none of them hit anyone.

A few alcoves here and there held crates, or small forklifts. Peter guessed these were smaller supply tunnels, to bring goods further into the facility. Why it had to be so deep underground, so inaccessible, made Peter more fearful of its contents. He still wasn't sure if they'd be able to find cover from the explosion; if it billowed back along these tunnels, their only escape, then they would be as dead as their enemies.

Finally, his radio crackled to life.

“Peter!”

“Myron! Where's Em, is she okay?”

“Thanks for the concern,” said Myron, “Yeah, she's fine. They've met a few, but most seem to be up top. I found a map.”

“Of the complex?”

“Of this level, at least. Yeah, looking like these three tunnels meet at a warehouse, and past that should be the ammo depot. There's a sub train station on the other end of the complex, dunno what that's for, but – ”

“Not important. How much farther?”

“Not far for us.”

“Get to the edge, wait til I get there, and we'll take it together. Give the same to Emily.”

“You got it,” said Myron. His voice clicked off.

The tunnel wound back and forth, a few more times. A single louse soldier gave them easily ten seconds of warning with its echoing footsteps; Peter shot it dead, through the eye, as it rounded the corner. As he stepped past it, peering around the corner again, he saw a brighter-lit room, with white light rather than red. Shelves and crates stacked up inside it.

“Warehouse,” said Peter to Lyvri, “We're here.” He turned back to the soldiers.

“Once we're in, fan out, clear the whole thing. Then we push through the ammo storage. We have to go quick, before they figure out what we're trying to do.”

Heads nodded; satisfied, Peter reached for his radio.

“Myron, you there?”

“Waiting for you.”

He switched channels.

“Em?”

“Kinda insulted you told Myron first.”

“Not now.”

“We're ready.”

“Okay, go.”

He switched to Myron again.

“Move in.”

He clicked the radio off.

“Let's get in there.”

On his feet again, he moved into the warehouse, gun leading, swiveling about, looking for signs of opposition. None came. The warehouse was quiet, save for faint, deep echoes from the battle above them.

“They all gone?” Lyvri whispered, wondering aloud.

“Dunno,” said Peter, “Keep your guard up.”

Suddenly, there was a clicking, sharp, like high-heeled shoes. Too sharp for louse boots. Cautiously, Peter rounded one of the shelves; ten meters down the aisle, stood a bulbous creature, on four legs, gun hanging from its belly.

“Gunpod!” Peter shouted, ducking back. It opened fire, shredding through crates. Peter dropped to a crouch as the bullets cut through the shelves. He heard a cry of pain somewhere, then the sound of returning fire.

On his hands and knees, Peter moved down the aisle on the other side, until he was at the opposite corner. He peered out. The gunpod had moved away, and he watched it round the corner, before he could raise his gun. Something tapped his shoulder; he started. Lyvri was behind him.

“You got a grenade?” Peter asked her.

“No,” she whispered back.

“Sure as hell would like to have one.”

He looked at the shelf a moment longer, before getting up suddenly.

“Where the hell are you going?” Lyvri hissed.

“Don't need a grenade,” said Peter. He took aim at the corner strut that held up the shelf; a slender, folded strip of metal. He fired at it with his rifle, flinching as the bullets sparked and ricocheted. But they took their toll, and the shelf began to tilt. Swiftly, Peter aimed at the other strut, firing through the crates, into it. His magazine clicked empty, but it was done. The shelf toppled against the wall with a wrenching creak. Peter heard a mechanical squeal.

From behind him, the others moved up slowly. Peter strode up to where he guessed the thing lay, and tore a crate from the tangled mess. The dented bulbous body greeted him, the gun pinned sideways by another box. He slipped in another magazine, and filled the fallen gunpod with holes, teeth gritted as he did. Then he turned back.

“Nice,” said Lyvri softly as he passed.

“That's nothing,” he muttered. From around the other shelves, he spotted Emily and Myron, sweaty but otherwise unsullied.

“All right?” asked Myron.

“Yeah,” said Peter, reloading again. He raised his brown eyes to meet Myron's gray ones.

“There's still that ammo depot.”

He turned toward the pair of metal sliding doors at the end of the warehouse. A console sat on the wall next to it. Peter walked up, pushing the button to open it. It did not budge.

“It's not going to open,” said Lyvri from behind him, “They've locked down the whole complex.”

“How do you know?” said Peter.

Lyvri pointed to a small red light in the corner of the console.

“Oh,” said Peter, “Guess they do things different around here.” With a grunt, he unslung the backpack he carried, and pulled out a plastic bundle, wrapped tight with cord.

“How the hell do I use these things?”

Of the explosives experts they had brought along, only Imiri had survived the firefights that had brought them through the complex. Peter and Jiara helped her set them, taped to the doors in precise places that would open them without killing anyone. Peter followed her instructions as best he could; he knew explosives had a knack for unintended results.

They drew back, against the wall, Peter and Emily on one side of the door, Myron, Lyvri and Jiara on the other, and the others behind them.

“Ready?” Peter muttered to Emily.

“No,” she said, “It's been too easy so far.”

“Maybe we're having some luck for once,” said Peter. To Imiri, he gave a thumbs up.

The blast was remarkably quiet for an explosion. Imiri had mentioned something about a directional blast. Peter wasted no more time wondering about it; as soon as he heard the crumpled doors clang to the floor, he was running forward, rounding the corner.

A louse soldier crouched behind an overturned bench; Peter shot him through the head reflexively. The room ahead held firearms of all types, and there were pallets of ammunition everywhere. Another soldier leaned out as Peter ran in; he slid to the floor clumsily, off to the side. His rifle slipped from his hands, as he desperately pulled himself to cover behind a shelf.

The others rushed in behind him; one was struck down by louse bullets as he entered. The others fired back, dropping the louse behind the shelf. But more replaced it, as evidenced by the continuing firefight.

Peter slowly rose up, drawing his pistol; his rifle lay out past the shelf, well in the line of fire. He fired at several louse soldiers hiding behind a nearby gun rack; his bullets pinged off the weapons

dangerously. As he ducked back down, Emily rushed into the room, crouching beside him.

“One at the end, with a heavy machine gun. They probably knew we were coming.”

“How do we get him?” said Peter, sliding out his pistol's magazine to check it.

“Around the shelves,” said Emily.

“The sides?”

“Yeah, come on!” she said, tugging on his shoulder. Slowly, he rose and followed her, stooped over. Around the corner, another louse soldier fired at someone off to the side. Emily shot him through the neck, and kept running. Past a break in the shelves, a wave of bullets struck the wall near her head, and she dashed for cover.

Her eyes flashed at Peter expectantly. He rushed forward, trying to aim as he did.

Moving toward ammo dump to blow it up, and silo above it. Read other stuff before you get back in. make sure they meet krick at some point, learn other whos survived from woobarren

Warrick is not from the Valley. Make sure krick doesnt die in woobarren.

lyvri keeps wearing stolen louse goggles, as do other soldiers

Lyvri eventually falls in love with Peter, but does not tell him until she is dying in his arms. Peter says he loves her back, but doesn't mean it; later, ponders whether he made the right choice lying to her.

Eventually link up with other scattered enkarrans, who ended up with other groups.

Peter ends up negotiating with Kamenians to join battle, supply tide-turning air power and technology. Leads decisive raid on lice to convince kamenians that its a winning fight (like with french in rev war). Orion meets julia from them later.

Lyvri dies – mission to plant charges

“Go! Get back to the *Pride!*” Peter shouted, bullets plunking in the soft ground around him, spraying him with dirt. He shielded his eyes; a single stray fleck of soil could blind him long enough to be fatal.

The other soldiers seemed not to have heard him. Lyvri and her group crouched barely ten meters away, behind another log in the clearing, but it seemed like an uncrossable gulf of space, with a hundred bullets blocking his path.

He dared to peak out at the lice again. At least twenty, in the trees. One was peering out, fully half of his abdomen exposed. Peter lined up the shot, and dropped him, before ducking back down, as a fresh wave of bullets chewed away at the wood.

A brief lull in the chattering fire, punctuated by a single sharp crack, gave him cause to look up again. The lice were moving into the clearing, and Lyvri had stood up to shoot, taking one down as it ran. There were too many; all of the sudden at least a dozen pairs of red eyes rushing toward him. Peter forced himself past the confusion and fired, ignoring the clumsy streams of bullets that brushed past him as the lice fired as they ran.

“Go! Get out of here!” Peter shouted again, but the racket of gunfire drowned his feeble voice.

One soldier fell, then another, as the streams of louse bullets began to hit home. Peter felt something grab his gun; reflexively, he tugged it back, before realizing that a bullet had struck it. A second later, his arms flared with the pain of the jolt.

Gritting his teeth, he peered over the remnants of the log, and shot back, retaliating desperately. His bullets killed one louse and wounded another, but more replaced them. Peter threw himself down onto his stomach, and made to crawl away, hoping the lice thought him dead.

Three meters from the log, he sprang to his feet suddenly, dashing toward the woods, weaving side to side as he did. Behind a tree, he glanced over his shoulder. Lyvri stood alone now, but for one other soldier still standing beside her. The others lay dead. Peter's stomach tightened.

“Lyvri!” he shouted, “Run!”

He leaned out, firing at a pair of lice off to her left. One fell, the other retreated. He was sure she hadn't seen them. She fired her rifle from the hip. Even from twenty meters away, he could see her teeth gritted. *Get out of there, girl*, he thought.

“Lyvri!” he shouted again, before a pair of bullets plunked off a tree nearby, and he ducked.

“Damn it,” he muttered. He dropped to a crouch, turning around. He felt a premonition; the louse was there, but on the other side. Peter leaned around the tree, and put him down. His fellow, a few meters further, turned and raised his gun. Peter shot him, too, and he fell heavily amongst the pine needles.

He saw her running now, the other soldier behind her. Her slender legs swung like scissors, her black bangs sweeping in front of her eyes. Peter watched her, fists tightened around the polished wood of his rifle grip, begging the whining bullets to stay away.

They didn't. One caught her in the shoulder, and she stiffened, but kept running. The next three struck her in the back, bursting out her front in a bloody spray. He heard her cry out, and fall hard on her front.

“Lyvri! No!”

Bursting out from behind the tree, Peter gunned down a louse near the fallen log he'd hidden behind just seconds ago. His thighs burned as he ran, uncaring for the enemy. A louse soldier approached her fallen form cautiously. He turned as Peter approached, but too late; just as he raised his submachine gun, Peter swung his rifle in a wide arc, cracking a lens, revealing cold, black eye underneath. He drew his knife, ramming it hard into the louse's gut, over and over, at least a dozen times. Finally, he tore it out, throwing the dying louse to the ground.

“Fucker!” he roared, before rushing to Lyvri.

Her eyes were open, wide, just millimeters from the pine needles that coated the forest floor. They quivered from her frantic breath. Peter slid one arm under her chest, wincing as he felt hot blood on his arm. He lifted her onto his back.

He lumbered away, knowing the lice were not far behind. They still shot at him, but he couldn't look back. He could only see the root-strewn path before him, could only feel Lyvri's life slipping away as he ran with her over his shoulder.

At last he found cover, down a short slope, where a small patch of boulders sat in a depression. He had run at least three hundred meters. Lyvri's companion was gone, and Peter spared barely a split-second of thought for his fate. He lay Lyvri down on her back. Her blue eyes gaped at him. Her slender chest quivered from her fast, shallow breaths, her gray jacket damp and dark. He grabbed her hand.

"Please ..." Peter croaked, his voice suddenly weak.

"We got them, Peter," she gasped, "We won, we won."

He smiled, despite himself. Moisture gathered in his eyes; her features grew blurry. He wiped the tears away, but they returned, hot and furious.

"I'm sorry, Lyvri, I'm sorry."

"Peter?"

Her weary voice...

"What?"

"I ... I didn't know how to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I love you. I love you, and it doesn't matter, I know you don't. But I'm gone anyway, what does it matter if I tell you now?"

A rush of blood in his forehead. This was too much all at once. No, she couldn't be dying. How could she love him? How could she be dying here, in his arms, unfulfilled? The future was for him and Emily, for their children, and she had paid for it in what little life she had left.

"I love you, too, Lyvri." The lie slipped from his mouth involuntarily.

"You can't, Peter," she said, shaking her head, "You have Emily."

"I do," said Peter, hating himself, "And I ... I love her. But I can't deny I had ... some feelings for you. I don't know, Lyvri."

Something akin to a smile came onto her face. Peter felt sick to his stomach. He couldn't change his mind. Not now. The truth didn't matter, she would be dead in seconds.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Knew it," she said, and chuckled weakly. Peter watched the satisfaction in her face, and suddenly wanted to kill himself. But he smiled back. Suddenly, she began to cough, and blood bubbled from her lips. She leaned back, moaning.

"God, I'm dying," she said weakly. Peter opened his mouth to deny it, to tell her she'd survive. But the stains were too dark, and he had lied to her enough already.

Peter could not find words.

"We won't forget you, Lyvri."

"Like you could if you tried," she said, smiling at him. Then the coughing seized her again, an insatiable fit that left her limp, her eyes glassy. Peter held her, cradled her against his chest, but her body was heavy with lifelessness. He sighed, then leaned forward into her, sobbing. The pain in his chest accentuated with every heartbeat. She couldn't be dead. But she was.

He heard the rustling of footsteps approaching. He tore himself away from her still-warm body, letting it lie back. He changed magazines, then stood back against the rocks. They'd pay.

The first one came over the crest of the slope, firing as he ran. They skipped and sparked off the rocks. One struck Lyvri's body, ripping into her leg. Peter squeezed the trigger, and with a sharp crack, the louse dropped hard onto his back, sliding down the slope in a torrent of pine needles and leaves.

The second knelt behind a tree, taking aim at Peter, who ducked around another boulder. He leaned out, and shot back, filling the tree with holes. The louse fell back, and as he did, his third fellow came into view, unsuspecting. Peter shot him, then dropped to a crouch. He moved back around the boulders, to the other side, peering around the edge. He spotted a fourth louse, walking cautiously down the slope, rifle before him. Peter took another step forward, his heel crushing a twig. The louse turned at the noise, and Peter riddled his chest with bullets. He heard scrambling from back behind the boulders, and wheeled around, firing from the hip. The louse fell over, belly full of bullets, but Peter clenched his teeth savagely, and fired again, watching his enemy writhe on the forest floor, until the bullets ran out, and all that was left was echoes.

He went back to Lyvri, slinging her over his shoulder, trying not to look at those wide, blue eyes. As he limped away, back through the forest, he stumbled on roots, his eyes thick with tears. He almost fell once, but caught himself, Lyvri nearly slipping from his grasp. He realized that he had left her rifle behind, and was filled with a sudden urging to go back for it. But he couldn't now. It would do no good to risk himself for something Lyvri would term pointlessly sentimental.

Fear seized him. He realized he couldn't face Yyrick. He couldn't walk back to the *Pride*, watch his face crumple as he saw his dead sister.

The weight of his lie assaulted her. What would Emily think? He couldn't tell her. But he couldn't keep it from her. What had he ever kept from her? This brutal war had left little room for secrets.

She was dying. The poor woman deserved something in her last moments, something to make death slightly less horrific. Something to cling to, as a thanks for her thankless sacrifices.

A tricopter roared overhead, gun blazing. The treetops wavered in the wind, and a few branches fell among the dancing shadows of the canopy. Peter looked up, blinking in the wind. Point Seven would be taken now, without a doubt. If that didn't impress the Kamenians, nothing would.

He spotted the *Pride* long before he wanted to, sitting in the clearing they'd said it would be in. He spotted the soldier who'd stood with Lyvri, who had run with her, resting on a log, drinking from his canteen. He felt a rush of hate for him, that he hadn't stopped to help her. That she had died instead of him. But he pushed those thoughts away. They weren't fair, or right; just blind pain flung at the nearest target.

He spotted Emily by the entrance ramp, talking to Yyrick. Her long dark mane danced ever so slightly in the wind, her rifle crossing her back at a slant, its sling pulling at her slender shoulder. The joy of seeing her again clashed with the shock of death, and he dropped to his knees, feeling Lyvri's body press hard against his back.

Yyrick was first to spot them, and he ran forward, Emily on his heels.

"Peter! Peter!"

"She's dead!" he growled, falling to his elbows. Crippling weariness spread through his taxed muscles, and he let her body roll off of him. She was gone, what did it matter anyway?

"Oh, damn it, no," he heard Emily gasp. But the shuddering groan of Yyrick, and the feeling as he rushed by, grabbing at Lyvri where she lay, was far worse. Peter sat up, his eyes strained and dried out, watching Yyrick's thick back shaking. Then he moaned again, in anguish. Emily lay a hand on his shoulder, and crouched next to him.

"How?" he said, and the wavering in the strong man's voice felt like a knot of iron in Peter's gut, "How? How?"

"She ran, Yyrick, she ran. We blew the whole thing up, but the lice ambushed us outside. She fought like hell. There were twenty shooting at us, and by the time I faced the last of them there were four. She had to have killed a dozen on her own."

"She's gone," said Yyrick.

"She ... yeah," said Peter.

Emily's eyes were wet now, too.

"We need to get back to Myron and Warrick," she said, "We've gotta clear out so they can blow

these woods to hell.”

“Yeah,” said Peter, his mind utterly absent, “Yeah, we do.”

Yyrick straightened up.

“I’ll carry her,” Peter offered.

“No,” said Yyrick, “I’ve got her. Just let me.”

“Okay,” said Peter. He watched him gather her in his arms.

“Close her eyes,” said Emily.

Yyrick looked at her, then at Lyvri’s blank stare. He slid his fingers down her face, leaving a tranquil, sleep-like expression behind. Then he sighed, his breath shuddering, and walked toward the *Pride*. Peter turned to Emily, burying himself in her embrace, clinging to the warmth for a moment, before breaking away, and following Yyrick.

In the air, they watched the fleet rain fire on the forest around Point Seven. Without the shields, the ground batteries were on even footing with the cruisers, and they did not last long. Peter spent the minutes sitting with Emily at one of the starboard windows, watching victory unfold, trying to feel satisfaction. But none came.

His words kept slipping back into his mind, no matter how much he clung to other thoughts. The lie assaulted him. But it didn’t matter what he had said. She had slipped into absolute nothingness a moment later, leaving him the only witness. There was no soul left, no afterlife. Just the few last heartbeats of consciousness, that he had eased her pain in. And there was no reason for his guilt.

At last he broke away from Emily, and stood up.

“What?”

“Going to the bridge.”

She nodded, and turned back to the window.

On the bridge, Peter saw Yyrick and his pilot. Ahead was the *Sky Razor*, long and proud, hanging in the bleak sky alone. As he entered, Yyrick’s eyes met his, but they were too full of pain, and Peter could think of nothing to say.

Slowly, the *Pride* fell in behind the *Sky Razor*, wind whistling through the curves and corners of the ships. Finally, they drew into the *Razor’s* spacious landing bay, settling to the floor with a sharp jolt. The droning engines began to fade, and Peter stood staring ahead at the mostly-empty landing bay

peter tells emily about lyvri’s “confession” later on, and his reaction, it causes some tension between them

A lone fighter flew along the side of a hulking black cruiser, too close and too fast to be shot down. It seemed to have dropped out of nowhere, to have fallen from the branches of the titanic trees above, dodging the first few rockets like droplets shaken off in surprise. It unleashed a stream of cannon fire into the seam between the cruiser's armor plates. A slender line of flame burst into being along the length of the ship.

Inside the cockpit, the pilot's visor-clad head turned, the blank black visage shifting as something glinted off the wing. Two pursuing missiles. The fighter spat flares out its backside with a crisp cackling. One of the missiles fell for it; the other did not.

Even as the fighter dove at fantastic speed, the missile easily matched it, the battered ship limping away in the distance, forgotten now. The visor shifted again; it was easily visible behind now, and gaining. It would catch up in barely ten seconds; even as the ground hurtled toward them, the pilot knew that would be just enough.

Unerringly, the missile dodged another round of flares. They were less than a kilometer up now, the mountainside below, the alpine forest that clustered around the massive roots of the supertrees, some curling up above the ground to form arches a hundred meters tall. Beautiful, any other day; now a deadly distraction.

Behind that black visor were numbers.

"Four ... three ... two ... one."

The sound behind shifted; the pilot yanked back hard on the joystick, the ailerons straining, the metal screeching and creaking, begging for mercy. The fighter leveled off barely fifty meters up, barely clear of some of the taller trees. Behind, the missile crashed into the ground harmlessly, its fuel exhausted, billowing flame rupturing through the damp, peaceful pines, boiling them dry and scorching them.

A few minutes later, the fighter began to slow, nearing a cluster of cruisers hovering among a group of hills, angling for the landing bay in the side of the largest one. The aircraft shuddered a bit in relief, as it neared the refuge of a hangar in which to rest and refuel. Beneath the visor, the pilot smiled. They had done well.

Peter Green stood tall on the bridge, brown shirt clinging tightly to his chest, green pants held up by a belt with the same buckle he had owned all those years. Myron stood behind him.

"Sorties are coming back in," said one of the dozens seated at control panels around the bridge, "We've inflicted a decent amount of damage on the cruiser patrols. I think we've gotten their attention."

Myron turned to look at his friend.

"What's the move?"

Peter stared straight ahead, at the looming mass that was Macalavay. Taller than the tallest mountain, as large as a nation, a monstrosity of iron and war. He felt his jaw tighten.

"We go all in," he said, "It's time."

Myron nodded; Peter did not see it, but he sensed it, saw it in his mind. He shook his head; even years later, the feeling was still uncanny.

"Send to all the Kamenian forces in holding patterns, we move in. Don't bother using the encrypted frequency. It doesn't matter if the lice hear us now."

"Yes sir," came a reply.

"All right, people, you know the plan!" shouted Peter to the rest of the bridge, "We're going to hand it to them today, and we need everyone in top shape. Start sending your orders. We're gonna hit 'em now while we have the chance!"

"Yes sir!" came the scattered but enthusiastic reply from around the bridge. Even a few cheers and whistles were thrown in, but they quickly dispersed in the atmosphere of tense military discipline. They had not won yet.

Peter felt a lurch in his heels as the *Zodiac II* began to move. The ship had been a gift from the Kamenians, a reproduction of a legendary battlecruiser that had been destroyed in some battle long ago. Long before they had come to Sarengarth.

For years they had bombarded Macalavay, hammering at its shields, chipping away at its defenses with artillery that shook the ground even from miles off. The lice had retaliated, but most of the superfortresses exterior guns were quickly silenced; the rest hovered behind the shield, impotent but waiting, the lice not daring to lower the shield against the tremendous arsenal the Kamenians had amassed. It was sectioned, so it would not mean leaving the entire fortress vulnerable, but the shield could not simply blink on and off; restoring it meant a slow charging that could take anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour. More than enough time for the vigilant who artillery crews to inflict some serious damage.

But the shield had wavered, then failed. Little panels gave out, one at a time, like bubbles popping. Now, it was vulnerable. Now, they were ready.

Peter repressed a shudder as Macalavay came into view. He turned to Myron.

"I'm leaving you in temporary command," he muttered, "I'll be right back."

Myron nodded.

"Sure."

"Don't screw it up while I'm gone."

"Won't," said Myron.

Peter strode off the bridge.

In the hallways he wove between the busy crewmen rushing about, nearly tripping over a young woman carrying some sort of weapon part. He stepped around her, and kept going, heading for the hangar, navigating the winding corridors as though they were his childhood home.

He came out onto the balcony, seeing the landing bay before him, fighters landing, fighters fueling, mechanics rushing about. Through the great frame of the open hangar doors he could see the dozens of ships that flanked the *Zodiac II* on both sides, mostly artillery ships, laden with missiles. The sight heartened him, and the hint of a grin came onto his weathered face.

His head turned as he heard footsteps coming up the stairs to his left; he saw the short figure in gray flight-suit and round, almost reflective flight helmet. In one smooth motion the figure removed the helmet, unleashing a torrent of long brown hair. Peter smiled, and rushed to his wife, meeting her embrace. He held her for a moment before releasing her.

"You're safe," he said softly.

"For now," said Emily.

"Doesn't matter. Good enough."

"We moving? I felt us move."

"Yeah. Soon as the last fighter pulled in."

She shook her head, and looked away.

"God, please let this work."

"It will, Em. It has to. We've hammered this place into oblivion. Their outer defenses are powder. We should be able to swarm in."

"And what about the inner defenses?" she said.

Peter paused.

"We're well-armed. We should be able –"

"If things had happened the way they should have been able to, we never would have ended up in this damned place," said Emily, "We would've had a son and daughter years before we did. We would've ... we ..."

She looked away, her voice drifting off.

"We have those things now," said Peter, "And we will have more of them, once we finish this place. We did it once, Em. We can do it again."

She looked at him plaintively.

"Let's get to the bridge," she said, "I'm sure you left Myron in command of things."

"He does fine."

"He does. But you do better."

They set off together, just a few feet apart, swiftly but unhurried, leaving the hangar behind.

From Ereena they watched it happen. The slope-side village had a perfect view of the action, and little work would be done in the little village that day. Orion knew it as soon as he awoke, but the tiny joy of freedom was doused by the dread that hung around him. His mother and father were gone again. Even after seventeen years the feeling never changed.

He got up, dressed, and ate as much as he could fit in his shrunken stomach, before dressing and wandering outside. His sister was already awake; she rose early. He set off walking along the narrow path toward the rocky outcropping a hundred meters up. It would be an excellent viewing platform. Orion paused in his step, suddenly, at the edge of the houses, the needle-littered trail before him. He didn't have to watch it. He could turn around, go to work, ignore the distant thundering as he split firewood or watered vegetables or whatever else needed done.

But then his father's face, and his mother's, flashed in his head, and then he had to. Resolved, he stepped forward onto the trail, and began on his way up.

As he clambered over the clusters of rocks, occasionally throwing a glance behind him, he suddenly felt himself falling; he stopped suddenly, an instant before a patch of water on the rock before him. Cautiously, he crouched, and probed the dark patch with his finger; ice, a thin layer, vestige of the fading winter. He stood again, the strange feeling fading now. He had not been falling, no, he hadn't felt the sickly plummet in his stomach; but he had felt *something*. He should have been used to it now, but it still mystified him. At least he had been right this time. Perhaps he should tell someone, a doctor, yet every time he considered it he dreaded learning he had some incurable mental illness that would leave him shunned by all.

Well, no, not his father. Or his mother or sister. Or Myron. But everyone else. Peter could force acceptance on them to some level, but it would always be there, behind their smiling faces, a knowledge that he was someone insane, unworthy of thought, unworthy of consideration.

He decided to think about something else.

He thought of his rifle, still leaned against the wall in the back room of the cabin. He knew he wouldn't need, yet for some reason he yearned for the security it gave him when he clutched it. Something to hold, to give him power beyond his own fists and feet. But if things did go wrong, the pitiful weapon would be little protection against the hordes of louse ships and fighters, the fire from the sky, covering everything, leaving them writhing in agony and death.

Myron had given him yet another shooting lesson barely a day ago, taught him to shoot thrown disks from the air with his old shotgun. Would he ever see the man again?

He found his sister atop the hill, sitting cross-legged on a rock, her eyes and lips wistful, the morning sun peeking through the clouds to gently illuminate her face. Her blond hair twitched in the slight breeze, a long mane of it that ran down behind her shoulders. She turned to him, and smiled.

"Morning Orion."

"Morning Cass," he said, trying without success to return the smile. Hers faded.

"Today is the day," she said, suddenly solemn.

"It is," said Orion, "Surprised there's not a hundred others up here already."

"Most everyone else is still asleep," said Cassiopeia.

"Might be a good thing."

There was a pause as they gazed out at the towering hulk of Macalavay, watched the few louse cruisers that always slid slowly around it, and watched the distant pinpoints that were the who fleet,

hovering in the air, surrounding the superfortress, ready to attack.

"They're going to be okay," said Cassiopeia, seemingly to herself as much as to Orion.

"I hope," said Orion, still looking out at Macalavay.

"It's so strange," said Cassiopeia, "To think that we might not have to live here anymore. Or, at least, we could live without our mother and father being gone all the time."

"I'm seventeen," said Orion, "You're fifteen. I think it's too late for a lot of what we missed."

Cassiopeia's green eyes glared at him.

"I don't know, Cass," said Orion, "Maybe we didn't miss that much anyway. We grew up, learned to take care of ourselves, learned to help out around here. We saw our parents at least every few days. They've been busy."

"They don't even live with us, Orion," said Cassiopeia, "Don't you want to know what that's like?" She looked plaintive.

"Of course, but ... look, it's different, okay? The way we grew up, it's not how most families are. You see the other kids, like Trevor and his sister, and you know it's different for them. But I don't mind. We're just as good a family as they are."

"How do you know that?" said Cass, "You've never lived in any family but this one."

"And I never want to," said Orion.

Cassiopeia looked at him a moment longer, a concerned frown on her face, before turning away.

"I guess you're right," she said, "I mean, we've got it better than some."

There was a pause. They both were thinking of Brianne, one of Cassiopeia's friends. Her father was a crewman on one of the Kamenian artillery batteries. Louse fighters had attacked their position, strafing it relentlessly with rocket fire. They'd been shot down, but Brianne's father had given his life to do it, found bloody and dead in the anti-aircraft gun chair's shredded straps. Riddled with holes. That had been four years ago, and Brianne had never been the same since.

A distant flash interrupted their somber thoughts, glinting off of Cassiopeia's eyes. She gasped; Orion turned, seeing fire billowing on the side of Macalavay, near one of the top corners.

"Did you bring the binoculars?" Orion asked.

"Yeah," said Cass, "Cause I knew you'd forget them."

She held a pair out to him, and he took it.

A torrent of missiles broke free of the approaching who fleet, streaking toward the superfortress. Thin red beams retaliated, laser countermeasures tearing into the swarm, one beam catching several at once, melting their little electronic brains, the speed of light the only thing that could keep up with the lightning-fast missiles. But they pushed on, slamming into Macalavay, leaving billowing smoke and crumbling stone in their wake, exposing the metal beneath like bare bone. It was barely discernible from so far away.

Just then the sound reached them, from many kilometers away, the very ground seeming to hum beneath the soles of their shoes, the air itself seeming to quiver with electricity. The sound echoed, eerily and ominously, shattering the warm drollness of the morning.

The distant explosions crackled, like thunder unadulterated by hills or trees, a sharp crisp sound that chilled the neck and shook the soul. Orion felt a cold needle in his chest. He could only imagine what it was like up close.

Then Macalavay retaliated.

Orion raised the binoculars to his eyes, watching the railguns firing, ripping holes in the advancing who ships. Some listed and fell, others continued forward through the torrent. Orion watched one of the railguns atop Macalavay struck again and again by missiles, until it shattered, pieces falling down the walls. Tumbling thousands of meters, they seemed to move so slowly, even as they plummeted toward the ground.

Through shaky hands Orion watched a quivering view of a who battlecruiser swarmed by Scorpions. Missiles struck it, again and again, splintering an engine off. A series of small explosions ran

along its side, and before a more powerful one split the ship in half, billowing golden fire and black smoke from the fatal wound.

It took nearly ten minutes for the louse cruisers to join the defense; but when they did, they nearly equaled the who fleet in numbers. Even so, Orion knew one Kamenian ship would be worth three of theirs. More than a few Kamenian cruisers turned wide, unleashing a broadside of railgun and missile fire into the approaching lice. One of the larger Kamenian cruisers fired a heavy railgun directly into the side of one of the louse cruisers, snapping it like a twig.

Orion stumbled back, and sat next to his sister on the rock. He kept watching. There would be a lot to see today.

As Peter watched, another four ships went down, in barely the space of ten seconds. He sighed, rubbing his forehead, his eyebrow furrowed. He had known that this would be a costly battle, but that didn't make it any easier to watch.

He had not expected Macalavay to come to life so vibrantly and so violently as it had. Already he had lost twice as many ships as he had expected to by this point. Pushing into the interior of Macalavay might be difficult.

Myron stood behind him, Emily at his side.

"When do we commit the troop ships?" he asked.

"When it's safe," said Peter, still looking at the view screen.

"We might not have that much time," said Myron, "Part of the plan counts on getting troops inside, where they can capture batteries, disable them, get a toehold on the inside of the thing."

"I know the plan," said Peter, not looking up.

"Then you know we have to pick a time and live with the consequences. We might lose some – hell, we probably will lose a lot. But it's got to be done."

"What's this here?" said Peter, ignoring his friend's words, pointing at a large red square on the map, which was slowly pulsating. Myron came forward, peered over his shoulder.

"Heavy battery. One of two this side of the superfortress. They've got them perched on the corners firing at us."

"It's raining hell on our ships," said Peter.

"It's a battery," said Myron, "That's what it does."

"It has to go," said Peter. He turned to Emily.

"Are you serious?" she said incredulously.

"Yeah," said Peter, "If we can take that out it'll let a whole lot of pressure off of our ships. Then we can get our troops inside. Happy?" he said, turning to Myron now, who shrugged.

"If anyone can do it, it's you two," said Myron.

"Right," said Peter, "I'm leaving you in charge again. Keep things on course."

"I will," said Myron.

"Let's go," said Peter to Emily. He pressed a button on a nearby panel.

"Squadron Nine-Four, report to hangar," Peter's voice boomed over the intercom, "Squadron Nine-Four, to hangar. Immediately."

He released the button, and turned to Myron.

"We'll be back," he said, then followed Emily off of the bridge.

Barely five minutes later, the eight Falcon fighters wove between the looming Kamenian fleet, the occasional rail-gun slug or missile shrieking past them. Peter had little fear from the enemy at this distance; they had more tempting targets than a few fighters.

The furious melee ahead was almost blinding. Unshielded, Macalavay was proving quite

vulnerable to bullet and bomb. As Peter watched, a great tower crumbled majestically, plummeting several kilometers toward the ground. He watched intently; he had not seen this for twenty years.

A proximity alarm flashed near his thigh; he had drifted a bit close to a Kamenian ship. He veered away, forcing himself to focus. This would not be easy; already, looking at the towering battery, its long barrel as thick as one of the cruisers, he wondered if he had bitten off more than he could chew.

"Alright there?" came Emily's voice over the radio.

"Yeah," said Peter, "Just distracted. Keep in formation, then break apart when we get within three clicks. Dodge, weave, throw 'em off, however you have to. Look like just another fighter squadron joining the battle. Then hit that battery from the side. You've got two torpedoes, each, remember, so make them count."

"Don't miss," came the wry voice of Alice Kimp, one of the Kamenian pilots Peter had recruited after a promising raid on one of the outer towers, near the forests. She had managed to fly straight through a hangar that went from end to end, dropping time-delayed bombs as she flew. A moment later, she flew out the other side, and they detonated, all but gutting the structure. It had caught Peter's eye; two days later, she was transferred.

They flew forward of the other cruisers, and like leaping from a ledge they felt suddenly free – and vulnerable. They hurtled toward the close-quarters firefight ahead of them. Already the air grew thick with smoke. Peter punched his radio.

"Split!" he cried, before twisting his hand, turning the control stick off to the left, sending his Falcon into a corkscrew, diving. A stream of anti-aircraft fire flew out in front of him; he pulled back just a little bit, ducking under it, then pulling up, flying straight for the wall of Macalavay, lining up perfectly flush with it, too close to be shot at.

"Hug the wall!" he shouted into his radio, though he had no idea if anyone could hear it. Had they been attacking the wall, it would have made them useless, but they weren't, and the tactic might stand a chance of getting them there alive.

There was a cry of distress from the radio; a man, Hurrick, had a Scorpion on his tail.

"I can't shake him!" he cried, "Can't get him off. I tried flares, I tried –"

Static replaced his voice. Peter saw a green icon on his console go dark. He shook his head. No time for distractions now.

The wall suddenly ran out, and he was soaring straight up, over the top of Macalavay, the endless landscape of towers and landing strips stretching out before him. A few lights, lavender and orange and red, blinked intermittently, spread out across the monotonous angles of gray. Peter leveled off and dove. He angled his fighter toward the giant battery sitting on the corner of Macalavay, perched so many kilometers up that clouds tickled its barrel. It pulsed every half-minute, flinging a two-ton slug at some hapless ship that would be ripped in two by the shot.

He spotted two Scorpion fighters, ahead and below, climbing fast to intercept him. He turned, forcing them to climb faster to catch him. They fell back, out of his sight, as he passed. In their ascent they lost speed; nimbly, Peter turned his fighter around, one-hundred eighty degrees, and sped back toward them, his guns whirring. By the time they realized what was happening, one had lost an engine, and began to list dangerously, trailing smoke. The other broke away, but Peter chased it down, turning inside its curve. A stream of hot lead, then a pair of missiles, finished it off.

A warning flashed on his dashboard; the other Scorpion, though wounded, had somehow ended up behind him. Peter glanced in his mirror, seeing the wavering trail of smoke, and the thin profile of the vengeful fighter.

"Damn it."

He slammed his flares button, and swerved away from the battery. Survival was more important. The Scorpion was gaining.

Then it was gone, blown in half. Its remains hurtled toward Macalavay in an airborne somersault. Peter looked around wildly for a second, confused, before realizing. He turned around slowly, a wide

curve bringing the battery back into view, and pushed the radio button.

"I love you, Emily," he said, voice thick with relief.

"Love you too," she replied tensely, "Alice split off, she's engaging some Scorpions. I would have helped her, but I ... she can ... herself."

Interference cut into Emily's words.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," said Peter, "Line up on that battery. Let's hit it fast before more Scorpions come."

"They already are," said Emily, "Outer side, north."

Peter's eyes swiveled to the north, and he spotted four black dots, wavering in the air.

"Right," he said, "Let's do this quick."

He lined up the pale green circle on his HUD over the thin shimmering line that wrapped around the battery near the top; out of view of the cruisers lower down, but well in sight for Peter and Emily. It had to be the control center. Peter steadied himself, then flicked the button to switch to torpedoes, and slowly, cautiously squeezed the trigger.

As his shot out, so did Emily's barely a split second later.

"Break and drop!" came Emily's voice, "They're shooting at us."

Peter cut the thrust and rolled over on one side, his stomach lurching sickeningly, his torpedoes, and whatever damage they were about to inflict, spinning out of view. They dropped, missiles speeding harmlessly overhead, then pulled out, barely five hundred meters above the roof of Macalaway. Peter's Falcon sped between two skeletal iron towers. Then it climbed, fast, toward the four fresh foes.

Off to the right, Emily did the same; he glimpsed her fighter catching up in his peripherals. He switched back to his missiles, and steadied himself.

"Flank them!" he shouted into the radio.

"You've got it," said Emily.

"Nine-Four-Three, where are you?" shouted Peter, looking for Alice.

"Two Scorpions on my tail," said Alice, "I've got them, I've got them, copy?"

"Copy," said Peter, "Where's everyone else?"

"Four and Five are lining up their torpedoes now. Six is ... six is down. Seven and Eight already fired their torpedoes."

"Seven, Eight, copy!" Peter shouted.

"Copy," came the voice of Eight, a man named Hedrick who Peter could not remember adding to his squadron. Perhaps he had been Emily's idea.

"Status!" Peter demanded.

"Peter!" Emily insisted, "They're close."

"Head home, Seven, and Eight. You've done your job." Then he clicked off his radio, and whirled his fighter to the side, the four Scorpions speeding past, their missiles blurring harmlessly by. After they passed, one started to turn, but Peter turned fast, shooting at the Scorpion as it banked hard, his bullets chewing relentlessly at its wing. It fishtailed, trying to throw off the attack, but the stream of cannon fire swerved into its cockpit, and it suddenly stopped turning, instead drifting sideways, the cockpit glass shattered. Peter watched the Scorpion cartwheel into oblivion, then whirled sharply to the left, back toward the fight.

"Peter, I need help here!" came Emily's desperate voice. He slammed the thrust, speeding toward her. He could see her fighter, wildly twisting to escape a Scorpion on her tail. She flew toward him, the Scorpion right behind.

"Dive, Em!" he shouted. She obliged, just in time for Peter to fire a missile over her fighter and into the Scorpion. Peter watched it collide in a burst of smoke, fire, and twisted steel, before it rocketed past, Peter swerving his Falcon out of the way to avoid the hurtling wreckage.

"Thanks," she crackled.

"Two left," said Peter.

They turned in sync, to face their two remaining opponents. Both Scorpions rolled to opposite sides, splitting up, a flanking maneuver Peter knew well.

"Stay together," he said to Emily.

They turned wide, following the first one as it spun around to meet them. Peter fired a pair of missiles at it, then followed up with a long stream of cannon fire. Much of it missed, but the missiles sent the fighter into a wild dive and spin to avoid them, and just as it pulled out, Emily's two missiles impacted it, blowing one wing off from the engine out, sending it tumbling like a leaf dropped from a tree.

The second Scorpion angled at them from above, out of the late-morning sun. Peter could hear cannon fire whizzing by his cockpit, and thunks all around him that told him he was being hit.

"I can't see him!" Emily cried over the radio.

"Split up," said Peter.

They broke apart, climbing as fast as they could. Peter wove to and fro to evade the cannon fire, but still heard it following him relentlessly, missing by meters, and sometimes hitting. He gritted his teeth; a single lucky bullet of the thousands screaming toward him, could strike him in the head. He had to act fast.

"He's on me, Em! Climb and find him!"

"On it."

Peter wove valiantly, then dove, hoping to throw his enemy off. But to no avail; a second later, Peter caught a glimpse of the fighter swerving in behind him. A second later, Emily swerved in behind it. The three of them flew, in a line, for a few seconds, Peter's heart racing, still barely dodging the Scorpion's stream of hot lead.

"Peter, move!" Emily shouted on the radio, "I can't get a bead on him without hitting you."

Peter spun his ship to the right, but the Scorpion tailed him, refusing to break away.

"Just shoot, Emily, shoot!"

"I can't, you're in the way, damn it!"

He heard an alarm flashing from his elbow as missiles streaked toward him. He slammed the flares button, heard them hiss behind, defeating them. Emily still wavered behind him, refusing to fire.

"Fine," Peter muttered to himself. He reached forward, steadied himself, then cut the thrust.

He felt a lurch as the ship lost speed, then a whoosh and a rattling as the Scorpion flew past him, then Emily's fighter. The Falcon slowed to a mid-air crawl, and as he watched, Emily fired two missiles, each of which slammed into the Scorpion, the first blowing a wing off, the second obliterating it. Peter sighed a little with relief, and set into a dive, switching over to his torpedoes. Every second counted; the sooner they destroyed that gun battery, the fewer lives it would claim.

Peter has to finish destroying massive artillery damaging warships, before they can advance troops ships into Macalavay to gain a foothold and capture gun batteries.

Sunlight gleamed off of the chrome barrels of the armored carrier's coaxial guns, belying the bitter wind that blew across the rocky plains. Myron stared out at the surrounding landscape from the top of the largest of ten large tanks as they hovered barely five feet over the landscape. His steel eyes stared out at the landscape. One hand held a pair of range-finder binoculars, and the other adjusted his helmet so that it covered as much of his hair as possible, and shielded some of his face from the sadistic bite of the wind.

"It's cold as hell up here," Myron muttered unhappily to himself.

"I'm pretty sure hell wouldn't be that cold," came a soft female voice from behind him. Myron chuckled, knowing without turning around that Emily had come to join him. Peter had never liked bringing her on combat missions, but she'd proven herself as adept at taking care of herself as any of the soldiers that came through training, and she could defend herself adequately if it came to it. And, while female soldiers might have been a minority, they were by no means rare. Peter respected Emily's free will more than anything and that was one of the reasons he loved her. So she had come.

Emily ascended the thin grated staircase leading to the shielded observation position on the carrier ship, the tap of each footstep echoing metallicly even in the frozen air. The carrier, nearly seventy feet long and forty wide, was armed with the type of cannons normally only found on heavy cruisers. Around each of the seven carriers were smaller escort tanks, far smaller and with far less potent artillery aboard, but also much more maneuverable. Put together, they were a force of deadly versatility, at least against the opponents Myron expected them to encounter. At last she reached the top and came to stand beside Myron.

"Where's Peter?" he asked, eyes still watching the glare off of the flat rock that filled the expanse before them.

"Control room," she replied, "Keeping us right on course. I asked him to come up here with me, to see how you're doing, but he didn't want to."

"Probably doesn't want his ears frozen off," Myron said darkly, and now it was Emily's turn to laugh. She came up next to him, scarf wrapped around her neck, dressed in the knee-length coat that female officers wore. It had been tailored to fit her thinner frame better, though, and reached to mid-thigh on her. Her headgear was identical to Myron's, and below it her hair flowed freely in the wind. Her emerald green eyes looked out ahead, scanning back and forth across the landscape, searching the way Myron had. He watched her. Sometimes, deep down, he would admit to himself that he was jealous of Peter.

For some reason, it was thoughts like these that made Myron realize his age. Peter and Emily barely aged, being Chosen. But Myron had felt his fifty years pass, and he was no longer a young or even middle-aged man. He was healthy and strong, and knew he'd live, probably even fight, for many more years. But he would die before Peter and Emily would. Once, he'd been Peter's mentor, teaching him to fight, to shoot, to think. But now he was merely an old relic, brought along just so as not to be left behind. He was still an asset, still a fighter. But Peter had many other soldiers at his disposal, many other leaders capable as Myron.

But then, Myron realized, none were as trusted as he was. That was the reason that he'd always been picked to lead the most important missions, to cut the critical supply lines, to decapitate the enemy command, to destabilize the enemy's movements. Peter couldn't trust many people in the tense times, so he could only truly rely on those who'd served him longest. The vital missions would be entrusted to Myron as long as he led the whos, and as long as Myron could still fight.

A flicker of light in the distance distracted Myron from his thoughts. He raised his binoculars, and peered through them, looking for the source of the light. He scanned back and forth, then stopped suddenly. There were several black shapes, about the same size as the tank he rode in, on the horizon, and, according to his range-finder, they were just two kilometers away.

"Enemies," said Myron, who turned around and went for the staircase back down to the cabin. He slid open the metal door with a creak, and quickly descended to the control area, where four soldiers

sat in a square formation, one driving the tank and controlling the main cannon, one as a backup driver, and two others checking engines and other functions.

“Leo,” said Myron to the main driver, “We’ve got four bandits on the horizon.”

“Bearing?” asked Leo, not raising his eyes from the control interface.

“Dead ahead.”

Leo turned around to look at Myron.

“You’re sure they’re hostile?”

“Have I ever guessed wrong?”

Leo shrugged, then turned back to the controls and brought the main cannon online to fire.

Satisfied, Myron turned and climbed back up to the turret. Just as he was coming out the door, the gun fired, jolting the entire tank backwards and nearly knocking Myron back onto the stairs. When the tank was again moving normally, Myron peered up to watch the shells fly. The other tanks were firing as well, hoping to pick off the enemy before they were close enough to fire. One of the few advantages they had was in longer ranged armor; they wouldn’t be vulnerable to retaliation until they were within a kilometer or so of the enemy tanks.

The main cannon fired again, testing Myron’s balance. A bright white bolt of glowing metal sped off into the distance. A moment later, it impacted on one of the black dots, resulting in a flash of red and a spectacular cloud of billowing black smoke.

“One down,” muttered Myron under his breath.

Suddenly, a purple ball of energy slid into Myron’s view, seemingly out of nowhere. Before he could even register it in his mind, it had collided with one of his tanks, resulting in a deafening explosion that sent charred pieces of machinery everywhere, including a chunk of armor that tumbled through the air directly at the turret they were standing on. Myron ducked and covered his face to protect it. Behind him, Emily did the same. The scorched metal bounced off the side of the tank with a hollow clang, before landing back on the rocky ground, still smoking. Myron turned around and saw the wreckage of the tank, billowing smoke.

“What the hell was that?” came a startled voice from inside the tank. Myron looked around wildly.

“Return fire!” he shouted. Another cluster of deafening booms echoed like a stifled thunderclap. In this distance, two more white flashes, followed by slowly rising columns of thick black smoke, indicated at least two more kills.

Before Myron could give another order, he found himself in the air, feeling as though his ears had been punched brutally, from a giant slingshot. He could see the blackened crust of the tank he’d been in a second before, pieces stripped from it and suspended in the air. Then he was falling, and jolted horribly as he landed. The cold wind mercilessly whipped face as he lay broken on the rocks, staring into the blinding sunlight.

“Four- thirty-four is down!” came a static-ridden voice in his ear. Myron realized his radio link had survived the blast. He tried to sit up, but was greeted by a crippling pain that forced him back down, as if a rubber band was stretched along his spine to keep it tight. Something had definitely been broken.

“We’re alright,” Myron croaked back into the microphone, hoping he was being somewhat convincing, “Return fire! Contact Tiger squadron and see if they can give us any clue what’s going on.”

“You got it,” crackled a confirmation.

“Do it,” said Myron, beginning to pull himself along the ground, looking for Emily, ignoring the painful scraping of the sharp, black rocks. Somewhere in the distance, another cannon blast thundered; a split-second later, a nearby impact flung him back down, his cheek punctured against a pebble. Cursing, he pushed himself back up. Why were they still shooting at him?

He spotted Emily, lying unconscious, ten meters from the wreck, dangerously exposed. With a grunt, he began to crawl toward her.

Peter could only stare in shock at the horrible scene before him. Beside him, Emily was equally aghast. The entirety of the *Forthright Avenger's* bridge crew lay dead, covered in slashes, many unrecognizable. A few black scorch marks and a couple of bullet holes indicated that fire had been exchanged, but most of the bodies had been simply hacked to pieces. Peter knelt next to one of the fallen, a young woman with a short-cut shock of black hair that was matted with blood. Her blue eyes were still wide open, glassy and dead. Orion pressed his thumb against a vein in her neck, just to be sure. Then he sighed and got to his feet.

“Do you like my handiwork, Peter?” came a slow, precise voice from behind him. Peter whipped around, recognizing the voice instantly, but he saw nothing.

“Damn it,” he muttered under his breath. Timeless somehow always had the upper hand when they met. And he always had a way out, too. Peter whipped out his daggers. Behind him, Emily pulled out her own.

Then, before his mind could fully register the movement, Timeless was in front of them. With a single swipe, he slashed a red line across the side of Emily's face, her smooth cheek suddenly interrupted by a vicious gash. She fell to her knees, where Timeless' second strike hit the side of her bowed head, sprawling her on her side, too stunned to make a sound. Her dagger clattered from her hand.

“You'll pay for that,” Peter spat, voice seething with hatred as he eyed Emily pained expression. Peter grinned. Timeless began to approach him, unsheathing a pair of short batons. Peter warding his daggers in front of him, ready for an attack. They began to circle, Emily's limp form just outside the arc of their movements. As he passed her, Timeless drove the heel of his boot into her ribs. She gasped suddenly, then rolled over moaning, clutching her abdomen. Peter could barely see through the narrow slits of his eyes. Filled with rage, he charged Timeless, staff leading.

Timeless easily parried Peter's first blow, but Peter slammed his knuckles with the butt of his dagger around, smashing two of his opponent's fingers, and causing him to drop one of his batons. It fell through the iron grating in the floor, landing in the water below with a splash. Enraged, Timeless lashed out in fury, and Peter barely ducked the attack. As he turned his head, Timeless spun his baton, hooking Peter's left-hand dagger from his hand, and, on the backswipe, denting his knee with a dull blow that made Peter wince even before he felt the pain. Numbness swept over his leg.

Refusing to allow himself to be killed so easily, Peter backpedaled, ignoring the stabbing pain from his leg that pulsed every time it touched something. Timeless replaced his missing baton with a discfinder, which he aimed at Peter's head. Hearing a click, Peter flung himself out of the way as the deadly darts whizzed past, and he landed on his foot badly, causing waves of nearly crippling pain to roll throughout his body. He staggered to his feet just in time to avoid a lumbering swing with the baton. As it came swinging back, time seemed to slow in Peter's mind as reflexes took over. His elbow punched up, deflecting the baton so that it swung high. Peter followed with a vicious uppercut into his opponent's ribs. As Timeless reeled back, Peter kicked at him, bludgeoning his kneecap. *Repayment in kind*, Peter thought to himself with vicious satisfaction.

Timeless winced, but was far from finished. He swung his baton at Peter, who stepped into the blow, catching Timeless' arm in mid-swing, and twisted his wrists. Timeless' other fist balled and came in viciously, but Peter caught it in his cupped hand, and, now with a grip on both of Timeless' hands, hooked his foot around the back of his enemy's knee and pulled, forcing Timeless down on one knee. He then stepped back, put his foot to Timeless' chest, and pushed hard, sending him onto his back. Timeless rolled over on his side, but came to a sort of crawling position after the second roll, and was back on his feet, back in a crouch, leaping back at Peter, his baton unbelievably still in his hand. Peter stumbled back and ducked a wild swipe. A gleam of adrenaline flashed in his eyes, and his grin promised nothing but cold malice. Peter lashed out, smashing Timeless' jaw and snapping his head to the side. He reeled, and

Peter grabbed Timeless' other baton from the ground, and went on the offensive, driving him back, their fight circling Emily's unconscious form on the floor. Both gritted their teeth, weapons slapping each other with ear-splitting snaps.

Meanwhile, thirteen hundred feet below Peter and Timeless, Orion was dashing down the hallway to the hangar, trying to keep pace with the hundreds of others around him. Soldiers and civilians alike joined the crowded rush. Behind them, Orion could hear the unearthly screech of energy fire, the screams of its victims, and the stuttering staccato bursts of return fire. Myron was covering their escape, as well as that of the fleeing civilians, and it seemed like he and his soldiers were doing an excellent job. Or at least a sufficient one.

As he ran, Orion tried to refocus his priorities. He needed to find Julia, as quickly as he could, not only because he was worried for her, but because he knew that until he did, his fear for her would be a potentially deadly distraction. So Orion looked from side to side, craning his neck occasionally to see if she had joined the crowd from one of the side hallways, hoping for a glimpse of her blond ponytail bobbing amongst the other heads. He knew he would recognize her immediately if he saw her.

A few moments later, though, there was still no sign of her, and they were barely a thousand feet from the hangar bay. Orion could feel fear growing in him like cold water filling a canteen. Already his mind had created a thousand terrible possibilities as to her fate, and as much as Orion tried to shut them out, he could not shake the fear that something terrible might have happened to her.

Then he felt something touch his shoulder, and without turning around he knew who it was. Had they not been running for their lives, he would have turned and buried her in a hug. But he sufficed to grab her hand and pull her alongside him.

"Where's Peter?" she asked, almost casually.

"I don't know," Orion shook his head, "I haven't heard from Cass yet either."

"I'm sure she's fine. She was flying cover for the withdrawal, right? I'm sure that's a busy job."

"Well where were *you*?" Orion asked.

"Trying not to get shot. I'm not exactly a trained soldier, am I?"

A jarring explosion interrupted their conversation, and nearly threw them to floor. Many others were. One man pitched head-over-heels, before landing flat on his back with a soft thud. A bright light flashed from behind him, and echoed screams were lost in a sudden rumbling noise, which grew until Orion could hear nothing else, then faded. When it had cleared, Orion found himself on the ground; apparently in the intensity of the noise he had fallen over. He got to his feet.

"You know how to shoot," said Orion, trying to continue their conversation despite the nearly overwhelming tinnitus.

"What was that?" Julia said, ignoring Orion and turning to look behind them. The crowd was starting to move again; several people were still staggering to their feet, and Orion felt the flow of the throng beginning to carry them along again.

"No idea," said Orion, his mind more focused on escaping, "Probably some sort of sound-based thing. Anything else with an explosion large enough to be that loud would have killed us all."

Julia stopped running suddenly. Orion stopped, too, and went back to her. She was staring back down the tunnel, from which pained screams and gunfire still emanated, their echoes bouncing down the hallway like ricocheting bullets.

"What?" Orion said hurriedly. Julia did not respond immediately, and Orion persisted. "Julia, we have to move! Everyone's leaving!"

"Myron's still down there. And the soldiers. I – I think they're dead."

"We can't do anything for them, Julia. We have to go." He took her arm, leading her through the crowd, and did not resist, but she did not turn away from the terrible noises behind him until they reached the hangar.

Here there was a terrific rush of activity, as Orion and Julia could see from the balcony at the

entrance to the hangar. Several Matland-class transport ships, one of which Orion recognized as the *Radiant Ether*, sat side-by-side in an easily three-hundred meter long landing bay. People clogged and clotted the stairs trying to get down to the main floor, and around the boarding areas of each ship was pure chaos. Sheer terror would kill more people here than the lice would; already people were trampling over each other in their rush to secure a place on the escaping ships.

“Stairs?” asked Julia, looking at the near-solid mass of people.

“No,” said Orion, “We can't get down right now. We're going to have to wait.”

“What about you? Aren't you supposed to escort the ships out?”

“Yeah, but I don't think that's going to happen at the moment, is it?” Orion said irritably. To have come all this way, danger constantly on their heels, only to be delayed now by a crowded staircase was at best a little frustrating. He leaned against the railing, glaring at the floor.

His eyes had just barely begun to trace out the lines between the tiles in the floor, when the sound of gunfire grew louder and louder from down the hallway. Orion looked up. A woman, fleeing frantically, burst free of the end of the hallway, only to be struck by a trio of bullets that spun her around before she dropped to the floor.

“What the hell?” Julia said, starting forward. Suddenly, Orion threw his arm across her front and held her back.

A solitary louse soldier emerged, almost calmly, from the hallway, submachine gun presented before him, flat orange lenses glinting as they glanced from side-to-side. At once he noticed Orion and Julia; most of the rest of the civilians had filtered down the stairs. He raised his gun.

“Down!” shouted Orion; he and Julia dived for cover behind stray stacks of supplies near the wall. The gun stuttered as it sprayed bullets, punching holes in the supply boxes and ricocheting around inside, but thankfully few penetrated the box entirely. He heard Julia scream from behind him; sudden panic drove him forward. He crawled around the boxes to the balcony, where he pushed himself and shouted.

“They're in the goddamned hangar! Someone get up here!”

Heads turned to look at him, but Orion had to throw himself back to the floor as a fresh torrent of bullets shattered smaller boxes, sending splinters of plastic flying in every direction. Then they stopped. Orion lay prone for a second, trying to hear over his rapid panting. Then he turned his head, and glimpsed a black boot stepping into view, behind the crates. Immediately he was on his feet, running back around them on the other side, drawing his knife as he went. The louse soldier, busy peering down the maze of crates, turned around just as Orion drove his knife right under his mask, up into his chin. With a jolt and a muffled cry of pain, the soldier stiffened, his body becoming dead weight in Orion's arms. He dropped the corpse, wheeled around, looking for Julia.

Behind him, several soldiers rushed up the stairs, rifles in hand. They looked at Orion.

“Hallway!” he shouted. They scampered to take positions against the wall on either side.

Orion turned back to the crates. Julia was lying on her side, staring at the wall, her shallow, controlled breathing visible as her chest rose and fell. Orion rushed to her side.

“Leg,” she said weakly. Orion reached over to her thigh, pulled her hand away, and slowly peeled bloody clothing away from the wound. Julia winced as he did; he put his other hand on her hip to steady her.

“It missed the artery,” said Orion.

“Yeah I figured that,” Julia said, through teeth gritted with pain.

Orion heard gunfire from the hallway.

“I'll be back,” he said. As he drew away, he saw Julia's face, crumpled, her eyes squeezed shut, and almost dropped back next to her, to scoop her up and carry her to the safety of the escape ships. But she was as resilient as anyone Orion had ever known. She would be alright.

Bullets jerked through one of the soldiers firing from the hallway; he and his weapon fell with a clatter. The other soldiers returned fire with carefully aimed bursts, even as bullets flew out of the

hallway to punch through metal paneling and glass on the opposite wall.

Orion went for the downed soldier's gun. He raised the scope to his eyes, centering the glowing cherry-red crosshair over the exposed leg of a louse soldier hiding in an alcove. Orion fired; the soldier started, and dropped both his weapon and an empty magazine clattered to floor as he slumped against the wall. Orion ducked back immediately. Another soldier was not so fast, and was struck across the shoulder and hip by louse bullets, knocking him to the floor. He weakly tried to drag himself back to cover, but another wave of gunfire ripped through his helmet, splattering blood and brains across the floor. Orion gritted his teeth, before whirling around and aiming another trio of bullets. He gunned down two louse soldiers in rapid succession, their own blood spraying against the wall.

It was only when he had flung himself back around the corner that Orion fully processed what he had seen a second before. There were easily twenty louse soldiers in the nearest alcoves, and beyond them, he had glimpsed what had to be dozens more moving down the halls.

"There are too many!" Orion shouted to the soldier on the opposite side of the hallway, "We have to hold them as long as we can, then get out of here."

The soldier nodded; he and his companion raised their rifles again, firing furiously. One ran out of ammunition; then the second. Both stopped, crouching against the wall to reload. At once Orion heard sudden footsteps; the lice must have heard the guns clicking empty. He angled his gun around the corner, firing it blindly; he heard a smothered shout of pain. The soldiers finished reloading and rejoined the firefight.

An uneasy feeling snaked its tendrils around Orion's brain as he shot furiously from cover. As he realized what it was, his suspicions were confirmed as a small black tube shot out from the hallway, rolling and skipping along the floor.

"Grenade!" Orion shouted; but as he uttered the words the thing skittered past them, out of lethal range.

Smoke hissed out of the grenade as it came to a rest against the opposite wall, spreading ominously, blurring his sight. Orion waved his hand at it futilely; he could not see his hand in front of his own face. Blindly, he stumbled back, in a direction he guessed was away from the wall, before bumping into the supply crates he had found shelter behind just a few moments – or was it seconds? – before. He put his hand against the floor to steady himself, and felt warmth. Julia.

A sudden outbreak of gunfire cracked through the smoke. They were getting closer. Could the louse soldiers see through the smoke? Orion did not know what was behind the goggles they wore; perhaps the dreadful beings could see in infrared thanks to their eye-wear. Orion had no answer for that; he would have to get out of the smoke, and fast.

He slung his gun over his shoulder, and slid his hands under Julia's shoulders. This would have to be fast. He wanted nothing more than to take a moment to prepare himself, but there was no time. He tightened his grip on Julia, and ran out from behind the crates.

Immediately, bullets skipped off the floor around him, but already his sight was growing clearer; he dragged Julia to the top of the stairs, where only a few tendrils of smoke remained. He slid Julia down a couple of stairs, before crouching in front of her, unslinging his rifle, and aiming into the smoke. He fired through the sight, confidently, even though he could see nothing. Rapid footsteps scattering in all directions; Orion guessed his impromptu bluff had worked. He dropped the gun, gathered up Julia again, and rushed down the stairs.

Off to the side, in the hangar, Orion saw a heavy machine, bipod set firmly on some metal crates, manned by a single soldier. As soon as Orion and Julia were off the stairs, he opened fire, shattering glass and metal, severing the railing in several places, and tearing chunks of stone from the wall. A louse soldier rushed forward out of the smoke, falling forward, skittering under the railing, through the now-empty glass panel, to fall twenty feet onto the hard floor below. The gunfire echoed throughout the cavernous hangar.

Orion had not stopped moving; as more louse soldiers came to the top of the stairs, three or four

dying before they could even return fire, Orion had dragged Julia to the entry plank of one of the ships. But for a few stragglers, all of the civilians had filtered into the ships. This one looked about ready to take off.

A woman in uniform stood by the door; Orion carried Julia to her.

“She's shot in the thigh. Make sure she gets –”

A stray bullet struck the metal above the portal, ricocheting dangerous.

“ – make sure she gets seen to.”

The woman nodded. Julia began to stir. Orion carried her a short way into the ship, before setting her down against the wall. Her eyes cracked open.

“I've got to go,” Orion said, “They'll need fighter escort.”

Julia simply grinned a little, red light shining on her pallid face, before closing her eyes again.

Orion gave the ship one last glance before darting back out the door.

There was little left Myron could do to hold Point Seven. He had all but exhausted his already insufficient forces. The rag-tag platoon he commanded had already lost the large hangars where the first louse troops had landed; now they fought bitterly, room-to-room, giving no ground until it was taken from them. The battle was already lost; delaying was now the best that they could do to give the others a chance to escape.

And take as many of the bastards with them as they could.

Glassware shattered as louse bullets washed over the top of the table that Myron and his five remaining soldiers hid behind.

The *Radiant Ether*, closely tailed by the *Infallible Triumph*, burst free from the landing bay. As soon as Orion had followed them out, he saw the sides of the ships light up like lanterns as enemy fire struck them from all sides, and the chemical armor flared to life to absorb it. Orion could feel the pulsing shock waves as the small LEIRG guns on the sides of the *Radiant Ether* opened fire, hurling a five-hundred pound carbonite-surfaced lead projectile deep into the port side of one of the attacking cruisers. A fountain of metal burst out of the gaping wound out in all directions. One particularly large chunk barreled toward Orion; he rolled his Falcon to the right to evade it, nearly blacking out from the sudden maneuver, then going into a dive. He was supposed to pick off attacking fighters, while Cassiopeia's squadron supported the transports in battling the enemy cruisers, but he could not do that while in the thick of battle. He hunted best from the sidelines. Indeed, as he pulled out of his dive, below the mass melee of larger ships, he spotted four Scorpion interlopers slipping in between the two to attack *Infallible Triumph*. He fired his Falcon's afterburners, climbing rapidly, opening up with his cannon as he did. White lead sprayed in front of him; Orion could not tell whether they were hitting, but a sudden gout of smoke appeared in the side of one of the Scorpions, and Orion, taking that as a good sign, climbed still further before leveling out behind them.

Realizing they were being pursued, the enemy fighters scattered. Orion pursued one that dived to the left, firing a missile as he followed. The fighter, thinking its escape successful, did not notice until the missile struck, leaving a shimmering ball of fire and a shower of metal behind with a terrific boom. He continued in his dive, hoping to climb again and attack the fighters unaware.

Then Orion spotted something on his tracking system out of the corner of his eye. A second later, there was a dull thump that jolted Orion forward, followed by a muted crackling sound. Turning his head, Orion saw a trail of dull gray smoke extending out behind his Falcon. Orion fired his engines to gain a little speed, then pushed a button on the right side of the cockpit. He heard a rattling sound as his air mines were released.

There was a mechanical click as each mine was released. Orion had let go all thirty-two of them. A moment later, there was a satisfying series of small explosions, almost like many balloons popping at once, as the mines made impact. Orion pulled up and dumped speed, coming to a near stand-still,

hovering temporarily, as the flaming hulk of the enemy fighter sank away next to him. He smiled, then angled his fighter up again and began climbing, pushing the Falcon's engines hard to avoid a stall.

As he did, he saw that in his absence, the escape fleet had not done well. Smoke poured from the sides of *Infallible Triumph*, and by the time Orion had reached their altitude, the ship was all but derelict. Suddenly, a massive spray of energy fire struck the already flaming midsection, and with a titanic crack audible even inside the cockpit of Orion's tiny Falcon fighter, the ship split in two. Orion could see small shapes, which he could only guess were people, being flung from the sides and plummeting toward the ground. Whether any had parachutes, Orion could only guess, and it did not really matter, as they would likely be captured or killed as soon as they were found anyway. Orion tried his best to put them from his mind. Ignoring the sinking pieces of the *Infallible Triumph*, he focused on the protecting the others. He spotted the two remaining fighters from the Scorpion squadron he had attacked, making a beeline for the *Radiant Ether's* bridge. Orion thought of the *Infallible Triumph*, and angled the Falcon's nose downwards, pursuing the enemy fighters. He fired at an arbitrary spot ahead of them, trying to compensate for the differences in velocity.

Orion visits Julia in hospital

“She's fine,” the nurse said, “You can see her.”

Peter followed her through the window-lined corridors to a small room, where Julia lay on her back under clean white sheets. As he entered, her head tilted to the side, and smiled weakly at the sight of him. She appeared rejuvenated.

“Hey,” she said

Peter stood at the balcony, the setting sun illuminating his once-proud, now sunken frame. His eyes, lined with the hint of wrinkles, cast a steely glare at the forest beyond, and, and past it, the distant smoke of the ruin of Point Seven. Further on, barely visible, lay Macalavay, the omnipresent giant in the mist, sitting on the horizon, blocking it and choking it.

It was time to finish the war.

The thought struck him with a sort of certainty, as if he'd already known it. This war had carried him so far, for so long. He could swivel his eyes to the left, and see, in the distance, the spot where the *Ethereal Wrangler* had crashed so many years ago, leaving them stranded to fight again.

Perhaps war had become ingrained in him. Or was it the fear that, like with Woebarren, destroying Macalavay would simply force them to wander again, to find another fortress to crash near, and begin the cycle anew? He could only pray that it had been a simple coincidence.

His eyes shifted to Macalavay's faint silhouette. He tried to see past it, through it. What lay beyond? Perhaps a place where Whos lived in peace, free from the war the lice wrought on them. But he doubted it.

Maybe, somewhere, they could find shelter. Once Macalavay was gone, there might be a who city, somewhere deep underground, or high in the sky, or powerfully fortified, where they could live their lives. Not fight. Not survive. Live.

The loss of Point Seven had stung them, but like a wasp sting on an elephant's foot, as it bore down to crush the insect. These years of siege had not been wasted; Macalavay cowered, like a wounded animal. It would not be long before they could sink in a decisive blow.

What would he do after? He knew nothing of being a father, other than trying to give his offspring the strength to fight. He knew nothing of a normal life, a normal family. What would he do? Perhaps that was why he clung to the war, had been so hesitant to finish it; because beyond its resolution lay an empty void where there should be joy and celebration.

Despair flooded him. Had this been his life, used up for the sake of meaningless slaughter? Winning the war would do nothing good, simply remove the bad. And beyond that, a blank slate that terrified him.

He thought back to the valley, when his love for Emily was fresh, when his fondness for life was bursting at the seams. What had he wanted then? To see what was beyond the valley. Thirty years later, he wished he could go back. A life in peace, in oblivion, in ignorance would have been desirable. But it didn't matter now. If he could go back, he would be the same as he was, eager to roam.

He wished he knew more. He had stumbled blindly for so many years, fighting because he had had to, running because he had had to. And the purpose to it all, when it was all undone, would be a smoking ruin, if they were lucky.

He wished he knew what it meant, to be Chosen, how he saw those few split-seconds into the future, that had saved his life when all other luck had run out.

Attack on Generator: also figure out what Cassiopeia is doing at this time, maybe have separate section.

Orion awoke suddenly to a hand on his shoulder. It was Julia. The lamp in their bedroom was on, and she was half-dressed, shaking him awake. Orion looked at the clock. He'd been asleep for four hours: it was about 0200, military time.

"Peter wants us in the briefing room," she said, pulling on her uniform pants and beginning to fasten her belt. Orion rolled over to look at her.

"Now? In the dead of night?"

"Yeah," said Julia, clicking the crosshair emblem on her belt.

"What for?" Orion asked.

"I don't know," Julia said as she pulled her shirt over her head, "Some sort of secret meeting or something. Myron knocked a moment ago to tell us. We have to be down there in ... ten minutes," she said, glancing at the clock. She then straightened her shirt, threw on her coat, and began to tie her hair back into her customary ponytail.

Orion rubbed his eyes, extracted himself from the warm, heavy covers of the bed, and went over to her. He began to put on his uniform, piece by piece, until he was fully dressed. As he tightened his belt buckle, Julia finished tying her shoes. Orion knelt under the bed and carefully drew out his own, and began to pull them on when a second knock came at the door. Julia opened it.

"Is Orion ready?" Myron said from outside the room.

"Almost," said Julia, turning to look as Orion hurriedly tied his laces.

"Good. I'm here to escort you both to the briefing room."

"Escort us?" Orion said as he tied his right shoelace and stood up.

"Yes," said Myron, looking right at Orion as he did.

"All right, then," said Orion after a brief pause. "Let's go," and moved toward the door. Myron stepped back and began to walk down the hallway. Julia followed him, and Orion brought up the rear, looking behind them occasionally as they walked. Safe as the complex was, Orion never liked walking through corridors in the dead of night. It reminded him of too many traumatic experiences for him to ever be comfortable with it. Lost in the darkened service corridors at Point Seven, every corner holding the promise of death, dim emergency lights flickering out their last bits of life.

Down three floors, over two hallways, then to an elevator. Orion had seen it before but he had no clue where it led to. There was only a down button, no up, despite being on what Orion was pretty sure was the bottom floor of the complex. He had always figured it led to the basement. Myron simply walked up to it, pressed the button, stepped back, and waited.

A moment later there was a soft tone, then the smooth hiss of the chrome doors as they slid open. Orion stepped onto the grated floor inside, moved into the corner, and waited for the other two to get on. Myron wordlessly pressed a button marked "B13," then leaned back as the doors closed. Orion felt the initial jolt of descent, then the feeling that they were dropping very fast. Indeed, when the elevator came to a stop at floor B13, Orion's knees nearly gave out at the sudden deceleration. Julia stumbled as well. Myron said nothing, merely walked through the open doors into a dark hallway. Orion followed him, Julia in tow, eyes darting between the floor, which was made from some sort of smooth, dark brown cement, and the pipes that ran along the hallway on the ceiling. There were very few rooms, and most seemed to contain either cleaning equipment or maintenance equipment. Finally, however, the hallway ended with a pair of sliding doors, a small scanner on the wall next to them. Myron swiped his MID card through the slot, put it back in his pocket as the doors opened, then walked inside. Orion and Julia followed.

The room was lighter than the others, with bright white florescent ceiling lights rather than dull maintenance room lights. A long, gray table was set in the middle of the room, with a drawing screen hung on the wall showing an image of what appeared to be a sort of power plant. Peter stood next to it, his expression as serious as ever. About twenty people sat around the table, all dressed in green-gray

uniforms. Orion recognized only one: a soldier whom he was fairly certain was called Kalec, a rather dark man who Orion identified as a sharpshooter from the eye-shaped insignia on the breast pocket of his uniform. He could not remember where he'd seen him before.

Myron took his seat first, sitting adjacent to the head of the table. Orion and Julia followed, and took the two seats next to his. Orion had just barely pulled in his chair when Peter started talking.

"People," he said, "We're here to discuss a mission, for which each of you have been hand-picked, whether due to your significant skill or extraordinary exploits, that will be absolutely vital to the escape from Macalavay." Peter motioned to the screen, and the projector switched to a complex-looking schematic.

"This, here, is a generator complex. Our job will be to get in here, plant a tactical nuke near the fusion reactor, then get out of there. The detonation should be able to break through the plating and disrupt the supercooled hydrogen, which should cause... one hell of an explosion." Orion saw his father's lips quiver with suppressed amusement. Peter swiped his hand across the drawing screen's display, and a different diagram appeared, this one a map of the complex.

"A central tower, branching out into several smaller ones, is a common louse defense design. We're going to break into that tower, get into the generator, which should be in the upper levels, where there's more air flow to cool it. Adrien Trothera," – Peter indicated a man sitting near the back of the table– "and Navria Kinley will be taking care of the nuke. We've all been in louse complexes before, we know their basic structure, and I'm fairly certain this one is no different. If not, we'll... adapt. As we always do."

Peter's expression grew somber. He sighed. "If anything," he said, "Let's do this for everyone who gave their lives at Point Seven. Let's make sure they don't die in vain."

Around the table, Orion could feel that those words had somehow united them. Nearly everyone had lost a friend or a loved one at Point Seven. Orion could see Adrien gain a sort of distant expression, as though he were remembering someone. Navria, too, seemed deep in memory, so much so that when Orion spoke again, she visibly started, banging her knee on the underside of the table. Peter looked at her, before continuing.

"We've made a strong offensive with Operation Keyhole these last few weeks, in preparation, driving the enemy back. He will be anticipating an attack, but not one like this. Insofar, our actions have been consistent with a motive to control Macalavay. This has never been our goal, in my opinion. We are going to destroy Macalavay."

Murmurs instantly traveled around the table, like a wave emanating from Peter's words.

"Destroy it?" Navria asked, "How?"

"First, by taking out these generators. I have other teams attacking other power stations, but this one is particularly vital. It is connected to five different systems; power to the outer defenses, inner defenses, the transport system, the communications system, and the shields. Not to mention it is located near a central support junction. The explosion will weaken the column, and when we hit it again, it should be enough to knock it down."

Navria nodded, but her face was still blank with shock. Orion, too, was reeling from his father's words; destroy Macalavay? After all these years? Where would they go?

"The enemy are still reeling from our sudden offensive, but have not begun to consider its implications. It will be well-guarded, but our team should be able to infiltrate. We will be using a special tricopter equipped with radar-deflection technology. It is our best model to date, and we have been holding back on using in anticipation of these attacks. Once armed before a mission, they will detonate if left off for more than twenty-four hours. The attack should take at most three; any longer, the lice will have time to respond, converge on us, and crush us. We cannot allow that to happen."

Orion traded glances with Julia; she, too, looked apprehensive.

"Now, we have accurate sonic scans of what it looks like inside, but little idea of what to expect inside. Likely, a lot of louse soldiers. We are going in fully equipped and armed. But know that this is a

gamble. If we succeed, however, we will be able to start evacuation plans, and be ready to make one last offensive to crush the louse fleet, and hopefully take Macalavay down with it.”

Peter looked around the room, his face firmly displaying his belief in his words.

“Any questions?” he asked, brow furrowed as his eyes scanned the room.

“How do we get in?” Julia asked, her soft voice sounding uncomfortably quiet after Peter's brisk words. Her blond hair rustled as she leaned back; Peter watched it, distractedly, and almost missed the answer.

“... tunnel forty-five or so kilometers long. It's certainly lined with defenses, but with our ability to, quite literally, slip under the radar, we'll...”

“Who are all these people?” Orion muttered to Myron.

“That one there's Kalec Obriam.”

“I remember him. He was at Point Seven. Helped me hold off some soldiers.”

Myron nodded.

“Lots of Point Seven veterans here. Hell, half the reason they're *here* is because of what they did *there*. It was trial by fire, and they stepped up.”

Orion listened as Myron went around the table, describing each one in a short sentence or two, until Peter cut him off.

“Got something to add?” he asked sternly, as though catching a student talking in class.

“I was trying to be discreet,” Myron said, his voice even against Peter's.

“You're flying the damned tricopter, pay attention.”

“I already know how to get there. Memorized the tunnel top to bottom. Why's Orion need to know? I'm getting him caught up on what's going on. Filling him in.”

Peter gave Myron a look that seemed like a warning; something rose in Orion, a suspicion. It stayed in the back of his head and Peter resumed speaking, tickling at his thoughts. Myron said nothing more to him, but he was fairly certain he knew at least a little bit about each of his comrades-to-be.

Before long, the briefing was over, and Orion's mind had already slipped into a state that begged for sleep, a strange fluid leaking into his skull, his mind floating in it, while still tied down by the ropes of wakefulness. He only got up when Julia touched his arm, looking at him expectantly. The other soldiers filed out; Myron, Peter, and a couple others whose names Orion had already forgotten, remained behind, speaking quietly, concerned expressions across their faces.

“You okay?” Julia asked as they left.

“Yeah, just tried. Nothing like getting up at three in the morning for a briefing,” he replied, attempting to attach a grin to his weary face. It slipped off a few seconds later.

Julia returned his ephemeral smile.

“Can't believe we're destroying this place,” she said, glancing around at the hallways, “I mean, the science is sound, but something makes me feel like it wouldn't work. It's like ... home, in a strange sort of way.”

“We've never known 'home', Julia. Not like it should be,” he replied.

“I don't know,” she said, taking his hand, “We've got it pretty close.”

Orion stopped. All of the sudden, he felt a strange urge that he needed to know what was being said back in the briefing room. Julia's hand swung forward, out of his loosening grip, and she stopped also, and turned to look at him.

“Orion?” she asked, curious concern on her face.

“Nothing,” he said, gulping. His intuition tingled; something was happening back in that room. “I'm fine,” he said, trying to keep his voice even, “Just go back to the room. I'll be there in a minute.”

“Promise?” Julia asked, approaching him with a grin.

“I promise,” said Orion, smiling as well. He kissed her lightly on the lips, then she turned away and set off back down the hall, her ponytail bouncing behind her. Orion went back the other way.

By the time he'd reached the briefing room, a full conversation was underway. Trying to keep his

eavesdropping as stealthy as possible, Orion leaned his ear against the crack in the door, dropping to a crouch so he would not lean on something accidentally. He listened closely, and heard Myron's voice.

"We have to tell them, Peter. It's only right that they know what we're up against."

"What should I tell them? That we have little to no chance of getting out of there alive? The place is swarming with those ... things. The generator we're targeting also houses one of their... factories."

"We need to tell them, Peter. Unless we can choose a different target – and I know that we can't – it will only make it worse that they don't know."

"It can't possibly make it worse."

A fist slammed on the table suddenly. Orion started, and almost lost his balance.

"Dammit Peter!" Myron shouted, "I don't care about your obsessive needs! Lives are at stake!"

"No. We keep it secret."

Myron made a sneering noise.

"You're unbelievable," he said. Orion pictured him turning away from his father and beginning to pace the room, even though his footsteps were as silent as they always were.

"Nevertheless, Myron, I am the one in command of the mission," Peter continued. Orion heard his father's voice grow stern, as though he was admonishing a child. "The information is secret for a reason. They are not to be told."

"So that they can fight for us without knowing the risks involved? And die from those things?" Myron demanded. Peter sighed.

"Myron, you need to understand that this war is going to have significant casualties."

"It already has," said Myron, aghast, "We've lost millions–"

"I mean significant to us."

There was a pause.

"So," said Myron finally, his voice showing a hint of suppressed fury, "You are going to risk your son, a girl who is like a daughter to you, your wife, and some of our best soldiers, all because you can't tell them about these... things?"

There was another pause. Orion felt the tension in the air even outside the room.

"Yes."

Myron scoffed, and began to storm away, his footsteps growing louder. Orion sprang into action, padding quickly and silently down the hallway and around the corner. Barely a second later, Myron exited in a huff, turning the corner at the other end of the hall. A moment after that, Peter left as well, his expression pained. Quietly, Orion withdrew from the corner and returned to the room.

Julia was waiting for him when he opened the door.

"What was that all about?" she said almost immediately.

"Nothing," said Orion, trying to brush her off. He was still trying to process what he had just heard, and felt in no state to confide it to anyone, not even to Julia. He headed for the bathroom door, but Julia was up in a flash to intercept him.

"Tell me," she said, no edge of sternness or demand in her voice. Orion looked at her eyes. They were wide as they always were, and the deepest green he had ever seen. They were also the most convincing eyes he had ever seen. If he could not trust her, who could he trust?

"There are some... things at the generator complex. That my father didn't tell us about."

"What sort of things?" Julia asked, her voice a mix of curiosity and worry.

"I don't know. He and Myron were still in the briefing room, arguing. Myron wanted him to tell us, so we'd know what we'd be facing, but my father... he insisted that we not be told."

Julia paused, eyes still locked on Orion, absorbing the information.

"I wonder why."

"I don't know," said Orion, a note of worry in his voice. His eyes had a lost look to them.

"Are you sure you heard him right?" said Julia gently.

"Of course I am!" Orion snapped, "I wouldn't make that up! He's sending us to die, and he won't even tell us what all is in there!"

"You don't need to be angry," Julia replied, "I wasn't doubting you. I was just... checking."

Her soft, even voice cut across his aggression. Orion sighed, sitting on the edge of their bed, letting his face sink into his palms. "Sorry. I... just don't understand. Why would he lie to us?"

"He isn't really lying, he's just not –"

"He's as good as lying!" Orion burst out, angry that she would defend him. He wanted to shout, so loud that his father would hear him, come in and try that stern voice on him. He wanted to expose the lies he'd told them. He wanted the entire mission to fail. But suddenly, something calming about his father, the way he had always done what he thought was right, always been in the best interests of the nits, never had much more than a sliver of a self-interest. The swelling anger in his chest shrank. His eyes were shut behind his fingers, but he felt the bed move slightly, and knew Julia had sat down next to him.

"Sometimes trust means more than complete honesty. Maybe he has a perfectly good reason for keeping some things to himself. You don't think he could really betray the people he's fought and bled for, do you? Certainly not intentionally."

Yet again, she was voicing his own thoughts. His conscience's words became hers. A swell of affection for her came over him, strangely. His hands slid from his face, and he slid one around her waist, and the other reached for her hand and found it.

They sat in silence for a few moments, before Julia said, "We should go back to sleep. We'll need at least a little energy for tomorrow."

Orion nodded. He stood up and eased his uniform shirt off over his head, draping it over the back of the chair, before climbing onto the bed, its softness suddenly welcome. He slid his legs under the covers, the cloth suddenly catching on one of the hairs on his leg. A grimace danced across his face, but he let it fade away, rolling onto his side and shutting his eyes. A moment later, Julia's smooth body slid in next to him, her legs brushing against his. As they did, a faint hunger awakened in Orion; he wanted her, at least once more, before the war took her from him. But that was a stupid, stupid thought. He forced the impulse away. Tomorrow, they would be here again, weary from the fight, but perhaps with enough energy to make love before drifting back into sleep. His fears were nothing but nervousness, he told himself, warranted but unnecessary. He slid his arm around her, nestled in against the pillows, felt her breath tickle his arm as she slowly succumbed to sleep. As he drifted away, he slid his arm away from her shoulder; her mere presence was enough to comfort him.

Light greeted him starkly, uncomfortably. He awoke, prepared himself for the day, feeling like a machine, numb, sensations and movements mechanical. A warm shower helped, but he still felt as though he were wearing rubber over his skin. *Breakfast will calm your nerves*, he told himself. He trudged from his room in his uniform, belt pulled looser than usual, shirt less well tucked. He found Julia at the breakfast table that had been set aside for the elite members of the mission. His hand found hers under the table. Dinner was peach slices and toast. They would be given protein bars on the flight, but with the maneuvers that would be necessary to reach the generator areas, a light breakfast was essential to the cleanliness of the ship's interior.

"We'll be okay," Julia whispered in his ear. Orion nodded, trying to conceal how pale he was, the sweat dripping down his ear. She hadn't seen the plans, hadn't overheard Peter and Myron talking about what guarded the generator complex, both outside and inside. The very thought of the things they'd described made him squeeze Julia's hand even tighter. She squeezed back.

When their plates were cleaned, their small appetites sated, they made their way to the hangar bay. The cold gray concrete seemed even more forbidding today. Orion felt how hard it was under his

feet, how easy it would be to slip and fall and strike his head and crack his skull and die, and suddenly he felt the urge to cover his head to protect it. He buried the feeling. *How am I going to function when I am afraid of a concrete floor?*

Orion followed the others to the tricopter they would be using to reach the complex. They stood in a circle, Orion next to Julia, Peter next to Emily, and Myron, spaced from the others, his hand occupied stroking his graying stubble rather than holding another one.

Seven other soldiers arrived. Orion had not been given a list of his comrades, and tried to remember what Myron had told him about each of them in the previous night's meeting: Kalec Obriam, the sharpshooter he had met fighting at Point Seven; Adrien, the explosives expert whose shock of black hair was shaved in a triangle, making it look like a bird's beak on top of his head; Trent Owihia, apparently the only surviving member of the forces that had defended the northern hallway at Point Seven; and Dariah Owalls, a slight woman whom Orion had heard had never missed a shot. She, too, had been one of the few to survive the attack on Point Seven. *Peter certainly picked the best*, he thought, grudging respect emerging for his father once again. The residue from their argument was slowly being washed from his mind by the fear of what was to come. Fear that even Orion's formidable self-control was having difficulty pinning down. He did not fear dying, only suffering, and that was one fear he could face.

Then he looked to his left, where Julia was biting her lip gently, a single lock of her blond hair falling down her forehead, reaching for her eye like a slender, ghostly claw. Her eyes, tantalizingly dancing between green and blue, betrayed the fear that the rest of her face concealed. She saw him looking at her, and released her bottom lip, and smiled. Orion smiled back.

*I'm fearing for her more than me. If I die, I'm gone. If she dies, I have to live with that.*

Yet if he was killed, Julia would have to live with the pain of the loss. She loved him as much as he loved her. It was strange how intricately selfish the mind was, even in what seemed so selfless on the surface.

Orion watched Peter glancing around to make sure all of their team had arrived. Around them, pilots and soldiers prepared to grant them the protection they needed to get where they had to go. The operation depended on them as well. Orion felt more pressure than ever. He concentrated on his father as he began to give them the final briefing.

"It's important to remember that once we reach the generator complex, there's no telling what we may find inside," Peter said grimly.

*No telling us at least*, Orion thought. Then he saw Julia, watching his expression twist, her eyes filled with sudden curiosity. He relaxed and pushed the thought from his mind.

"It's vital that Adrien and Navria make it to the generator so that they can place the explosives." Orion saw now a second person, a short girl who looked barely old enough to be in the military, with rosy cheeks and a black ponytail sticking out behind her helmet, standing near Adrien, wearing the same explosives expert insignia. Despite her childish appearance, something about her face registered coldness. Orion found her appearance intimidating, and did not look at her again. A moment later, he remembered her name from the briefing the night before; but could not remember looking at her. He dispelled the strange thought, focusing again on his father's words.

"Try your best to minimize the amount of killing we have to do. Our mission is the generators, not mass destruction. If someone is killed, leave the body. If someone is wounded, I cannot try force you to abandon compassion, and leave them to die. I can only ask you to remember the larger mission. Our greater purpose."

*I will not leave Julia*, Orion reaffirmed it in his mind.

"No matter the danger we may face, the greatest enemy is fear. Fear of the unknown is an emotion you must resist, keep it from sapping your nerves and skill."

*Even though you won't tell us half of what the hell is inside*, Peter thought, his brow lowering. He put on his helmet and followed Peter into the landing craft, then turned to help Julia into it. They took

their seats, strapped in, and waited for the ship to take off. Orion wondered who the twelfth member of their team was, before realizing that Myron was missing.

*Of course. He's flying the ship.*

Orion felt a little better. At least they'd get there in one piece.

It took nearly an hour to reach their co-ordinates; flying through Who-controlled airspace. Operation Keyhole had worked, pushing the enemy back to the base of the cliff that held the generator complex. At the top was a tunnel that, if intelligence was correct, ran forty kilometers into the heart of Macalavay. Miles of rock would shield the generators from anything that didn't come through this tunnel. It had to be heavily defended.

But when they entered the tunnel, they found only a bare, well-lit tube of metal, two hundred meters high, lined with brilliant white lights and catwalks on either side. The only sound was that of the engines' roar, echoing down the cavernous passage.

Orion thought that the escorts would not be needed at all when he heard a blast outside. The shuttle rocked. Orion heard Julia praying in a soft whisper. Across the aisle, he heard Peter doing the same. The missile blasts were followed by a cacophony of screeches, the characteristic sound of laser fire, interspersed with six more explosions (Orion counted them in his head). It continued for nearly a full minute, until the guns began to go silent. At last, Myron's voice came over the shuttle intercom.

"Just a few enemy fighters. They're gone. Two of ours are damaged, possible KIA in one. They're turning back."

A screech, then a sound of sizzling metal, cut off Myron's speech. Straining his neck to see out of the small porthole, Orion saw that their pilot had been wrong. Gun platforms mounted on the catwalks were firing away, sending streams of hot white bolts in their direction. They blurred in his vision as the shuttle rushed by. The sounds of air combat broke out once again, and Orion heard the unmistakable sound of an aircraft falling from flight over and over. *This entire section must be defended by gun platforms*, Orion thought.

Myron's voice crackled on the intercom again, "We've lost our nav system, and we're leaking fuel" he said, voice not wavering in the least even as he delivered the ominous news, "I'm bringing us down a little to stay out of their way. We've only got another couple kilometers to go."

Then Orion was thrown forward out of his seat, the shuttle's cabin suddenly filled with a wave of heat. He shut his eyes, and blinked away tears. Blinded, he felt himself hurled to the floor, and he curled into a fetal position from the sudden pain up and down his body. When it passed a moment later, he opened his eyes. A hole was seared in the wall. Julia lay next to him, a burn on her cheek, but otherwise unharmed. Dariah and Trent, the Point Seven veterans, were not so lucky. Trent was all but balded from where the flames had struck him, and his skin was pink from the heat. He was dead. Dariah had been killed by the heat as well, her uniform blackened, hair smoldering under her melted helmet. Orion looked away.

The blast had hit the left side of the cabin; Peter, Emily, and the others on the right were unharmed. Orion noticed a flashing red light on the wall near the ceiling, then pulled himself to his feet to examine what was left of his seat. Nothing. A charred restraint and a blackened bump on the wall were all that was left. He was lucky the shock wave had knocked him down before the heat had done its work.

*What hit us?* Orion wondered. He knew of nothing that could produce such an intense heat in so narrow a radius.

"Thermal beams," said Myron ominously over the intercom, "They've got expensive stuff guarding this place. I think we've got the right spot." He guided the ship in descent; they had reached their destination. Orion heard the thump, then the scrape of touchdown, then the click of their seat buckles disengaging. They would have to move immediately. Speed was one of their greatest weapons.

Adrien and Kalec were the first to exit, dashing out as soon as the door opened and light flooded the cabin, rifles ready in front of them. Navria followed. Orion snatched the carbine propped next to his seat, turned the safety off, and ran outside.

They had landed in a large cavern, boulders strewn around, in the center of which stood a rounded, segmented tower. Four small bridges led off of it like compass points, leading to four thinner towers about as tall as the central one. The whole structure appeared about fifty meters tall and twice that many wide. The only light, beyond that within the towers, was a glowing green stream emerging from the top of the central tower. Orion stared in awe; he had no idea what it was.

Gunfire was already coming from the nearest tower; Orion couldn't see the source, and he threw himself to cover behind one of the boulders. Bolts of energy sear holes in the cavern floor, and when Orion stuck his head out to look for the source of the gunfire, he was greeted by a hail of glowing needles. *We're pinned down already*, he thought desperately. Then suddenly, from his right, he heard a trio of gunshots, which he identified as being from a sniper rifle, then the shooting from the tower stopped.

"Let's go!" Kalec shouted, emerging from cover behind the nearest boulder. Orion watched him running out from behind a rock, two others following him. A second later he was dead, four bullets tearing out of his back and flinging him onto the ground.

Orion's head swiveled to their source. Soldiers now poured out of the bottom of the nearest tower, firing as they ran, not even bothering to shoot from cover. Orion flung himself prone, took aim, and picked off four of them with his first round of ammunition. As he reached for his second magazine, he heard the sound of searing flesh, followed by a cry of pain. Turning his head to the left, he saw Navria fall to the ground, steaming blood splattered on the rock behind her. Orion squeezed his eyes shut for a minute, trying to ignore the fall of yet another comrade, and reloaded his gun.

The bulk of louse soldiers was barely a hundred feet away now, and Orion could see the insignia on their black helmets, could almost make out the faces of a few. He fired a few short bursts of ammunition, dropping two more enemies, but they were getting closer and they were getting accurate. Orion felt something grab his leg suddenly, and he turned to shake it off before realizing a laser shot had struck him, and had mercifully only melted part of the thigh plate on his uniform before boring a hole in their landing shuttle behind him. When he turned back to shoot, another laser shot fragmented the rock inches from his head, propelling bits of dust into his eye.

Shouting in frustration, Orion rolled behind the rock, trying to rub his eyes out. His eyes began to tear up, washing out of most of the dust. Vision blurry, he turned back to fire again, only to find a louse soldier's boot right in front of his face. He rolled out of the way, onto his back, and fired straight up. Bullets tore through the soldier's back, hurling him off his feet to land face down on the ground.

Satisfied, Orion stood up, and fired his weapon into the advancing throng of enemies. They had reached their position, but Peter and Myron were making short work of them in close combat, managing to outflank enemies on their own, so light on their feet that the lice they dispatched often had no time to even see their killers' faces. The other survivors held their own as well, putting down the fragmented remainder of the attacking force.

Once the sounds of combat had stopped, Peter rushed to Navria, knelt beside her, put his thumb on her wrist.

"She's alive. The bullet shattered her left shoulder," Peter said, brow furrowed.

"Shouldn't we put her back in the shuttle, get her out?" Julia said, emerging from behind another boulder. Orion's heart leapt at seeing her alive and unharmed.

"We need her. She's coming with us," said Peter firmly.

"But what if she dies?" Julia protested.

Peter looked at her, communicating instantly that now was not the time for generosity. He and Myron each supported one of Navria's shoulders, and they began to move toward the first tower, clinging to the boulders to keep themselves as shielded as possible. As they walked, Orion tried to count

how many of them were left. Dariah and Trent had been killed on the flight in, Kalec was dead from four bullets to the chest, and Orion counted one more soldier missing. Adrien, Peter, Orion, Emily, Julia, Myron, and himself. And Navria. That made eight of the twelve. Four dead. A third of their force out of action before they'd even gotten into the tower. Orion suppressed a shudder of foreboding.

Once they reached the base of the tower, they found a door locked and guarded by a coded identification device that seemed to include some sort of biometric security. Orion began to examine it when Adrien strode forward, pushing him away. He began to place what looked like small wrapped gifts on the door, sticking them on with adhesive, then connecting them with a fuse. Understanding what was happening, Orion stood back with the others. Adrien finished placing the explosions, then fired his weapon into the door mechanism. Some alarm went off inside, echoing dully through the metal. Orion heard footsteps inside, approaching the door, then stopping.

"They're waiting for us," Julia whispered next to him.

Adrien pushed a small button on his belt. The blast threw them all to the ground. When Orion got back to his feet, ears ringing, he saw a hole where the door had once been, framed by twisted and blackened metal. There was little left of the soldiers who'd waited just inside the door except for shreds of uniform and half of a gun. The soldiers further inside, however, were merely shaken, and they fired as Orion and the others approached. Myron dispatched two quickly with shots from his pistol, the crack echoing through the cavern like a dog's barking. Behind him, Adrien flung a grenade, which rolled along the ground with a faint grinding sound before detonating.

Orion and Julia ran in first, Peter behind, and Emily and Adrien at the back, carrying Navria. Once inside, Orion looked around, trying to orient himself. Emily let Navria to the ground, reaching into the small pack on her side, and pulled out a thin needle, which she inserted into Navria's upper arm. A moment later, she began to stir, then began to moan in pain. Emily produced a second vial of blue liquid, and spread some on her torn shoulder.

Orion could see the entrance hallway branched off in two directions, then turned again to form the perimeter of the tower. To the left and right, at the end of each hallway, was a staircase. He wondered what was in here, that his father had refused to tell him about.

The dead lice were mostly shredded from Adrien's grenade; among the few who were intact, Orion spotted thin red discs clipped to their vests. Curiously, he stooped next to one, and plucked the thing off.

"Let's split up," said Peter, "Each of us take one of the charges. Emily, Navria, Adrien, Myron, and I will go up one staircase, Orion and Julia go up the other. We'll be less of a target that way."

"Why are there five of you, and two of us?" Orion demanded.

"Because Navria's wounded, she's the one who knows demolitions the best, and out of all of us, you're the best on your own. And Julia. At the very least, you can keep them busy until we're out."

"All right," Orion agreed, still thinking it was a terrible idea. He inserted a fresh magazine into his gun, dropping the spent one to the ground with an unnecessarily loud clatter. As he turned to Julia, he saw her smiling.

"Come on, just you and me, right?" she whispered as they departed from the others.

"Yeah," said Orion with a smile, reaching to stroke her chin as they walked down the corridor together. Orion threw one last look over his shoulder, watching his mother, father, and mentor disappear down the hallway in the other direction.

They reached the stairs. Orion began to push at the door, but it had locked. He stepped back, but before he could think of anything else, Julia had drawn her pistol and fired three shots into the little plastic console box that controlled the lock. Orion moved forward to shove at the door again, with no success.

"Oops," said Julia.

"Wait a minute," said Orion, drawing out the red disc he had found on the dead louse. He held it up; there was a brief whine, and spark from the ruined console, but then a hiss and a click as the door

unlocked.

“We should probably tell Peter about this.”

Orion turned around.

“It's too late, they're gone. They'll find another way to get through.”

He ignored Julia's worried expression as they began to move up the stairs, thinking of all the things his father had not told him, that he was yet to discover.

Their boots clicked softly on each step, as they moved cautiously but purposely forward. The staircase doubled back once, leading to a second level, but did not continue upward.

“Very important place, if they don't want anything centralized. We'll have to go through this whole level just to find another staircase to the next level,” Julia said as they reached the first landing.

“Or find a map,” Orion muttered, disheartened.

They spread out onto either side of the double doors.

“Ready?” Julia whispered, fingers flexing around her rifle.

“Yeah.”

With a buzz and a click, the door unlocked. Simultaneously, the two of them each pushed one door, and moved inside before it was fully open. Rifle barrels darting around like eager eyes, they scanned and cleared the hallway, moving cautiously.

“Central staircase?” Julia whispered, pointing to a map on the wall. It showed a veritable maze of hallways, maintenance rooms, barracks, and offices, but in the center was a red square, larger than most of the other rooms.

“Could be. Or the reactor.”

“Either way, it's a good shot.”

“Alright. Let's go.”

Orion drew his knife and pried the plastic map from the wall, reaching over his shoulder to tuck it into his backpack, rifle hanging limply from his other hand. Suddenly, there was a screech, one unidentifiable and incomparable to any Orion had heard before. Immediately, he raised his weapon, blood pounding in his ears; he barely heard the map drop to the floor behind him.

“What...” Julia whispered, mouth hanging slightly open. The screech came again, this time echoing almost sinisterly. The lights in the hallway suddenly shut off, before flickering dimly back to life. A green light blinked against the wall to Orion's side; turning to look, he saw that it was from a tiny pinprick gleaming on the console.

“I think we woke them up,” Orion muttered, brow furrowed. He turned back, looking back and forth, before hearing a faint, broken hissing, as if meat were being fried, oil bubbling furiously. Then sharper, more definite sounds emerged, clicking and clattering.

“Something's coming.”

“Let's move!” Orion shouted, dashing forward. He looked over his shoulder to see Julia just standing there, mouth forming a perfect “o” as she stared blankly at something. Just as he turned back, something came around the corner.

Seven beady dots greeted Orion, amid a sack-shaped, milky, hairy lump of flesh that hung from four thick, chitinous, barbed legs. He had no time to shout, and his gun was pointed at the floor. As he reached to raise it, the thing sprang. Orion flung himself sideways, slipping awkwardly and landing hard on his side on the floor. Panic gripped him; he rolled desperately against the wall, trying to make it back to his feet, as the first burst from Julia's rifle tore through the thing. He scampered up to a crouch, shakily making it to his feet as a second trio of bullets flung the mangled thing onto its side.

Before Orion could turn to thank her, another came around the corner, but he was ready, raising his rifle and firing again and again, spattering the walls and ceiling with brown, glue-like blood, as the thing's unearthly screech filled the hallway. He backpedaled as two more came around, charging for them, pincers clicking, a great, stinger-tipped appendage on their back, that Orion hadn't noticed before. He and Julia mowed them down, the sounds of their weapons combining in stereo. In what felt like a full

ten minutes, the creatures were dead.

"I have no idea what those were," Julia said between controlled breaths. Orion crouched next to one, looking closely. He prodded with the barrel of his rifle.

"Orion, no!"

He leaped back at her words; the strange claw that grew from the top of the creature sprang down, like a hook, smashing the sharp, black tip against the floor. A bluish liquid leaked out.

"Poison," he muttered, "Great." He turned back to Julia.

"You're welcome," she said.

"Yeah, thanks," he replied, still looking at the dead bug.

"Let's keep going," Julia said, her voice wavering as a now-familiar noise grew around their ears again. Orion squeezed his eyes shut, wishing his father had told them about the strange beasts.

On the other side, the other group had encountered the same beasts. Peter tore a knife free from one's center eyes; it screeched and went limp. Behind him, Emily fired precise, single shots into the creatures, blowing off legs, pincers, occasionally hitting home with a body shot; but the things skittered from side to side on their legs, oddly placed to have no favored direction of motion. Myron sprayed automatic fire at them, holding them at bay, but he knew if too many more came, or if louse soldiers showed up, they would be over-matched. The complete absence of lice surprised him, and unnerved him. He knew better than to fall into a trap like this. It was too easy.

Peter spun around, raising his carbine, spattering another of the creatures against the wall as it approached, narrowly dodging the hook-like pincer atop the things back as it scythed down. He knew better than to let it touch him; it would pump enough morphine into him to stop his heart in a minute. He figured the louse soldiers used the things to brew painkillers as a secondary function; now, as the hallway through thick with chitinous corpses, shattered bits of exoskeleton, and brown blood smeared with blue venom, their efforts were being extensively wasted.

He hoped Orion and Julia did not encounter the creatures, hopeless a wish as that was. Now, in the heat of battle, he could not understand why he did not tell them. Perhaps simply because he did not want to believe it himself, that such sick, twisted perversions of life could exist. Stupid, to risk his son's life for his own inability to cope.

One of the creatures caught his arm in its pincers; he cried out with shock, slashing away the stinger as it descended, the oily, sapphire fluid spattering his eyebrows, and dripping down dangerously close to his eye. He grunted with effort, trying to force the thing off of him; then four stark gunshots rang out, and he felt the thing torn away from him in several sudden motions. He extracted himself entirely, wiping his brow, and aiming again, gunning down another of the creatures as it slipped past Emily's and Myron's formidable barrage. He looked over his shoulder to see Adrian, still supporting Navria's limp form, firing from his handgun. Peter returned the man's reassuring grin and nod.

They advanced, slowly, one corpse at a time. How many had they killed, fifteen, twenty? The screeching and clattering was deafening; only the gunfire rose above the cacophony.

It was halfway to the next staircase that Orion and Julia met the first group of louse soldiers. Without letting their guard down, they had cleared the winding hallway meter by meter; Orion, slightly ahead, spotted a glowing pair of eyes peering around the door ahead, and instinctively ducked back as the first torrent of bullets came, puncturing metal, spattering stone, ricocheting dangerously. He yanked the pin from a grenade, and flung it around the corner, watching it satisfying glance of the door frame, bouncing into the room. One soldier ran out; Julia gunned him down. The grenade detonated. Another louse soldier leaned out from another door, aiming his submachine gun at Julia; Orion shot him twice in the chest, and he dropped noiselessly.

Another corner, then another, then more of the bug-like creatures: five, but the section of hallway that they met them in was thankfully long, and they were taken down easily. Julia's gun ran out of ammo

halfway through; she slid in a new clip as Orion took the legs from the last two, then put them down with single shots from his sidearm.

“Last mag,” she said flatly.

“Damn it,” Orion muttered.

They were not even on the third level yet.

Rounding the corner, Peter only found more of the four-legged spider creatures. He lifted his rifle and fired, tearing the bulbous sac of venom hanging from the closest one. It screeched and skittered toward him. Peter plucked a pin from one of his grenades, flicked his wrist, and sent it skipping along the floor, down the hallway. The ground shuddered and the lights flickered out when it detonated, leaving only the somber red glow of the emergency lights. The sickly smell of the creatures' blood invaded his nostrils. He decided to breathe shallowly; their blood was probably poisonous, too.

“Grenade!” came a cry from Emily. A second later, the lights went out as chunks of stone were blasted from the wall in a tremendous blast. Shrapnel ricocheted everywhere; Peter felt a sting on his cheek. His hand snapped to it instantly, and came away with a dull red streak along his thumb.

*Just a scratch*, he thought. Then he saw Emily a few feet away, lying on her side in a pile of rubble.

“Em!” Peter shouted instantly. He ran toward her, and was instantly greeted by the crisp snapping of machine gun fire. He threw himself to the ground, amongst the rubble, and kept crawling toward her, as bullets pulverized some of the chunks of rock around him, spray dust and sand everywhere. Pulling his handgun from his side, he aimed almost blindly, firing off several shots. He heard a couple of muffled cries of pain. The gunfire abated somewhat.

“Emily!” he shouted, shaking her limp form. She did not move. “Emily, come on!” he shook her shoulders violently. Suddenly her eyes opened.

“I'm all right,” she said, suddenly panting. There was a bloody gash on her cheek, but she wasn't bleeding. She sat up. Peter grabbed her wrist and helped her to her feet. A grin slowly slipped onto her face as she saw Peter's worried expression.

“I'm fine,” she said. Peter laughed, relieved.

Then the door at the end of the hallway burst open again.

Down another hallway, Orion and Julia fought side by side. Spider creatures burst from every door along the hallway, filling the air with the noise of their clicking footsteps, and the austere scent of fear. Julia's hair was stuck to her face with sweat; every creature that approached, she gunned down. Orion fought with knife in one hand, gun in the other, slashing and shooting the things wherever he could. His right wrist was numb from the weapon's recoil, but they had cleared three floors so far, and they were nearing the staircase to the fourth level, where, if the intelligence was correct, they could cross a bridge to the generator.

Finally, the door to the staircase came into view as they turned onto the last hallway. Orion armed a grenade, then rolled it down the hallway, clearing out two of the creatures as they skittered down the hallway. The explosion prompted two more to exit from behind doors; Julia opened fire on them with her rifle, hair flying from the recoil. Orion heard clicking behind them, and turned suddenly to see one of the spider things right behind him. Pure reflex dictated his motions as he dodged the lethal morphine stinger and, with a flick of his knife, slashed it off. The monster screeched, and raised the deadly claw that extended from the top of its body for a death blow. Orion lunged out of the way, and stabbed a hole in the creature's leg, causing it to splinter and break off. The creature staggered on three legs, then stumbled. Orion plunged the knife into the top of its body, and was greeted by a spray of dark green blood that stained his uniform, before the thing sank to the ground and died. Orion turned back to Julia, his chest and face a dark, mucky green.

"Flattering," said Julia with a grin, lowering her rifle as she turned to look at him. A long stinger flashed out from around the corner and struck, piercing her stomach and bursting out her back, spraying the wall behind her red. Her entire body straightened suddenly, like a rope pulled taut; the stinger slid back out of her, and her mouth fell open in a gaping expression combining shock and agony. Then her face crumpled up with pain, and she dropped to her knees.

Orion stared, shock flooding through him, and numbing him. His entire body strained to burst into action, but simultaneously paralyzed at the sight. The spider snapped out a leg, throwing Julia's limp body against the wall, before coming fully around the corner, feet clicking on the floor, stinger still dripping with blood. Julia's blood.

All Orion heard was a roar, and felt himself ramming the creature back with his shoulder, stabbing his knife in between its claw-shaped pincers as it stumbled and screeched, kicking it to the ground, and driving his knife into its fallen body again and again, until there was nothing left the carcass but a ragged piece of flesh with its legs jutting out at awkward angles. Tears stung his eyes suddenly, blurring his sight. He tore his carbine from his shoulder, and fired an entire magazine into the creature's corpse, teeth gritted. When it emptied, he stomped on the creature's corpse, over and over, spattering green muck on the floor, until his eyes were so moist he could barely see. He dropped the weapon to the floor with a hollow clatter. Then he knelt next to Julia.

She was staring at the ceiling, lying on her back, eyes still holding a semblance of life, her body squirming with the labor of continuing to breath. Orion looked at her wound, her green uniform blemished with a black, spreading stain.

"I love you," she gasped out, in between desperate grabs for breath. Her eyes had become unfocused, but Orion could tell she could see him. She grabbed his hand. Orion clung to it, felt the twitch of her pulse, a sign of life. It seemed like the most precious feeling in the world.

"No!" Orion shouted, "You'll be alright. Just ... just give me a minute."

"Orion..."

"Shut the fuck up! I'm going to help you, just lie still!"

"No," said Julia, her voice shuddering. Tears limned in her eyes, spilling over the edges, gripping her eyelashes like dew. The blood was everywhere now.

"Julia ... no ... no ... damn it, no."

"I love you Orion."

He stared down at her, her hair thick, the back of her head hot in his hand. The bandages fell from his hand onto the floor. No, she could not be dead. No, she could not be dying.

No.

Her eyes still watched him.

"I love you, too," he said quietly, trying not to let his voice break. His entire body felt numb, and a warm wash ran down over his body, as though water was flowing under his skin.

With what must have been incredible exertion, Julia leaned up to kiss Orion, looking into his eyes. Then her sharp, stuttering, desperate breathing ceased, and her chest deflated with finality as she sank back limply into Orion's arms.

A sudden fury was flowing through him, filling the hollowness of stark denial. Julia's body tumbled uselessly from his arms.

A door burst open at the end of the hallway, banging against the wall. Four louse soldiers charged, gun barrels leading. Orion sprang to his feet, blood pounding in his head in even tempo with his footsteps as he rushed into them, tearing the pistol from his hip, firing against and again, drawing his knife as he ran.

By the time the soldiers realized how enraged their opponent was, only one was still left with enough limbs to try to flee. Orion fired his carbine into the soldier's back as he ran, a feeling of cruel victory rushing through him as he as he watched the soldier jerk back and forth like marionette on strings before flopping over. But that was not enough. Mad energy overtook Orion. He no longer cared

for his own life, for his own soul. He would kill until there was nothing left to kill, and if he could, he would die in the process.

Orion ran up the stairs, feet flashing, running faster than he'd even run, as if he could outrun death itself.

Peter, too, reached the top of a staircase almost simultaneously, on the other side of the tower. Emily and Myron behind him, and Adrien and Navria shuffling along last. The shoulder wound would make her little help in the fight, but she could still do the job she came to do.

Traces of gunfire reached his ears; Orion and Julia had made it!

"Let's meet up with them," he said to Myron and Emily, who nodded.

Then they heard a roar of anger, muted by the walls. The sound chilled Peter, and he suppressed a shiver as he looked back to Emily. Her eyes were wide.

"Hurry," said Myron

Another group of soldiers waited at the top of the stairs. Orion kicked the first one in the stomach, doubling him over, his helmet falling off, his hair in Orion's face as he stumbled forward. He grabbed it and pulled, hurling the soldier down the stairs behind him, then grabbed the second one's knife arm, twisting the soldier's wrist, hearing the satisfying snapping of bone, and even more satisfying cry of pain from the soldier. Orion took his knife as the soldier stumbled past him down the stairs. Two knives in hand, he made short work of the last two, mercilessly slashing them over and over, leaving them like tigers striped with blood. Orion kicked open the stairwell door. A pair of spider creatures turned, and clacked forward on their thin legs. Before they could get halfway to the door, Orion had sprinted forward, severed three of the first spider's legs, and planted his second knife in the other one's head. He turned to the other one, spasming awkwardly on the ground with a single leg. He pulled his carbine off of his shoulder, kicked it back, and shot it to pieces.

Behind them, doors swung open, and bullets sprayed from the doorways. Orion ducked behind the corner of the hallway, pulled the pin on a grenade, and rolled it down until it stopped between two of the doorways. The soldiers barely had time to scream before they were blown to pieces, along with the ceiling and several of the lights. Orion poked his head back out, but a sudden barrage forced him to duck back around the corner.

Suddenly, something within him snapped. He felt his intelligent instincts, the ones that had kept him alive for years even when others died around him, fade away. Here they were useless cautions, and there was no need for that. It did not matter if he died. He was already dead.

Orion sprang to his feet, running unbelievably fast. Carbine pointed in front of them, he responded to each of the soldiers that greeted him with a burst of gunfire. One by one, the lice in each doorway fell. A bullet punctured his thigh with a sudden sting. He gasped, nearly dropping to his knees, until adrenaline washed away the pain, and he was up again. Blood was leaking out, hopefully staunching somewhat by his uniform, but surely he was still dying. He did not care.

He wavered on his feet, a gray, warm wave suddenly washing over his vision; he did not realize it had happened until it was already over. He sank to his knees.

"I can't pass out now," he said to himself through gritted teeth, forcing himself up, but another, more fierce wave dropped him to his knees, and he flopped, almost helplessly to his side, his entire leg numb, blood flowing evenly onto the floor, soaking through his pant leg. A dull pain grew in his head, as he realized the extent of his injuries.

"God damn it!" he spat furiously, flecks of blood spattering the floor as he spoke. Then the gray fuzz overwhelmed him, his last sensation being the feeling of his wet cheek against the cold floor.

As Peter came around the corner, on the trail of dead bugs that Orion and Julia had left, he found a pool of red blood among the brown. Then he saw her; Julia's body, slender and beautiful, strewn incongruously among the crudely shaped bug corpses.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, covering his face with his hands, letting his carbine slip from his hands.

"What the hell?" Emily said incredulously behind him.

"She's dead."

"Where's Orion?"

"I don't know!" Peter roared.

There was a sudden sound of gunfire, followed by a sharp grunt, Peter was immediately on his feet, eyes bulging, sprinting toward the sound. He drew his pistol as he ran.

"Peter!" Emily shouted after him.

Recklessly, Peter sprinted around the corner, just in time to see Orion collapse onto his side. A bug skittered toward him, sniffing curiously.

Peter sprang forward, enraged, tearing his pistol from his belt, firing clumsy shots as he ran. But one shredded a leg joint, and the creature staggered, raising its stinger. Two more shots blew it off. Peter rammed into the thing, knocking it back, away from his son. It screeched, and reared back. The gun clattered to the floor; he replaced it with his knife, and grabbed the creature's pincers with one hand, keeping them at bay.

"Not my son, fucker," he hissed, before plunging the blade into the thing's eye. It let out a keening screech, ear-splitting but satisfying. Peter held it in his grip for a second, teeth gritted, before letting it slide off the knife and fall limply to the ground.

Emily came up right behind him, and immediately rushed to Orion's side.

"Peter, help!" she said desperately, tears in her voice. As Peter turned around, he saw she was already crying. Thick, dark blood pooled around Orion's leg.

"Give me the first aid kit!" he barked to Myron, who obliged almost instantly, tossing the black box to Peter, who caught it, ripped it open, fumbling with bandages and medifoam as Emily pressed a bunched up strip of cloth against the wound.

"He's going to need surgery," she said, her voice breaking. Two red tear streaks already ran from the corners of her eyes down to her chin.

"Let's make it so he doesn't need it *now*," Peter said, wrapping the bandages tightly around his son's leg.

"Aren't you going to make a tourniquet?"

"No."

"But he'll bleed to death!"

"I'm not making my son hobble around on one leg the rest of his life!" Peter roared.

*I did this*, he thought as he struggled to staunch the flow of blood. His neglect, his own hesitation and fear; there was no lying about it to himself, no way he could convince himself this was the right thing, no platitude. The simple, stark truth was there before him, assaulting him. The least he could do was make up for it now. Punish himself later, but for now, salvage what he could. And that was his son's life.

The dark stain on the cloth slowed its growth.

"We need to get him somewhere, now!" Emily insisted.

"Not without setting those explosives!"

"We're only gone up three levels. Who knows how many more there are? We can't keep going like this, we'll all die."

Peter seethed, at himself and at his wife, but held his anger in.

"You and Myron take Orion back to the ship. I'll go with Adrian and Navria and get the explosives in position."

"There's so many floors left."

"That's fine. I have an idea. Go back through the stairs we came up, and down to the entrance, and get back to the ship. Wait for me there. Take a radio."

Emily looked at him questioningly, then, expressionlessly, leaned forward and hugged him tightly. Peter responded, holding her closely, hoping it was not the last time he would.

"Go," he said, pressing a small hand radio into her hand, then setting off in the other direction.

Adrian followed Peter, Navria shuffling with him, as Emily finished tying a tight bandage around Orion's leg, and Myron slid a full clip into his gun. As he left them, uncertainty whirled through Peter. What was he supposed to do now?

He followed the map through the now-vacant corridors, leading to another staircase. He crept up them quietly, clearing every corner with footsteps as silent as a leaf touching the grass. Even without the others, a slight strain of confidence held him in its grip.

"Stay here," he said to Adrian and Navria, "I'll find the central staircase, then come back for you. Don't move."

They nodded. Peter pressed against the door softly, leaning forward as it clicked open, rifle barrel pushed through the tiny crack first, before he proceeded.

This next level obviated his map. Here, the corridors closest to the edge were lined with windows, almost floor-to-ceiling, affording a view of the dark cavern walls through the grimy glass. Peter peered out, and immediately a stab of shock ran through him; four louse landing craft sat in a neat line near their own, soldiers moving slowly toward the base of the structure, in formation. At least forty. Myron and Emily, against all those soldiers. With Orion, dying, to take care of. Peter slamming his fist against the glass, so hard that the dull pain lingered.

The window next to him shattered.

As though it had swung down from above, a louse copter swooped into view, gun blazing. Peter ran, all guilt momentarily forgotten, as the windows burst, misting the floor with fine bits of glass, as a bed for the larger shards. One slashed Peter's exposed neck, but not too deeply; another left a long scratch on his cheek. He covered his eyes, and dove around the corner, out of line of sight to the windows. Cursing, he put his hand against his throat. A little blood, but the wound was superficial. He breathed a sigh of relief. As he got to his feet, he realized how loose his stomach was, how vulnerable his jugular vein was, how soft his flesh was compared to the furious sting of lead bullets. Teeth gritted, he forced himself onward, adjusting his grip on his rifle. He reached for the hand radio at his belt, squeezing the button on the side.

"Em, there's something like... three dozen soldiers coming toward the entrance. Just..."

His voice trailed away.

"Forty soldiers," he said again, "And a copter, but its got its sights on me. I'm looking for a way up, but you've got to either get past all those or find another way out. They're guarding our ship, too. I have no... I have no idea how we're going to get out of here. Emily, I'm sorry."

His finger slipped away, with his will to speak, and the radio clicked off.

Before long he came to another set of windows; ceasing his pace, his ears caught the subtle thrumming, dulled by the walls. He sighed. It would have to be quick.

He burst out from the corner, immediately realizing how stupid his actions were, how the chopper had to be waiting for him. Firing blindly, he sprinted at the crest of a wave of shattered glass. The noise was overwhelming; he could not hear his own weapon's report. As he slid to safety once again, he realized it was empty; he had no more ammo, only his sidearm.

*I have to find a way around these windows,* he thought as he cocked the pistol. *One more run past those windows will finish me off.*

His breathing felt like it was pumping water, not air, through his weary lungs. It was a miracle that no bullets had struck him. Perhaps his Chosen insight had saved, told him the exact rhythm of steps to avoid the bullets, but in retrospect there was no way to tell. Sometimes it came, as imperceptibly as a

dream, leaving him to wonder later how he had survived.

Either way, testing it again would be reckless. He began to check the doors along the corridor, finding only empty offices and maintenance rooms. *Why is everything abandoned?*

In one room he found a pair of louse soldiers. A blurred command forced his head down, as automatic fire pinged off the metal desk between him and the lice. He waited until one came around the desk, gunned him down, split his head before he could fire a shot, then swiftly popped up and fired three bullets into the others stomach. The soldier fell with a growl of pain, gun stuttering as he held it in his death grip. Peter ducked reflexively, as bullets bounced around the room. There was a sudden wet thud; Peter rose cautiously, and saw one of the ricocheting bullets had left a bloody hole in place of one of the soldier's goggle lenses. A sigh of relief escaped his lungs, punctuating his desperate panting.

Another room held louse weapons; Peter searched desperately for a rocket launcher, grenade launcher, even a heavy enough machine gun, but the room held assault rifles and submachine guns. Peter grabbed one of the rifles, and several magazines that were laying invitingly on a crate. He slid one in with a click, and almost smiled, but suppressed it immediately. If all the gun did was inject him with false bravado, he was better leaving it behind.

In the hallway, he realized the purr of rotors had faded away. He moved quickly around the corner, to the brink of the next line of windows. Halfway down the hallway, another corridor split off, leading away from the others that encircled the edges. A gleam of triumph flashed across Peter's chest. Then the thrumming hum returned.

Emily spotted the attackers before they spotted her. He squeezed off a burst from her rifle, dropping one, as Myron shot another next to hers. Immediately, bullets struck the entrance hall like hail; they fell back, around the corner. Emily's eye went to her son's unconscious form, propped against the wall next to her.

"We can't do this," she said to Myron, "We have to find another way out."

"They'll hunt us down," Myron said, craning his neck to see around the corner. With sudden ferocity, he shot a stream of bullets out into the open, then ducked back as the response skittered off the floor, the distant barking of weapons barely audible.

"They're still pretty far away."

"Peter said something about a copter."

A flash of anger shot through Emily at her husband's name, and a cold wash of regret followed it. This was not his fault. Why was she angry at the messenger?

"Either way, we have to move," she said, "I can't carry Orion, and move fast. Neither of us can. We've got to get out the other side, and find someplace to hide, wait for Peter and the others, then find a way back to our ship from there."

Myron peered out again, then pulled back. He met her eyes, and nodded. Emily crouched, sliding her hands under her son's shoulders, hoisting him up, slinging him over her back.

"I can still carry you," she whispered tenderly in his unconscious ear.

She skipped carefully across the width of the hallway, as Myron covered her with his rifle, firing again and again until there was sharp click. Behind her, she heard the hollow clattering of an empty magazine. A moment later, Myron was right behind her, fumbling with a new one.

They came to the stairs they had originally ascended, but passed them, going around the corner. This new hallway bent several times. Around the second corner, they found a stray bug; Myron shot it down without trouble, but the sight unnerved Emily. Escaping would be hard enough; fighting more of the bugs with only two of them would be all but impossible.

"Door ahead," Myron said as they came around a fifth corner; Emily no longer knew what direction they were going. He was ahead now; she had fallen back slightly, slowed by Orion's weight. But she kept up with him as he rushed to the doorway.

"This has got to lead outside," he said, shaking his head, rifle hanging limply from his arm by its

strap, as he punched buttons on the door console. With a dull clang, and a screech, the door began to slide open, the grinding of gears audible now.

“Ready?” Myron said, turning to her with a hopeful grimace. As he did, there was a series of sharp skittering thuds, and the smooth iron surface was suddenly punctuated with scattered holes.

Peter took careful aim, watching the copter hang ready, just outside, a patient predator. He sprang out, lining up the sights on the cockpit, and fired, piercing the pale spiderweb of cracked glass, firing again and again.

A sudden panic forced him forward as the copter began to shoot back. He abandoned his retaliatory efforts, and ran, eyes only on the diverging corridor ahead.

As he came to it, he realized his mistake; he was a perfect target, running straight down the hallway, away from the copter, which slid into position behind him, evident as the noise grew louder. Little bursts of sparks sprang into being around Peter, blinking out of existence as soon as they came. He wove desperately, zig-zagging back and forth, praying simply to reach the end. His legs jolted oddly, almost throwing him to the ground, as a vision of bullets whirring right over his shoulder flashed through his overwhelmed mind.

He came to a railing around a staircase, and almost vaulted over it; nausea and vertigo overran him as he slammed into it, leaning dangerously over an endless drop, fading into black before the bottom was visible. Around this abyss, a thin metal staircase clung to the walls, the gray cylindrical room proceeding up to a brilliant ball of white a hundred meters up.

Loping swiftly out of view of the now-distant copter, Peter sank to the ground, his rifle clicking against the wall, the sound echoing. He remembered he had promised to go back for Navria and Adrian; his heart sank. Could he even make it back? Was there any time? Were they even still alive?

He thought of Emily, and Myron, and his son. He had sent them all to their deaths. Glaring at the railing, the impulse to vault over it ran through him, but he threw it off. His face sank into his palms, finding brief solace in the darkness and warmth of that insular world; but when he pulled away, the cavernous room was still there.

There was no choice but to go back for Adrian and Navria. They had the explosives; he could not count on finding more anywhere else. He would have to find a way past that copter.

He set off carefully along the catwalk, to the first set of stairs. They brought him barely sixty feet, but that was at least three floors; gazing across the chamber, to the other staircases, he saw they were staggered differently, but the spacing was the same. Three staircases, each one leading to levels spaced three apart, set differently so all of them were covered. It was a defensible, if not efficient design. Maybe the inhabitants of this building weren't expected to be particularly mobile, anyway; sitting and watching meters and gauges didn't require a lot of walking around.

Peter's footsteps clacked against the grate. Looking down through the gaps, he realized that the rickety metal plates were the only thing standing between him, and falling hundreds of meters. A shiver ran up his back.

The door was open, the console glowing green. He walked through, swiveling his aim side to side. He immediately heard the strange chattering of the bugs, and was ready for them as they came around the corner. He gunned one, two, three down, but there was easily a dozen, and they were gaining ground. As he reached for his belt, he remembered with a stab of panic he was out of grenades.

Backpedaling, throwing glances behind him, he made his way to the staircase. Cautiously, he moved down it; the swarm followed him, the slender tips of their spindly legs catching in the grate. One fell over the railing. Peter gunned down more, their bodies confused with each other. He fired again and again, ejected one spent clip, and slid in another.

Their weight began to strain the staircase; Peter felt it twist dangerously under his feet. A twinge of panic gripped him, throwing off his aim. He abandoned shooting, and ran as quickly as he dared to down the precarious stairs. He turned back to look at the glob of bugs gathering further back; as

he did, there was a sudden, screeching creak, the sound of tearing metal. He felt the floor give way under him; sheer terror shot through him. Leaping forward, he landed hard on his stomach, nose almost sliced in the grate, arms slammed brutally against the cold metal. His fingers interlocked with the lattice of iron; he realizing his feet were dangling. He pulled himself along, pain pulsing through him, until he was fully supported by the walkway. Getting up awkwardly, his heart sank as he saw the entire staircase torn away, the bugs gone, his chance of reaching the next level gone. The stairways bypassed each other oddly, so that getting onto one when it passed another level required leaping a two-meter gap. Onto an unstable grated staircase.

Peter turned to look back down the hallway at the shattered windows. There was no way it was not still out there. He would have to risk it.

Emily pulled Myron back from the opening door, as more bullets punctured it. She leaned out and fired through the widening gap.

"They came around, sealed us off," Myron said in between heavy breaths, his back against the wall. He slammed his fist against the wall. "Damn it!"

Emily let Orion down gently, then leaned out and fired again, hoping to at least keep the lice from getting too close. Myron joined her, just as the door opened fully, and the enemy's bullets began to dig into the opposite wall.

One whizzed by Emily's ear; she jolted back, almost dropping her rifle in surprise. A sudden hotness gripped her ears, as though her close brush with death had embarrassed her.

"They're getting more accurate."

"Shit," Myron said as he leaned back, too, "There's a gunpod out there. Maybe four, five soldiers max, but the 'pod is going to be what gets us if we don't take it down."

"Can you get a bead on it?"

"Not with all those soldiers. Hell, even without them, I don't think I could take it. It knows right where we are."

Emily stood still for a moment, before pushing her rifle out again and firing, not exposing herself at all, simply retaliating blindly to keep the lice from getting too close. Then she reached for her cap, pulled it from her head, and hung it from the end of her rifle.

"What are you doing?" Myron asked, brow suddenly furrowed.

"Oldest trick in the book," she replied, "I stick it out, you wait a second, then you poke out and take the shot. Don't miss."

"I won't."

Gingerly, Emily extended the rifle tip out past the corner. Almost immediately, bullets whizzed by, one tearing at the cap, flinging it around wildly like a flag caught in a vicious gust, before spinning it off, torn and shredded.

Before it had landed, Myron had popped out and fired three shots, then ducked back before the lice could switch their aim. Satisfaction brought a grim smile to his face as the gunpod's distorted moan met his ears.

Emily sank to the ground, the tip of her rifle shattered, her arm sore and pulsing from the jolt it had received. One bullet had caught the barrel, nearly jerking the weapon from her grip, but she had held on. She steadied her rattled hand, and peered out, gunning down a louse soldier who had gotten too close. They had moved in, thinking Emily and Myron had been forced down for good, and it was simply a matter of moving up and finishing them.

It took barely five seconds to prove them wrong.

Standing on the brink, Peter's mind drained of everything but a strange peace, wrapped around the terror beneath like a blanket over a wild beast. Combat was different; in a way it was no different, but there was something about heights, the risk of falling, that made Peter wonder whether it was worth

facing the copter again.

He made the jump easily, but wobbled on his feet for a second on the other side. As he did, sheer panic seized him, and he nearly fell, but caught himself against the railing, icy blood pounding through his chest and forehead, like pins and needles. As he began up the stairs, he realized he had been in no real danger at all. If anything had killed him, it would have been his irrational phobia.

The first door was already open. Again, the mystery of this place's decrepitude puzzled him. Had the lice anticipated their attack? Was this place being renovated, overhauled somehow? Why in the world hadn't an entire battalion of louse soldiers landed by now? A sliver of an answer festered in the depths of Peter's mind, but he did not want to confront it. Not until he had found the reactor, and taken care of that copter.

He searched, room to room, looking for an armory. A few stray bugs skittered about, lost, but he put them down easily, as there was never more than one at a time.

After covering nearly half the floor, he found a heavily reinforced door, dull green and incongruous to the others. This had to be an armory. A moment of fiddling with the console proved fruitless; he almost passed the room by, before noticing a slender red box on the console that looked almost like a thumbpad.

"Biometric security?" he wondered aloud. It seemed odd. He had never seen a louse soldier without gloves on, knew not whether they even had individual fingerprints. With a shrug, he pressed his thumb against it. Nothing happened, unsurprisingly.

No more grenades. No more sticks of explosives. No way to get past the door. Unless...

He drew his knife smoothly, feeling Quicksilver's rubber grip in his hands, the blade, keen and lustrous as ever, glinting in the cold light. Sliding the tip into the tiny sliver of a gap between the console and the wall, he twisted it into position, then plunged downward, keeping his fingers far from the blade. Immediately, there was a crackling and a hissing. He heard it lock, then unlock, then, finally, begin to open. When it did, he froze, not daring to tamper with his luck.

Finally it was open; he left the knife in, in case disturbing it would make the door close again. Inside he found four rocket tubes; he took them, rolled them out into the hall.

Back outside, he yanked out the knife; the door began to close, then the light on the console stuttered, and went out, leaving the door half-opened. Smiling now, he slung the freshly gathered munitions over his shoulder, and strode confidently down the hallway, back to the stairs, back to the long hallway and the waiting copter.

Hugging the cavern walls, Myron and Emily moved cautiously from stalagmite to stalagmite. Each was nearly two meters thick at the base, and easily ten to fifteen tall. The gray contours were warm, whenever Emily's exposed arm came to rest against the stone, in between dashes from one to the other. Orion was still over her shoulder; he was still alive, Emily could feel his pulse beating resolutely as she carried him.

"Four ships around ours. Eight soldiers guarding them. And if there are more... I can't believe there aren't more. This was supposed to be an in-and-out thing. In our plans, if we'd lingered this long, we'd all be dead, surrounded and overwhelmed."

"Maybe it's a trap," Emily said, and immediately she feared for Peter. And Adrian and Navria.

Myron shook his head.

"No way they knew we would do it like this. We specifically made the push just so we could get a ship in here, under their radar. They don't know about our stealth copters, and they don't know that our offensive was for this. They think we were going for some sort of troop training center. Because we're attacking that too, remember?"

"I'm familiar with the plan, Myron."

"How do we get rid of them?" he said.

"I don't know."

A sudden explosion from the tower startled them; Emily flinched, firing a few rounds in panic. The louse soldiers swiveled their attention to the tower, watching the helicopter that had been circling it falling, streamers of fire and smoke behind it.

"That's how!" Myron shouted, "Shoot them!"

Their rifles chattered in a vicious ambush, splattering one louse soldier against the side of their copter, and dropping two others. The others shot back wildly, but Myron and Emily picked them off. Two survived to retreat behind one of the parked landing craft. Their bullets had never come close.

They advanced swiftly, but cautiously. Orion's weight wore on Emily's shoulder, slowing her, but she could not give in now, so close to safety. She heard a clink from Myron, and saw him yank the pin off of a grenade, and hurl it, somersaulting through the air, behind the landing craft.

Emily gunned down the first louse soldier that ran out, a short spray of fire that ended with a shot to the head. The other was not so lucky; he ran out just in time to be obliterated by the grenade blast. She lowered her rifle tentatively.

"Get in the ship," said Myron, rushing for the cockpit.

"Who was that?"

"Peter. It has to be Peter. He's still in there, and we've got to get him and whoever's left."

Myron stared at the wrecked helicopter, lying in a crumpled heap at the base of the tower. He spotted a shattered window, about halfway up.

"All right," he said, "Let's go."

Peter sprinted down the hallway, his mind whirring, trying to find Adrian and Navria, having waited a barely a second after shooting the helicopter before taking off. Down the stairs, down a hallway, he found them. Adrian lay dead on his back, Navria was still slumped against the wall, a rifle in her hands. Her eyes were closed. Peter ran faster.

He knelt next to her, shaking her desperately. Her eyes popped open.

"Peter," she said, relieved.

"What happened?"

"They shot Adrian, he was trying to protect me."

"I'm sorry, Navria."

"Where's the reactor?"

Peter pointed.

"Up. There's a central staircase."

"Let's go," she said, making to get up, and almost collapsing.

"Careful," said Peter, helping her up.

"I'm fine," she insisted, taking a few shaky steps forward, before regaining her balance.

He led her back along the hallway, back to the stairs, back to the hole in the window through which he'd shot the helicopter, back to the rickety grated balcony, and the spiral staircases that wound their way up toward the brilliant white light.

"Where is everyone?" whispered Navria as they made their way to the first staircase.

"They probably pulled most of them to go fight the war, left those spider-things behind instead. Maybe we got lucky."

"Julia's dead," said Navria darkly, "We didn't get lucky."

Peter felt like he had been punched in the gut. She *was* dead. And Orion would blame him.

The air grew warmer as they ascended. Navria glanced up, the brilliant light of the reactor washing out her face.

"Some sort of magnetic plasma containment. I don't know what it's for."

"The reactor has to be inside it, right?"

"Oh yeah," she said with a mischievous grin, "It's in there. We just need to get up close enough."

## Planning the escape

“We simply need to make sure the tac nukes are detonated. As soon as they are, we will have about an hour to get out of here. We have identified thirty-three vital structural points in Macalavay. All of them are under our control. We will set them off, at which time we must be ready to go. Admiral Ratham is preparing his fleet to escape via the eastern exit, whereas Admiral Thereos will lead his out the southern exit. Myron and I will head will head the fighter escorts.”

Around the table, the military men were agreeing. They had little choice, as Peter was their leader, respected and maybe a sliver feared, but they knew that he welcomed healthy disagreement, and one of them had already shot up his hand to speak.

“Why aren't you going to be in the fleet?” the admiral demanded, without waiting for Peter to acknowledge him, “If you are killed – not that I would ever think you would be – but if you are, you are our leader! The glue that holds our people together! You should be near the center of the fleet, commanding, where you are safe!”

Peter turned a cold glare on the admiral. “Any leader who hides behind the men he leads is no leader at all. I will risk my life just as much as I ask the people I command to risk their lives.”

The admiral sat back, seeming properly abashed.

“Any more questions?” Peter asked. Another hand raised. It was Admiral Ratham.

“Who's going to be detonating the charges? If the lice know what we're up to, surely they'll throw everything they've got into stopping that. Right now they don't want to commit too many men to an attack, because there's not much to gain. But if they can disrupt our attempts to bring this whole place to the ground, I'm sure they'll consider that a pretty high priority.”

“As I said, I've picked teams of men, and the areas are firmly under our control.”

“How do you plan on evacuating everyone once the charges have been set off,” said another gray-haired man, this one a general, infantry by the crossed rifles on his shoulder. Orion noticed the pin on his uniform; he had fought at Point Seven.

## Escaping Macalavay

"Orion!" a voice called from across the hangar. Orion's head swiveled, recognizing it as his father's. A second later, he'd emerged from the crowd to stand before Orion.

"Have something for you, son," said Peter, slightly breathless. He handed Orion his dagger, Quicksilver, and what looked like some sort of medallion.

"Aren't these yours?" Orion asked, eyeing the items curiously. He had an idea about the intent of these gifts, and he didn't like it.

"They're yours now."

Orion met his father's eyes, trying to discern a motive for his sudden generosity.

"Why are you giving this to me?"

"They're valuable. They need to be kept safe."

"In case something happens?"

"Nothing is going to happen," Peter responded calmly.

"Then why aren't you keep them?" Orion pressed. Peter sighed.

"These things are far more valuable than my own life. I am entrusting them to you. Hold them close. One day you will need them."

Orion looked at the medallion and knife, then eyed his father curiously, considering his odd statement. "All right," he said cautiously. He started to climb the ladder to his fighter's cockpit.

"Orion." His father's calm voice cut through the chaotic noise of the crowd. Orion looked back to a worried expression.

"Yeah?"

"Good luck."

Orion nodded. He opened the cockpit hatch, slid his legs over the side, and lowered himself down in the pilot's seat. His co-pilot, Anarya, already sat in the co-pilot's seat, not yet strapped in. Her normally olive-toned skin had been stained with a sickly pallor, and her brown eyes betrayed her anxiety. There was, at some point, an inverse relationship between fear and performance, and she was nearing it. So was he, most likely.

"All right, Anarya?" he asked when the glass canopy of the cockpit had closed with a soft hiss, both of them sealed inside, past the point of no return. He heard a soft rustling from behind him and assumed that she had nodded.

Today, there was no retreat, no escape, there was no second chance, and bailing out would only drop them onto the scorched earth of a dying Macalavay, where they would be torn to pieces by the atomic wind that would flay the skin from their bodies before they hit the ground.

Orion blinked the upsetting images from his mind, fearing for a moment that they might somehow transfer to Anarya's mind and frighten her as well.

He unlocked the switches to start the engines, upload the weapons systems, prepare the inflight computer. Around him, he heard the warm moan of the other twenty fighters copying him, mixed with his co-pilot's anxious, shallow breath as the microphones came online. Orion realized how much he relied on her now. Nothing else mattered now, and she might be the last person he ever spoke to.

*Stop telling yourself that,* Orion commanded himself as the first fighters hovered out of the landing bay. He began the final preflight check.

"Fueling hoses disengaged?"

"Disengaged before you got here."

"Engine checks out?"

"Affirmative."

Orion winced at the waver in her voice.

"Fuel mix okay?"

"Yep," she said, her voice more firm this time.

Orion pushed the thrusters to fifty percent, and felt the exhilaration of freedom as the metal landing gear left the floor of the bay. *Freedom from the ground, that's why we fly. It's in a person's instinct to resist confinement, and even if I die today I will die free*, Orion thought. The ship began to slide forward, picking up speed, then hurtling out of the hangar. Switching his microphone into the command channel, he tuned in just in time to hear Halex's voice ordering them into formation.

The twelve disc-shaped ships fell into a V-formation. The large cruisers, surrounded and shielded by the smaller escort cruisers, were far more loosely organized. *They'd better get that fixed*, Orion thought to himself. The enemy would pick off stragglers like a pack of hunting wolves did. Their animal instinct was far stronger; they were hunting prey, rather than fighting a battle.

There were only two capital ships helping them escort; the *Unity* and the *Disparity*. The southern escape route had been given the least battleships because it was not only the area of least enemy concentration but also part of a decoy; the lice would assume the whos would protect their most valued people with their strongest forces, but Peter had suggested the opposite strategy. Animal instinct was sometimes easily fooled.

However, as their full field of battle came into view, Orion realized that even without as many enemies they would still have trouble getting through. Half a dozen enemy ships loomed like black bullets floating in the distance. A dark cloud of Scorpion fighters swarmed in front of them, bullets spraying from their noses.

"Fighters ahead," Halex said calmly, which Orion considered something of an understatement, "Wait until we're at three hundred meters, let off some rockets, then break formation." Orion tried to suppress the thrill of impending battle. A pilot had to be grimly methodical, able to instantly improvise, and there was no room to pause for glory. He spotted the thin, "H"-shaped profile of the approaching Scorpion fighters, and he felt each of his heartbeats tap against his ribs.

The distance indicator on the HUD tracked the fighters growing closer. Three hundred meters was close, at least for an air battle where they cruised along at nearly five hundred kilometers per hour. Nine-hundred-fifty-three, nine-hundred-twenty, eight hundred-ninety-four. The numbers changed faster than Orion's mind could register; finally, he decided to just fire at three-hundred fifty meters and his reflexes would compensate for the difference. Halex was cutting it awfully close.

Finally, the ships were at three-fifty-four and Orion fired four missiles, then veered out of the way. He heard a dull explosion behind him, and grinned in satisfaction. The barrage had been effective; as Orion dived, hoping to draw some fighters along with him, he saw the black smoking hulks of at least thirty enemy ships falling past him. A drop in the bucket, but that was where it started.

Five Scorpions followed him into the dive, directly behind him, thinking this pilot a stupid and easy catch. It had been taught as a rule in flight schools on both sides that once an enemy was on your "six," or directly behind you, you were more vulnerable than ever.

But Orion's fighter was equipped with rear-facing weapons, and a rear-facing copilot. Anarya did not even wait to be told before opening fire. A stream of hot lead cut across the stiletto-shaped wings of two of the fighters, and they burst into flame. Orion pulled up fast as the ground grew larger, and the damaged fighters were unable to avert their path, and crashed into the ground. The other three remained behind him, but Orion skirted the ship side to side and relied on Anarya's superior skill to take out the remaining three.

As he leveled off, Orion spotted another pair of Scorpions turning away from a trail of smoke, angling towards him. His eyes darted to the smoke trail; its source, a Falcon fighter in a full dive. Orion's heart sank; he had known there would be casualties, he always knew there would casualties, but they hit him all the same.

A deluge of bullets punched holes in the front of Orion's fighter, sounding exactly like falling hailstones but with far deadlier results. The enemy fighters were high, and on his right, bearing down and leading him. Orion swerved to the right, and punched the flares. His instincts had saved them; barely a second later, a pair of missiles streaked past, hungrily chasing the falling flares.

He heard the chatter of Anarya's gun from behind him.

"Climb?"

"I've got them," she said, "We've got to meet up with the fleet."

Angling the Falcon toward the distant ships, Orion pushed the throttle forward until it refused to go further. The ship lurched forward, accelerating wildly. A thrill ran through Orion's chest, and under the thick wool of his flight jacket, he felt goosebumps. A moment later, the chattering ceased.

"Got them."

"Good shot," said Orion, "That's seven – "

"We're hit," Anarya cut across urgently, "Fuel's leaking. Who else is left?"

Orion looked at the status screen on the end of the dashboard, and his heart sank. Fully half of the green shapes were unlit, indicating only a few squad members still in the air. Two of the remainder were heavily damaged and had broken formation to head for repairs. Five active fighters remained flying, including Halex. Orion finally looked around at the larger battle. To his dismay, the fate of his squad was widespread. A huge swath had been cut through the louse fighter force, but that of the nits had been nearly burned out in doing so.

"What do we do now?" Anarya asked, voice heavy with sorrow for dead allies. Orion stared at the controls, trying to think of an alternate plan.

"We're heading for the *Sky Razor*. Hopefully we'll be able to fight from there and help regroup. We can't do much more with fuel figures like these," Orion said, looking down at their remaining fuel. Seventy-six liters would barely be enough to catch up with the *Sky Razor*.

"Let's go then," said Anarya, "Maybe we can draw some fighters into the cruisers' field of fire."

It was a risky plan, and likely not one the cruisers would appreciate. But lingering here would not do them much good, and the fleet would need help.

Orion leaned back as the ship pointed up and climbed, pulling him down and lurching Anarya forward in her seat. He set his HUD to track the location of the *Sky Razor*. A minute later, a blue diamond appeared on his screen.

"Few clicks away," Orion said casually, "We'll make it."

"Fighters," came Anarya's alarmed voice. A second later, there was a clattering sound as bullets skittered across the surface of their ship.

"We okay?" said Orion distractedly, focusing on getting to the *Sky Razor* before they could become embroiled in another dogfight.

"They just skimmed us a bit, but I think we should—" Anarya was cut off as glass shattered. Orion heard her scream in pain, and the surprise made him let go of the thrust, letting the Falcon glide, the engines' sound sinking away to leave an eerie silence.

"Anarya!" Orion shouted desperately. He heard no response. He dared himself to turn around to look. She was slumped forward, helmet fallen off, holes in the glass whistling sharply in the wind. Orion felt an empty panic seize him, filled the next moment by hot fury.

"You're all going to hell," he growled through the shakiness in his voice, and wheeled his fighter around, jamming the throttle stick to full, recklessly diving straight at his pursuers. He launched one, two, three missiles that soared ahead of him, then followed it up with a spray of gunfire that wheeled from side-to-side until both ships spurted gouts of flame. The missiles slammed into the pair of them, finishing them off in a fantastic explosion that left nothing but a pair of burning hulks falling to the ground, trailing a cloud of metal flakes. Orion felt numb all over. He pulled out of the dive, realizing it had cost him precious fuel, and resumed his precipitous upward climb.

At last he reached the *Sky Razor's* rear landing bay, the engines already starting to sputter. One of the few cruisers of its size to have such a commodity, the bay could only hold four fighters, and it was fortunately empty at the moment. Orion's fighter skidded along the floor, the last dollops of leaking fuel spattering on the ground, before coming to a stop. The engines ceased their roar, and the quiet filled Orion's ears. Then the cockpit was opening with a smooth hiss. He had to get Anarya out of there.

He scrambled from his seat, over the seat. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be breathing, but her front was covered in blood and holes were torn everywhere in her flight suit. Her hair was matted with sweat, and covered her face like a shroud, revealing nothing but her barely parted lips. Orion brushed it back, desperately hoping to reveal life and not death. Her closed eyes opened slightly as he did. He wrapped his arms around her and began to drag her out of her seat, the frayed straps tearing easily to release her. At last she lay on her back on the top of the fighter, she gasped for breath, and Orion could see the bloodstains on her uniform spreading. Desperately, Orion began to stand up, to run for help, but Anarya grabbed his arm.

“No. Stay,” she said, her voice weak with pain. Her hand was frigid and pale, already nearly drained of blood, and she gripped Orion's wrist like a handcuff. Her voice, barely discernible before, was now lost to her desperate gasps as her lungs clawed for life. Her grip tightened.

“I don't want to die alone,” she whispered. Orion nodded. Their eyes met. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. She coughed suddenly, and another drop came out, sliding down her cheek, trailing red. Her labored breathing went on for another moment, then her eyes closed and her breathing stopped. A distant explosion echoed through the empty hangar. It was only then that Orion realized his eyes were clouded with tears. He wiped them away. First Julia, now Anarya. How many of the people that he cared about were going to die? And how many more would it take before he was all but dead as well?

He barely paid attention to his own actions as he ran from the bay, leaving Anarya's body sprawled on the wing of their fighter. There would be time for a proper mourning later. The best he could do now was make sure she hadn't died in vain, and Orion had every intention of making sure that didn't happen.

Somehow he found the bridge. The ship was not very large, but there were still people moving around it everywhere, and Orion elbowed more than one blue-uniformed crewman as he made his way there. He didn't have time to stop and apologize. There were places for caring in war, but this was not one of them.

When he came to the bridge door, he barged in without thinking, the metal hatch slamming into the wall next to it with a loud clang. The result was the two guards by the door immediately sprang into action to subdue the sudden intruder. Two arms were suddenly wrapped around his, pushing him back, slamming him against the door as it came to a close. One of the guard's faces came inches from Orion's, his beady eyes narrowed in anger. Then they widened in recognition, and the grip on his arms released.

“Sorry,” said the beady-eyed guard hastily, stepping back. Orion ignored him and strode to the bridge, where Myron was on the controls, flanked by his two copilots in red uniforms. Orion forgot their names.

“Myron.” Orion said simply, in between breaths.

“Glad you found us,” Myron said distractedly, busily maneuvering the ship.

“I landed in the bay. My fighter was ... riddled with holes, couldn't fly it. Anarya is.... gone.”

Myron did not even turn around. “Either help me with the controls or shut up. I can't fly this thing and shoot well at the same time.”

Orion nodded and went to the control screen next to Myron's, and began targeting the ship's guns. There were four ships pursuing the *Sky Razor*: three small escort sloops barely fifty meters long each, and a larger craft about the same size as *Sky Razor*. Orion knew they were out-matched: the cruiser they could overpower by itself, but with three smaller ships to contend with as well...

His fingers flying over the controls, Orion set three of the EIRGs to focus on each of the smaller ships, and the remaining guns to fire at the cruiser. The smaller ships needed to be taken out quickly: they were small, but their weapons packed a powerful punch.

“Myron, match their velocity,” said Orion, focusing on the screen. He felt a lurch as the ship accelerated slightly, watched the line on the control screen become almost perfectly perpendicular between the three left EIRG batteries and the control area of the leftmost enemy sloop. Orion pressed

another button, and felt the ship twinge slightly as the guns fired a hundred meters behind him. Not bothering to confirm a kill or even a hit, he marked the second ship on the right.

“Get with them,” he said. Myron obeyed. The drop in velocity made Orion sway on his feet, but he kept firm. Right as the lines matched up, he fired the right batteries. Without prompting, Myron sped up the *Sky Razor* slightly so that Orion could aim at the third ship. As we watched the lines, there was a loud, ugly noise of metal tearing, suddenly lost in the roar of an explosion. Orion fell to the floor, grimacing with pain as his right forearm took the brunt of his fall. He staggered to his feet. Myron was barely getting up when Orion had already lined up the shot with the final cruiser, ignoring the twinges in his arm. There was another gentle rock of the ship as the third enemy sloop had three holes punched through the hull. Orion was fairly sure the radar wasn't accurate enough to detect it, but he could almost swear he saw the EIRG projectile bursting out the other side. He checked the radar. The fourth ship, the cruiser, seemed to have broken off its pursuit. They had gotten away.

“*Onyx* needs support,” said a tall balding man to Myron's left. He was wearing a headset and sporting a bruise on his temple, likely from being flung to the floor when the *Sky Razor* was hit.

“Right,” said Orion, as Myron adjusted the controls, “Let's go help them out.”

Peter sat quietly at one of the *Lion's Pride's* control seats, with Emily on his left maneuvering the ship. They had made it through the cloud of enemy fighters, tearing eight of them out of formation, leading them away, then destroying them entirely with the *Pride's* formidable arsenal.

They had no escort. Selfless as ever, Peter refused to value his life above any other. But he knew Timeless was tracking him, and he could not justify staying so close to the rest of the fleet, and exposing them to him. His fight was with Peter and Emily; all the whos, really, but his target would be them.

As he sat staring at the ship's altimeter display, watching the numbers vacillate around fifty-eight hundred meters, he let his mind wander. He wondered where his son was, where his daughter was, whether they were still alive, and whether any of them would survive their escape. Worries circled in his head like vultures. They would not strike at him; they were waiting until these events occurred, so that they could feed on his guilt, and make him wonder how he could have acted differently.

The sound of bullets striking the front of the ship, like a sudden knock on the door, stirred Peter from his thoughts. A second later, the sound of gunfire from above indicated the *Pride's* turrets were shooting back. Peter slid over a seat and took the main controls. Pulling back on the control stick, the ship tilted back and rocketed upward, pointing directly at the sun. Peter had been taught to fly out of the sun in flight school, to surprise the enemy, and he was sure the louse pilots were just as cunning. Unfortunately for them, this meant he knew exactly where they were. He fired directly into the blinding light, and hear the muffled death cries of one, two, three fighters, who fell out of flight trailing smoke, bleeding shards of metal, tumbling toward the ground. Louse fighters normally traveled in groups of four, meaning there was still one left. Almost reassuringly, a shadow blinked over Peter's ship as the final fighter flew past. Peter let it go, leveled off his flight, and began to descend again. From behind, he heard the sounds of his wingmen dispatching the lone Scorpion, letting it tumble toward the soon-to-be-roiling ground.

“We're about seventy kilometers from the rest of the fleet, and two hundred from where we took off at Apex Station,” came Emily's voice from the left most seat, where positioning and tracking screens showed their location.

“Isn't that where we're supposed to be?” Peter asked. The plans, the instructions, the entire mission was blurry in his brain.

“Yes. I'm just checking the fuel. We didn't exactly take our fair share of it, did we?”

“The others needed it more, Em.”

“So do we,” she said, fingers tight around the controls, “

Peter held the ship on a steady course. Around them, mostly below, he could see the multiple flashes of light and small swarming black dots that indicated aircraft in combat. Large black shapes, the

cruisers, sometimes disappeared as well, although usually their disappearance was more noticeable than a simple explosion or falling trail of smoke. Peter could see one ship, one of the capital escort cruisers they'd brought along, keel to the side, dots of light flashing all over its surface as tiny explosions tore at it. At last, ragged with holes, it broke into the three segments that fell to earth among a floating flotsam of debris. Peter sighed. Not everyone would survive their escape. The words made it no easier to watch.

They did not encounter any more opponents until a few moments later, when a single green blip appeared on the tracking screen.

"Approaching fighter!" Emily said urgently, surprised both by its sudden appearance and its speed.

"How many?" Peter asked, keeping the ship firmly on course.

"One."

Peter turned his head to look at Emily's puzzled expression. Then his eyes narrowed. He turned back to the control and fired. Bullets sprayed in front of the fighter, now coming into view, an hourglass shape. A thin stream of cannon fire burst from the center of the hourglass, tearing into the *Lion's Pride*, riddling it with holes. A few hit the glass on the cockpit, searing tiny holes in the screen that whistled a piercing shriek. Multiples alarms wailed and flashed. The hourglass fighter sped by, but Peter heard a thump on the top of the cockpit, sounds of shuffling, and a sickening cry of pain, indicating the fighter had dropped at least a one-man boarding party. He burst from his seat and ran to the stairs at the back of the control room, kicking open the door, drawing two knives, and climbing the stairs to the roof.

When he opened the roof access hatch, he found the rear gunfire station abandoned, the gunner dead, her body sprawled behind the turret, three long slashes on the front of her olive green uniform, blood tinging the edges of the torn cloth. Peter's heart jolted at the sight. He wanted to run toward the body, to pull it in before the wind claimed it, but stopped himself. Timeless was still here. The wounds on the gunner's body were knife slashes, not bullet holes. He crept cautiously onto the roof.

Immediately, like a bat, Timeless leaped from his perch on the roof of the staircase and landed behind Peter, who threw himself into a roll. When he came up, Timeless was already on him, knocking him back, pinning his wrists. Peter swiveled his hands, spinning his daggers and gashed Timeless' finger. He pulled back, and Peter kicked once, twice, three times, knocking Timeless backwards onto the floor. He tumbled out of the way as Peter ran to finish him off, coming up on Peter's right. Not missing a beat, Peter lunged again, but Timeless neatly stepped out of the way. Only when he came up the third time, with Peter directionally disoriented, did he come in to fight.

Peter's skill with a knife equaled Timeless', and even with a disadvantage Peter held him. They fought for several minutes, dodging swipes, blocking limbs, deflecting thrusts. The midday sun flashed off the whirring metal.

Finally, Peter's first knife stabbed into Timeless's forearm, and the second came across in a throat-level slash. Timeless threw his head back, then backpedaled and withdrew, the knife still in his arm, yanked from Peter's grip. With one last furious look at Peter, Timeless leaped from the brink of the ship, the wind grabbing him and pulling him away. But rather than tumbling helplessly, he seemed to catch the air, falling gracefully like a diving hawk. Nerves rattled, Peter stood watching the spectacle for a moment, before rushing back downstairs.

"What got hit?" Peter asked before he'd even gotten fully through the door. No answer came from Emily, who was facing away from him, hunched over the controls, her hair hanging over the sides of her face, punching buttons furiously.

"What got hit?" Peter repeated.

"Everything," Emily replied distractedly as she punched buttons furiously running through data, and watching red number after red number flash onto the control screen. "We're losing fuel and coolant, and the engines have taken significant damage. Everything's leaking into everything. That bastard has good aim."

"Can't you do anything about it?" Peter said, a trace of panic creeping into his voice.

“Not really,” Emily said, her voice strained with desperation.

“Do we at least have enough fuel to join the others?”

“No. We’ll be lucky to be in the air for another minute.”

Peter stared at the ships in the distance, now breaking free of the louse fleet, and realized he might never reach them.

“Extend the glide flaps and start climbing. Maybe we can reach the lower ships in the fleet.”

Peter had no idea if that plan would work. The glide flaps were for slowing the ship for landing on an carrier, not descending gracefully through the skies conserving altitude. But it might work.

“Peter.” Emily’s voice was serious. Peter turned to look at her. “We’re losing altitude fast.”

Only then did he notice how fast they were dropping indeed. One of the ship’s operators now served as copilot, and watched the altimeter with a look of desperation. He barely kept his voice steady as he read off their height.

“Five thousand meters.”

Peter shook his head. Barely seconds ago they’d been at fifty-eight hundred. The *Lion’s Pride* was dropping like a rock.

For the first time that day, Peter wondered what was going to happen to him.

Orion engaged the enemy fighters dead on, weaving back and forth. The Scorpions’ underestimation of the *Sky Razor’s* maneuverability was turning out to be a deadly assumption for the louse pilots to make. Between the extra firepower from Myron on the rear gun, eliminating the deadliest threat in aviation— an opponent directly behind you— and Orion’s lightning quick reflexes and flying finesse, they had already shot down seven pursuers by the time a pair of blinding white flashes shot out in front of them, into the distance.

“Did someone shoot a missile?” Orion called to the rest of the cabin. When no response came, he turned around to look at the other cabin crew. They stared back at him blankly, or ignored him.

Out of the corner of his eye, out the small rear view ports, Orion saw a hulking black mass growing larger. He spun back to the controls, slamming the stick forward. The ship went into a dive, just as a deep boom sounded right above the ship, followed by a series of deafening crackles like amplified radio static. From experience, he knew they were thermobaric missiles. Sure enough, he felt the ship pulled upward as the aftermath of the blast sucked in all of the air around them. Gritting his teeth, he forced the ship into a corkscrew dive, twisting it free of the updraft. A moment later, he pulled back on the controls, righting the ship. Behind him, he heard a retch, followed by a splattering sound. He grimaced. Apparently the flight crew had not enjoyed his drastic maneuvers.

He turned his thoughts to rejoining the fleet; the cruiser attack had distracted him, but it was time to get back to their job as an escort.

As he eased the ship into a shallow dive, he heard a deep boom from behind him, resonating like an earthquake along the floor of the ship.

“What was that?” Orion wheeled around in his seat, momentarily forgetting the missile-spewing louse cruiser behind them. He glanced out the back window.

It seemed that the destruction of Macalavay was well underway. Four of the main towers on the closest wall had collapsed, spilling over the edge and dragging down the ships closest to them under a brutal tidal wave of broken stone and iron.

A moment later, the rumbling began again, and the brick-shaped structures that composed the entire formation condensed onto each other, spitting out the struts and scaffolding that held them apart from each other.

Explosions blossomed like blooming roses from the sides of the structures, and more than one disincorporated entirely, huge chunks of rubble and debris pouring down over the rest. With nothing else to hold them up, the others followed suit, reminding Orion of the one card pulled from a card house that brings the entire thing down. He stared in muted amazement for another moment before turning back to

the front of his ship.

Looking down onto the land around Macalavay, he saw cracks running through the ground, entire buildings consumed. Plumes of smoke already reached high into the sky from the carnage on the ground, and Orion flew through one of them as the *Sky Razor* approached the escaped fleet.

A moment later, he heard a series of cannon blasts, followed by more than one explosion on the surface of the *Sky Razor*. On his status screen, Orion could see several red dots flashing, indicating damaged areas, but he only glanced at the display and kept his focus on flying. Cannon fire. Orion began to move back and forth, counting on the assumption that it would take a few minutes for the cruiser to compensate for their motion, by which time Orion hoped to reach the fleet, where support from the capital ships and escorts would surely gun this errant enemy down. Another barrage of cannon fire. Orion slid the *Sky Razor* to the left about four hundred meters, sending everyone without something to hold onto sprawling. Fortunately the ship wasn't tall enough for anyone to fall fatally within it. A second round of cannon fire sounded from behind him.

Orion crossed his fingers as he slid the *Sky Razor* out of the way.

"Altitude four thousand," the operator shouted urgently from the front of the cockpit.

"Damn it," Peter cursed under his breath, his composure finally cracking. He turned around, where Emily desperately scrambled over heating controls.

"I can't do a thing," she cried, angrily pushing a green button repeatedly, "We're overheated; he shot out the heating systems." She turned to him, eyes full of desperation, "We've lost most of our fuel."

Peter considered his wife as she stared at him. Those eyes had never lied to him. And those eyes showed that hope was lost.

"Give it up," Peter said to the operator, who promptly stared at him. Peter stared back, "We've got about as much chance of survival as... we don't. We've fallen behind the fleet. We're lost in the swarm of enemy fighters, and we don't really have any chance of getting out."

"What about the escape pods?" the operator asked. Peter almost chuckled.

"We're too close to the ground. Trust me, hitting the ground in an escape pod at this speed is not going to be pleasant, even with the chutes deployed."

"We could take the chance."

"You can."

The operator stared at Peter for a moment, before standing up and heading down the hallway that led to the escape pod at the rear of the ship. *Good luck*, thought Peter dryly, and he remained still, staring at the control panel. Emily came up behind him.

"It's fortunate that we have children," she said softly, as though this were a tender, sentimental moment between them. The earthquakes from the great structure's collapse had decimated the settlements in the Outreach, and as they flew over it now, columns of black smoke trailed up toward them like sinister tendrils. Emily stared at them. The incessant rumbling of the engines sounded strained now, like a starving beast howling for food. Peter considered the controls for a moment, then sat down in the pilot's seat, curling his fingers tight around the control stick.

"Strap yourself in," said Peter, eying a heavy cruiser bearing in on what he knew to be the *Sky Razor*, "Let's see if we can give Orion and Myron a chance to make it out of here."

Not far away, Orion weaved the *Sky Razor* back and forth, losing speed from shifting back and forth, but managing to avoid the enemy cruiser's cannon fire. But he knew he was playing a deadly game. They knew how to lead, and they were getting better at it.

"Guided missiles," came an alert from Myron through his headphones, "About two clicks away and closing."

Orion simply stared at the controls. Guided missiles... heavy cannons... he could dodge one or the other. Too drastic of a change in flight path would lose the missiles, but would give the cannons at

chance to get a bead on him; he would be flying in too straight of a line. Vice-versa...he would dodge the cannons, but the missiles would be undeterred by a few back and forth strafes.

"One klick," came Myron's anxious voice a few seconds later. Orion realized that he was about to be killed. He slammed the control stick down, going into a steep dive. He squeezed his eyes shut, and waited for the inevitable impact of whatever weapon spelled their death.

A fierce explosion burst behind them, shining red light into the cabin through the narrow view ports. Orion's eyes opened, suddenly desiring to see his end. But the *Sky Razor* didn't waver in its path. Nothing had hit them. A heartbeat later, Orion heard a loud, whistling shriek, then a second explosion. Orion, deciding not to wait around to see what happened, pulled out of his dive. Once he had re-stabilized the ship, he spoke into the microphone.

"Myron, what happened?"

There came no reply.

"Myron? Are you there?"

No answer.

"Myron!"

"I'm here," came Myron's voice. It was shaking.

"What happened? Did you see?" Orion said nervously, worried by the wavering tone of Myron's normally steady voice.

"It's... it's the *Lion's Pride*."

"What happened to it?"

"It's... gone. It... it took both the missiles, then swerved around and hit the cruiser's bridge head on. The cruiser's falling fast; I think the impact disabled it. But the *Pride* is just... gone."

"Oh," Orion managed to say, his mind numb with shock, "Well, there's no way Mom and Dad were on there. They must have bailed out. Shame we lost the ship though. It's been through a lot, after all...."

"Orion." Myron's voice cut through his babbling. Orion stopped, mouth twisting into a grimace of shock. Then, suddenly, he slammed his fist on the controls, setting off an alarm somewhere in the next room. He slumped against the dashboard, burying his face in his arms. Suddenly, he wanted to crash the *Sky Razor* into the roiling earth below. End himself, end the entire thing. But he kept his course. He heard his mother's voice, in his mind, and while he knew it was just a thought that had occurred to him, a memory from long ago when he was young, or just imagination, it felt unbelievably real.

"Don't give in, Orion. You are far from finished."

Tears welling in his eyes, Orion nodded to himself, and reset the ship's course.

Falling. The sickly sensation of instability, as the winds buffeted them as they fell. Peter did not scream, he merely let his body spread wide like a parachute, trying in vain to slow his descent. He could not see Emily. Emily. She must already be dead. Somehow, no matter how much he loved her, the thought did not pain him.

The ground was coming into focus now, and the wind blurred his eyes as he looked down, roaring its rushing doom in his ear. Tears streamed past his eyes from the wind, but there was nothing but serenity inside him. There was still hope in his offspring. Orion, the headstrong warrior, and Cassiopeia, the best pilot the Whos had known in years, both still lived. That was the way of life; it went on in your children. In a way, he wasn't about to die. Peter smiled.

Then the ground rushed up to meet him.

A few minutes later, the *Sky Razor* had reunited with the south portion of the fleet. By now, they were far enough from Macalavay to have lost most of their pursuers, and those few who did follow were quickly dispatched. As the fleet reached safer skies, there was time for ships to pass between cruisers, carrying people to see the loved ones they'd been separated from. Orion watched the throng of joyfully

reunited families and friends from the window of the *Sky Razor*, now docked within the larger *Onyx*, and felt his misery worsen. There would be no such rejoicing for him.

He disembarked from the *Sky Razor* into the *Onyx's* landing bay, ignoring congratulations, words of sympathy, cheering, all of it, from the surrounding crowd. He wandered from the landing bay into the empty winding corridors beyond.

He found a sofa in the residential area of the *Onyx*, the civilian craft they had landed on. He sat on the cool, synthetic leather, staring at the wall, struggling to keep the grief from overwhelming him. His mother, his father, Julia, even Anarya; gone within days of each other. His siblings were still alive, but Procyon couldn't even talk yet, and Cassiopeia; she was still out escorting the fleet. Julia was dead, and that had been painful enough, but to lose his parents as well, was ultimately crippling.

Later on, looking back, he could not remember exactly how long he had sat there. Hours, days, even weeks could have blurred by. As dead to the world, as dead to meaning, as he had felt that he could be, he lay there, barely clinging to life. The sinking pain in his chest eventually grew numb; his mourning grew into malaise. His father was dead, leadership had passed to him now. But he barely cared. How could he lead his people to victory when he could not even lead himself?

Cassiopeia's fighter slowed as it approached the hangar bay of the *Onyx*, a strange feeling of relief flowing through her sore muscles. Behind her, Alenia was commanding another group of fighters, her voice muffled by Cassiopeia's earphones.

Pegasus Squadron had done well. A few fighters had been lost, but they had protected the fleet, driven off the louse fighters, and gotten out of range of Macalavay's death throes. She did not know how her brother had fared, or her parents; now, suddenly, she could think of nothing but them, seeing them again, their family together again, free from the horrid war, at least for now. For the first nineteen years of her life she had known nothing but this awful place, the war-torn land surrounding it, and a barely-sheltered childhood that had died young. She remembered her father's stories of the valley they had come from, before Macalavay, before Woebarran, all those years ago. She desired nothing more than to go to that place, or find one like it. A refuge. Somewhere she could sleep without the distant sounds of war. Somewhere she could think without fear overwhelming her thoughts, fear of her family dying, fear of dying herself.

Somewhere she could live, not survive.

Five hundred feet away, on the bridge of the *Onyx*, clouds washed over the windows at the front of the ship like silent whispers of waves. Myron leaned back in his seat, boredly twirling a pen in front of him. He felt a strange equilibrium inside himself, as though the deaths of his two closest friends had removed some great weight from within him. Perhaps, he thought, it was simply emptiness.

He watched the reports flood in on the great screen in front of him with much attention but little interest. Of six hundred and fifty two cruisers to take off from Macalavay, four hundred ninety three had made it to the rendezvous point. Of those, sixty-four were irreparably damaged, and had reached the rendezvous only to either crash-land in the nearby mountains, or be evacuated, in mid-air, by another cruiser, usually overcrowding it even more than it already was.

Another ninety-six would require significant repairs; mostly combat ships. Of nearly five thousand fighters dispatched, all but about a thousand had been lost. Initial casualty estimated all hovered around fifty thousand. Already Myron wanted to stop watching.

They had carved a huge swath through the louse fleet, and the destruction of Macalavay would certainly put a handicap on their fighting capabilities for a long time. But the nit fleet was still damaged, battle-weary, outnumbered... and on the run. If the lice could mount a focused attack on them – even a small one – there was no doubt they would be annihilated.

Myron stood up and walked toward the door. Their battles were far from over, but they had earned a short respite. He intended to make the most of it.

Cassiopeia didn't learn of her mother's death until the next night. When she did, she found herself stumbling to her room, stripping off her flight suit, and fell into her bed, burying her face in her pillow, trying to stifle the raw sobs that wracked her body. She and her family had faced death with every breath they took, had narrowly escaped its clutches so many times, but never had she imagined that its fingers would actually catch and claim them.

She worked her fingers around the pillow, as though it were someone's throat, as though she were somehow already avenging her parents' death. Anger began to work its way into the empty spaces that dulled the pain of the loss. She was changed already. She had died with her parents, and now all she was had become a creature focused with hatred on one thing.

The lice would pay for what they had done.

The small outpost didn't look threatening from the air, but there was no doubt among the minds of the soldiers on the Albatross tricopters that the entire hill was bristling with hidden landmines, booby traps, and barbed wire. There were surely hundreds of lice watching them already. They had been told to expect "light resistance," but they knew that if there was one thing lice were good at, it was hiding their true strength. There were always more.

The lead tricopter carried four men; behind it were seven more, each carrying eight soldiers. Sixty soldiers was estimated to be more than enough to overwhelm perhaps forty defenders, but as the Albatrosses swept low over the plains around the outpost, it became quite obvious that this was not true at all. The outpost was a complicated concrete structure, mazes of hallways and bunkers and foxholes, and the lice had strung barbed wire around the structure at a radius of seventy-five meters. Scattered around the structure were chunks of concrete. Louse soldiers crouched behind the massive chunks of masonry, their black uniforms making them look like ants from the air. Even from twenty meters up, the soldiers felt as though they could see the cruel determination in their sleek black soulless eyes.

Thirty meters from the barbed wire fence, the lead gunship touched down, the other continuing past it, to touch down ten meters from the front of the louse defenses. The doors on the side slid open smoothly, and four men carrying long rifles emerged, and immediately took positions along the edge of the brush, dropping to either crouch or lay prone among the foliage. Relieved of its sniper team, the gunship rose again, and this time the large gun at the bottom swiveled to face the barbed wire thirty meters in front of it. With a deep growl it blazed to life, and the ship recoiled, straining to keep itself in the air. The gunfire tore through the barbed wire, giving the snipers behind them a clear shot at the lice defending the outpost.

As soon as the last couple posts of the wire fence collapsed, the gunship began a slow, menacing crawl forward, barely a meter above the ground, the few scraggly clumps of tall grass whipping in the wind. The gun swiveled up again, aiming at the scattered chunks of concrete that sheltered the louse defenders.

The pilot grinned behind his visor, and squeezed the trigger of the heavy caliber guns strapped to either side of the ship's cockpit. With a roaring sound like a cross between grinding gears and thunder, hundreds of bullets swept downrange, punching holes in concrete and flesh, glowing as they led the charge. Bits of rock spattered everywhere, tall columns of soil leaped into the air, and louse soldiers caught in the line of fire were simply disintegrated.

The louse soldiers took relatively few casualties as they advanced; the gun swiveled again and brutally silenced a machine gun nest pinning down one group, then turned and fired at the now-fleeing lice, abandoning their makeshift defenses. Within seconds, the enemy had ceased fire entirely, either dead or hiding. The gunship hovered, almost completely still in the air, the rotors thrumming like a heartbeat.

Orion sat back in the pilot's seat and sighed, partly from relief, and partly from frustration. He knew he should be up there with them, leading the charge, inspiring his men, but after the deaths of his parents, the commanders had been unwilling to allow the sons and daughter of Peter and Emily to do much more than sit and watch the battles unfold. Orion's contribution at the controls of the support guns was something he'd had to beg for; actually venturing into the firefight was out of the question.

*Perhaps that's a good thing,* Orion thought. Between the loss of Julia and his parents within mere days of each other, not to mention all of the turmoil of leaving the place that was, while not home, the closest thing he'd ever had to one. His people hadn't known home for many years, ever since they'd been forced from the valley. Inside, Orion felt grief, fear and loneliness simultaneously. He was lost in himself, since that was the safest place to be. Perhaps cover fire was the only safe path for a depressed, isolated young soldier such as himself. The commanders were probably relieved he hadn't lost it and turned the ship's guns on his own men. His fist tightened suddenly as he imagined the others speculating

about such a possibility.

*Julia wouldn't have thought that.* Even now, Orion could hear her voice in his head, reassuring him, keeping him safe, not only from enemies, but from himself. Without her, he was sometimes unsure what was sane and what wasn't.

Somewhere inside Orion, he knew that that was why he had to keep fighting. At the very least, he could do it for Julia. Not to avenge her; the ones responsible for her death were dead, most by Orion's own hand. He could, however, make sure he never lost anyone again. Ever.

Above the fortress, a squadron of nine VAR Hawk fighters circled, forming a cage for any escaping enemy aircraft. Their conquest had to be silent and innocuous; no one could be allowed to get away to tell the enemy of their location. War had been hard enough in the closed quarters of the ancient strongholds; out here in the open, they were easy game. Their war had to be cautious, silent.

Inside, Cassiopeia and her co-pilot Alenia kept their fighter steady and on course with the others, not wanting to break formation at all. Even so, Cassiopeia's hand still shook as she guided the fighter along its path.

Part of the Pegasus wing, a unit of all-female fighter squadrons, Cassiopeia's squadron had been chosen for this mission because they were the best of this group. Pegasus pilots always excelled, a subject of intense feminist debate among military personnel and civilians alike, not all of it lighthearted. Women had sometimes been denied a role in the military, not due to any perceived inability to equal male soldiers, but because of the frequent sexual liaisons between members of an egalitarian military, something the Flight Corps leaders had found out the hard way. Love and war didn't mix; a soldier needed objectivity as much as any professional, and enough unnecessary deaths had resulted from these attachments; a soldier rushing from behind cover to retrieve a wounded romantic companion was often gunned down also.

The Pegasus wing solved the problem, at least for the Flight Corps, with separate housing, dining, even training. It was the latter difference that caused questioning of the equality of the two groups out of the Flight Corp. Over time, varying culture and morals made it possible to reintegrate the two forces, but the Pegasus project still housed the best pilots, and was now looked on as an honor to be sought after by female pilots.

"Wing leader says fall back to two clicks, do another couple circles, then go back to formation and head back to the *Dauntless Vindicator*," came Alenia's voice; she was plugged into the headphones reading the captain's orders, manning the rarely-used back seat of the versatile Hawk fighters. Usually the back seat held extra gear, or was modified to contain extra weight, whether in fuel or ammunition. The back seat could control a rear gun on the fighter, but other than that, their job was to ease the main pilot's job with such administrated tasks. Cassiopeia sighed, partly in relief, partly in exasperation. The mission was nearly over, that was true, but there had never been any real need for air support in the first place. All they'd done was make the operation more conspicuous. Cassiopeia had spent much of the battle expecting a swarm of enemy fighters to swarm from the surrounding mountains and gun them down.

As Cassiopeia moved their fighter out to the ordered two kilometer radius, she mulled over the events of the last couple months. After Macalavay, they had been scattered. She had not seen Orion in three weeks, since the last time the fleet had met. After finding a mountain range, they had begun a series of aggressive attacks, taking them one by one. So far, out of the twenty small outposts that dotted the slopes and ridges of these mountains, eleven had been taken. Cassiopeia looked across the plains as she circled, and saw, in the distance, a blue flag, just a dot in her vision, rise over the battlements of the smoking fortress. *Twelve*, thought Cassiopeia, her thin lips pursing into a grin, a rare expression on her face since her parents had died. The tide was turning. A little hope couldn't hurt.

After the fighter group reached the *Dauntless Vindicator*, entered the bay, and landed, Cassiopeia

immediately headed for the status room, not even bothering to flatten her wild hair after removing her helmet. She strode swiftly along the corridors, head held high less out of pride than out of discipline and fear. Twenty-two soldiers had been killed in the assault. Certainly acceptable costs, as the fort had lost three hundred defenders and could now provide a home for several hundred civilians until some wider plan could be formulated. But behind the warm glow of success, her paranoia still had to be quenched. She needed to know her brother was alive.

As she reached the door, watching the rifles casually hanging from the guards' hands, one stopped her. She sighed.

"Need identification, miss," he said in an unnecessarily gruff voice. Cursing under her breath, Cassiopeia unzipped the front of her flight suit, pulled her pilot dog tags from around her neck, and showed them to the guard. He nodded. Cassiopeia zipped her flight suit back up and went inside, ignoring the smug grin on the guard's face.

Once in the status room, her eyes scanned down the casualty list in the corner of the massive screens that surrounded the room. She did not see Orion's name. Rather than relief, though, she merely felt a strange variety of satisfaction. Relief would mean she'd expected something to have happened. But nothing could happen to Orion, or anyone close to her now. It simply couldn't.

Gazing at the other data on the conquest with the other twenty or so soldiers and commanders in the room, watching the news flow in on the blue screens with fascination, Cassiopeia didn't hear someone coming up behind her. She felt a tap on her back, and wheeled around, ready to confront whoever it was, and hoping it was the guard from outside so that she could slap him for his juvenile actions earlier. But it was her brother.

An involuntary smile came to her face. Not only safe in the letters on the screen above them, but here, safe, right in front of her. She embraced him, burying her face in his shoulder, smiling as she hadn't smiled in the last three weeks that it had been since she'd seen him. They were in separate assignments, worked from separate ships, and in the current, volatile state of the fleet, fuel could not be spared for social visits.

When they broke apart, Cassiopeia looking into her brother's eyes. Unable to think of anything else to say, she managed to let out, "You're alive," in a weak voice.

"You expected any different?" Orion said darkly, the grin that had been on his face since his reunification with his sister fading fast, "They wouldn't even let me into combat. I landed the gunship and shot a few rounds as support fire." Cassiopeia frowned as well. *It figures*, she thought to herself. *They're too terrified of losing someone important.* But she dismissed that selfish thought. They *were* important. Peter's blood, his Chosen blood, ran in Orion and Cassiopeia, as well as their youngest brother Procyon. Their forces needed a leader; the admirals and generals had done fairly well on their own, but they'd all answered to Peter and Emily, and even where Peter and Emily did not command, they advised. Orion and Cassiopeia lacked the wisdom, the experience to be leaders of an entire people. Even Cassiopeia, arrogant as she was, could see clearly that this was beyond she and her brother's abilities.

"You know Myron makes his decisions to protect us," Cassiopeia chided gently. Orion grunted his acceptance.

"We'll be landing soon," he said gruffly, "You should get ready." Then he turned his back and walked off, leaving Cassiopeia alone with her thoughts.

Myron, being the only leader that had been anywhere near as trusted and respected as Peter and Emily had, had been the one to command the assault on the louse outpost, as well as nearly every other part of the whos' flight from Macalavay and their attempt to find themselves a new home. He'd done well – the mountain they'd just captured was the first of many they'd need to secure the mountain range, which they planned to settle in. As a result of all this work he was not only almost constantly busy, but when he wasn't, he was usually so exhausted he had little motivation for anything but sleep. Yet he still

found time to teach Orion and Cassiopeia things nearly everything he knew. Combat techniques, strategy, diplomacy, sciences. Knowledge they would need to command, to try to climb the titanic pedestal that their parents had left behind.

It had been frustrating. "How do you train a true leader?" Myron often mused, despite how devoid of amusement the idea was. Orion and Cassiopeia took quickly to the new skills he taught them, but somehow he still felt it wouldn't be enough. He couldn't teach talent. Myron knew they had the potential to hold up their father's heritage, but he knew it would be a long road for them to develop themselves. It had taken Peter until the age of fifty to truly become a leader, endowed with all the wisdom necessary to rule, and though he had aged at half that rate due to his heritage, it had still been a journey that had taken most of his life. Myron was old now, but he was still spry, and he would follow these two, teaching them all he could, until death claimed him as well. *This is my final favor to you, my friends*, he'd sometimes think to himself after the lessons, sitting tiredly in his living chamber on the *Vindicator*, a pot on the stove, a substitute for the comforts of home. *You are gone now, but I will teach your children, and in whatever way I can, I shall resurrect you in them.*

Myron thought of the youngest sibling, Procyon, dead in Macalavay. Dead from a slip of the hand in planning, a stronghold overrun. A child dead, barely separated by his innocence from the countless other victims of the war, and separated far more by the fact that he had been Peter and Emily's son.

This was no time to let things slip. A single slip could bring a force ten times their size and ferocity down on them like a storm from hell. Myron had faith in the men and women he commanded, but no amount of faith could win out against sheer superiority. They might kill twenty lice for each casualty they took, but they would be overrun in the end, and at relatively little cost to their enemy. Myron felt as though they were a fly hovering around an elephant. They were small, hard to detect, but if they were, a single swat would be enough to finish them off. He thought of the vast swarms of enemy fighters the fleeing fleet had narrowly evaded on their flight from Macalavay. He remembered the endless ranks of enemy soldiers that had destroyed Point Seven. No matter how many were slaughtered, somehow more replaced them. But the nits had no such endless forces. They fought a war they were destined to lose.

By the time the ship had landed, both Orion and Cassiopeia were dressed in uniform, ready to head the small party that would be inspecting the compound and deciding whether it would be fit for refurbishment as a nit settlement. It was a great responsibility, and Myron was to accompany them. As Cassiopeia fitted her helmet and strapped the chin strap, she noticed Orion once again had the troubled expression she associated with Julia. She knew that the pain from Julia's death was still sharp within her brother, and it would be a long time before it faded, if ever. Orion raised his eyes suddenly, and Cassiopeia looked back at what she was doing, as if she hadn't seen. Looking in the mirror, she stepped back and examined herself.

"You look nice," Orion said flatly, trying to compliment her.

"Thanks," she replied.

Orion clicked the straps of his helmet into place, and they faced each other.

"Let's get out there before Myron can take lead of the whole thing without us," Orion said sardonically.

"You know he wouldn't do that."

"Maybe not."

"He wouldn't. Why would he?"

"He likes where he is."

"Where he is?"

"In command of everything," Orion said, examining his boots, then bending down to double-knot the laces. Cassiopeia couldn't believe that he was saying what he was saying.

"In command of everything?" she echoed incredulously, "You think he likes having all of this responsibility on his hands? You think he's just a power-hungry old man?"

"No," Orion coldly replied to his sister's appraisal of his words, "I don't think he's power-hungry. He's already got the power, doesn't he?" He straightened up and began for the door. Cassiopeia stood rigid, shocked that Orion, who usually had nothing but respect for their friend and mentor, could speak like this. She stood up, stood in front of him, and even though he had at least four inches on her, her expression stopped him dead in his tracks.

"What kind of stupid crap have you been coming up with while you've been sitting 'out of harm's way?" Cassiopeia demanded, "Is this just your damn self-pity again? You're feeling awfully sorry for yourself, as if you're the only one who's lost people they loved. You think Myron likes that our mother and father are... dead?" Cassiopeia's voice almost broke at the statement, but she forced herself not to lose her composure. She stared at Orion coldly

"Just because your girlfriend's dead," Cassiopeia said, her anger mounting, "doesn't mean you get to take it out on us." As soon as she said it she instantly realized she had pushed her brother too far. His expression hardened suddenly.

"Go to hell," he said, then shoved past her and stormed out the door. Her eyes followed his departure, then she sighed and sank back onto the bench, guilt dousing her anger as it washed through her chest.

The dressing room was lined with lockers, and she was filled with the sudden urge to open all the doors and then slam them all shut, one by one, as hard as she could. She knew she had been too harsh to Orion, knew that he was still trying to cope with Julia's death, and yet his methods of coping were nearly impossible to deal with. Cassiopeia was surprised he had not tried to murder anyone yet.

Resignedly, she began out the door. Hopefully the presence of authority might cool Orion's anger. It was anger that wasn't directed at any one thing, just at the world in general, and at himself for being so self-centered to blame everyone around him for his own problems. There was no easy way to relieve it. Random bursts of rage would emit from him, like a gout of water from a waking geyser. Cassiopeia hoped that when the rocks broke free entirely, Orion was surrounded by enemies rather than by friends.

The cool, sleek passages of the *Vindicator* were familiar to Cassiopeia by now, and within just ten minutes she was at the landing bay, filled with the wounded, and with plenty of fresh troops, ready to clear the ruins for settlement. The habitation corps was gathering trucks of supplies, food, tools, and materials to make the small outpost habitable for the time being. Forty-five hundred people would have to live on barely half a square kilometer of land, which would have to provide food, water, medicine, and sanitation for all of them.

Cassiopeia hoped dearly that there was a huge store of food hidden beneath the complex; she had seen the condition of many of the civilians during her nightly treks through the passageways of the *Vindicator*, and the only thing worse than their apparent health was their morale. She couldn't blame them. So many had died during the escape from Macalavay. Many had lost husbands, wives, brothers, sisters. Some children had lost both their parents during the escape. Some older families had lost all of their children. They had little to be grateful for, except their own ever-threatened lives, and the dwindling food supply that grew worse in quality all the time. Cassiopeia had overheard a conversation while going to the bridge to receive orders, about some potentially expired food in the hold, and whether they should drop it. She'd heard the admiral say, "Keep it. Spoiled food is better than no food at all."

The sudden glare of her brother brought her back to reality, and sent a cold wash through her chest and arms. She nearly forgot to salute Admiral Crole as she emerged from the cramped hallways into the open, chaotic forum of the landing bay. She nearly winced as she did so; he looked like a younger version of Admiral Vallister, who had been killed four days after the escape from Macalavay. Two louse cruisers had caught the *Foerender*; by the time the rest of the fleet could respond, Vallister was dead and his ship was keeling in the air. Rescue crews tried to move in, but before they could the ship exploded, wiping out the rescue sloops and damaging the *Onyx*, which was nearby. Cassiopeia

remembered being thrown to the ground by the force of the explosion, even though they'd been nearly ten kilometers from the *Foerender* when it had exploded.

She visibly shook her head, trying to clear the distracting thoughts flowing through her brain like chaotic river rapids. Her eyes locked onto Orion and Myron, standing with a group of soldiers. Orion and Myron seemed to be arguing about something.

*Of course*, thought Cassiopeia, rolling her eyes as she approached, *It's not enough just to take it out on me, he's got to pick a fight with Myron too.*

When she reached them, Orion was mid-sentence.

"...can't I come along with you all? I'm just as capable as you are."

"And far more valuable," Myron explained calmly, "It's simple common sense not to have both of this fleets' most valued leaders together like this. It makes it so both of us could be killed at once."

Cassiopeia felt a twinge of affront at not being included as one of the "leaders," but she knew better than to make an issue of it. As though reading her thoughts, Orion swiveled and pointed at her.

"There's Cass. There's Crole. They're just as capable of leading. You need someone to have your back. And what use am I if I'm just going to be skulking around here, maybe flying a ship now and then, if I'm lucky?"

Myron sighed.

"All right, get a weapon. You'll help us clear out the interior of the structure."

"What about me?" Cassiopeia piped up.

"I was hoping you'd be willing to fly us down there, since Orion has decided not to be our pilot anymore," said Myron without looking at her, sliding a magazine into the bottom of his rifle with a sharp click. He examined it with affected interest, before letting his arm drop to his side.

"Count me in."

The five gunships. With sloping walls, stone columns, and a veritable maze of stairs leading around the exterior, it looked like a cross between a temple and a fortress.

As soon as they touched down, Orion and Myron sprinted out from the gunship, rifles held high, looking around, but any exterior defenders had been gunned down. One lay sprawled, halfway down the steps, blood dripping down the stairs in a grotesque, miniature waterfall. Orion and Myron sprinted up the stairs, not stopping until they had their backs to the wall next to the door. They signaled for the other soldiers to catch up.

Free of her burden, Cassiopeia pushed the throttle, sending the Albatross's engines back into overdrive. The ship began to rise, the others following. As they flew away, Myron turned back to the door.

"Blow it open, and we'll lob in a few grenades, then in we go. Okay?" he said, panting.

"Got it," said Orion. The other soldiers nodded assent.

One of the soldiers pulled a explosive stick from his backpack, and taped it over the seam of the iron doors. Trailing wire, he moved away from it, guiding his comrades along the wall, further from the door. Then he set it off.

As the twisted remnants of the doors spun through the air like crumpled paper. A series of sharp bangs followed, and a couple cries of pain, as grenades followed behind them. The soldiers rushed in through the splintered portal, firing their rifles into the room, light glinting off the thick smoke.

One soldier went down instantly, a trio of bullets puncturing his shoulder. Orion saw the masked louse soldier, crouching behind a crate of supplies, dropping back to his knee to seek out another target. In a flash, the exposed head was in Orion's sights, then it was burst open in a spray of blood. Orion dashed for the cover of the boxes, firing into the smoky darkness as he did. He rolled behind the boxes, slid out the now-empty clip, and loaded a new one.

To his left, another soldier stiffened and fell as bullets burst out of the smoke and into her chest. As she collapsed, Orion popped his rifle out from behind the crate and fired, before drawing it back,

mind racing. The lice had goggles; infrared vision, perhaps?

He sprang to his feet, slamming himself against the wall, and moved along it, gun pointed into the smoke as he did. Fear shot through his chest, tightening his lungs; he could not see, he was easy prey for any louse who turned his rifle his way.

Orion raised his gun, aiming, and firing short, confident bursts into the gray nothingness in front of him. His insane bluff worked; he found his eyes clearing, and himself at the back of the room. A door in front of him led deeper inside; from it sprinted four reinforcements. Orion gunned one down as they ran past, then sprinted past, behind them, before they could reverse direction. In the hallway, he slid into an alcove, bullets spattering right behind his heels.

Reaching for the grenade on his belt, Orion knew he had to make this count. If he missed, he would lose his grenade, and give his enemy an idea. He bit down on the pin, feeling the cold metal on his tongue, and squeezed the handle, before ripping it free and hurling out of the alcove, back into the room and back into the smoke. He pressed his hair against the cool stone wall of the alcove, closing his eyes. A sharp blast rattled the tiles on the floor; immediately Orion was on his feet, running from one alcove to the next, firing to protect his own movement, back in cover, then off again.

The smoke was clearing now; he saw the glassy, red eyes of enemy soldiers, kneeling behind crates, firing down the hallway, stripping tiles from the walls and floor. Orion returned fire aggressively; he was not alone. One by one, the soldiers he occupied were shot from behind, until at last, just as Orion ran out of bullets, a single louse soldier raised his submachine gun, bearing down the sights at Orion, who stood and watched as Myron gripped the soldier by the collar, and plunged his knife into the back of the louse's neck. Orion met Myron's eye. He nodded in agreement.

Orion was gazing down the corridor when the other caught up to him. It was luxurious; surely not the creation of lice, with their simple, industrial aesthetics. The black marble, the teal stone that formed the folded walls of the alcove-lined hallway, and the iron bands that ran along the floor, mystified him. What kind of building had this been, before the lice had captured it?

The soldiers followed him down the hallway, their boots' crisp clicking dangerously loud against the glossy floor. Even without those sounds, Orion felt dangerously exposed as they made their way cautiously down the winding corridors. The feeling of being observed was nearly overwhelming. Their movements were the only sound.

They came to a series of what seemed to be offices; whatever role they had played in the original structure was now forgotten. Orion moved in first, up to a makeshift partition hanging from the ceiling. As his hip bumped it, it swayed back and forth gently. He heard growling, distorted speech, and sudden footsteps; he whirled around, just in time to shoot the first unlucky louse soldier sent to investigate. His body jerked twice, then dropped to the floor, submachine gun clattering by his side.

With sickeningly close whines, bullets punched through the partition, spraying shreds of cardboard out of the holes to flutter to the ground like confetti. The other soldiers returned fire; Orion dive for cover, flattening himself on the ground, crawling under the hanging partition to a desk. From the floor, he spotted a pair of boots spiked with metal studs around the bottom; he fired twice, shattering the foot and knocking the creature to the ground. The black mask rolled to look at him, red eyes glaring. Without hesitation, Orion put another bullet through the fallen soldier's helmet.

Seconds later, the firefight was over. Gathering himself to his feet, Orion began to walk among the desks, many of whom were sprinkled with bits of shredded paper. He prodded a folder with his rifle, seeing a lump inside it; a bullet rolled out. Orion stared for a second, then grinned grimly.

"Offices mean intelligence. Grab what you can, and two of you bring it back to command. I doubt there's much resistance left in here anyway."

"Don't speak too soon," Orion warned, watching the bullet he had released roll off the desk to clink on the floor. Myron grimaced at him.

The remaining offices were unoccupied; a few side hallways led to more rooms, but they were empty, but for a few gray nylon sleeping bags. The lice had some rations strewn about, but mostly an

unrecognizable tan mush that looked inedible.

"It's well-packaged," Myron observed, "Maybe it's delicious to them."

"Maybe this is why they're so pissed off," said Orion dryly. Myron chuckled.

The hallway led to stairs, which led to another door, which led to another hallway on the floor below. This lower level had larger chambers; Orion and Myron moved slowly into one, the soldiers behind them, fanning out slowly, only exposing themselves to a new area when they had their rifles pointed directly at it. It was large, full of alcoves, some of which were short hallway that led to other, smaller side chambers.

There was a snap and whine of gunfire; a soldier around the corner from Orion cried out and fell to the ground, his rifle clattering from his hand into view. With rapid, skittering footsteps, came a slender body hanging from four spindly legs, a three-barreled gun swinging from below its abdomen. The gun swiveled up to point at Orion; as it did, it was simultaneously shredded by bullets from Myron, Orion, and three other soldiers.

"Gun-pod," Myron observed, "Thought we'd seen the last of those."

"Me, too," said Orion concernedly, slowly advancing toward the fallen soldier. He knelt next to him, still looking from side-to-side as he felt for a pulse. He sighed.

"Nothing," he said. Myron winced.

They returned to the hallway, securing the other rooms one by one. Finally they came back to the first, having reached a dead end.

"No leader? I would have expected something more here..." said Myron.

Orion's expression darkened suddenly.

"I just realized we passed a door back there somewhere."

"What? How? I didn't see any."

Myron followed Orion back along the hallway to a slight depression in the wall.

"I ignored it before, thought it was a door then realized it wasn't. But it's got to be. Help me," he said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. Myron came up next to him, and they both began to heave against the door. It gave way slowly; a sudden burst of gunfire interrupted them, and they staggered back, a few bullets sparking out of the blackness, putting holes in the wall.

In a single smooth motion, Myron drew a grenade from his belt, yanked off the pin, and flung it into the room. A beat, then another, then a deafening boom. He followed it with a spray of fire from his rifle, until the clip was empty. He motioned to Orion, who moved forward silently, flicking the switch on the flashlight on the side of his rifle.

When he peered in, he saw a single louse soldier, wearing a clear, black mask over his face. Unlike the gas masks and goggles the other soldiers wore, this one's helmet had a visor, simply a smooth pane of glass, curling around his face in a U-shape.

"Officer?" Myron asked.

"I think. But not like any we've seen before."

"If our time since we left Macalavay has taught us anything, it's that there's a *lot* we haven't seen before," Myron replied, stepping into the room for a closer look. He knelt next to the shredded corpse, pinching at the bloody fabric.

"Dhaika?" he said.

"What?"

"That's what it says. 'Dhaika'. On his shoulder."

Orion knelt next to Myron; the script was unclear, and smeared with blood, but Myron had not read wrong.

"New project?"

"No idea," Myron replied, straightening up, "Whoever he was, he was a coward. Ran back down here after we finished off his friends."

"He almost took our heads off."

“Almost.”

Outside the small chamber, they regrouped the squad, who was beginning to spread out, examining the ruined basement with interest.

“Let's get back upstairs. The other ships are waiting on us.”

Cassiopeia felt a sudden jolt as the *Vindicator* touched down in the field. Already near the door, a rifle in her hand, now dressed in a simple brown windbreaker and green pants, her second favorite choice of apparel after her flight suit, she watched the dozen or so civilians that grouped in front of her. Their backs laden with supplies, they looked both weary and excited for a new home, after so many weeks in the cramped conditions of the *Vindicator*.

She found it hard to agree with them; she preferred the small room she had on the ship, over what had looked, from the cockpit of the tricopter, to be an empty, eerie place. But then, many of these people shared a room with ten others, in bunk beds stacked two or three high. She did not envy their conditions.

The door hissed open, bleak sunlight leaking into the corridor. She looked out at the gray, lumpy buildings emerging from the hillside, before leading the civilians down the ramp and onto the soft, wet grass. Here were strewn several louse corpses, on their sides, their masked faces unchanged. They looked so much like dead insects; if not for the blood, they could not have been found disturbing at all.

No children had come out with this first party; Cassiopeia was unsure what the point of this small group was? To stake out housing claims? She had heard there was some hierarchy among the civilians, that each room had a leader, each hallway a leader, and so on. There were about five hundred civilians aboard the ship; how much room could there be in this stronghold? And it was only the one ship. The others could not search for shelter elsewhere; keeping the fleet together was vital for stealth. Otherwise, communications would have to be carried out over long-range radio, and that could easily be intercepted...

Before long, they had sloshed their way to the outskirts of the stronghold. Here, soldiers were setting up camp among the strange chunks of stone that the lice had set up as barricades. They would sleep outside; the civilians were given the interior. That was assuming there was not enough room inside the stronghold; closer up, Cassiopeia realized it was quite possible there was. Either way, someone had to keep watch.

She was momentarily uncertain what season it was, before a glance at the trees, whose otherwise vibrant colors were dulled by the rainy day, reminded her that it was still early autumn. Not many leaves had changed yet, but they would, and it would be beautiful. These few months of change were her favorite; she often wondered if it was because of the monotonous war that had occupied the first twenty years of her life.

As she came to the stairs, she wondered if it was Orion's favorite season, also. For being brother and sister, they rarely talked about such things. Suddenly, a pit of sadness swelled in her, and she slipped a little on the stairs, the others still behind her. The war had taken so much from her, now it had taken a normal childhood, a normal relationship with her own brother. It was as if she no longer knew him sometimes; her parents' death had broken her as much as it had him, but Orion also coped with the death of Julia. He still wasn't over, and Cassiopeia could barely blame him. She could barely remember having a real conversation with Orion while he had been with Julia; it was as if she had replaced her. Losing her, to Orion, was like losing Orion would be to Cassiopeia; the only person you could confide in, gone.

Suddenly she regretted what she had said earlier, more than she already did. Simultaneously, she did not want to face him, and wanted nothing more than to rush to him, make sure he was alright. What if he and Myron had discovered something terrible underground? She quickened her pace into the entrance hall.

There he was, again, and she wanted to embrace him fiercely as she had done barely a few hours earlier. But she restrained herself; his eyes still held a touch of hurt as they met hers. Myron and the others were cleaning up the bodies.

“Hey, Cass,” he said casually as she approached.

“Hey. I'm taking these people to pick out their rooms. Everything clear?”

“Should be. Tore up a gunpod in the basement, a decent number of troops, and in the basement we killed an officer, I think.”

“You think?”

“I'll tell you later.”

She smiled warmly at him, and walked past, leading the civilians to the hallway beyond. As they began to spread among the offices, she instructed them on where to go, still cautious, but in the back of her mind, the fact that Orion no longer seemed angry at her, that he had something to tell her, took away her cold thoughts of a few moments ago.

The offices looked unkempt but habitable. They would take some cleaning. If they were lucky, these would only be temporary living arrangements anyway. Winter was only a few months away; hopefully they would be long gone by then.

What was out there, besides the endless, rolling landscape, and the few scattered louse fortresses they had stumbled across so far? There had to be more Whos. Cassiopeia often dreamed of another place like the valley; she had never been there, but her parents had always told them stories when they were younger. Without the taint of any imperfections the place might have, it seemed positively idyllic compared to the long, gray siege of a life that Cassiopeia had known.

For whatever reason, her brother had never wanted to hear about the valley; she did not understand why. They had used to walk together, through the fields far from Point Seven, before it fell, before Julia, and tell him her dream. He listened, but when she mentioned the valley, any of the memories her parents had relayed to her, he became suddenly reserved. It did not frighten her, merely mystified her. His actions now, however, did unnerve her a little.

The civilians became comfortable rather quickly; as word spread that the stronghold was clear, more began to filter in. Worry-faced mothers with braying infants. Curious children shepherded in clusters around their parents. Many of the offices were windowed, providing little privacy, but already some were holding blankets up to them, discussing how best to hang curtains. A comforting feeling swept away Cassiopeia's reservations about the place, watching them hard at work making this place a home, for however long they spent in it.

Before long, her leadership role was all but forgotten, and she felt like a simple guard. There were plenty of those standing around. Readjusting the rifle strap, feeling relief as it no longer bit into her shoulder, she turned and left, hoping to find Orion.

He was sitting on the front stairs, watching the late afternoon sun, talking about something with Myron, who sat next to him. Wordlessly, she joined them, sliding her legs over the ragged gray stone.

“What's the deal with the stuff in the basement?” she said, a little too eagerly. Next to her, a woman passing by with her husband gave Cassiopeia a strange, slightly frightened look; immediately, thoughts ran through her head of fear-mongering rumors among the civilians. Fortunately, neither Orion nor Myron seemed to notice.

“Any clue what the hell a 'Dhaika' is?” Myron asked.

“No...”

“That's what his uniform said. Blank face plate, like half a jar around his face. Relatively normal helmet. Tiny little breath filter at the bottom, with a hose leading down to what looked like a larger filter on his chest. Haven't had time to examine him, though. Getting the civilians in was top priority,” he said, in a tone that indicated he was less than happy with the arrangement.

“Well, they're in comfortably,” she replied hopefully, her heart sinking. Orion was ignoring her; it was Myron who had answered her question. “They're hanging curtains, rolling out sleeping bags.”

“This place probably doesn't have running water. At best a well. We didn't investigate the bathrooms much.”

“It'll be nice to find a place where we can all take showers again,” Orion said dully, “Other than

the half-a-minute rationed ones on the ship.”

“Anything on ... you know, another place?” Cassiopeia said, hoping it was not a ridiculous question. To her relief, Myron sighed, then answered.

“No real leads. We get a few fragmented signals now and then, but almost always louse radio messages. Only an idiot's going to broadcast long range with swarms of lice about.”

“Unless it's a stronghold capable of fending them off,” Cassiopeia replied.

“What I'd give for a chance of that,” Orion said sardonically.

“Well, there is a chance,” Cassiopeia countered. Myron nodded slightly in agreement.

“I suppose,” Orion said, the hostility in voice somewhat dulled.

“There has to be someplace, otherwise the lice wouldn't be fighting. Or, at least, there would be a lot more of them. If there was a Woobarren, and a Macalavay, there have to be other super-fortresses. Occupied with other groups of Whos.”

For a few seconds, no one said anything. Then Myron nodded again.

“You make a fair point.”

“Maybe we should look for a louse fleet, with a scouting mission. Try to trail them as inconspicuously as possible. They might lead us to another fight.”

Orion gazed back over his shoulder at the stream of civilians still filtering through the doors behind them.

“I don't know if these people are ready for another war,” he said.

Neither of them had any answer for that.

“I think we should do it, through. At least it'd be better shelter than this. We can use this place as a base. It'll just be me, Orion maybe, and a few others. We'll go out in fighters. I swear, we'll bail out and abandon the ships if we have to, to keep from leading them back to here.”

Myron sat back.

“It's already autumn. We've been on the run for two or three months now; hell, I can't even remember. Supplies are running low. Cassiopeia is right, it's time we make a move.”

Orion looked pensive for a moment, before responding.

“I agree.”

“Alright,” said Myron, “I'll talk to Crole and the others.”

“I'll talk to Pegasus Squadron, get a few of them to come.”

“Might as well take the best,” Myron said.

“Great,” said Orion sarcastically, “I'll be the only guy.” But there was humor in his voice, and relief flooded through Cassiopeia. The delicate balance of her brother's volatile behavior had, at least for now, been restored.

“I'm going to go check on the civilians,” Cassiopeia said.

“Alright.”

“Bye, sis.”

She walked briskly back into the stronghold, hoping for a quieter room for herself before all the good ones were taken. And a place to take the rifle off her shoulder; the strap was straining against her skin again, the stock banging annoyingly against her spine.

One of the offices was barely large enough for a single desk; on the floor space behind it, there was adequate room to lay down. Cassiopeia pulled the rifle off her shoulder, making sure the safety was on before laying it on the grimy surface of the desk. She found a sleeping bag among the supplies being brought in, laid it carefully out on the floor, and lay down atop it, ignoring the musty smell that hung near the floor, desperate for some well-needed rest.

By nightfall, the ships were empty but for a skeleton crew of guards and maintenance. A few small fires brewed in the camp outside, but other than that, the lights were as subdued as possible. Battery-powered lamps provided light inside; the emergency lights were left on low, running off a

generator in the basement. Orion made the wise decision to minimize their heat signature; though the slowly-cooling engines would likely invalidate that strategy.

Many of the captains disliked Cassiopeia's idea; Myron did his best to placate them with her suggested safeguards. Before long, Crole was converted, and it was a tipping point; the others respected Crole, if not Myron, who wished their decisions were based more on what was said, than who said it. But with Peter dead, there was a strange void where there had once been a clear leader. Was it Crole or was it Myron? The men were as amicable as they had ever been, yet the other leaders carried out a power struggle, regardless of the complete lack of competition between the two. It puzzled Myron, and troubled him just a little bit.

As he returned to the stronghold after a weary day, he began to miss his old friend. No, he and Emily had been more than just his friends. They had been his family. He had not lost anyone in the Excision, save a sister he had not spoken to in years. Military life had been his mother, father, brother, sister, and friend for so long, he felt as though he had become mechanical.

*Peter would have known what to do*, he told himself, echoing the litany he had told himself nearly every day. He did not know what good it did to lament Peter's death, what good it did to reaffirm that the only person who could lead them was gone, but somehow it comforted him anyways.

A special room had been set aside for him; another for Orion, another for Cassiopeia. When he looked in on her, he found her fast asleep, the look of concentration she wore so often loosening in her sleep and slipping from her face. Myron thought about spreading a blanket over her, but did not want to disturb her. He left her, went to his own room, pulled his coat off, and hung it over the back of the desk that dominated the room. A sleeping bag already waited for him on the floor; with barely any hesitation, he slipping inside it, feeling his muscles relax, as though they were breaking out of a crust that had solidified around them. He barely noticed the hard, cold floor beneath.

*If we are lucky*, he thought as his body suddenly realized how exhausted it was, *we won't be sleeping on floor much longer*.

Thick clouds veiled the stars, and this disappointed Orion. There was little else to do out in the camp, and he began to regret volunteering to watch with the other soldiers. Most of them were not much for conversation; mostly lewd stories of exploits that made Orion's thoughts hover uncomfortably around the black pit that was Julia's death.

He stared into the fire, watching the dance of the tantalizing tongues, pretending it was entertainment exclusively for him.

One of the soldiers, a larger man named Jarvik, laughed raucously from across the fire. There were no female soldiers around, and the joking had become more juvenile. Orion tuned it out; he was not in the mood to join them. Jarvik was one of the heavy gunners, as evidenced by the bulky machine gun that sat across his lap.

Immediately, the night watch seemed impossibly long. He did not want to be alone, with tortured thoughts of loss tugging at his mind. He wanted to be asleep, where there was refuge, if only for a few hours. Sometimes, in the morning, he would roll over, reaching for her unconscious form, to draw it close, to remind him why he was alive, what justified the life he had spent fighting. Now, his hands gripped at nothing. Revulsion at his wakefulness would sink in; he would bury into the pillow, begging for sleep to take him back, but it rarely did. Once or twice, Myron had knocked on the door to wake him; he thought about killing him in return, for just a few seconds.

Finding another Who stronghold meant nothing to him. It was as meaningless as every strategic advantage ever was; just means to another victory, so that they could fight another battle. So that he could lose someone else who mattered to him.

A sudden commotion from across the camp brought him to his feet, blissfully forcing his dark thoughts away. Jarvik got up as well, as did the other soldiers. A voice, amplified and distorted somehow, was commanding them; one of the soldiers grabbed a nearby bucket of water and hurled it

onto the fire.

“What the hell?” Jarvik boomed.

“He said put out the damned fires!” the extinguisher replied.

“Get down!” another hissed. Orion flattened himself out on the cool, damp ground, twisting his neck to peer into the sky. Two silhouettes streaked overhead; a blinding burst dropped from one. It flew over the camp, over the stronghold, overshooting badly, to crash among the trees in the distance. The blast sent tremors through the ground; the sheer power unnerved him.

“Shit,” Jarvik growled, “We need to get inside. We're goddamn sitting ducks out here. Goddamn sitting – ”

Another blinding flash, and Orion couldn't see. He staggered to his feet, taking a few steps in what he guessed was the direction of the stairs, but felt his foot slam into something, and he nearly lost his balance. He stood still, feeling hopelessly naked, praying for the blindness to fade. Somewhere, there was screaming, but it felt distant, as though it were coming over a radio.

A sharp series of stings ran up his arm and back. He cried out but could not hear the sound of his own voice. He felt an impact at his kneecaps; he realized it was the ground. The noise was growing louder now. Rolling over and over, he felt a pulse of pain against his thigh. Someone had stepped on him. He kept rolling until he bumped into a rock, or a log, or perhaps the fire. Maybe his flesh was burning, but he was too numb to feel it. No, he could feel, he just couldn't see.

His hearing was suddenly crisp again. The chattering of gunfire was distinct; heavy footsteps around him, screaming. Two heavy hands grabbed onto his, hauling him to his feet; a spot of white swam in his vision. It was the front of the stronghold, he could see again, but his eyes were yet to adjust to the dark again after being bathed in light. His mysterious savior dragged him along for a second, before Orion gained his own footing, and began to stumble toward the light.

Another bomb landed in the distance.

“Are you alright?” came a gruff voice. It was Jarvik, and Orion could see some trace of his outline now, his machine gun strapped over his burly body. He forced himself to nod, and the hands came off of him.

“Flash bombs,” Jarvik said, “They've got troops in the treeline.”

“We've been here barely five hours,” Orion said groggily, “They've never counterattacked before.”

“Guess we tripped a switch,” said Jarvik.

“Are we losing?”

Jarvik chuckled.

“I doubt it.”

Orion staggered up the stairs, just as a heavy machine gun, set on a tripod, fired from the plateau next to the stairs, scything through the patches of long grass, strewn rock, and scraggly trees. Orion could see the glowing dots, like myriad cats' eyes, moving through the darkness. Here and there, one would flash and vanish as a soldier was shot down.

Orion unslung his own weapon, firing at a louse soldier approaching the edge of the camp, the first few shots missing, but the next burst hitting home, sending him sprawling into a tent, blood flecked on the cloth.

The lice fired as they ran, and as they came up among the rocks, some peeling off the charging mass to kneel behind them, steady their rifles before firing again. The bullets began to find marks; a Who soldier ducked behind a column as piece of stone chipped off of it, and when he stepped back to fire, his head snapped back suddenly, and he dropped to the ground.

Within the camp, those who could not make it to the stronghold were being overrun. A young woman, only identifiable by the silhouette of long hair flying behind her in the dark, sprang out suddenly from behind a tent, a pair of loud shotgun blasts punctuating the steady stream of automatic fire. Two louse soldiers fell; a third ran up, knocking her back, drawing a knife, and fluidly sinking it

into her chest. She fell to the ground, and a hot fury surged through Orion as he watched. The louse soldier fell within his sights before he had time to step past his kill, and a trio of brilliant flashes sent him tumbling against a withered tree trunk.

The bombers were back, an eerie roar tinged with faint whistling sank down from the sky above. A pair of explosions roared into being behind a line of bushes and rocks, throwing light on the lice swarming forward; there were dozens. Orion shot at whoever he could, but it was like watching a wave flood in from the ocean, over the sand; there were too many.

"Inside! Get inside!" Orion shouted. Jarvik's gun sounded like an electric drill as it blazed beside him, pushing the man back as though a bull were charging against him. A soldier rushed past him, obeying Orion's order; then another, then another, until at last it was just Orion and Jarvik covering the retreat.

One woman rushed toward Orion, her forehead sweaty and her eyes wide and terrified. She let out a grunt of pain as whizzing bullets struck her in the back, and she fell forward onto the stairs. Orion reached for her, but more bullets slammed into her prone form; then a sharp sting lashed out across Orion's knee, dropping him onto his back.

He rolled, sideways, desperately trying to pull himself out of harm's way. He heard another cry of pain, but he ignored it. A warm, dense feeling was spreading through his forehead. Bracing his palm against the cold floor, he felt his fingers slip through a wet, sticky substance. Nausea enveloped him. The sounds of battle faded slowly as little pinpricks of light blinked in his vision, before fusing into a murky gray all too soon for him to tolerate.

When he awoke, dead silence greeted his weary ears. His eyes clicked open. Had they all been slaughtered? A sickening feeling struck his gut, and his lungs, lulled into complacency by unconsciousness, suddenly carved through his chest, pulling in air.

He still lay, barely three meters from the entrance to the stronghold, on his side. He tried to move his leg, but it was as though someone were dragging needles through the inside of his knee. He gasped with pain, but gritted his teeth immediately. Any lice nearby had likely passed him over as another corpse; changing their minds would ensure he ended up one. Especially when he couldn't walk.

With a few deep breaths to steady himself, he tried, furtively, to look around. He spotted the door, unbreached. The sight startled him; the lice had overrun them. Surely they hadn't been stopped by a simple door?

A grunt, and he tried to drag himself along with his arms, trailing his useless leg behind him. A bit of pain at first, but he let it come in tiny bites, moving an inch at a time, until he could stomach it.

The door began to slide open; desperately, Orion's eyes scanned for a gun, a knife, something to defend himself. But it would be pointless, with one leg. He let himself go limp, cautiously laying his cheek back on the cold stone floor.

"We have to find him, Myron."

"Cass, we don't know if they'll come back."

"I don't care! You didn't have to come."

"I can't have you get killed, too."

"Orion's not dead."

Cassiopeia stood just outside the door, holding an assault rifle at her hip, gazing out at the blackness beyond, her breath visible in the cool night air. Myron, behind her, looked resigned but annoyed. Cassiopeia's eyes skipped across the columns, then down to the corpses that lay just outside the door. Then she saw Orion.

"Myron, he's... no!" She rushed for Orion's side, grabbed his shoulders.

"I'm alright, Cass," Orion croaked weakly.

"Myron, get down here and help me!"

"Cass," Orion said, more clearly. His lungs, taxed by the exertion, pulled in the cold air, laced

with a sanguine stench that sent a chill through him.

“You're all right,” Cassiopeia said dully, staring at Orion. Then she hugged him, her thin body almost crushing his. “Myron thought you were dead.”

“That's bullshit,” came Myron's voice from behind her. Cassiopeia smiled warmly. Orion managed a weak laugh.

“We have to get inside. We think it was just a raid, but they might be back.”

“Can you move?” Myron grunted.

“I don't know,” Orion said, trying again to push himself up. Fresh pain greeted him as he did.

“No.”

“Alright,” said Cassiopeia, “I can carry you.”

She cupped her hands under his shoulders, slowly lifting him, making sure not to put pressure on his knee. As she did, Orion's injury swiveled into view for the first time. A dark red, swollen gouge in the side of his knee. Bile limned Orion's tongue. He wanted to pass out again.

The door opened again. Orion heard some rustling, then Cassiopeia's voice.

“I've got him!” she said indignantly.

## ORIONS INJURED KNEE

VAR=Variable Altitude/Role

Mirricidim (muh-RICK-ih-dum)

People begin dropping dead on cruiser – louse attack left poison in water supply – eventually they find clues that lice were on the ship.

“Hopefully next time we touch down, it will be in friendly territory,” said Myron as the *Vindicator* lurched away from the earth, the treetops sinking away into a frothy green blanket, rapidly gaining altitude. The mountains, not far from their stronghold, reached up toward them as they flew past, but fell far short as the ship flew into the clouds. The ascent took barely a minute, and Myron's wishful words were stale by the time the world around grew white and impenetrable.

“

Approaching Sarengarth – Kylea Tirwater is woman who advocates for civilian rights, unionizing and what not. Creates a lot of conflict; Myron wants to kill her for the safety of the others.

“We've been following this fleet for days,” Myron muttered, swiveling boredly, “It's not going anywhere.”

The bridge, all but empty in the late hours, left little sound to distract him, save the monotonous grumbling of the engines. Cassiopeia leaned against the wall across from him, arms crossed casually, even as the ship rocked gently. Her hair hung around her chin, sharpening it, giving her a critical look.

“Where are we even supposed to end up?” Myron repeated, trying to draw a response from her. She had been listening to him for almost a minute now without speaking.

“This isn't a cargo fleet, Myron,” she said after staring at him a moment longer, “It's a war fleet. They're going somewhere to *fight*. Why are you doubting me?”

“I'm not, but—”

“You *are*.”

“I have good reason to,” Myron countered, “I have people who need food, water. We need to land and replenish our supplies. The people here are living in cramped conditions meant for half as many people, and they are civilians, not soldiers, for the most part. The fleet needs a rest.”

“And you think that's not where I'm trying to take you?”

“I know where you're *trying* to take us, Cassiopeia, but I'm beginning to doubt it's there, or any such place exists at all.”

“If there are no Whos left, where are the louse ships going? What's even their purpose?”

Myron shrugged.

“They have to have plans for what they've conquered.”

Cassiopeia slid down the wall, to sit on the floor, knees drawn up to hide her chin. Her lips quivered almost imperceptibly.

“What?” Myron asked her, puzzled.

“I don't understand,” she whispered, and now the silence hollow, vacant bridge seemed especially eerie, “Why do they even exist? The lice? They just build these fortresses and ... what? Wait to attack us? I've never seen a single one who wasn't a soldier. How are they born?”

“I don't know, Cass. No one knows. We've seen troop ships arrive with reinforcements, but we don't know where they came from.”

“We barely know a thing, Myron,” she cried, suddenly agitated, “That's why we have to find some more people. More Whos. Maybe someone who knows what's going on. Another fortress. One that's already there, one that won't just get overrun one day like Point Seven did.”

Myron slowly shook his head.

“I don't think that's possible.”

“It has to be. I can't live thinking we're going to be on the run our whole lives.”

“We won't be,” said Myron, turning to look out the black window. The impenetrable night lay beyond the frigid glass, cold and howling as the ship whipped through the night. His head felt suddenly heavy, as though a band of lead ran through his forehead. “One way or another,” he said, “We'll won't be running away much longer.”

Cassiopeia nodded slowly, her eyes glossy. She rested her temples against her kneecaps, and for a long time was silent.

“Where's Orion?” Myron muttered. He wanted to sleep, but he could not abandon his post at the bridge. Not for another few hours.

“Asleep.”

“Lucky.”

Cassiopeia chuckled dryly.

“He needs it,” she said softly.

"We all need it."

She shook her head.

"Not like he does."

"What do you mean?"

Cassiopeia sighed, and slid her legs forward, crossing them carefully.

"Julia. Mom. Dad. It hit him differently than it hit you and I. He's functioning, but inside he's..."

She stopped, gazing intently at the inside of her leg.

"I don't know how he is," she admitted bluntly.

"Give him time, Cass, he'll come through," Myron said gently.

"I don't know if he will."

"At least he'll talk to you again."

"But I don't know if he will, Myron," she insisted, and he suddenly saw that the edges of her eyes were limned with red, "What if what happened to him, watching her get ripped up like that, then lose everyone else; what if it fucked him up too badly to come back? He's got me, he's got you, but he never *uses* us. Damn it, I was happy just when he told me *something*. Didn't have anything to do with how he's feeling, or what the hell's happening to him, but just something about the lice you found in the basement of that stronghold. And I feel like it's my fault," she said, now struggling to steady her voice, "He's just ... so goddamn abrasive with it sometimes, and I know it's not his fault, but I can't help but lash out when he does, and all I'm doing is making it worse, and—"

"Cass," Myron intoned gently.

"I've lost my family, I can't lose my brother, too. We need this place, wherever these ships are going to. I need a chance to ... to help him. However I can. Because so far I haven't, and look what it's done."

This time, Myron had no response. A distant clatter echoed through the hallways; neither of them showed any reaction to it. Finally, Cassiopeia spoke again.

"I'm going to bed," she said, rubbing her eyes, "Those ships are bound to end up close to wherever they're going by tomorrow. Need to be ready for when they do."

"Alright," said Myron, not daring to disturb her with anymore of his pessimism.

"Night," she said, padding softly away, and off the bridge, turning a corner, then out of sight.

Myron turned back to the controls. Red and green numbers, gently flickered and fluctuating, but stable overall. He stared at them, tracking their movement, making sure the radar was clear. He set his elbow on the side of the control board, and rested his forehead on his palm, propping it up, and watched the display in silence, letting his thoughts drift into the nothingness that existed between consciousness and sleep.

It was one in the morning by the time he was relieved, and he barely found his room. Warm, fuzzy exhaustion weighed him down; the back of his neck ached, and he thirsted for the clean, cool sheet that waited for him in his cabin.

He nearly stumbled on the threshold, but once inside he let the door click behind him, and sank amongst the blankets. It was only after a few moments of relief, and with great effort, that he rolled himself over, pulled off his jacket, and shirt, and unbuckled his belt, casting them across the room lazily. A drill sergeant would have censured him for his dishonorable treatment of his uniform, but the thought merely amused Myron as he drifted into the warm miasma of sleep.

A sudden knock on the door roused him; he wanted desperately to fall back to sleep, but he knew the persistent visitor would not go away; he was already knocking again. Flinging the door open, he was shocked to see Orion.

"What?" he asked.

"Someone on the bridge?" he asked tiredly.

"Yeah..." Myron answered, uncertain of what Orion was here for.

"Good," he said, nodding, looking at his own arm, "Were you talking to Cass?"

"Yeah, why?"

"She's in her room, crying. I can hear her. What the hell happened?"

"Why don't you ask her that?" Myron replied, with more hostility than he had intended. Orion simply shrugged, and turned to look back down the hallway.

"Night," he said, making to close the door. Myron stopped him.

"Talk to your sister," he said, "She's worried about you, I'm sure you know it, and you haven't done a damn thing to make her feel better."

Orion's face contorted.

"In the morning," he said unconvincingly, "I'll talk to her in the morning."

"Fine," Myron replied, not wanting to press the subject further.

The door clicked shut. Myron turned back to his bed, succumbing to it before anything normal, like changing into nightclothes, or brushing his teeth, could draw him away. He felt his cheek cool on the pillow.

Any traces of Cassiopeia's tears had disappeared by breakfast. She looked calm, content, and seemed to have forgotten her conversation with Myron the night before. Orion ate across from her, looking sullen.

"The ships are slowing down," Myron said, "We're getting close."

"We still haven't worked out what we're going to do if we arrive there right in the middle of an attack," Orion pointed out, "They might shoot us down, thinking we're lice."

"That's why it's tricky," said Myron, "We don't want to slow down too early, or we'll lose them, but too late and we'll end up right in range of friendly fire."

"Not to mention the lice," Cassiopeia added darkly.

"How do we even know it'll be 'friendly' fire, anyway?" said Orion, stirring at his oatmeal with more vigor than such a bland food deserved, "They might want nothing to do with us."

"Well then they're stupid," Cassiopeia said bitterly, "I'd take any allies I could get, I don't care if I don't like them. Just because they're sitting in their comfortable fortress now, doesn't mean they won't need us later, the way we need them now."

Her anger surprised Orion, but then he understood it, too.

"Try not to judge them," Myron said calmly, "For all we know, they'll welcome us with open arms. Especially if we come to their aid right as they are attacked."

"Or it could look suspicious," Orion pointed out, missing the subtext as it slipped away entirely.

"It could. But once we start fighting on their side, I think it will be pretty obvious we mean them no harm," said Cassiopeia.

"Or it could look like the lice sacrificed a few ships to get traitors inside the fortress," insisted Orion, "Especially if they've been under siege for a while."

"We can't know for sure," Myron interjected, as Cassiopeia opened her mouth with a retort, "There's no way of telling how they'll react to us. We'll disengage if they fire on us, and go somewhere else. But honestly, I doubt the lice would send a whole fleet of 'traitors', if they even had any," he added hastily, to placate Cassiopeia, "And they'll probably have thought this out. If not... well, we might not want to be there long."

"No, Cass is right," Orion conceded, his voice much calmer now, "That place is our best hope."

They finished their food in silence, busing their plates, walking out a side door so as to avoid the crowd that ate in the larger mess hall. A lieutenant was waiting for Myron just outside.

"Crole wants you on the bridge."

Myron immediately quickened his pace, nodding to the lieutenant as he passed him. Orion and Cassiopeia glanced at each other.

"Need to fix up the fighters," Cassiopeia said, "We might need them soon."

"We will," Orion said darkly, "It's time for some payback after all this running."

She watched his expression curiously as they began down the corridor, passing busy pilots, soldiers, and crewmen, even a family of civilians here or there, but almost always with a military escort. Orion remembered Kylea, and grinned with some satisfaction imagining how she would be reacting to this.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said, his smile fading instantly. He turned and saw her looking at him, a tinge of concern in her eyes.

"You coming to help?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'll be flying, too, right?"

"Minus one, but yeah."

Orion's brow furrowed; immediately, regret washed through Cassiopeia's chest, down into her stomach. She froze.

"I don't why I said that, Orion, I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he replied, but his expression remained unchanged.

*Damn it*, she thought, *Why did I say that?* She followed him now, as they rounded the last few corners, came to the balcony that overlooked the landing bay. Round Falcons and diamond-shaped VARs sat in neat rows, at least twenty of each. Still, at least half the landing bay remained empty, a grim token of the last run from Macalavay.

Orion paused a moment at the balcony, his fingers brushing against the railing, but began off again right away, losing no momentum; Cassiopeia had to quicken her pace to keep up with him. Down thirty feet, the fighters seemed larger, the smooth exteriors gleaming with thin lines, dim reflections of the white lights that hung from the ceiling.

Alenia already sat atop Cassiopeia's Hawk, fiddling with an exhaust port.

"I think a shell casing got caught in it last flight," she called down. Cassiopeia's mouth creased unpleasantly.

"Let me see," she said, and vaulted up onto the front of the Hawk, walking evenly across the wing. She knelt next to the exhaust port. Behind her, she heard Orion walking off. He would tend to his own fighter alone.

*Just what he needs*, Cassiopeia said, *More alone time.*

"Cass?" Alenia's voice jabbed a needle into her thoughts.

"Yeah," she said.

"Hold this?"

"Yep."

"Thanks."

She wrapped her thin fingers around the handle of the wrench.

"Hold that there," Alenia said.

There was a horrible rasping sound, like two grates grinding together, then a sudden ping, as with a cry of exultation Alenia yanked the other wrench free.

"Got it!" she said triumphantly. Then her eyes narrowed. "What the hell is this?"

It appeared something like a bent whistle, a roll of metal with several small tabs on it.

"That can't be a shell casing," Cassiopeia said, "Probably a piece of a louse fighter."

"Maybe," said Alenia. She tucked in her breast pocket, the metal bulging under her shirt.

"Does everything else check out?"

"You missed a lot," Alenia said, looking at a clipboard next to her thigh, "Ran through cooling diagnostics, reloaded the missiles and cannon, checked the flaps, elevators, that sort of thing," she said, waving her hand by the end.

"Sorry," Cassiopeia said, peering into the exhaust vent, "I was eating breakfast."

Alenia just looked at her.

“Right,” she said, turning back to the clipboard, “Well, either way, it's done, and it barely took half an hour, except for that thing stuck in the vent. Which I needed you for. So it worked out.”

“Yep.”

Alenia glanced behind over her shoulder before continuing, “So when are we going to get to this place?”

“Myron says early evening.”

“Right,” she said again, “You want to know what I think?”

Cassiopeia nodded.

“I think we're going to find another hole in the ground,” she said, pulling off her gloves and tucking them in her belt, “Find them just like we were, hiding in caves. Maybe we'll find a Point Seven. Last a few months until an entire goddamn fleet comes crashing down on us.”

“You're not optimistic...” Cassiopeia said as Alenia slid from the edge of the wing, back onto the concrete floor. She landed perfectly on her feet, long hair bobbing a little, and turned back, saying nothing.

“I'm going to have breakfast now,” she said as she walked away, “If there's any left.”

Cassiopeia nodded as her friend walked toward the stairs, weaving between the parked fighters, taken aback by the sudden jab. She hoped it was just cabin fever, or something like it; but then, they had been trained to live in these conditions for months on end. They had certainly done it before. Perhaps hopelessness, sheer hopelessness, was settling in among these people, as the surviving Macalavay ships were picked off, one by one.

*Or maybe she knows something I don't,* she thought, but forced it away. Where had that come from?

Her mind wound back to the piece of metal Alenia had found. How briskly she had walked off. It suddenly seemed suspicious, but Cassiopeia refused to allow those thoughts. She thought about what she had said to Myron and Orion this morning, and she still believed it. They couldn't afford any distrust.

She walked over to where Orion worked on his fighter, alone, ignoring the crew that worked on another Hawk a few feet away. The aircraft were grouped by type, and Orion's was right on the border between them. Most Falcons were

Diomirick = prince of sarengarth

## Fall of Perrodin

Orion's fighter wove through Sarengarth's branches, the swarms of descending landing craft looking like snowflakes falling from the sky. The cruisers were up there, letting them fall by the thousands, and Orion intended to pay them a visit.

He curled around another branch, the back of his ship spraying flares that sizzled in the frigid air. A pursuing missile flew into them and spun out of control. Orion pulled up fast, and fired two missiles of his own, which streaked forward and hit an unsuspecting Scorpion, blowing off the side of its wing and sending it spiraling to the ground miles below.

Pulling back on the control stick, he began to climb. The engine squealed, but Orion pressed it onward anyway. Above, a Scorpion broke away from its squadron to dive directly at him. He spun out of the way of its first few missiles, wove away from the next two, then unleashed a hot stream of cannon fire that shredded the cockpit. Pilot-less, the Scorpion fell past Orion, heading directly for the ground.

Faint lights occasionally shone through the dark lights of the night above. Red, and deep purple, they were Orion's only indication of where his enemy floated, hiding behind the safety of the clouds. He pushed the thrust harder. If this fighter couldn't reach up there, it wasn't worth flying anymore.

"Tiger leader, you copy?" came Vylee's voice on the radio.

"Copy," said Orion, "Where are you, Vylee?"

"We looped around Perrodin to shake some enemy fighters, we're climbing now," she said.

"Get up here, fast. We're going to give those cruisers up there something to think about."

He rolled his fighter to the side, looping out of the way of another trio of missiles, before gunning down another Scorpion. As it passed, a sudden series of thunks rattled Orion's ears; looking out, he saw a few scattered bullet holes in the side of his ship. He silently cursed his own recklessness. Any decent pilot would not climb so relentlessly, not risk stalling out his aircraft, not be a sitting duck for any enemy who noticed him flying in a straight path, slowed by the rigor of ascent.

But Orion knew he was not a decent pilot, and that that was what gave him a chance at attacking those cruisers.

Praying the rest of Tiger Squadron was as lucky as he was, he switched to air torpedoes; slow, powerful missiles that would skirt the air. The base of the cloud cover was barely another half-kilometer higher; seconds away. No doubt a hundred more louse fighters waited for him up there. He pressed on, uncaring.

His Falcon tore through the clouds, into a different world, one with a black, wispy floor, and a somber moon shining down on it. Orion counted eight heavy cruisers closest to him, with other groups nearly thirty kilometers off. He grabbed his radio again.

"Vylee, where are you guys?"

"Pushing through cloud cover now, sir," she said, barely a second later. Her crisp voice gave Orion a bit of confidence. He wished Cassiopeia were with him now – a pilot more reckless than even he – but she was away, protecting the western strongholds, with her own fighters.

Orion watched four streaks tear through the dark mist below; then, a second later, five others, from farther away. He leveled off, facing one of the cruisers directly now, watching its dark silhouette looming against a barely-lighter background, its fuzzy red lights blinking softly, watching his allies curve toward it out of the corner of his eye. He saw the rapid white blinking of anti-aircraft fire from four positions near the front of the ship; he made a mental note of their locations, before spinning out of the way of a stream of white-hot lead.

"Four around the bridge. Lock on 'em and take them out," he said.

"Roger," said Vylee.

Two missiles streaked from her fighter, illuminating the billowing clouds below, two sparkling pinpricks twisting eagerly, before slamming into one of the anti-aircraft batteries, interrupting its constant stream of bullets.

Orion lined up with another, and eliminated it with a missile of his own. Others streaked from his allies, silencing the final two. Orion whirled his fighter around the cruiser, hugging its form, barely twenty meters from its jagged, bristling surface. It blurred by, Orion's eyes scanning for his target; the landing bay. He spotted it, a thin, lit alcove in the ship's side. He let off another pair of rockets, which spiraled into it. As he sped by, his eyes caught the distinctive shape of several smoking Scorpion wrecks. He smiled with satisfaction.

"This one's out," he said, "No defenses."

"Copy," said Vylee, "Let's get the others."

But the other cruisers had already begun to respond. Missiles fell away from them like a tree shedding leaves, trailing smoke, pulling up to race toward them. Behind them, Orion saw the distinctive crimped diamond profile of several Scorpion fighters.

"We've got bogeys, coming in hot. At least a dozen missiles."

"Hide behind the ship," said Vylee.

Orion was already moving, maneuvering his Falcon up and over. He curled over the back of the disabled louse cruiser, just as the first missile arced over it behind him. He punched the flare button, spraying out the hot decoys, letting them hang in the air behind him as he curled back under the louse cruiser, watching fire blossom along its flank as errant missiles made impact. He fell into rough formation with the other Falcons, and flew on, angling for the next cruiser.

An urgent voice cackled on the radio, punctuated by bursts of static.

"... four ... one hit ... going home ... too much ... hot."

Orion struggled to make out what the pilot was saying. But then there was a brilliant explosion, and a light on his status screen flickered out. He sighed. It felt dull, after so many endless times, but it still hurt. A little.

He tensed himself, then grabbed the radio.

"On my mark, missiles on the next cruiser. We'll chop into these, then retreat."

"Only two?" came Vylee's surprised voice.

"Yes," said Orion firmly.

"But we came up here to –"

"I know what we came up here for, Vylee! Follow your orders! On my mark."

Orion could hear her sigh, even over the radio.

"Yes, sir."

"Two ... one ... mark!"

The rockets burst free, searing toward their targets, not a single overlap, not a single rocket wasted. Orion's pilots were well-trained, calculating their position in the formation, counting the targets, figuring out where their shot was supposed to go, saving Orion, the squadron leader, a lot of micromanaging. All while evading streams of cannon fire. Very well-trained.

In rapid series the roiling red and orange flashed along the side of the cruiser, crippling at least half of its weapons systems. Orion felt definite satisfaction. They had all but a free pass to rip these cruisers to shreds. Two less ships worth of landing craft for the soldiers on the ground. Two less ships of Scorpions for Sarengarth the shoot down.

Another light flickered out on his screen, as they circled the cruisers, guns blaring at the engines and bridge. Orion held his breath. They would have to do this quick.

At last, something in one of the engines ruptured, causing one small explosion, then a much larger one, that shook Orion's fighter even as it shuddered in a tight turn. When he turned to look, he saw violent flame coating the back of the first cruiser, one of its main engines burning freely, the other gone entirely, a shredded hole in its wake.

"One down. Take out the other, then lets get out of here."

Like vultures they circled the other, as it broke away from its formation, already listing from heavy damage to a steering engine. Orion curled around it once, circling it back to front, firing a single

missile at the bridge. But it was nearly impossible to hit, protected in a recess blocked by metal plates positioned to protect it, but so as not to entirely limit its field of view. It was a good design, one that frustrated Orion.

But he had more missiles.

He circled around again, missing again; but not by as much, this time striking the side of one of the protective plates, blowing it off. He watched it flutter away, like a shred of paper in the wind, and grinned. One more pass would do the trick.

Flying wide around the back of the cruiser, where his allies were chewing away at the engines, Orion spotted at least a few dozen distant dots, nestled in the clouds, at least two hundred kilometers distant. More cruisers.

He sighed. The lice had already shot down two of his fighters. Killed two of his pilots. It would be brainless and arrogant to attack more cruisers, in a bullheaded effort to fight the whole fleet alone. He forced himself to concentrate, refusing to anticipate the moment that Kylee spotted them, too, and radioed him to tell him so.

The bridge came into view, beautifully naked and exposed. Orion squeezed the trigger with sudden ferocity, launching a single missile into it. It burrowed into the narrow slit, before blowing up, shattering the bridge area, leaving nothing behind but fire and a few stuck-out beams. Orion turned away as the ship began to fly aimlessly, turned almost entirely on its side.

"Let's go home," he said.

"But sir, there are more –"

"There's fifty more of the damn things coming, Vylee, you know they never stop. Form up on me, head back. We'll do another run in an hour when we're fueled up again."

There was no response, but Orion watched her indicator, and the rest of the squad's, as they fell into formation behind him.

They descended swiftly, not in a break-neck dive, but fast enough that Orion could hear the wind roaring. He topped off the throttle, letting gravity do the work. They broke back through the clouds to a tremendous rumble and crack.

Orion could not tell what it was at first, dismissed it as thunder maybe, or the sound of a cruiser breaking apart. But no, it was much too loud. He looked to the right, daring to take his eyes off the front for just a second.

What he saw gripped his eyes. The base of Perrodin's trunk, wreathed in flames, its body broken, its unbelievably massive top half slowly keeling toward him. Louse cruisers swarmed around its base, circling it like a plague of insects.

"Holy shit," he muttered, "Vylee! Evasive maneuvers!"

There was no response.

"Vylee!"

"Something ... ship ... can't pull ... ejector seat ... broken."

"Vylee, are you there?"

"Orion ... tell ... sorry ... can't do this."

"Vylee!"

Nothing.

"Damn it!" Orion shouted. In the nick of time, he spotted one of the flailing, falling branches whipping toward him. He slammed his stick to the side, whirling out of the way as it flew past. A sudden jolt almost snapped his neck. His head slammed into the side of the cockpit, sending a wave of stars over his vision. Several alarms blared warningly, their sound dulled by what had to be a concussion. Orion tasted blood. He sat up, gripping the controls clumsily, and struggled to keep flying.

His eyes flitted to the status screen for a split-second, and came away, leaving him aghast. Fully half of his squadron – eight more fighters – had been taken down by Perrodin.

A deep boom resonated through his aircraft, the clouds above suddenly brightened from the

blossoming fire below. Orion stared down at it, watching the impossible large inferno. Surely dozens of louse cruisers had also been crushed by the falling tree-city; not that they would care, he noted bitterly.

Shaken, Orion turned back toward Sarengarth, his original destination.

"Anyone still there?" he muttered into the radio, worried by how slurred his voice was.

"Yes sir."

"Still here, sir."

"Roger."

"Still flying, Tiger Leader."

The voices, quivering but alive, heartened him a little, at least in contrast with the flaming, spidery hulk of a wreckage. The shock was too much. An entire tree-city, miles tall, weighing as much as a mountain, toppled over. How? Orion guided his ship toward the white, clinical lights of Hangar 8, where he'd taken off from, where, he hoped, Cassiopeia might be waiting for him, resting from her own mission. A needle of fear punctured his chest; but no, she had been on the other side of Sarengarth, well away from Perrodin. But the risk was always there, regardless, to keep his heart rate high until the moment he finally saw her.

He landed gently, exiting his fighter in a daze. The others landed a few moments later, but Orion was already wandering aimlessly across the hangar, searching for Cassiopeia.

He found her in the small break room near the entrance, away from the fighters. The door swung shut behind him, sealing away the echoing noise of the busy hangar bay. She did not turn to him, her eyes taut on the small view screen hung from the wall.

"Hi Orion," she said, her voice muted. Somehow, she always knew when it was him.

"Cass. I'm ... just glad you're alright."

She still wore her brown flight suit, her hair tucked under the collar as it usually was. Now she turned her head, offering him a watery smile.

"Is Verric okay?"

She nodded.

"We were over by Mirricidum. A strafing run on some armor moving through the forest. Blew the hell out of them." Her smile disappeared. "Got back here about fifteen minutes ago. Got to see this happen."

"Where is he?"

"Off at the nearest comm station. He's got family in Perrodin." Her face fell.

On the screen was footage from the upper branches. Captions trotted across the screen, the narrators words barely discernible.

"Turn the volume up," said Orion. Cassiopeia punched buttons on the remote.

"... not a nuclear strike, which makes its cause unknown. It is likely that Perrodin buckled under the sheer weight of the barrage. No reports had been issued since the attack began, leaving many to believe ..."

"Maybe someone got in," muttered Cassiopeia, "Dhaika, or something."

"Maybe," said Orion, still watching.

"God, there's got to be millions of people in there," she said.

They stood watching the flames. Orion could hear the rumbling in the distance, resonating a split-second out of sync with the view-screen audio. The thundering cracks of railguns firing filtered down to him, providing a staccato rhythm to the low booming. Orion watched as they switched back to footage of the fallen city; much of it burned now, flames gripping the branches, tearing them free, dropping them thousands of feet to crash to the ground, consumed in a billowing fireball.

The small radio on Cassiopeia's belt beeped suddenly and insistently. She reached for it, glanced at it, and immediately put it to her ear.

"Verric! Are they –"

She put a hand to her mouth as the muted voice from the speaker cut her off.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, "I'm so sorry."  
She looked to Orion helplessly.

### Cassiopeia chooses Orion

"Your choice," said Timeless.

Orion squeezed his eyes shut. This was it. Whatever happened next, it would be horrible.

"Don't hurt him," said Cassiopeia weakly, "Please."

Timeless' lip curled cruelly.

"Please don't hurt my brother."

Orion's eyes flashed open, a mix of relief and guilt flooded through him. He knew what was about to happen, and he didn't want to watch it.

With a fluid motion, Timeless whipped out his knife, approaching Verric fast.

"No!" he cried, "No! No! No! Please don't!"

"Leave him alone!" screamed Cassiopeia, "Get away from him! No!"

Hysteria gripped her face as Timeless sank the knife into Verric's forehead. He stiffened, jolting backwards against the pillar he was bound to.

"You bastard!" screamed Cassiopeia, thrashing wildly now, testing her bonds, "Fuck you! No!"

Orion turned to his sister, watching her with gritted teeth, her hair tossed wildly around her contorted face. He glanced over to where the knife sat lodged in Verric's skull, his eyes still open as if alive, blood pooling and dripping down his temples.

"I lied," said Timeless, slowly approaching Cassiopeia, the knife swinging teasingly from between two of his fingers. He flung it up into a loose grip as he came in front of her. He pointed it carefully at her neck, where her veins bulged with rage.

"I think this one will be slow," said Timeless, "I think I will enjoy watching the blood drain from you, watch the fight go out of you. Wait until you're pale as a sheet before I look away."

He raised the knife.

Cassiopeia wrenched the rope up to her elbow, grunting with pain, catching Timeless' wrist with her fingertips. Her fingers wrapped tight around it. Timeless pushed the knife toward her throat, but Cassiopeia leaned to the side, biting into his hand, through the gloves. Timeless cried out with pain, stumbling backward. Enraged, he charged Cassiopeia, sinking the knife into her arm, then her shoulder. She writhed in the bindings, screaming. Suddenly, her whole right arm was free; Timeless had missed, stabbed into the ropes, weakening them just enough for her to escape. She grabbed

keeper tells orion and calana how to get to cave. Says there is something ancient and mysterious there. A few have traveled there, but never went in more than a few feet, or otherwise never came back. Stories and legends of ghosts living there

Ceremony before they leave, where Orion is given blessing. He sees visions before and after, but tells Calana about them almost as soon as they happen, but not myron and cassiopeia until right before he leaves on journey to cave.

As Orion continued along the narrow path, something damp suddenly gripped his hand tightly as it trailed behind him. Instinctively, Orion spun around, wrenching his hand free, only to see it was Calana.

“Sorry!” she said instantly. A trickle of unnecessary adrenaline ran down the back of Orion's neck, but already his muscles were beginning to relax again.

“It's fine, just... don't do that.”

“I won't...”

“I mean, you can hold my hand if you want, but don't grab it out of nowhere like that.”

Calana smiled nervously, then took hold of Orion's hand again, and they started off again.

“It's frightening so high up, isn't it?” Calana said, though her voice betrayed no hint of fear.

“It can be,” Orion replied simply, “Don't look down.”

The view from the cliff-side trail was surreal; it seemed as though there were a great painting only a few hundred feet away, rather than a grand panorama of a unbelievably deep cavern, the other side of which was hundreds of kilometers away...

“I've lived here all my life, and I still can't believe that this valley was once full of our people. When the Keeper spoke to me when I came of age, he told me that this land was not always a volatile monster, but that the heat beneath the ground powered cities larger than any we'd ever know. He wanted to share the visions with me, but I was not capable.”

Orion glanced behind him and saw a rather pensive and disappointed expression on her face.

“It doesn't mean anything,” he said, “And the visions you speak of, are painful. When we were flying through that wasteland, and I saw the acid rivers, and the boiling lakes, and whatever those creatures were that dwelt in the water, I had visions of what it used to be, and how it was destroyed.”

The path widened finally; Calana walked up astride of him, still clutching his hand.

“The Schism was terrible,” she said, a faint tremor in her voice, “The Keeper said that what happened was necessary, but could have been avoided. He told me about a cycle of life, and how the Schism had cut the loop... and... if our people somehow, someday succeed... it was break the cycle and we will be free.” Her brow furrowed with the effort of remembering.

“What cycle?”

“I don't know. It never made any sense to me, either. I just remembered because... well, I figured it would be important.”

The trail wrapped around a twist in the facade of the cliff. As it did, the waterfall the Keeper had told them of became visible. It seemed, from so far away, like a white cloud draped over the side of the precipice, hanging down, billowing in the wind. Orion suddenly recognized the faint hissing he'd heard as the noise of millions of gallons of water flowing with each heartbeat, tumbling over the edge and into oblivion a hundred kilometers below.

Wind suddenly whipped at their faces, pulling their clothing taut against their bodies, forcing their eyes shut. When it had subsided, Orion could see a small black dot, miniscule next to the titanic falls.

“That must be the cave,” he said.

“It has to be forty kilometers away,” said Calana.

“At least we can see it now,” Orion said. Calana laughed, and they continued.

When night came over them again, they had made it halfway, and found an alcove, about ten meters in diameter, off the side of the trail.

“It's out of the wind, and hopefully no one can see us from the air.”

“They'd have thousands of miles of cliff to scan anyway.”

“If there is one thing I've learned in the years I've fought them, it's to never underestimate the lice. I did it once, and...” Orion's voice trailed off, suddenly thinking of Julia. Five years had passed since her death, but her last moments were etched cleanly in Orion's mind. The time had numbed the memory somewhat, but it flooded back as stark and poignant as ever now. Guilt washed through his mind, and he felt a sudden urge to turn away from Calana, to never say another word to her. In his mind, he saw Julia's wide, damp eyes staring into his own as she lay dying in his arms. He swung his fist blindly, bruising it against the wall of the alcove.

“Orion?” Calana's worried voice brought him back to the present.

“I can't afford to make any more mistakes,” he said.

Calana walked over to him, sat next to him, and looked at him. Her eyes were wide, and that same tantalizing mixture of greens and blues. Orion suddenly realized he had never properly looked at her eyes before.

“Sometimes,” she said, “I've found talking about the past can help you live with it.”

Orion shook his head. “It was a long time ago. Talking won't change... anything.” His gaze sank to the ground in front of him, “All that matters from here on out is what I do about it. And I will never risk someone I care about again.”

“What's inside you matters, too. What reason do you have to fight if you're going to suffer inside for your entire life?”

Orion met her eyes again, and they seemed to bore into him more deeply than anything else had, reaching to pull at a crack that resided deep within him.

“I lost my parents and the closest... person... I've ever had, within days of each other.”

“So you fight for vengeance.”

She was right. Orion did not want his composure to crack. Suddenly their entire journey seemed pointless. He wanted to leave. He stared out beyond her, at the stirring, sepulchral clouds in the distance, and felt a hollowness grow in his chest, like an actual physical sensation. A tingle ran down his back. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again.

“Yes.”

Calana looked at him for what could have been a few seconds, or could have been much longer. The wind outside rose and fell in waves, like a small child whose tantrums constantly exhausted him. During one of the lulls, Calana spoke again.

“Tenebrauk's the only family I have,” she said quietly, looking down. When she raised her eyes, Orion saw a glint in them, before she looked away again, off to the side. She continued,

“When I was four I watched them all die. From my home we watched Cale Sier hit by a stream of bright lights. And all at once they burst into flame. Then like ... like black leaves from a tree, they fell from the sky, and landed. Even from miles away, I could tell there had to be thousands.”

Her words paused for a moment. The wind filled in the gap with a particularly fierce howl, that scoured sand from the trail outside. When it cleared, Orion noticed the moon was rising.

“I don't know why they never attacked us. But no one came from Cale Sier. After they were gone, Tenebrauk found my parents' bodies among the ruins. We buried... so many people.”

Calana's face was loose, blank, as she sat lost in memory. But her eyes seemed steely even so. Suddenly her voice hardened.

“You can't just live with the hate,” she said, her voice suddenly fierce, “They can kill everyone

you care about, leave you maimed and broken, with no one to turn to and nothing to live for. But you can't just fight for revenge. You have to fight for that day, whenever it is, that all the bastards are dead and rotted and forgotten, and our grandchildren, or their children, are someday living in the world, finally free of this war. Otherwise they win. They want hate. It's all they have, and so they spread it."

"What does it matter what we fight for?"

"It's the only thing that makes us better than them. They are the takers. We are the givers."

For a long time they said nothing. The moonlight shone clearly into the alcove, the one pillar of stone that split the entrance casting a long shadow into the small space they shared.

"I don't think they hate. I don't think they feel anything," said Orion.

"Maybe not."

"They are more machine than man. Something sucks the emotions, the thoughts out of their brain. I would almost pity them."

"Don't pity them, Orion. If they feel nothing, there is nothing to pity."

"I don't. I said almost. I would pity what they could have been. Maybe could be."

"Thinking like that could cost you your life."

Orion chuckled.

"That's what Myron would say. He'd be pissed off that I even considered that these creatures could be ... something like us." He gazed out into the valley, into the ethereal night.

Calana just looked at him.

"But they have to be," he insisted, turning back to meet her eyes, "It's here. What happened, what made us who we are, and them. This long war, it has to mean something. We just fought, for years and years, not knowing why we were fighting, other than that they were the enemy, and they would kill us. But something has to make them want to destroy. And I want to understand it."

Her eyes fell away from his.

"They are just evil."

"There has to be a reason."

Their eyes met again, and Calana's were cold.

"I don't think so."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Orion looking for words with which to warm to her again. Suddenly, he became aware of how alone they were, how they were possibly hundreds of miles from the nearest living soul. Just a few footsteps away was a drop that plunged miles into nothingness, where the howling winds that battered the cliffside would push them among the rocks, and shred them long before they hit the ground. A tingle ran down his spine.

He looked back at Calana. Her eyes traced the walls of the alcove.

"Sometimes there's symbols," she said.

"What?"

"On the walls," she said, still looking for them on the ceiling above them, "When I was a child we found them in caves all the time. Runes, writing, drawings, diagrams. We never knew what to make of them. They must be so old, though. Before even the city."

Orion nodded pensively. Calana watched him, crossing her arms and bending over a little.

"It's cold in here," she muttered. She got up, and walked toward the back of the alcove, which was dark and out of sight. Orion heard some rustling and clattering, but he did not pay it any attention. Instead he sat still, wondering what these symbols could offer. Likely nothing. They were before his time. But the sheer wonder, of something more ancient than the city, enveloped him. Of course, something had to have come before; a city could not have just popped into existence. All the same, the feeling clung to him, more poignant on this crisp, indigo night.

"Firewood," said Calana, letting several small logs tumble from her arms with a hollow clatter. Orion's eyes widened.

"Where did you find those?"

"Back of the wall. I guess someone else left them here or something. Who knows?"

Why someone would carry twice as much firewood along that narrow trail and leave some behind, mystified him.

"Got any matches?" Calana asked him.

"There should be some in the backpack," he said, turning and reaching for it. He dug inside and found them, in a small plastic container. He handed them to her.

She built a small, triangular stack on the floor, in the dust, then reached for a knife on her belt, and began slicing shavings of bark off of one of the logs.

"Kindling," she explained as Orion watched her curiously, "Little stuff to start the fire."

Orion nodded.

"Never spent much time making fires," he whispered.

"It's not hard. It's much harder in the winter. With the wind, where you have to dig a hole in the snow to keep it out, and your fingers are freezing."

Orion chuckled.

"That sounds impossible."

"I've done it. Tenebrauk decided he'd finally take his little sister out on the hunting expedition. Got to go out a few days in the freezing cold."

"Fun."

"Bagged a few deer, one big huge one, with antlers almost as wide as Tenebrauk's tall. Because, of course, we had to measure."

Orion nodded slowly.

"I've been hunting once," he said, wondering how much he should say, "When I was young. It was ... interesting."

"Did you get anything?"

"A fawn. A female fawn."

"You're not supposed to shoot those, you idiot," Calana chided playfully, "Not that it really matters, though. Without enough people around to live off of them, there's plenty to go around."

"Yeah," said Orion, letting the thought pass.

She replaced her knife on her belt, and began gathering the little shavings into a pile at the center of the triangle.

"Further out, in the fields and hills, there are kronaxceros."

"What the hell are those?" said Orion.

Calana smiled, lighting a match and carefully lighting the fire.

"Think something like a turtle crossed with a bear. Big plated grazing creatures, something like thirty feet long. They move around in these huge herds, and sometimes, something sets them off, and they go on this giant stampede that you can hear for miles. Sounds like a rumble of thunder, constantly echoing, for hours."

Orion watched the wisps of red beginning to grow as Calana worked to coax the fire into existence.

"Kind of wish I'd lived out here," said Orion, "It's beautiful here."

Calana looked up, to see his eyes on her. Orion thought he saw her blushing, though it could have just been the light of fire.

"It is," she said softly. Orion was shaking his head gently.

"I spent my whole life within sight of a war. Then I grew up and became a part of it. But I never really thought about ... living. Until I came out here."

Calana watched him.

"How bad is it? Where the war is?"

"Terrible," said Orion, "The lice never stop coming. You would think they would run out of steel, or nuclear fuel, or *people*. But they've never let up an inch."

She sighed.

“What are you hoping to find in this cave, anyway?”

“I don't know,” said Orion, “Answers.”

She watched him for a few minutes, then looked away. They sat in front of the fire for a while, warming their cold, tired bodies, before letting it dwindle into soft, faint red flickers.

“We should probably get some sleep,” said Calana.

“Yeah,” said Orion.

They laid out their sleeping bags, carefully sliding into them, barely a foot between each other.

“Night,” said Orion.

“Night,” said Calana.

Orion let his cheek rest on the small pillow, the host of thoughts and fears that assaulted him each night fading away as he lay there. It was a rare night that he had the strength to fight them off, but it was a rare night that he spent in a lonely alcove with a woman such as Calana. Whatever the cause of her soothing presence, he decided not to ponder it, to take advantage of the tranquility that held him loosely, and he slipped off into sleep, any pain, any mystery, any fear forgotten.

The next morning they began off again, after a quick breakfast. The white ashes of their fire the night before clung to the charred insides of the logs; Orion stared at them as he ate a few of the protein bars they had brought.

Calana's hand brushed near his as they walked, before finally gripping it again.

“Are you scared of heights, or something?” said Orion.

“Maybe I just like holding your hand.”

Orion was glad he was walking on the outside.

The remaining miles seemed to pass in minutes, though the sun had shifted significantly by the time the cave drew into view, and Orion was certain at least a few hours must have passed.

Even from a hundred meters away, the cave seemed much smaller than he had expected. What was here? It couldn't be much. A wash of regret clawed at Orion, but they were alone on a slender trail, many miles elevation change a few feet away on each side. Myron and Cassiopeia likely thought them dead after that attack, and without a radio, Orion and Calana had no way to convince them otherwise. What other choice did they have?

The rock curved inward, as though a fist had been pushed into clay. The path curved and led into an overhang, then sloped up into the lit portion of the cave entrance. Further along, the thundering of the massive waterfall, barely a kilometer away now, was almost deafening, though over time it grew on the ears, feeling less and less grating and more and more soothing.

As they drew closer, Orion could tell that the cave was about forty meters tall at the entrance. A few boulders sat on the ground just past the arch; gazing up, Orion could see that they had broken free of the ceiling, likely centuries ago, both the rocks and the gaps they left behind smoothed by the years of wind and water.

They paused at the very brink of the entrance. Calana turned to Orion.

“Ready?” she said, taking a breath to steady herself.

“Yeah,” said Orion, unslinging the submachine gun he had been carrying, and holding it loosely at his side. He didn't expect anything to happen, but the Keeper had spoken of ghosts...

Calana walked in first, Orion behind her, eyes scanning around. Ahead of them, the passage drew on, thinning slightly, and growing darker.

“You've got the lantern?” Calana asked.

“Yeah,” said Orion, stopping, and taking off his pack to get it for her. As he did, he heard a screech, so sudden and sharp that he spent the next few seconds wondering if he had heard it at all. Beside him, Calana was frozen, her fingers sliding toward her belt, more specifically the knife that hung at her hip.

“Nothing,” said Orion, “Probably just a bird.”

It was a weak lie, and they both knew it. Calana took the lantern and flicked it on, moving forward, Orion behind her with the gun. As they moved into the darkness, he noticed that her hands were shaking. He came up and grabbed her other hand gently. She jumped, slightly, but then relaxed.

Every footstep seemed to be a blinding beacon to their presence. Orion could sense that something was hunting them, trailing them from a flank, between the stalagmites, but he knew that veering his light into the darkness was to weaken himself, to give the creature a split-second advantage in which to pounce.

Behind him, Calana seemed to sense his anxiety; her grip on his hand tightened, and Orion could no longer hear her footsteps. A cold wave ran through him; he reached for the submachine gun slung at his hip, brought it to his hands, and with his thumb flicked the safety off.

They continued walking. A warmth in the air seemed to grow, teasingly, between the cold gusts of air from the cavern. Occasional droplets of water fell from the ceiling, providing a quiet, scattering rhythm for the pair as they ventured between the great stalagmites.

The scent of rot greeted Orion's cold nostrils as they reached a new chamber in the cave. He gazed upward curiously. Suddenly he grabbed Calana by the arm, sprinted back through the cave, dragging her along.

“What was it?” she said.

Something with six legs and milky white eyes that reflected enough light as to seem to glow, sprang through the winding passage they had just exited, bounding over stalagmites and rocks on the ground, kicking some, sending them skittering wildly. With a flourish, Orion spun, aiming the submachine gun at where it had been, but it was gone.

“Act oblivious,” he whispered, “Let it think it's sneaking up on us.”

Calana nodded nervously, her eyes, barely visible in the dim light, darting around the ceiling. They continued on.

A moment later, the skittering sound returned. Orion felt Calana's shoulder tense at the noise, but they kept walking, as quietly as they could.

There was a sudden, loud scraping of stone, and Orion spun around the creature descended on them, illuminated by the muzzle flashes of Orion's gun, as though by a strobe light. Each frozen frame of the creature made it appear far more terrifying; as it landed, its belly peppered with bleeding holes, it reared back, screeching, the two forearms coming forward, long claws slashing at Orion. He barely got out of the way in time, flinging himself sideways onto the ground. Urgency forced him back to his feet almost instantly; he staggered back into a wide, stable stance, and opened fire again. The creature screeched, the bright flashes of light revealing the gaping holes he tore in the side of the creature. It could not be more than three meters long, but it seemed gigantic, even in the spacious corridor of the cave.

The gun clicked suddenly. Orion dropped it, whipping out his knife as the creature, now free of the hail of bullets, leaped forward, flicking droplets of its warm blood onto Orion's face as it pounced. Orion dove under it, between the legs, scraping his shoulder, tearing his clothing against the rough floor, feeling the rough underbelly of the creature's exoskeleton rubbing his other shoulder. He struggled back to his feet, and swiped one of the creature's back legs, severing it easily. It screamed, the piercing sound only intensified by the echoic walls of the cavern.

It charged him, pincers clicking. Half-stunned, barely aware of his own actions, he plunged the knife between them. The entire creature's body shuddered as he did, the pincers clamping down on his hand. He grunted from the pain as they sank in, but pushed the knife in deeper, tearing at his own skin, but stiffening the bug's body. The pincers loosened; Orion reached it, pried them apart, and extracted his bloody hand, as the creature sank to the ground. He stooped over it, pulling arm out entirely, and his knife with it.

Calana approached him from the shadows, like a ghost, staring timidly at the dead creature.

Orion panted, as his adrenaline drained away, his heart pulsing as if each heartbeat were a blow to the chest. He staggered towards her; she caught him as his knees buckled, lowering to lean against one of the base of one of the larger stalagmites.

"You okay?" she asked worriedly.

"Yeah," said Orion, staring blankly at the dead creature, "It's dead."

"Obviously," said Calana, approaching the corpse slowly.

"Calana, don't!" Orion shouted. She looked back at him; as she did, one of the creature's forearms twitched, reaching for her suddenly. She spun, and grabbed onto it. The claws flexed, sharp tips reaching for the vulnerable flesh on her arms and above her breast. She stepped around it, tugging on the forearm, bending it, the chitin cracking with another, awful screech. The broken arm fell limply, gradually, grotesquely bending back toward its original shape, pickle-color blood oozing from the cracks.

"See?" Calana said with a triumphant grin, "I'm not helpless."

Orion was too busy trying to regain a normal breathing pattern to say anything. She knelt next to the dead husk of a creature.

"I've heard of these," she said, the timorous quality now gone from her voice, "Attalacks, I think they're called. Yeah, look." She pointed to the flesh around the bullet holes, which had taken on a gray, crusty quality against the pink muscle it had been. Orion prodded it with his finger; it was firm, impenetrable.

"More you shoot them, the more their skin hardens. This wasn't one of the bad ones. With some of them, it happens all over their bodies, and pretty soon they're impossible to kill."

"Impossible?" said Orion with a quizzical grin. Calana gave him a hard look.

"No. But you'd need a rocket or something. Shooting one right in the brain is the best idea, because then you don't have to wear it down. Or knock off some legs."

"This one died pretty easily," Orion pointed out.

"Because this one is likely a juvenile!" Calana said, a twinge of annoyance in her voice, "Recklessness with these things will get us slaughtered! Trust me, I grew up hearing about them. All the time. If we run into another one, shoot off the legs. Be careful not to hit the body, that will trigger the regeneration."

"Alright," Orion promised, straightening up and attaching a fresh magazine to his gun.

They continued through the cave, which seemed to shape into the rough outline of rooms now. Orion followed them, moving swiftly and quietly. Lingered would leave them to be caught unaware by another creature.

They found a small table in one of the room, made of stone, covered with scrawls.

"What's this say?" Orion asked Calana.

"Like I would know," she said, "It's ancient. If it's even a language."

More than a few of the scrawls looked like pictures, and Orion took Calana's other hand, moving the lantern over them. One was a vague outline of a face, with lines radiating from the eyes; another was a circle of arrows; another seemed to be the form of a person, but with an animal head.

"Wait," said Calana, "I do recognize one of these symbols. Looks like one of the words they figured out, examining those caves I told you about."

"What does it say?"

"I'm not sure. Something about, 'no, don't.'"

"That sounds ominous."

"Yeah."

Behind him, a few rocks scuffled.

"Was that you?" said Calana.

"No," said Orion. The hairs stood up on his arm; he swiveled around. Calana whirled around, bringing the lantern to bear.

The attalack leaped at them before the light moved enough, springing onto Calana and pinning her to the ground.

"No!" Orion shouted, firing the submachine gun, tearing off a leg. The creature screeched, and staggered to the side, turning to the side. Calana rolled over, swinging the light away, leaving Orion in the dark, with the attalack.

"Don't shoot it!" Calana shouted.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

Something flashed in his mind; a black and white image of the creature. Unthinkingly, unconsciously, he flung himself to the side, feeling a rush of air as the attalack sprang through the space he had occupied a split-second before. He fell hard on the stone floor, but rolled to the side.

"Move the light onto it!"

"Don't shoot it!"

"Move the damned light!" Orion roared.

It swung over, shining onto the creature as it skittered to a stop and advanced menacingly, pincers clicking, its tiny head and beady eyes glinting with malice.

Orion straightened up, and took careful aim, as the creature bent to pounce again, the sight centered perfectly over the creature's head. Its missing leg threw it off-balance, and it crouched oddly to compensate.

Suddenly, it sprang. Orion fired, then tried to fling himself out of the way as easily half a ton of attalack barreled through the air toward him. Part of a leg clipped his shoulder, spinning him hard to the ground, the gun clattering from his hands. Behind him, Calana shrieked.

Orion dragged himself to his feet, blood pounding, whirling around, drawing Quicksilver in one fluid motion. But the thing was dead, Calana standing over it, eyes wide.

"Nice shot," she said, panting for breath. Orion grinned.

"One does it, if you hit them right."

"I guess so," she said, looking over her shoulder, "We should keep moving. There might be more of them."

"I'm sure there are," said Orion, collecting the submachine gun, and following her.

The passages wound about, so that it was all they could do to keep progressing further in, yet Orion could tell there was a pattern to them. A ring within a ring, links between them, rooms along the links like beads on a string. He wondered how far they would have to go before they found what they were looking for; or, even, what they were looking for. The war had begun here, because of here, thousands of years ago. What had caused it?

Something flashed through Orion's head. An orb. Suddenly, he knew where to go.

"This way," he said, taking the lead.

"How do you know?" said Calana.

"I just ... I just do."

They wound down several more passageways, Orion navigating them as though they were familiar to him, yet he did not know how he knew. Perhaps another inherited memory.

A thrill of trepidation struck him as they came to one last hallway, which circled around in an even curve. Several archways stood at equal intervals along the inner wall. Light trickled out of each of them, and it was not from Calana's lantern.

"What...?" he heard her mutter disbelievingly from behind him.

"This is the place," said Orion, with a certainty that frightened him. It did not make logical sense; yet he was certain that he knew this place, as though it were the cradle of his birth.

They approached one of the archways carefully. Behind him, Calana bit her lip.

"You first," she whispered.

Orion looked at her for a second, then turned and took a confident step into the archway.

A huge chamber, easily a hundred meters across, stood before him, its center holding a tapering

platform, almost like a floor-to-ceiling stalagmite broken in the middle. Within it was a faint, slowly pulsing, pinkish-white orb. Orion gazed at it, his breathing growing quicker.

He blinked, and when he did, he saw his own face. Curious, he closed his eyes again; a flash of fire that forced them open again. Gritting his teeth, he forced them shut, the light of the orb visible even behind his eyelids. He saw the lice marching, firing on whos as they ran, who soldiers running to defend them. Blood pooled in the ground as the great massacre grew.

His eyes flashed open; he gasped, a deep breath that drew in the cold cave air. He saw his own face in his mind, warped and gray. He saw a man, middle-aged, with a high forehead and brown hair; seeming familiar, yet utterly strange to Orion. The face grew gray, wrinkled; but not old. Black spilled into the orbs of his eyes, like ink spilled into water, leaving two seamless black pupils that flashed red as he watched; his lips curled cruelly, the teeth still flat and wide, but holding a predatory quality. Maybe it was just the grin. But it was a louse face, same as Orion had seen the first time he'd ripped one's mask off.

The man crumpled to the floor, choking on something. Orion felt a rush of pity, of compassion, and wanted to help him, but he could not. The man collapsed, writhing and twitching as black smoke filled the air.

His eyes opened again with a gasp. Everything was deadly silent.

"Don't move," said a low, gravelly voice. Orion knew it was a louse soldier; but he could not tell if it was real, or just another vision.

But the air was frigid, the cave air was black, cold, and damp, and a faint breeze pressed on his face. Where was Calana?

"Hello, Orion," said a higher, colder voice, from inches behind him. Orion whirled around, recognizing it instantly, the realization sending a cold, disabling chill of fear down his neck. How?

Timeless stood, a handgun leveled at Orion's face, a safe distance back. Orion knew he could not beat the man's lightning reflexes. Behind Timeless, two lice pointed their guns at Calana, whose quivering arms were raised in surrender. One grabbed her, forearm under her chin, holding a pistol to her temple. Her face mixed fear and hate equally, pale and striking in the dimness of the cave.

Behind the lice, stood two strange creatures, humanoid, each arm ending in a single, long, curved claw, as though a bony scimitar had been fused at each wrist. It's sallow skin was punctuated by its head, which sunk into its shoulders and chest, an almost metallic, smooth, featureless egg-shape, whose edges dug into the flesh, crusted with black dried blood where it met the skin.

"How did you find me?" muttered Orion through gritted teeth.

"It wasn't hard," hissed Timeless, "It never is. You are foolish, and predictable. Both make you easy to follow."

"What is it?" demanded Orion, "Those visions. What do they mean?"

Timeless cackled.

"They mean nothing."

"Then why are they here?"

"You are about to die," said Timeless, "Surely you don't want to waste your last moments in pointless, unfulfilled questioning?"

Orion glared at Timeless. He had killed Xenia. He had killed Orion's parents. His blood pounded with rage; he wanted to strike now. But he couldn't. Timeless would slash his throat before he moved an inch.

He would wait.

"You came out here, millions of kilometers, to follow me," said Orion, in a cool voice that belied the pulsing fear that chilled his skin, "Obviously something important is in this cave."

"Nonsense," said Timeless, "You, and your friends, are important to your people. Heroes ... leaders even ... who have snatched victory from us over and over. Out here, alone, away from your followers, you are weak. Chasing memories of a forgotten world."

Behind him, Orion heard a shuffle as Calana struggled weakly. She whimpered as the louse tightened his grip on her throat, pulling his forearm up so that she almost hung from it, barely able to breathe. Guilt struck Orion as he watched her, held hostage because of him, after she had done so much to lead him here.

"Why are you fighting us?" demanded Orion, "So many years of war, and do we even know why? Only that we are ancient enemies. Whatever it was, it started here."

Timeless grinned.

"Ah, you are truly deluded," he whispered, a strained, greasy sound, "*We* are not ancient enemies. *You* are."

"What?" said Orion. Something twitched in his mind; what he had just saw.

"You and I are both the ultimate evolution; my kind, the superior, unfeeling, machine. Capable of pleasure, but not of emptiness. Capable of satisfaction, not restlessness. And you, are the fascinating, ultimate creature, capable of creating its own successor. Weaker than its own creation."

In a flash it made sense, but Orion's mind rejected it. It seemed wrong, strange; how could the whos have *created* the lice. It did not make sense.

"Yes, Orion, your people created the Dhomezi. But no, they were not some mad laboratory experiment with unforeseen consequences. They were created intentionally, made intentionally, as a replacement for the weaker men and women who had done so much harm, were so selfish and so pathetically undisciplined. You are going to die, so I can tell you. Always before, you were surrounded by friends. But you have no radio, no one else to save you. No lucky twist of fate this time."

Timeless kept his gun trained on Orion, his eyes gleaming with soulless intensity.

"Fifty thousand years ago, before even the time of this place, before Faien'roh had ever been thought of, there was a great, blinding nuclear war. The surface of the world scoured clean by cleansing flame. Over what? Some diplomatic disagreement. Some petty squabble. Some group feeling they were being cheated, feeling they had been dealt an unfair card by life."

As he spoke, he grew closer, until the barrel of his gun tickled the tiny hairs on Orion's forehead. In the back, the two sword-armed creatures were silent and still.

"Your dissatisfaction, your pain; they made you inadequate. You lacked control. You scathed the world, rent civilization into the ashes and stone from whence it came, repeatedly, over nothing. This will never happen with us. A louse will never be unhappy. We control when he feels satisfaction, when he feels reward. It is only every time he kills one of you, stamps out one more flame standing in the way of our glorious empire."

"You're insane," said Orion.

Timeless laughed again.

"Of course it will seem insane to you. But the happiness you feel from joy, or love, or beauty, is no different, chemically, from the feelings we can give our soldiers. You need to feel you are doing right; they *know* they are doing right, and it makes them perfect."

Orion felt a cold ring of metal pressing against his forehead now.

"This place will stand, evermore, as a memorial to the *failure* of your kind, Orion. The place where superiority sprang from the loins of the inferior. And you will die here, the last great outspoken fool who thought he could beat us."

"I doubt it," said Orion.

He ducked suddenly, the weight that Timeless had put on the barrel, leaning every so slightly on it, sending him a little off-balance; just enough time for Orion to slide under, up, grabbing Timeless' gun arm and twisting it in a fluid motion. With a hiss of pain, he released it, and it clattered onto the cave floor. Orion jammed an elbow into Timeless' gut, sending him staggering back.

Unslinging his submachine gun, Orion unleashed a barrage of lead that struck each louse soldier, killing both, flinging them onto the cave floor. A certainty overcame him as he shot the one holding Calana; the louse fell back, the bullet flying an inch from Calana's ear to puncture the louse's goggle,

leaving a bloody hole in its wake.

Timeless recovered quickly; Orion emptied the rest of the clip into his chest, but all it did was slow him down. He advanced, daggers in hand, heedlessly. Orion drew Quicksilver, and another dagger, and dropped into a stance, ready.

The sword-armed creatures approached, flanking Timeless on either side. Orion's heartbeat quickened as they drew closer, growing more visible as they approached the glowing orb. But he only had a second to wonder how he would handle three opponents at once, before they leaped at him, in a flurry of steel and bone.

Myron and Cassiopeia circled the cliffs for a third time.

"Ship's running out of fuel," said Cassiopeia.

"We have to find them," said Myron.

"We will," said Cassiopeia.

WRITE MOAR HERE

Steel sparked in the blackness, as Orion's blades collided over and over. Sweat clung to him as he dodged, parried, lashed out at an opponent who was too daring. Timeless alone was an unequaled challenge; Timeless and two more opponents were too much to handle.

Fortunately they got in the way of each other a lot, and thus they worked in brutal concert, attacking him in rapid succession, timing their blows perfectly, requiring inhuman speed to deflect them all.

And Orion had that.

The fight required complete focus; he could not tell what was happening to Calana. He heard the chattering of machine guns; surely there were more louse soldiers, flooding into the cave now. A jolt of panic hit Orion as he realized that she did not have a gun; then a wave of relief as he remembered the two armed louse soldiers he had killed before Timeless and his two strange allies had converged on him.

Then a bony blade slashed a thin, bloody line along his cheek, inches from his eye, and he reminded himself to concentrate.

He adapted quickly to the long, sweeping blows of these sword-clawed monsters; they were strong, and deflecting them was difficult. But they were slow with such large weapons, and though they wove like dervishes, their movements were predictable. Orion waited until one had swept past his face, blocking both Timeless and the other sword-claw from attacking him effectively. In a flash, he sank his dagger into the back of the creature's arm. It screeched; a keening, sepulchral sound. But when it pulled away, Orion noted with satisfaction that it was slower.

Timeless drew back from the fight suddenly. Orion wondered for a second why, then, with a jolt of realization, remembered the handgun, still loaded and discarded on the floor nearby. It would take him mere seconds to find it. Orion would have to work fast.

He let the creatures move him, let the sweeps of their bladed arms be walls to move between. He ducked under one blow, sticking his dagger up and out to slash the arm as it swung by. Another screech; Orion took advantage of the split-second distraction of pain, leaping up and away from the other. It tried to react, but Orion ran inside the arc of its other blade, sinking his knife into its chest.

Out of the corner of his eye, Orion saw that Timeless had the gun, that he was straightening up to shoot. Without hesitation, Orion grabbed the sword-claw's dying body and flung himself to the ground, rolling over the sloped floor of the cave. He felt one, two, three bullets hit the corpse, the blunt pistol bullets failing to penetrate all the way through. He heard Timeless' footsteps approaching; surely he would not be so stupid a second time. Orion could not figure out where his enemy was without exposing himself; and within seconds, Timeless could walk around, find an angle where Orion could not cover himself with his makeshift shield. His mind worked furiously, straining for a solution.

A sudden burst of gunfire startled Orion; certain that Timeless had found an opening, that he was

about to die. But the gunfire continued; four deep, powerful blasts from Timeless' pistol, then the relentless chattering of a louse submachine gun. Suddenly Orion understood, and sprang to his feet, heaving the sword-claw corpse off of him.

Calana crouched behind a boulder, shooting at Timeless, bullets pinging off the walls. Timeless fired back a few more times, before his gun ran empty, and he dropped it, drawing a dagger.

"No!" Orion shouted, realizing what was about to happen. He sprinted for Timeless, but the second sword-claw intercepted him.

The dagger whirled through the air, slashing Calana's shoulder and knocking her to the ground. The second spun into her stomach.

Orion ducked the sword-claw's first swipe, before driving a powerful blow up and into its stomach. It screeched, and slumped, rolling away from Orion, who ran past. Timeless simply drew two fresh daggers, holding them loosely in her hands, approaching Calana where she lay on her back, groaning in pain. Even in the dim cave Orion could see dark stains spreading across her shirt.

Timeless whirled around as Orion met him, blocked his first blows, and stepped back, ready for more. But Orion, driven by his victory over the two sword-claws, pressed his advantage relentlessly, driving Timeless back. Orion shot a worried glance at Calana; and was shocked to see her shakily rising to her feet.

"Calana!" he shouted, "Get outside! Get to the radio on their ship. Call Myron and Cass!"

She nodded, and staggered toward the chamber's entrance, her gun hanging loosely from her grip. Orion watched her go, fearing for her, wondering if she would make it; but there was nothing he could do. If he turned his back on Timeless for even a split-second, there would be a knife in his neck.

Only a body fine-tuned and toned by years of warfare, could hold up under Timeless' relentless, tireless assault. Orion had spent nights wondering how the man defied so many limits of a person's endurance. But then, it was the Chosen heritage that gave Orion so much of his prowess.

It was a trouble train of thought to follow.

He ducked, slashed, dodged and wove. Timeless was trying to wear him down, as he always did, over a prolonged duel. Already Orion could feel fluid churning in his muscles, straining to keep blood flowing to them fast enough. He fought conservatively, moving no more than he had to.

Images began to flash in his mind again. Orion saw things in his mind, things that could only be Timeless' thoughts: a dark, sunken city, huge, overrun with monstrous machines, and dim orange lights choked by a smoggy gray mist. Coordinates flashed in his head, and, at once, were imprinted in his memory, firmly and absolutely.

Then his mind flashed back to reality, an instant later, and he raised his knife to block another blow from Timeless.

Calana limped out of the chamber. Orion battled Timeless a moment longer, before lashing out with a broad swipe to cover his retreat. Were he not already tired from battling Timeless' allies, Orion would have made an effort to finish him; although given what Timeless had survived thus far, it seemed unlikely that "killing" him would do any good.

He sprinted over the uneven stone, away from the mysterious orb.

"It's no good, Orion!" Timeless called after him, "You're surrounded here!"

But Orion heard the rapid slapping of pursuing footsteps.

He ran through the chambers, catching up with Calana in seconds.

"You okay?"

"Who ... the hell ... is that?" she said, wincing with every step. She turned to him, her eyes wide with fear. "Where did he go?"

"He's coming. Don't worry, I'll stop him. Just get to the ship."

She nodded shakily.

"What if ... there's more lice?" she said.

Orion shook his head.

“We'll figure out something. Just keep your gun up and ready.”

“Should I ... shoot him?”

“Don't bother.”

Orion whirled around as the footsteps grew louder, and now it was his turn to be on the defensive, struggling to hold Timeless' calculated strikes at bay. At one point, Timeless thrust under Orion's arm, hoping to slash at it; Orion stepped forward, pinching Timeless' wrist in his armpit, and slamming his other elbow into his chest. He heard a sickening pop from Timeless' hand; he howled in pain, and staggered back, as Orion slashed a bloody line just below his throat.

Blood trickled from the wound; but barely any, and Timeless renewed his offensive, slashing and slicing with his daggers. Orion drew back, letting him slash at air, grinning as Timeless flailed ineffectually. He barreled forward, enraged at Orion's taunt. The slip in precision was just enough. Orion parried both blows wide, and tripped Timeless, letting the man's own forward momentum drive him to the floor.

Pouncing on him now, while he lay there, would be deadly; an unseen knife would surely find Orion's ribs. He and Calana moved further through the tunnels.

As Timeless sprang to his feet again, there was a suddenly clattering, echoing through the tunnel. Timeless ignored it, but Orion saw it; two of the attalacks, surely alerted by all the chaos, skittered toward them from behind Timeless, who spun to look at them. Orion drove forward, sinking Quicksilver into Timeless' back. He howled, and sprang forward, ripping the blade out of him, and staggering to the side.

“Run,” Orion muttered.

“I can't,” said Calana.

Orion looked at her, then, without warning, scooped her up into his arms, his daggers tucked in his fists, and sprinted as fast as he could. He had a head start on the attalacks, but they were much faster. Orion heard, from behind him, a swish of a dagger, and the wet sound of rent flesh. At least one was occupied with Timeless.

He rounded another corner, the creature's claws skittering on the wet cave floor. Orion fought every urge to shoot it with the gun hanging from Calana's arms; it would slow him down, and unless it was a precise shot, it would just make things worse. The thing's reactive flesh made it a losing proposition.

At last he spotted light, then, gradually, the outline of the distant mountains as his eyes adjusted to the light. Orion knew they were thousands of kilometers distant, and hundreds tall, yet, from here, they seemed almost like normal mountains. The thought seemed odd to him, made the world feel smaller for a moment.

Then the attalack pounced, slamming into his back and driving him to the floor.

“We have to go back, Myron. We're already going to be pushing it on having enough fuel.”

Myron shook his head.

“He's out there.”

Cassiopeia glared at him.

“We won't do him any favors if we crashland out here and can't find him.”

“Just do it,” said Myron.

They flew on in tense silence. Suddenly, the radar monitor began to beep frantically.

“What the hell?” muttered Myron. Then his eyes widened.

“What's this?” he said pointing at the screen.

Cassiopeia let out a soft gasp when she saw it; red all over, five hundred kilometers away. Something that she had never seen ... something that couldn't be possible. Unless an entire louse fleet were making its way toward them.

Her eyes widened with realization.

“We have to find Orion, fast.”

Orion felt his ribs flatten, heard Calana scream, heard a wet smack as she tumbled against the stone floor, heard a clatter as the gun skittered away. Quicksilver stayed in his hand, flat against his chest. He rolled over, to find himself an inch from the creature's pincers, and three beady, insectoid eyes. Unthinkingly, he sank his knife into one of the eyes.

The creature hissed, the stench of its breath sickening Orion. He wriggled in its grip as the pincers sliced at his chest, tentatively, as though tasting him.

His head lolled to the side; he saw a Calana, covered in grime and bruises, scrambling for her gun. Orion slashed at the thing again; its head flashed back, not wanting to lose another eye.

A shout of exultation. She had found it. She rose, turned, eyes glittering with malice.

A single crack, and the creature's head snapped to the side, Orion's face splattered with a lukewarm, sticky fluid. He felt the creature sink to the ground, its full weight atop him.

“Damn it,” he muttered, trying to writhe his way out, “Damn it.”

At last, he pulled his waist free, and sat up carefully, pressing it up with one leg and drawing the other out, working them free one bit at a time.

“Where's Timeless?” said Orion.

“Who?”

“That man I was fighting.”

“He must still be busy with the attalack. Only one followed us.”

They ran out into the sun, where a single louse pilot sat waiting in the cockpit of a landing copter, parked a few meters from the edge of the cliff. He started to turn as they exited the cave; Calana shot him twice in the head, shattering the cockpit and spraying the cracked glass with blood. Then she ran for the radio.

“Here,” she said, tossing the gun to Orion. She stumbled slightly, but held herself steady, and swung the cockpit door open, grabbing at the dial.

“What frequency?”

“One-two-six-four-eight-seven-five,” Orion recited, his eyes scanning the cave for any sign of Timeless or the other attalack.

“Hang on,” she said. Orion could hear her breathing, even over the whistling wind at the cave's edge. He waited, listening to the radio hiss and crackle.

Skittering caught his ears; his muscles tensed, ready. He heard footsteps, too, and occasional sounds of scuffling.

“Hurry up, Calana...” he muttered, his eyes wide.

“Got it!” she called to him triumphantly.

“Tell them to get us out of – ” Orion started, before Calana thrust the microphone into his hand. He took it, sliding one of his knives into its sheath.

“Cass? Myron? You there?”

“Yeah,” came Myron's fuzzy voice, “Cass bet we wouldn't find you today.” In the background, Orion heard his sister's indiscernible voice, surely trying to deny Myron's words.

“Not important!” said Orion, pushing the dead louse soldier out of the pilot's seat, and sliding into it himself, “We found the cave, and Timeless found us. Fought his soldiers off, but he's still coming. We need you to get us out of here, fast!”

“Alright, we're coming,” said Myron, his tone suddenly more serious, “Where are you?”

“Follow the cliff to the waterfall. We're a click short of it, if that. There's a louse copter parked on the cliffside, that's how we're getting the radio.”

“Got it,” said Myron, “We'll be there in a minute. Orion, there's something else...”

“Not now,” said Orion. He clicked the radio off.

“Calana?” he called from the cockpit, “They'll be here in a – ”

Something slammed into the side of the louse copter, knocking to the side. A thrill of fear overcame Orion as it stopped barely a meter from the cliff's edge. Abandoning the radio, he slid from his seat, and out of the other side of the cockpit. He spotted an attalack, rearing back to strike again, Calana on the ground in a crouch, a dent in the side of the copter, her gun abandoned on the sandy ground a few feet away.

Orion dove for it, but the creature lashed its stinger, knocking him onto his back. He crawled forward, rolling out of the way as the creature swung again, and grasping at the gun handle with his fingertips. Scrabbling forward another inch, he grabbed it, and forced himself back, firing a shot into the base of its tail. It screeched for a second, and Orion watched the flesh bubble, like a chemical reaction, growing thicker and tougher by the second. He backpedaled, as the creature turned to him. Orion looked behind him; he stopped as he saw barely a meter between his heels and the edge of the cliff. He turned back to the attalack. How much it looked like an insectoid tiger, crouching, watching, ready to pounce.

It sprang forward, and Orion fired a trio of shots. It swept over his head, ripping the gun from his hands, striking the ground, and tumbling over the edge of the cliff.

Orion struggled back to his feet, in time to see Timeless step out from the front of the cave.

"Call Tenebrauk, tell him we need fighter escorts!" said Cassiopeia.

"What good will that do? They have ten fighters at best, against an entire fleet of lice?" said Myron incredulously.

"Just do it!" said Cassiopeia, echoing Myron's earlier words. He sighed, shook his head, and reached for the radio, fiddling with the dial.

"There's the waterfall!" she called, veering the tricopter suddenly to the side. Myron turned his head to look, seeing a great, white, foaming trail sliding down the side of the almost endlessly-tall cliff face. A small black dot, to the right, caught his eye.

"There's the cave," he said, "Go for that."

"I see it."

Myron turned back to the radio.

"Tenebrauk? Are you there? Tenebrauk?"

It took a moment, but an answer came.

"Yes, Myron Brown, I am here. What is it?"

"There's an entire damn fleet making its way through this valley! We need fighter escort. Something. Fast."

"A fleet?"

"Yeah! Fifty ships at least!"

A second of silence.

"I will scramble our fighters," said Tenebrauk soberly.

"Do that," said Myron, and he hung up.

He turned to Cassiopeia, watched a bead of sweat slide over her temple as she gripped the flight stick tightly in concentration.

"This is going to be a tough landing," she muttered flatly, "Not a lot of space."

"You can do it," said Myron. She smirked.

"I hope so."

As they drew closer, Myron spotted Orion, locked in a fierce duel with Timeless. They had spotted the tricopter; the girl, Calana, or whatever her name was, stood by, keeping her distance from the fight.

"Get me close!" Myron shouted, rolling out his seat and moving back into the passenger bay. He found his shotgun on the rack next to the sliding door, tore it free, and hurriedly began to insert shells. He saw the cliff's edge out the front window; they were close. He slammed the release for the door, watching it slide over, a sliver of light flooding into the passenger bay. Myron struggled to keep his

footing; they were barely ten meters from the cliff's edge now. He raised his shotgun, taking careful aim.

At last they hovered barely a few feet up. Calana ran for the bay; Myron grabbed her wrist, pulled her up and into the tricopter. She turned.

"Orion!"

Orion turned, for a second, to see her; a second too long. Timeless slashed his chest and arm, and Orion spun to the side, nearly falling.

"Hey, asshole!" shouted Myron, firing his shotgun at Timeless. The pellets tore into him, knocking him against the wall of the cave. Myron pumped the shotgun, and fired again, drawing blood. Timeless raised his arms, as if to ward off another shot, before sprinting into the safety of the cave.

Orion struggled to regain his balance, then ran toward them, leaping into the ship.

"Thanks," said Orion, as he stood shakily inside the passenger bay.

"No problem," said Myron, "Cass! He's in! Let's go!"

The bay doors began to slide shut again as they peeled away from the cliff's edge, leaving Timeless alone and covering inside the cave.

"Orion, if I wasn't flying right now, you'd be getting the biggest hug of your life," said Cassiopeia from the cockpit, her voice shaky with relief.

"Wait 'til we get back to Cale Sier," said Orion, grinning despite himself.

"There's a whole damned louse fleet," said Myron, "Floating it's way through the valley. Tenebrauk's coming out with fighters to escort us back, maybe distract them."

Orion nodded. The ship flew in silence for several minutes, until the radio crackled to life again.

"We are in the air," said Tenebrauk, "We are about fifteen minutes away."

"Distract them as long as you can," ordered Myron, "Don't engage anyone directly, just ... try to lead them off. Slow them down a bit."

"We will."

Myron clicked off the radio again, then sighed. Orion watched him, and felt a wash of guilt. Tenebrauk and his men were risking their lives again, for the very people who had brought devastation to his tranquil villages. He looked to Calana, remembering her eagerness to help.

He wanted to tell them, now, while he still could, about what he had seen, but it seemed premature. And how could he, when there was so much to tell and so little time to tell it in?

His mind seemed to be catching up now; a hundred images had flashed between every frame of his visions. He closed his eyes, and they flooded back, foreign, like memories that had been plucked from another's mind and set in his. So many cities, burning in the night, the smoke scattering the light of the amber red fires. The deep rumbling of a tree-city's collapse, resonating more powerfully than the strongest thunder, vibrating the ground, straining the ears, even from many kilometers away.

Lice moving through the cities; they looked different then, but they were still lice. More primitive masks, maybe. No gunpods. But they fought in the already-weary city with an endless energy. They fire on civilians and soldiers alike. Thick video-screens plastered to the sides of towering buildings blared with the news, before bullets punctured them and they sparked into silence.

Atomic bombs detonating; the ultimately blinding flash, the shock wave that flattened the ground into glass and ash, the very surface of the world cracking and bleeding. Leaving this place behind, as it was now.

"Myron, there's something coming at us. And fast." Cassiopeia's voice tore Orion from his thoughts and visions.

"What are they?" said Myron.

"Judging by the speed, probably missiles. Six of them. Long-range."

"Damn it!" said Myron, "Where's Tenebrauk?"

"I haven't heard from him since he said he was fifteen minutes out."

"Doesn't this damn thing have flares or something? Countermeasures?"

"Yeah," said Cassiopeia, "But it's not a guarantee that they work. They could be video-guided. At

such long range, it's more than likely that – ”

“What are we going to do?” Myron demanded.

In response, Cassiopeia swerved the tricopter wide, angling it down, and dropping, fast. A familiar thrill grabbed at Orion's insides, made worse without a control stick in his hands to anchor him, make him feel in control.

A second later, there was a whooshing from behind. Orion couldn't see anything, except a shaky view out the front window as the ship rattled along in its dive.

“One flew by. But it'll be turning around.”

In the darkness, Orion felt hopeless.

She pulled up suddenly, the seat digging into Orion's back with tremendous force. He gritted his teeth, watching what he could out the front, saw the cliffs of the valley's side loom into view again, though somewhat lower. They must have dropped a full kilometer.

A hand suddenly gripped his. It was Calana. He turned to her, seeing her worried eyes in the dark, and squeezed back.

“My sister's a good pilot,” he muttered to her, “We're going to be fine.”

She nodded, not releasing his hand.

Cassiopeia began to dive again, but not as steeply this time.

“I'm going to try to lose it along the wall. The others are still pretty far off.”

Myron gripped the handle above his seat so tightly that, even in the dark, Orion could see his knuckles whitening.

“Where ... the hell ... is Tenebrauk?” he muttered through gritted teeth.

There was a clattering as Cassiopeia picked up the radio, the tricopter swerving a little as she did so.

“Tenebrauk? Are you there?”

“We are here,” came Tenebrauk's voice, “We see the other missiles. We'll try to lead them off. We're faster.”

“Thank you,” whispered Cassiopeia, though Orion could still hear her somehow, even over the roar of the engines and the rushing of the wind.

“Did you find them?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Cassiopeia.

“Is my sister safe?”

“She's alive, with us, if that's what you mean.”

“Yes. Thank you. Thank Orion for keeping her safe.”

“Will do.”

She banked wide as they drew closer to the cliff, spinning so that they flew perfectly parallel to it, barely a hundred meters from the rocky facade. A crescendoing screech bit into Orion's ears, then a sharp whistle, then a tremendous explosion above their heads, which temporarily bathed the cockpit in white light. A heavy boulder fell in front of them, missing them by mere milliseconds. Cassiopeia did not even flinch, but held true to her course.

“That's one,” said Myron triumphantly.

“There's still others. Four on us, and gaining,” said Cassiopeia.

The cliff began to slope more gently, bending away. The slope they had flown down, open but still dotted with great trees, dwarfed by the cliffs but still thousands of meters tall.

“We'll have a chance weaving in between those,” said Cassiopeia.

She eased the tricopter to the side, away from the cliffs, then turned hard into them, clearing a corner by barely fifty meters. Orion could not judge distances well from where he sat, but he could tell from his limited view that it was a feat of flying that he would not have even attempted, let alone been able to achieve.

An alert suddenly beeped from within the cockpit.

“Shit,” said Cassiopeia, “They’re ten clicks away.”

She grabbed the radio.

“Tenebrauk! Get your fighters out of there, head back to Cale Veni. There’s nothing more you can do for us.”

A pause. And then,

“Okay.”

They flew on, the tricopter’s engines straining as Cassiopeia pushed them to their limit. But even so, a missile was much faster. Orion watched the radar screen from where he sat, watching the missiles trace red lines on the faded teal screen, watched the dots of Tenebrauk’s fighters as they turned around to rejoin them.

Past it, out the window, he saw super-trees approaching, then blurring by. So many fallen, broken; or else, withered and gray, riddled with great, gaping holes.

“They’re six clicks behind us and closing!” Cassiopeia shouted from the cockpit.

Orion felt a trickle of desperation, like frigid mercury, snake down his back, along his spine, winding between his vertebrae. As a pilot, he’d rarely felt afraid in the air; but as a passenger, the feeling of helplessness was nearly overwhelming.

“Five clicks! Damn it, someone do something!”

He felt Calana’s fingernails digging into his arm; they felt like an anchor to the real world, even while the inevitability of death seemed apparent. They were caught on open ground, with no cover, no obstacle that could save them. They were out of countermeasures, and too low on fuel to try anything. All they could hope to do was outlast the missiles.

“Four!”

“Calana!” came a voice over the radio. Even through the fuzz of interference, Orion recognized it was Tenebrauk. Next to him, Calana straightened up suddenly.

“The missiles are not going to stop,” Tenebrauk said in his gravelly voice, “I am going to stop them. Tell Calana I love her. Tell Orion to take good care of her.”

“No!” shouted Calana, bewilderment, then realization, spreading across her face.

“Goodbye, sister.”

“Tenebrauk!”

No more sound issued from the radio.

A moment later, a glow limned the edges of the small windows of the tricopter. Calana’s face twisted into a mixture of grief and shock, her hand over her eyes, her mouth open, but silent. The light from the explosions lit the lines of her face as it crumpled. Orion reached out, laying a hand on her shoulder, feeling somewhat numb himself. He had barely known Tenebrauk for a week, yet it seemed unbelievable he was dead so suddenly.

“He took the missiles for us,” he said flatly.

“We still have to get out of here. There are about a hundred louse cruisers behind us.”

Calana sobbed the entire way back to Cale Veni.

Ileya knew instantly, from Orion’s face when he exited the tricopter, that something had gone wrong. Immediately her heart began to race.

“Tenebrauk’s dead,” Orion said flatly. Behind him, still exiting the copter, Calana was staring into the distance, tear streaks visible on her face even from thirty feet away. Ileya’s face contorted with grief. Myron, exiting behind Orion, closed his eyes. They had brought disaster to these people with their mere presence. Orion tried to comfort her, but she broke away from his grasp, and walked off, already sobbing.

Myron caught up with him. He sighed.

“Did you get what you went there for?” he muttered.

“I think I understand now,” Orion said.

“Then what?”

“Something happened here. A division. That's what the schism was. In that cave, something happened that started the war. They took control of Faien'roh, and used it as a base to grow from.”

“This was their... capital?”

“Not for long. They nuked this place to destroy it. That's why everything's erupting here; to hit the deepest who cities and settlements, they would have had to fire nukes deep into the crust. The pressure under here is enormous; the holes the burrow bombs made, and the cracks from the detonation, gave it a release. It went from a peaceful geothermal region to a volcanic wasteland.”

“So then they moved?”

“After they destroyed Faien'roh, they moved on, attacking the rest of the who empire.”

“But where did they end up?”

Orion's mouth twitched, the hint of a grin on his face.

“Whatever was in that cave, was some sort of... artifact, or machine, that would bring forth memories. I don't know how it worked, something magnetic. I guess thoughts are compatible, it creates a weird sort of mind-meld thing. Not completely, but I could catch traces of mental impulses from Timeless when I fought him – ”

“You could read his thoughts or something?” said Myron, aghast.

“Yes, let me finish here,” Orion said, “Our trip here is not so fruitless after all. Their capital is Casa Novak, to the very deep south, in a marshy area. And I think I know where to find it. When I had Timeless nearly finished, thoughts of escape went through his head. I think I caught some coordinates in my head.”

“Whatever that machine is, it's incredible,” said Myron.

“Yes,” Orion said.

Myron nodded, chewing on the news. Orion's face fell.

“Information Tenebrauk died for,” said Orion softly.

There was a pause.

“He was a good man,” said Myron.

“Yeah.”

They had begun walking back towards the mountainside village. Calana sat alone on the edge of the great rock mesa they had landed on, staring into the distance. Orion started for her, but Myron caught his arm.

“Remember with Julia,” he said simply. Those words cast a pall over Orion; at once he understood Calana's pain, and wanted even more to go comfort her. But then he understood again, and instead followed Myron back to the village.

The news of Tenebrauk's death had caused a great stir. Many wept as Myron and Orion passed by them; Orion suspected more would if they had returned a body. Their feet stirred dust as they trudged resignedly toward the tower atop the mountain; Orion's news seemed forgotten as they watched the people in mourning, watched the news of their beloved leader's death spread almost in pace with their footsteps.

They reached the tower almost in a daze. Myron turned to Orion.

“We cannot stay here any longer. We've caused these people enough pain.”

Orion nodded. He looked out at the valley. A host of lice were surely gathering there, a thousand ships, a half-million troops. It was like a hundred boot stamps with a single ant among them. Cale Veni would not last a minute. Even with the other cities to help them, the battle would not last long.

“I don't want to leave Calana,” he admitted bluntly.

“This is her home, Orion,” said Myron, a hint of sternness in his voice.

“I... I...” Orion's voice trailed off as he looked at the sun, its magenta form swollen as it sank below the rim of the huge valley. How could he explain his feelings to Myron, without earning a scoff? But his face seemed to understand.

They stood for several minutes without saying anything. Orion finally turned back to the tower. "I think we've earned some dinner," he said.

They ate with Cassiopeia, few words passing between them. Slowly they retired to their chambers, one by one. Orion fell onto his bed with a profound exhaustion, and at once dreaded the wakefulness that would inevitably come back to him. He sank into sleep at last, from pure fatigue.

Calana did not come in that night.

The previous day still subdued the tone of the next morning. They ate a nearly silent breakfast. Orion ate a few spoonfuls of the stew that Ileya had served them, before she left, her eyes clearly red from a night of grief. Myron and Cassiopeia were discussing the day ahead, but Orion could not tear his thoughts away from Calana, the pain she had to be feeling, pain he knew only too well. But he knew, to reach out to her, would be all but useless. Watching grief could feel almost as awful as grief itself.

"We need to get out of here, Myron, before we bring anymore harm to these people. Go home. This place has taught us everything we can learn from it."

Myron was shaking his head.

"Orion says there's more," he replied in a harsh whisper, "Things we haven't found yet. He said he has some sort of... inherited memory. He can see what happened here, all those thousands of years ago. No idea what triggers it, but maybe exploring some of these old ruins will let him use this ... thing. He can see history."

Myron's words jolted Orion from his sorrow for Calana and Tenebrauk.

"Like a hallucination?" Cassiopeia whispered back, incredulous.

"No," said Orion. Both of them jumped.

"Sorry, Orion," Myron said hastily, "I didn't mean to be talking behind your back, but..."

"They aren't hallucinations," Orion stated simply.

"I didn't say they were," Myron replied.

"And I didn't mean it that way," Cassiopeia said, "It's just... do you think they gave it to you in that ceremony?"

"No. I saw these things before that. All he did was say some words and drink some water from the river. Nothing else. Has this place gotten to you, sister? Made you believe in magic?" A tinge of insult tinted Orion's voice.

"What do you see?" said Cassiopeia.

"Flashes of the past," Orion said, rubbing his left temple with his thumb, "Sometimes there are discernible details. I saw all those fallen trees, falling. I saw the old cities before they were ruins. I saw people – our people – living there. It was like... like I had some goggles to see into the past, but they had a short circuit. Maybe they are just hallucinations," he admitted, "But I said things that Calana confirmed happened. Specific things. Whatever this is, it's real."

Myron and Cassiopeia did not speak for a moment, merely looking at him, digesting his words. Fear shot through Orion; what if they thought he was crazy? A tingle ran down his arm; he felt hot blood rushing across his cheeks, back, and forehead.

"Does this happen regularly?" Cassiopeia said quietly.

"No. But it usually happens eventually. It's like, the memories are there, but I have to be in the same place for them to come out. Things have to be lined up right. It's happened dozens of times since we came here, though. I just... I just kept my mouth shut."

"Well you shouldn't have," said Cassiopeia, "You know you can trust us."

"I do," said Orion, "I didn't want you to think I was insane."

"How can they be memories?" Myron cut across, "Unless you can inherit memories, and, last time I checked, you couldn't."

Orion shrugged, as though the question were beyond him.

"I have no idea. I think it has to do with the Chosen thing."

Myron rolled his eyes.

"You know, when I told your father about this, he didn't even believe me. Now you're about to apply it to every strange thing you come across."

"Do you have a better explanation?" Orion demanded. Cassiopeia looked timidly at them. When Orion noticed her expression, he lowered his voice.

"I don't."

Orion stirred his food. A strange anger had gathered in him, mixed with shame. He loathed what he had inherited; what was the good of his gifts, if he constantly rested on them, constantly felt as though he was considered conceited whenever he mentioned it. An urge gathered in him to shout at Myron, that someone gave this to him, that he hadn't taken it, hadn't chosen it. The irony in the name twisted his mouth into a half-smile. As he rose his gaze, he caught Cassiopeia's worried expression, and immediately cleared his throat.

"I think tomorrow we should go to the old capital."

"Auvernox?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think that's where it began."

"What began?"

"The Schism."

"So you think you're going to get one of these visions while you're there?"

"Yeah, pretty much," he said, leaning back and folding his arms. His meal was before him, all but finished, and the sight of the clean plate instilled in him an energy, a will to accomplish something. Across the table, Myron shrugged.

"It's why we came here," he said, "I don't see why not. I'll see if I can get our ship refueled."

"I'll help him," Cassiopeia offered, suddenly refusing to look at Orion.

"Right," Orion replied, nodding in acceptance, "I'm going to look in the archives again. Whatever I can find out about Auvernox. And I might talk to the Keeper again. Whatever information we have, will help."

He stood up, abandoning the other two, striding out of the adobe dining room into the rougher hallways leading toward the bleaching sun outside. The doors were open; the two guards did not react as he passed them.

Calana sat where he had left her the night before; a shot of worry ran through Orion, and he quickened his pace. He found her sitting quietly, legs dangling over the edge of the rock, occasionally flicking pebbles into the gully beneath.

"Calana," he said softly. She did not turn.

"Hi, Orion."

A hundred potential answers snapped through Orion's brain. None of them fit.

"We're going back to Auvernox tomorrow. Hope we can find... the rest of what we're looking for," he said. He reached out and brushed her arm gently. "You gonna come with us? You've been an excellent guide, so far."

"Yes." Finally, she turned, her eyes limned with moisture, the edges lined with reddened stains. Dark crescents under her eyes marred her beautiful face. "Why are you going?"

"I... the things I see. The things I've been seeing." It suddenly seemed strange to Orion that he had told her about these visions before either Myron or Cassiopeia, "I told them. They think – I think – that, if we go there, I might see something. What happened there."

"Wish you could put a camera in your brain?" Calana said, smiling, her heels scraping as they passed each other. Her mouth shrank as her smile faded.

"Are you okay?" Orion asked, even though he knew it was a stupid question.

"No. Of course it's not." She sighed, her legs coming to a rest against the rocks. Orion sat next to her, their ankles brushing together as they dangled over the cliff's edge.

"I lost my parents, but I was so young, I feel like I never felt it like I should have. Like I do now," she said, turning to meet Orion's eyes.

A feeling, indescribable, sat heavily in Orion's stomach at her words. Her strange selflessness struck him, leaving him uncomfortable next to her.

"I... I... it's not much different," he managed.

Beside him, Calana shrugged, her lips tensing suddenly, and a single tear escaping the corner of her eye, tumbling down her nose, before slowing to collect on the top of her upper lip. Orion reached out to brush it away.

"I don't know what to say, Calana," he admitted, "There just... isn't anything."

"Do you still miss them?" she asked him, looking out at the landscape, seeming like a faded painting to their eyes, motionless and distant.

"Yeah, every day," Orion sighed. A dark pit solidified inside him. It was a lie. He realized that days had passed, whole weeks perhaps, when he had not thought of his parents, of Julia, of Xenia, at all. The people he had lost had truly become lost, among the past, despite his best attempts to cling to them. He suddenly realized he did not want to say this to Calana, whose eyes looked at him expectantly.

"No," he admitted, a burst of breath expelling him. Then he sighed, "I do, but not as often... not as often as I should."

She still looked at him with motionless eyes.

"It doesn't mean you get over it," he said, "It's just ... it becomes real after a while."

"It's sure pretty real now," she said suddenly. Her bitter voice startled Orion into silence; glancing back up at her, he saw a hollow look carved into her face.

"It hurts now," he said, "because it hasn't sunk in yet. And when it does – "

"I don't want it to," she interrupted.

"It will get better."

"I won't let it."

Orion gave it up. He nodded, agreeing, but inside he knew he was right, saw his own pain in her. He fought a haughty reassurance that rose in his mind; there was no superiority here, no words he could say to come out on top. And if there were, he would lose it all the same. Instead, he let her lean into him, wrapped his arms around her, rested his cheek on top of her head, feeling the soft brown hair tickle his cheek. He gazed out at the distant tendrils of turquoise and orange, poisonous boiling rivers. Here and there along the horizon, a geyser shot up, a little white fuzz in Orion's vision.

It had looked so much more beautiful at night.

Maybe he should stay here. Abandon the hopeless war to live out here. Of course he couldn't, but it was nice to indulge the fantasy. Away from the people dying on a daily basis, away from the constant flow of adrenaline in his bloodstream, his Chosen intuition, whatever it was, keeping him an inch away from death wherever he went.

Out here, farming corn on barely-fertile ground, his back always bent, hot sun on his neck – somehow, Calana barely had a tan, and Orion was certain he was a few shades darker after only a few days of being here. And yet living here, staying with Calana, helping her heal; Myron and Cassiopeia would be here, too. What did he owe the world?

Maybe that thinking what was led to the lice being created in the first place. It still seemed so surreal to him; that the ancient whos had somehow been responsible for the birth of their own enemies. That his father, his mother, Julia, Xenia; they had died, for a mistake? So many millions, surely billions now, of others, dead.

But Timeless' words echoed in his mind, uncannily, so that he gripped Calana a little tighter: *they were created intentionally, made intentionally. Not some mad laboratory experiment.* But Orion still couldn't believe it.

"I'm glad you came here," said Calana softly.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. Not many people here my age. A few friends. Not a lot of ... choices, though," she said, her eyes tracing Orion's arm.

"What?"

"Well, most of the men here are Tenebrauk's friends, his soldiers. Reminded me too much of him, you know. Always wanted to keep away from him, even though I loved him. But now of course I wish I was closer to him than ever."

"I understand," said Orion.

"But still," she continued, "I've always been lonely out here. Always watched sunsets and sunrises by myself. Worked alone. Or with friends, good friends, but it never amounted to much when it mattered."

She sighed.

"I want to come back with you," she said, "You're new here, strange to me. But my whole life has been without purpose. Without Tenebrauk, there's nothing for me here."

Something akin to guilt slithered through Orion.

"Slow down," he said, "I ... I know it's hard, but don't do anything you can't change your mind about. If you leave with us, it's a one-way trip. You can't come back."

She smiled at him.

"I don't want to."

Then she reached up and kissed him, wrapping one soft hand into his hair, and the other onto his chest. Shock washed over Orion; he reciprocated after a moment, cautiously, feeling that he was wrong, that he was taking advantage of her. She was hurt and he was there. That was all that this was. He felt guilty for indulging it.

Then she released him, with a smile, which creased into a frown when she saw his expression.

"What? You didn't like that?"

"I did," said Orion, "But..."

"Then you liked it," she said, kissing him again, drawing into him tightly. Orion wanted to pull away, but she would not let go. Perhaps this was what she needed now.

## Attacking Kaga-Hirik

before this attack, second tree near sarengarth destroyed by louse attack.

Trathe's eyes locked on Orion's.

"Don't keep them going too long," he said, "We've chased this ship for a week now. It's on course for Sarengarth. The lice will be looking out for anything. It's going to be heavily defended. Get in, get out, and stop the thing before they can mount too much of a response. We can break their defenses, but if you stay too long, the hammer will fall and crush us to dust."

"I understand," Orion said, nodding.

"Myron and I will both lead soldiers into the *Kaga-hirik* to try to disable the engines. At the speed and altitude it will be traveling at, crashing the thing into the group should do a good job of destroying it. But once we do, we need to get out, because we don't want to be anywhere near it when it explodes. Once it crashes, it'll be a ticking time bomb."

"Mm," Orion nodded again, sliding his flight helmet on over his head.

"I've got him locked on," said Orion over the rapidly beeping tone from his controls. The tempo of the sound just barely outpaced his heartbeat. Sweat rolled down his eyebrow, making his forehead twitch. He had to wait for Timeless to make a mistake, release his missile countermeasures too early, then fire. They were trapped on their path above the *Kaga-hirik*, and the tunnel's walls would not allow any deviation. Timeless's only chance was the release his countermeasures and drop speed. Orion trusted his missiles were far faster.

The standoff continued for a full fifteen seconds, though they seemed like a half an hour to Orion. Suddenly, Timeless's small hourglass-shaped fighter spun right over left, corkscrewing down out of sight.

"Damn it," Peter cursed under his breath. He angled his Falcon down to the left, and followed. It would be treacherous flying; a single mistake, and he would likely never know what he'd done wrong.

Timeless had flown down into the gap between two of the four modules that made up the *Kaga-hirik*. Spiraling around the many towers and other protrusions that formed the spine of the mighty ship, Orion scanned the gray landscape before him for any sign of Timeless's fighter. He spotted a gray blur arcing around a particularly large, blue cylinder, covered with spidery iron scaffolding.

Orion was not the pilot his sister was; she was occupied further down, disabling the ship's bridge defense turrets so that Myron and the attack group could set down in one of the nearby landing bays. Orion's mission was simple; get Timeless, and kill him. Quicksilver was the only weapon that could kill Timeless; Orion swore to himself that this time he would not make a mistake. Mistakes were what had gotten Cyra killed.

*Kaga-hirik* was putting up an excellent fight: Cassiopeia

Another nit fighter, trailing smoke, fell from the air. Cassiopeia watched it, trying not to let it distract her too much. She took aim at another Scorpion fighter gunning for the bombers, and let fly a pair of missiles. They spun in an elegant, helical dance of smoke trails, before coming together in a violent red burst of flame, tearing a chunk out of the Scorpion's side, and jolting it into an out-of-control spin that ended with it crashing into the side of the *Kaga-Hirik*.

Cassiopeia couldn't help but feel confident. The bombers had already taken out eight missile

turrets, at the lost of one of their own and three fighters from Cassiopeia's squadron. Her girls had done excellently, taking out three waves of Scorpions without a scratch, and holding off rogue interlopers that tried to score a lucky shot on one of the precious bombers.

*Four more*, Cassiopeia thought to herself, looking at the trails of smoke and flame emitting from the bombed-out missile turrets. Four of them were still active, still spitting missiles, but Cassiopeia's fighters managed to distract their heat-seeking homing devices away from the bombers, and out-maneuvering them until the short-ranged missiles were out of fuel.

Cassiopeia's control panel beeped, indicating an oncoming missile. She nose-dived, going into a corkscrew, speeding toward the Kaga-Hirik, before pulling up just in time to miss smashing into it. Out of the top corner of her eye, she saw the smoke trail of the missile speeding off into the distance, before ceasing as the short-ranged rocket motor burned itself out. She smiled with satisfaction.

Suddenly, the glass of her cockpit shattered. A burning pain shot through her right shoulder, and she was blinded suddenly by heat and smoke. Her eyes watered, and try as she might she could not open them. A sudden sense of falling and spinning gave her the impression her fighter was badly out of control, and blindly she groped for the controls. Finally the smoke cleared slightly, and she could see the rapidly-approaching hull of the *Kaga-Hirik*.

Then she was lying on her back, sharp pains pulsing all over her body. There was something sticky flowing on her temple, and she felt blood trickling down her face. She swallowed something, then swallowed it again, before realized it was blood. Finally she managed to force her bleeding lips apart to let out a moan of pain. The air rushing into her lungs felt like mercurial acid; it froze and burned simultaneously.

*I'm dying*, she thought over and over. She'd faced death before, come within an inch of it, lived with the knowledge that she could be dead any day, should have been dead a thousand times over, but somehow it had never truly sunk in; it had been blunted behind bravado.

She suddenly became aware her hip had shattered. A horrible warm feeling soaked through it, as though blood were seeping through the cracks in her bone. The warm feeling spread. She stared up at the sky, as wind howled above her. The sky seemed unbearably bright. She could feel a tug in the back of her head, as if she *were* dying, and some invisible, mystical force were tearing her spirit from her body. She panicked suddenly, tried to fight it, and felt herself growing lighter. She tilted her head to the side. There was blood everywhere. Tears suddenly filled her eyes.

*I'm dying*, she thought again, and this time the thought lingered with finality.

Orion was certain the controls on his Falcon were about to fall off; he yanked them to and fro with such ferocity it was miracle they still worked. He couldn't remember having been in a more fierce dogfight. The lice seemed to have sent the very best pilots they had to protect the *Kaga-Hirik*.

A sudden burst of fire and metal glinted across the right side of his glass cockpit. He glanced to the left, and saw a green Falcon, spitting fire, tumbling end over end like a dropped sheet of paper, leaving a bloody, swirled streak of smoke in the sky that was quickly smeared away by the powerful winds.

A strange feeling twinged through Orion's chest. The Falcon looked exactly like Cassiopeia's. But it couldn't be hers. Orion angled his fighter around the other away, trying to shake off the ominous feeling flowing through him.

As soon as he had, another sensation shot through him, like the sudden, last panicked sights of a mouse before an eagle snatches it and spears it dead in curling claws. Without thinking, Orion punched his fist into the glass around the ejector seat button, smashing through it, and depressing the button.

With a tremendous jerk, the cold air of the wind outside whipped his face, sending his the straps on his flight suit into a frenzied dance. He looked around and immediately regretted his decision. *What have I done?*

Below him, a crackling explosion threw bright light and an acrid smell into his nostrils. Looking

down through the blur of his streaming eyes, he saw his Falcon, falling away from the spectral spider of smoke the explosion had created. An hourglass fighter soared underneath the fading smoke, then banked left, entering into a wide arc. Orion felt panic shoot through him. If his parachute opened here, he'd be a sitting duck to the fighter to fly back and fill him through of holes. Not to mention the wind carrying him away, into whatever death awaited him below.

He fell faster and faster, towards the hulk of the *Kaga-Hirik*. He spread himself wide, trying to soak up as much air as possible. He felt himself slow slightly, the features of the ship's surface growing clearer. At what he guessed as barely eighty feet, he pulled the release on his parachute.

There was a sudden ruffling sound, a tremendous tug upward, then the sudden, brutal impact as he struck ground. Dazed, he rolled over and over before coming to a rest facing up. He hadn't landed anywhere near a defense battery; that was good luck in itself. He pushed himself to his feet. He had also landed in a gully, far enough down to be sheltered from the eddies of the supersonic wind above. That was also good.

Above him, he heard a faint whine of engines over the roar of mighty beast below him. He looked up, wiping the tears from his eyes, and squinted. The hourglass fighter loomed larger and larger in his vision, and barely a hundred meters in front of him, Orion could see little shards of metal popping up as bullets struck the surface of the *Kaga-Hirik*.

*It's Timeless*, thought Orion, suddenly recognizing the fighter's shape. *And if I don't move, his strafing will shred me.* The sudden appearance of Timeless jolted him into action. He drew his knife, and slashed himself free of his parachute cords, then sprinted as fast as he could, trying to careen side-to-side as much as possible, while his eyes swung around desperately in search of cover. He saw the smoldering remnants of a defense battery, at least two hundred meters away. That would be his best bet.

The shadow of Timeless's fighter flashed over him, and a sudden insight ran through Orion's head. He flung himself to the ground, rolling log-style to the left. A trail of bullet holes flew by him, spraying shrapnel everywhere. A sharp pain stabbed through Orion's elbow, but he ignored it. Adrenaline flew through him. He had barely twenty seconds to run two hundred meters.

*Not possible*, he thought, but he ran anyway. By what he guessed was the fifteen second mark, he saw Timeless's fighter begin to bank into a wide curve, to angle back for a second strafing run. It occurred to Orion how Timeless must feel right now, in a top-class fighter equipped with every weapon imaginable to man, with Orion helpless on the ground with nothing but a knife. He could only imagine the grin on his enemy's face. He swore he'd make it disappear if he died trying.

Sweat streamed down his legs, and frigid air flowed between the cloth of his flight suit pants and his damp skin, sending a chill up his back. His legs pumped harder and harder. He glanced up at the sky and saw the hourglass fighter once again approaching. He angled his gaze back to the shattered defense battery, the metal walls splintered open like a blossoming flower. It was barely fifty meters away now.

When he was barely five meters away, he heard a sudden roar, and felt a rush of heat behind him, lifting him up and hurling him forward. He slammed back onto the ground barely inches away from the sharp metal edges of the ruined battery, skidding underneath a creased piece of metal. He could feel something embedded in his back, likely shrapnel. He pushed himself to his feet, and was greeted by a sudden host of little pains. He winced, then gritted his teeth, and vaulted over the ruined walls of the defense battery, and began to search for a decent weapon; next pass, Timeless wouldn't miss.

He ransacked the shelves of the miniature armory against the wall, the desks, even the charred corpses of the battery crew. He found nothing but small arms; rifles, submachine guns, a pistol on the remains of what he guessed was the officer in charge. He saw a door, bent beyond recognition, with a tattered metal shelf leaning against it, leading into another room. He rushed forward, pulled the debris away from the door, and wrenched it open.

On the floor was what was once a louse soldier, now only identifiable by the steel cross on a chain among the blackened flesh. But it was what was on the floor next to him that caught Orion's attention; a spear-shaped rocket grenade. No electronic guidance of any kind; Orion would have to aim

well. The muffled whine of Timeless's approach filled his ears; Orion quickly forgot any reservations he might have had about his available weapon, grabbed it, and rushed outside.

The wind whipped across his face, sucking moisture from his lips, cheeks, and forearms as soon as it greeted his skin. Whatever was embedded in his back suddenly felt present, and Orion cringed and bent forward, his face temporarily contorted with pain. He growled suddenly and straightened up, forcing his anger into concentration. He centered the crosshair of the rocket grenade launcher over the hourglass-shaped fighter's profile, forming an almost beautiful geometric figure. With barely two hundred meters of distance between them to spare, Orion squeezed the trigger.

The recoil jerked him back, sending another wave of pain up his spine from the shrapnel mosaic covering his back. But with a grimace of satisfaction he watched Timeless try to angle his fighter out of the way of the incoming rocket. He was partially successful; the rocket exploded on its right wing, sending the fighter into an unintentional barrel roll, leaving a helix of smoke behind it, before skidding along the surface of the *Kaga-Hirik* in a storm of sparks. Orion threw himself to the ground split-seconds before the fighter struck the ruined defense battery, hopping it back into the air, flipping over back-to-front before crashing back to the deck with a splintering crunch. Orion grabbed one of the submachine guns on the ground nearby, leveling it at his shoulder, and sighting it on the ruined hourglass fighter.

He saw a slight movement underneath the wreck; without hesitation he opened fire, spattering bits of metal and glass everywhere. Suddenly he stopped; the movement had been nothing more than the fighter's remains collapsing slightly under their own weight. Orion cursed, and dropped to a crouch; he'd revealed his position.

His peripheral vision caught a black shape moving over his right shoulder; he wheeled and fired, but Timeless was already on him, knocking the gun out of Orion's hand with one swipe, and scoring a bloody line across his chest and arm with another. Orion threw a vicious punch into Timeless's thin drawn face; as he staggered back Orion drew Quicksilver from the holster at his hip, and a second from his boot. Timeless smiled cruelly, a thin line of blood running down from his pale nose. They looked at each other for a second, Orion glowering, Timeless grinning. Then they pounced simultaneously, weapons clashing as fast as bullets from a machine gun. Orion swiped, parried, ducked, inched out of the way, then struck again.

Timeless pressed him back, but Orion gave ground, willing to move, hoping to use the terrain to his advantage. As they passed by the case of weapons, Orion hooked his knife around one of the guns, flinging it forward. It discharged four times as it arched over Timeless's head. The shots missed, but were enough of a distraction for Orion to kick one of Timeless's knives out of his hand. Timeless swiped straight across with the other, but Orion ducked and stabbed straight upward, slicing a vertical line up Timeless' featureless black shirt. He prepared to send Quicksilver straight up into Timeless's chin from his crouched position, but Timeless slammed him back with his shin. Orion stumbled but as soon as he'd fallen he was on his way back to his feet, and met Timeless's single knife with two of his own.

Orion fought fiercely. Timeless compensated well for his lack of a second weapon with dodges and quick steps from side-to-side. Orion channeled his hatred for Timeless, cold as the air around them, into pure, unthinking instinct and precision. He wouldn't let it use him.

Timeless snuck a blow past Orion's guard, slashing his cheek. With sudden ferocity, Orion's leg shot up, curling around Timeless's exposed knife arm and pulling it down. Both fell down to nearly prone positions; Orion jerked his leg suddenly, and heard a satisfying snap. Timeless let out a yelp of pain, brought his other arm around, hand balled into a fist, into Orion's ear. Orion staggered back, immediately staggering to his feet, ready for Timeless's retaliation, but none came. By the time Orion looked up, knife ready, Timeless was gone.

Orion grabbed the half-empty submachine gun from the floor, ran to the edge of the destroyed battery, and looked out across the surface of the *Kaga-Hirik*. He saw Timeless sprinting, faster than naturally possible, away from him. Orion took careful aim, and fired, but the combined weight of his

wounds, the cold, and exhaustion began to take its toll, and the magazine ran out without a single bullet hitting its mark.

"Bastard," said Orion in between labored breaths, dropping to one knee and reloading, though he knew Timeless would be far out of range before he could fire again. He looked over his shoulder, panting, and something caught his eye. The wreck of the Falcon fighter he'd seen, on the other side of the wrecked battery. A cold iron bolt of panic stabbed through his chest. It couldn't be....

Panting, he began to jog toward it, dragging the loaded gun behind him. Though it was barely eighty meters away, the run seemed to take forever. But barely ten meters away he could recognize Cassiopeia, and see the blood pool around her, bleached by the intense light, and he barely had the will to continue. Desperation propelled him forward, then panic, and by the time he knelt beside her, tears were streaming down his face.

"Cass..." he said, struggling to keep his breath even. Her usually-brown pupils were nearly black, and her face, now sallow and smeared with blood, was dangerously still. It reminded him of Timeless's bloodless visage, but Orion shook that evil thought away.

"Cass..." he said again. She looked past him, suddenly coughing, violently, black flecks speckling the corners of her mouth.

"It's over. It's over, Orion."

"No. Just hold on, there'll be soldiers here any minute. We can get you out of –"

Cassiopeia stopped his words, grabbing his arm. The weakness in her grip alarmed Orion.

"Don't," she said, looking away, "I don't want to live in this world, anymore."

The words chilled Orion, tore barely submerged thoughts to the surface, thoughts he could not handle side by side with a dying sister in his arms. He searched for words to convince her, but found none, staring helplessly for what must have been half a minute.

Then she reached her arm up around his neck, pulling his ear next to her mouth.

"I love you, Orion," came a ragged whisper.

"I love you too, sis," Orion replied softly. Something grabbed hold of his throat so that no more speech could issue from it. He leaned back and looked at his sister's face. Each breath felt like he were inflating a balloon of lead. The hot breath in his ear suddenly ceased.

"No!" he shouted, springing to his feet with sudden urgency, as if repulsed by her. His head swung back and forth, almost comically.

The first few phases of Myron's strike mission had gone off seamlessly. The cruisers outside had damaged enough of the anti-aircraft guns along the *Kaga-Hirik* to allow he and his soldiers to land without any casualties. Once inside, they had easily cleared the scant resistance they had encountered.

Now, as they neared the engine rooms, Myron was beginning to have second thoughts. A breaker had taken three of his soldiers, two with a gun, and one when it exploded after a third had put it down. And that had been meeting the thing on equal terms; Myron did not want to imagine the results had the creature gotten the drop on them. Or more than one.

On the other side of the *Kaga-Hirik*, Emeric Trathe's soldiers had, if the radio reports were to be believed, also made good progress. Myron didn't like this; somehow it seemed too easy. He had repeatedly reminded Trathe to keep pace, so that they would hit the engine room at the same time. Coordination was key; else, they were a few doomed soldiers snaking through unfamiliar corridors, waiting until their time ran out.

A pair of louse soldiers came around the corner as Myron's team slowly advanced, and were greeted by a rattling hail of bullets, flinging them on to their backs, and spraying blood on the walls and floor behind them. The soldiers kept moving, as if nothing had happened.

The corridor rocked as something impacted the *Kaga-Hirik* outside. The lights stuttered, then returned, their light suddenly dimmer and warmer. The soldiers did not react, but Myron knew they were unnerved.

They came to a small antechamber, with a door to what Myron had to assume was the engine room, based on the symbols on the wall next to it. What else could a cone with red lines coming out of it mean? He waved his hand over the door, not at all surprised when it did not open.

One of the soldiers behind him came up with some plastic explosive, and began taping it to the door. Myron lifted the radio on his wrist to his mouth.

“Trathe, are you near the engine room yet?”

“Two doors away. I got a schematic thing here. You're on the other side?”

“Yes, we're in position to breach the door.”

“Give us a minute.”

Myron watched the soldier carefully set fuses in the explosive. He held up his hand as the soldier waved for the rest of the group to get back. They paused.

“There yet? You might have to blow the door down.”

No answer came from the wrist radio. Myron let five seconds pass before trying again.

“Trathe! Do you read?”

The radio crackled back to life, with the distorted sounds of gunfire.

“We're pinned down! Need relief! They're ... for us.”

“Trathe?”

He switched off his radio.

“Get away from the door. We're blowing this damn thing now.”

The soldiers gathered against the wall, far away from the door. With a click, the soldier who had set the explosives triggered them. With a sharp crack, the door broke free, falling against the floor heavily. The soldier rushed into the engine room.

At once Myron saw four tall, transparent tubes, filled from top to bottom with custard-yellow fluid. Whatever they were, they had to be important. The center of the room held a metal cylinder lined on all sides with controls.

His soldiers had already started shooting; four breakers, and at least ten Daika soldiers, had fortified the room, kneeling behind smaller control panels, alcoves, and boxes. A cry of pain issued from the soldier next to him as a well-aimed bullet gashed her throat; she bent and collapsed next to Myron, rifle clattering on the floor, copious blood pouring her wound.

Myron dragged her to the side behind a waist-high control panel, putting his hand over her throat in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. Around him, the firefight continued, but Myron could not tear himself away from his compassion. He drew out a long cloth bandage from the first aid kit at his belt, along with a tube of medical foam. The woman would need surgery to save her, but this could at least staunch the bleeding.

Behind him, he heard the deafening blast of a breaker exploding. Then heavy footsteps, and the growling blasts of a breaker rifle, far too close. He looked to his right, just in time to see one of them finishing off the last of his soldiers on the other side of the door.

He raised his assault rifle, firing fiercely from a crouch. One burst stripped the flesh from the creature's shoulder; its gun arm faltered. The second lashed it across the chest, the bullets leaving a mark on the armor but not penetrating. The third struck its head; and the fourth, and the fifth, until the sixth broke the creature's helmet. Time seemed to slow as the creature fell. Myron saw one of the dying soldiers stir slightly as the thing fell atop them and detonated. A thick pain shot through him as he watched.

He turned back to the woman's body spread across his legs. Desperately he felt for a pulse. Nothing. Her vacant eyes told him what he would not accept.

Behind him, another breaker exploded, following a series of heavy pounding footsteps. It had charged their lines, hoping to inflict as much damage as it could. Myron's soldiers had stopped it cold in the center of the room with a torrent of bullets, and it had collapsed, its discharge only shattering the glass on the control panels his soldiers hid behind.

Myron raised his head carefully above the control panel, immediately spotting a Dhaika soldier peering out from behind the control panel on the opposite side of the room. He squeezed the trigger, his gun stuttered, and the soldier fell.

Ducking back behind cover, Myron rapidly tried to assess their opposition. One breaker was left, out of sight, likely looking for a flank that let him get close enough to Myron's troops to wipe them out. His soldiers had done an excellent job; Myron guessed he had seen five Dhaika soldiers lying dead.

He popped his head back up, squeezing off another burst, before ducking back down. His rifle clicked empty; as he reloaded, another of his soldiers fell, skull shattered, dead before he even hit the floor. Myron peered out around the side, firing off precise, lethal bursts that took out another two Dhaika troops. He drew back around the panel and let out a long exhalation.

The gunfire was beginning to wind down; at last he heard it cease entirely, as a muffled shout came from across the room, along with the sound of a body tumbling down stairs.

"Clear!" came a shout from one of his own soldiers.

Myron stood up, and his heart fell; seven soldiers lay dead on one side of the room, and on the other, the breaker had killed three more. Counting the woman who had died next to him, that made eleven casualties. The element of surprise had saved them; had the lice been expecting an attack on their engines, the corridors would likely be swarming with Dhaika and breakers. They were lucky.

The soldiers clustered around the control panel, taping plastic explosive to each of the four golden tubes and the central control cylinder, and attaching the leftovers to anything else that looked important. As they worked, Myron went over to a pair of soldiers whose ration of explosives had already been spent.

"You two are with me," he said.

"Yes, sir," said one, a shorter woman with a broad face. The other had been the soldier who had blown open the door to the engine room. He asked,

"Where are we going?"

Myron slid the clip out from his gun, checked it, then replaced it with a new one.

"We're going to relieve Trathe, and see if we can get him out of here alive."

Abov

## Fall of Anahaia

The thunder of railgun impacts echoed through the crisp night sky, occasionally reaching down to the ears of Kira Matthews, sitting cross-legged among the rubble of Anahaia, her rifle leaned against her hip, her eyes intensely focused on cleaning her combat knife.

Anahaia. The name itself dredged up memories of school. Anahaia had been one of the first cities to fall when the lice first attacked, long before Orion had come to them to overthrow the old, corrupt leadership and establish himself in its place. Kira had always thought of Orion's arrival as nothing but an exchange of hats. Things seemed little better now. Anahaia had been wiped from the world, the buildings turned to rubble, and the rubble, for the most part, turned to dust. And yet here she was, defending a barren patch of turf for little reason other than to keep even the most worthless ground out of the hands of the lice. All she had was her uniform, helmet, rifle, and a rapidly cooling mug of hot chocolate, a special gift to her battalion from Orion himself.

She sneezed suddenly, sending a spray of sharp needles through her chest. The sensation was never pleasant, but tonight, whether because of the cold air, or her dehydration, or the strange feeling in her chest that balanced fear and anticipation, the sensation was especially uncomfortable.

Glancing over her shoulder, at the top branches of Sarengarth in the far distance, she could see light. Inside the branches, under the unsplinterable defenses, was life, celebration, music, and joy. The mellow gold illumination seemed comforting even from a hundred kilometers away, and Kira felt a sudden part of homesickness, especially for those she had left behind. Her friends, her husband, her aging mother. All of them would still be there when – or if – she returned. But out here, behind a crudely constructed collection of sandbag walls, barricades, land mines, and autofire gun turrets, trying to keep the lice armies from gaining a foothold in some forsaken ruin, such a prospect seemed like little more than a distant dream.

It was unlikely she would make it back anyway. Conscription, something Orion had called a “necessary evil,” had brought her out here to die, and die she likely would. The reports had come in this morning: a task force of at least three hundred louse cruisers, something that would surely keep the nits' ships busy while the lice swarmed up Anahaia and overran them. But still they stood their ground.

After all, thought Kira bitterly to herself over an equally bitter drink, that's our motto.

Indeed, “standing our ground” was the motto of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. And it had certainly lived up to it. In barely six months, they fought in more than twenty major engagements and sixty-four smaller ones. Everywhere, they had “stood their ground,” and as a result, barely thirty of the one thousand soldiers had been members of the Battalion six months before. Kira counted herself among that lucky number; and she owed her rank as Sergeant to that fact.

“Nice night,” came a voice from behind her. Kira grinned. Curray, the other sergeant in her platoon, said to have been transferred to the 423<sup>rd</sup> after singlehandedly destroying four louse copters after manning an anti-aircraft gun whose other crew had been killed. Whether or not the story was true, was another matter.

“Why are we even here?” Kira said flatly, staring at a small cluster of garbage a few feet away, “Four days ago we were at Peneglox, yesterday we were at Algabro, and now we're on the slope of some mountain with a hundred thousand lice a couple kilometers away, fighting over some rubble and trash.”

“Anahaia is the only stronghold within a hundred kilometers that's out of sight from Sarengarth. The lice can set up artillery here and let off an unanswerable barrage on us if we don't keep it out of their hands.”

“Some 'stronghold,’” said Kira, prodding a chunk of concrete with her foot.

“I'd say the engineers have done a fairly good job converting it.”

An echoing shout from across the maze of concrete trenches interrupted their conversation.

“Armor inbound! Defensive positions! Go!”

Immediately there was movement, a rush of faded-green bodies every which way, shouts of

anticipation, and fear. Kira stood up, and motioned for Curray to follow her. They moved swiftly through the maze of trenches, their heads bowed slightly, until they reached the foremost row of sandbags.

Guns bristled from the trenches with a rustle of motion like a flock of birds taking flight, the soldiers instantly, wordlessly spreading amongst the lines like water flowing against a sidewalk curb. Kira looked tentatively over her shoulder, and was reassured to see, behind her, the auto-fire rail gun turret behind a semicircle of sandbags. The whine of electrical pulses and sudden sharp series of staccato snaps signaled the gun firing, likely at targets Kira couldn't even see. She raised her rifle, pointing it from side-to-side, waiting for something to emerge from the fog so she could shoot at it. A couple heartbeats later, she spotted the bug-eyed helmet of a louse soldier taking shape from the mist to her left. She pulled the trigger, and with a stuttering bark the soldier staggered back, before collapsing. A second later, its corpse exploded in a bloody shower from the explosives implanted in its body.

"Breaker," said Curray from next to her, without removing his eye from the scope of his rifle, "They're not toying with us here."

More silhouettes, shrouded by the fog, began to materialize, barely fifty meters away. Around Kira, her fellow soldiers opened fire, the rapid crackling of gunfire echoing along the trenches, sending a cold shiver up Kira's spine, and sending goosebumps sprawling across her skin. Shaking them off, she joined in, letting off a full magazine into the advancing horde. But by the time she'd fire her last shot, pulled back the lever to let the empty magazine fall free so she could replace, she knew there were too many. The enemy fired as they ran, and Kira could hear the cries of her own comrades as they some of the bullets found their marks. A moment later, she heard the rail gun turret behind her fall silent, which could not be a good sign. Without its support fire, she knew her section of trenches would be quickly overrun. She threw a glance over her shoulder, trying to trace an escape route.

"Kira!"

She whipped her head around just in time to throw herself to the ground. A rocket slammed into the wall of concrete behind her, spattering her back with bits of concrete and shrapnel. She felt the bite of a hundred tiny cuts in her shoulder blades, and gritted her teeth. She pushed herself up, then staggered back to her feet, noticing blood streaming from her elbow and down her forearm. She grimaced, then turned around to help Curray to his feet. But as soon as she looked at his face, she realized with a start he was dead, his eyes open slightly, his arm shredded and bloody, a gaping gory hole in his stomach.

She squeezed her eyes, trying to crush the image in between her eyelids, then peered over the edge of the trench. The enemy was barely twenty meters away now; she could make out details of their body armor, their weapons, their helmets. She started moving backwards, firing short bursts into the surging throng as she did.

Two sharp stings pierced her in the shoulder and thigh, almost simultaneously, knocking her over. A sudden burst of adrenaline flooded through her, propelling her off the ground and into a fast sprint back through the trenches, among many other soldiers who were either retreating or unable to.

She stumbled a few times; when she peered down, she could see a spiderweb of blood running down her thigh, drops flying off her when she ran. The wound was covered by a flap of cloth, but she was certain if she pulled it back, it would be a grisly sight. She kept running.

Overhead she heard the rapid thrumming of tricopters. The tempo of the rotors was reassuring to Kira. Around her, most of the other soldiers were retreating; some were running full tilt from the front lines like she was. She tried to keep up; even as she ran, small splatters of concrete burst here and there as bullets missed by inches.

A shock wave threw her to the ground; a moment later she realized there had been a deafening explosion too. She pushed herself up, and turned around. Barely fifteen feet behind was the wreckage of a tricopter, crumpled and smoking, bolts and springs and strips of dark-green metal scattered everywhere. A charred arm hung out one of the shattered windows; several dead soldiers who had been hit by the falling 'copter as they fled, lay strewn around the wreckage. Some of the corpses were

smoldering, spattered by burning fuel from the burst fuel tank. Kira forced herself to her feet and kept running.

Cyra has just died, Orion learns of the distress call Kira sends when heavily wounded, her entire squad wiped out. Flies in ship to rescue her, flies her back, provides morale boost. Somehow feels consoled that, though he failed to save Cyra's life, he did at least save someone.

Irixium – Poisonous drug that greatly enhances reflexes / coordination. Used for last stands. Is fatal after about 9 hours.

Lice close in on Sarengarth.

"It took them eight months to break into Algabro, and three weeks to clear it out from top to bottom. It was a tough rock," said Crole as he shook his head gently, "But it's finished now."

"We can't keep giving ground like this," piped up Myron from the end of the table, two fingers pressed against his temple and a concerned expression on his face, "Sarengarth is tough, but it's not invincible. Without those outer strongholds, it will be like a grain of sugar in a field of ants. Helpless. They'll bury us with sheer numbers of ships."

Crole face twitched with uncertainty.

"We've kept them at bay far longer than estimated—"

"Not enough. Where the hell is the rest of the fleet? I thought it was supposed to be *guarding* these strongholds, instead of sitting back getting picked off in this pitiful disaster of a defense operation."

Orion stared at Myron, who rarely was so animated in their meetings. Crole looked affronted as well, but seemed incapable to mount any sort of verbal counteroffensive. Finally he managed,

"Well, what better idea do *you* have, Myron? You seldom offer any brilliant strategies of your own, you're content to sit back and criticize ours."

"We need to strike at the heart," Myron replied decisively, ignoring Crole's jab. "We need to strike a blow that staggers them, at the very least, like a thin blade we jam into their heel. Buy us time to reinforce our defenses, which will—"

"Just buy us more time," Orion said simply. The entire table turned to face him; he continued,

"Myron's right. We've got no choice but to make a try for Casa Novak. Our fleet is just wearing itself out here; it's got plenty of firepower, but all it does, at best, is kill off a few hundred thousand and make the lice respond with a million more. We need to use it to hit something vital; its not going to make anything last longer up here. I think Algabro proved that."

"Exactly!" Myron jumped on Orion's words, "Forty capital cruisers – a quarter of the whole goddamn fleet in firepower – went in there, reduced the land around Algabro to ashes after the lice captured it. A week later they attacked again, took down eight capital ships, then went after Kerehook. That drew all the ships away – we broke their attack again, thought they were finished. Then they went back in full force on Algabro. By the time they got back, all we could do was fire into the rock in a vain attempt to annihilate them. They're sticking us with pins from every angle, and watching us twitch. It's time to stab back."

There was silence around the table for a moment. Then Crole spoke.

"Do we even have any clue where Casa Novak is?"

"I have a pretty good idea," Orion said, "Most of the ships we catch out here were manufactured in relatively close proximity to Sarengarth; we're most of the focus of their war machine. But when we took the Kaga-Hirik, we got some data off the thing before it ... went off. There were several coordinates associated with Casa Novak. Encrypted, of course, but decoding narrowed it down, and only two of the locations make sense. They're within fifty thousand kilometers of each other, in the deep south."

"How far away are they from *us*?" said one of the other admirals.

Orion paused a moment. Then he spoke, "Best guess is two million kilometers."

There was a collective murmuring of disapproval from around the table, an unpromising response from a such experienced men.

"That's twice as far as it was to attack the *Kaga-Hirik*!" One voice rose above the others.

"It was six million kilometers to get to Faein'roh, four years ago."

"That was one cruiser, disguised, aboard a louse transport," another voice countered, "You plan to 'disguise' an entire damned fleet?"

"No," said Orion instantly. The room quieted.

“We already know that the lice pass up smaller ships in favor of larger ones. We also know we're not alone. There are small groups of whos in hiding. Splitting the fleet into smaller parts, we can gather force as we go along, then strike at Casa Novak without warning.”

“You're expecting the lice to just let us 'gather force' as we go? They haven't lasted this long staying oblivious to our tactics.”

“Yes. And so far our tactics have been tiny guerrilla attacks with hidden forces, and great last stands over strongholds, giving them up one-by-one. I doubt their fleet will go after the little stings in their heels, and pass up the greater prizes.”

“So we stick to where there's still fighting?”

“Yes. Finding louse ships with nothing better to do will be dangerous. But when they're focused at trying to hammer away at a fortress, I doubt they'll chase us, as long as we don't engage them. Not to mention we can find some additions to our fleet that will be all but wasted where they are.”

orion pick wrong coords first, leads them to breaker training area, other fortresses. HAS-34 is overtaken by parasites, and leads the fleet further astray; they suffer heavy losses, but continue along the shore to Casa Novak, and inflict significant damage, before being overrun. Orion retreats back to the north.

*We are falling.*

*Every day I sit in the dark, chilled, clean Situation Room, listening to the reports of bloody slaughters everywhere, delivered with cold clinical precision. Death tolls, retreats, conquests, and failures fill my ears, but the numbers, the photos, even the survivors who sometimes receive medals in our presence, their faces still drained of color from the horrors they either witnessed or partook in, leave no mark on me. I am numb to them; I have been immersed in the frozen stream of war for so long that I am jaded to even the most horrific and shocking things the lice can inflict on our people.*

*Sometimes when I gaze out from the windows of my quarters in Sarengarth, I wonder what will stand in my place a hundred years from now. Or a thousand. Or a million. Will any of the bullets fired, bombs dropped, knives thrust into the hearts of enemies, make any more than a speck of dust difference to what the world will look like then? We have little choice but to expel what little fight there is left in our race, like a final exhalation before collapse. To hide would be to die anyway, but cowering in a hole, a death dry of glory.*

*But with no historians to remember us, what will it matter?*

*Often, I wander into the depths of the city of Sarengarth, where there is still dancing and music, where people still focus on the trivialities of day-to-day life. They remind me of terminal patients; I know that, within a year or two, most if not all of them will be dead. There is no way we can defeat the louse onslaught; we can just delay it, weather it like a rock on the seashore, put our hands out to the flood, long enough to live a little longer, breathe a few more breaths, last just one more day.*

*What becomes of us from here, I do not know. Each new day answers a little more of that question, but it will only be when Sarengarth finally falters, the power that shields it from the Heartwood falters, and we finally break, that our future will be decided. Perhaps we will all be overrun, all slaughtered, crushed on all sides by the lice, like four entrapping walls. Maybe a few of us will escape, perhaps in enough numbers to strike back at them, hurt them, sting them. Perhaps we will live on in some sort of guerrilla resistance. I do not know who will survive; but I do know that if I am among them, they will look to me as a leader.*

*When the thoughts of what I have to look forward meet me, often when my mind is weary from missions or long Situation Room meetings, I wonder what happened in Faein'roh those thousands of years ago. I've been there now, seen the smoking, smoldering, steaming ruin it is now, the chilled remains of the fire that first sparked there, before engulfing the entirety of Omna in the blaze. I wonder if the leaders there felt the same way I do now, making a final stand against an enemy that did, eventually, overwhelm them. And overwhelm the rest of the nits as well, driving our race to the brink of extinction.*

*But only the brink.*

*Can we regrow again as our ancestors did? Is there some corner of the world where we can hide, nourish ourselves, swell our numbers again, and strike back? My mind races so far into the future with these possibilities, I often find it reeling back to the present with dizzying speed. My Chosen intuition cannot reach that far, but sometimes I feel as though I can glimpse a future when we have purged evil from Omna, cleansed the disease that the lice have spread over us, and recolonized the atomic wasteland beyond. It might be foolish, wishful thinking, but I hold fast to those thoughts, to keep myself from resignation to the doom that is wrapping us in it's cold grip.*

*We are falling, but I will not give up hope.*

The door opened with a soft metallic creak, and a sudden influx of sound from outside. Orion burst from the insular cage of his meditative thoughts, looking up at his visitor. It was Emma.

“Hi,” he ventured absently, his mind still readjusting to the room around him.

“Hello,” she replied, looking around as if expecting to see another person in the room. Orion barely registered her movements. As he stared at the floor, the world came a bit more into focus, and the ice of his grid-locked, worrying thoughts melted away, but in their place was a sort of disorientation, like that that comes when reawakening after a night of many vivid dreams.

“What do you want?” Orion asked flatly, in an attempt to be conversational.

“Briefing's in five minutes, departure right after. Thought you'd be a bit more...” Emma nodded her head side-to-side with a twisted half-smile, as if those gestures communicated her unspoken words.

“Just thinking,” said Orion simply.

“Oh,” Emma replied, nodding slowly. Orion stood up, finally looking at her. She smiled.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

“Yeah...” he said absently, staring at himself in the mirror across the room. He brushed a bit of his hair out of his eyes. He marveled that, at the age of thirty, he still had the appearance of a man of twenty-one, even with the stress of a life spent at war. Bangs still curled down over his forehead like claws. His face was unlined. He remembered things from twenty, thirty years ago with perfect clarity, inherited memories, more scattered, from even longer ago. Somehow, it felt like all of it was leading up to the events of tomorrow.

“Orion?” Emma asked again. He'd been standing still, staring at the mirror, for what had probably been ten or fifteen seconds in silence.

“Yeah,” he said again, and made for the door.

Five minutes later they sat in the worn, foam-backed chairs in the briefing room nearest the hangar they'd be departing from in less than half an hour. Orion leaned back, eying the slowly revolving image of the fortress Kair Hovaal with a strange blend of dread and boredom. On his right side sat Emma, dressed in her combat suit, sans armor, and on his left sat Myron, arms crossed, his dark eyes suddenly beady and intense, his gray flight suit wrinkled, his gray whiskers slightly ruffled. He stroked them from time-to-time with his thumbnail.

The door to the right of the display at the front of the room opened silently, and in walked a well-decorated man, whose fleet would be supporting the assault. He stood in front of the display, briefly regarded the twenty-or-so seated before him, then began speaking without pretense.

“The attack on Kair Hovaal is going to require extreme precision and

## Emma Dies

“Come on! We've got to get back to the ship!” Emma shouted to Orion as he emptied the last of his magazine at the swarming louse soldiers. Nearby, a breaker exploded, sending a spray of dirt over their heads. Choked sounds of agony followed.

They ran over the rocks, leaping from boulder to boulder as if it were a childhood game. An ominous throbbing sounded overhead: two tricopters staggered past, one trailing orange fire like a trail of blood in the sky. A pair of missiles soared barely twenty feet over their heads: Orion could feel burning phosphorous from its trail land on his jacket. The missiles impacted a tank about thirty meters away, shattering a boulder nearby. Rock fragments whirring toward them like a volley of bullets: Orion pulled Emma down. He grimaced as shards of rock slashed his jacket, their eager claws scratching at the flesh beneath. Then they were both on their feet, leaping from rock-to-rock with the other surviving nit soldiers.

A small cluster of louse soldiers had cut off the retreat, with a makeshift machine-gun nest atop one of the rocks.

“You got this?” Orion whispered to Emma. She nodded, and raised her rifle, sighting on the soldiers carefully. Orion smiled at her, kissed her cheek, then grabbed his submachine gun and made for the nest.

Darting from boulder to boulder, Orion approached the nests with ease. By the time he'd reached them, several of the soldiers were dead; likely Emma's work. Orion grinned with satisfaction as he lobbed a grenade into the nest. A couple seconds after it detonated, he scrambled up onto the rock to deal with the survivors.

There weren't many. One louse soldier raised a shaky hand to fire a pistol: Orion put a trio of bullets through his breathing mask and goggles, jerking his head back against the sandbags. Another leaped up from behind a crate of ammo: Orion shot him twice in the chest and once in the head. He crumpled against the crate. A third soldier ran: Orion let off a long burst that tore through his back and legs, dropping him.

A moment later, Emma was beside him, rifle in hand, a scratch on her cheek. She smiled.

“Good shooting,” Orion said, tingling elation running through him. He reached out to wipe at her cheek.

“We'll clean it up when we get back,” she said. Then her grin faded. “What do you think's happened to Sarengarth?”

Orion sighed, “I don't know. But no matter what happens there, I'll keep you safe. We'll keep each other safe. That's how we've lived through last few months.”

Emma's smile returned slightly as she pulled the strap of her rifle back over her shoulder.

“Let's get to the *Selfynn*, then. They'll need our help back there.”

As she turned to leap to the next rock, there was a roar behind them. Emma turned just as a shadow fell on her face.

“Oh shit.”

Something powerful swatted Orion to the side; he landed hard, but the fall seemed surreally slow. His eyes traced back to Emma. A malevolent laugh resonated through his ringing ears, and the crack of a single gunshot broke through Orion's stunned mind. Emma's head jerked backward, a spurt of blood arcing behind it. She tumbled back, falling off the rock and out of view.

Orion was on his feet before the hulk could turn around. He unloaded half a magazine into the creature's back before it knocked the weapon from his hand. Orion replaced the gun with a knife, dropping into a roll and tumbling between the creature's legs, slashing at its groin and calf as he did. The hulk let out a gurgling growl of surprise, before retaliating with a furious kick to Orion's side. He loosened his body, letting the kick knock him over, and sprang back to his feet, catching his opponent

off-guard. Before the hulk could react, he pounced on it, sinking his knife into its mouth. It fell away, spitting and roaring. Orion stabbed it again, and then again, tearing its flesh, splattering the aberration's orange blood all over himself and the rocks. Eventually, the wretched thing began to thrash in its death throes, and flung Orion off before convulsing itself into the world of the dead.

Teeth gritted in frustration, Orion ran to the edge of the boulder. Emma lay in a stream about ten meters down the the slope, on her, one arm stretched out in front of her, the other curled over her chest. Her rifle was nearby, broken, water trickling over the smooth, cool metal.

"No!" he growled, leaping from the boulder. He landed badly, falling and rolling over twice, before clumsily getting back to his feet. His leg was sprained; an all-too-familiar, needle-like sensation spread through it, barely masking the pain. He limped over to Emma's prone form. By the time he knelt by her body, he was sobbing.

The bullet had torn an awful, gory hole in her forehead, but had spared her face beneath, which was frozen in a look of shock. Her eyes, whose color Orion could never pin down, were a decided blue, staring into the distance, as though it might hold the answer as to why she had been taken from the world so suddenly.

"No!" Orion shouted again, frightened by his sudden acceptance. She could not be dead. He grabbed her jacket, forced his mouth onto hers, worked his lungs furiously, trying to give her air, to give her life.

A bullet whizzed by overhead; Orion heard the garbled-radio voice of louse soldiers approaching. He squeezed his eyes shut, then grabbed his submachine gun and whipped himself around. As the first louse soldier came around the rock, he clamped his fingers around the trigger, throwing his aim off and nearly crushing the gun sight. The soldier looked at him, raised his weapon just in time to stiffen as a dozen holes punched through him, shaking and twisting him before dropping him like a puppet with cut strings.

A second, then a third soldier came around the corner, and met similar fates. In between them, Orion tried to drag Emma's body away. His fingers dug into the shoulders of her jacket, he grunted with the effort of sliding her even a few feet. She had always moved so lightly on her feet; how was it she was so heavy now? The words "dead weight" flashed through Orion's mind, and suddenly, it was though the hulk had struck him again, as though he were watching Emma's skull broken open again. She was dead.

There was a strangled bark of gunfire from the rock, and Orion felt a sting on his shoulder, knocking him back. A fourth soldier had appeared by the rock, and was kneeling, firing, his head cocked to the side as if curious. Orion let out a vicious roar, and fired back, plastering the soldiers innards against the rock. As he fell forward, Orion staggered back to his feet and examined the wound. It was bleeding a bit, but his jacket had taken most of the damage.

Beyond the rock, Orion could see more louse soldiers, and several hulks, making their way down the slope. With a heart-wrenching final glance at Emma, he shook his head, flung himself around, and forced himself to sprint down the slope, running as if he could outrun all his loss, all his pain; as if he could outrun the world around him.

It was only as the landing area drew into the site, as the *Selfynn* and its sister ships became discernible in his vision, that Orion began to realize what a physical toll his exertion had taken. As he slowed, it was as though grief had caught back up with him, and he leaned against a tree suddenly, almost overcome. With a shout of exultation he slammed his fists into the tree. He was certain he'd bruised them. The pain felt good. He kept running.

Nearly everyone was already in the *Selfynn*: by the time he'd gotten inside, the ship was quite crowded. Almost everyone was clustered around the view screens, watching footage of the attack on Sarengarth. As Orion made his way through the corridors to the bridge, he heard snippets of words from the report.

“Powerful electromagnetic weapon...”

“... initial impacts likely killed hundreds...”

“... advised to leave the city immediately. Transport will be provided.”

“Orion!” came a shout from the end of a hallway. It was Myron. Orion ran after him, through the door and onto the bridge.

He found Myron's face growing whiter and whiter with rage, as he watched missile after missile impact Sarengarth's side, forming a strangely beautiful, undulating crimson blossom. Cries of pure shock echoed from around them as the missiles struck. A huge branch began to droop, at a terrifying deformed angle. Suddenly there was a flash of white and the video screen went blank.

Orion turned his head. Behind him, the other crew members' mouths were agape with shock. His eyes felt numb, as though he were dreaming. Emma dead, Sarengarth falling; how could both happen in one day? A strange sort of urge rose in his chest, to begin breaking things around him to see if they were real. Maybe if this were really a dream he could do whatever he wanted, without reaction from those around him. Maybe if he tried killing someone....

“Let's go,” said Myron suddenly, snapping Orion back into focus. Myron's voice echoed through the room with more weight than Orion had ever heard. The silence was unbelievable; even the engines seemed to have lost their breath with shock. No one moved. There was a clatter behind Orion; one woman had passed out, fallen from her seat, struck her head on the clean white floor. The man sitting next to her had tears streaming down his face; he looked as though he were suffocating. His face was stark white, as though he'd bled to death.

“Well?” Myron cried suddenly, his voice so suddenly powerful it made Orion shudder involuntarily, “Are we going to get moving or are we going to let those bastards destroy what little we have left?” Myron's voice was barely controlled; Orion could tell he was about to burst out with rage. The other crew members must have sensed it too, because they sprang into action. A moment later Orion was jolted back in his seat as the *Selfynn* leaped into the air with a suddenness uncharacteristic of a ship its size.

Myron was moving around the control room, barking orders. Orion was almost afraid of the man's rage, if only because it was nothing to what bubbled inside him. Emma was dead. No matter how many times he tried to force his mind to accept it, it was like trying to penetrate an iron wall with a twig. And yet, beneath his outer denial, he knew what had happened. All he could do was bury himself under the numbness that now filled him, as though his flesh were made from thick rubber, as though his eyes were simply watching a film, as though his ears were only hearing far off distant echoes. As though his mind were lost in memory.

A moment later Myron was in front of him.

“Orion... when we get to Sarengarth, you *need* to protect the evacuees. We need to get as many out as we can.”

Orion barely heard his voice. He felt as though his entire body had been glued into place by some semisolid. He tried to speak, simply to think, but all he could see was Emma lying on her side, a great gory hole through her temple...

“Orion!” Myron shouted, desperation leaking into his voice.

“It's all gone,” he murmured blankly, staring at the floor. Myron bent down and grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Damn it, Orion, stop your boyish self-pity. This isn't the time! Do you think you're the only one who's lost someone?” he hissed.

The fury inside him broke free.

“What would you know? You've never had a woman in your life. You've only ever been the servant of our family, our friend. You never stopped short of doing whatever you could for us, and I'll never forget how grateful I am for that. But don't pretend you know something that you don't!”

Myron recoiled a bit. Orion felt a savage satisfaction well up from his words. A predatory urge

grew inside him, to kill the cowardly animal as it shrunk away, finish it off. But just as he was opening his mouth, the video screen flickered back to life.

Fully half of Sarengarth was on fire. Black louse ships clung to its surface like a swarm of mosquitoes nesting on putrid water. As the screen brightened fully, a bright white pulse, trailing copious smoke, struck the central trunk, exploding so brightly it washed out the screen momentarily.

“What the hell!” Myron shouted as he turned around.

Orion could not take his eyes from the spectacle; then suddenly, he could watch it no more. He burst from his seat, and strode from the room, shaking off Myron's quick grab to stop him.

“Orion!”

By the time the *Selfynn* was within view of Sarengarth, the crew in the control were watching the attack unfold almost continuously. Twice they veered off course due to the crew members' distraction. But seeing the destruction on a screen was nothing to seeing it for real. A great portion of the tree's array of branches was simply gone, as though scooped away. Most of the rest of what was visible was comparable to a hellish fireworks show. The crew members steadied themselves quickly, but Myron could tell they were shaken.

“We're going to do our best to hit the missile ships,” Myron said, trying to keep his voice steady, “If we destroy a few of those, break up their ranks, confuse them, whatever we can do; it will give the evacuees some time to escape.”

“Where will they go?” asked one crew member near Myron.

“I don't know. I – I don't think anyone knows. We're just trying to get as many people the hell out as we can.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Right. At your stations. Line up your shots and make them count.”

The downside of a computer-controlled firing system, linked to the control room, was that the guns would be useless if the control room was hit. But then, the ship would be an aimless projectile without the control room anyway, so it held little consequence. Beside, they were engaging bombard ships: the heaviest, most powerful ammunition meant to hit the biggest targets. What little anti-air defense they had would be paltry compared to what the *Selfynn* and her sister ships could unleash.

“Bogey at point-oh-three-two,” one crewman called urgently.

“Light cruiser. Got him locked.” came a calmer female voice.

There was a deep boom as the ship let off a volley. A moment later the crisp female voice returned.

“Impact. He's falling out of the sky like a rock.”

“Acquired another target!” came a third voice from further back.

A slight modicum of reassurance settled over Myron, despite the desperate situation around them. His people were working together as effectively as ever, and the result was deadly. It could not have been a minute after the first light cruiser was shot down, that the *Selfynn* and its two comrades had chewed their way through a back section of the louse fleet and was within range of the missile ships. Seconds later, the *Selfynn* rocked violently from the collective recoils of volley after volley.

“Stagger your fire!” Myron shouted after a minute, “Before you roll the ship over!”

A few minutes later the turbulent rocking had subsided somewhat. The *Selfynn*, staying as mobile as possible, had moved out of range of the missile ships.

“We've got five confirmed missile ship kills, and three escorts,” the woman who'd destroyed the first cruiser said.

“Excellent,” said Myron, gazing out the window as they neared Sarengarth. Louse ships covered the exterior. He could not imagine the horrific massacre likely being carried out within. He hoped for swift deaths for the doomed whos inside. There would be little time; but enough to grab what was precious and flee.

And he suddenly wondered, *Where the hell is Orion?*

“Death is better than surrender. Death is better than this.”

Orion repeated the words under his breath again and again, faster and faster, almost frantically, as he strapped himself into the seat of his Falcon. Suddenly he stumbled over his words. Then he shook his head.

“There is nothing left for you here,” he whispered to himself, eyes pressed shut.

The corners of his eyes seemed to grow dark, as though his vision were tunneling, to show nothing but his final fate at the end. He would die fighting. That was his destiny. That had been his destiny, his and everyone around him, all along. He had known it. He had resigned himself to it. Why was it so hard now that the time had finally come?

*Because I had thought Emma would be by my side for it.*

But that was not enough. Emma had been by his side. She had died. Just like Cyra had died, Calana, Xenia, and Julia. Cassiopeia. Mom and Dad. And now it was time for him to join them.

The thought cracked the wall of denial his mind had valiantly been putting up for what already felt like an eternity. Slowly, he sank his face into his hands, and began to softly sob. Tears blurred his vision as, with great effort, he hooked his finger around the handle and pulled the cockpit window shut, as he flicked on the switches to activate the flight systems, the weapon systems. He wiped his eyes with the cuff of his flight suit, but the plastic fabric did little to absorb the moisture. Quietly cursing in frustration, he rubbed his eyes against his glove, the metal zipper scratching at his eyebrow. He straightened up and shook his head. He would not cry anymore. The strong man he had been would not be dishonored by dying pitifully in tears.

He turned his head to the side as the engines warmed up. A pair of crewmen were fumbling with a fuel drum. It struck him that they might be the last people he would ever see. He stopped, transfixed, not noticing when the engines came up to full speed, as his fighter buckled in eagerness to leap free from the hangar floor and take to the sky. The two crewmen struggled with the barrel a moment longer, before finally heaving it onto a small cart. One turned around; a woman. Across the hangar, her eyes met his. She smiled, almost embarrassed. He tried to return the smile, but a sudden growl from the engines demanded his attention. He slammed his hand on the brake release, and the Falcon quickly slid forward, then broke free from the landing bay and dove into the free air beyond.

The burning branches of Sarengarth loomed large in his vision, and, unlike before, seeing it for real sent a jolt through Orion's chest. Louse ships stuck to the outside like mold growing on spoiled food, and tiny pinpricks of explosions glimmered in and out of Orion's vision like twinkling stars.

Within seconds, he was weaving his Falcon between the dying city's branches. A pair of Scorpion fighters curled around a branch, hoping to catch him as easy prey. He corkscrewed out of the way, barely clearing the tops and bottoms of branches as he went. He locked on to another Scorpion, which seemed to have lost its allies. He fired off a chain of rockets, several of which connected satisfyingly with the enemy fighter's underside, detonated with a satisfying crack that Orion felt in his stomach even over the roar of the engines behind him. Wheeling around, he reversed direction and kept hunting.

Then he saw it; a missile ship, looming like a cloud, missiles peeling off the sides of the ship, trailing white smoke as they crashed into the sides of Sarengarth, gashing deep, likely mortal wounds. With a bright, white flash that nearly blinded Orion, one exploded directly overhead. A deep cracking noise sounded above him; a moment later, a section of branch, several hundred meters long, fell right in front of him. In panic, he yanked on the controls, sending his Falcon into an almost direct upward climb. As the shock dissipated, he eased them back forward, nosing the fighter back to a more comfortable elevation. The missile cruiser was getting closer; Orion flicked a switch to arm his own missiles. Four armor-piercing delayed-detonation Viper missiles hung ready on his fighter's underbelly; as he drew within range, he aimed carefully; the missiles wouldn't have a lot of distance to correct their flight path before crashing into the side of the enemy ship. Finally, with barely three seconds to spare, he let the

missiles fly, then turned sharply to avoid flying over the ship as the missiles detonated.

When they did, the explosion created a visible shock wave that jolted the helpless Falcon into an unintentional corkscrew; Orion heard an unpleasant growl from the engines, and heard a sound like a whip snapping above his head. Looking up, he saw a thin crack in his windscreen.

As he finally got his Falcon's errant spinning under control, he slowly banked around to get a view of his work. The back half of the missile ship was gutted; great gaping holes bled smoke that barely concealed the raging inferno beneath it. Lightning crackled within the smoke. The entire ship keeled; the last few functioning batteries shot off remaining missiles at an almost panicked frequency. Within the fifteen seconds it took for Orion to bring his fighter fully around, the missile ship had gone into a rapid descent, trailing smoke, further fragments of the ship breaking away from it as it fell.

Rage drove Orion's piloting, but he sacrificed none of his precision. Each second seemed like a full minute, the space between heartbeats stretched out longer and longer. Like a recurring pain, the realization that Emma was dead washed back over him. His hands nearly slipped off the controls, but suddenly he grabbed back onto them, holding tight, trying to crush the stick between his thumb and fingers. His breaths came fast and shallow, and he felt himself growing distracted.

A series of sharp thuds skittered across his Falcon; he heard a hissing sound from somewhere, like air leaking from a balloon. He jerked the control stick to the side, his stomach lurching as the fighter rolled in response, and dived. As he pulled back up, narrowly threading the needle between two branches, Orion hoped his impromptu maneuvers had been enough to throw off his pursuer. But then he saw an hourglass-shaped profile, a billowing newborn inferno behind it, and he understood.

The fire was almost blinding; Orion knew that if he engaged Timeless now, he'd be firing blindly. Instead, he nosed forward into a dive. Behind him, he could see the hourglass fighter eagerly following. Weaving between branches, flaming louse cruisers, and swarms of Scorpions and landing craft, Orion's fighter absorbed three more hits from stray cannon fire. He knew he was running out of time, and luck; Timeless' fighter could dive faster, and would catch up easily if he didn't pull up soon. But Orion couldn't afford to give up the advantage while he had it.

At last, just as they came clear from the branches, just as Orion's intuition told him that Timeless was just in range to fire off a rocket, he yanked back on the control stick, feeling his body squeezed against the seat from the force. Timeless' hourglass fighter followed him, following Orion's movements as though his fighter were tied to the Falcon. Orion angled his fighter's nose up, catching air, slowing down. Timeless sped in front of him, but immediately banked into a wide arc, hoping to turn around before Orion could take advantage of his maneuvering.

Bullets flicked out into the air ahead with a muffled rattling. Orion led Timeless flawlessly, and soon a trail of gray smoke bled from the hourglass fighter's wing. By the time Timeless had turned fully, coming straight at Orion, the smoke had turned black. Timeless' silhouette grew larger and larger, until at last Orion realized that he wasn't going to turn out of the way.

Without thinking, Orion fired off a stream of missiles. At almost that exact second, barely an instant later, Timeless fired off his own barrage. Time seemed to blur as the two fighters approached each other. Orion could almost swear he saw Timeless' face, the two red vertical slits in his helmet that ran down its front like bloody slashes.

Then the missiles hit home, and there was nothing.

The *Selfynn* was dying.

They had plowed through six enemy missile ships, engaging each of them, one at a time, in a bloody shower of fire. At first it had been one gun turret lost, then two, then five. As the sixth louse cruiser fell away, broken, trails of smoke still reaching up like desperately grasping fingers, Myron realized he'd all but run his ship into the ground.

"What do we have left?" he demanded, still watching his latest opponent crumpling against the ground in a burst of fire.

“Three of our eight missile pods, four of our eighteen gun turrets, and two of our four anti-aircraft guns. We've also lost an engine, but the stabilization program can compensate for—”

“Right,” said Myron, “Turn the ship around, get us back to Sarengarth. We're going to get as many people as we can and get the hell out. And we need to find Orion.”

“Yes, sir.”

Myron felt a lurch in his stomach as the ship turned drastically, though he knew it was from more than a change in direction. He'd suddenly become aware of how alone he was, how nearly everyone he knew was either dead or missing. Emma and Orion had made him feel young, as though there were still hope in a hopeless war. With her dead, and Orion likely doing something stupid because of it, he felt suddenly ancient and worn out, profoundly exhausted, as though his years were catching up with him, as though the telomeres had suddenly ceased to function, and he was aging retroactively...

A violent jolt nearly threw Myron to the ground.

“What was that?” he demanded urgently.

“Cruiser. Escorting some landing craft. Looking like we got too close for comfort.”

“Get the hell away from that thing, and find an open landing bay! There are people waiting for a way out, and we're not going to leave them for dead!” Myron's voice faltered slightly; he shored it up with a growl to reinforce his words. Yet he knew his actions would be all but helpless. Sarengarth was the last stronghold; there was no “way out” for all these people. No more refuges.

The ship pulled up, climbing rapidly, angling for a small opening in the black plague of louse ships wrapped around Sarengarth's bark. Scorpions flew around the few who ships that still flew, relentlessly spraying rockets into their flaming, expiring forms.

Then there was a blinding flash of light, and screams drowned out by a powerful impact. Myron was thrown to the ground; pain covered his chest suddenly, as though a wild animal were clawing at his front. He thrashed from side-to-side, roaring in fury, before realizing nothing was attacking him. He opened his eyes, shook his head, and pushed himself up on his elbows.

A rocket had hit the bridge, and blown open the front window. Myron's front was covered in tiny specks of blood; bits of glass covered the torn gray fabric of his uniform. The young man who had been giving Myron status updates was dead, a section of iron from the window frame embedded in his throat. A woman who'd been monitoring the engines was lying on her side, curled in a fetal position, thrashing as he desperately tried to pull chunks of shrapnel from her abdomen. Blood covered the sleek white of the floor; Myron felt nauseous suddenly. He tried to struggle to his feet, but pain flared through him, and he fell back to the ground. He looked down.

A metal pipe had stuck in his ankle, blood dripping from the end like some grotesque spile. He winced. Slowly, tucked his damaged foot under him, he pushed up on the other heel, slowly bringing himself to a limp. He staggered forward, to where the pilot had once sat, and now lay slumped over the controls, either dead or unconscious. Grunting with every limping step, Myron clawed his way to the control chair. The ship was tilting back; the bodies on the floor were sliding back. The other two survivors clung to their seats.

The angle became too much, and Myron slipped, falling hard on his front and beginning to slide. With a fierce roar, he flung his hand around the back of the chair as the ship went nearly vertical. Tendons tensed, Myron pulled himself within reach of the control stick, and, with as much effort as he could muster, eased it forward.

The *Selfynn* leveled off almost right away. Myron felt himself collapse on the ground, but he was barely down for a second before he dragged himself back into the seat. They had nearly come level with the landing bay; Myron pulled back on the engine throttle to slow the *Selfynn*, then carefully guided it toward the landing bay.

It was only as he grew closer than he saw the bay was full of attacks.

There was blood all down Orion's leg. The left half of his Falcon had literally been blown off;

drops of his blood beaded in the wind, and slipped off into the furious air behind. The cockpit had been sheared in half; the throttle control was gone. The engines stuttered. Electricity crackled as hardware short-circuited. The radar and instrument displays flickered like dying lightbulbs, before going black entirely. Through his streaming eyes, Orion could see the huge glass windows of what was either a restaurant or some sort of observation post. They were his best bet for a soft landing.

He twisted the stick to the side; with a snap almost inaudible in the wind, it broke off, barely clinging to the base by a knot of wires. The Falcon banked dangerously; Orion slammed his fist into the emergency engine cut off, then flicked the switch for the flaps; the glass covering it had already been shattered.

Orion was lucky; by the time the Falcon hit the windows, it was dead in the air, lumbering slowly forward at what couldn't be more than thirty kilometers an hour. But Orion still wasn't prepared for the piercing noise of hundreds of meters of four-foot-thick glass shattering.

The first thing he saw was the surprised face of a nit soldier, before his head was smashed against the cracked cockpit of the wrecked Falcon. Then the sleek, cold, orange goggles of a louse soldier, showing none of the shock that had to lie below, as he too was dashed against the ship's aluminum exterior. Then Orion plowed through furniture; tables, chairs, a potted plant. Then, with one last jolt that threw Orion's head against the dashboard in a shower of stars, the Falcon stopped.

A warm rush ran through Orion's face as he clutched at his sore head; adrenaline washed away the pain as the urgency of his situation registered with him. He was wounded, barely capable of fighting, and likely surrounded by enemies.

He reached for the submachine gun tucked behind the seat. One of the magazines was bent hopelessly, but the other two had somehow survived, as had the gun itself. As he picked it up, the stock fell away, sending a momentary rush of panic through Orion, before he realized the broken part was a non-essential one.

Surveying the huge eating area with bleary eyes, he saw louse soldiers pouring in from the opposite end, having flipped over several tables in a makeshift fortification. At the other end, nit soldiers shot back from whatever cover they could find.

Orion considered helping them for a moment, but he knew he could not afford to get into any unnecessary fighting in his weakened state. He looked around wildly for another exit. He spotted a side door, leading to some sort of maintenance passage. Swinging his bloodied leg over the side of the shattered cockpit, he slipped away from the corpse of his fighter, landing surprisingly gracefully, and loping quickly toward the door, head bowed slightly as to avoid being spotted.

Then a roar from behind him made him turn around.

A black hourglass shape had drawn level with the shattered window, hovering in the howling wind. Two great shreds of the wings were missing, but the trailing smoke was gone. Orion stared at the ship for a moment in pure shock, before it opened fire.

Bullets ripped through tables, overturning them, then sending them tumbling like kicked stones. Most were shredded to bits of wood and plastic and metal, the shrapnel forming its own deadly barrage. Orion darted from cover to cover, leaping over ruined tables. His mind desperately decided that the large potted trees had to offer some better protection from the withering streams of gunfire; he dashed between them, collecting his breath at each one, and spotting his next refuge.

Several bullets grazed him; more than once he heard the whine of a bullet tracing by, whimpering in a disappointment, a relentless reminder of his mortality. A rocket burst over his head, showering him with bits of plaster from the wall above.

Not breathing at all, Orion reached the exit door, dove through it, and collapsed on the cold floor behind it, his lungs utterly empty of oxygen. Bullets punched through the door behind him, prompting him to keep moving. He dragged himself forward on his wrists, gasping for air.

At last his breath came back to him, and he began to make his way through the winding passages. Dull echoes of the raging battle around him filtered through the walls, sounding like a faint, far off radio.

Orion's leg wound had clotted and dried; his pants had torn, leaving his calf showing what looked like a forking lightning bolt etched in blood. Slowly the pain faded, and he no longer limped.

After what could have been either minutes or hours, he reached another door. No desperate sounds of battle issued from it. Orion leaned against it, pushing against the metal bar with a cling. It creaked open, revealing a ruined atrium, strewn with corpses. Orion noted with grim satisfaction that there seemed to be more slain lice than nits. A hulk lay slumped over a fountain; water streamed from the cracked marble walls, pooling on the gray brick floor and mixing with the creature's dark blood. Orion took a tentative step into the atrium, his gun pushed out in front of him. It suddenly occurred to him he'd lost the magazines for it, left them by his ruined fighter. He discarded the gun, dropped to his knees, and began to tug on one of the submachine guns a fallen louse soldier was carrying.

Suddenly it fired. Orion leaped back.

In the distance he heard a guttural shout, some sudden footsteps, and then a roar.

"Damn it!" he shouted. Forgetting the submachine gun, he went for one of his own people's assault rifles. He found a who soldier on her back near the wall, an almost disinterested expression on her pale face, as if her desperate final moments were not engaging enough. He tugged her assault rifle from her hands, ignored the dried blood crusting on the stock and grip. He raised it to his shoulder, took a crouch behind a column on the wall, and took aim. The quiet in the atrium was maddening; but for the approaching footsteps and faint echoes of war, there was no sound at all.'

A pair of orange eyes appeared behind the corner in the distance; Orion let off a burst, shattering the orange goggles and jerking the louse soldier back against the wall. He slid down, leaving a spatter of grayish-brown behind him.

Another soldier. Another burst of fire. Another spray of blood.

Then, with footsteps that made the ground quiver even at twenty meters away, a war hulk came around the corner, a massive chain gun strapped to its arm. With a roar, it tightened a fist the size of Orion's entire abdomen, and with a whirring and grinding a spray of bullets ripped through the atrium, jolting some of the corpses, peeling bits of marble off of the fountain, cracking the brittle stone until the entire structure collapsed with a splash, shattering the column Orion had cowered behind, and covering the wall behind it with a hundred bullet holes.

Except Orion was no longer there.

Sprinting across the atrium, stepping over bodies, Orion searched desperately for some sort of heavier firepower. He sprayed fire almost blindly as he ran, hoping to at least keep harrying the creature until he could find some way to kill it. The thing could be killed with a couple of well-placed bullets to the mouth, of course, but to stop moving to take the shot, when the creature had no other targets to distract him, would be a deadly gamble.

The clip on his gun ran out; Orion dropped it. He had spotted a rocket-propelled grenade tube, discarded, in a corner. For a split-second, he met the creature's black, shielded eyes, and felt a trace of understanding pass between them.

Scrambling over bodies, bullets tearing through the corpses behind him, shattering floor tiles, Orion went for the rocket tube. He dodged behind a pillar. The hulk's bullets began to eat through it eagerly, hungry for the prize behind. Orion scooped up the weapon, sighted down it, then took a deep breath. A bullet suddenly flew past his head, having torn all the way through the pillar.

Now was the time.

Orion sprang from behind the pillar, running as fast as he could. High-pitched whines came as a warning. He was running out of luck. He couldn't stop long enough to aim and fire, or he would present enough of a target for the hulk to finish him off.

Suddenly, the firing ceased. The hulk seemed almost puzzled, even behind its rigid mask. Orion wasted no time in lining up the sights of the rocket launcher on the creature's chest, and firing. The rocket burst through the creature's chest, shrapnel thrashing around inside it's ribcage. The rocket made it barely a few meters out the creature's back before it detonated, the blast flinging the hulk's corpse face

down among the ruined floor, the impact stirring up a visible cloud of plaster.

Orion dropped the rocket tube, panting. This was the second hulk he had killed today, singlehandedly. Under some other circumstances, he felt he might brag about such a feat, but as his home crumbled around him, bragging rights seemed hollow. Emma's death welled up inside him suddenly. He felt the urge to pick up one of the guns strewn all around him, and end it, now. There were so many. He could leave this fallen world behind.

He squeezed his eyes shut, fingers clenching his temples, trying to massage away the feelings, push them away from under his skin with the his fingers. He stooped down and picked up one of the fallen assault rifles.

"Not yet," he muttered between gritted teeth. He walked out of the hall, around the still-smoking corpse of the hulk, and on into the ruins of Sarengarth.

One of the soldiers next to Myron raised her assault rifle, to fire through the shattered window; Myron forced it down with a shout.

"Idiot! Unless you're planning to blow its head off in one fucking shot!"

Myron's hatred for attalacks only swelled with the desperation of the situation. They meandered around the hangar, taunting him, ripping into the corpses of those who had died defending the landing bay, challenging him. He would meet that challenge.

"We need to get them into one concentration."

"Why?"

"I'm going to drop a ship on them. Bring her around, right along side the hangar, and open one of the exit hatches on the side, and wait for my order."

Myron strode out of the ruined control room without another word.

Along the way, he grabbed a shotgun from one of the cases along the hallway. This had to work. Myron was sure there were civilians huddled in the rooms just beyond, keeping out of the landing bay to avoid the deadly creatures. With the lice flooding through every corridor in Sarengarth, there was no doubt that they would be killed either way if Myron didn't get them out of here. And soon.

The hatch opened as the ship drew into position next to the hangar. Myron found himself standing on the side of the *Selfynn*, looking down fifteen feet at a swarm of hungry attalacks. They hissed, spat, and swung at him with their pathetically short claws. Myron almost grinned.

As the creatures began to gather, he focused himself. This would take excellent timing. Attalacks swarmed in from everywhere, preferring the anticipation of fresh food to scavenging among the dead. Myron stood rigid, fingers wrapped tightly around the safety bar next to him. Now would not be a good time to fall.

They began to climb over each other, forming a living ramp to snap at Myron, whose eyes darted around the landing bay rapidly. There were still a few more stragglers running to the swarm. As the attalacks stacked themselves on each other shakily, their thin, needle-like legs slipping and scrabbling almost clumsily, Myron watched the last few join the group. All but a couple attalacks were within about ten meters of each other, forming at almost homogenous field of dull red exoskeletons.

The first attalack reached high enough to reach Myron; it swiped with it's vicious, sharp, venom-laden tail. Myron barely ducked it time; he heard the stinger scrape against the metal above him. He fired a shotgun blast into the creature's hungry mouth, knocking it back, dead. He raised his wrist radio to his mouth.

"Swivel the ship! Now!"

There was a pause. Another attalack clambered over the others. Myron blew off a leg, and it stumbled back. Then he was thrown back as the ship spun, then brought its bulk down like a hammer on the cluster of attalacks. A sound like crunching leaves, but amplified a thousand times, rustled through the ship, along with piercing shrieks of agony from the crushed attalacks.

The *Selfynn* tottered from side-to-side, slightly, like a great rolling pin, before settling to the floor

of the hangar, atop a cushion of crunched attalacks.

The crew and soldiers wasted no time in scrambling out of the ship, securing the hangar, and putting down the last few surviving, pinned attalacks, with shotgun blasts. Myron emerged from the ship a moment later. He eyed the shattered stairs, leading to a balcony, from which doors led to the chambers and corridors beyond.

"Three of you, with me," he said.

They were up the stairs in barely ten seconds, past the mangled bodies of the unfortunate attalack victims. By the door to the hangar, a dead attalack had slumped against the portal. Myron groaned. The creatures were always a deadly threat, and a massive inconvenience post-mortem. He bent over, wrapping his arms around one of the chitinous legs.

"Help me. Don't touch the stinger."

The four together managed to lift and drag the creature to the side. Myron pounded on the door with his fist.

"Anyone in there? This is Myron Brown. We have a ship in the hangar to get you out of here."

The door opened tentatively. A worried female face peered out from behind it. A second of examining them, and she burst free from the door, a louse's submachine gun dangling from her left hand. She was dressed in civilian clothes. Behind her, Myron could see easily fifty more civilians, and a few more soldiers, sitting against the wall, the door at the far end of the corridor barred automatically.

"This way, quickly," Myron said. The civilians stood up, milling around for a moment, collecting belongings, before rushing through the door, throwing fearful glances behind them from time to time, as they made their way to the *Selfynn* and climbed aboard.

The soldiers came up the rear. Myron caught one of them by the arm.

"How many other ships got away? What do you know?"

"Nothing, sir," the soldier said, a tremor in his voice, "We were chased by a hulk down these corridors. We had to split into two groups. The other half went the other way."

"Where are they?" Myron demanded.

The soldier's face fell. "The hulk followed them. They're all dead."

Around Orion, impacts shook Sarengarth as he made his way through the corridors, hoping to find a hangar. He encountered a couple of small groups of louse soldiers; he dispatched them easily, usually gunning them all down before they had figured out where he was. Many of the lights had gone out, as power to the great structure began to fail, but Orion was a master of using the shadows. The lice had infrared goggles, but there was so much errant heat about, not to mention small fires burning, that Orion had not problem concealing himself.

After what he guessed was about ten minutes of fruitless searching, he came to a thin hallway through one of the branches. Tall, once beautiful windows had been shattered, letting window howl through, brushing the shattered fragments of glass into elaborate, swirling patterns on the floor. Orion looked out at them, walking carefully out into the passageway. He peered through the empty pane, looking down at the swarm of ships clustering around Sarengarth. Suddenly, one passed beneath the window, barely twenty feet down, like a majestic whale floating just below the surface of the water.

Impulsiveness overtook Orion. He vaulted through the window, landing atop the slow ship. Pulsing shock waves rippling through the metal beneath his feet, up his legs and into his chest, as the cruiser rocked slowly back and forth from the recoil of its rail-guns. Orion saw a Scorpion fighter fly toward him, from far away, veering off its previous trajectory. He dashed behind one of the thin fins on the side of the ship. A moment later, he lifted his head, looked around, but a sudden gust of wind forced his eyes shut. The ship began to accelerate, sliding Orion slowly backward. As he did, he saw, the hourglass profile of Timeless' fighter soaring toward him. Even over the whipping wind, he heard the guns begin to fire, a low, stuttering whine. He clawed his way back along the surface of the ship, hiding behind the fins again, hoping they would profile shelter from the deadly bullets.

As Orion unslung his assault rifle, he realized the other Scorpion must have called Timeless to the fight. It was as though there was a manhunt after him. Orion immediately realized how selfish that thought was; there was a “manhunt” against every who still left alive in Sarengarth. But somehow, like always, Timeless wanted Orion for himself; the louse fighter had not fired at Orion when it had had the element of surprise. Strangely, Orion felt himself agreeing with the sentiment; if he could not die by his own hand, he would almost rather die by Timeless' than anyone else.

He shook such morbid thoughts away, aiming carefully over the other fin with the rifle, waiting for Timeless' fighter to come back into view.

A deep booming, like thunder, followed by a hollow cracking, like very close thunder, distracted him. Looking to the side, he saw one of the largest branches of Sarengarth cracking and beginning to fall, certainly carrying thousands of doomed whos and lice with it.

Timeless' fighter came back into view, just in time to be lost among the branches. Orion suddenly braced himself, realized he was about to be hit too.

The impact between branch and ship was tremendous; Orion felt himself swept from the deck instantly. He cried out with pain as he was slashed by a shard of metal; he tumbled over and over, finding himself atop one of the branches, lying on its metal surface as it plunged toward the ground below. He shakily got to his feet, looking ahead in the howling wind, only to see Timeless standing about thirty feet away, rigid and unmoving but for his cloak flapping in the wind.

Orion drew his daggers. One way or another, this was going to be finished now.

The *Selfynn* broke free of the landing bay, ascending rapidly like a bird taking flight. Myron's mind furiously fought itself on whether to go back again, to try to salvage more people. He couldn't think of anyplace safe to bring those he already had rescued, and if he went back with them, was caught in some trap, and they all were killed, his efforts would be for naught anyway. But then the terrified faces, clustered behind a door in some darkened chamber barely held above complete blackness by dim emergency lights, possibly close to a hangar bay...

Wind buffeted Myron's face and hair; urgency had given them no time to repair the shattered windows on the bridge. The battle had broken his ship, left most of its weapons eliminated. Myron turned back to Sarengarth, watching it bleed smoke, a great branch breaking free and crashing through the others, great gouts of flame spurting from every contact point as it collapsed. Sarengarth itself would not fall; it would be scarred, damaged, but mostly scoured from the inside. Even after today, the lice would spend months combing through the structure to clear it out entirely.

With a soft sigh, Myron turned to the controls.

“Head for what's left of Algabro. We'll refuel there, and get out of here.”

Orion dodged a perfectly-aimed knife blow at his throat; perfectly aimed, but perfectly dodged. Timeless' driven, silent offensive was fruitless. Orion's fury broke free; Timeless himself hadn't killed Emma, but he had killed Orion's parents, his sister, and Calana. Sarengarth might fall, but at a cost to the lice, beyond a million faceless, soulless soldiers and warbeasts dead.

With a blind swipe, Orion tried to hook Timeless, hoping to throw them both from the falling branch, where the wind could catch them and tear them to the shreds as the branch plummeted past them. Timeless seemed to anticipate his self-sacrificial strategy, and punished Orion with a slash to the arm. Another came at his face; he withdrew and parried Timeless' blow with all the force he could muster, throwing his foe's arm out wide. Quicksilver dove in, and Orion prayed for a finishing blow, finally, after all these years.

But Timeless parried flawlessly, and the fight continued.

Both traded blows viciously, neither side gaining an advantage. Orion felt himself tiring; a wave of urgency overcame him as adrenaline re-energized his muscles. Timeless never exhausted himself; he was always mercilessly efficient, and he relied on it.

Orion began to move more slowly, parrying and dodging almost clumsily. Timeless' arm shot out, scraping along Orion's cheek. He snapped his head back, errorlessly evading Timeless' second strike. With both his opponent's hands occupied, Orion sprang forward, ducking low, opening two wide gashes in Timeless' side, and ending up behind him.

Timeless wheeled around, but not fast enough. The bluff had worked; Timeless had thought Orion weary, and sprang for the death blow. Now the tide was turned. Orion plunged both knives into the back of Timeless's neck. He screamed, a noise that sounded strange from the crisp, hollow voice.

"That's for my parents," he spat. He twisted the knives.

"Actually, that's for everyone, you fucking bastard."

With a final grunt of exhalation, he kicked Timeless' prostrate form forward.

Victory had just behind to register in his mind when the falling branch hit the ground.

Four Scorpions doggedly pursued the *Selfynn* as it flew away, down the side of the great hill, the burning tree slowly shrinking in the distance. They weaved around the air mines that streamed behind the ship, along with the smoke from its gouged wounds. From one streamed a thin, searing line of cannon fire, scoring a long, dotted line of holes along the side of one of the four engines, tearing a line in a coolant hose.

On the bridge, Lieutenant Greiner noticed the rising temperature, the alarming red glow of the screen reflected off of her widening eyes.

"We've lost an engine!" she cried, "It's heating up fast!"

Myron swiveled around.

"What's it at?"

"It just started rising up all the sudden, from thirty-nine-fifty to forty-two-sixty."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Alright, we'll have to drop it."

"We can't make it that far on three engines."

Myron smiled grimly.

"Peter and I made it to Macalavay on one, and that was a ship almost twice the size of this one."

She made a shaky attempt at returning his grin.

"I'll start recalibrating the other engines. We'll slightly favor the right, but it shouldn't be a problem. It'll be done by the time we get to Algabro."

He smiled, patted her shoulder gently, and turned back to the window.

"Myron? Sir?"

"What?"

"Where are we going to go?"

Somewhere distant, an explosion roared over the rushing wind and grumbling engines, a pulse running through the iron floor, the air suddenly tinted with an oily scent.

"I don't know," Myron admitted.

He turned away, with no more words to comfort her.

A sudden burst of muted color, the taste of blood and sweat in his mouth, the strange scent that spreads through one's nose after a blow to the face, and then a moment of fuzzy blackness. He shakily struggled to his feet, before his left knee gave out, and his head swung sideways, his elbow scraping the ground as he caught himself, before finally surrendering and rolling onto his side.

Pain pulsed through his every string of muscle, his bones felt as though a great hand had shifted them significantly, his arms jammed into his shoulder, his neck jammed into his chest, his thighs jammed into his pelvis. He heaved himself onto his back; a million little threads of pain, almost tingly, shot up his arms as he did. As his head lolled to the side, he was forced to blink away some dust.

He had landed atop a building in the city around Sarengarth, and as he looked around, he saw

many great branches probing the ruined city like fingers penetrating the surface of a pond. The dull, raspy roar of furious flames sounded dangerously close; somewhere else, the cracking of gunfire, reverberating intermittently, suggested that somewhere, the fighting still continued.

An attempt to drag himself away failed; he nearly passed out from the pain. Traces of darkness, like black lightning bolts, like the crackling veins in his eye, began to snake in from the edges of his vision. He tried to speak, but the weight of his wounds, his exhaustion, and suddenly remembering, again, that Emma was dead, sank him deeper into sleep. His final thought, before gently tilting into oblivion, was wishing he would not wake up.

Algabro had been an inadequate staging area for the lice to attack Sarengarth from. As a result, the cracked, monolithic fortress, and the city that clung to it like young children around a grandfather, still stood, like an eye in the storm that raged around it.

The ship touched down at the small airfield, barely a few kilometers away; though its shadow still reached them, sheltering them from the glaring, late afternoon sun, casting a great shadow that painted itself against the hills even further out. Now and then, a deep, thrumming heartbeat would pulse through their feet, barely audible, leaving them uncertain whether anything had passed them at all.

It took barely an hour to refuel the ship, to make hasty repairs to the bridge window, and to cast many of the destroyed weapons out of the ship, left abandoned on the runway like a child's strewn toys. Myron spent much of the time watching the distant, fuming ruins of Algabro; each time he had offered them help, they had refused it.

By the time they were back in the air, Myron felt a dull pit gathering in his chest, like an iron tumor. His legs felt useless; he sank onto a chair on the bridge, the crew carrying on without him. He occasionally stared out the window, hoping that the ship would bank and turn so that he could catch one last glimpse of Sarengarth, so that he could seal it in his memory, when the coming months stole from him the belief that it had ever really happened. But the crew dared not stray near the ruined tree again. Myron sighed as the ship slid amongst the towering trees, over the Ravenoth River, looking down at the shells of the cities that had once stood there, ruins spread like scattered pebbles.

They flew through the night, Myron's mind entertaining nothing but the still-fresh memories of the day; they were too much all together. Orion dead, Sarengarth swarmed and overrun, what was left of his people, that he knew of, flying aimlessly away, easy prey for even a tiny contingent of enemies. He remembered when they had left Macalavay, the weeks spent flying aimlessly. How close that time seemed now, six years later. Was this to be his life? Or would this be the last time it happened, the last time he was cast out into the world. Perhaps they would die. That would finish it.

The thoughts tumbled over and over in his head, as he sat on the bridge, the flickering light draining his vitality, unless at last he felt his forehead was leaden, pulsing, and begging for sleep. He found his quarters, fell into them, ignoring the fact that, outside, the sun was rising in a red dawn.

Consciousness found Orion on his back, but in darkness rather than the stark, gray sunlight he remembered. Outside, a lamenting wail, faint and distant, competed with a crackling, rumbling noise. It sounded like growling thunder that did not cease, as though it were constantly crescendoing to a final, deafening clap, but never growing any louder. The sound unnerved him; he wanted to go outside, and see what it was.

Instead, he stared at the ceiling of a comfortable-looking bedroom. The plaster was cracked, crippled, and when Orion looked down he saw white powder staining the blankets that covered him. He lay back for a moment, groaning softly. His entire body ached; he shifted, trying to make himself more comfortable, but was greeted by a strange, splintery sensation all over his body. It unnerved him, and he did not try to move again.

Someone was moving around in the other room, but quietly. He had no interest in it. Emma was still dead. Sarengarth was gone. Where was he? Why was he not in the hands of the lice? His eyes traced

the smooth ceiling, tracing the untouched innocence around its gaping wound, knowing that he could not keep away from it forever.

He heard the clink of glass, then shuffling footsteps. A moment later, a young woman in a stained white dress appeared at the door, her plain face creased with a serious frown. She carried a tray with a mug, and wisps of steam, barely discernible, rose from it, like ephemeral streamers curling in the wind. Her face was motionless; her eyes did not meet his as she circled his bed.

Before she reached him, the ground shook. Orion heard a distant voice, loud and authoritative and mechanical, but the thick walls stole any coherency it might have had. The woman started; the mug slid on the tray but did not fall; she steadied it, and smoothly slid it in front of him. He sat up.

"Thanks."

"We need to get out of here."

Orion nodded.

"How did you find me? I thought I was dead."

"This block was overrun by the lice weeks ago, passed over. I hid when they went by, I've been hiding in here since. When the branch hit, I ran upstairs to see what had happened, and saw you on the roof, flailing around. Then you passed out."

"And you got me?"

"Yeah."

Another rumbling sound rattled glass; Orion realized a pile of junk was blocking a small window pane across the room, leaving a single bar of brightened glass above it. A shiver ran down his arm as the sepulchral noise passed over him. The woman raised her eyebrows, glancing up at the ceiling tentatively.

"There's not a lot of time. The branch that hit the ground is starting to collapse into the rest of the city. It's already weakened; any moment, a piece could break off and crush this house."

"If there's not a lot of time, why are you giving me a drink?"

She stared at him.

"We're not going to be able to get away," she said simply.

Orion took a sip. The liquid seared his lips; he could not tell what it was supposed to be. He set it down on the nightstand.

"We sure can't get away if we just sit here," he said, beginning to throw the covers off. She stopped him, a hand pressed firmly against his shoulder, pushing him back.

"Alright, alright," he said, "Isn't there a subway station somewhere nearby?"

"Full of lice. Full of monsters."

"Okay," he said, "Still, there has to be something we can do."

"No."

Orion looked at her curiously.

"What is your name," he asked her.

"Serena."

"I'm Orion."

She froze.

"I know you. You're... you're the one. The one who's helped win all those battles. I saw –"

"Yes, yes, that's me," Orion said hastily, "Serena, we've got to get into the subway system. If we can find a weapon, and get into the smaller service tunnels, we might stand a chance of getting out of here alive."

"Can you see when the branch is going to collapse?" she asked, as though she hadn't heard him.

"I doubt it. No. I can get us out of here alive, though."

She shook her head.

"I don't know."

"Serena, please," Orion begged, "You don't have to die."

"It doesn't matter, we both will. They said it would happen. People said it everywhere. It wasn't

going to last forever. One day, there would be lice in Sarengarth. And now – ”

“Listen!” Orion shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders. She flinched away from him.

“Don't touch me!”

“I'm sorry. Look, have you got a gun?”

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

“Where?”

She pointed. Orion got up, the cloth falling away from him like water rolling off his body, taking tentative steps over to a wooden cabinet against the side wall, just below the window.

“My husband used to have one here, before they drafted him. I heard you – ”

“This case?”

“Yes.”

With a creak and click, he opened the door, reaching into the dark interior, feeling the cool metal and soft rubber. He pulled it out; a pump shotgun, an old model, but it would have to do.

“Food. Backpacks. Lights – flashlights! We need a couple flashlights.”

She stood motionless for a second more, then sprang into action, hurrying into the kitchen. Orion heard rustling. He carefully loaded the shotgun, then slipped the remaining shells into his pockets. He felt his hip; Quicksilver was gone!

No, no it wasn't. It was there, on the nightstand, still clinging to his belt. He grabbed it, clicking it around his waist. He smiled faintly. Then another explosion rumbled overhead.

“How much food?” Serena called from the kitchen.

“Enough for a few days. If we don't get somewhere by that time, we'll be pretty much screwed anyway. Just don't – ”

A simmering thunder, more felt than heard, undulated through the house, rattling the beams. Orion felt like his bones were brittle glass being rent to pieces; he nearly collapsed, before realizing nothing had happened to him, simply unpleasant vibrations...

One heartbeat, then two, then a clap and a roar, like cannon fire, seeming so close but sounding so distant, ripped through Orion's ears. He brushed the detritus that blocked to the window to the floor, squinting in the sudden brightness.

Outside, a single chunk of branch, the size of a skyscraper, pierced in the ground, slowly tipping, collapsing, like a pencil point ground against stone. Above, the others dangled doubtfully, like fingers threatening their demise.

“We've got to go,” Orion said, turning back to the house. He saw Serena by the nightstand, with a small backpack hanging from her arm. He saw her scoop a small picture frame into the bag, zip it up, and sling the pack over her shoulder. She straightened up, and saw him watching her.

“I can't leave it. It's all I have left of him.”

“It's fine,” Orion said, “I've got a gun. We can go as soon as you're ready.”

“I'm ready,” she said, her arm quivering subtly.

“All right.”

He walked past her, shotgun barrel leading, back through the tormented house, stepping over spilled liquids and shattered glassware. Gently, he pressed his elbow against the front door; it was ajar, the doorknob broken off.

As he stepped into the street, something whizzed overhead, barely thirty feet, coming and going so fast that Orion could not tell what it was. He loped into the street, looking back over his shoulder, to see a pair of Scorpion fighters, shrinking into the distance. Above them, the mass of louse ships writhed and undulated, like storm clouds. His spine grew icy; right away, he felt exposed in the street, in the bright light, among shifting clusters of litter, whose flinching movements could be an enemy springing out for a kill. But he doused his nerves with a renewed grip on the shotgun, and a glance at Serena behind him.

Carefully, they began to move through the alleyways, avoiding the debris that lay strewn about. A

particularly large piece of rubble had crushed the roof of a house; further on, they found pieces of singed flesh and bone, among bits of flaming wood that had to have come from above.

As they came out onto the fourth street, Orion slowed slightly to admire a red car, sleek and shiny, seemingly unscathed by the slow rain of dust from the dying tree above. He stared at it for a second too long; a pair of red eyes flashed in his vision, and bullets skittered off the car's hood, scratching it, ripping flakes of paint off, flinging them into the air. Orion ducked, pulled Serena down beside him, and pumped the shotgun. He popped up, firing off a shell, spraying pellet into the soldier's chest, barely ten meters away. He slumped against the wall of a ruined storefront, a black stain on the concrete. Orion sank back down, just to see two more coming out from the other side.

No car between them, the soldiers had free reign to fire; but they did not. Orion staggered back into the alleyway, feeling for Serena's arm. As he did, he saw louse soldiers everywhere, approaching from every direction; at least a dozen, but his scrambled mind couldn't count, could only react.

"Orion!" Serena shrieked. There was a deafening crack right next to his ears, and something warm spattered his cheek. He grabbed onto Serena's arm, only to turn and see her sinking among the rubble, her chest caved in, blood – her blood – all over Orion's arms and legs.

The shotgun fell from his hands as shock coursed through him. As Serena collapsed into a mess of tangled limbs, he saw past her; a pair of louse soldiers, all but motionless. The first one moved forward, grabbing Orion by the collar. He went for his knife, but a knee went into his stomach, sending him sprawling. Quicksilver clattered from his hand; the soldiers pushed him further into the street, into the center, where the bleached sun could shine down on him like a spotlight. He gritted his teeth, trying to rise, but he was surrounded.

And there was Timeless, impossibly, walking forward, drawing away his hood and cloak. Orion saw him turn, motion to two of the soldiers with his thumb. His shoulder blades twisted into view, and Timeless winced; Orion noted, with satisfaction, two long, dark smears cascading down from them. He had done damage.

He turned back, locking his black eyes with Orion's. Rough hands, unfamiliar hands, gloved and oily, gripped his forearms and pulled them back, straining them. Cold links of metal went around his wrists. Something slammed into him, between his shoulder blades; he bent forward, but did not cry out.

As he leaned back again, he gazed up at the sun, cold and lifeless in the sky. Clinical white, not buttery yellow. Closer were Timeless' beady eyes, frozen in a cold stare. Orion glared back, as two arms tucked under his shoulder and began to drag him away.

End

*Each day is another journey across the edge of a razor blade. It is no different than before, but now, so uncomfortably close to my enemy, his eyes and weapon pointed at me at every hour of wakefulness, I feel the raw density of defeat weighing me down, keeping me on balance. Often, in the first dreary moments after I emerge from the cavernous shelter of sleep, I will still fall victim to the illusory hope that Emma will be resting peacefully next to me, that the day will hold a battle we can fight, and win, together, even in a collapsing world.*

*Then I am reminded by the pained, exhausted, surrendered expressions of those stirring around me, of the cold black walls and ceiling of the purely functional barracks, of the soulless men who line up to lead us on the day's errands, that that world is gone.*

*I often want to charge toward their guns, defenseless, arms wide, and accept a hail of bullets as my fate. A better fate than labor cleaning up the destroyed world left behind.*

*Every corpse I drag to a truck to be carted away and burned, every shattered brick I sweep away, every nail I drive and beam I haul, under the watch of cherry plastic eyes, is a streak of paint brushed over the previous masterpiece, a sheen of white, or black, or gray, covered over a textured world that has perished.*

*I will not pretend to have no regrets. Perhaps hiding among the Underthrown would have been best, living out my life in the safety of endless, gargantuan caverns. Maybe she could have lived longer. Maybe I could have lived longer.*

*But my last days with her, were spent living, for what it is worth in this forsaken world.*

“Stronghold Alsh Nerra. Fell twenty-two weeks ago. Siege duration forty-one weeks. Enemy casualties, estimated ninety-three-thousand, five-hundred. Estimated—”

An oily taste slithered across Orion's tongue as he sat, strapped to his seat, the metallic voice from the speaker rattling his ears. Gazing out the window at the burning shell of a fortress below, built into a great mountain rising amongst the gargantuan trees, he realized he felt not even a twinge of emotion. Weeks of this, some strange form of indoctrination, had numbed him to the fall of his people's civilization. He would stare down, listening to the narration of a six-month siege that ended in a hundred thousand deaths, then another, then another, as they passed each broken fortress in succession, on the way to whatever their next job site was.

Orion was unsure of why they were bothering to move him and these fifty-or-so others around so much. There were plenty of people to enslave locally; prisoners of war from the battles fought to control the ruins they now scoured, or civilians. He had watched the lice dispose of unneeded workers before; they had shot twenty of the weakest after they had finished digging a mass grave. Orion, and the few who had been spared, were forced to toss the still-warm corpses into the hole, then fill it in. He clearly remembered the stains on his hands from moving the freshly-bled bodies. His hands tightened into fists at the memory, fingernails digging into the harness around his shoulders.

They would have to execute him soon. What other use was this, besides humiliation? The lice held only two motivations in their industrial minds: stark cruelty, and seamless efficiency. If it was not the latter driving them, it must be the former.

His stomach tightened as the ship began to tilt; the drone of the engines grew slightly more frantic, and he felt his body slide, straining against his restraints, squeezing blood out of his shoulders and hips. He craned his neck, even as it was bounced from side to side by the rocky descent, trying to see where they were landing. It was always the same; half a week of cleaning bodies, digging graves, cleaning the area around the fallen stronghold. Fortunately, they weren't trusted to build the fortresses that would replace it. But another five days of blisters, hot sun pressed against his neck, mouth dry and nose clogged from the dust that hung in the air. Someone would snap, charge the soldiers in a one-man

or one-woman rebellion, and be gunned down before they made it two meters, leaving another body for the slaves to clean up. The others would respond to the louse soldiers' expressionless gazes with hateful expressions; Orion did not defy them the way these people did.

Often he wondered if any sanity remained inside him, besides the few moments of clarity in which the claws that were Emma's, Cassiopeia's, even Julia's and his parents' deaths, reached to tear at him. He sobbed in the silence of the work tents. He was not alone; men and women who looked tougher than nails often came to breakfast in the morning with dried tear streaks down their faces. They had died, as Orion had, and this was hell, for all but the few who had the wherewithal to escape it. He suddenly understood the lone rebels, gunned down on a daily basis.

"City of Karrashin, fell two weeks ago. Siege duration eighty-four weeks. Enemy casualties, estimated over one million. Louse casualties, estimated at three million six hundred thousand."

Orion winced at the strange mispronunciation of the name; it was as if they were spitting on the dead city, and its one million inhabitants. Karrashin had still been under siege when Sarengarth had fallen; looking at the ravaged shell from above, Orion felt a strange disconnect from reality. He was not shocked the city had fallen; in fact, he was unsure why he felt so numb all of the sudden.

*Perhaps I've finally snapped,* he wondered, and indulged that thought for a few moments.

Louse casualties almost four times the Who casualties; such huge numbers no longer rattled Orion, instead they simply washed over him without comprehension. A million people; he had once seen a hundred thousand gathered. Ten times that many, dead. A sea of souls, each life with a childhood, someone as complex as he was. This was why the numbers meant nothing now.

"Stronghold-city Devanitrude. Fell eighteen weeks ago. Siege duration, sixty-eight weeks. Enemy casualties thirty-four thousand. Louse casualties, estimated at six-hundred-twenty-thousand."

The voice spoke of the Pyrrhic victory with no shame; it betrayed no emotions. Orion could not even tell if it was male or female. Simple, cold calculation.

Devanitrude had given a measure of satisfaction, whenever news of it reached Sarengarth. Its name was one of the few Orion recognized; he remembered tales of the repeated disastrous attempts the lice made to take it. Eight towers, from which great cables held the central city over the chasm below. The lice had attacked the towers, hoping to destroy them and send the central mass tumbling away. The intricate maze of trenches and tunnels that defended Devanitrude caught the lice by surprise; they lost thousands just to gain a few meters. Bombers were easily shot down by hidden missile emplacements spread among the trenches. Snipers atop the towers picked off the few louse soldiers not easily disposed of.

With much of their fleet committed elsewhere, it was a long time before they could send any cruisers. Armor was sent next, escorted by hulks. The Who lines primed by several devastating breaker assaults, it seemed like this would be the end. But the defensive forces spent hours rigging improvised landmines, and they were devastatingly effective, alongside the myriad caches of rocket launchers hidden amongst the labyrinthine trenches. Devanitrude's railgun defenses easily picked off the survivors. The trenches were weakened, but the lice had already lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

For reasons still unknown, the lice sent more and more waves of troops and bioforms, all of which were massacred. The aroma of decay, and the stench of industry, had always clung to them. Orion remembered hearing the reports in the Situation Room, so many months; no, now it had to be at least a year ago. Why the lice were so willing to spend so many lives puzzled them; they surely felt no compassion for the soldiers they sent to die, but it was wasteful if anything.

Looking down at yet another smoking ruin now, Orion remembered Devanitrude's final fall. Eight heavy missile cruisers, fresh from felling Alsh Nerra, clustered around the city. What was left of the city. The towers curled inward, like flattered spider legs. The lice had gotten their wish, at the cost of more than half a million lives. Whatever that cost meant to them.

The tour continued for hours, Orion's mind wavering between exhaustion and half-wakefulness.

Whenever he actually began to nod off, a tiny jolt would pulse across his chest unpleasantly, stealing his sleepiness, returning him to the stark, bright interior of the prisoner transport. He wondered where they would land. Perhaps someplace where he could run, break free of their clutches, get far enough as for retrieval to be valueless, and end up with a bullet in his neck.

If he had a gun, he would do it himself. But of course he wouldn't. One night, Orion had awoken to a wet smacking sound; a man was on all fours next to his bed, trying to kill himself simply by smashing himself against the ground. Orion winced at the memory, though it tempted him. But the soldiers had come and tied the man down. The next day, he had broken away, running for the edge of the quarry. Their bullets had torn through him, flinging his body from the precipice. No one had moved, or said anything. The march had continued.

What was going to happen to them? Were they simply to be worked, until they died from exhaustion, or until they went insane, slowly, one by one, and took their own lives? Such a perverse idea would come from the lice. Orion suspected he was too important to be executed, at least not in the standard way. Suicide had tempted him, every day, requiring nothing more than a few errant footsteps, but he had stopped himself every time. He did not know why.

Night slowly slid its fingers over the land, first in indigo clouds, then orange sky, then the flickering remnants of the sunlight. At last it was gone, leaving the windows black, so they could not see the ruins they passed. The voice ceased. Orion's eyes darted among his companions; their eyes, like his must be, were reddened with strain, quivering with weariness, and hollow with loss.

The ship did not show signs of descent for a few hours after dark. A sudden jolt sent a quiver of relief through Orion; landing would mean freedom from these harnesses, and a night in a cot. The blankets might be itchy and unclean, the barracks they slept in drafty and cold, but it beat hanging here, strapped into a harness, in the clinical white lights of the ship's interior. A dryness crusted over the back of Orion's throat; he could not remember the last time he had drank water.

Slowly, the jolts grew more frequent, until they could not longer be ignored. They were dropping, and quite fast, too. A twinge of nausea tickled his stomach, but there was not enough food in it for there to be any risk of air sickness. A swooping feeling shot through his midriff as the ship tottered in the air; a moment later, he felt pressed against his harness as it slowed suddenly.

Before long, it had touched down, and they were left sitting in silence, fear thick in the air. Maybe it was over now. Maybe it would be another night spend in a cold, drafty makeshift building. Neither prospect was pleasant.

Then the door hissed open. A single louse soldier stood there, machine pistol gripped loosely in his black-gloved hand. He raised his hand.

"Follow," his garbled voice spat. He raised the machine pistol with one hand, the other hand's index finger carefully flicking a switch on the wall. The harnesses relinquished their stringent grip. Orion's legs were numb, tingling uncomfortably. He rubbed his thighs, hoping to stimulate blood flow. Across the aisle, a young woman with dark eyes and black, matted hair stumbled, falling onto her hands and knees.

"Get up." The voice commanded.

She struggled to her feet, helped by a balding man next to her.

"Follow."

They filed out, one-by-one, after him. Orion emerged from the confines of the ship clumsily, the dusk light gleaming off of the helmets of at least two dozen louse soldiers who stood watch over their exit. Motionless, masked, they seemed like statues. Until the black-haired woman stumbled again, falling over on her side.

The lead soldier halted, turning around completely, and walking back to her. Orion's muscles tensed; he begged the Revenant to spare her, or at least to give her a quick death. It could have just as easily been him.

The louse slid his arms under the fallen woman's shoulders, and hauled her to her feet. He considered her for a moment, before turning and saying something indecipherable to his comrades. There was a outburst of growling; it took Orion a moment to realize it was cold, cruel laughter. The soldier brought the woman to two others, who looked at her. Then, in a fluid motion, they tore away her shirt, leaving nothing but its ripped remnants to cover her breasts. She whimpered fearfully. The two soldiers hooked their arms around her, and began to take her away. Orion squeezed his eyes shut; the Revenant had not heard his prayers.

The lice gave them barely a few minutes for dinner, but it was more than sufficient for the paltry rations their enemy gave them. Orion wondered why they bothered feeding him at all. He had seen some of the louse workers – drudges, as he knew they were called – and realized he had something in common with them.

A brisk wind blew through the tent, chilling the already-weary faces within. Tears streamed down the face of a man who sat across from him, the fierce wind whipping his eyes. Orion would have offered to exchange seats with him, but he knew it would do him no good; the lice would stop it, somehow, and maybe kill them both. A few feet away, a woman was shivering uncontrollably. Orion did his best to convey his sympathy to the man with a few attempts at eye contact, but he could not say anything. More than once, the lice had shot a prisoner for talking when not explicitly asked to; they saw it as potential plotting for an uprising.

*Like it would do any good,* Orion thought, crossing his arms and trying to keep his teeth from chattering. The stew in front of him was growing icy, and Orion suspected even a starving rat would have refused this food. But what else had he expected? He had expected to die, not be left a prisoner, alone even with a dozen of his own people around him, each night hating himself for not having the strength to end it, now, while he still had a shred of dignity.

Then the others were getting up, carrying their bowls to a collection bin; many of them still half-full, Orion noticed. It didn't surprise him; it couldn't be any more palatable to them than it had been to him.

Faces now warped with sheer misery, they followed the louse soldiers' lead, to the barracks where they would sleep. Dinner had been the only sliver of hope that something might relieve their despair, even if were brief and ephemeral. Now, they walked across the cold concrete, between tents and buildings, louse soldiers, even a hulk here or there, milling about, cleaning weapons, eating, clustering around fires. Orion craned his neck, trying to see a louse uncovered by his helmet, but he could not. He had seen the gray, wrinkled skin plenty of times; he did not know why he wanted to see it again now.

Behind him, he heard a shuffling sound; a moment later, he realized it was sobbing, barely quelled by what little strength was left in the prisoner. He wanted to turn, to comfort him, or her, but he knew better. Any empathy, or kind instinct, had swift and brutal consequences here.

The thick wooden beams of the drafty barracks were all but lost in the shadows of the dying day. The sun was gone now, just a smear of distant orange over a deep, violet sky. There were eight dim, orange bulbs, giving just enough light to see by, hanging from the posts and corners. The iron framed beds looked cold but welcoming; the mix of feelings left a pit in Orion's stomach.

No order issued from the louse soldier's mouth; they knew the routine well. One by one, they slipped into bed, nestling under the itchy woolen blankets.

Orion writhed beneath them, as the loops of wool tore at his leg hair, plucked them away, tormenting him. Strangely, the urge to kill himself now, to give up, rose powerfully as he struggled to find sleep. More than once, he slammed his fist into his own leg in frustration; anywhere else would make too much noise. He gritted his teeth as pain flared across his thigh; that had been stupid.

Eventually, he lay face-down, beads of sweat clinging to his body, his stomach an empty, dense marble that roiled uncomfortably, his body weary, the faint taste of bile in his mouth. Throwing up would get him killed.

His last thoughts were of Emma, her warm body beside his, how that could make this almost tolerable, to have her with him. Of course he would never wish this on her; but he knew, if she had not died, she would be here with him, suffering with him. And Orion would do the same for her.

But she was gone, and there was no way to bring her back. All he could do was cling to memories as he drifted into restless sleep.

“Get up.”

He rolled over, to a louse soldier standing over him, round red eyes glaring.

“Get up.”

The electric, distorted voice. It seemed like it had been years since he had heard it. But it had always been shouting commands in battle, or occasionally muttering to another, oblivious to Orion's presence. But now it was confronting him, calmly but strictly. He sat up, slowly.

A single, jarring punch drove him to the floor. He rolled over, sprang up, ready to fight, but immediately relaxed his muscles, instead letting his arms and head hang, and joining the other captives respectfully. It didn't matter. Fighting back wouldn't matter. He just had to survive, until he could take it no more. Then he would end it.

The bitter taste in his mouth from the night before was still there, ruining what little taste breakfast had. His fist closed around the thin, plastic butter knife they had given him, though they would never be given a luxury like butter. He wondered whether they even had it. The idea of lice tending to an animal farm put a dangerous smile on his face; he turned his mind away from the thought.

They had taken Quicksilver from him. But it didn't matter, it was just a knife. Still, his mind often wandered to the weapon, the flimsy substitute in his hand reminding him most mornings. He doubted Timeless would have thrown it away; it had belonged to Orion's father as well, and he could almost see Timeless wearing on his belt, as a token of victory. The thought angered Orion, but it interested him as well. Few lice had any concept of pride, of individual accomplishment, of taking trophies. Perhaps the Breakers had such customs, but it all ran against their single-mindedness. Orion wondered.

After breakfast, the lice escorted them down a road, to where many ruined buildings stood. Corpses, half-decayed, still lay strewn about. Drudges already moved swiftly, gathering what louse soldiers lay dead in the ruins. The others were left for the who captives.

Orion took tentative steps over the blood-flecked chunks of concrete, in the midst of his fellow prisoners, ignoring the ants that fed on the black crust. He found a body; a young woman, clad in a faded blue dress, eyes shut, gray dust coating her eyelids. Hooking his hands under her shoulders, he began to drag her free of the fallen debris.

It was better here, than it had been in the last place. A small border outpost that had fallen months ago. The bodies there had been in various states of decay; one, unrecognizable, had torn in half when Orion tried to move it. He remembered vomiting.

No one had died of disease yet, but they would; their captors gave them no gloves, no masks, no protection. They were worthless labor, to be worked to exhaustion, and if they died, it did not matter; it was simply one less mouth to feed.

Orion wondered how long it would be before they forced him to dig his own grave.

The work continued through the morning, through the afternoon, first extracting the corpses, then burying them; then moving the rubble by hand, rolling foot-wide boulders away. Perhaps this place was too inaccessible to bring bulldozers in; perhaps it was too remote to be worth the trouble, and they preferred using the prisoners anyway.

He wondered, often, of Myron's fate. He had left him, stolen away from the *Selfynn* without a second thought, his mind focused on nothing but his own self-destruction. Surely the man had perished

in the battle; the louse victory had been absolute. He had stayed observant, hoping to catch a glimpse of Myron among the other work groups, but it was foolish, they would not have let him anywhere near Orion anyways. They knew better.

Why were they keeping him? He had not seen Timeless since he had been captured, in the ground city, surrounded and outnumbered. How had Timeless found him? So soon after Orion had sunk both of his daggers into his neck? And why was he sparing Orion now? Perhaps it didn't matter, perhaps Orion didn't matter. But for so many years, Timeless had sought him as his solitary prey. Orion had expected to die, perhaps for Timeless to find him and finish him off. He was certain that when he was executed, it would be at Timeless' hands.

They had dragged him away, into a landing craft, leaving Serena's broken body alone in the dusty, trash-strewn street. Rough, gloved hands relieved him of his daggers. He had sat, uncaring, surrendered in heart as in body. He remembered sitting there, expecting to die; hoping for it.

He felt no differently now.

Orange replaced blue in the sky above, before it gradually faded to inky black. There were no stars. The work continued for another hour, Orion's already weakening muscles surrendering entirely. To hell with it. They could shoot him now. It meant nothing. He turned to face them, where they sat on the nearby trucks, holding the guns that would kill him.

Instead, one of them raised a megaphone, not even noticing Orion.

"Enough!" he barked, "Follow."

Slowly, they collected behind the lice, who escorted them back, the soft crackling of footsteps on gravel overpowering even the drone of the crickets. Overhead, the echoing grumble of engines drew their eyes upward; a pair of landing craft drifted past, barely a hundred meters up, their red landing lights blinking against the night.

Eventually they reached the open shelter where they ate breakfast. A bland porridge was served to them for dinner; they ate quietly, subdued from their long day of work. Orion could see those around him wincing each time they shifted, their muscles sore.

"No! No!" came a man's voice from a few tables away. Orion did not want to look, but he forced himself to. He saw him; standing up, facing a pair of louse soldiers who had wrapped their arms around a woman, perhaps in her mid-thirties, whose round face contained a mix of fear and confusion.

"Let her go!"

"Sit down," one of the lice commanded.

"No! Let her go! Let her go, you fucking bastards!" the man screamed, reaching into his coat. Before either louse could react, he withdrew a small, boxy pistol; a louse sidearm. Four stark white flashes cut through the night air, as the gun barked, tearing holes in the louse soldier's head and chest. Immediately, the lice produced their own handguns, and fired back. Orion felt a nearly overwhelming thrill of vertigo, and, unconsciously, he flattened his cheek against the table. A bullet whizzed overhead, ending in a sickening thud.

The man staggered under the barrage, hit by at least twenty bullets. Orion could not see him, but he could see the woman squeeze her eyes shut as one last shot rang out, slamming into the center of her face. She went limp, and the man fell to the ground, the gun clattering from his hand with finality.

Orion straightened up, realizing the man had shot her, his own wife probably, to spare her the torture the lice would inflict. The thought made him sick; but as he turned to his side, he saw the man next to him, a bullet hole in the side of his neck, bleeding furiously onto the table.

"No..." he muttered breathlessly. He felt fuzzy and light; he shook his head to clear the feeling, but it did little.

*I ducked, he thought, That bullet would have hit me.*

He swallowed a thick load of bile that had risen in his throat. A tingling feeling ran down his arms and legs.

"Dinner's over," said one of the louse soldiers, his fuzzy electronic voice full of malevolence,

“Go to the barracks.”

They rose, and silently obeyed. Orion's eyes met those of another young woman, a few meters away. Her face told him she was thinking the same thing: *Why haven't we all done that?*

Maybe she would be next. Maybe Orion would. But it wouldn't be him, no. Something, a need for closure, gripped him. He felt certain that he would see Timeless again. Maybe, this time, he could kill him.

And so the days dragged on, Orion living on what few scraps of purpose he could gather. Emma's death bit him each morning, and each night he prayed not to awaken, to somehow die in his sleep. But of course that never happened.

The deaths continued, but, like being struck in the same place, over and over, when the skin gets more and more numb with each blow, before long he no longer felt anything. A man would simply collapse, and be left to die; until, as soon as they had passed, a louse would put a bullet in his head to make sure he was dead; or a woman would try to flee, and be gunned down. Orion doubted any of them entertained serious thoughts of successfully running away; but they escaped in a different sense, each of them struggling to hang on, until they could take the hopelessness no more. All of them would break eventually. There was no way to win, when they had nothing and their captors had everything.

They cleaned up after the war. Burying bodies; sometimes Orion watched other crews dig holes for the corpses they collected, before being gunned down themselves, the unfortunates unknowingly digging their own graves. Clearing wreckage; a great piece of concrete slipped free and fell upon a woman, pinning her. The lice had done nothing, ignored it, as if clearing it no longer mattered. Orion passed by her several times, watched her squirm underneath it, groaning with pain, then weeping with frustration. At one point he met her eyes, green and plaintive. They looked like Emma's. He looked away, and continued with his work. There was nothing he could do for her.

An hour later, another woman left the work group, moving over to the slab of concrete, hoping she could free her, save her. Orion watched her go, and returned to his work, refusing to turn around, refusing to watch. There were two cracks; Orion squeezed his eyes shut. As they were led away, back to camp, they saw the woman still struggling to get free, her would-be savior shot dead just a few feet away. The next day they left, flew off, to somewhere else in the shattered world.

Thousands of strongholds and cities had fallen. Every day they were serenaded on the screen as they passed them overhead. Some days they flew through cloud cover so thick they could not see the city below; a mercy, Orion thought. Some days he realized it was not clouds, it was too dark, it had to be smoke, only to dip below and see the massive columns of it rising from the city, the fire roiling somewhere inside.

A poison gas leak one day while cleaning the bodies from an industrial district killed more than half of Orion's work mates; he did not know them, but by face. The old man with salt-and-pepper whiskers, loose jowls that suggested a life of worn smiles, on his hands and knees on the dusty, glass-covered floor, coughing and hacking and gasping until the blood came, and he rolled over and expired. A young woman with dark hair and beady eyes, whom Orion could tell had been a mother, just by her face, but he couldn't explain it. Her eyes grew redder and redder, until at last she simply passed out, and they had left her. Someone who reminded him of Myron, yet much younger, barely twenty if that. He had lain on the floor, writhing for breath after enduring it for an hour, as the lice stood by and watched from behind their gas masks.

Orion himself barely endured it, felt the gas eating at his muscles, and his mind. He fell into bed that night, and barely a moment later he began to cough, hard and dry and viciously, throughout the night, without any sleep. As he lay there, sweating, the wool blanket wrapped around him, memories of dead Emma tormenting him, his lungs tearing themselves to pieces, making him cough until he met the verge of losing consciousness, he felt the last shreds of his willpower breaking. He would do it tomorrow, he told himself, he would break away and run, feel the bullets bite his back, feel that stinging

pain, then the warm sticky flood of blood through his lungs, he did not care how much it hurt, only that it would be over. He finally rolled onto his back, looking up at the ceiling, thinking of the years before, the years of his life that had taken him here. All throughout it, the marvelous and horrible adventure it had been, he had always known that someday they would lose. He had sometimes thought what it would feel like; a death in fire, or by knife, or by bullets. Something quick, maybe painful, maybe painless. He had never imagined something like this.

Aldrick Nauss moved swiftly between the spindly pines that clustered around the larger ones. He held the bow tightly in his hand, his pistol strapped to his leg, ready and waiting. But he would not need it now, it was there for safety. A bow was quiet, a hunter's weapon.

He spotted the deer, ambling by, alone. There was never just one, but one would be enough. Its antlers swayed its head as it walked, gazing to and fro. Aldrick took an arrow from the quiver on his back, and slowly, silently but for a faint stretching sound, drew back the string. He exhaled slowly, his body stiff, spotting a faint trace of vapor inches from his lips. Spring was still young, and the early morning air still chilled him when he first stepped out into it.

A deep thrumming noise, and a sharp whoosh as the arrow scrambled through the air, fishtailing ever-so-slightly as it flew. A sloppy shot, one that struck the deer in the neck. It thrashed about for a moment, before collapsing, legs still kicking.

"Damn it," he muttered. He ran toward the creature, drawing out another arrow. He had used it as a boy, but even then he had only been a passable shot. The woods around Tangata had had few deer, and it took much of a day just to get far enough away to no longer hear the engines, the rush of the city. It had scared away so much of the wildlife. He had seen a doe, a few fawns, maybe a buck once. But he had hunted squirrel with the old six-twelve his father had given him at fourteen, and he had learned how to stalk a quarry.

He looked down at the deer, its one visible eye wide with pain. They had such big eyes. Aldrick fired his arrow straight into the side of its head, keeping his mind off of the sound. Something like guilt washed through him. It always had, and likely always would. What chance did the creature have? What had it done to him? What had it thought of, in those seconds before his arrow caught it unaware, filled its world with pain? He forced the thoughts away. He had people to feed.

Slinging the creature over his strong shoulders, he turned and headed back along the trail. It would be half an hour back to Neverfall, but Aldrick didn't mind. It gave him time to think, time to escape, just as it had when he had been a boy, wandering in the woods, finding his way out by the sun and his way back by the stars.

Something moved in a cluster of brush; he stiffened, hand suddenly on his pistol. He moved over to a tree, laying down the dead deer onto the leaves of the forest floor, straightening up. Unbuttoning his holster, he drew out the gun, an old Modave model. Another of his father's gifts, and the only one he still had. He approached the grove, his steps cat-like, avoiding the crinkly leaves and finding the hard roots and soft needles.

A small bird burst free of the bushes; a blue jay. Aldrick raised the gun suddenly; then lowered it. Then he sighed, turning back to the trees, gathering the deer, and continuing on his way. Perhaps he felt a bit stupid, but he knew he shouldn't. One could never be too careful.

The edge of Neverfall was marked by a pair of brush piles, sticks and twigs and bent branches that had been unsuitable for building houses and far better for kindling. A woman with brown hair, slender in face and form, wearing a faded green dress, pulled a few sticks free into a cloth sack at her side. Aldrick recognized her, and walked over.

"Hi, Abby," he said pleasantly, "Got a clue where Myron is? Caught another deer for our

ladders.”

“He should be happy,” said Abby with a bit of a smile, “I don’t know where he is. I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Probably out on the ledge,” said Aldrick, “I swear, some days I wonder if he’s going to jump.” Abby just stared at him.

“I’m joking. I didn’t mean – ”

“He wouldn’t,” said Abby, “He would tell me if something was wrong.”

“I know he would, Abby. I didn’t mean it. You know I didn’t.”

She sighed.

“I know.”

“What’s wrong?”

She looked at him, pursing her lips.

“Nothing,” she said, “Nothing. I just don’t like that he spends so much time out there.”

“He likes to watch it, I guess.”

“Like a masochist.”

“Maybe.”

“You probably want to take that to the storehouse. Get the weight off your shoulders.”

“I will. Then I’ll go find him.”

“Okay. See you Aldrick.”

“Yep.”

He walked on, toward the small cluster of houses and tents that formed the fledgling village of Neverfall. Further back, in the trees, was a clear patch where the *Selfynn* had cleared a swath in the trees. Aldrick had been in Sarengarth when the *Selfynn* landed there, protecting fifty huddled civilians, waiting for a chance at escape, when Myron had come and brought them aboard. They had wandered south for three days, the image of Sarengarth burning etched sharply in their minds. It was the first thing they saw when they awoke, and it was the thought that swelled in them each night when they went to sleep.

It had taken four Scorpion fighters to bring down the already-wounded *Selfynn*, which Myron had dauntlessly guided into the cliff-top forests. Aldrick remembered staring out the window, down more than fifty kilometers, watching thin clouds press against the endless sheet of rock. They had careened off of the edge, listed heavily right, and, somehow, scraped the tops of the trees with just enough momentum for a rough, but survivable, landing. The Scorpions had strafed them twice, killing a few, before turning in a wide arc, out to the horizon.

Four hard months had passed building Neverfall into the small collection of two dozen huts, farming in the clearings left by their axe work, hunting for food, and salvaging what they could from the *Selfynn*’s wreckage. It had worked so far; nobody had starved to death yet. In fact, given their location, it was remarkable – and perhaps a little eerie – how peaceful it had been.

After leaving the deer at the icehouse, Aldrick meandered through the boulders down the forested slope, toward the rocky overlook where he guessed Myron would be. All around him, trees lay splintered and fallen, victims of the stiff winds that plagued the cliffside.

At last he came to a short clearing; he moved swiftly through it, up the short slope on the other side, almost eager to see it, the great louse superfortress that sat in the valley, its immense roof, a jagged landscape of radio towers and missile batteries and airstrips and who knew what else, rising to almost level with the cliff; but many kilometers off, at least a hundred. Even so, it took up much of the view, blocking the horizon.

The cliffs ran almost full-circle, ending out of sight, sloping down somewhere blocked by the fortress’s bulk. He saw Myron sitting out on a rock, only a few footsteps from a drop of at least a hundred meters, cross-legged, his hair having lengthened in the busy months, his face bearded, salt-and-pepper bristles clinging to his chin, almost blending in with the stark, shifting clouds, bright white. His lined eyes looked sad; never but in this moment had he looked older to Aldrick.

"Hey, Myron," said Aldrick, approaching cautiously. Myron turned his head, to meet Aldrick's eye, face stiff and expressionless. He nodded agreement, then turned back to the fortress. It was mid-afternoon, but the clouds made it seem later, and the superfortress' lavender lights, blinking eerily, were clearly visible in the somber light.

"Got us a deer," said Aldrick. Myron nodded.

"Good," he said, "Whatever we can get."

"It's in the ice-house. Haven't skinned it yet."

"Right. Well you should."

"Will when we get back."

Myron turned and looked at him.

"We?"

"Yeah, we."

"I'm staying out here," said Myron, turning back.

"This isn't healthy, you know," said Aldrick, "It's gonna keep you up at night, thinking about the place. We can't attack it, can't find it, no way no how. There's fifty of us and ten million of them. No goddamn way."

"I'm not thinking of attacking it," said Myron.

"Then what are you thinking of?"

"Nothing," Myron smiled, "Just thinking."

Aldrick rolled his eyes, sighed, and looked back at the woods.

"Just thought I'd come out and say hi. Abby's worried about you, you know."

"We're all worried."

"She's your wife, Myron. You married her two months after we landed here."

"Weren't exactly a lot of other options."

"I'm sure she'd be thrilled to hear that."

Myron turned back again.

"Don't tell her."

"Wasn't going to. I figured you said that just to piss me off."

"Pretty much did," said Myron, pointing at a small structure built into the side of the cliffs, barely visible, at least seventy kilometers away. Aldrick could barely see it. It had to be huge, to be visible at all. "You think we could find a ship there?"

"Why?"

"Just so we have a way of getting around."

"Getting around where?"

Myron didn't respond, just sat for a moment staring at it.

"How would we get over there, anyway?" Aldrick asked, to humor him.

"There's caves around here. Who knows where they might lead? Or we could just circle the cliffs, go along that way."

"And get mowed down by the lice," said Aldrick, "It's an insane idea and you know it. Why even bring it up?"

Myron shrugged, then sat forward, sliding off the rock and standing up. His other side turned to Aldrick, who realized he was not wearing his handgun.

"You went out unarmed?" said Aldrick, only semi-aghast.

"Yeah," said Myron, "I've got a flip-knife in my pocket. I don't need to be lugging a damn gun around all the time."

Aldrick had known Myron long enough to know such words were unbecoming of him. But he let it go. Myron began walking back into the woods, his footsteps taking him over the crest of the little hill and down out of sight. Aldrick gave one last glance out at the ominous lights flashing in the gathering dusk, then turned and followed him.

Skinning the deer did not take long. It was a skill Aldrick had picked up fast, out of necessity, when they had crashed. After a couple weeks, it felt as though he had been doing it for years; in a way, he had, but on far smaller creatures.

It was cold inside the ice-house, and dark, so Aldrick worked just out the front door, cutting away meat. A mother and child walked by, the child's fearful eyes catching Aldrick's hard gaze. He forced a smile onto his face, but too late; the child had turned away, his mother drawing him close to him. Aldrick looked down at the blood and guts in his lap, and sighed, setting back to work.

He sorted out a few pounds of meat, the best cuts, and descended the dark staircase to put the rest away. Back out in the light, he slung the sack over his shoulder, and headed for the copse where they usually ate. Alanah kept everyone busy, and it was rare for more than a dozen people to be there eating at once, usually squeezing their meals in wherever they could. She had turned into Myron's lieutenant more than ever, running logistics, finding a job for everyone, down to the children. In the furor of daily life, most of the people did not realize how they drifted.

For even three months after the fall of Sarengarth, its aftershocks were still well-felt. What was there to do now, but survive? Aldrick had been on the *Selfynn* to lead boarding parties; a rare and dangerous maneuver, but one he was a veteran of. He had left no one behind, yet its loss still brought an ache of hopelessness to his chest. The final stronghold, the last beacon of freedom for the whos, and it was gone.

Except for this little village. That thought drove Aldrick, as he felt certain it did for Myron, too. To live, for just one more second; that was fighting back, and it was victory for every new heartbeat.

Aldrick gathered the meat, wrapped it, and put it away in the ice-house. The stores would last for at least a few months. They had been blessed to find arable land here, especially so well-sheltered by the forest. The *Selfynn* had provided all manner of building supplies, and it had not been a long

alrdick goes to sleep, next morning finds tracks, follows them, discovers pranesti's cave

## Orion is Executed

The clouds writhed incessantly, water wrung from them, and poured onto the small platform where Orion stood. Attached to the side of the louse ship, where it hovered miles above the water, the five-meter square held only four; Timeless, a louse in dress uniform, and two other soldiers. Orion noticed that Timeless wore Quicksilver on his belt, in a sheath.

He stood in line, waiting his turn. The first victim, a middle-aged woman who Orion had never seen until today, fell to her knees at the end of the platform. One of the louse soldiers walked up behind her, drawing a pistol from his belt, and leveling it with the back of her skull.

A single crack, all but lost to the rain, and she fell forward, tumbling from the brink. Orion squeezed his eyes. Five more, then him.

He felt nothing; barely even a twinge of empathy for his people, gunned down coldly and cruelly, right before his eyes.

## Attack on Nethogra

Rain blew over the fleet, like ocean waves in the sky, buffeting the fleet as the ships cut through the storm. Below, the water roiled. In the distance, the two sides of the great chasm.

The mist dulled the light of the distant explosions, but not their sound. Booming, deeper than the deepest, crackling thunder rolled through the endless gulf of air, to fall hard on Orion's ears, and send chills down his spine with every eerie, ethereal rumble.

"So where are we supposed to land?" Orion asked Jack, whose eyes were fixed on the distant towers, hanging from the side of the cliff.

"There," he said, pointing to them, "

"They're landing on the back of the ship!" shouted Jack over the roar of the rain, gunning the first soldier down, then ducking behind a metal case as a storm of bullets rained down on him in response. Orion's eyes, thick with water, could barely see; he aimed at what he guessed was an enemy, and fired from his PXP. The first burst missed; the second hit, spinning the shape to the ground.

A flash of red, from a few feet to the right, alerted him; he turned to it, seeing the perfect image of a louse soldier aiming a submachine gun straight at him, before another torrent of raindrops reduced his vision to a blurry mess. He cried out, and ducked down, hearing the rapport of gunfire over the tapping of rain against the metal ship. From behind him. He straightened up, seeing a wave of blonde hair behind him.

Jack's assault rifle blared on full-auto, sparking off the deck. Orion turned to look, and saw with shock at least a dozen louse soldiers running among the barrels. He squinted, trying to keep the water out of his eyes, shooting at what he could.

"Cover me!" Jack shouted, dropping to a crouch to reload. The lice pressed forward relentlessly; Megan fired back, as did another soldier who had come out to join them, but it would not be enough.

A wave reached up over the deck, splattering Orion and the others with even more water – he could not believe it was possible – and hurling him onto the deck. The wet smack of the wave whirled in his head as he got up again, taking aim, and shooting a louse soldier in the head as it craned its neck to see him. Satisfied, Orion ducked back down.

With a cry of pain, a body hit the deck. Orion glanced over, seeing the body of the soldier who had joined him, his blood already seeping into the film of water on the floor. He sighed, then steadied himself. He could not afford to let nerves get to him now.

Bullets plunked against the nearby barrels and boxes, their sound little different than that of the rain. Orion closed his eyes, wondering if his Chosen intuition could serve him here. But it was silent. Perhaps that was a good sign.

Suddenly, furiously, he forced himself to his feet, spraying wildly at a pair of louse soldiers as they dashed for a pile of crates barely fifteen feet away. The first one's head jerked to the side, knocking him into the open for a second and third bullet to slice cleanly through his chest. The second ran on, until Orion swiveled his rifle, nearly severing an arm. But the louse slid out of sight. Orion tensed, watching the barrel intently. He could not afford to keep himself exposed this long.

But before a full second had passed, the tip of a black helmet rose slowly over the boxes. Orion wasted no time in dashing it open with a trio of bullets, then throwing himself back to the ground.

Jack and Megan still stood, guns blazing. Orion detached his rifle's magazine. Two, maybe three bullets left. He dropped it, and pulled out a new one.

One less magazine for later. Thirty less bullets for later.

An explosion ripped through his ears, and the wet metal in front of him briefly shone red. The ship plummeted suddenly, sending a sickly swoop of panic through Orion. A raindrop dropped from his

eyelash into his eye; he blinked it away as panic pulsed through him. But then the ship evened out, as he heard a sudden slap and hiss from behind him. Orion stood up to shoot again, but instead of a maze of boxes and a half-dozen enemies left to kill, he saw an empty deck, and the wide, shocked expressions of Megan and Jack.

“Wave ... wave took them out,” Megan managed.

“Could've been us. We dropped low enough,” said Jack.

“What hit us?”

“No idea,” said Megan, “Let's get inside.”

Their collective eyes lingered on the dead soldier for a second.

“We'll get him,” said Jack. Megan nodded, and walked past them. Jack looked to Orion, and they both stooped and grabbed the dead soldier's arms, dragging him quickly across the slick deck, back to the door, back to the relative warmth and dryness inside.

They left him sitting against the wall of the corridor inside. Megan held a headset to her ear.

“Scorpion hit the side armor plate dead center with a missile, apparently,” she said. She smirked. “It's gone now. Crashed into the wave.”

“Tell them to pull up,” said Jack, “Get higher. It was a risky enough gambit flying this close to the waves to stay out of sight. No point in keeping it up when they've already seen us.”

“Alright,” said Megan, flicking the microphone down so that it sat in front of her mouth, “Jack says gain altitude. They've found us anyway.”

She pulled off the headset, and looked at them.

“Let's go get ready.”

A moment later, they were ten meters below the back deck, in the lower cargo bay, standing shakily in semi-darkness barely relieved by the dim red emergency lights. Tight straps around their legs and bellies held fluffy, bulky parachute bags against their bodies. They stood staring at the darkness ahead, where any moment, the ramp would open and lower, letting the dull, gleaming gray flood in from outside, and reveal the dizzying jump below.

Eight other soldiers stood behind them, silently. Orion wanted to say something, simply to calm his nerves, but it would be no use. As soon as his feet left the edge of the ramp, nothing but a thousand feet of churning air between him and a ground full of enemies, any comforting words would be pointless anyway.

The buzzing of the alarm seemed to stab a hole through Orion. The cargo bay was not usually used for troop drops, but it, and the warning alarm, served in a pinch. He gulped. The enemies on the ground did not frighten him nearly as much as the sickening plummet did.

As the ramp lowered, Jack and Megan began forward, their guns dangling loosely from the plethora of straps wrapped around them. Unceasingly, they spread their arms, and seemed to almost prance gracefully from the brink. Orion closed his eyes and forced himself forward.

The swirling rain instantly blinded him. He could barely see the dark shape below, where they were supposed to land, the platform probably already thick with louse soldiers, waiting patiently. Jack had told him not to pull his ripcord too soon, or the wind would carry him away. Turning his face away from the gust, to look at the waves in the distance, most easily ten meters high, Orion resolved to listen.

The ground grew closer. Orion's fingers curled tightly around the slick cord; he wrapped his once around his fist, to ensure a firm grip. The rough snapping of unfolding parachutes sounded from around him; he took the cue, tugging hard on the ripcord, feeling the straps tear at his thighs, flattening his stomach against his pelvis, and nearly flip him over. Immediately, he felt the wind pull him, but he looked down, seeing the platform barely forty feet down.

As the wind dragged him further, a thrill of panic gripped him, as the edge of platform drew closer and closer. He tugged on the parachute strings, and dropped suddenly, hitting the concrete hard, rolling over and over before coming to a rest on his side, some part of his rifle underneath him, digging

into his hip.

He pulled the strings away. He did not hear any gunfire yet; they had landed cold. He quickly rolled up the parachute into a clumsy bundle, and tucked it behind one of the crates, to shelter it from the wind. Then he went to join the others.

They met in a circle, looking at the stairs that led up and beyond, toward the towers built into the side of the cliff. They were titanic, larger than Sarengarth.

“Who's got the bomb?” said Orion.

“I do,” said Jack, indicating a disk-shaped bulge on his back.

Myron's monologue, leading his people away from Neverfall. Marries woman named Abby, officer on ship named Alanah Greiner becomes his second in command. "Housecross" = card game... come up with better name for it.

*Where does this journey take us?*

*I see, in our camp at night, a young woman, shivering, the curves all but starved from her body, and I wonder if this journey is worth it after all.*

*I see children without a mother, or a father, still forced to tread along with us. It is all I can do to make sure they have food and shoes to keep their feet from becoming any more raw and swollen than they already are.*

*I see my own broken spirit reflected in the eyes of everyone I pass, haunted by memories, some more terrible than my own. A man who was like a son to me, a woman who was like a daughter to me, are both gone, dead, and ventured forth from this terrible world. In my saddest hours, it is hard not to envy them.*

*I see all this, and lie awake at night, praying to the Revenant that I lead my people to a worthy place, that I have not misplaced my trust in these psionists. They speak to me of urgency, that the Underthrown are coming, that soon they will take back this land. And I wonder if I am leading my people on a miserable march for the sake of some lunatic's false vision.*

*Peter was always the leader. Orion could lead, Cassiopeia could lead. But Peter was the wisest man I ever knew. He built an army from us when we were but a handful of fragments. Twice. Over forty years he felled two terrifying weapons. And he raised two children to be among the greatest individuals our kind has ever known.*

*If only he could see what his world turned into.*

*There is no more I can do for his memory, than to keep his people safe. And each time someone stumbles amongst the pine needles, nearly collapses from exhaustion... each time we must seek cover under rocks as the foreboding sound of engines thrums in the sky overhead, I wonder if I have failed him. Would he have brought them here? Would he have trusted these people?*

*Maybe they are pointless questions.*

*I already let his children die. How much more could I fail him anyway?*

Myron goes on expedition to temple of the psionic cult they meet. Hears priests talking around altar across large, empty chamber they are all sleeping in. At one point, scout named Adrick goes ahead, through woods on edge of cliff, fights and kills two Dhaika. Pranesti tells him it will only be another two days to get to temple.

"Two more days," said Pranesti in his thin, precise voice, "Then we shall be where we need to be to meet the Underthrown."

"Do you really believe they'll be there?" Myron asked, furrowing his brow at the map Pranesti was holding out before them. He looked up to see the priest's glance harden, as though Myron had battered him with his words.

"Never mind," he said hastily.

"Your people are tired. At this temple, there is much food. It leads deep into the mountainside, into the cliffs, into a great chamber. From there, the Underthrown will rise."

Myron wanted desperately to believe in those words. They had spent the last two, three, four... he could no longer remember how many months it had been, looking forward to the next time they got to sleep under a roof, in one of the many abandoned temples along the trail that Pranesti and the other psionists led them along; beyond that, there was nothing to long for but the thin hope that their journey was not for nothing, and that the Underthrown would lay at the end of their trail. What significance their arrival would have to the actions of the mysterious subterranean people was anyone's guess. It certainly

wasn't Myron's.

"At least you will live in comfort tonight. Somewhat." Pranesti rolled up the map and tucked it into his backpack, straightened his robes, and walked up the steps, past the columns that held up the temple as it burrowed into the hillside, like a matchbox slid into a hill of sand, and into the interior, a grid of pillars, slabs, and altars.

He ate dinner with Abby, Greiner, and Adrick, gathered around the wooden slab that served as their table. The room was lit with a mix of torches and incandescent lanterns, leaving the light flickering oddly in some places and not in others. One sat in the middle of the makeshift dinner table, shining yellow light on the dull potato stew and oatmeal they picked at.

"Nothing beats home cooking, huh?" Greiner remarked boredly as she swallowed a bite of the stuff, grimacing at the taste.

"This isn't home cooking," Adrick said with the hint of a sneer, "Home is two hundred miles... that way." He waved a finger about for a second, before pointing vaguely to his left.

"At least you've still got your sense of direction," Myron muttered.

"Speaking of direction, one of you is going to play housecross with me, because I'll be damned if I'm spending another night scrubbing out my rifle with nothing better to," said Aldrick, "The thing's got to be cleaner than a two-year-old's mind by now."

"Anything to distract me from how screwed we are when we find this temple or whatever, and there's *not a damned thing there*," said Greiner, gathering another spoonful of oatmeal and bringing it to her mouth. As she did, she met Myron's eye and saw his expression.

"I didn't mean that," she said quickly, "It's just... it's been a frustrating journey. I'll be glad to get there, either way."

Myron nodded, and went back to eating.

"Anyway," she stuttered out, "I'll play."

"Thanks, Alanah."

"Count me in, too," muttered Myron.

Abby was watching the family eating at the table next to theirs, five meters away. Their laughter occasionally had bled into their conversation, but with no one talking, their joy was easily observable.

"Makes me miss my son," she said, before turning back to her food.

Myron never knew what to say at times like this. Sharing his own feelings of loss felt more selfish than empathetic when this happened.

"Abby, it's going to be a while... hell, maybe never, before you feel better," said Adrick softly, "You just... can't let it get to you. Remember them, but don't let the pain dominate you. He wouldn't want that."

"It doesn't, but it ... stings at times like this," said Abby, shaking her head, watching the family again.

Myron slid his arm around her.

"I wish I had known him, Abs," he said quietly.

"You two would have gotten along," she said, a small smile returning to her face, "Stubborn and grim. The quiet hero," she added affectionately.

"I'm not much of a hero."

"Yes you are."

"Orion was always the one who got the real work done."

"From what you've told me, you worked just as hard, but had none of the glory."

"It wasn't like that."

On the other side of the table, Greiner and Aldrick stood up, their plates cleaned, and walked off. Abby turned back to Myron.

"You deserve just as much adulation as Orion did. It might not matter to you, but it does to me."

"He's dead now."

Abby's smile twisted sympathetically, but Myron knew it was just that; she had never known Orion, or his father. Myron kept few illusions about himself, but he did know that both of them were greater men than he would ever be.

"I wish I could have met him," she said, echoing his thoughts, looking off to the side.

"His father, too," Myron added. She turned back to him.

"You're what we have now, to lead us. And you do it excellently."

She smiled at him. Aldrick swept past them, a deck of cards in his hand; Greiner followed behind him a moment later, sitting down and folding her hands expectantly. Myron sighed, picked up the deck, and began to deal out the cards.

Later, as Myron lay next to Abby on a stone slab covered with blankets, their packs as pillows, he felt a sudden rush of uncertainty, his wall of confidence crumbling in the quiet, introspective moments before sleep.

Far away, the chatting of several of the priests caught his ear. He could not tell if Pranesti was amongst them; all the psionists sounded the same.

"... if we continue."

"Do we remember the atomic wars of fifty thousand years ago? How many billions were left in dust, with no one to bury them? There is no wisdom in the ways of the Dhomezi. They spoil in the name of their industrial machine, but like a petulant adolescent it will soon run out its angry ways and exhaust itself." The priest had a hesitant manner of speech, drawing out some words and springing forward through others, pausing in odd places. His companions slowly bobbed their heads in agreement.

"How many must suffer in the meantime?" said another priest.

"We shall keep these here," said the first, "Let the Dhomezi win, let them have this world, let it be too full in their hands. Let it slide from their grip when they learn nature is too great to control, even with the might of a million black gloves and nuclear bombs."

"But what of it's fate when it falls?" the other priest said again.

Myron wanted to sleep, but the conversation kept his mind taut, held it above the warm mist of sleep. The priests discussed the fate of the future so casually, as though it were merely an interesting idea. They had never fought for it, never bled for it.

*My people have!* Myron thought, and instantly a stroke of anger pulsed through him. But immediately it subsided, leaving him surprised that such a blind thought had rushed through his old mind. How could the priests know anything of what they discussed? But in war there were always the thinkers, and the sufferers. The sufferers were remembered as a whole, the thinkers individually. That was the way it had always been, and the way it always would be, because there was no reason to change it. Myron kept listening.

"The world will regrow. It may be barren for a million years, but life will return."

"People?"

"Maybe. Perhaps not. Perhaps it would be for the better."

"We shall remain."

"We shall not remain. But perhaps what becomes of us will."

Myron rolled over. The wool blankets did little to mask the unforgiving stone beneath them. At least it wasn't cold. On the other side, far in the corner, another collection of priests sat conversing, their words inaudible. Beside them, a family sat playing cards. A young boy triumphantly flung down a card onto the stack in the center; his parents laughed, but even from across the spacious stone chamber, Myron could tell their smiles were strained and forced. Next to him, Abby shifted her body closer to his. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and slid his chin over her shoulder. Not everyone had someone to lay with tonight; plenty slept alone, their loved ones lost at Sarengarth.

Perhaps the priests were right, in that their fighting and suffering was irrelevant to the great arc

of history. The thought did not pain Myron; nor was the implied insignificance of their fight a comforting thought to him. Overall, it meant as little to him as his struggle to survive meant to the air, sky, and soil. His life was all that there would ever be on this planet. It was useless to think of a hundred thousand years to come, only to fight for them, to strive to leave behind something greater than he had found. Had he been born in a different time, he might have had a different life, a different priority, a different motivation; there was no point to these thoughts, not for practicality but for wisdom. Let the priests quibble over the state of the world in a future as alien as the ancient past; by then, they would be dead too, and if anything had improved, it would be Myron's hand among those that had brought it there, and not them.

At last, with that comforting thought wrapped around his tired mind, he sank into sleep.

Stirring his breakfast the next morning, Myron watched the priests again with stale disdain. Abby ate beside him, her eyes occasionally following his.

"What is it with them?" she asked, noticing finally that her eyes kept moving to the same place.

"They mystify me," he replied. It was true; for all he had told himself about him, he felt, no, knew that below those thoughts he understood they were naught but comfort. Without them, the priests' uncanny talents made Myron's mind feel naked and weak. Each time he met their eyes, he was *certain* that they could glimpse what he was thinking, or feeling.

Beside him, Abby nodded. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"I don't like them," she said, "I don't trust them," she finished, her eyes polished with fear, as though the priests could hear her words.

"They've given us no reason not to trust them. But I don't either. I should. But I don't."

"They *know*, Myron, it's almost as if they can tell what we think and feel, even before *we* know it. I would ask them to stop, but just how ridiculous would that sound? What could I prove? What could I accuse them of?"

Myron sighed.

"I get it, Abby, but they're our best chance. What they plan to show us, it can't be a hoax. It has to be *something*, earthly for all I know, but *there*. They believe in it."

Abby looked suddenly vehement.

"When are they just going to show us?" she hissed, her voice causing Myron to shudder involuntarily, "It's been months, months we've been on this trail. We're lucky no one's died yet; Adrick almost died on that scouting mission, god knows how he made it past two Dhaika on his own."

Myron had no words to answer her with. It was not fair, he supposed, to assume his people had the same attitude he did; chasing down every possible chance of a new weapon or new ally, even to risk himself and everyone he knew. Neverfall had been safe; it had survived many purges that had claimed every other village around. They had been lucky to get supplies from trade while they still could, that would not happen anymore.

And he had brought his people out, just as the colors of autumn were beginning to bleed through the leaves, into the stark cold of a dying year, on wind-whipped cliffs and frigid forests, on the word of some people in cloaks who claimed they could give him revenge. The hot shame of his stupidity washed down over his face. Abby looked at him, assessing his expression.

"I know you're trying to do what's right. And you're not wrong. I may not believe in them, but I believe in you."

"I know you do, Abby. But no one else does."

"They do, Myron, they do! Why else would they follow you from Neverfall, where we were finally safe, to do this. They obeyed, but they chose to obey. They came of their own free will. Maybe I just fancy myself as a critic. But I shouldn't."

"Your feelings are valid."

"Maybe. But I hope not."

Myron poked at the remains of his food, and tried to change the subject.

“Pranesti said he thinks it's only another thirty miles.”

“Only”

Myron tried to inject sympathy into his fading smile.

They exited the ruined temple into a cool, brisk fog that soaked through the trees, clung to the wet leaves and needles on the forest floor. Another fifteen miles, rewarded another evening of sore feet, blisters, calluses, pained expressions on young children's faces. Myron forced his feet to move.

A few birds dared to disturb the soft rustling of many footsteps, their chirps barely echoing through the wet air. The unpleasant humidity of the air moistened the back of Myron's throat uncomfortably, cold air girded his nostrils. His skin itched suddenly; he scratched at it through his coat. Looking further along the trail, past the priests and soldiers that led the group, he gazed into the endless wooded tunnel that seemed to mock their footsteps. They had to be getting close, it couldn't be more than another couple days of walking.

Like a ebony hawk, the tricopter hung just below the clouds, as if suspended by the ethereal ceiling above it. Below, a slate-tinted patch of rock, the fortress Teeroek, lay nestled between the great trees that insulated the mountainside from the whipping wind above. Flecks of light blinked in and out of sight, like synapses flickering all over the structure. For above it, floating imperceptibly slow, were the long, inky, shiny carapaces of louse cruisers; from so high up, it looked as though they were spitting sparks onto the lonely stronghold below them.

Across from Orion, Jack had slid his arm around Megan's waist to steady her, as they peered down from the side of the tricopter's open passenger bay. A wisp of cloud sailed under them, rendering the fortress below a faint outline until it had passed. Orion brushed a small trace of hair from his forehead; a second later, the wind resolutely blew it back into his field of vision. He ignored his companions, eyes fixed on the gray outline below him; the cloud faded away, leaving a clear view of the battle below. Ten thousand feet up, it was already difficult to breathe, but the majestic panorama made the terrible war they fought against the lice feel insignificant. Was it really all like this, from this high up? Just flitting lights and strings of smoke? No screams of agony, rough cracking of gunfire, leaving injured and dying companions behind? It was easy to envy the high ones who lived their lives up here, soaring on the wind, held aloft by great tanks of helium.

A crackling burst like a thunderclap just outside the cabin of the tricopter snapped Orion's muscles taut, like rubber bands. The scent of ozone invaded his frigid nostrils; the tricopter lurched to the left, and Orion slid towards his seat as the door closed with a whirl just audible above the roar of the wind, stealing the view, leaving them in darkness relieved only by faint, red emergency lights.

"Knew it was coming," muttered Jack as the ship pitched uncomfortably again, this time into what felt like a sharp dive; but there was no way to tell, no way to see what was happening. A second, then a third explosion shuddered through the cabin. Orion tightened his grip on the hand railing next to his seat; he was a pilot at heart, not a passenger.

With the cover of stealth torn free, the ship would have little option but to make for Eilayss and hope for the best. Orion had never considered the prospect of another who city that had not been demolished and scoured clean of life; in his months alone, he had found only ruins and tatters, save for a few scattered villages who he had had no heart to warn of their inevitable destruction. Since being found by Jack and Megan and the sparse remnants of the Who fleet that they fought with, he had come to terms with the knowledge that he might not set foot in another Who city within his lifetime.

Now the ship slowed its dive, evening out steadily.

"We're probably coming over the Causeway," said Megan. Her voice quivered a little; Orion realized that both of his companions looked shaken. He was unsure why he wasn't; he had reacted to the blast, but it had not rattled him at all. He sighed as he nodded in agreement with Megan's words; perhaps the dull veil that had settled over him on his solitary trek had not yet lifted entirely.

Across the Causeway, according to Jack, over a trail of fallen trees, slowly shaken down over the years by the intense air traffic overhead, lay the city of Eilayss, exposed to the sky, still standing by sole virtue of the thousands of hidden EIRG batteries that the lice were still trying to purge from the thick forests around the city.

As they slowed, the doors slid open again with a soft hiss; cold wind fluttered around within the cabin, and Orion could see the landing platform below. When they landed, the jolt of deceleration ran up his spine uncomfortably, and he winced. The whirring of the rotors began to slow, before stopping entirely, leaving the sound of whirling wind muffled by his dulled ears.

Jack was the first to exit, striding confidently from the tricopter. The other soldiers, Megan first, followed. Orion emerged behind them, rubbing his sore back. Perhaps a tiny sliver of ego despised Jack leading the soldiers, but Orion tempered those feelings with the knowledge that he was by no means fit to lead. He was still recovering.

- Nuke goes off in Eilayss, they have to retreat underground. Orion is talking to soldier when it happens; his face gets suddenly bright and he falls over, screaming because he's blinded.
- Spends 2 weeks underground
- Myron's group gets attacked, has to flee into woods even further.

Orion has Dholeska.

It was killing him. It was killing him and he was losing the fight. He could feel himself slipping away, his body weakened significantly. Not as though he were bound down, but as though the strings of muscle had been cut, trimmed down until there was but a thread left behind.

On his feet, to go to the bathroom or get a drink when he was too thirsty to wait for the nurse, he noticed he could still move decently well, but when he lay back down he was all but spent, liquid pulsing through his exhausted legs, aches clenching on his tired calves, his feet numb.

He would wake up suddenly, mucus clogging his nostrils, reaching down the back of his throat, dulling his hearing. The stench of his own sweat clung to him, though it barely filtered through. The rashes on his wrists and arms itched fiercely, demanding he scratch at them, but he could barely move his hands. It was futile, anyway; scratching at the red patches only invited the sensation back tenfold.

There could not be much standing between him and death. His flesh swelled; soon he would be as the victims he had seen before, skin rumpled, lumped and bunched up in odd places as though tethered down, as though a hundred rubber bands crisscrossed his body. His face would be all but a flat, featureless lump, his skull melted, his jaws and vertebrae fused together as the virus commanded his body to commit suicide.

He slammed his fist against the side of his bed. He could not die!

At once he was on his feet, stumbling through the darkness. He could not die, he could not die without passing on the Chosen line. It had to be done.

He passed through the archway, to the other room where the rest of them were sleeping. Megan was curled up in her bunk, a solid blue wool blanket drawn over her.

His head pounded with the simple effort of moving around. He inhaled, drawing a deep breath through his sore, tattered lungs.

His hand touched her shoulder.

"Megan," he croaked, shocked by the weakness of his own voice.

She did not respond.

"Megan!" he hissed, then descended into a fit of coughing. He grabbed his mouth. Jack snored across the room, a gentle purr like a tiger. He could not wake them. Only her.

He shook her shoulder, and her eyes opened.

"Orion?" she whispered, "What?"

"I ... we ... I need you for something." He didn't know what to say. But it would not matter in a few hours. "We ... need to have sex. You and I."

"What the hell? What ... what are you talking about?"

Orion felt a surge of frustration; he could barely think. A soft hissing, like radio static, grew in the background, and he could not tell if it was something in the bunker, or the virus eating away at his sense of hearing.

"I ... I'm serious. I need ... I need a child. I have to pass on my ... genes. Please. Megan, I swear this is –"

She stared at him.

Suddenly, something heavy slammed into Orion's temple. He felt reality fly away, as though he had left it behind as he was flung sideways, partly naked, onto the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" came a growl from off to the side. Something slammed into his

stomach, curling him up into a painfully tight ball, straining his ruined back muscles. He faded in and out of consciousness rapidly, each new wave of gray fuzziness threatening to take him under entirely.

Another blow impacted his stomach, and he lost his grip entirely.

Jack slammed his fist into Orion's stomach over and over heated

Your blood on my hands isn't worth it. I'll the world above take care of it for me.

He awoke with his arm chained to a pipe by cold manacles that bit into his sore wrist. Instinctively, he tugged at them, then let his arms go limp. The floor was cold beneath his legs, barely sheltered from the frigid stone by his thin pants. The room he was in was bare, but for a single calendar hanging from the wall, askew, one page curled halfway down so as to cover anything but the blank, faded outline of the grid that organized the days into meaningless squares. He stared at it, disoriented, as the events of the previous night swelled up within him, to slam against his awareness with such force that at once he slammed himself against the wall. What had he done?

Had it even been the previous night? What day was it? All that he knew was that it had been six months since the fall of Sarengarth. How long ago had that day been? He remembered that Megan had told him that when they had landed here. That had been four days ago...

Megan...

Immediately, he wanted to kill himself. He could never face the woman again. She and Jack, together, had saved his life, and he had tried to rape her in return for it.

The dryness in his throat clawed at him; he coughed, a rasping sound escaping his mouth, barely relieving it. He felt the Dholeska's grip on him loosening; but that was part of its guile, allowing the victim a short respite before raging through his body one last time and finishing him off. Right now, he was laying in the eye of the storm, and it was passing, quickly.

He closed his eyes, begging for death, begging for the disease to kill him before he had to see either Jack, or Megan, or any of the soldiers. In his desperation, he had seen no other option, had been driven out of his mind by an illness taking his life. But how could he ever explain that to them? Had it been Jack or Megan, or any decent person Orion had ever known, they would take a painful death over hurting a friend. Self-sacrifice was everything to them; it was one of the only things that separated them from the lice.

But self-interest hadn't driven him. He knew the Chosen bloodline had to be passed on. The abilities he had, the Whos needed them more than they needed him or any other person. It was crucial. Why had he only had two siblings, one dying in infancy? Why hadn't his father had brothers? Why hadn't he had uncles? Why was their family all but a straight line, of either only children, or families whittled down to a single survivor?

The impersonality of his urge to reproduce almost sickened him. He had hoped to impregnate Megan, with no thought to the child's future, its life. Or to hers. The only thought registering in his mind had been a need to preserve something he saw as precious, a crucial advantage in a war. Was he any better than someone like Timeless? Maybe they were on different sides, but they both understood the value of "necessary evils."

No, Orion told himself. Timeless would have enjoyed it.

The door opened. It was Megan.

Orion struggled to keep the fear off his face; he inhaled deeply, trying to throw off the anxiety that inundated his entire body. Cold, dust-ridden air spilled into his lungs, and he coughed shallowly, forcing it back out. When he raised his head again, she was inside the room, walking slowly, dressed in her simple uniform, an unreadable expression on her face. She leaned against the wall, staring at him.

"Jack is thinking about killing you," she said simply, staring at him.

"He probably should," said Orion.

"Shut up," she snapped instantly, suddenly fixing him with a burning expression, "I don't need to hear an ounce of your damned self-pity. You know what you did."

"I know what I did," Orion replied, his voice wavering.

"What... *why* the hell did you? What... what on earth possessed you?"

"You're facing me."

Megan's face twisted into a hateful expression.

"What, I'm supposed to be scared of you? Cry in the corner like a poor helpless little girl? I need some sort of psychological help now?"

She paced around the room now, almost frantically, her hair trailing behind her.

"I've had a breaker pin me to the ground by a spike through my arm, and I shot the thing in the head, and rolled off, only to get knocked off my feet by the blast, and I'm still here. I had a parasite leap on my back, stick it's little pincers in my arm, and I managed to rip the thing off. I killed an attalack, *by myself*. I think I've been through worse."

Orion just watched her. He had no words.

"If you hadn't caught me by surprise, I would have broken your fucking neck," she added.

He nodded. She stared back at him, her fervent expression betraying her urge to last out at him. She crossed her arms in front of her, standing rigid.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, "I swear I did not mean to hurt you."

"You thought that was supposed to be *fun* for me? What the hell—"

"No," he interrupted, "I thought I was dying. I needed to... pass on my genes. I have to. I can't die without a child. Whatever I have, it matters more than me. It's something I inherited from my father. The Dholeska was – probably still is – killing me. I was desperate. Megan, I'm ... I'm so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing."

"You sure knew damn well what you were doing."

"I thought this whole morning about killing myself."

"Like you would get off that easy."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

He met her eyes, her expression hardened with fury, suppressed hurt. Something akin to frigid mercury hardened in his chest, driving the words he meant to say next from his mind. Even if, somehow, he forgave himself, she never would.

"What should I do?"

Megan leaned back against the wall, looking at him, then looking away. She blinked; a thin tear slid down her face, visible only by the reflective streak it left on her cheek.

"I don't know," she said.

"Megan, I swear to god I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do to make it up to you, nothing I could ever do to make up for something like that. Even if my apology is worthless, I wanted to... say it anyway."

She looked at him, tears flooding down her face now, and if anything it was worse than when she was angry at him. Pure, unadulterated self-loathing overflowed his mind. He strained his swollen wrists against the cold manacles; sharp, cathartic pain pulsing through him.

The door opened behind Megan; Jack stood in the doorway, his expression livid, as though he had prepared beforehand, swelling himself up with hatred. Dread replaced anger as he strode into the room, glowering at Orion. His fist tightened.

"Jack, don't."

"You don't have to be scared of him."

"I'm not," she said. Jack turned around.

"He tried to defile you just because he caught a virus. I watched half the damn children in Eilayss dying of the Dholeska, and he thinks it made him special."

"No," said Orion. Jack wheeled around, his eyes bulging with barely contained fury.

“Kill me if you want,” said Orion, “I won't deny I deserve it now. But I am sorry for what I did, and I know that even if – ”

“Spare me the bullshit. I want an explanation. You come up with something decent, I might let you go without putting a bullet in your spine first.”

The weight of the words hit Orion, and his speech faltered. *I might let you go.* No matter what, his time here was over. The best he hope for was not being killed, and while he had stood behind his words, he did not want to die. Guilt wracked his body, but if he was dead there was no way to heal the harm he had caused. He took a deep breath.

“I'll tell you what I told Megan.”

“You'd better have one hell of an explanation as to why–”

“I was Chosen,” said Orion.

Jack stared at him, then cracked a laugh.

“Chosen'? What the hell is this– ”

“I don't know how, or why, I just know that my genes ... they have to be passed on. I have a gift of... insight. I can see into the future, see when something is going to happen a split-second before it does. I don't know if it's supernatural, or just insanely fast reflexes, but...”

He stopped when he saw Jack's expression.

“So you wanted to impregnate Megan with some sort of... freak mutation?” he demanded, advancing on Orion, “You couldn't get tail any other way, so you decided the best way was to – ”

“Jack,” said Megan, her speech cracked with emotion.

He stopped, sighed, and leaned back, his biceps relaxing.

“I will give you a gun, some ammo, some food and water. Be glad you're even getting that,” he said, pacing back and forth before Orion, “You can leave by the elevator. Your fate is your own. But you're not welcome here. Ever again.”

His face did not react, but the weight of the words, of his stupid, horrible mistake, bore into Orion's chest, flattening his lungs, denying him a voice until Jack spoke again.

“Do you understand?”

Even from several feet away, Orion could feel Jack's hot breath on his face.

“Yes.”

“Good. I'll get it.”

He walked loudly out of the room, the door closing with a sound one notch short of slamming. Orion looked back to Megan. Her tears were drying now, her face reddened but returning to normal. He averted his eyes, staring at the floor, first shame, then desperation washing through him. Outside, the glazed dust of nuclear fallout still hung in the air, as did fresh strains of the Dholeska virus, ready to cling to his lungs and drag him back into a state of near-death. It felt selfish to consider his own fate, when he had brought it on himself. Even if he did make it out, he would die from either radiation, disease, or an enemy's bullet.

Perhaps he would simply wander into the woods and end it, quietly. He would have a gun. It would be better than being captured again, better than living out his last days lost in crushing guilt, no matter how much he deserved it.

Megan was no longer looking at him, merely staring out the window, her hand on her hip, her fingers occasionally tracing the handle of her knife. The sight stung Orion. His mind dwelt on what was to come. Should he survive, where would he go? What place was there left for him? Macalavay, Sarengarth... one by one, the lice took the places he called home away from him.

With a click and sudden rush of air, Jack returned, eyes bulging slightly, a pack, a long, wooden rifle Orion recognized as the one he had carried when they found him, and a belt with a few pouches and a sheathed knife. Jack tossed it to Orion, who caught it.

“Stand up.”

He obeyed, rising to his feet, warm blood flooding his forehead, making him feel lightheaded.

Megan looked away as he passed. He wanted to apologize to her, but one look at Jack's expression was enough to keep his mouth shut.

Down the gray, musty corridors, the hum of electricity and thrumming drone of air and water through the pipes overhead, Jack led him to the elevator. Pressing his finger to the button, he turned around as the gate clattered open. His expression was rigid, held no sign that this was a sentimental goodbye. A pit sank in Orion's stomach; this was it, he was leaving them.

He stepped through the spreading grate, onto the rusty orange metal that covered the floor. Jack turned around as he walked past, staring at him, pushing the button again to close the lift. Suddenly distracted by the interior of the elevator, Orion heard Jack say something as the doors closed.

With a rumble, the elevator began its progress upward, the small car pitch black but for a pair of red emergency lights, pill-shaped, encircled by wire mesh. Orion stared at them; the light was so dim that he could look right at them with no discomfort.

After what could have been a minute, maybe more, he realized the bundle Jack had given him still hung limply from his hand. He slung the backpack around his shoulder, twisting his arm to fit through the other strap, and slid the belt through the loops at his waist, tightening and clipping it on. The rifle appeared no different than when he had last used it; the clips were refilled, the scope unscathed, the wood more polished if anything. The rifle's condition mystified Orion; he thought that they had gotten rid of it.

With a rattle of finality, the elevator reached its destination; the doors slid open to the long hallway they had fled down, the smooth linoleum floor layered with dust and chunks of concrete. An entire section of the ceiling had fallen in, allowing pale sunlight to glint bright off the floor. Through the hole, Orion could see the sky. Already, the dust from the nuclear explosion had cleared away, leaving behind an idyllic cerulean sky.

Orion's footsteps clicked and squeaked against the floor as he walked, briskly but cautiously, down the corridor, the iron doors, sundered by the cannon fire they had sustained, leaning against the wall, askew. They grew larger and larger as he grew closer; as he walked past them, to the hillside trenches outside, they seemed thicker than he remembered them. Perhaps everything would seem larger after two weeks in the claustrophobic chambers below.

The worn grass was thick with white dust, like a frosting of snow. Orion spotted a dead louse soldier, on his side, chest armor punctured in several places, dried blood crusting the wound. He reached for the fallen soldier's gas mask, pulling it away, sliding it over his face. The stench of industrial oil, burnt rubber, and foul breath met his nostrils; he almost threw it away, but knew it would be vital to his survival, would filter out the Dholeska until he could get away from here.

He set off down the hillside, between the ruined trenches, the distant sight of the Causeway sinking below the trees as he descended. Averting his eyes from the bodies that lay strewn about, he continued until he was walking across the fields around the hill, then toward the trees beyond. Here, most of the bodies were lice, lying rigid and curled in the grass like dead insects.

At the forest's edge, he turned back, looking at the dilapidated ruin of Teeroek. Even weeks later, wisps of smoke rose in some places, surely still-burning fuel fires. One of the larger towers was fully collapsed, but the top half was missing, as though sheared off and taken away. He became aware of how solemn his expression was; with a sigh, he turned back to the trees, and walked on into the woods.

The thin trees stood up like a bed of nails, the forest floor uncluttered but for a layer of pine needles, an occasional root, and, here and there, a branch, or a few smaller plants. One or two might be mildly poisonous, but he swept through them anyway, uncaring.

Perhaps it was time to die.

No, he had done what he had done, a terrible thing, for a reason. That reason was still valid. He could not die. Whatever it was about him, he knew it was vital. He knew it was important.

He came to a woodland stream, the mask dulling its tranquil babbling. He tried to skip across the shallow water, but slipped, the break mask throwing off his depth perception. He fell hard on his hip,

rolling over, cold water flowing over his leg.

Instead of getting up, he lay there for a moment. His pants were already wet, there was no point now. He felt the stream wash the dust from his legs, scouring it clean, making him feel like a creature of moisture of life, instead of iron and death.

After a moment, he thrust off the mask; his bout with the virus had probably inoculated him already. He slid himself further into the water, sighing. Slowly his skin, then his muscles, grew all but numb, acclimating to the feel of the flowing stream. He lay his head back, his mind drifting.

He got up, stripped the clothes from his body, and washed himself, splashing water onto his face. Every warrior's instinct screamed at him not to expose himself so flagrantly, but he did not care. Let the lice come and shoot him now, if they wanted, let him die in a cool stream. Even if he bled to death, the water would soothe his wounds. Anyway, there were worse ways to die.

After a while, he pulled himself from the water, standing on the leaves, letting what sun filtered through the trees dry him. Eventually, he slid his clothes back on, slung the rifle over his back again, and set off again, the air cooling his damp skin as he walked.

The fading sun gathered the remaining rays of light in a tight bundle, dragging them with it through the clouds near the horizon. It hovered there, fat and content, swollen and dim, tinting the deep purple sky. The twilight breeze carried the smells of autumn; pine and drained chlorophyll, and the elusive scent of cold air. Brisk promises of wonder and adventure, freedom, soaked through the air, an almost childish feeling.

Myron walked next to Abby, clutching her hand, his fingers locked in place by the cold. Their feet shuffled through the soft leaves; behind them, children played amongst the larger piles that gathered on the forest floor, before their parents dragged them forward. Myron grinned as he watched them. With his wife by his side, and the beautiful night, it was easy to forget the potential terror that hung in that mysterious, shrouded sky.

But the gorgeous day had infected the people of Neverfall. They clustered in groups, talking cautiously but eagerly, woolen clothes bundled as they huddled together. Even Pranesti seemed cheerful, if any of the psionists could be said to have any moods beyond their ordinary lukewarm temperament. He strode at the head of the group, robes trailing over the leaves like a rustling ghost. His bleached, billowing clothes were the most visible in the fading light.

"It almost makes all this worth it, doesn't it?" said Abby contentedly, watching the treetops rustling in the soft wind, their silhouette black against the deep violet clouds.

"It does," Myron replied, his arm gently encircling her shoulders.

"I wish we could just live out here," she said.

"We pretty much have been."

Abby chuckled softly, her white teeth strangely bright in the dim light.

"No, I mean nights like this. Days like this. Just forever."

"I'd like that."

She smiled warmly, the few lines on her face disappearing entirely. Her grin faded suddenly. White light bathed the clearing, stark shadows suddenly visible on the forest floor. Someone screamed.

"Down!" she hissed, her hand gripping his, and tugging him down amongst the leaves. A loud snap burst through the air, shaking the ground with its impact. Even with his eyes closed, Myron was temporarily blinded; he straightened up shakily.

"We need to get off the trail!"

He scrambled desperately through the leaves. Several were burning; he kicked them away as he ran, finally diving into the slope on the other side of the trail, dragging himself on it, fingers grasping the rough back of the thin trees, pulling himself forward, up the slope, feet sliding and scrabbling on the layer of leaves that lubricated the hillside as though it were oiled. At last he found a dark place, under

some fallen trees, as the roar of engines crescendoed overhead, soft thunks sounding against the wood of the slender trees. One branch popped, a sudden whine cutting annoyingly through Myron's ear. They were strafing the trail. Already, the others had mostly cleared the trail; Myron's heart sank as he saw several dark lumps left behind.

Another bright burst of light; when it cleared, Abby was beside him, her cold breath on his cheek. He held onto her tightly, arm wrapped around her wool jacket, clinging to her as much as she clung to him. At last, the waves of noise from the engines began to fade, this time permanently, and the screams subsided somewhat.

Myron began to get to his feet, to move down the slope, the stupidity of his actions clear in his mind, but compassion overwhelming them. He saw a dark shape writhing on the ground; he slid his arms under shoulders and dragged it away. It was a woman who couldn't be older than twenty-five, her face so pale it stood out as clearly as Pranesti's robes had. He fumbled for a flashlight, before his hands brushed against something hard in his pocket. He pulled it out eagerly and flicked it on.

Dark blood spread over the woman's green coat; her breath, having a shallow, even tempo before, accelerated desperately as he peeled the torn, stained cloth back to reveal the wound.

"Abby! Damn it, I need help here!"

He desperately pulled bits of fuzz from the fringes of the hole, then pulling the sleeve of the jacket over the wound, and pressing down. A second later, she was by his side, helping him lay the injured woman down by the side of the trail.

"Abby, I need you to get—"

"It's Aldrick."

"I need you to get me some bandages and antibiotics."

There was some rustling to the side, and a few heartbeats later a bottle and bundle of soft cloth was pushed into his hand. Myron pulled away the cloth for a moment; a fresh spurt of blood greeted him. He hastily fumbled with the bandages, drawing a length off, before pushing it down against the wound, staunching the flow, but soaking the cloth with a spreading black stain.

"Help me sit her up against the tree."

"That's not going to help," said Aldrick, "It's too close to her heart anyway. You just better hope it didn't nick a lung. Keep holding that down until the bleeding stops, that's the best we can do."

"We need to move her a little."

Together, one hand still firmly pressed over the bandages, they began to drag her to the edge of the trail. As they moved her, she let out a sudden shriek.

"Oh no..." said Aldrick fearfully as he looked at her.

"What?" Myron snapped instantly, muscles groaning under the strain of their respective tasks.

"Look."

The bullet had exited out her back. Myron grunted in frustration.

"Just forget that, help me bandage her back then."

They abandoned their efforts to move her, instead wrapping bandages tightly around her shoulder, holding them, trying to stop the bleeding. The woman groaned in pain, her breathing fragmented. Myron realized he had to keep her from going into shock.

"What's your name?" he said as he worked.

"Ki... anna," she replied between hard-earned breaths. Myron did not want to unnecessarily exert her, but he knew it was vital to keep her conscious and talking.

"It's a beautiful name. Do you have any family?" he continued, adjusting his grip on the bandages.

"Yeah, I ... I did. I had a husband and a son back at ... back at Sarengarth."

"I'm sorry," he said flatly.

"I ..." Kianna coughed violently, and her head sank back amongst the leaves.

"Damn it!" Myron shouted. Both his hands were occupied, pressing against opposite sides of her

body. "Aldrick!"

"There's nothing we can do, Myron. It went through her lung."

"What?"

Aldrick had nothing to offer but a helpless, horrified look. Kianna twitched a few more times, before her muscles slowly went limp, and her chest sank with finality.

Myron's breath hissed between his teeth. He let go of Kianna's body, let it slide off his knees. He rose to his feet, flung the bandages down, staggered over to a root-covered rock on the side of the trail, and sat down, forehead in his hands, elbows propped on his knees, letting hot frustration wash through him. Further along the trail, he saw the pale, ghostly swirled of Pranesti's robes as he led the others back onto the trail, and a sudden rush of rage hauled him to his feet.

He strode up the man without ceasing, grabbed him by the shoulders.

"How much farther is it?"

"I – I – a few more days," Pranesti stuttered.

"Don't give me your bullshit! Tell me the truth!"

"I ... I don't know for certain," said Pranesti, "I just know, that if the Underthrown come up, they will come up through that temple. The caves lead down to those far below. They would be fools not to surface there. We will be protected. And even if they do not arrive, it is far safer in there than in your village."

"I've heard this before," said Myron.

"It's still true," said Pranesti.

Myron's arm swung out behind him.

"Four of my people just died back there. I watched it happen to one of them," Myron hissed, "Any more, and it's on you."

Pranesti nodded timidly.

"Myron," came Abby's calm voice from behind him, but he ignored it.

"I didn't lead them out here so they could be target practice for the goddamn lice," said Myron.

"I understand," said Pranesti, "I am risking my people's lives as much as you are risking yours. Do not think I value you less than myself."

Myron drew back slightly, a little abashed, but still furious. His face relaxed a little, however, and he nodded wordlessly, before turning on his heel, and sweeping away.

"Myron..."

"Don't say anything. Just... not now."

Abby sighed.

"Okay."

scouts spot fortification of dhaika on trail ahead, Myron brings Aldrick and a few other soldiers, puts and Abby and Greiner in command of the group, should he not make it back. Pranesti insists on coming along, saying his abilities can help them.

After Orion leaves, Jack and Megan are both killed attacking a louse skytrain support, but succeed in planting the nuke and blowing it to pieces. Sniper kills most of jacks group, picking them off as they fight a group of louse soldiers, shoots megan in the arm, before jack flanks the soldiers with a shotgun, and finally sneaks up and stabs the sniper in the back. They continue; but then megan is shot, jack runs furiously forward, takes over gun truck that had been disabled, covers the nuke truck until it reaches the base of the tower, before being overwhelmed by the lice.

## Attacking the Skytrain

Thousands of kilometers away, a tricopter hovered barely a meter above the ground, hanging in the chill twilight air, stirring up a cloud of dust; a dangerous sign. They would have to move quickly, before they were found.

Jack leaped from the passenger bay first, his boots sending a few pebbles tumbling. Megan landed beside him a second later, followed by the rest of the squad. He glanced at her, the grim, confident expression on her pretty face, its delicate form framed by her sturdy helmet. Then he looked away from her, down the hill.

The massive scrub land mountains had once been a small country, the long clearings ideal for air-cruiser transport. Now, the lice had built a titanic skytrain running through its remains; nothing but the sandy hills and scraggly bushes. A lattice of clinical white lights blinked against the sky's evening azure, framing a great, tapering grid of a tower. Its base sat a few kilometers away, blocked by the slope of the hill; but that was their target. It had been in planning for almost a month now. They were going to take it down.

"Alright," said Jack, surveying their surroundings, "Get up there, push through, clear the way for the trucks. If we get tangled up fighting near the road, then what the hell, as long as we're distracting them from the actual threat."

"What about when the nukes go off?" said one of the soldiers.

"We run like hell," said Jack.

A few humorless laughs faded quickly.

"Time to move," he said.

He turned to Megan.

"You ready for this?" he muttered to her.

"Yeah. I'll take point," said Megan tensely.

Jack nodded, and fell behind her, ears still perked for any trace of the noise.

They moved up the hill, spread out in a shallow V-shape. Now and then, one would drop to a crouch, looking around, covering for his fellows. Even in the intense concentration of combat, Jack felt proud. He had trained these men and women, fought beside them, and they were among the best soldiers the whos could offer. Even with so many others dead, so many strongholds and cities fallen to the lice, they could still fight back, and sting.

Beside him, Megan moved like a stalking cat, her motions smooth but swift, sudden but graceful. She would spot the enemy before any of them.

The tower climbed higher and higher in his vision as they drew closer to it. The lights that clung to it illuminated the sandy slopes gently, like moonlight, but without its buttery quality. They were like stadium lights; Jack remembered sports games as a child, before the war had come to them, and changed everything.

Here and there, a few crickets chirped. More than once, a lizard skittered by; Megan almost shot one, her gun snapping to it an instant after it had moved. She lowered it slowly, turning to glare at Jack's grin.

Before long, the creatures grew quieter, leaving one less dangerous distraction. Jack nodded a silent thanks to the creatures as they moved between the tall bushes, carefully clearing behind each one.

Then, at once, like an engine ripping to life, the sudden guttural noise of gunfire tore at Jack's ears. The flickering light, fractured by the numerous, emaciated branches of the scrub-land bushes, disoriented Jack; reflexively, he flung himself to the ground. In the confusion, he spotted Megan, also flat on her stomach, neck craning as the whine of bullets overhead cut shreds of foliage that fluttered onto their backs. A scream came from behind Jack, the faint noise overwhelmed by the resolute roar of the unending barrage.

"See any?" Jack shouted.

Megan shook her head fiercely.

"Damn it!" he muttered to himself, unable to hear his own words. He raised his rifle, spraying blindly through the bushes next to him, then crawling along, elbow over elbow, to reach her.

From her position, he couldn't see much more; a fresh torrent forced him down. He could not possibly lie flatter.

"We need to move!" Megan shouted.

"Ready?"

"Now!"

Jack sprang clumsily into a crouch, bringing his rifle around to fire aimlessly at the enemy, the stock slamming into his temple. Pain flared through his forehead, but he ran onward, a pit in his stomach as the bullets whizzed by. Ahead of him, Megan leaped into a depression in the sand; he followed, looking back, spotting at least a few dark lumps on the ground, and the other soldiers having retreated.

"Of all things, a goddamn ambush," Megan muttered, shaking her head disdainfully, adjusting her rifle.

"We can go in from a flank. I don't think they saw us."

"Are you sure?" Her wide eyes looked genuinely curious.

"No. But it beats getting hunted down and killed."

She nodded, eyes peering over the top.

"Alright, let's go."

They circled around the bushes, spotting the enemy, in a rough, staggered line, crouched among the bushes barely ten meters away.

"Easy pickings," Megan whispered.

They opened fire, carefully placed bursts shattering helmets and sending heavy corpses sprawling. After every fifth shot, one of them moved, never letting their enemy get a bead on them. In barely thirty seconds, at least fifteen louse soldiers lay dead. It didn't take much longer for the others to get back on their feet and finish the job.

Jack turned to Megan, crouched behind a thready bush just a few steps away, ponytail sticking out below the back of her helmet. She wore a grin; Jack returned it involuntarily, despite where they were, and what they were doing.

He followed her back to the others, the cold sheen of sweat that covered Jack cooling him refreshingly, elation washing through him as the adrenaline slowly drained away.

"Four dead," one of the soldiers said with a heavy expression when he rejoined them.

"Leave them," said Jack, "We don't have time. Either that ambush had damn good direction, or there are a hundred more spread out through this whole desert and we just stumbled into one. We need to continue up the mountainside, clear out to the rendezvous point so the trucks can come through."

"Yes sir."

Megan came up beside him.

"I think those were just scouts or a patrol. They know how important this skytrain is; if they took our attack seriously, there would be Dhaika and hulks guarding it, not a few measly squads of infantry."

"Infantry that got the drop on us," Jack pointed out. As if in answer, Megan held up a pair of goggles; more hung from her arm, like a bunch of oversized wrist-watches.

"Took them. Anyone low on ammo should switch out for one of their assault rifles."

"Goggles?"

"Night vision, right?" Megan said, as though it were obvious.

"Right. Give."

She handed one to Jack, who wore a skeptical expression. It faded fast as he slid the lenses down over his eyes.

"I thought these were just for show."

The faint red outline that was now Megan shook her head.

"The lice are damned good night fighters, in some respects, but the goggles don't exactly help a lot with peripheral vision. That's why only a few of us should wear them. Usually we're on the defense, not the attack. Can't get to their bodies to take these, because by the time we do, there's more."

"Hand them out."

Within a few minutes, half the soldiers wore the lenses, and a few more had exchanged their assault rifles for the slender, boxy louse weapons.

"Don't they usually have those paperclip-looking submachine guns?" Jack said blankly as he examined the weapons.

"Yeah. Guess these guys are a step up," Megan muttered, "Could have to do with the open terrain. Longer range."

Jack nodded, looking around, further up the slope, to where the endless, latticed obelisk of pallid blue lights extended up into the sky for miles, until the lines fused together in a vanishing point.

"We need to get moving," he said.

"Let's go then."

They moved swiftly through the bushes, past the bodies, further up the slope, weaving between bushes. At one point Jack heard a hissing noise from a nearby bush, and immediately trained his rifle on it, the hairs on his back quivering with anticipation. But a small, slender shape slithered out, and at once he felt like a fool. Behind him, Megan giggled.

The night seemed almost romantically beautiful. Ironically. Had there not just been a brutal firefight, had there been just the tower above, the slivered slice of moon at the distant horizon, and cold air and ratcheting sound of crickets from around them, Jack would have taken Megan's hand as they walked. The other soldiers' boots made soft sloshing noises in the sand. The noise lulled Jack into an almost dangerous lack of awareness; now and then, he jolted himself back, glancing around alertly, panic rushing through him. A single second spent off-guard could kill him.

Without any landmark to punctuate the journey, the footsteps, the bushes, the hills grew together into a monotonous journey. In the distance, Jack heard the blurry barking of a distant firefight. He smiled. Their allies were making progress.

A gully ran along the base of the next hill, like a contour line, filled with colorful stones. The reds, grays, and whites contrasted the dusty color of the sand, even in the dim moonlight. Clacking sounds shot through Jack's ears as the soldiers stepped over them, dangerously loud to his sharp ears.

Suddenly, sharp pain wriggled through his chest, the distant sound of a gunshot registering fuzzily in his mind, drowned out by the soldiers around him. Looking down, he saw that the stock of his PXP had been shattered, spraying shards of plexiglass into him. The wounds were superficial, mostly; he was lucky the magazine hadn't been hit.

Beside him, the other soldiers had flattened into the gully, afraid to move. Jack grimaced, then belly-crawled over to where Megan lay still, not moving a muscle, her eyes wide, barely inches from the sand, as she peered up the hill.

"Peel off to the sides, we'll have to move through the bushes."

"Who?"

"Just me and you on one side. Get ... damn it, I don't know their names. Get two others on the other. We can't all go on the flanks, or they'll know what we're doing."

"Got it," Megan said, rolling over to transfer the orders.

"Now!" Jack shouted, "Go, go, go!"

He began to drag himself, arm over arm, toward the cover of the bushes, the riverbed rocks biting at his elbows, scratching in protest. He ignored them, until finally he could not longer see up to the top of the hill, and dared to get up. Turning, seeing that Megan was right behind him, he reached for the sidearm at his belt. As he did, he saw a single shot ripple cloth on a soldier's back, striking with uncanny accuracy.

"Sniper," he muttered to her, "I knew they'd have something like this."

"Then why are we pinned down?" Megan hissed as they made their way through the bushes, guns leading.

"What the fuck was I supposed to do about it? Anything in the air would be shot down in a matter of minutes. We're lucky we're not being strafed already. Besides, we're not pinned down. You and I, we're *never* pinned down."

He watched a smile crawl onto her face as she pushed through the stringy foliage.

"There they are," he said, "By that cluster of boulders."

"What about the sniper?"

"He already knows we're here."

As if on command, a fleck of red spattered Megan's chest; she shrieked with pain, a noise Jack had never heard from her before. All he saw was a gory hole in her arm, like mashed cherry, before she stumbled along, rifle barely hanging from her other hand, as they rushed for the protection of the rocks.

They failed to surprise the sniper, but the bulk of the troops were all but oblivious to their approach; they had sent only a single sentry to watch their flanks, who Jack easily eliminated with his pistol, a single shot to the head from barely ten meters away.

Spreading out, they took out the soldiers from the side, two or three falling in the first volley. Megan fired, grimacing with each burst, blood coating her entire forearm. Worry ran through Jack, but he shrugged it off. Firing his pistol as he ran, he left Megan to deal with the last of the troops; they were surprised, and either hiding or firing recklessly. Either way, they were easy prey for Megan and her spectacular aim.

Circling around behind the boulder, Jack ran as fast as he could, weaving unpredictably, slowing at some times and speeding up at others. Nothing too obvious, but not too subtle either; he heard a whine nearby, and watched a small scoop of sand flung up into the air. In the distance, he spotted the road that the bomb truck would be taking; it looked clear.

Then another bullet landed nearby, and forced him to focus.

He spotted a clump of bushes on a knoll, about forty meters from the louse lines, a little bit forward of them. It made sense, and explained why the sniper knew about them but the soldiers didn't, if he was a lone wolf, isolated from the rest.

He also realized how exposed he was.

A growl in the distance sounded like it was right next to him; he jumped as he ran, looking to the side to see several trucks, surely full of lice, moving down a hill further up the slope. It was distant, and harmless... for now.

Another shot whizzed by; Jack froze suddenly, then slumped to the ground, staying still, praying his ploy worked. If he didn't, he would be a sitting duck for the sniper's second shot, which would have the luxury of lining up directly on his forehead. Jack's hand had landed right next to the skin above his ear; he rubbed at it gingerly, realizing how soft it was, despite the hard skull underneath. He waited one, two, three seconds, all the way to ten, before springing up, running as fast as he had before, sand falling away from his body like rain. Jack still heard the even, spaced-out tempo as the sniper continued shooting... but not at him.

As he reached the cluster, the sniper straightened up, the smooth glass faceplate of a Dhaika reflecting the moonlight. He raised a handgun; Jack shot first, and the soldier doubled over, a bloody wound ripped in his chestplate. Jack fired again and again as he ran, until the gun was empty, and in a single fluid motion he drew his knife, colliding with the soldier, driving the blade up through his armpit, then tearing it out, bringing it across with a flourish, slicing at cloth and throat muscle. The Dhaika fell away, gurgling. Jack picked up the handgun, and fired it twice into the sniper's chest, then sank to his knees, panting, the cold sweat of his exertion catching up with him, the adrenaline flowing away, leaving his muscles weak. Dangerously weak.

Before long, Megan caught up, with four other soldiers.

"What happened to the rest?" Jack said, his breathing steady now.

"Dead," she said, shaking her head. A sudden gust of wind seemed to accentuate her solemn news, blowing her hair back like a flag, and chilling the sweat on Jack's neck, so that a tingle ran down his spine.

"What happened to the other group?"

"They're gone too, sniper must have got them while they moved up."

"Shit," Jack muttered, "So this is it?"

"Yeah."

"We need to get to the road, join the truck. There are more coming, we need to get out of here before they meet with the truck."

"Well, we're wasting time here then."

They headed for the road, now moving down a slope, kicking tiny torrents of sand ahead of their feet. Megan handed Jack a louse submachine gun.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"I'm fine, by the way," she said.

"I figured you were."

"It threw off my aim. I stopped the bleeding, and shot some morphine into it, but it's like writing with a cast on," she said, "We'd better be close."

"We are."

She looked at him.

"I love you," she muttered, confident they were far enough of the other soldiers, as to not be heard, "Whether we win this or not. Even if we screw the whole thing up, I still love you."

"Don't say that."

"Why?" she said, looking hurt, "I mean it."

"You don't need to. You can say that later."

"Maybe."

Reaching the road took another half an hour. They saw a pair of towers lining the road, a long metal fence, like a string of tinsel running through the desert, snaking out from each of them, to circle around, out of sight.

"Sentry towers," said Jack, "Wish I had grabbed that sniper rifle."

"Like you'd be able to hit them."

A sudden grumble startled them, but satisfaction gripped Jack as he looked to the source; further down the road, the bomb truck, with several others behind it, moving along the road with certainty.

"They're going to be busy with that gate for a few minutes, let's meet with them while we have the chance."

"Alright."

They sprinted down the slope, heedless of the danger. A streak of smoke broke free from one of the trucks, and slammed into the first sentry tower; it exploded in a red flash, and a shower of sparks. The second began to chatter out a response, before a second rocket silenced it as well.

The trucks coasted to a stop just a few meters from the gate that ran between the two towers; several soldier left the trucks, and clustered around it. There was a sharp bang, and the doors cracked apart. They were close enough to see faces; one looked panicked, and turned a rifle on them.

"Stop! We're friendly!" Jack yelled, thrusting his hands into the air. The weapons lowered, and a guilty expression ran across the soldier's flushed face. One of the squad leaders came forward.

"Where's the rest of your troops?" she asked, her face grim.

"Dead," said Megan as she came up behind Jack.

"This side is clear," said Jack, "We ran into a couple groups, cleared them out."

"All right," the soldier replied, "You can get in the back of one of the trucks, reload your guns. We're coming up on the base of the tower, and once we get close, you all will dismount and clear the way for us."

"I thought we were escorting the trucks."

"You are. But someone's got to punch a way through their lines. There's bound to be louse soldiers all around it by now. Not a lot; this line goes on for thousands and thousands of miles, with a..."

"Why are we changing the plan?" Jack demanded.

"Do you know how much planning went into this?" she shot back, "Weeks of preparation, getting the trucks close enough without being spotted. Plenty of people have already given their lives. Just because you've got a shit end of the deal now, doesn't let you back out. Get on the truck."

Jack let a thousand angry thoughts buzz through his mind, but he obeyed orders. He helped Megan up into the truck bay, then perched himself on the boards that had been nailed to the wall, as makeshift benches. She sat down beside him, her rifle across her lap.

"Is your arm okay?" he asked her, trying to ignore the gazes of the other soldiers.

"It's fine."

"Good," said Jack, surrendering and looking around at his new companions. One held a rocket launcher tube, its side tapping against his knee with a hollow thunk whenever the truck hit a bump; which it did often. It was as though the rest of the desert had been cleansed of rocks, and what they found had been used to build the road.

A blinding flash forced his thoughts away. Even with the obnoxious rocking of the truck, he felt the force of the blast, pulsing through his legs. Another landed, the sound almost deafening, the shock wave noticeably jolting the truck.

"Mortar fire!" one of the soldiers shouted.

*As if that weren't already obvious*, Jack thought as another shell burst not far away, briefly illuminating the sand in stark white. Each flash was like lightning, the thunder-like echo of distant shells completing the effect.

The truck slowed, then shuddered to a stop. Panic ran through Jack; he craned his neck as the driver exited the cabin.

"Out! Out! Out!" he shouted, then spun around suddenly, and dropped. Harsh cracking filled his ears, and a warm glow fell on the side of the truck; red and yellow tongues gripped the frame, eating away at the wooden boards that formed the walls. Jack leaped from the edge, then turned to catch Megan, as the panicking soldiers hurriedly exited the burning truck.

They fanned out into the bushes, returning fire at the enemy, who Jack realized with a start were barely twenty meters up the slope, behind sandbags. Behind them, the tower loomed, the base of the nearest leg not far away. He ran after Megan, taking shelter behind a rock. Another mortar shell landed nearby, showering them with sand.

"Flanking?" she asked.

"I don't think it will matter."

They sprang up, firing at the vague silhouettes ahead of them, the unfamiliar submachine gun chattering uncomfortably in Jack's grip. Muzzle flashes lit the dusty desert floor as if by strobe light, tormenting his mind as it worked furiously, trying to focus on a solution.

"Up the middle," he muttered.

"What?"

"Go! Up the middle!" Jack shouted.

Megan followed him as he sprang out from behind the rock, dashing for the next one. Bullets rained over their heads, but none found their marks. His boots skidded, and he almost stumbled, but a second later, his sweaty neck was pressed against the cool stone, its dust clinging to his moist skin, Megan beside him.

They sprang out again, a second later, firing as they moved, slowly taking boulders. Behind them, the other soldiers followed, advancing unsteadily up the slope, but advancing. One by one, the louse soldiers fell.

Off to the side, the bomb truck was still moving, slowly trundling past them. As he watched, a

mortar struck right next to it, rocking it violently, but it pushed through the dust cloud resolutely. Further up, another squad of lice moved toward it, gun flickering and crackling.

“Keep going!” Jack commanded.

They ran on. The lice noticed them, turning to fire back, but the first volley had already taken down three of their number. Within seconds, they lay dead in the sand, and Jack's troops were still moving, running alongside the truck.

A pair of Scorpions flew overhead, silhouetted against the night, like black bats flying at dusk. The eerie moan of their engines was punctuated by the sudden stutter of machine gun fire, blinking from the back of one of the escort trucks.

The sandbag-lined trenches that surrounded the base of the tower were within range now. There were few boulders here; simply a pockmarked, sandy slope, open save for a few skinny bushes here and there.

“Back to the trucks!” Jack roared to the soldiers. They closed in on the road.

Ahead, one of the trucks ahead of the bomb truck exploded, nearly flipping over. Just as Jack dashed onto the road, the flaming Scorpion fell from the sky, tracing a faint smoky line into the distant desert. He looked down into the valley, seeing it curve miles away and thousands of feet down, before disappearing, replaced a second later by a distant pinprick of billowing red.

A mortar shell crashed nearby. He heard screams of agony, but ignored them. Megan still followed his footsteps, barely a meter behind him as they weaved through the trucks. The mounted guns were ablaze, firing into the enemy lines.

A rocket hissing overhead, its bright trail momentarily blinding. Jack slipped, throwing his hands out in front of him. He heard the crackling noise of the truck's wheels, rolling steadily; he pushed himself to the side, out of the way. Then another hiss, and he was deaf.

His vision returned slowly, seeing first the bright flames, a form writhing within them. Then he was back on his feet, Megan's strong arms pulling him up.

“Got to keep running!” she shouted, dragging him away from the burning truck. He heaved himself back to his feet, and ran alongside her. He had dropped his gun, he would have to find another.

Ahead of them, soldiers moved slowly among the bomb truck, firing, then moving back to the cover it provided. Further ahead, soldiers spilled into the trenches.

“We've got to go help them,” he muttered. Megan nodded. Jack bent down, searching for a gun; he found a fallen soldier, a man whose arm had been nearly blown off, with another dark stain across his chest. His fingers wrapped around his rifle grip; Jack took it, pulling it away from the stiff fingers.

“Alright,” he said.

Leaning forward, keeping low, they dashed off the road, sprinting the ten meters between them and the trenches, leaping over the sandbags, landing roughly in the winding trenches below. A louse soldier came around the corner, surprised at their sudden entrance; Megan shot him down before she had entirely straightened up. Jack ran past her, swiveling his gun to the right; she was right behind him, looking off to the left.

“Which way?”

“Right. Towards the base. We've got to get in there.”

He went first, moving slowly through the maze. They rounded another corner, finding a trio of lice standing on wooden platforms, firing over the lip of the trenches, oblivious. Jack shot one in the back; the others did not even turn. Megan shot the second, and as the third realized what was happening, Jack put him down with a second burst before he could pull the trigger.

They ran past the corpses. Jack moved up to the next corner, dashing around it, gun ready, only to have a heavy mass slam into him. A glass faceplate flashed in his vision, then a dull blow to his face knocked him back into the sand. He felt something loose in his face.

He heard a pair of gunshots, and a grunt; then more shooting. Rolling to his feet, he saw Megan, still back at the corner, firing at two Dhaika at the other end of the passage, a third one, dead, by his side.

A grin started to slip onto his face, but stopped at Megan's scream.

She staggered backwards, a shocked expression on her face. Jack watched, frozen, as two more bullets punched into her chest, leaving blossoming red stains in their wake as they threw her backwards. Mouth agape, eyes wide, she fired as she fell, bullets flung blindly down the corridor.

Gathering up his weapon, Jack shot back before the Dhaika could switch targets, shattering one faceplate with a gory spray, and blowing the knees out from the other. Both staggered and fell; Jack did not wait to watch either, instead dashing for Megan as she, too, slumped to the ground.

She fell against the wall, arms limp at her side, head angled oddly, her eyes looking at him curiously. Blood covered her front, and on the wall above her were two messy stains, soaking into the packed sand. He reached for her chin, to lift it, to look into her eyes one last time. But all that greeted him was a glassy stare.

His knees buckled and gave out. He could not breathe fast enough. She was not dead. She was not dead. But here she was, taken from him without even a goodbye. He grunted, kicking her gun down the corridor, grabbing at his forehead.

Reality seemed to slip away. There was still the mission. It had to be finished.

He gathered up his rifle, and took Megan's sidearm. He walked up to the Dhaika soldier whose legs he had mangled, who lay on his back, arms reaching for his gun. Jack gritted his teeth, stomping on the soldier's chest, holding him in place, and firing into his blank faceplate, cracking it, lining the cracks with blood. Then he flung the gun to the ground.

Moving onward, through the trenches, he felt the panic sinking away. She was not dead.

He finally came to an incline, that led up out of the trenches, past a wire fence, the base of the tower barely thirty feet away. A louse soldier stood atop it, glowering down. He fired off four shots before Jack sent him staggering back, a pair of holes in his chest plate. He sprinted up the ramp, kicking the corpse as he did. She was not dead.

Fifteen meters or so to the right, the bomb truck was drawing toward the gate, alone, barely any soldiers still guarding it, a fierce, bloody firefight in close quarters. A louse soldier ran around the side of the truck, catching one who soldier unaware, and plunging a knife into his neck.

Jack raised his rifle, and fired off a burst at the knife-wielding louse. The first missed, but he shot again, and tore away the louse's soldier, flinging him against the side of the truck and away from his victim, who stood for a second more before toppling onto his back.

The gate was thick and heavily guarded; two machine gun nests above it, already silenced from afar, and a thick steel gate. A group of Whos ran ahead of the truck, slamming bricks of explosive against the gate, then flinging themselves to the side, and detonating them, obliterating it. The truck moved forward, pulling in just as Jack reached it, close enough to grab the bumper. His lungs pounded, begging for release, but he ignored him.

The interior, walls lined with crates, bathed them in cold, white light, three hallways leading away into the distance. Lice fired at them, the plunk of bullets echoing around the room. Jack gunned down waiting in the corner as he ran in, swiveling around to shoot at one in the opposite corner. Just as he lined up the sights, another Who finished it for him. The truck rumbled to a stop; the driver climbed out of the cabin, going for the bomb. He was gunned down, shouted with pain and toppling into the truck bay. Jack started with surprise, then ran for the truck, past the five or so Who soldiers who still stood, firing at the lice as they closed in.

His fingers burrowed into the wires that ran along the bomb. He found the black one, tugged at it, then ripped it free. There was a beep, not audible against the stuttering roar of the firefight, but Jack saw the red bulb blink twice. Fifteen seconds.

He vaulted over the side of the truck to join his allies. As he landed, the woman who stood next to him staggered back, her gun clattering onto the floor. Megan gripped his mind, but he had no time to mourn her now.

Jack squeezed the trigger, letting a continuous stream of fire slather the hallway, felling one, two,

three, four lice. But they shot back, and he was exposed, his back to the truck, and nothing between him and a hail of bullets.

The first one hit his thigh, and he fell to his knees, but kept shooting, the gun kicking against his weakening bicep. A fifth soldier fell, but then the next bullet pierced his arm. Another popped the truck's tire. He heard another scream from behind him; the last thing he saw was lice sprinting toward the truck, their goggles, emotionless though they were, somehow filled with desperation.

There was a furious beeping from behind him, and then there was nothing.

Orion is wounded by attack, staggers to house, ends up with couple, Gordon and Amelia, living in their home, after traveling hundreds of miles from Eilayss. Accesses resistance wavelink page, learns that Jack and Megan have died.

Orion's head swam as he made his way up the darkened hill, the wound at his side pulsating dangerously; it felt as though the force of it would throw him off balance. He was terrified to even lean to his right side, frightened he would somehow bend his shattered ribs, puncture his lungs with the broken shards. Even breathing was painful, and each step sent a definite wave of agony through his abdomen, like a spray of needles.

The lights bobbing in his blurred vision, near the top, drove him on. If the hilltop held a louse camp, he would have already been shot by sentries. His feet almost slipped on the dew-slick grass, and he felt a rush of the brisk night air brush his cheeks and neck. He grunted, then cursed his decision to ascend the hill.

At last he reached the door. He felt like he was heaving a heavy boulder, as he raised his fist to pound at the door. Frustration came over him at his own weakness, and he slammed it again, harder, before sinking to the ground, his fist cold, numb, and bruised. Behind him the door opened.

"Who is it?" came a suspicious voice, rusted and gravelly, but sharp and alert.

Orion turned his head, catching a blurry image of a man, not thin but not portly, with a grizzly, close-cut beard, holding a shotgun. He saw the man's head swivel to his prone form, then a warm buzzing and swift blackness overcame him.

When he awoke, he lay on his back, chilled linen sheets pressed against his skin uncomfortably. They felt wet; perhaps it was his own nervous sweat.

In another room, his dulled hearing heard distant clanging and hissing, and soft chattering. His entire right side was inflamed, but as Orion reached to touch it, his fingers were held back by a thick cast. He dared not move from his uncomfortable position.

Eventually, he sank back into sleep.

When he awoke, he was alone in a small, cozy-looking room. He lay on a red patterned couch, a wool blanket and teal quilt draped over him. He let his head roll to the side; a wide painting of a mountain and forest hung from the wall, flanked by several delicate plates on stands. A small table sat off to the right, its spindly, wooden legs supporting an old clock made of dark-chocolate-colored polished wood.

He tried to sit up

Finally arrive at temple.

Myron rolled over heavily, away from his wife.

"I've led them astray."

Abby's hand reached for his shoulder, cool but not uncomfortable, to draw him back.

"No you haven't," she whispered gently. Myron shrugged, starting hopelessly at the custard-colored light that the candles threw onto the ceiling.

"I screwed up. I've taken us away from Neverfall, hundreds and hundreds of miles. We're only still alive because Aldrick is the best damn hunter I've ever known, and because these forests were pretty much chock-full of deer. We'd have starved to death if not for him."

"But we didn't."

"We won't last the winter," Myron hissed insistently, turning to face her. She retreated, rolling onto her back, a crinkly look on her face as she stared at the ceiling.

"You know, when I was younger, I'd just started working for maintenance in Sarengarth. Not the most glamorous work for a girl fresh out school, right?" she said with a grin. It faded.

"The first attack, I remember sitting in a room with the electrical monitors for one of the lower branches ... I don't even remember which one now. Just listening to the humming, watching the little lights blink, thinking. Then I heard some alarm going off in the distance, and a cold chill ran through me, all by myself in that little room. I remember making it out, into one of the larger corridors with a window, watching the ships coming on that cold, crisp night. It was silent until you heard the dull roar. Then the explosions, the gunfire, as Sarengarth fought back. The sounds. Somber, but volatile and electric," she said, eyes glazed as she was lost in memory.

"I miss that place," Myron replied, but only halfheartedly.

"We fought so hard, so strong, for so long. And now we are going to hide? Live out all but meaningless lives hiding in our village? I would suffer through this ten more times for a sliver of hope of fighting back. *Really* fighting back. And I would bet you anything that almost anyone else here would take that bet with me."

"But not all of them."

Abby shook her head.

"Life gave us hard choices. At least we had a childhood, oblivious to the war. You in the valley, me in Sarengarth. But so many more didn't. They grew up with this, with mortality constantly nudging them, reminding them with dead family, dead friends. Always taught to fear that porcine face, the gnawed face behind that mask, the garbled hissing from that metal snout. I hear the stories children tell each other. Hiding won't change it; eventually every one of those fears will come true, for all of us. We can't hide. We can't delude ourselves. *You* can't delude yourself, Myron."

"I'm not the one deluding myself. We can't win."

"The Underthrown can. I heard so much about them, before Sarengarth fell, tales that came back from your journey with Orion."

"Full of embellishment, I'm sure," said Myron dully.

"Oh really?" Abby said, her eyes widening, "What about the thousands and thousands of ships, the cities strewn throughout caverns that are miles wide and miles tall. It sounded like another world, but with no sky, and safe from the lice."

"And you think they would abandon all that, to fight for us?" Myron said dismissively, "Orion was a fool to think that they would. Even his little ploy, making them think they weren't as safe as they thought they were; even then, they would hide down there forever rather than face what's up here."

"Forever?"

"What do they have to gain?" Myron asked, "A world with great swathes of land ruined by nuclear war? The stench of death? The Dholeska? They wouldn't fight for this place. Certainly not out of

caring. If they cared about us, they would have told us to seek shelter with them underground.”

“I don't think—”

“Then you are as much of an idiot as he was!” Myron growled. Abby shrank back, but her intense green eyes continued to bore into him.

“Then why did you lead us here?” she asked simply.

Myron paused.

“I don't know,” he replied after a moment.

And it was not a lie.

A few days passed before the people of Neverfall were settled in, stable enough that Myron trusted himself to leave them alone for a while. Pranesti had said that it could take hours, or even days, to open the seal. Myron did not understand, but knew better than to question his words. Already he was regretting leading his people so far. They would already be lucky to return to Neverfall by the first snowfall.

And that was assuming the village was still there, and had not been razed by the lice. In that case, perhaps Myron owed Pranesti a debt of gratitude. Or perhaps he owed it to himself, he did not know. Such thoughts had always seemed needless to him, pointless speculation about what had not happened.

They were still alive, and that was what counted for now.

The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous it sounded. An entire fleet, greater than even Sarengarth's had ever been, bursting free of a tiny gate in a cliffside temple? The implausibility was glaring. He gripped at his knee tightly, cursing his own stupid decision, one that he could not back out of now. They should leave, now. Why had he even brought the others along? To keep them safe by his side, afraid to let them out of his sight, as if they were his children? Look at what a great leader he was, he thought to himself bitterly, if anything they were safer without him.

Across from him, Abby and the others were eating in silence. Today was the day. The stale anger that remained between him and Abby still festered in the air, though it occurred to him that he was likely the only one that felt it. He let his self-pity fall away, and steadied himself. He could not undo what he had done. He would have to go through with this, unseal whatever seal existed in the lower levels of the temple, and then try to make the best of it.

His food slipped away, bite by bite, his thoughts distracting him. This morning's meal had been pancakes, even with syrup, a celebratory meal from the cooks. Even they bought this bullshit, Myron thought angrily. And now it had cost him enjoyment of the only real meal he had eaten in months.

As soon as his plate was clean, he went to Pranesti.

“No more delays, we've got

*It's been months now, traveling along the resistance railways, trying to leave the shame of my deeds behind me. The journey is so often a solitary one; or alongside refugees too broken, too shell-shocked for words. I have few of my own.*

*What more good can it do, to fight back? A person straps a few sticks of explosives to themselves, blows up a tank? A train? A hulk? A squad of enemies? Their sacrifices are for purposes of suicide just as much as for purposes of defiance.*

*I spent a night with a man who told me a story of when the lice had first taken his village, they had not killed anyone, simply rolled into the city along tanks. A girl, barely a young woman, approached them, lime-green dress behind her in the wind, a pair of roses in her hands. Perhaps the sight pulled on some forgotten string of empathy within the lice; they let her approach. But her thumb was on a button, and a second later there was a flash and the entire street shook. The girl was gone, instantly, into boiled dust, as was most of the tank.*

*The lice then lined up everyone in the street, and gunned them down as retribution, this man watching from his second-story window, seeing men, women, children fall to their knees, flung backwards, their blood intermingled in the horrible massacre. He barely escaped as the lice, caught up in their killing frenzy, halted their search long enough for him to slip away.*

*It is stories like these that make me realize that it is all but hopeless to fight now. It is survival that, at best, can be the focus of our lives. I will kill whatever louse soldiers stand in my way, but there is no longer a point in taking the fight to them. Perhaps ten thousand years from now, when our numbers have swollen, festered under the guise of defeat, we can rise again, strike down our foes. Or perhaps, we can live in the cracks of the world, the forgotten crevices and shelves of rock, and wait for their destructive souls to unravel themselves. The lice are as likely to sink the killing blade into their own chests as we are to do it for them. Only a matter of time.*

*Will I be alive? My father showed no signs of aging, even when he was fifty years old. Am I blessed with the same slow, if existent, decay? Timeless was at least as old as my father, and he was if anything more nimble than before when I last met him.*

*Having to watch my loved ones die from old age would be a relief, compared to the horrible ways I have lost them so far. I could live with it. I have no fear of death anymore, I am as familiar with the taste of my own blood, with what it feels like to have it drain from your body, and slowly be replaced, as if it is food and drink. My normal survival instincts, to run from danger, have been beaten so severely that they no longer register. I am still cautious, but it is a thought, and no longer an feeling.*

*It is ironic that I might live so long when, after so much loss, I long for the peace that the end of my life will bring me.*

*I have trudged so many miles I dare not estimate them; my feet permanently sore from exertion. I have done terrible things now, watched our war change from bleak siege to utter hopelessness. For so long, I was so certain that there had to be something more for me, a family one day, a life. But back and forth, like a pendulum; no, more slowly onward, like a wall of magma, the lice have progressed, crushing us.*

*How can I believe in anything? What god would give me these gifts, yet leave me to suffer through this with them?*

*It seems like so long ago, the journey to distant Faien'roh, meeting Calana, the sweeping, daring chases through that massive louse complex to get there. The night I spent sitting with her in that cliffside alcove, on the way to finding the secrets of our past. It has been a scant four years since I journeyed into that dark cave with her, with nothing but my wits and my weapons, trying to learn something that might help us. Years since our journey to Arsthonna, where my eyes were opened to the wide world. Years since our attacks on Rhashidon.*

*And what good has it done us?*

*Nothing.*

*I will try to free myself of this war now. Find a place to hide, to live out my life. Pass on the*

*Chosen bloodline, so that at last I can sink away, stop fighting this hopeless war, languish in the guilt of bestowing that hellish responsibility on some poor child who has done nothing to deserve it.*

From a distance, it looked like a prime candidate; a small, walled seaside village. Orion had wandered twenty kilometers from the train station, along the rocky, sandy hills, the salty scent of the sea already firmly embedded in his nostrils. It felt freeing; his weariness faded.

He could no longer count the days since he had left Gordon and Amelia. The long nights, watching the faint lights of louse towers shift against the horizon, a faint umber patch the only sign left of the moon, with no way to judge whether it was hundreds or thousands of kilometers between him and them, those mysterious distant lights reminding him that there was still depth to the world.

He padded across the sand, wondering how they would receive him. And wondering how long it would be before they forced him out again.

The wooden walls stood ten meters tall at most, little more than a primitive palisade. The fortification had certainly not been an original feature of the town. Orion grinned at the thought of such a flimsy defense trying to hold the lice at bay.

He weaved from side to side, almost drunkenly, suddenly uncaring of what lay within. If it meant a warm bed, or even a cold one, it was worth it; not another night leaning against his seat in the stale, dim light of a grimy train car.

“Don't step off the trail!” came a loud, authoritative voice from the wall. He stood barely fifty meters from it now, and jumped in surprise, nearly staggering off into the surrounding foliage.

“Stay on, unless you want to be blown to bits.”

Orion stared at the wall for a second, searching for its source, pondering the statement, before realizing. *Landmines*, he thought, *of course*. He kept walking.

“That's enough,” came the voice by the time he stood barely twenty meters from the gate. It was definitely female, he could tell that much. “

*I was more than grateful to come to Alderheim. The weeks, maybe even months that I spent wandering, ferried about, since I left the hospitality of Gordon and Amelia, have drained me, left an iron band around my head, like a vise squeezing all of the fullness from my heart and mind.*

*The first few days here, with the amber sunrises, the faint rush of the sea at night that lulls one into sleep, the wet boards of the palisade that guards this little town, I felt at home.*

*My guilt still hangs over me, but these people know nothing of it.*

*Somehow I have earned a title.*

*Three days after I arrived, they led me to a room where a girl, who could not have been older than sixteen or seventeen, lay dying on a faded bed sheet, a blanket barely covering her. Few would have called her beautiful, but her face was tapering and pleasant, but with a hardened edges to the soft curves. I could tell from her eyes that she had seen the trials of combat, been splattered with the blood of dying friend, realized with a stab of panic that her fate was no longer in her own hands, but in her enemies'. Simple blood poisoning, from a wound suffered in the battle where I was recovered, was killing her; the drugs to stop it had long since run out. Simply the sight of her pale face emanated cold clamminess; I had little doubt she would be dead by the morning.*

*So I sat with her, held her hand, stroked her hair. I never learned her name, but I talked to her, asked her about her life. Her parents had farmed the land for their entire lives; her own had come to fruition on barely thirty acres of field and forest. I found myself almost envying her peaceful life as she told me of it. Until she told me of the attacks, the fires at night, the screams as the chortling of bullets rent the cold black air, their stark echoes sending a fearful chill through one's heart that was never forgotten. Memories I knew too well.*

*I found a book, one that I have read, by the table. It was Teachings, the holy book of the Revenant. I took it as I listened to her, reading it when she faded into sleep. In that moment, I felt as though something was gleaming at me, a missing piece of my heritage, my destiny, that I had been avoiding out of disbelief. I had never had faith, had always countered it with cold, sometimes cynical logic; yet as I stared at the book, I recognized the need for it, to drive me forward if nothing else.*

*As she entered her final hours, I read to her, helped her find solace in the words of the Teachings, both eloquent and poignant. I do not know whether I helped her find peace in death; I was never a priest, my comfort to her was bumbling and, perhaps, self-indulgent. But as she died her face held a faint smile; in a world whose inhabitants are doomed, no fate is more desirable now.*

*Each time I wonder when I gained this label of "Teacher" among the dying resistance, when I now speak to them before battle, bless them with what words I can find, this episode swims to the surface. When she died, I clipped a little lock of her hair, and taped it inside of the book. I want to remember her, even if in such a shallow, possibly irreverent way. I do not want the people who die now to be forgotten; they are too few, too precious, to be anything but important. I want to believe that the Revenant waits for us, that death does not hold torment, but peace. I want to believe that I can bring to these people a hope that they have forgotten. I want to believe that this life is not simply some test, but for those who fail, there is still some hope beyond. I want to believe, simply, that there is hope.*

*How can I preach words that I do not believe in?*

*"Teacher!" came a shout over the soft lapping of the water, "Teacher."*

*Orion turned as Dreeun approached. It seemed strange, a fully-grown man calling his name in the same tone with which a child calls his mother. He had gained respect among these people, respect he proud of; but the almost worship-like adulation felt wrong.*

*"What is it, Dreeun?" Orion said almost resignedly, turning away from the golden waves.*

*"A supply transport is going to be refueling at a depot about fifteen miles out. We plan to hit it, today, and we wish for you to come with us."*

*His shoulders sank involuntarily. He did not want to watch more of them die.*

"I will come," he replied. Dreeun smiled.

"Good. We will wait for you by the gate."

Orion nodded. The reality of another day spent fighting, another few faces erased from the roster, left to dwell in memory, sank in uncomfortably. The sunrise-lit waves suddenly did not seem so beautiful. Each morning, since about a week after he had come here, was spent watching the sunrise on the beach, and he had found a sliver of solace in the chill morning, the rushing waves, and the warmth of the sun countering the brisk air.

Now he began to wander back to the small cottage he shared with two others. The white paint was now burnt and yellowed by the nascent sunlight, the warmth of it belying the cold. His footsteps clacked on the wooden porch, and as he pulled open the door, he was immediately greeted by the scent of cinnamon, and the melodious sound of soft whistling. In the kitchen, he found Trielle, her back turned to him, the little tinted window on the front of the oven lit.

"Morning," he murmured, walking past her to sit down at the table, "Is Cormick awake yet?"

She rolled her eyes.

"I doubt it. When is he ever up before nine?"

"He'll have to be today. We're going on another hit."

Trielle's rounded face fell.

"Dreeun said so," Orion explained.

"I guess I'll wake him up after I finish making breakfast," Trielle said, turning back to her work.

"No matter, I'll get him," Orion muttered. Sometimes awakening Cormick was peaceful; other times it was akin to disturbing an angry bear. He began to ascend the rickety wooden stairs, somewhat loudly, as a prelude. At the top, he creaked open Cormick's door slightly, and walked in. The man lay flat on his stomach, one arm bent at the elbow, hanging over the side, the covers drawn messily over him. Orion sighed.

"Come on Cormick," he said, gingerly shaking the man's shoulder. He responded by rolling his bulky form over, greeting Orion's nostrils with a wave of sweaty stench. Orion grimaced, looking over his shoulder, wanting to return to the safety of the cinnamon scent and Trielle's more pleasant company.

"Cormick, get up!" he shouted, tugging the covers off, his frustration mounting. It was childish, but effective; Cormick rolled over, the beard that wrapped his chin glistening with perspiration. His thick arms flailed wildly.

"Goddamn it, Teacher, why do you have to wake me like that?" his gruff voice growled.

"Be glad Trielle didn't do it. She was ready to get a bucket of water out of the river," Orion replied, turning back to the door as Cormick sat up.

"What's the deal anyway?" he demanded from behind him.

"Another hit. Refueling supply cruiser."

"You'd better be damned glad I'm the only one here big enough to take one of those HEG suits. Not like the rest of you toothpicks," he spat, still bitter at his sudden awakening.

Orion grinned.

"I'll be downstairs. Trielle's making some sort of cinnamon roll for breakfast."

"You eat it all, Teacher, and I will go to sleep with claws tonight."

The door opened, and Orion walked out, ignoring the strange comment.

Downstairs, breakfast was finished, and Orion was met with the pungent but welcome smell of fresh baking. Alderheim had once been a cultured seaside town, and what was left of that, had not run out yet. Orion had not had such well-made food since he had left Sarengarth.

"Morning Orion," Trielle said pleasantly. She was just a few inches shorter than Orion, but no thicker, despite being a mother of two. She was younger than he was, too, something that reminded Orion of his own lack of progeny every time he remembered it. One child, her son, was dead; the other had gone missing in Cullsweth, a town barely ten kilometers inland.

It had been her daughter, Marie. Trielle often spoke fondly of her, as though she were just in the

next room, barely out of earshot, rather than missing in a half-burnt town, and likely dead. Orion never shared this view with her; she repeatedly reaffirmed that her daughter was still alive, even when no one disagreed.

Orion suspected that it was for Cormick's benefit; he had been her husband's friend, and set to watch the girl the day that Cullsweth was attacked. But he had lost her, fled and saved himself. They seemed more or less amicable now, but Orion knew Cormick still felt guilty for it; more than once, he swore he had heard faint weeping from the man's room. Such a thing might seem comical from the rough-and-tumble, bear-like man, but to Orion it was simply disturbing.

He bit into the cinnamon roll she had placed before him, feeling the sweet, thick sauce swirling on his tongue, contrasting with the dry, crumbly bread. It was delicious. His unwanted title, the long months he had suffered on the road, all the things he had done, all of it seemed worth it for the excellent cooking.

He watched her work from behind, the fringes of her reddish hair bobbing in and out of the curve of her back as she turned from side to side, busily finishing the rest of the cinnamon rolls. With an unpleasant jolt, he remembered Megan, what he had tried to do to her, that she was dead now, that she had likely never forgiven him. He could not believe what he had done; the madness of the disease was no excuse. He pushed the thought from his mind; it did not belong here. But tendrils of the memory remained, tugging at his thoughts, until he could bear it no more.

"They're going out on another raid."

"Again?" Trielle sighed.

"Yeah."

"If we keep stirring up trouble like this, the lice are going find us and strike back."

"Like Cullsweth," said Orion.

"Yeah," said Trielle shakily. There was a pause.

"I think she's still alive, Tri, I really do."

"No," she said, her voice breaking now, "I... I mean, she can't be, not now, but ... but ..."

"Don't say stuff like that," Orion said firmly. Trielle looked at him, her thin, pretty face sunk with hopelessness. She sighed.

"I know," she said.

A few moments passed without conversation. Orion devoured the rest of the cinnamon roll to fill the gap in conversation. He thought of Cullsweth; a ruined town whose final wisps of smoke were fading away, right along with the hopes of holding it. Since he had come to Alderheim, he had spent days combing the rubble, conducting funerals for the dead.

He did not want to conduct one for Trielle's daughter.

A heavy clomping from the steps turned Orion's head; Cormick lumbered into the kitchen, the blariness of sleep still upon his face, his hair tangled.

"Good morning," he grumbled, reaching for one of the cinnamon rolls. Trielle reached her arm in front, blocking him.

"Get a plate," she said, giggling.

As Cormick opened the cupboard, Orion swallowed his final bite.

"Won't get far with sticky trigger fingers, will you?" he asked.

"Shut up," Cormick growled, sitting down heavily across the table, and beginning to pick at his roll. Orion grinned.

"I've got to wear that goddamned suit for three hours again today, I'm going to enjoy my breakfast." He took a bite, chewing curiously. "Excellent," he said, turning to nod to Trielle. She blushed slightly, watching him eat with a warm grin.

"Where are you going today, Tri?" said Orion, washing his plate in the sink.

"Probably out to the fields. Winter's coming, we need to finish the harvest or we won't have enough food."

"You're not coming with us?" Cormick said, his mouth full. Trielle just looked at him.

"I would have thought that Morette would need more people on watch," Orion said, "She knows they'll be looking here now that they've got Cullsweth."

"They haven't 'got' Cullsweth, Teacher," Cormick growled.

"No, they haven't," Orion corrected himself, "But they will."

"Over my dead body."

Orion grinned.

"Alright," he said, "We'll stop them."

"Today," Cormick insisted, "Today, we're gonna stop them. We're going to kick their sorry asses. Make them run."

"They haven't run in a long time, Cormick."

"But they have."

"Yeah."

"And they will."

Orion paused a moment, before nodding.

"More?" Trielle asked quietly, offering another plate of cinnamon rolls.

"No thanks, Tri, I'm stuffed," Orion said, "They were more than filling."

She smiled warmly as Cormick took another plateful. Orion looked at him.

"What?" he grumbled defensively, "I need it. You are a wolf, Teacher, skinny and fast. I am a bear, thick and tough. I need to be able to carry that big damn gun."

Trielle laughed, her back to them now.

"Fair enough," Orion said, inclining his head ever so slightly.

Cormick made short work of his second helping, and stood up, plate pinched between two fingers, sliding it into the sink.

"Thank you, Tri," he purred, ambling back to the stairs, presumably to don the bulky HEG suit he would wear into battle. Trielle watched him go.

"It makes it so easy to forget," she said, "When its like this, its easy to forget what happened with him."

"It wasn't his fault, Tri."

"You know it, and I know it. But he doesn't." She shook her head, "And next time we go back to Cullsweth, it won't matter."

"I thought you said –"

"Yeah, well then I'm stupid sometimes, then, right?"

Orion did not know how to react. She suddenly turned to him, so swiftly that Orion flinched away from her.

"She's alive, Orion, and damn it, I will find her if I die trying."

"We will, Tri. You won't die trying. We'll find her. She's alive."

"You swear?" Her expression was furious, yet it seemed vulnerable, like a half-melted sheet of ice that might crack at the slightest touch. Orion felt a curious tingle run across his forehead. He furrowed his brow.

"I swear," he said.

The frigid air brushed uncomfortably against Orion's papery skin. In sleep, the moisture in his body seemed to have retreated to the deepest crevices within him, leaving his flesh delicate and dry. His lips felt numb as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Once, a man wanted for proof of life's value," he read, glancing up from the tiny book in his hands, "With no hope or meaning, he had all but surrendered to languishing away his life. But the Revenant came to him, and showed him a path into light, that led from his own life, to fulfillment."

He glanced up again. The others watched him, perfectly silent, perfectly still. He continued.

"The man suffered in his work, for many long years, each time cursing the Revenant for his labor, for its endlessness."

Across the crowd, Morette caught his eye. She was a slight woman, long black hair falling down past her shoulders, clad in a brown fleece coat, a rifle strap cutting across her shoulder. She had lost a husband and four children in Cullsweth, before becoming the leader here. She watched him expectantly.

"At the end of this suffering, the man was to die. But the Revenant pointed him to what he created, to what it did for his children, for his friends' children. And his pain was holy, and he left this world fulfilled."

He closed the book.

"We've all fought, for years upon years. Losing brothers, sisters, lovers, fathers, mothers, friends. We all know this. We wonder why we are still fighting."

Thirty pairs of eyes seemed to bore into him. He drew in breath, feeling the chill air in his lungs. He shuddered.

"It is not because we have no choice," he said, but a thought cut through his mind: *yes it is*. He shook it away.

"It is not because we are fanatic, or suicidal," he continued, his mind flashing with memories of soldiers charging louse ranks, hand grenades clutched firmly in their fists.

"It is because we will stab at our enemy, tiny pinpricks, one at a time, then many, until he is driven away, like a beast in a swarm of wasps."

The soldiers watched him. So many of them had seen what he had, knew better. A thousand louse ships in the sky, looking like a swarm of ants surging against the atmosphere. How many "pinpricks" would that take? their eyes seemed to ask.

"There is an end in sight," Orion said, suddenly sure of his words, "I have seen it. Deep beneath this earth, our ancestors fled underground. I have been there, and there are millions. A great fleet, ready to fight. And they are coming. But we must keep the fight going until they come."

They knew it was a lie, but it was not. How could he convince them? He felt for the stone Iyilla had given him, before realizing he no longer had it. There was nothing for his words to stand on.

He realized the soldiers around him shifting; they had taken his pause as an indication that his speech was concluded. They milled about, gathering rifles, sliding clips of ammunition into belt pouches, dividing up rations. Morette made her way through the group, toward him.

"Teacher," she said, her eyes serious, "I need you to lead one of the groups. You will be distracting the enemy, while the group I lead, smaller, will get closer to the ship and plant the explosives."

"Alright," said Orion, "Any trucks?"

"No. This isn't a raid on soldiers in tents. We're hoping to blast a fueling station sky-high, and put a decent dent in the cruiser as well. Stealth is going to be our only option; that and the fact that they think we are entirely occupied in Cullsweth. Our soldiers have been putting up one hell of a fight."

"Yes, they have."

"But they won't have much hope if we don't take out the cruisers."

"If they thought we were important enough to use cruisers on us –"

"After today, I bet they will," Morette said, "Once we –"

"Arilyn," Orion said firmly.

"What?" she said impatiently.

"Looking too important will get us killed."

"*Not* looking important will get us killed faster," she said.

"If we start blowing up fuel depots, actually tearing into the stuff behind their front lines, they're going to get pissed. We won't just be a waste of time anymore."

"Their entire fleet has moved inland!" Morette countered, "They are clustering around the

strongholds, laying siege to them, not picking out the myriad of little towns that lay in between them.”

“If they have a fuel depot here, there's bound to be more ships on the way.”

Morette threw up her arms.

“Listen, Teacher,” she said, traces of venom in her voice, “You have been useful. Inspiring my soldiers. I know what you were before, but I am the leader here. You will not question my orders.”

“Your orders could get everyone in this town killed.”

She leaned close, her nose barely an inch from his. Up close, she wasn't so short; in fact, Orion doubted he had more than an inch or two on her.

“Do you think we will live much longer anyway?” she hissed, “Cullsweth is destroyed! They will crush us once winter comes! What am I supposed to do, let us die sitting here, in this town, waiting for it to happen? You said it yourself! We have a chance to sting our enemy before he stomps us out.”

“I didn't say we should hasten our own defeat.”

“We're not!”

“You are.”

She glared at him a moment longer, before turning away, ordering the soldiers about. Orion watched her, disdain in his eyes, but he swallowed it. The mission would not allow any rifts between its soldiers. And he could not stop it from happening, anyway.

Cormick found him, already clad in his HEG suit, a chain gun hanging from his shoulder, the chunky armor clustering around his arms, legs, and chest. The visor of the helmet was open, revealing a face that looked uncomfortable in its confines.

“I'm with you, as it turns out.”

“Yeah, we're running distraction,” Orion said, looking him over.

“Teacher,” he muttered, leaning closer, “What that true? What you said?”

“About?”

“The people. Underground.”

“Yes.”

“And you expected them to believe you?”

Orion sighed.

“I don't know. The people in this town are desperate for hope. I watched them as I spoke; they didn't buy any of it.”

“They respect you.”

“Respect doesn't garner belief.”

“But you weren't lying? People are coming?”

“I think so. They... they're there. I don't know if they are still coming.”

Cormick looked at him, expression hardening, even with his cheeks wrapped tightly, almost comically, in the cloth under his helmet.

“They said they would. But it's been ... nearly a year.”

Cormick looked out to the east, where the edge of the horizon, sunlight glinting off the sea, was barely visible over the wall that surrounded Alderheim.

“We can pray, can't we, Teacher?”

Orion paused, a chill running down his arms suddenly.

“Yes. We can pray, Cormick.”

Nearly an hour passed on the march before they could see Cullsweth; a smoking ember of a town, buildings cracked away, faint points of motion visible in the splintered streets. Hulks, most likely.

“Binoculars,” said Orion to Dreeun, who stood behind him. Orion took the binoculars and looked through them, surveying the ruins.

“Four or five hulks,” said Orion, “Clusters of five around each. Just patrolling the streets, likely

trying to clean up any survivors.”

“Why bother?” said Dreeun, “Why not attack Alderheim now?”

Orion shrugged.

“Maybe they want to savor it. You know they have a sick way of doing that.”

“Yeah,” said Dreeun, taking the binoculars back.

“I say we ought to go in now,” muttered Cormick from behind, “Find Marie, blow the hell out of whatever gets in our way.”

“Not today, Cormick,” said Orion, “Morette will have me hanged if she finds out I diverted our mission to look for a single child. But we will find her. One of these days, you, Trielle, and I will go, and we will find her.”

Cormick snorted.

“Like Morette would let me go. Can't risk her precious HEG suit.”

“Wish her luck finding another man who can wear that thing,” said Orion, clapping him on the shoulder as he walked by. Cormick grinned.

“Cruiser should be refueling a little further along this slope,” said Orion, “Let's go.”

Alderheim was held in by two walls: the sea on one side, a long, narrow ridge on the other. It was that slope, perhaps, that had stopped the lice so far. Not that they needed to worry about geographic features. They could easily transport enough lice by air to take Alderheim. They certainly had had no problem sending millions of ships to attack Sarengarth each year.

But thoughts of Sarengarth were still painful, even passing ones. They made him remember Emma, Cassiopeia, Calana. Myron. The names seemed so much more like names now, the faces fading, as though they were from another life. Something in Orion's mind kicked and clawed, desperately straining to hold onto them, and another felt free, unburdened. What good did it do, to mourn their deaths? Did it resurrect them somehow?

The cruiser station was easily visible, flanked by four tall blinking radio towers, a sinister miniature mockery of the massive louse sky-towers that strained to stab the sky above, through the highest clouds, up in the stratosphere. The cruiser bay was small, Orion guessed from the separation between the towers, likely meant for light cruisers. Barely a hundred meters, if that.

They crept between the straight, arrow-shaped pines, between the boulders that stuck out from the slope. Orion clutched his rifle, the bolt-action hunting rifle he had liberated from that ruined shack all those months ago. He'd shot dozens of Dholeska-infected with it, innocent people left insane. Now it was time to finally take some proper revenge on those who'd caused it.

“Dreeun, you've got the bombs?”

“I've got the bombs.”

“Good. Pick three favorites, move up to those trees, and get ready to run. Soon as we open up, you go for the cruiser, and then the fuel barrels. Prime them before you run. That way if you ... don't make it, they'll still go off. Damage something.”

“Alright.”

Orion sighed, chambered a round in his rifle, and motioned to the others. They moved up the slope, between the trees, stepping around the few leaves that lay on the ground.

“Cormick, when we get up there, find a good spot, and lay down whatever fire you can. You've got incendiary ammo?”

Cormick nodded.

“Good. Use it. Blow some fuel barrels sky high. The heat will wash out their goggles whether it kills any or not.”

“Okay, Teacher.”

“Stop calling me that.”

They found some boulders off to the right, far from where Orion had sent Dreeun. Cormick crouched behind one, peering over, his face barely visible through the grated mask that covered his face. He looked at Orion.

“This is good. Shoot from here. Far enough over, we'll draw them away from Dreeun.”

Orion nodded, and set his rifle on the rock, scanning carefully through the scope. A platform holding a light missile cruiser, about thirty louse soldiers, and about forty drudges hard at work refueling. Several pallets of fuel barrels sat off in one corner, farthest from Orion. As he looked at them, a hint of a smile came onto his face. He turned back.

“Everyone, find a spot in these rocks and trees. Spread out, but be quiet! When I fire the first shot, you open up.” His eyes found a young woman in the small crowd, with short, mousy brown hair, wearing a brown cap.

“Rusi,” he said, hoping that that was her name, “Have you got the RPG?”

“Yes, Teacher,” she said, unshouldering a tube, and four egg-shaped warheads.

“Good. Bring it here.”

She crouched, moving carefully forward, and handed it to Orion. He fitted the first rocket in, and twisted it into place. He glanced around; most of the troops were crouching behind the rocks, a few moving out into the trees. Looking down at the RPG, he flicked off the safety, and raised it to his shoulder.

“Thanks,” he said to Rusi.

“You're welcome.”

He aimed carefully, lining up the ancient iron sights with the bundle of barrels.

“This ought to make one hell of an entrance.”

He squeezed the trigger. Immediately, the rocket streaked out of the trees, leaving a tell-tale trail of white smoke behind it. It slammed into the barrels, the explosion rumbling, shaking the ground, the red and orange billowing before black smoke smothered them. Like scurrying ants, the lice began to move; the drudges scrambling for cover, the soldiers hiding behind whatever cover they could find, and returning fire.

“Nice shot,” said Cormick, his voice muffled by his mask, “You led 'em right to us! Damn smoke trail isn't obvious?”

“That was the whole idea,” said Orion, picking up his rifle. He peered through the scope, spotting a louse soldier running across the platform, from cover to cover. Just as he squeezed the trigger, Cormick opened up with his rotating gun, the brutally loud, fuzzy sound of its fire making Orion flinch. The shot still hit, striking the louse's arm, throwing the gun from his hand. But it kept running, sliding behind a stack of crates.

Shaking his head, Orion pulled back the bolt and looked for another target. He found one; a louse soldier with an assault rifle, peering back and forth from his perch behind a small shed. Orion fired a single shot; it struck the ground right in front of its feet. The louse sprang back behind the shed. Orion reloaded, then fired another shot at the corner of the shed. The louse slumped to his knees, flopping over into view.

Cormick's stream of bullets shredded crates, exploded barrels, and shredded any louse unlucky enough to get in its line of fire. Orion scanned frantically, looking for any louse that might be lining its sights up on Cormick, but found none.

Dreeun and his three handpicked soldiers were moving. Orion followed them, picking off what few lice stood in their way. One fell to louse bullets, but Dreeun and his soldiers kept running, unceasingly, backpacks bobbing on their shoulders. They ducked down behind a pair of metal cases suddenly; Orion watched sparks burst from the top. A lot of sparks.

Orion's eyes darted back to the front of the cruiser. Then he spotted it, with a sudden skip in his heartbeat. A hulk stood tall, its gun-arm vibrating steadily. It would rip through that crate in seconds, and Dreeun in split-seconds.

“Cormick!” Orion shouted, “The hulk!”

No response. Orion punched him in the arm.

“What the hell?”

“Shoot the damn hulk!” Orion roared.

“You got it!” shouted Cormick, swiveling his gun and opening fire on the creature. The first bullets tore into its leg, staggering it, but it reacted fast for such a bulky creature, raising its shield to protect itself from Cormick's fire.

Orion thought about trying the RPG, but that wouldn't be enough. A waste of rockets, for what a single bullet could do just as well. He lined up a shot on the hulk's ankle, right in a seam in the armor, and pulled the trigger. The creature twitched. Orion fired again, missing, his bullet ricocheting off the creature's armor, but the third and fourth struck true, driving into the creature's foot. It staggered a little, lowering its shield.

Cormick did not waste a moment, spraying a fresh wave bullets into the creature's shoulder and head. It roared, audibly, desperately trying to raise its shield again, but Cormick overwhelmed it. It slumped against the cruiser and collapsed, dead.

Beside Orion, Cormick's gun went silent, its barrels red-hot.

“Got to let it cool now,” said Cormick. Orion nodded, eyes still on Dreeun. Another of his soldiers lay dead behind the crate, but Dreeun had taken her backpack, and they sprinted on. He flung two near the cruiser's engines, watching as they skidded underneath. The other flung his at a massive pile of crates blocked by a low concrete wall; likely Cormick's next target, had his gun not overheated.

“Good,” whispered Orion, “Now get out of there.”

Dreeun turned and ran; a fresh wave of louse soldiers moved from the other side of the cruiser, past where the dead hulk lay, shooting as they ran. Dreeun returned fire, striking one down. Orion swiftly lined up a shot on another, shooting it in the neck. Two more lice fell to Orion's allies. Dreeun's companion fired desperately at one louse, wounding it, but it returned fire, a shotgun blast catching him in the shoulder and spinning him to the ground.

Orion shot another louse in the arm, as it tried to move around a stack of crates. He watched Dreeun drop his rifle, and pull out a handgun, shooting one louse dead center in its chest, and shooting another in the arm and neck. Both collapsed, but there were too many. A stream of bullets struck Dreeun in the face, flinging him onto his back.

The lice turned to the forest, just as the charges went off. The explosion seemed to such the air out of Orion's lungs, leaving nothing but heat behind. Orion forced his head down, ears ready to burst, Cormick laying down beside him. At last, as the echoes tore painfully through the trees, and finally faded, they lifted their heads again.

They had ripped a gaping hole in the cruiser's backside; engine and fuel line were exposed. Showers of sparks burst out intermittently, showering onto the fuel that dripped and poured from cracked pipes. The middle of the cruiser was withered, nothing left but a bent metal skeleton; the fuel crates were entirely gone, a blackened crater ripped through the concrete, at least a meter deep, in their place. The shed that Orion had shot the louse through was gone; as were most of the corpses. A few lice still stood, staggering about, some missing arms.

“Put them down,” said Orion. A brief moment of periodic gunfire, and the lice stopped moving, one by one. Orion looked at the wrecked cruiser, now burning freely.

“Good job,” he said, “Alright, let's go home.”

“What about Dreeun?” said Cormick, “Ought to bring his body back.”

“What body?” said Orion.

Cormick lifted the visor of his helmet, fixing Orion with a hard stare.

“He did what he meant to do. I'm sorry he's dead,” said Orion, “Looking for ashes, maybe a finger won't change that.”

Cormick turned his head to the side, looking at the scathed cruiser.

"I'll tell the family," said Orion.

"You do that," said Cormick.

"I will. Let's go."

By the time they returned, twilight shone on the tranquil waves, the bleached sand, and the celery-colored grass. Alderheim, a cluster of dark shapes and golden lights, now seemed more than ever like a seaside paradise.

"You think Trielle's got more cinnamon rolls for dinner?" asked Cormick, his suit clanking faintly as he walked.

"I think you need to start making your own food, Cormick, that's what I think."

"Why? She's good at it."

"Well what if she doesn't want to make food for your lazy ass anymore?"

"Lazy ass? Who stood in this sweaty suit all day, ripped up a hulk for you?"

"You know what I mean, Cormick. She stays at home and she doesn't want to."

The moon rose slowly as the sun set behind them, its creamy yellow glistening off the gentle black ripples as day met night. Orion looked out at the blurred horizon. Emma should have been here, she should have lived, long enough to see this. She had wanted to see an ocean, for so many years. She had told him one night, as they lay together, some night on the long Casa Novak siege. And she had, but it certainly wasn't what she'd had in mind. But this was.

Morette and a few soldiers stood waiting for them at the gates.

"Report," she said as soon as they were close.

"Blew two big holes in the cruiser, and there's nothing left of their fuel. Killed a hulk, and about thirty lice."

"Losses?"

"Eight. Four who went with Dreeun, and my group in the trees lost three." He paused. "Dreeun was killed as well."

Morette lowered her eyes.

"He was a good man."

"He was."

A few seconds passed, before one of the soldiers shifted uncomfortably.

"Go home, enjoy some dinner," said Morette, "You've earned it."

She turned away, her escorts following her back. Orion turned to his troops.

"Go home," he echoed, "You're dismissed."

Orion and Cormick stood as the soldiers walked past them, through the gates and into the town. Rusi smiled at Orion as she passed; he returned a half-hearted grin.

They stood together for a moment, quietly, looking out as a soft night wind rustled through the sea grass that topped the little dunes. They undulated like sea waves, weaving together, then untangling. The brisk breeze caught Orion's hair; he felt a few flecks of sand tickle his face, but he blinked and wiped them away.

"Well, I'm hungry," said Cormick. He walked off, the massive gun slung over his shoulder tapping his back with every other step. Orion looked up at the few visible stars, watching them for a moment, before turning and following him.

Trielle was almost asleep when they entered, laying on a couch.

"Dinner's in the kitchen," she muttered sleepily, "Help yourself."

Her face was tan. She had been out in the fields all day.

"You have a good day?" said Orion.

“Just go eat your stupid food,” said Trielle, tired and irritated.

He turned and walked into the kitchen, releasing his pack and rifle onto the floor. He wanted to change; the jacket he had worn for months still made him feel unclean when he wore it, though he had washed it here, let it dry in the seaside air. It smelled different, but felt the same, felt like his long months on the road. He shed it as well, and draped it over the back of his chair, taking a plate from the cupboard, portions of potatoes and vegetables from the half-empty bowls on the counter, and sat down across from Cormick, who was already digging in busily. They ate in silence for a few moments, before Trielle got up and walked over to them.

“How'd it go today?” she asked sleepily.

“Mission accomplished,” said Orion flatly.

“That's good,” said Trielle.

“Yeah. Dreeun's dead.”

Trielle froze suddenly.

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, we were sorry to see it,” said Cormick, “But he did it. Set the charges, blew a louse cruiser in half almost. Quite impressive.”

“Mm,” said Trielle, turning her back to them. She picked up a box of empty bottles, and carried them out a side door, dropping them outside, then turning back.

“So do I get to come next time?” she asked.

“I hope so,” said Orion.

“Enough to ask Morette if I can go out for once?”

Orion sighed. Cormick glanced between the two of them.

“Look, Trielle, she didn't let you go today because she thought you might try to slip off and look for Marie. Again.”

“She knows I wouldn't do that.”

“Really? Because you did it once.”

“Yeah, well if you had a daughter, missing in a city full of mindless killers, you might feel inclined to slip off from... what? Blowing up some fuel line? Ambushing a patrol? I don't know about you, but finding her is far more important – to *me* at least – than whether or not some stupid food trucks make it to where they're going.”

Orion paused.

“Look, I know how you feel—”

“No you don't! Did you ever – ”

“You think I haven't lost people too?” Orion shouted, “I had to hold my own sister while she bled out! Watched plenty of people I loved die!”

Trielle stood silent for a moment.

“You never told us about that, before,” muttered Cormick.

“Yeah, well, there's a reason for that,” said Orion fiercely. He turned back to Trielle. “You, me, everyone – they've all lost someone. They all want to go back to Cullsweth, look for their families, their friends. But we can't. Fighting back is more important. Let them ... let them not die in vain.”

“She's not dead, Orion.”

“I know she's not,” said Orion, winded now, “But we can't rush in there recklessly to get her, get ourselves killed. Then *no one* will be looking for her. They'll forget her. Believe me, Trielle, I want to find Marie too. When the time comes, we'll find it together. All three of us.”

“Every day she spends there is another day she's in danger!”

Orion sighed in surrender.

“Alright. I'll talk to her. But she's not happy with me already. I warned her not to send out so many raids, and call attention to us.”

“You did?” said Trielle, “After saying we should be fighting back, instead of looking for my

daughter?"

"Look," said Orion, "I ... there's a difference."

He stopped. Trielle was fixing him with a hard glare.

"Fine. You're right," said Orion, "I'll do it tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Actually, tonight. Why not?" said Orion. He stood up, his plate empty. "Be back in a few," he said, turning on his heel and walking for the door, grabbing his jacket as he went.

The screen door swung shut behind him, the street outside indigo in the dusk, a wavering, splintered line of custard yellow lights glowing softly along the rows of houses. The gravel crunched under his feet; a few others were out walking. One nodded to Orion as he passed.

"Hello Teacher."

"Hello," said Orion.

He strode on, resisting the urge to pull his hood up, and hide his identity. He did not understand why; he had been a leader in Sarengarth, had been responsible for decisions involving thousands if not millions. Yet here, being regaled as a teacher of religion, seemed strange to him. He spoke words he barely believed, to give hope. The last months since Sarengarth had fallen, he had drawn within himself, and it was uncomfortable to leave his shell.

Morette had to feel threatened by his popularity. Perhaps that was why she was so short with him. If he could only admit to her that he liked it no more than she did. That he did it to spread hope, for him as much as the others, not to glorify himself.

What glory was there anymore? The elation he had felt, watching the rolling waves of louse fighters crushed by the unrelenting, ground-shaking retaliation of mighty Sarengarth. Yet now the tree-city was a smoking shell, a thousand thousand kilometers away, and here he was, in the last little scrap of a town that still stood.

Now he watched the ocean waves as he walked along the beach boardwalk, around to Morette's home. She did not have a family, at least not anymore. Orion had never had the nerve to ask what had happened to them. Or perhaps it was her nature, to live alone.

A guard stood at her door, rifle slack in his grip. He stiffened to attention as Orion approached, less out of deference to him, as to look vigilant. Orion walked straight up to him.

"Request to see Miss Morette," he said politely but glumly, "Tell her it's Orion," he added.

"Alright," said the guard, turning and pushing inside. He returned a moment later, followed by Morette. She wore a thin, almost papery-looking red dress that dropped to her knees. It reminded Orion, vaguely, of Calana, her simple clothing, all those years ago when he had met her in Cale Veni. This place, by the seashore, the infinite sky and sea, unconfined by trees or mountains; raw nature. It was nothing like Faien'roh, yet it reminded him of the place, in spirit if not in style.

"Yes?" said Morette, and suddenly he had to focus.

"Ma'am," he said, inclining his head a little. It couldn't hurt.

"Drop it, Orion. What do you need?"

"I want to go to Cullsweth. I want to take Trielle and Cormick. I want to look for her daughter."

"Absolutely not. Cormick's got the only function HEG suit this town has. I can't risk it on a search for one person."

"We'll bring back as many as we can find. Maybe more people who can fight for us. Maybe –"

"You miss the point, Orion," she said, "I cannot risk lives like this, for nothing. For someone who is more than likely dead."

Orion nodded.

"Fine. I agree," he said, "But they're not your lives to risk."

"It's my damned HEG suit."

"Then keep it," said Orion, "But Trielle and I are going. If you don't like it ... well, you can kick us out. Exile us. Then we'll look for her on our own. And Cormick is coming with us."

Morette shook her head.

"I have no one else who can wear it," said Morette, "I need him."

"And he needs her," said Orion, "Arilyn, he feels responsible for Marie. I don't know exactly what the hell happened, but I can tell it had something to do with him. He was friends with Trielle's husband. Her father. He's dead, but she might still be alive."

"He's functioning fine," said Morette, turning and walking into her home, "Come in," she said to Orion, beckoning for him to follow.

He let the door shudder shut behind him. The moon was rising over the ocean, the waves splintering its light into a shimmering path that ran from the beach to the horizon. It was picturesque, and Orion felt a faint gust through the screen windows. He sat across from Morette, who had perched herself on a small, dark-green cloth chair. Orion sat back in the cushion.

"Tea?" she offered, holding up a small saucer.

"Sure," said Orion, "Thank you."

Morette took a long deep sip, then sighed. Her dark eyes met Orion's, and he felt a palpitating chill in his neck. Maybe it was just the cool air.

"Look, Orion, I appreciate what you've done for Alderheim. But there's only so much control I can allow you."

"This isn't control, Morette, this is me. And Trielle."

"We need all the people we can get," she said.

"Yes," said Orion, "But we can't leave them like that, to suffer when their loved ones might still be alive out there."

"The same people have said the same things," said Morette, "What do I do, let a mass exodus wander back into Cullsweth, to be massacred?"

Orion looked at her. He took a sip of the bitter tea – bitter, yet pleasantly so.

"You never had a family, did you?"

Morette's eyes narrowed.

"No," she said, "But I don't see how that's relevant."

"If you had, you'd know what it's like," said Orion.

"Let's leave my own life out of this," said Morette.

"Fine," said Orion, "But if you had someone trapped in that town, wouldn't you want to go get them? No matter what the risk?"

"Yes," said Morette, "And it's a stupid, self-absorbed desire."

"Fine," said Orion, "But we're still free people here. This isn't a prison?"

"Of course not," said Morette, "But –"

"Then we're going. Suit or not, guns or not, we're going soon. And we'll bring her back."

"And lead the lice to this town?"

Orion shook his head.

"No," he said, "They already know where we are, trust me. It's just a matter of time –"

"Swear it!" said Morette, "You swear you will not lead a thousand lice back here, in the pursuit of a single child!"

They locked eyes for a moment. Orion's gaze held hers, and he suddenly understood her. The obsessive need to sacrifice the few for the many. The need to protect this town, even when someday it would be doomed. This childless woman had adopted Alderheim as her own, and its inhabitants as her sons and daughters. Maybe that was too simple, insultingly simple. But it held a glimmer of the truth.

"I promise," said Orion, "I'll die before I'll lead them back here. So will everyone else."

"Fine," said Morette, "You may leave whatever day we don't have a raid planned. Which, likely, will be the next week or two at this rate. We've mostly run out of targets."

"We'll have plenty soon," said Orion. He stood up.

"Thanks for the tea," he said, turning away from her. He pushed out the door, and back into the

darkening dusk.

When he told Trielle, her face held rigid for a moment, sitting back on the couch near the door, before the faint hint of a smile appeared. Then it faded.

"I know I shouldn't get my hopes up," she said.

"Get them as high as you want," said Orion, "Trust me, if you're wrong, it won't matter how you felt before anyway."

She nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"Cormick's already asleep," she said.

"Not surprised," said Orion.

They looked at each other. Her blue eyes seemed to sag back into her face, making her look far older than she was. She had been married young, pushed into it by her parents. Cormick had told him. She had not loved her husband, but she had cherished her first child.

"We go tomorrow," she said, looking away.

"We ... we might want a day to make a plan," said Orion.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Look," said Orion, "You rush into this, you do it full of passion, you'll die. You do it with a level head, let it wait until you've won, let it drive you, not steer you –"

"I don't need your platitudes!" said Trielle, shaking her head, "I need my daughter. She's all I have left! All I have left! What do you have?"

"Nothing," said Orion.

"Right!" she screeched, "So what would you know?"

She stopped, breathing hard, anger fading suddenly as she watched Orion's face. The words stung, but he held firm. She needed to understand.

"It ... it doesn't matter Trielle. No matter how good you are, they get taken away eventually. No matter how good you are."

"I don't care! They already took her away, I'm going to find her, I'm going to –"

"No," said Orion, his voice deathly calm, "You do care. And you can't. Not now," he said, "They took everyone away from me. Time eroded it all away. All the people I knew. I walked away from it, spent months without a word to anyone. I'm dead inside, Tri. You're right, I don't know what it's like. Not anymore."

She looked at him.

"I didn't mean it, Orion, I'm sorry, I just –"

"You were right," said Orion, "And you are right."

He sat up, stood up.

"I'll find her myself. I'll go get her. I'll bring her back. Alone."

"Like hell you will," said Trielle, her teeth gritted, "You think I'm not coming?"

"I ... I don't know," said Orion, "I should do this for you. For myself."

"It's for Marie," said Trielle, "No one else."

Orion sighed, his back to her. He stared out the back window, through the white light of the kitchen, into the darkness, the marshes behind her house, the soft moonlight dimly lighting the distant line of pine trees past them.

"We'll all go," said Orion, "Tomorrow."

"Good," said Trielle, "Like I said the first time."

"But if there comes a time someone needs to throw their ass out in the line of fire, and go get her, let it be me. You're her mother. She needs you. She doesn't need me."

He turned back to her; her eyes watched him pityingly.

"Thank you, Orion," she said softly.

"You're welcome."

She stood up, slid her arms around him, and hugged him tightly to her. The scent of seaweed clung to her stringy strawberry hair. She drew back, and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"I should get to bed," said Orion, pulling away from her.

"You should," said Trielle, "Orion," she said as he turned away.

"What?"

She shook her head.

"I won't be able to repay you," she said, "Ever."

"We find her, that's enough for me."

She gave him a weak smile, then sat back on the couch.

"Night," she said gently.

"Night."

He made his way up the creaky steps, the bare bulb lighting the staircase flickering tentatively. Cormick was snoring; he grinned. He found his room, shed his boots, his pants, his shirt, his socks, and climbed into bed all but bare. He slid under the cool sheets, pressing his face against the pillow. He listened to the slow, somber, rhythmic hissing of the waves, dulled by the windows and the distance, yet still audible. He pressed his cheek to the pillow harder, feeling tears rising. He thought of Emma, thought of her lying next to him, thought of her face clenched in ecstasy, close to him, warm and naked. Then he thought of her laying on her back in that stream, the trappings of war stuck to her, half her head blown off by some monster. The helpless rage that had driven him to defeat. Had Myron escaped? Had he perished like Emma had, like everyone had? Could Orion still be with him if he hadn't run so furiously, sought death so blindly that he had almost found it?

Tears dribbled over his nose onto the pillow, and he gasped, letting out what little of the pain he could. Then he surrendered, letting the tears wash out of his eyes, not caring for the shame, not caring for the weakness. He had walked a dead man for those many months. Maybe he was coming alive again now.

Stark grief overwhelmed him. Had he ever really lived? Born so close to that titanic fortress, that Macalavay; grown up in the forests, its shadow a part of the horizon, ever-present. It seemed like another life; *it had* been. He remembered playing with his sister, chasing her through the woods. He remembered the daring missions into the louse strongholds after that, into Maalsuur, into Lurgiam, and the others. The roaring of the engines, the faint voices on the radio the only companionship, besides the eerie blinking of lights, and the fire of battle. And all that suffering had brought him here, his whole life spent clawing at a wall, at a mountain that could never be torn down. For the first time in months he thought of killing himself. He remembered Casa Novak, those sunken orange lights, the smog-shrouded towers whose sinister lights formed dull halos in the fog. They had stretched on forever, it seemed like, alive yet death, that endless iron prison that had some incomprehensible purpose. It had slaughtered all of them. And why? What did the lice win? What did anyone win?

They were the enemy. It had been a precept he had lived with since youth, since the moment he could comprehend it, but it no longer seemed good enough. All those years he had fought, even after learning there was no way he could win. He had seen this coming, years before, yet back then it simply chilled him, seemed part of the grand adventure. Now he faced it, the loss, the nothingness that took its place. That world he had lived in was gone, and it was irreplaceable. Even here, in such a beautiful paradise, the emptiness clawed at him. Perhaps the lice would pass this place by, sweep inland for more tempting targets. Yet it would not matter, because the beautiful shoreline, the warm, cozy amber lights, the cold gray waves would give him nothing but loneliness now.

Eventually he could not stand it. He wiped the tears from his face, sliding the covers off of himself, and turning on the light. He had no idea how many minutes had passed since he had lain down. He gazed into the mirror over the dresser, carefully brushed his cheeks so that the redness faded. Then he tip-toed back down the creaky steps. A glass of milk might calm him, placate him long enough to let

him slip into the bliss of sleep. If there was any left.

He heard a furious scrubbing noise as he descended. Curious, he paused, peaking under the railing at the source.

Trielle sat on the couch, rifle spread out on the low wooden table in front of her, disassembled. She scrubbed the barrel furiously, scouring it, a look of grim determination on her face, drawing her lips thin, her eyes narrow. Four magazines sat upright beside the weapon, filled to the top. Orion watched a moment longer, then descended the steps the rest of the way, walking past her without meeting her eye.

"Need to be ready," she muttered softly.

"Yeah," said Orion, walking past. The fervor on her face worried him.

"Do you think we should bring anyone else?" Trielle asked, "Rusi, maybe?"

"I don't know. I don't know if we can trust her to see it through."

"Who else can we trust?"

"Cormick. That's probably it. Who else besides him has a stake in finding her?"

"You, apparently."

Orion smiled for a split-second.

"Yeah, I guess."

Trielle gave up on her frantic efforts, and began to reassemble her rifle, glancing at Orion.

"You've never explained why you've been so willing to go with me, you know."

"Well, I like to consider myself a good man."

"You *are* a good man, Orion. Good as any I've known. But this is beyond ... you've risked your life for us, so much."

"Maybe I'm used to it," said Orion, "It's not like I haven't done it before."

"That's not it either," said Trielle knowingly, "There's bigger problems out there than some poor woman with a missing daughter. You told me. You told us, about what you used to do. Not even that long ago. Great things."

Orion stared at her for a few drawn-out heartbeats, then shrugged, and sighed.

"What else can I do anymore? The war is lost. Least I can do is save a few more lives."

Trielle snapped her gun back together, and shook her head.

"It's not lost, Orion. It's not lost until you and I have both of us are drawing our last breaths, you got it? Not until that exact moment. Not until the last of us dies."

"I got it, Trielle."

"Good," she said, slinging her rifle, and sighing, "Damn, I need to sleep."

"You definitely do."

"Alright, yeah, well, night again," she said, leaning her rifle against the wall, and turning to the stairs. She walked past Orion. Suddenly the sound of her footsteps paused; then she rushed back to him, her arms wrapping tight around him. Orion felt his ribs straining from the surprising strength of her embrace. The warmth of her neck burned his cheek, as he breathed in the sweet scent of her hair. After a few surprised seconds, he reciprocated.

"Thank you so much," she whispered, before pulling away, "Garret ... my husband ... he ... I don't think he ever would have done something like this for me."

"Cormick's going, too."

"I know. I know, Orion, and I am grateful as I'll ever be to him, too. But you ... no one is this kind, Orion. Not anymore."

"Like you said," Orion whispered, "The fight's not over."

She pulled away, and nodded, before heading back up the stairs.

Orion watched her go, until the stairs had finished creaking, until her footsteps had faded, until the soft click of her door shutting. Then he sank onto the soft couch, leaning back.

*This is what your life has turned to, isn't it?* he thought as he sat alone, *Orion Green, the hero of Sarengarth, searching for a missing girl in some forsaken city. This is what defeat has brought you to.*

He felt his eyes sliding out of focus, the clutter about the small room blurring as exhaustion gripped him gently. The pointlessness of tomorrow's errand gripped him, against the backdrop of memories. Memories of earlier battles, ones that decided the fate of thousands, even millions. But then he remembered the feeling of Trielle clinging to him. And her face, full of gratitude.

*Perhaps this is how we start to rebuild.*

The caw of seagulls yanked him from consciousness, to a quiet, post-dawn sky greyish-blue and muted. He watched it out the ravaged screen window in the kitchen, but a tiny square from where he lay. His skin felt dry, his muscles aching after lying in one position the entire night. After a moment of laziness, he leaned forward, getting shakily to his feet.

Trielle's rifle still lay against the wall, where she had left it the night before. She was likely still sleeping. He would let her. It would be a busy morning, preparing. Cormick would not like fighting without his precious HEG suit, but it had been one of Morette's conditions, and Orion could not blame her. Beside, in a search-and-rescue attempt of three, it might just slow them down.

In the kitchen he slowly prepared himself a meager breakfast; his stomach would accept little more. He warmed the stove, and searched the icebox for eggs.

Cormick awoke first, shuffling about upstairs for a moment, before coming down. The stairs creaked as he descended. Orion turned to see him wiping his eyes. He stopped in the hallway, looking at one of the small tables near the sofa. Then he proceeded into the kitchen, and bent to reach into the icebox. The smell of sweat clung to him, more than it usually did.

"Morning, Cormick."

"Morning, Orion."

As Orion watched him, he drew out a frozen cinnamon roll, unwrapped it, and put it in the oven, twisting the knob to defrost it.

"Probably shouldn't have that for breakfast every morning," said Orion, "Can't be healthy."

"Yeah," said Cormick, "That's the most unhealthy thing I do."

The pan had heated up now; Orion cracked the eggs, hoping he was doing it correctly. He had grown spoiled in Sarengarth, his meals always cooked for him. Now, he could barely remember how to do it for himself.

As the pan sizzled, Cormick sat down at the table, looking out the stain-streaked window, across the stream, at the magenta sun hanging just above the distant hills.

"How long you think we'll be gone?"

"Probably a couple days," said Orion. He turned back to his pan. "Why, you got someone waiting on you, Cormick?" he said jokingly.

"No," said Cormick sadly, "No one's waiting for me, Teacher."

"I told you to stop calling me that."

Cormick looked at Orion, then out the window again.

Upstairs, Orion heard Trielle stirring. By the time she was downstairs, Orion began to wonder if his eggs were finished cooking.

Orion pointed at the pan as she walked by.

"Are these done?"

Trielle looked at them.

"Yeah, they were done a long time ago, Orion. You're going to be eating burnt eggs."

"How burned?"

"Not bad," she said, smiling, "Keep practicing, you won't need me, soon."

She bent into the icebox to retrieve her own breakfast.

"Made enough for two," said Orion. She looked at him for a second, then smiled.

"Thanks, but I'm alright."

"Suit yourself," said Orion, sliding the eggs from pan to plate. He sat down across from Cormick, and began to eat. The eggs rolled crisply over his tongue, and they certainly had been cooked a bit too long.

"Used to be able to cook," Orion muttered.

"Never bothered to learn," said Cormick, "So what's the plan, Teacher?"

"There is no plan," said Orion, "We'll try to get as close to Cullsweth as we can. Then we make camp, and try to figure out how to get in."

"Sounds excellent," said Cormick, "Improvisation."

"You have a better idea?"

Cormick shook his head.

"Thought not."

"The real question, is where Marie is going to be hiding out," said Trielle from the stove, "I don't think she'll have gone too far from the house. But Cullsweth's a big town. It's got plenty of hiding spots for sure, and she might have been forced out, had to go somewhere else."

"Our best bet, is to go block by block," said Cormick, "Only way to be sure, eh?"

"No," said Orion, "That'll take days. The lice will hunt us down by then. We need to do better than that."

"How?" said Trielle, "There's no way to tell where she is."

"Maybe," said Orion, "But there's a way to tell *her* where *we* are."

"What do you mean?"

"We draw her out. One way or another."

"That's dangerous," said Trielle, "No way."

"It's dangerous," said Orion, "But more dangerous is trying to search every basement and hallway of every house. Our luck *will* run out. And then the only three people who care about her in this entire town, will be dead."

"She might have escaped already," said Trielle hopefully, "Maybe she's in the forest, or on her way here."

"Without food? Without protection? That's one of the least hopeful options, Tri."

Orion saw her fist tighten as he said that.

"I know," said Trielle, "Just ... wish she was on her way."

"She is," said Orion, "We're going to find her."

Trielle joined them at the table, her hair hanging lankly beside her reddish cheeks. She looked down at her food, eating cautiously, as if each forkful might attack her.

Cormick had finished a long time ago, and was staring out the window again. The sun had risen higher now, yellowing. The sky looked more like morning than dawn now.

"We should probably get ready," said Cormick.

"What have you got for weapons?" Orion asked.

"Assault rifle. An old Kehrlich gun. Sure would be better off with my HEG suit."

"Morette's got to put the town first, Cormick," said Orion, "I can't really blame her."

"Doesn't mean she's not a bitch for doing it," Cormick grumbled, walking off toward the stairs. Trielle and Orion struggled to suppress smiles. Once he was gone, Orion finished eating quickly, without words to distract his mouth. He washed his plate and fork, then looked back at Trielle, who was still eating, looking out the same window Cormick had been, watching sea birds circling over the field behind the house.

"I'm going to get packed, okay?"

She nodded.

Orion headed upstairs to his room, and found his rifle. They would visit the armory before they left. That hadn't been a term of his agreement with Morette, but Orion didn't care. If she'd sooner lose two loyal soldiers than a few bullets, she was out of her mind.

He stuffed a sleeping bag, some matches, a canteen, and wrapped rations into his bag. Digging through the drawers, he found a pair of binoculars upon a book about seaside birds. He put the binoculars into his bag. He would need them.

Back downstairs, he filled his canteen in the sink. Trielle was still eating.

"Have we got iodine tablets?" he asked her.

"No idea," said Trielle.

"Water purification?"

"We have a filter in the well. You mean to take with us?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing," said Trielle, shaking her head.

"Great," said Orion, "Guess we'll have to take our chances."

He slung the canteen over his shoulder and headed back upstairs.

It was still early when they set out; the streets, such as they were, were mostly empty, though Orion could see shapes stirring in many of the cottages. A few were out in the fields or gardens, working: watering plants, trimming branches, seeding crops. By the time they reached the armory – a large, two-story wooden shed well within sight of Morette's house – they were no longer alone.

A man and woman stood outside the armory, rifles over their shoulders, dressed in olive and brown. They perked up as they approached.

"You got an order from Morette?" asked the woman.

"It's just a few magazines," said Orion, "To fill up from what we used up yesterday."

"You need her permission to get anything out of this armory. You don't know that, Teacher?"

Orion felt a flash of impatience, but held his cool.

"You can tell her when she wakes up. I doubt she'll have an issue with it."

"You can come back then, if you want," said the woman, "But not until."

"I think Morette would prefer her soldiers to be well-armed. Something could happen at any time, and I doubt she'd like to leave us empty just because she slept in."

The woman's eyes darted from Orion, to Cormick, then to Trielle. She rolled her eyes, then nodded.

"Fine. But you sign out anything you take. And if I find out this wasn't authorized, it's on you."

"Of course," said Orion. The two soldiers stood aside, and unlocked the door.

Orion switched on the lights as he entered. Dim incandescent bulbs flickered to life, adding to what little streamed in through the windows. A rickety wooden staircase waited at the other end of rows of shelves, holding stacked magazines, racks of guns, and plenty of boxes of ammunition.

"Take as much as you can carry," said Orion, "Grenades, too. Nothing heavy, though."

"Right," said Trielle, walking along the shelves.

"Don't weigh yourself down, either," said Orion, "If we have our way, we'll be doing as little fighting as possible."

"Not exactly my style," murmured Cormick, his deep voice echoing.

Quickly, they gathered what they needed. Orion took six magazines for his rifle, four for his pistol, and a pair of grenades. All went into his backpack, or onto his belt. Before long, he met Cormick, laden down with half a dozen magazines in a bag slung over his back. And Trielle, similarly armed.

As they began to circle back to the front, the doors swung open. Orion heard Morette's voice, faint but clear, talking to one of the soldiers.

"... no I didn't."

Orion looked to Trielle.

"Shit," he muttered, "We've got to get out of here."

"Is there a back door?"

“Yeah,” said Trielle, “Back corner. Follow me.”

They ducked low behind some shelves, walking quickly as the soldiers moved in. Trielle reached the door first, looking back at them as they staggered toward her. A magazine fell out of Cormick's bag, and clattered loudly on the wooden floor. Cormick stopped, but Orion grabbed his arm.

“Leave it,” he said. They reached the door, and Orion nodded to Trielle, who pushed it open. Bright light flooded into the armory, and Orion heard sudden footsteps behind them. They slammed the door shut, and ran over the sand and grass, along a trail that led out the back of the armory, and along the edge of the town. Orion could see the forest, barely forty meters away, and he sprinted along, Trielle ahead of him, Cormick behind him. Orion glanced over his shoulder, seeing the door still closed. Apparently, they had decided not to pursue.

They reached the woods, making their way in until they couldn't see the town anymore, then stopping in a patch of pine needles. Orion was breathing hard, drawing in sea-scented air with every breath. As he panted, he turned to the others.

“Well, we'll be in a bit of trouble when we get back,” he said, hands on his knees.

“I honestly couldn't care less,” said Trielle, pulling some magazines out of her bag, “What did we get?”

“I've got enough for me,” said Orion, “And two grenades.”

“I got four,” said Cormick, leaning against a tree.

Orion burst out laughing, then looked at Trielle's expressionless face. His grin faded.

“We'll need them,” he said more seriously, nodding at Cormick.

“I didn't get any grenades or anything,” said Trielle, “But I did get this.”

From her backpack she pulled out a small hand-held radio, the size of a brick.

“Two way,” said Trielle, “Maybe she's listening.”

“She might be,” said Orion, “That's... that's a good idea. Where did you find that?”

She shrugged.

“Somewhere in the 'miscellaneous' section. There were scopes and what-not, too. Figured this would be better.”

“Probably,” said Orion. He straightened up again, his breathing calmer now, “We ought to keep moving. We've got a ways to go if we want to be outside Cullsweth by dusk.”

Trielle nodded, and began to put away her things. So did Cormick, and they both followed Orion through the woods, towards the hills, and towards Cullsweth.

At noon they stopped for lunch. They had enough food for each of them to last three days. Orion figured they could scavenge when they got into Cullsweth. The town hadn't been lost that long ago. Something had to still be good. Cans, maybe.

By late-afternoon, cruisers had flown overhead twice. Louse ships, large enough to cast a shadow over them for a full ten seconds. They stopped, crouching by trees just in case they were somehow spotted, but Orion worried little. The ships would not care much for three people wandering alone.

The sun began to set as they reached the crest of the hills, not too far from where they had attacked the fueling cruiser just the day before, and barely five kilometers from Cullsweth. The sun was setting now, but Orion did not care. They could move at night.

Finally, Cullsweth was within sight, only a few lights still lit. More prevalent were the lavender lights of louse camps throughout the buildings. The majority of the town sat in a sort of valley, with roads snaking in and out in three places. Each road had a camp near it.

“Would killing some of them draw Marie out?” Cormick whispered from behind Orion.

“No,” said Orion. He watched and pondered.

“Where are we going to go?” asked Trielle.

“You brought stuff for a fire, right?” asked Cormick.

"No fire," said Orion.

"What do you mean?"

"No fire," said Orion, "They'll see it."

"You want us to freeze to death?"

"No," said Orion, "We're not going to freeze."

"Then where are we going to sleep?" Trielle asked.

"Just shut up, I'm trying to find something."

He spotted a cottage spaced far from the others. Would it have a basement? Would there be lice taking shelter inside. He guessed not. But the bastards could see in the dark. He couldn't.

"There," he said, pointing to the cottage, "We take it slow, we get inside, we find the basement, and we spend the night there. Tomorrow... tomorrow, we'll think of something."

"All right," said Trielle, "But how to we get in there?"

"There's trees. You get over to... that rock," said Orion, "With Cormick. You cover me, I'll move up to the house and make sure it's clear. When I flash a light three times, it's safe to move up and come inside."

"Sounds risky," said Cormick.

"This is just the beginning of the risk," said Orion.

"Have you got a flashlight?" whispered Trielle.

"Yeah," said Orion. He could see her breath. They needed to get inside somewhere; they wouldn't survive a night out in this cold.

"Let's go," he said.

Trielle and Cormick made their way to the boulder Orion had pointed out, near where the ravine leveled off. He went the opposite direction, following the treeline. He heard a distant, faint mechanical voice from within the center of town, and a cold shiver ran down his spine.

He moved from tree to tree, approaching the cottage, peering out from behind each one as he went. Then he spotted it; a pair of red eyes, visible for barely a second as their owner walked past a window. He gripped the bark of the tree in frustration, then forced himself forward, slinging his rifle and drawing his pistol and knife. He would have to be quiet.

He saw the door, but did not go to it; he flattened himself against the window instead, peering inside. He saw one louse seated at a table, unmasked, feeding gray porridge to his gray face by a faint light. Orion noted this, and ducked down again, moving to the next window.

A louse sat on the back porch, a machine-gun clamped to the wall, the screen window stripped away. He scanned back and forth, watching the woods. He hadn't seen Trielle and Cormick yet, but he likely soon would.

Orion's mind raced as he moved back toward the front door. It was a long shot, but if anything had a chance of working, this did.

In front of the door, ready now, he looked one more time at the distant lights of the center of town, fractured by the splintering tree branches. The night sky, dark and blue, hung silently above, the black clouds moving ever so slowly, relentlessly. He could not wait any longer. This had to work.

His knuckles rapped on the door, and he swiftly drew back against the wall, in a low crouch, his back flattened as best he could. A silent moment passed, before it opened. As soon as he saw the glowing red eyes, he sprang, driving his knife up into the louse's chin. He heard a noise of surprise, that he quickly silenced. The soldier struggled in his grip for a second, vapor breath pouring from his gas mask. Then he went limp, and Orion lowered him slowly to the ground.

Inside the house, he moved quietly. The floor creaked a couple of times, and Orion's muscles tensed each time. But nothing came of them. He grew closer to the back porch.

Suddenly, the barrel of his gun, slung over his shoulder, brushed against a framed painting on the wall. It fell to the floor, the glass shattering loudly. Orion started, then looked around frantically. He moved into an adjacent bathroom, opening the door quickly, and unslinging his pack, waiting ready.

The louse soldier walked by a second later, submachine gun leading. Orion sprang, swiping the gun out of his hand. The louse responded with a brutal punch to the jaw, which sent Orion staggering against the wall of the bathroom. The louse reached for his sidearm as Orion reeled, but at the sight of it, Orion sprang forward again, pinning the louse's wrist against the wall with his knife. He growled with pain, grappling with Orion for a second, before throwing him off; but when he did, Orion had the louse soldier's sidearm in his hand.

Tossing it aside as the louse drew his knife, Orion waited. The louse barreled forward into the bathroom, knife leading. Orion slammed his arm against the louse diverting the knife, then sidestepping so that the louse staggered past him a bit. Then he grabbed the louse by the scruff of his neck, and slammed his head into the sink, shattering porcelain. Orion prayed there was not a third soldier to hear the noise.

The louse threw him off again, and Orion staggered back, his head slamming hard against the wall, his knife clattering from his hand. The louse turned again, raising his knife to stab Orion, but Orion caught his wrist, and twisted the knife free of the louse's splayed fingers. Orion jammed a fist into the louse's throat, then tackled him to the ground, fingers around the soldier's throat, knees on his arms. The louse thrashed, but Orion held him down, his arms pulsing with fury, until his labored breathing stopped.

Orion sat back, panting, then got up and retrieved his knife. He took the louse's knife, too, for good measure, then staggered to the porch, drew the light from his bag, and flashed it three times. Then he sat down and waited.

When Trielle and Cormick reached the house, they worked quickly, slumping both lice back in their seats to make them look somewhat alive, taking their weapons, and locking themselves in the basement. They took the louse soldiers' protein rations, food that Orion wished was tasteless, but it would keep them alive if they needed it. Once the bolt lock had been set, they went to work unrolling sleeping bags.

"I'll take first watch," said Trielle to Orion, "You look like you need some sleep."

"Yeah," said Orion, not eager to disagree. His jaw still ached faintly, and Cormick had mentioned a bruise.

"Tomorrow, we'll try the radio," she said. Orion nodded. He slid into his sleeping bag, feeling the smooth fabric against his legs, and lay his head on his backpack.

"What do we do if they find us?" said Cormick, "They're bound to notice two missing soldiers soon. They'll search the whole place."

"They might," said Orion, "Hopefully we'll be long gone by then."

"Where do we go next?"

"I don't know," Orion admitted, "Somewhere, though."

He turned to Trielle.

"Wake me up when it's my turn."

There were no more words. Trielle sat quietly, rifle on her lap, watching the door. Cormick lay on his front, snoring within minutes. It took Orion a bit longer to drift off.

He awoke to Trielle's hand on his shoulder, rocking him gently.

"Rise and shine."

"Yeah, yeah," said Orion blearily. His dreams had been formless; they had hoped to rescue Emma here, not Marie. And upon finding her, she was on her back again, dead, shot in the forehead, lying in the stream broken. And as he had sobbed over her corpse, he had seen cold blue eyes staring at him, framed by wavy black hair. The hateful look he'd seen in the bunkers of Teeroek.

"Orion?"

"I'm getting up," he said, pulling himself out of the covers. He rose shakily to his feet, and went to sit where Trielle had been. He turned to look at her.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Orion, "Just tired, is all."

She smiled at him, and went to her sleeping bag, kneeling and sliding her slender legs inside it. Behind her, Cormick still snored faintly.

"You talked in your sleep," said Trielle. Orion started at the words.

"What did I say?" he asked calmly, even as his heart raced.

"Something about 'sorry, sorry'. Didn't catch much. You have a bad dream?"

Orion closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Something like that."

Trielle looked at him, chewing her lip.

"I get them too," she said, "About when I lost Marie, mostly. Or when I left my family. Not sorry about that one, though."

"Why?"

"Well, if it wasn't for them, I never would have ended up married to Garret. They arranged the whole thing. I mean, I wouldn't take it back, but only because of Marie. I think she was the only person I loved by the time Garret died."

"I understand," said Orion.

"You ever been married?" Trielle asked curiously.

"Sort of," said Orion, "Well, technically."

"Technically?" Trielle asked, the hint of a laugh on her voice.

"It was a long time ago," said Orion, "It's ... complicated. I killed her brother."

"What?" said Trielle, "Well, that promises to be a story."

"We'd come to Sarengarth," said Orion, "And her brother and her were the only ... royalty, I guess, that were left. Except he had the whole place under his thumb, since as the next male heir, he was in charge. He'd also poisoned his father into mental illness, so he was unfit to rule either."

Trielle was listening attentively now, lying on her side, eyes trained on Orion.

"So we got some evidence of his crimes, and I challenged him in his own throne room."

"Challenged him to what?"

"A knife fight."

"You won?"

"Obviously."

"Impressive," said Trielle. She gazed at him a moment longer, before saying, "It's got to be weird, doing all that, then ending up here, with –"

The sound of voices interrupted her. She froze, eyes widening. Orion pressed a finger to his lips, and slowly stood up, moving to the door, laying down in front of it, pressing his ear to the crack. He could hear footsteps; at least two, but it couldn't be more than three or four. He turned back to Trielle.

"How many?" she mouthed. Orion shrugged. He made his way back over to her, wincing as the floor creaked slightly.

"What do we do?" whispered Trielle.

"Wait for them to pass," said Orion, "But if they come in here, we need to be ready."

"We can't use guns," said Trielle, "We've got no chance if there's more than a couple."

"We might have to use guns," said Orion, "I'll cover the door with a knife, but if they start to overwhelm me, you shoot them, got it?"

She nodded.

"Good," said Orion.

"What do we do about Cormick?"

"I don't know. Don't wake him up unless they get in here. The last thing we need is for him to

wake up talking or yawning or angry and make noise.”

“Yeah,” said Trielle, “What do I do if something happens to you?” she asked.

“Get out of here, with Cormick. Find another house, maybe. Start fiddling with that radio. It's a slim chance, but it might work.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Cover the door,” said Orion. He slid Quicksilver from its sheath, and moved silently to the door, pressing himself against the wall. The voices still muttered, now from the left side of the door, further down the hallway. They had found the dead soldier on the porch. They'd be in here within minutes.

He stood there, muscles tensed, absolutely still, locking eyes with Trielle across the room, in the near-darkness, as she sat, rifle ready. They stayed there for minutes, as the footsteps shuffled about outside. At one point, they drew close to the door; Orion could hear them just outside, could hear the faint hissing of their mask filters. But they passed, and a moment later, he heard nothing but silence.

“I think they're gone,” Trielle whispered.

“Maybe,” said Orion.

“But why?”

“Probably figured whoever killed them wasn't stupid enough to stick around. If so, then they underestimated my stupidity,” he said, sliding Quicksilver back into his belt, “Let's get Cormick up, and get out of here. They'll be back eventually.”

“Where do we go?”

“Somewhere else. Another house along the rim.”

“It's the middle of the night still,” said Trielle.

Orion sighed.

“We have to move. They'll...”

“And kill more lice in another house? Leave a bigger trail? You might not be so lucky next time.”

Orion looked at her. She was right.

“Okay,” he said, “We'll stay here. But if they get out there and don't find anyone, they might figure we're still here.”

“Why didn't they look in here?” asked Trielle, “Why wouldn't they at least *check* this room?”

“Maybe they...” Orion stopped suddenly, and walked past Trielle. Behind a pile of old clothing and other junk, he saw a black metal box in the corner, out of the light. He hadn't noticed it before.

“Furnace,” he said. He stepped gingerly around the detritus strewn on the floor, to press a finger against it. “Nice and warm,” he said.

“It would have washed out their heat vision,” said Trielle, “They would have looked around, thinking they'd see us, and they didn't.”

“The goggles are pretty primitive,” said Orion, “They only see blurs and fuzzes. Usually that's enough for them to spot someone.”

“Not this time, though,” said Trielle with a grin.

“We can't count on that happening twice, though,” said Orion, “Come morning, let's do what we can with that radio, then get out of here before they wise up.”

After the fall of Alderheim. Trielle and Orion out hunting, but fail to catch anything...

Trielle followed Orion back toward the camp, and for a few minutes there was nothing but the cold moonlight, crackling leaves, and the slender branches that hid in the darkness to scratch at their faces.

"It's alright, Orion," said Trielle, "We've still got rations left."

"Not enough," said Orion, "They won't last us more than a week."

"Whatever," said Trielle, "I guess I can stand to be a little skinnier."

Orion stopped and turned to look at her.

"Right."

They continued walking.

"Look, it's... I'm just saying, don't feel bad. Or guilty."

"I just don't want to starve."

"No, it's more than that, Orion. I can tell. You get like you've failed us or something."

"It's not about that."

"Really?"

Orion didn't reply. They began down a slope, between a maze of oak trees. Moonlight seemed to cascade down the waves in the bark.

"Listen, you've... you saved Marie. You saved her life. You saved *my* life."

"Cormick helped save Marie."

"Yeah, but that's the difference, Orion. Cormick felt responsible. He shouldn't have, but I wasn't going to turn down his help. I'll always be grateful to him, Orion, but he did it for himself, too."

Orion said nothing. Trielle pressed on.

"*You* had no reason to go.

Orion stopped, and turned to face Trielle, who stopped short, looking surprised.

"Cormick died, Trielle."

"I know. I ... you know I wish he'd lived. But you *did* live."

She took a step toward him.

"That's luck," said Orion, "It could have as easily been me."

He knew it was a lie; the Chosen intuition would have likely saved him, as it had so many times before. But it could always fail, as it had for his parents.

"Why, then?" asked Trielle, a couple feet away.

"Because it had to be done."

She was uncomfortably close now.

"No. It's 'cause you're such a good man."

She slid a cold hand around Orion's neck, and kissed him. Fear pulsed through Orion at the suddenness of it, and of the warmth it gave him. A half-formed thought in his mind, brought to life abruptly. Recklessness filled him, and he reciprocated for a moment, until she pulled away. She whispered in his ear.

"Come on."

She kissed his neck. Goosebumps ran along his neck. He didn't move. Trielle looked at him.

"You're really gonna say no?" she said.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, and their lips met again. Trielle grabbed at his back, and stumbled forward, pushing him against a tree. Her fingers curled and tugged at his jacket. He pulled at hers, sliding it off. They undressed each other, Orion guiding her to the ground, among the crinkly leaves. The heat where their bodies met contrasted with the frigid autumn air around them. Orion pushed himself inside her, began to make love to her. The rhythm built, and the leaves rustled, and suddenly Trielle was squirming beneath him, moaning. She gasped, gulping in the cold night air. Then she hugged Orion to her, fiercely, and he fell atop her, exhausted.

“Orion...” she whimpered in his ear.

A feeling, quivering and protective, spread through his chest. He clung to her warmth, afraid to get up, afraid to move. Wind wound between the trees, and a stick clattered somewhere in the forest.

“You’ve no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that,” Trielle murmured to him, splitting the silence.

Orion propped himself up, looking down on her freckled face with confusion. Trielle giggled.

“God, you must think I’m some kind of whore.”

“No,” said Orion, “No, I don’t think that.”

“It’s just been so long,” she said softly.

“I understand,” said Orion.

Trielle smiled, then kissed him again.

“Good.”

She pulled him close again, locking her lips onto his. But Orion put a hand over her arm, and pulled back.

“What?” said Trielle.

“We shouldn’t do this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t. Not now, Tri.”

“Why? What are you talking about?”

“I just can’t.”

“Drive faster!” Orion roared, praying the fierce wind wasn't carrying away his voice.

Each missile's impact rattled Orion's ribs, making him feel as though they were not properly attached. He squeezed the trigger, feeling the gun spasm and chatter, sending white-hot rounds streaming toward the fighter as it made for another pass. There was nothing he could do about the looming missile cruiser, but he could put down a few fighters before they did the same to him.

The canyon edge was barely fifty feet away; if the truck was hit, it would coast, and it could go either way...

A familiar, ragged shriek caught his ears, even over the whipping wind. He swiveled the gun as the Scorpion flew by, easily outpacing the truck. Orion followed it, keeping the shaking iron crosshair roughly lined up with the space just ahead of the fighter. He saw a sudden flash on the leading wing of the fighter, and then a trail of smoke. He smiled, almost biting off his tongue as the truck hit a rock, jarring his spine. He winced, and swiveled back, barely keeping his balance.

“Hurt one!” he shouted triumphantly to Trielle. She didn't hear him.

The missiles were getting closer; one was bound to get lucky eventually. There was nothing he could do to it; what rounds did make it far enough would plunk off its thick exterior, or crumple against it.

He was out of his league.

“Fishtail!” he screamed to Trielle as the Scorpion began to arc back, ready to hit the truck head on. A spray of bullets from its cannons cut through the growl of the engine, little spurts of dust running along the desert floor, screaming toward them.

“Now!”

The truck swerved dangerously. Orion braced himself to keep from being flung off, his hand grasping at the hot barrel momentarily. A sharp pain; he reflexively drew away, and slipped, slamming his shoulder against the floor of the truck. Barely inches from where he lay, a string of bullet holes ran along the floor. He got to his feet, wavering for a moment, before grasping the handles and letting off a fresh barrage at the Scorpion as it flew away.

Without lateral movement, it was an easy target. Orion's bullets tore into its tail, until at last, one of the engines exploded with a flash, and it began to lose altitude, dropping out of sight.

“Has to be another one!” Trielle shouted, not daring to turn her head, so that Orion could barely hear her. He nodded to himself, eyes cautiously scanning the sky. They drove on smoother terrain now; though now a thick cloud of dust ran behind the truck, even in front of it. Orion squinted to keep it out of his eyes.

Like a pouncing tiger, the second fighter sprang up over the lip of the canyon, barely three hundred meters ahead, flipping wingtip-over-wingtip, firing aimlessly. Orion shot back, but the fighter was tumbling oddly, and barely any of his bullets found their mark. He ducked down as it fired; he heard a loud pop, and suddenly the truck was shaking much more violently than it had been.

“Shit,” he muttered, listening to the wet sound of flopping rubber. They had at least a kilometer left to go, and on three tires they would be a sitting duck. Or at least a crawling one.

Miraculous though it was that Trielle had not immediately spun out the moment the tire had popped, especially at these speeds, Orion knew it would be a fast-wasted advantage if he didn't use it. The Scorpion wheeled around fast, seeing its target wounded, and hoping for a quick kill. Before it had even fully turned, Orion had started shooting, catching it off guard. With so much momentum, the pilot had no time to change his mind; he could only commit to dueling it out with Orion.

A sting in his knee; he thanked the carbonite armor as it deflected the grazing shot. Adrenaline flooded through him, an almost relieving feeling, as the gun thrashed around. The truck was filling with holes; another tire popped, but at these speeds it was just another jolt. The truck was doomed; they would have to keep going on feet. The missile ship was still there. It would kill them. But he would take down this fighter first.

As it grew closer, Orion's aim grew wobblier and wobblier. At last he laid off, pulling his numb

hands from the trigger. The fighter kept coming, stuttering out a vicious response, but Orion was carefully aiming at the thin glass bubble in the center of the wing. Just as the first wave of bullets skittered across the floor just in front of his feet, he fired a single, short burst, piercing the front of the cockpit and spraying the glass behind it with red. It kept flying, but stopped shooting, sinking fast, before tumbling amongst the sand in a thick cloud that quickly concealed it.

Orion began to sigh, but the sudden deceleration of the truck interrupted it.

*What has kept me going these last months?*

*It has not been hope. Hope was a commodity abandoned when Sarengarth fell; or long before. Desperation drove me on so many ill-fated quests. Compassion drove me to stand in a falling world. But hope did not enter into it. I have known for years how the endgame would be played.*

*Enough of my people have tied knives to their rifles, out of ammunition, with nothing but a grenade to pull the pin on, to clutch it tightly as they ran for the largest mass of enemies. Enough of my people have been forced to dig graves for their dead fathers and children, before being gunned down themselves. Enough of my people have perished in atomic fire, in a blinding flash, too quick to know they have died. Perhaps that is the most merciful of deaths; or perhaps the most merciless, too fast to ever know you have escaped the hell of life.*

*Nineteen hours. It took nineteen hours for them to crush the Underthrown fleet. Perhaps in other places they have fared better, but I see no reason to cling to that vague promise any longer. The lice are an ocean, always more. Splattering one mask, to turn around to face ten more; that has been a part of my life for too long.*

*Why have I not ended it?*

*I can trot out excuses, but they all come back to hope. And there is no more of that. There is simply the crisp, clear reality that I have ignored for so long; that we have lost. Fifty years; no, longer. My whole life spent in the twilight years of a struggle whose outcome was defined before my birth; before my parents' birth. At last, too late, I realize we were nothing more than an insurrection, to be subdued, held underwater until we drowned.*

*As I walked away, down that lonely road, a pale honeyed haze in the late afternoon sky, a diseased and dying day, Trielle by my side, limping, I realized my entire life has been a lie. There is no meaning behind our struggle; we will be wiped from the history books as surely as rain washes blood from stone. There may be a stain; a few hundred thousand years where fallout lingers in the air. By that time, the buildings will have crumbled, the bones will have long since turned to dust, and the lice will still be there. Timeless and eternal, for in a life that is no different from any other, there is no distinction. Just an endless parade of masks, overturned and replaced like fresh water in a waterfall, foaming and frothing, meaninglessly.*

*A hundred thousand years of frigid, rusted iron. Of oil in the air. Of sick monsters wrapped in rubber tubes. This is the future of my world. A sooty sky, like an eternal thunderstorm, over and over. A distant glow of red lights, hazy in the distance, but they will hold no promise, for they will have no hospitality but the bite of iron and the sting of lead. And I wonder why it no longer saddens me.*

*The stale memories well up, freshened, of the loved ones I lost, each one tearing away at my nerves, leaving a numb patch behind, until now I feel nothing. I embrace Trielle, lay next to her, struggle to comfort her when there is no possible comfort, but she not there, and I am not there, and I am watching from behind thick glass eyes, and the lenses are clouding.*

*Often as I fall into sleep, I pray for release, to be taken while I am oblivious. It is not death, for there cannot be death without dying. I do not want to die. But I do want to be dead.*

Still staggering, Trielle fell a few steps behind Orion. He turned, seeing a face scrunched with accumulated pain, and rushed to help her.

"Where is Marie?" she said, rubbing her temple. She sat down on a rock, pulling her leg up, looking at her knee intently. The setting sun tinted the flesh a strange cherry orange color; it looked alarming to Orion before he realized it was just a trick of the light.

"Where is Marie?" she said again.

"Should be back at the camp with Nole. Do you need help?" he said, offering his hand. She brushed it off.

"I can make it back."

"Alright."

He began along the trail again, with her limping behind him, occasionally stumbling on the uneven rocks. A moment later, she was sitting again, stroking her knee furiously, as though trying to rub something off of it.

"Trielle—"

"I can walk."

"No, you can't."

"Yes I can!"

She made to get up again; her knee gave out almost immediately, and she slipped. Orion caught her, but she had already slammed her elbow against the side of the rock, the cracking sound jarring to him. He helped her up, but she felt heavy in his arms.

"Damn ... *it*," she spat, trying to force herself to stay up.

"You need to give your leg a rest, Tri. Let me help you."

"I've got it, just—"

"Please." Orion bore his eyes into hers. She stared back, and tightened her lips.

"Fine. Only if it's saving us time."

"I think it will save us a lot of time," Orion said, slipping his arm under her shoulders and helping her along. Trielle rolled her eyes.

"Shut up," she muttered, but when Orion glanced at her again, a moment later, he saw her fighting a grin. It faded as they came around the side of the slope, and she glared out at the cliffs in the distance.

Here the Underthrown cruisers floated like clouds aflame, the rumblings like thunder as they died, listed in the air, some sinking away slowly, as though a great hand were lowering them through the air, the smoke trails left behind drowned out by the glare of the setting sun.

The cavern from which they burst roiled from the weight of the salvage they endured, great boulders the size of skyscrapers tumbling away, the gargantuan landslide diminished to echoes by the distance. Orion stared, swallowing, the taste of his teeth suddenly bitter. Beside him, Trielle watched as well, no emotion on her face.

"We knew it was going to happen anyways."

Orion nodded.

"But then why did you call them here?"

"Because back then, I didn't know."

And yet, he had known. Perhaps jealousy was what had compelled him to drag them into the fight. Jealousy of their security in their subterranean world.

Either way, it didn't matter. They had chosen to come, and they had certainly known the consequences; perhaps better than Orion had. He remembered their caverns, so great as to seem like another world beneath the soil. He wondered if he would still be welcome there now.

The stained white cloth rippled in the wind, a crisp snapping sound telling them they were close before the tents came into view. But save for a few, no one was there; they stood further up, on a crest of rocks, utterly exposed, both to the wind and to any wayward projectiles, watching the battle unfold, one

half of them sun-baked, the other dark. Orion felt a cool gust on his face as he ran to join them.

Nole stood, with his back turned, arms crossed, fingers digging into his biceps.

"It's not over," he said, hearing Orion approach.

"Yes, it is."

"No," Nole repeated, shaking his head, turning to face Orion, "This was one. You said there were more."

"There were. What makes you think anything different is happening with them?"

Nole laughed.

"If this was the grand fleet you spoke of, then I think you've been overselling it. And I can spot that pretty well, you weren't. These were *all* the ships you saw?"

"No, there were more. But—"

"But what?" Nole said, his smile fading, "You want this to be over so fast? I don't think so, my friend. I'm sure the rest of them are kicking ass somewhere else."

"You seem confident for someone whose never even seen any of them," Orion shot back, annoyed by Nole's baseless confidence. Did he have no respect for those whose slaughter they had just witnessed? But Nole only chuckled.

"You said there were more. I believe you," he said, his face holding its hallmark wry grin. The brim of his hat shaded his face almost comically.

"And so they can rise up and be killed, like these were?" Orion demanded indignantly.

"Maybe," Nole said, "Or maybe they won't be. Either way, at least they aren't huddling underground, right?"

The words echoed Orion's thoughts, though at least he was ashamed of them. Nole didn't seem to be. But he had no retort to the mercenary's words.

"We wait," Nole continued, "Wait for another fleet to rise, then try again. You give up too easily, Orion. I cannot believe it, given what you've told me about yourself."

"Having my city gutted from roots to branches didn't help," Orion muttered.

"Maybe we can make it back to the ship by dusk?" Trielle cut in, "I assume Marie is there, since she's not here."

Orion noticed her expression, one tired of the sniping between Orion and Nole. He nodded quickly in agreement.

"Yes, let's break camp and go."

"You two can," Nole said, "I'll be along later."

Orion opened his mouth to speak, but Trielle interrupted him.

"All right," she said.

"See you," Nole said.

Orion followed her, down the slope, away from the camp, the *Helnar*p visible in the distance. A kilometer and a half, at most.

"Is your leg better?"

"M-hm. At least enough to walk."

"Good."

A full thirty seconds passed in silence. A distance rumbling thickened the knot of dread in Orion's stomach. Or maybe it was guilt.

"What are you going to tell her?"

"Huh?"

"Marie. What are you going to tell her?"

"Why would I tell her anything?"

"She's going to ask what happened today."

Trielle shrugged.

"What should I say, Orion. Hundreds of thousands of people died? She's a child. She can't even

comprehend it.”

“She knows there's a war on, Tri. She's sure seen enough of it already.”

“Don't you think I know that?” Trielle said, suddenly agitated.

“You do. And you know she's going to ask questions.”

“Why are *you* asking?” she demanded. Orion shrugged.

“Maybe I want to know too.”

Trielle shook her head, and smiled weakly.

“Orion, I know you're not one for mind games. They piss you off. Tell me what's going on with this, because it's obviously something.”

“Nole's wrong,” Orion said, “The Underthrown aren't going to win.”

Trielle's face creased.

“How do you know? It's like he said – ”

“No, Tri, it isn't,” Orion said, stopping and turning to face her. She paused as well, a small gust of wind fluttering her hair as the late afternoon sun fell bright and mellow across her face.

“I was on a louse cruiser, four years ago. One of the big ones, kilometers and kilometers over the clouds. Each of those clouds, was chock-full of lice. There are more than we could ever imagine. This was bigger than we could ever imagine. We always have been a rock in the sea, and always will be. And no matter how big a rock, it always wears away eventually.”

“You said there were millions of Underthrown, with thousands of ships. A huge army, a huge fleet, underground, a whole world down there. Are you saying you were lying?”

“I wasn't. No, I was. But as much to myself as anyone. I pretended for years that we had a chance in this war, but I was just prolonging the inevitable.”

Across from him, Trielle was shaking her head.

“What?”

“Listen to yourself. You think you know everything.”

She turned away and began down the trail again.

“Listen!” Orion shouted after her, suddenly angry at her dismissiveness, “I saw clouds full – ”

“No, you listen!” Trielle cried back, wheeling around so fast she stumbled, falling, catching herself against a rock. Orion rushed to help her, but she pushed him off, forcing herself back to her feet.

“I lived in that village for so much of my life. I watched those ships roll in from the sea. Who knows where they came from? They darkened the sky. They blew the hell of cities I'd visited as a little girl, left them smoking husks when I thought they were too big for anything to ever happen to them. I watched from the window, watched in the distance as they bled fire in the night. I've seen just as much as you did. I know how many there are.”

Orion watched her, not daring to speak now, as he watched her eyes gleam.

“But we're going to kill them, you know that?” she whispered. Even over the wind that whistled through the rocky summit, Orion heard her clearly. “We're going to let them crash against us again and again. And once we break somewhere, we'll find someone else. We'll fight them until one of us wears out, and, goddamn it, it is *not* going to be us. It's *not*. It *can't* be. So I'm not going to tell my daughter one fucking thing. Because it's not over. And I'm not going to tell her it is. And you'd better not tell her a damned thing either.”

Orion looked at her for a moment, watched her chest heave, watched her steady herself awkwardly on her weak leg.

“I won't,” he promised.

“Good,” she hissed. Then her tightened lips loosened. Her beauty filtered back into face, driving away the ferocity. But the strength still lingered there, underneath it, and Orion let her continue down the trail, shakily at first, but then straightforward and even, her footsteps unerring as they continued down the mountainside.

The *Helnarp* waited for them in the dark by the time they arrived, its lights gleaming daringly in the night. The violet sky faded into a deep, barely discernible indigo in the distance, and the lime-green landing lights seemed too much of a beacon, too much of an invitation for the bloodthirsty louse fleet to descend on them. But Orion ignored it. He had done braver things than stay in a ship with its lights on at night.

Trielle had not spoken the entire way down the trail, but as they ascended the boarding ramp, past the few soldiers that milled about outside, she spoke again.

“I

Without one of its engines, it took the *Helnarp* barely thirty seconds to fall from the sky. Trielle realized suddenly that there would be no way

The great inferno ate away at the *Helnarp*, its oil bleeding away in gouts of flame. Like a pig roasted over a spit, the middle section received the brunt of the flames, steel melting in the titanic heat, carbonite warping like chocolate squeezed in the palm of one's hand. The heat tore every drop of sweat from every pore, beyond discomfort, to a place where numbness meant nothing, where the sting of the air retreated behind the pounding pulse of fear.

Trielle fired blindly into the smoke, the flashes reflecting off the billowing clouds. Her gritted teeth felt as though they were about to crumble to dust. A sharp click signified she had run out of ammunition... again.

There was no doubt they were in there. The Fhaarcast soldiers, the obscuring smoke no deterrent to them, would not hesitate to push ahead. But one second passed, then two, then three, and Trielle realized that maybe she was not about to die.

Where was Nole? That was the most important thing. He knew this ship inside and out. He would know a way to escape.

She staggered away from the smoke, leaped over pile of shredded metal, and dashed toward the nearest door, trying to limit her breaths even as her lungs begged for more. A light feeling ran through her forehead, and she surrendered. Smoke inhalation would be better than passing out and dying in the blaze.

The floor shifted, then dropped with a wrenching screech. Trielle screamed, falling flat on her stomach, banging her chin on the searing floor, but she clawed her way forward, pulling herself back to her feet, and running on, slamming through the door into the next room.

Here, two soldiers – Nole's, she noted – knelt behind what had once been a control panel. One reloaded her rifle, the other fired random bursts into the billowing smoke beyond them.

“Hey!” she shouted.

The male soldier whipped around, assault rifle pointed straight at her, eyes visibly wide even in the dim, crackling light.

“Where the hell is Nole?”

“No idea!” the female soldier shouted.

“Why are you still here?”

“Someone had to cover the retreat.”

Trielle shook her head.

“Follow me.”

The soldiers looked around uneasily, before rising to follow her.

A sudden ratcheting noise sprang from the smoke. Trielle flattened herself on the floor, fingers probing the strap of her holstered sidearm. She pulled it away, sliding the gun into her hand. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Somewhere around her, a body hit the floor. Then, another door opened somewhere, a loud bang that punctuated the almost constant gunfire that suddenly filled the room.

Trielle peeled her cheek from the floor just in time to see a distinctive profile sink a knife into a Fhaarcast soldier's throat, rip it free, then fire a stream of bullets from his machine pistol, which writhed in his arm. The figure came out of the smoke, the silhouette of his wide-brimmed hat already identifying him. She had always thought that thing to be stupid.

“Tri, come on!” Nole roared, sliding another clip into his gun. He offered her a hand. More shooting behind him; he must have brought friends. She got to her feet, and ran after him.

“Out!” Nole shouted. His soldiers ceased shooting, just as a Fhaarcast soldier stumbled out of the

smoke to fall to his knees and flop over dead. They dashed back through the door as suddenly as they had come, Nole and Trielle the last ones through.

"You've got to stop getting lost, Tri," he muttered as they backed through the door, his gravelly voice barely discernible.

"Like it was my fault."

Nole did not answer.

"Where are the escape pods?"

"They'll be cooked to a crisp in this heat. The only reason we're not already dead is the armor on this thing. And it's mostly melted, too."

"I'm familiar with how armor works," Trielle said, "How do we get off then?"

Nole looked at her sadly.

"I don't think we do. Best shot we have is the end of the ship. We managed to land perfectly, so the front and back ends of the ships are landed at the edges of the bowl, whereas we're suspended over the flames."

They talked as they ran, and Trielle followed Nole, who followed his soldiers. Of course, they would know their way around as well as he did. Trielle searched the man's face for some expression of pain, or grief, at losing his ship. But he seemed stoic. Perhaps it would come later. Or maybe he just worked differently than others.

The air began to cool off, sending a rush of blood into Trielle's cheeks. A chill shuddered up her spine in relief. Maybe they could make it off the *Helnarp* alive; but then where would they go next?

They were close to the rear passenger bay; she knew the ship well enough to know that much. A spacious room, crates of supplies lining the wall. Nole's soldiers slowed when they reached the room, leaning against the columns, panting for breath.

Another wrenching noise, and Trielle's muscles tensed reflexively before she knew what was happening. Then a sickening jolt, and she landed hard on her back. As she leaned forward, she saw the ship had tilted again, probably the middle burned away altogether. Then she saw the supply crates on the other side of the room begin to slide.

"Shit! Nole, look out!"

One of the soldiers got to his feet just in time to be knocked from his feet by one of the sliding crates. Trielle forced herself into a crouch, bracing her arm against the wall, flinging herself behind one of the columns, then slipping and falling awkwardly. A moment later, the first crate slammed against the wall, crushing the soldier behind it with a sickening crunch. The second crashed into the spot Trielle had just been laying, shattering and splintering, heavy pallets of food spilling out of it.

A flash of red, and a gout of flame tore through the door across the room.

"No, no, no," Trielle muttered, tugging her pinned arm out from under her hip, and shakily raising her pistol. Undaunted by the raging fire, she saw four black silhouettes. She fired off bullet after bullet, striking the first soldier and flinging him backwards. The rest missed, and a sharp click sent a rush of fear through her. The empty gun slipped from her fingers. She lay awkwardly against the wall, an easy target. Her arms strained, struggling to push herself away, wishing she could simply crumple to the floor, curl up and hide until this was all over. A sudden thrill seized her as the other three raised their guns to kill her.

Then just as the first bullets skittered against the wall, one of the soldiers jerked oddly and collapsed. The other two swiveled their focus, but it was too late; Nole shot them down, before sliding into view, almost comically, and catching himself with a hand around the corner of the door. He turned to Trielle.

"Get down that hallway. It leads to a side exit door."

"What about you?"

"I'll be right behind you."

With a grunt of effort, she forced herself up, walking on two legs and a hand, carefully moving

herself along the wall. She took Nole's hand, and he pulled her up into the hallway. The ship lay at an almost perfect forty-five degree angle now, and the floor was no longer the floor, but a corner, meaning that as she began to walk along the hallway, her feet were propped against either side of the "V" where the wall and floor met. Her ankles labored with each step, and she could barely keep up with Nole, though he wasn't moving much faster than she was.

At the end of the hallway was a door. Nole pushed it open, holding it up with his arm. Trielle staggered along behind him, to catch up. She peered out the door; four meters down, a shredded wall of sandbags, and beyond those, stacks of crates, piles of sandbags, an anti-aircraft gun here or there. Off to the right, on the inner side of the wall, tongues of flame reached up over the edge, their features distorted as the heat warped the air.

"I've called for a tricopter," Nole said, "See that clear spot, over by that tower?" He pointed out, along the wall, to a thin matrix of green lights, at least three hundred meters away, "That's where they'll be. The lice have mostly cleared out of here, we should have an easy time of it."

"Who jumps down first?" Trielle asked him. Nole grinned.

"You, of course. Ladies first. I'll hold them off for a minute, give you a headstart."

She glared at him, took one last look at the distant lights, then slipped from the edge. A sickly swoop, then her loose knees bent under the impact, and she rolled over onto the soft sandbags. As she rose to her feet, the ache of the fall began to slip into her muscles, like an aftertaste, but she straightened up and continued.

Down here, in the open, she felt naked, vulnerable to enemies who could be anywhere in the thick smoke. Her hand went to her belt, before she remembered she had dropped the pistol inside. She peered into the circles of sandbags as she passed them, hoping to find a replacement. She turned to see if Nole was catching up; all she could see were several shadowy figures by the sandbags where she had jumped down. He must have stayed for the other soldiers. For a mercenary, he had a lot of heart.

She spotted a dead louse soldier, face-down by a trio of barrels. As she knelt next to him, sliding her fingers underneath to roll him over, a deafening screech startled her, and she spun around. The *Helnap* was sliding into the fire again, this time fatally. Her eyes turned to the middle section; it was entirely burned away. She looked around wildly, trying to find Nole and the soldiers, hoping they had not been dragged away by the ship, but she couldn't see anything. Trying not to panic, she turned back to the dead louse, pushing him over to reveal a pool of sticky, half-dried blood crusted around a submachine gun. Gingerly, she wrapped her fingers around the grip, ignoring the unpleasant, wet sensation. Carefully, she rose back to her feet.

Which way to go? Nole had told her to go toward the tower, but she could barely see it. All she knew was that it was the opposite direction of the *Helnap*. Nole was dead. The thought suddenly struck her with certainty. He could have followed, but he had chosen to stay, to give Trielle a chance to escape. And she was wasting it.

She ran between the crates, weaving between them. At one point she caught a louse soldier, confused and alone, the flickering waves of fire reflected in its goggles. Trielle fired twice into its chest, and it dropped. She ran past it, not stopped, looking over her shoulder, peering around every corner. The heat coated her in sweat; a drop of it fell into her eye, the salty tang stinging for a second before she brushed it away.

A sharp thunk startled her; she tensed, dropping to a crouch again, eyes darting about, before seeing a pair of holes punched in a crate on her other side. Silently, she dropped to her hands and knees, slinging her rifle, pulling out her sidearm, and crawling, slowly, along the barrels. Every fourth step she looked over her shoulder, feeling foolish, like a child.

Sudden rapid footsteps forced her up to her knees. She aimed her pistol carefully, her arms shaking, sweat beading on her wrists. A pair of louse soldiers rushed around a group of barrels, ten meters away at the most. They fired, bullets skipping and sparking off of the concrete. Trielle fired back desperately, dashing for the crates next to her, flattening herself again. Her pistol clicked empty; in

surprise she dropped it. Fear swelled in her as the louse soldier began approaching. She fumbled for her rifle.

Flames washed over her, over the world in front of her, with a guttural roar. Sparks coated her arm; she swore and batted them off, then screamed as the pain of the burning heat came, curling up against the crates, then rolling on the ground madly. If the louse was still there, she was an easy target; but her mind was in agony, and the thought barely registered.

Finally, she came to a rest, her cheek against the simmering concrete. Her eyes opened, her breath still ragged. She pushed herself up, seeing ahead of her nothing but charred lumps where the louse soldiers had been. She looked around, found her pistol, put it away, and continued on, rifle leading, moving carefully, her skin tender from the burns.

A thin stream of flame slowly spent itself as she approached; a sudden give, somewhere in the fire, had caused all that air to rush up in a brutal, massive sort of backdraft. She thought of Nole, shuddering, shivering despite the heat, thinking of his last moments, just like what she had experienced, only without surviving. The edges of her eyes burned from the heat, and she wanted to cry.

The tower was less than two hundred meters away now, she realized as she darted between the crates, carefully. She spotted two louse soldiers sprinting across a gap between boxes, ahead of her, oblivious to her presence. She let them go. If she didn't get out of here soon, she would be as dead as they would.

She broke into a temperate jog, still keeping her head low, eyes still looking out for trouble. Already, flames licked the side of the tower; soon the intense heat would melt anything. She

First Attack on a Dholeska Laboratory (first encounter with smoke-stalkers). Meets Jiek, computer hacker expert, just before this first scene.

“Three clicks, and we'll be inside their radar,” said Eriss, her lips pursed in concentration.

“They'll already know we're here,” said Orion from the seat beside her. Eriss did not answer, already busy with the controls. The mist outside tilted off the cockpit gently, even as it rushed toward them at blinding speed. It felt as though they were flying through the steam from a waterfall.

She reminded him of Cassiopeia. Not at all in appearance, but in spirit. It was painful to think about. Stupid of him to try to replace her. But there was a resemblance, he couldn't deny that.

“If only we could have fit a Guire suit over the whole ship, they would have no clue.”

“The deflective angles should work, Eriss,” Orion said comfortingly, though a strain in his voice betrayed his uncertainty, “Radar ought to slide right off of us.”

“What if they've got air detection? Or heat? It's the middle of winter.”

“They're going to scan across hundreds of kilometers of sky? Looking for a blip? Maybe.”

“But maybe.”

Orion chuckled dryly.

“By the time we're close enough for that to work, it'll be too late for them.”

Eriss looked away from him, away from the controls, at a spot on the floor.

“All right.”

“Moment of truth coming up,” Orion said, before realizing his voice sounded much more alarmed than he had meant it to. Eriss bolted and sat straight up, eyes immediately latched onto the view screen.

“One-fifty eight ... one-fifty-eight-point-five ... one fifty seven ... okay. We're in,” she said, exhaling in relief.

“Now we wait.”

“I'm not picking up anything,” Eriss said, now intently watching their own radar.

“Maybe they're stealth missiles,” Orion said. Eriss glared at him. He grinned.

“Sorry.”

“Go see if they're ready, in the armory,” she said.

“Alright. Good luck Eriss.”

She turned to him, a dangerously long distraction from her piloting the ship.

“Good luck, Orion.”

He walked along the grated floor that ran through the slender passages outside, barely enough room for him to swing his arms at his side without scraping his knuckles against the walls.

When he found the armory, the door was ajar. It was one room away from the back exit bay, from which they would emerge when the ship landed. Back there, it was dark and cold. In here, it was warm and alive. The sixteen soldiers that would go with Orion into hell, and hopefully make it back. Trielle sat closest to the door, so much that he almost missed her as he walked in. They exchanged smiles, but not much more. In less than fifteen minutes, they would be fighting for their lives, and the tense prelude was not the best time to renew attachments.

“We're about one hundred fifty clicks out from the laboratory,” Orion announced, as he reached into his locker and withdrew his carbine. It hung heavily from his hand, as he pulled out the extra magazines, and slowly slid them into his belt pouches, and vest pockets.

“Best estimate is about ten minutes then,” said a female voice behind him. He wheeled around. He realized he did not even know most of their names; none of them, in fact, save Trielle, and Jiek, who he had met not moments before. More than half were Underthrown. The other half were Nole's troops. The implications sank in, and he was silent for a full ten seconds.

“Sir?”

“Yes. Best estimate's about ten minutes. We know the plan, we're going to get in there, scoop up

what we can, jack what we can from the computers, and get the hell out. Make our way to the base of the tower through the maintenance tunnels, and Eriss will come get us just outside the bottom floor.”

“What's left of us,” said one soldier. The others ignored him.

“There shouldn't be a lot of lice down there. This is firmly controlled louse territory. They're not expecting a ground attack.”

“These are Nephnari,” another soldier said. Orion recognized her voice as the one that had shaken him from his reverie. He looked at her; a thin but thoughtful face. Maybe she understood just how much of a shot in the dark this mission was.

“Yes,” Orion replied.

“So, they are always expecting a ground attack. They have all those warbeasts and god knows what else. If there aren't monsters crawling all over the structure, I'd be shocked.”

“Look,” said Orion, “It's a laboratory. We think this is one of the places that they developed the Dholeska virus. It's not an exactly a front-line position. I'm sure it will be well-defended, but they wouldn't waste resources on upkeep for a ground defense when the closest Who-controlled territory is ... more than a thousand kilometers away.”

A red light buzzed. A knot tightened in Orion's stomach. It always would.

“Get ready!” he shouted. The soldiers stood up, filed through the door as it slid open, into the landing bay. A dull roar echoed through the dark exit bay. Were they already under attack?

Somewhere in the darkness, with nothing but a few orange lights to cut through it, Trielle's hand found his.

“You okay?” she whispered in his ear.

“No.”

“This is going to work, Orion. It was a brilliant idea. Now we just have to fight for it.”

A sickening jolt ran through his stomach as the ship began to descend.

The doors creaked open, and somber blue light flooded into the chamber.

“Move!” he roared. They sprinted out of the bay in a wave, down the ramp, onto the cold, slippery concrete. A single Nephnari guard wheeled around in surprise; a single bullet bit his shoulder and flung him to the ground. Orion lowered his gun, kept running. The landing pad was barely thirty meters across; past it, a four-story structure, topped with four missile batteries and a panoply of machine gun nests and radio antennas.

Just as he reached the door, the rattling of machine-gun fire began. He knew instantly it was from the roof; a few tracer bullets streaked through his peripheral vision as he glanced upward. He heard a shout from somewhere behind him, then an explosion. Above him, sandbags and bits of brick tumbled from the edge. He dove for cover as they crashed around him, among the mangled remnants of a machine gun, and the torn pieces of a louse soldier.

The rest of the squad reached the door a few seconds later. Trielle was panting, a triumphant smile on her face, the grenade launcher hanging loosely in her arms.

“Nice shot,” he said. She nodded.

The element of surprise, still fresh, had brought them farther than Orion had expected it to.

“Alright,” he said, “We get inside, move through. If we find computers, then ... you two stay with Jiek,” said Orion, pointing to two of the Underthrown soldiers, the man and the woman who had argued with him in the armory. He did not recognize anyone else. “The rest of you, stick with me. We get to the lab, steal as much as we can. Remember, labeled bottles, papers, anything that looks like it might have information. Then we get to the central elevator shaft, and go down to the bottom of the tower. We can call Eriss from there.”

A door burst open from across the landing platform, a small building meant as an exit for the

stair landing.

“Go!” Orion shouted.

He made to slam through the door, but it stopped him dead. It was locked.

*Obviously*, he thought to himself bitterly.

The lice across the landing platform opened fire, Eriss' ship still hovering barely ten meters up. A wave of bullets sparked over the cockpit, and the ship began to list in the air, before swirling out of control.

“Oh no,” Trielle whispered from beside him.

Bullets began to hammer the wall they huddled against; they were in the open, the only cover being fuel tanks and crates of supplies. They scattered, running for those. Orion slipped, fell onto his elbows, rolled over, grabbed his carbine, and sprang back to a crouch. He raised his sore arms, aiming carefully from behind a metal container, and firing into the bulk of the Nephnari troops as they streamed out of the stair house. A second later it exploded; Trielle's work, most likely.

With the flow of soldiers, stemmed, it took just a few more seconds to finish off the ones who had made it up. But as Orion glanced around, he saw at least one casualty on his side; with a jolt in his midriff, he saw the woman he had assigned to protect Jiek, lying on her side, writhing in pain. He ran to her, the urgency of pressing on forgotten.

Each time she squirmed, a fresh gout of blood poured from her wound, making it easy to find; just below her neck, a stray bullet had torn right through her shoulder. Orion tore a strip of cloth from a pouch on his vest, and pressed it against the wound.

“Help!” he shouted. A few of the soldiers still stared at something out of sight; Orion guessed it was Eriss' crash. He did not want to think about that.

Someone knelt next to him.

“Give me a first aid kit. Bandages. Fast,” Orion said.

“You got it.” Trielle's voice startled him.

“Then morphine.”

She fumbled in her pack for a moment, before handing him a roll of bandages, with Orion tightly wrapped around the woman's shoulder. When he was finished, Trielle pressed a syringe into his hand.

“Bet you we could find a ton of that inside,” she muttered.

“Let's hope not,” said Orion, as he uncapped the needle and stuck into the woman's skin. The cool blue fluid drained out of the glass tube slowly, and her pained squirming slowed.

“Thank you,” she muttered in between heavy breaths. She t

"I think we should name our son 'Leo'," Trielle said as she stuck her feet into her boots.

"Why?" he asked, still working on his own boots. Each time he tried to tie the laces, they seemed to slip from his fingers.

"Because Leo was the name of an ancient constellation," she said, "He was a lion."

"Lion?"

"A mythical beast," said Trielle as she slid her combat vest over her shoulders, facing him, "Fierce, brave, and proud." She turned away. "Our son should be proud."

"He will be," said Orion. There was a stagnant pause. "I guess you could name him Leo."

Trielle whipped around, her expression contorting from shock to hurt. Then to anger.

"We," Orion said hastily, "We can name him Leo. We will."

He looked at her pleadingly. Furious eyes greeted him.

"Go to hell," she spat, backing away from him, out the door, and away into the hallway. Orion sighed, then went back to his shoelaces.

It would be difficult to slip away from Admiral Jacevyk again. For all the risk, the previous two attacks had been all but fruitless. The first had led him here, but the second had dried up the trail. Another blind jab at the mountain could cost more lives. His certainly dribbled away. Was this the way to win the war? It had to be. It was just a question of whether it could be done.

He figured he should probably go make up with Trielle, try to apologize, but he knew it would be no good, like trying to calm a hurricane. He had to let her anger run itself out. Let her take out in the battle. She knew where to draw the line; no matter what was said between them, the tension of combat swept it aside.

The corridors of the *Northfire* brought him to the hangar, where he found the attack craft waiting, his crew and soldiers standing around it expectantly.

Alanah, Aldrick, Abby, and Myron are making their way through the wasteland, find Dholeska-infected monsters in a ruined building...

"This room looks clear," said Alanah, her eyes shiny even in the dark. Aldrick followed close behind, gun barrel swiveling from side-to-side. At one point, his flashlight caught the vapor of her breath in the air; he saw her face, entirely drained of color, staring back at him as she leaned against the wall. She looked as though she were about to throw up.

"This stuff's pretty fucked up, Alanah," he said, "Maybe you should let me take point for a bit."

She nodded, staring at the floor. She seemed to be trying to control her breathing.

"Romantic of you," she managed. Aldrick grinned, then nodded to her. She leaned forward, getting back to her feet, following him to the next door.

"Why did we have to split up?" Aldrick muttered, shaking his head, "Myron can be one hell of an idiot sometimes. I mean, I respect him and all, but when you're out in a place like this –"

"Can we just open the door?" Alanah asked, a note of dismay in her voice.

Aldrick looked at her for a second.

"Yeah, of course."

He carefully pushed it open, letting the little sliver of flashlight shine in, slowly illuminating the room. A crib sat against one wall, but it looked unused. He moved further in; a double bed, a lump under the sheets on one side. Aldrick looked back at Alanah, then back to the lump. Together, they moved toward it, guns raised.

The wrenching noise of labored breathing, of deep, achy gasps, caught his ear. He swiveled to the side; there, on the floor, sat a woman; or what must have once been one. Long, oily hair hung over its warped, pustule-covered face; it was naked, but a sagging potbelly covered it; it was not real, it could not be real. It stood up, and any feminine resemblance was lost. It was just another monster now, another sad, lost person driven mad.

Aldrick fired first, a pair of bullets into its chest. The thing staggered, but did not fall. It rose, ambling toward them, a knife in its hand. Alanah screamed, and her gun flashed and chattered, spraying bullets into the creature, its body spewing blood. Aldrick felt a cold trickle run down his neck. He did not hear the telltale whining of ricochets; the creature's body was stopping their bullets, soaking them up like a sponge. He rolled on his heels, backpedaling, until the cold concrete greeted his neck, telling him he was cornered.

Beside him, Alanah's gun ran empty, and a split second later, so did Aldrick's. Not even five seconds had passed, yet the thing's face, its jaw sagging, as though it could not open wide enough. Alanah shrieked again. Aldrick dropped his rifle, drew his pistol, and fired one, two, three, four, five rounds, directly into the creature's forehead. At last it stumbled, and slumped, the knife slashing at thin air just inches from Aldrick's belly.

He let out a lungful of air. Next to him, Alanah was breathing heavy, hyperventilating almost. He reached for her shoulder.

"Damn, that one was hard to put down," he said, forcing himself to chuckle, "Right?"

But Alanah's eyes were still fixed firmly on the corpse.

"What?" he asked, turning to follow her gaze.

A wet ripping sound seemed to echo in the empty room, though it was barely larger than the bedroom he and Alanah shared in Neverfall. Something tore at the creature's belly, black fluid pouring thick and plentiful out of the wound. Alanah's hand drew away from his, and he heard a retching sound from behind him. He found himself unable to draw his eyes from the spectacle; yet, simultaneously, unable to do anything about it.

A hand reached up from the creature's shredded belly. Aldrick fumbled with a new clip with his gun, yet his fingers felt thick and numb, and he felt as though he were looking at the creature through a screen; as though it could not be real, as though he had slipped into a dream. They had put at least sixty

bullets into the creature between the two of them, and it was getting back up?

Something the height and build of an eleven-year-old child surfaced, straightened, and came for them, leaving the corpse of its host ruined and deflated on the floor behind it, dripping a pungent oily fluid behind it. Aldrick heard a sob a split-second before he pulled the trigger. He couldn't count on Alanah's help for this one. He couldn't blame her.

The bullets staggered the creature, flicking bits of gore against the wall. Aldrick felt deranged, sick, wrong. Finally, the child slumped forward, face down. Aldrick lowered his gun, sliding out the magazine to check the ammo. Still a few bullets left.

Another tearing sound. Aldrick raised his gun and fired at the body, jerking it from side to side, as a third, even smaller creature rose. It was barely three feet tall, covered head-to-toe in black fluid, its body warped, disproportionate. The gunfire sheared an arm off; then the bullets ran out, leaving Aldrick squeezing the trigger futilely.

"No, damn it, no!"

He drew his sidearm again, fired again. Seven bullets, all into its chest, doing nothing but slowing it down. Aldrick could see through its body, a clear, gaping hole torn through. How? How could it be real?

The creature reached for him, grabbing his leg. It was a child, he should be able to shake it off, but it held his leg in an iron grip. He felt it biting down on his leg, shredding the thick pads strapped to his calves. Any second it would bite flesh. He drew his knife, stabbing at it, before it twisted oddly, and he fell to the ground.

The thing gave up on his leg, crawling eagerly onto his stomach. Pressing his hands against its forehead, feeling the cold, sticky fluid that clung to it, Aldrick desperately tried to hold it at bay. At last, he forced a solid blow into it, and it leaned back, off-balance.

A single gunshot jerked the childish head to the side. It fell, gently but with finality. Aldrick crawled away from it desperately, over to where Alanah sat in the corner, holding her pistol, her hands shaking so badly Aldrick could not believe she had hit. He reached for them, to pull the gun away, to comfort her, and realized his own hands were shaking too.

The door burst open, Myron standing in the doorway, looking down on them.

"What happened? We heard shooting over –"

Aldrick just pointed at the floor.

The last corpse lay on its back, a trail of black blood stretching from where it lay, to the body it had ripped itself free of. Aldrick saw a feeble, infant hand stretching from its stomach. So there were more, even if they were too weak to pull themselves out.

"What the hell is that?" Abby said, entering the room from behind Myron.

"No idea," Alanah said, her voice uneven with suppressed anguish, "It just ... came at us. We killed one, then another ripped its way out its stomach. Then another came out of the second. It was like they were ... nested inside one another."

"Goddamn," said Myron, his eyes wide in the dim light, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"Pregnant woman," said Aldrick, gingerly probing the corpse with the tip of his rifle, lifting its emaciated arm. His hand quivered, and mentally he cursed himself for being frightened of it. "Dholeska must've had some sort of strange effect on her because of the child."

"What does that mean?" said Alanah, her voice growing more even with curiosity, "It tries to copy the thing? It tried to make the baby into the mother?"

"I don't know," said Aldrick, shaking his head, "Not a biologist. Don't want to be, if it means I deal with this kind of weird shit." He let the arm fall again, limp and cold against the stone.

"Let's keep moving," said Myron, "Clear this place out so we've got a place to stay tonight."

"Yeah," said Abby, coming up behind Myron, "The back rooms are clear."

"One more door," said Aldrick, turning to it. He strode up, and turned the handle.

"Aldrick, don't!" hissed Myron, "No idea what's behind there!"

"Can't be worse than this, can it?" said Aldrick, slamming his shoulder against it. It refused to give. Gritting his teeth, he grunted and tried again. Nothing.

"Myron, give me your shotgun," said Aldrick, "Damn thing is locked."

He took it, and aimed carefully at the doorknob.

"Everyone back," he said.

Feet shuffled behind him. He squeezed the trigger, feeling the shotgun kick back against his shoulder. Bits of shredded wood peppered his face. He pumped it with a sharp click, and fired again, and against, until the doorknob, and the wood around it, was full separated from the door. He punched it through with the shotgun barrel, then pushed the door open with his heel.

Alanah clicked on a flashlight, shining it inside. Corpses clogged the floor, and a second later, the stench washed out, cold and putrid. Aldrick felt his stomach gurgle, then clench.

"Hold your noses," he said.

"You think?" said Abby.

"Not staying here," said Myron, "Not with that smell."

"Let's see if its better in the other rooms," said Alanah, "It's not like we can risk going back out there and looking for something else. It's too dark now."

"Yeah, true," said Myron, taking the shotgun back from Aldrick. He turned back to the door.

"Come on," he said, "Not much point staying here if you want your appetite."

"I don't," said Aldrick, "Sure not with what we've been eating."

"You can cook tonight, then, asshole," said Myron, "My talents don't include being a five-star chef, exactly, okay? We're eating to survive at this point."

"Orion, what is it?" she asked softly. Her voice, more than ever, reminded him of a morning bird, cooing gently, soothingly. Orion surrendered.

"It's ... it's back to how it was. Nothing's changed."

"What do you mean?"

"Cassiopeia died. My parents died. So many others died. And for what? The war is as it was, just a few years ago. I'm in the same place, doing the same thing, but worn down. I can't go around a second time," he said, shaking his head, "Something has to change, one way or the other. This has to end."

"Orion, you can't end the war by yourself."

"Why not?" he said, "Hell, I've done nearly everything else myself. And I won't be alone. We've got Myron, we've got Aldrick. I've got you."

She smiled weakly.

"I can't do much with these two in me," she said. Orion shook his head.

"Soon they'll be born. We'll raise them together, Trielle, I swear we will. We're going to finish this."

She just stared at him.

"Tomorrow, I'll get Myron, and we'll figure out a plan to attack another Dholeska lab. We have to get lucky eventually, find someplace with useful information. This has to work. It has – "

"Orion."

"What?"

"What's causing this? Why now?"

He sighed.

"I don't know. Maybe seeing that girl Thrynne again. She was Cass' friend, you know."

"I know."

"Maybe I've just run out of ways to deal with it, Tri. I don't know."

"What about me?"

He turned to her. Her eyes shone blue even in the dim light.

"I love you, Trielle," said Orion, "I do. I just ... I just didn't want to believe it."

"Why?"

He sighed.

"Each time I dare to love someone, care about them, they end up dead. Everyone does, I guess, in the world we live in. But they're the ones I notice."

Trielle fixed him with an intense stare. Then she grabbed his cheeks, pulled him in, and kissed him fiercely. She drew back.

"I'm not dead yet," she said. She kissed him, then pushed him back against the pillow, climbing atop him, kissing him more and more, driving the thoughts from Orion's mind as he lost himself in her body, making him forget.

When they were finished, Orion lay on his back, Trielle curling against him.

"Better?" she asked from his shoulder.

"Yeah," he said. She giggled.

"Really?"

"For now, at least."

"Good enough."

She reached for the lamp, turning it off with a click, leaving them in darkness. Orion could barely see her face.

"Can't believe we're sleeping in your old room," said Trielle softly.

"Yeah," said Orion, "Somehow it survived."

"It's nice," she said, "Nice view."

"Well of course," said Orion sarcastically, "Only the best for the king of Sarengarth."

"King'?"

“Not really. But I used to be pretty big around here. Guess that's changed.”

“How many other women did you sleep with in here?”

Orion paused.

“Why do you want to know that?”

Trielle shrugged. The sheets rustled.

“Just curious.”

“A ... a few,” said Orion, “They're gone now. Why? Why do you – ”

“It doesn't matter,” said Trielle, “I was just making conversation.”

“Well you suck at it,” said Orion, shaking his head.

Trielle chuckled.

“Any as good as me?”

“Of course not,” said Orion, a pang running through his chest as he spoke.

“That's right,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. She sighed contentedly, curling against him, her warm legs curling over his.

“I never knew what this was like,” said Trielle, “Laying next to someone I was in love with. My father married me off before anything could happen. Garret Linara. Some albino merchant's albino son. Couldn't stand him, but it got money for my dad.”

“You've told me,” said Orion, “

## WRITE MOAR TIL ORION FALLS ASLEEP

A dream. Fires. Fragments of thought. Orion saw a stream of light, crawling through the clouds, higher into the sky, flanked by smaller fellows, before bursting above them, blindingly, setting the clouds alight.

Showers of gray death. An entire world laid to waste. Both who and louse choking to death on the ashes of the sky.

Was this what he wanted?

The sights made no sense to him. They would turn the factions on each other. Dhruukaam and Phaarcast would battle to the death, and all the while a re-engineered Dholeska would gnaw at their ranks, leaving them weak. It would be ruthless, brutal, and terrible. But it would not destroy the world.

More than once he flashed into wakefulness, before realizing it was another part in the vision. His children, fresh from Trielle's womb, deformed horribly, ears melting into his throat as his body built itself all wrong, spiraling in terrifying directions. The blossoming nuclear clouds, like a flaming flower in the sky. Leo and Zoey, his beautiful son and daughter, their faces blank, warped. They were horrors, not children now.

He sat up with a start, gasping desperately, before reality soaked into him. He looked around. It was well into dawn now; he could faintly see the tops of the distant tree-cities to the east. Nearer was Peneglox, withered but standing. Nothing had changed. He was back where he had started.

Trielle still slept peacefully beside him, her bare back slowly expanding and contracting. He wanted to reach out to her, tell her about his dream, let it out, but he knew better. It would only worry him. It would be bad for the children, probably. Stress was bad for pregnant mothers, he knew that from somewhere. Though, were that true, it was probably far too late.

## Final showdown with timeless

The dots grew closer, but Orion couldn't see anything yet.

"You there, Brie?"

"Yeah. They're out there."

Orion switched channels.

"Fleet! You there?"

"Roger. Go ahead, Tiger Leader," came Admiral Zevyk's cool reply.

"Zevyk. They're right over the hill. Get ready to hit them with everything you've got."

"We're ready, Tiger Leader."

"Good. Over and out."

He switched to Myron's channel.

"You there, Myron? This is it."

"Don't I know it," Myron crackled back a second later, "We're locked and loaded."

"Good," said Orion, "Now stay with me until –"

The crest of the hill fell away, revealing a field of lights, larger than any Orion had seen since Casa Novak. Like all the stars in the sky had been dragged down to float before him. Easily a hundred thousand ships.

"Go!" he shouted into the radio, "Get to the tower, I'll be right behind you."

Like a wave of light, the louse cruisers opened fire, missiles streaking toward Orion and the fleet. He heard a rumbling from behind him, one that rattled the windscreen on his Falcon, as the Underthrown ships returned fire. Orion fired off a bright wheel of flares, before diving to the side.

"Brie, you still with me?"

"Yeah."

"Tiger Three?"

"Copy."

"Tiger Four?"

"Copy."

"Right," said Orion, "We need to make way for Myron's ship."

"You got it."

They sped on, heedless of the glowing, dotted streams of anti-aircraft fire that emitted from the lead ships. Orion spun his Falcon out of the way; a split-second later, the cruisers were gone, the entire front line of them annihilated by the first wave of Underthrown missiles. He dodged the burning hulks, bleeding white fire and smoke, shockingly bright against the cold, distant night.

Orion spun under another cruiser, filling its belly full of rockets. Brie followed tight behind; he watched her on his radar, every missile connecting, shredding the armor from its body. Orion pulled up as soon as the engines came into the view, wrapping tightly around the cruiser like a noose, back up onto its side, weaving between gun turrets, switching to a single air torpedo. He flew out over the bridge and dropped it, letting it fall straight, before detonating. The ship began to list violent, pouring smoke. He dove fast, letting off another stream of flares to draw off the inevitable retributive missiles. He pulled up barely five hundred meters up, speeding lower and lower. Brie and the other two fell in behind him. He didn't even know their names, he realized.

"Next ship!" Orion cried, pulling up fast, angling for a fresh cruiser, one that was alive with rail gun and missile fire.

"Let's do a dodge and burn here," said Brie, "This one looks like it'd fall for it."

"Do that," said Orion.

"Yes sir."

They flew straight up, two to a side, wrapping over the sides of the cruiser, clinging to angles where its anti-aircraft guns could not swivel far enough to hit them. Brie and Four headed for the

engines, a popular target for fighters. Disable the engines, disable the ship. Far easier than hitting the bridge, which was why the engines were stacked with defenses. A normal pilot could never hope to make such a shot.

But of course, Orion was not a normal pilot.

He and Three went the other way. A stream of cannon fire cut up suddenly, as he flew over the cruisers top, the bullets flung uselessly into the night as he swerved to the side. Behind him, he heard wrenching metal.

"Three! You there?"

"I don't know! I'm hit?"

"Head for the bridge!"

"I'm leaking fuel!"

There was no time; the bridge was drawing closer. Orion pulled back, climbing fast, before wheeling around sharply, and diving for the bridge, firing a stream of missiles into it, weaving back and forth. Only half made contact, but that was enough.

"Bridge is down!" said Orion.

"Good," came Brie's fuzzy voice.

"Three, copy!" said Orion.

No answer.

"Three, copy!"

The darkened status symbol on his Falcon's viewscreen confirmed what Orion already knew.

"Damn it," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Who's down?" said Brie.

"Three. We've got to move faster."

Around him, the Underthrown fleet was chewing through the lice viciously. The night sky was alive with falling stars trailing smoke, ships overcome in seconds. Orion hoped it would be enough.

"New plan," said Orion, "No more ships!" He clicked his radio channel again. "Myron, you there?"

"Copy that," said Myron, "You've opened a beautiful path for us."

"Me and the rest of the fleet," said Orion, "Fly low. Low as you can. It's better than waiting to cut through them. We don't have that kind of time."

"You're testing my novice piloting skills."

"Just do it. We'll be there to cover you."

"Alright."

He clicked back to Brie.

"Dive."

"You got it."

They dropped away, the rush of wind rumbling outside Orion's windscreen as they picked up speed in the dive. It felt free, a chill of fear and elation running down Orion's neck as he watched the distant, slow-blinking violet lights of the distant weapon.

"Bad news," came Brie's voice suddenly.

"What?"

"Scorpions. At least a dozen. Following us."

Orion's fist tightened with frustration.

"Fly faster."

"You got it."

"You've still got the spare canisters right?"

"Right."

"Where's our timer?"

"Thirty-nine-fifty-eight."

“Barely enough time.”

“Assuming it's even right.”

The engines' drone began more animated as Orion pushed the throttle to its limits. A straight contest of speed seemed so unsubtle, yet what better plan was there? Myron's landing ship could barely keep up that speed. This chase would have to end quickly.

“They're launching missiles!” came Brie's panicked voice.

“Evade!”

They broke wide, Four curving off to the side with Brie. But the missiles sped past, leaving a blinding trail of white smoke in their wake, and Orion and Brie forgotten. Realization hit Orion.

“Shit! Myron! Missiles!”

He heard the sound of impact over the radio.

“Myron!”

Ten seconds of fear and guilt pounded at Orion as he listened to the static-ridden sound of roaring flame.

“Orion!”

“Myron, status!”

“We're still up. No one's hurt, except a few bruises from the massive jolt we just got. Though how much longer we'll be airworthy is still yet to judge.”

“Just make for the weapon. We'll take care of the pursuers.”

“You got it.”

He switched to Four's radio.

“Tiger Four, stay with Myron's ship. Make sure they get to the weapon.”

“Roger that.”

Orion wove carefully around a low-flying louse ship, then checked his view screen. The Scorpions were still behind them. Twelve.

“Ready to take them down, Brie?”

“Twelve? With two of us?”

Orion chuckled.

“Yeah. Why the hell not?”

He cut the throttle, bleeding speed, watching the Scorpions grow closer. He turned, bringing himself directly in front of them, then diving, ducking them as they soared past. He pulled up, evened out quickly, watching Brie fall in beside him. The Scorpions split, ready to engage them, but not before Orion and Brie had destroyed two with missiles.

“You take left, I take right,” said Orion.

They split up, the Scorpions splitting again, to come at them from four directions. Orion turned inside of his first pursuer, ending up face-to-face with a second. The Scorpion opened fire, but Orion swerved out of the way, unleashing his own stream of cannon fire that tore into the cockpit and wings. The fighter spiraled past, listing and smoking.

Orion cut sharply to the left, cutting across his first pursuer. There were three others, out there, curling around to attack him. If he spent too much time on any one, they would gang up and kill him. He had to be fast. He had to be formless.

One came straight at him, guns blinking. He rolled to the side, letting it fly past, wincing as several sharp thunks dashed across his wing. He checked his status screen as he leveled out. It hadn't hit the fuel lines. That was important.

He spun his Falcon around, just as the Scorpion was turning to come back. He aimed ahead of it, leading it with cannon fire, his shots punching through its wings, before striking an engine, which burst into flame. A second late, it exploded, severing half the Scorpion's wing. It spun out of control, dropping fast.

Two others had fallen in behind him. Orion pulled back suddenly, climbing. The Scorpions

copied him, but Orion knew his Falcon well. He shoved the stick forward, forcing his fighter into a dive. The Scorpions went to follow, but Orion was far faster, and they were all but left behind.

The second Scorpion was flying low, keeping close to the fight, circling, waiting for its chance. Orion fell on it like a bird of prey, firing three missiles in rapid succession. The Scorpion swerved, cutting wide, trying to turn and face him, hoping to outrun and outflank the missiles. The first missed, an instant too late. The second also flew past it, striking the ground in a brilliant blossom of flame. But the third struck solidly, blasting the Scorpion to piece, leaving its wings to flap helplessly in the wind like falling leaves.

The other two Scorpions were catching up now. Orion pulled up from his dive, watched the less-maneuverable Scorpions fall below him. But they pulled up eventually, and they were behind Orion now. He swerved to the left, then to the right, hoping to shake them off. But they held on fiercely.

A missile streaked toward him; he hit the flares button just in time, watched it streak off into the night as he flew upward, climbing toward the cloud-covered moon desperately. Above him, the pinpoint lights of the louse fleet rippled as their railguns fired in near-unison.

Cold sweat broke across his neck and back, making him shiver, lose his concentration. He was running out of options. He spun to the side, hoping to out-dive them, buy himself some time.

He heard one explosion behind him. He glanced at his radar, seeing only a single blip there now, breaking away from him fast. As he leveled off his Scorpion, nearly three thousand meters up now, he saw it disappear in a smear of fire, too.

"Seven for me, five for you," came Brie's voice over the radio, "I ought to be the squadron leader," she said triumphantly.

"Maybe once we're done with this," said Orion, a smile of relief breaking across his face.

"Fly on?"

"Yeah," said Orion, "Let's catch up with Myron."

The Finality weapon was barely eighty clicks away now. They had flown past most of the louse fleet; Orion could see the shimmers of the battle reflected on his windscreen, off in the distance.

"That was too easy," said Orion, shaking his head, "It's almost like they let us through."

"Don't jinx it," said Brie, "They don't know we found their timer. They think we're just taking it slow, hoping to win. They think we're as arrogant as they are."

"We *are* as arrogant as they are," said Orion, "Just not the way they think of arrogance."

They were getting closer now. The latticed tower drew closer now, the foreign, pale purple of its lights both menacing and mysterious now. Orion knew what was inside, but the truth of it struck him now; if fired, it would scathe the surface of the world, leave it dead. A dead, gray planet. Any life left would be a mutated Dholeska victim, insane, its mind writhing with constant agony. He watched the tower lights blink in series, a slow progression toward the top. He glanced at the timer. Thirty-three-oh-four. The lights kept blinking.

Then, like bats leaping free of their perch, four dark shapes burst free of the tower's sides, swinging wide toward Orion and Brie.

"Blackguard Scorpions," came Brie's voice, "I told you not to jinx it."

"Myron!" Orion shouted, "Myron!"

"What?"

"Fly *straight* for the control building up there. Do not stop for anything."

"Why?"

"Four Blackguard Scorpion fighters. Brie and I will take care of them. Keep Tiger Four close to you, and get inside."

"You're not going to die."

"No, I'm not," said Orion, arming his missiles with a series of sharp clicks, "But I might be a little late to the party."

The first Blackguard swooped down on them, fast and reckless. Orion fired two missiles at it, but

it swerved, dodging them. Orion swerved to the side, to follow it, but he stopped himself, as the second followed slowly, ready to shoot Orion in the back if he went to follow it. He remembered the Blackguard pilots' cunning. This would require something extra.

He spun after the first Scorpion anyway, letting the second one fall in behind him. Brie was already engaging the other two. Orion had no doubt she would win.

He fired at the first Scorpion, shredding its back and tail. The second prepared to finish Orion off from behind, more than willing to sacrifice its comrade to kill him. But Orion slammed the air mines button on his dashboard. Few had mastered the clumsy technology. Orion certainly hadn't. But it was unexpected enough, it just might work.

They bit into the Blackguard behind him, the explosions leaving the engines smoking, but not ruined. The Blackguard opened fire.

The fire cut across Orion's left wing, a blinding scream of lead that sliced across his own engines. He pulled back, letting the first smoking Blackguard fall away, and the second follow him.

He climbed desperately, heading for the control room.

"Brie! There's one on my tail, where are you?"

There was no response. But a quick glance at his status screen told him she was still alive; or, at least, her fighter was still operational, and flying.

"Brie!"

Another stream of plunks as bullets ripped into his other wing. The control building was barely two kilometers away now, growing larger with dizzying speed. Warning screens blinked and blared in front of him, the teal lights contrasting with the soft cradle of lavender he was flying toward.

A piece of the cockpit shattered. Orion glanced back. The Blackguard Scorpion was barely five hundred meters behind him. If Orion lost enough speed, his Falcon would slam right into it.

"Screw this," he muttered, punching the eject button.

Nothing happened.

"No," he muttered, "No, no, no!"

He deployed the flaps. They tore to shreds immediately, but slowed the Falcon brutally; Orion's head nearly struck the wind screen, his chest straining against the straps. Then his neck nearly snapped as the Blackguard Scorpion fighter clipped him, ripping off its own wing and spiraling away, and sent Orion's Falcon spinning like a thrown disc into the side of the control building.

The wrenching of metal, the heat of fire, and the stunning force of the crash left him dazed. Half-conscious, barely aware of what he was doing, he crawled from the shattered side of the cockpit. Sweat dripped all over him, the rubbery stench of burning oil. Something exploded, sending a shredded chunk of metal careening across the floor. He was inside now; the gray concrete floor, dimly lit by white florescent lights, forming a hallway leading to the door. He looked around, then down at himself. His front was covered in scratches, but nothing deep. He staggered to his feet, back toward the cockpit, suddenly frantic. He reached into the side bag, rummaging through. Three capsules. They were safe.

He slung the bag over his shoulder, drawing out a sidearm and four flips of ammunition. That would be enough to kill someone, get a better weapon. He reached for the radio.

"Myron! You in?"

"Yeah," came the faint voice, "Bottom level."

"No idea where the control room is."

"We'll clear it out."

Orion nodded, then stumbled away from the half-broken radio, shakily onto his feet again. He set off down the hallway, toward the door, limping a little with each step.

Myron stood guard as Anna busied herself with unlocking the door. There had been no one waiting for them in the hangar, something that worried Myron. Now, his wide eyes scanned the hangar,

over barrels and crates, over carts, over the only other parked aircraft, a louse landing ship, for any potential enemies waiting in ambush. His shotgun swiveled back and forth slowly. The other soldiers waited nearby, similarly alert. Aldrick crouched on the other side of the door, watching the distant battle, barely visible now as wavering streams of light in the blackness.

"Got it!" said Anna. The door began to slide open, slowly.

Myron waved to his soldiers. They crouched, defensively, behind whatever cover they could find, leaving Myron, Gideon, and Aldrick the closest. Anna stood flush against the door lock, unclipped a grenade from her vest, and pulled the pin. She looked at Myron, who nodded.

Without hesitation she flung it through the crack. The door opened fully, revealing at least a dozen louse soldiers. The grenade went off, killing at least two or three, but the rest returned fire. Myron fired back, striking one in the chest. Aldrick emptied a magazine from his carbine, hitting two. Gideon killed one with a burst from his PXP. The surviving lice ran for cover, but they were cut down. In less than ten seconds, they were all dead, and Myron and his team were moving forward.

"We still got everyone?" he called to them. A couple shook their heads, their eyes going to some barrels. Myron followed their gaze; there, her head and arm laying out from behind a couple crates, lay a young woman who had not ducked fast enough, a bloody hole in her head. Myron sighed.

"One casualty. Let's keep going."

They moved swiftly and silently into the hallway, clearing it both ways.

"I'll take half left, you take half right," said Aldrick.

"We're not splitting up," said Myron, "That's final."

"We have no idea where this damn control room is," said Aldrick.

"And this place is crawling with a hundred damned lice!" Myron growled back, "We split up, they'll just massacre us. We move in force, we might be slower, but at least we'll have a chance of finding the thing."

Aldrick shook his head.

"Fine," he said, "We'll do it your way."

"Right," said Myron, heading down the right passageway. The others followed. He heard a door open behind him; he snapped around, shotgun raised.

"There's a ladder in here," came Anna's voice.

Suddenly irritated, Myron strode back along the hallway toward the door.

"What?" he said, peering inside.

It was a small maintenance room, a single bare bulb lighting it. But Myron saw it, too; a rickety access ladder, snaking up through the ceiling, and into the darkness beyond. He walked into the room, and peered up the vertical corridor, hearing faint echoes filtering down through it. He shook his head.

"Coming out one at a time? We might be walking right into a trap."

"It might also lead us directly to the control room," said Gideon.

Myron shook his head again.

"No."

"Sir, I request that just two of us go. Anna and I could – "

"No, and that's an order!" Myron growled.

Gideon's eyebrows narrowed.

"Yes, sir."

Myron turned away from the ladder, and walked out of the room.

"Fall in behind me. We don't have a lot of time."

The other soldiers began to follow Myron, Aldrick giving Gideon a peculiar look before doing so. Anna came up next to him.

"Wait til we get to the corner," she whispered, "Then we'll ... slip away."

"He'll kill us if we disobey like that. Especially on such a vital mission. We'll be court-martialed before we know it."

"He won't have time to waste on us. And we might find the control room. We *could* save the day, here. You know it."

He looked at her.

"Alright."

They followed Myron and his group to the corner of the corridor, lagging behind slightly, before turning and silently tiptoeing back to the access room, and the thin ladder that climbed into darkness.

Orion had barely touched the door when a voice, strained and sinister, echoed through the intercom. Chills ran down the back of his hand; he pulled away from the door to listen, tightening his grip on his pistol.

"You were a fool to come here, Orion Green," came the voice, "Your strength, your near-supernatural perception, your skill ... all have given you an unmatched arrogance. You fight alongside your friends, attacking, then disappearing into the shadows. But no more."

Leaning against the door, Orion's eyes widened.

"I have deployed twenty-four Dhaika, Orion. They are hunting you through the corridors. I know you fancy yourself the hunter; now you are the hunted."

Frustration filled Orion. He was on the brink of death, and now Timeless was toying with him. He prayed that Myron and his troops had landed, and were giving the lice hell.

"They will be in three squads of eight. I am telling you this because there is no chance for you to escape," Timeless' voice slithered, "And so I say goodbye to you, Orion. One of the few worthy opponents of your entire pathetic race."

The intercom went silent. Orion could hear the silent footsteps already. It would not be long.

No, he would not fall to this game. If Timeless was sending Dhaika to kill him, it meant that he was occupied with preparing the weapon to fire. If Orion could get up there, kill the Dhaika, or evade them, he could still stop it from going off. He could still infect the infection. He could still win.

He forced himself to his feet, off the door, then jammed his heel against it, slamming it open. He smiled as he felt a satisfying rush of adrenaline, invigorating him.

"Bring it on, bastard," he muttered, then strode through the doorway.

High above, Brie wove desperately to escape the one remaining Blackguard fighter. She had already shot one to pieces, and had watched Orion crash into the side of the control building, taking one of the Blackguard fighters with him. But the last one was unshakable; it followed Brie impeccably as she clung to the latticed beams of the weapon's skeleton. She spun into a corkscrew dive, angling for the middle of the control building. She knew Myron and the others had landed at the bottom. Surely it couldn't hurt to put a bit of firepower into someplace she knew they weren't.

She fired her final two missiles into the near-center of the building, shattering glass and plating. Smoke billowed, and Brie flew into it, pulling up drastically. The tactic worked; the Blackguard fighter flew past the smoke, and by the time it had turned around, Brie was climbing fast. She level off, and turned, diving on the Blackguard fighter as it struggled to find where she was. It didn't take it long; it curled into a dive of its own, in the opposite direction of Brie.

Wing-over-wing, she spun to follow it. It tried to pull up, but Brie led it perfectly with a stream of cannon fire that left it smoking and crippled. But it refused to die. It pulled up, reversing direction, straight toward Brie's fighter, firing a stream of missiles in desperation.

She swung her fighter from side to side, evading the first three, before firing one of her own, watching it streak toward the lumbering, smoking Blackguard fighter, and impact directly in front of the cockpit, shattering the center of the plane. One engine exploded; the other flew wildly, still attached to a piece of the wing, like a lopsided rocket. She smiled with satisfaction.

Then one of the missiles swung around and struck the back of her Falcon, blowing it apart.

Orion heard them before he saw them; he tucked himself in one of the alcoves, looking around desperately. He spotted a door; it would have to do. He dashed across the hallway, and sprinted inside, ignoring the movement in his peripheral vision. They had seen him.

Dim light fell on the many crates and boxes around Orion. Some appeared to contain fuel rods, others various casings for canisters; but Orion couldn't read the labels in the darkness. He crouched behind one, and waited. He glanced around quickly; there was another door, on the opposite side of the room. It would likely take them a while to get there. Unless there were two separate squads, moving in coordination.

The door burst open. Orion saw a black thing flying in; a grenade. He ducked down as it landed with a clink, then blew several crates to smithereens. As the Dhaika began to rush into the room in the wake of their grenade, Orion sprang up and fired three shots. One struck the first Dhaika in the chest, the second two hit another in the head. Without waiting to see if they were dead, Orion dashed away, hoping to find another hiding spot in the maze of crates.

Like water they flowed through the passages. Orion caught two alone, springing out from an alcove and stabbing one in the neck. As the other turned, Orion held up the body, using the corpse as a shield, blocking the first few bullets before Orion shot him four times in the chest. He let the other body fall, and took one of the carbines, as well as a few magazines, sliding them into his belt before dashing away again.

He gunned one down as he ran around another corridor, shooting it in the stomach before it could react, and springing sideways around a corner before the other could fire back. Instead, it threw a grenade around the corner, bouncing it off the wall to come to a rest before Orion.

With a thrill of fear, he grabbed it and flung it upward. It detonated near the ceiling, darkening part of the room and showering Orion with broken glass. He held up his arm to shield himself, scrambling away on all fours, when he slammed headfirst into a crate. Dead end.

The Dhaika peered around the corner; Orion flattened himself against the same wall, letting his leg hang out into the center of the hallway, laying on the floor. Seeing what looked like a corpse, the Dhaika moved in more confidently. Orion put three bullets in his head, then sprang to his feet, climbing clumsily on top of the wall of crates in the darkness.

Bullets skittered at his feet, pinging off the metal lids, but he ducked behind another crate stacked atop the wall, and returned fire. There were three left, one wounded; Orion noticed the dark stain on its chest with satisfaction. It was slow, distracted by its injury. But still deadly.

To his side, he saw his chance. On one side, a maze of crates. On the other, a dark half of the room with a door that was bound to open any moment. Behind him, a metal grate; behind it, an air vent. It had worked before. Could it work again.

Orion shot one Dhaika as it came around the corner; but another had seen him, and fired on his high position. Orion lay face-down as bullet pinged and ricocheted dangerously close off of the metal. Then the shooting stopped. A novice soldier would have thought his enemy was reloading, and sprang out to finish him off. And the Dhaika would have gunned him down. But Orion knew better. He sprang out of the side of the crate, then pulled himself back in; a dangerous gamble, but he had few options. The Dhaika swiveled and fired, all too late. Orion rolled to the other side, firing wildly, but still accurately enough to run a line of bullets holes up the Dhaika's leg and stomach. It dropped. Orion swiveled as the last one peered out from behind a crate, barely ten meters away, thinking Orion distracted. He wasn't. His sights swung around, directly over the Dhaika's face.

Both fired simultaneously. Two bullets shattered the Dhaika's faceplate, killing him. But the Dhaika got off three shots of his own, before his gun was flung backward, still tight in the louse's death grip, spraying wildly until it ran empty. The first two bullets missed. The third scored Orion's leg.

He stumbled against the wall, watching blood spurt from the wound. It had hit something. Orion looked around desperately. He spotted the dead Dhaika. These soldiers valuable; considered worthy of medical aid. Orion hoped they carried first aid kits. Dripping blood, he climbed down carefully, rummaging over the closest body desperately, hoping it had something, as his life slowly leaked away.

He found a pouch with bandages and medical foam. He opened the small plastic tub, smearing it onto the injury, feeling a sharp sting as the disinfectant went to work, as it reacted with his blood to form a scab, soaking it up, stopping the bleeding. As he wrapped a roll of bandage around the wound, Orion realized how lucky he had been; had it been a more serious injury, instead of a simple graze, he would have bled out in barely a minute. Seconds to live.

His legs had sustained enough trauma in the crash; this wound made it worse. It stung each time he moved his knees. But he forced himself to climb again, back onto the first crate. Then he stopped himself, and turned back to the dead Dhaika. He took two machine pistols from the corpses, more ammo for the carbine, and three grenades. He hooked two on his belt; the third he kept in his hand, climbing the crates, and setting it next to the vent grate. He pulled the pin, then flung himself down, sliding back to the floor. It detonated; Orion's heart stopped for a second. His ears rang, and he guessed he had a minor concussion, but there was no time for that now. He scrambled back up the crates and into the air vent.

He came out in another hallway, shooting out the grate. He had to be closer now; he was moving further into the building, and he knew there would be a central staircase somewhere. He dropped nimbly onto his feet; a second later, a wave of pain punished him, and he dropped to one knee. Wincing, he got up again, and moved on, carefully taking each corner, ready for Dhaika.

Barely a minute passed before he heard subtle footsteps. They were there, in a wide room ahead, with a few benches and columns. A lounge? Orion smirked at the idea of louse soldiers reclining, talking to each other, drinking coffee. He forced himself to focus again. The sounds of movement were gone.

Orion unhooked two grenades from his belt, holding one in each hand. He slung his carbine, but not over his back, letting it hang at his hip so that he could grab it right away. Again, he peered around the corner, eyes narrowed, waiting.

Then they came, rushing out, moving into the room. Orion sprang forward, too, not wanting to be caught behind the corner, trapped. He made for one of the columns, yanking the grenades apart as he ran. Each pin was hooked around the other's handle; both were live. He flung one at the three already moving in, and the other at the opposite corner, where the others waited, hidden. Then he slid behind the first column, waiting for them to detonate, fingers tight around the handle of his carbine.

When they did, Orion spun around, in a crouch, firing at the wounded, broken Dhaika. One ran for cover hastily; Orion gunned him down. He spotted two more dead; one by the corner, and one in the middle of the lounge, between two shredded benches.

One stepped out from behind the corner, holding a peculiar weapon, a drum hanging from the bottom. Before Orion could fire, it shot a single projectile, trailing smoke, that slammed into the column Orion hid behind. It exploded, and the column took the brunt of the blast, but the shock wave still hurled Orion backward.

*Grenade launcher*, he realized as he lay on his back.

Stunned, he desperately rolled over, back behind the withered column. He reloaded his carbine quickly, abandoning the empty magazine. Then, ducking behind a bench, he dashed for the next column.

Another grenade streaked out as he ran, blowing up against the wall behind him. Shrapnel bit into the back of his hip, but he got behind the column in time, and shot down a running Dhaika who hoped the grenade would give him a chance to run. Four left.

Orion spotted one peeking out behind another column, and shot at it, but missed; the Dhaika's stream of automatic fire forced him to duck back, the bullets shredding the concrete column, spattering Orion's cheek with tiny, sharp flecks of it. He shook it off, and peered out the other side of the column,

carefully, firing at the Dhaika, catching its arm and its gun. It staggered out from behind the column, wounded, and Orion gunned it down.

He heard a pop; he ducked down as another grenade slammed into the column Orion hid behind. This time he held his ground, but the louse was relentless, firing again, obliterating the bench Orion had run behind. He peered out, spotting the Dhaika holding the grenade launcher, and shot him. It staggered against the wall, the launcher sliding from its grip and clattering on the floor.

Orion dashed for the next column, firing as he ran at another Dhaika, catching it in the arm and hip, and slamming it against the wall. It collected itself, and kept running. Orion slid behind the next column, and fired a long stream, the carbine quivering violently in his hands, striking the Dhaika again and again until he collapsed. Then he spun around.

The hallway, the corner where the grenade-launcher Dhaika lay dead, was barely five meters away. But there were still two unaccounted for. Now Orion's mind whirled with confusion. Silence filled his ears, but he strained for something, a creak or a click, that might give him a clue.

Then a rush of hurried footsteps startled him. Two ran out from the corridor they had first come from, firing at two columns across the room. Orion shot the first in the chest and arm, watching flecks of blood hit the ceiling as the bullets bore straight through. It staggered sideways and fell. The second swiveled around, its gun aimed directly at Orion, who met its black eyes behind its white-tinted faceplate, before he replaced it with cracked glass and a smear of blood. It stumbled backwards, falling on its back, dead. Orion exhaled.

He got to his feet, slowly, moving cautiously into the corridor. He spotted the grenade launcher, a six-shot, compact model. He scooped it up, and checked the drum. Two left. He searched the dead Dhaika for more, slipped them into the drum, then took a few more for good measure.

"Good, good, Orion," Timeless' voice crackled over the intercom again. Orion flinched, but held steady, muscles tense, glancing around. "Oh, no, I am still far away. You've slaughtered sixteen of my best soldiers singlehandedly. A rare feat. The third will kill you, though. Your arrogance will fella you."

The intercom clicked off, silent. His voice was gone.

Where would the third squad be? Where would it come from? Would it be waiting with Timeless? Had it already missed him, and was struggling to catch up? No, no, Timeless knew Orion better. He would try something unexpected.

*You'll send them the exact same way, right behind this group. You know I know you're not that straightforward. So you think I'll stride on, unwary. And then you'll catch me unawares.*

As if to confirm his thoughts, a rush of footsteps started, then ceased, further along the corridor. Orion smiled, and walked on.

Anna was higher up, her rifle slung over her back. Occasionally it bumped the walls of the thin ladder tube with a soft clink. Gideon winced with each tap, feeling as though the lice must be tracking them by the noise, waiting for them at the top.

They had made it about thirty meters up so far. Fear of heights was not a factor in the darkness, where the bottom was just a circle of light; claustrophobia was, though, and Gideon felt as though the walls would constrict and crush him at any moment. Of course the lice did not care; this would be like the womb to them, the safe hug of concrete and steel. The thought made him want to shudder.

At forty meters, Anna's radio buzzed.

"Gideon, Anna, where the hell are you?"

"Sir –"

There was a pause.

"You went back to the ladder, didn't you? Do you understand ..." Myron's voice trailed off, "If we survive this, you are both in deep shit, do you understand? You disobeyed a *direct* –"

Anna clicked the radio off, interrupting Myron's angry rant. Gideon sighed.

"You'd better be *sure* about this," he said, his voice echoing a little.

"I am," said Anna.

They kept climbing.

Her back was on fire. Like an animal she clawed at her flight vest, tearing it away. She rolled over, moaning with pain. The heat seared her, on all sides, too close.

She tried to crawl away, but something held her leg tightly. The side of the cockpit had bent against the seat, pinning her ankle. She cursed, kicking at the floor, tugging desperately to pull herself free. Her Falcon had crashed, leaving her seat on its side, her body hanging uncomfortably in the straps, her head lolling to the side.

She felt a sharp sting on her neck; she slapped at it desperately, until it went away. Somewhere in her groggy mind she understood that her hair had caught on fire. Straining, she curled herself forward, to reach at the dashboard. Barely conscious from the effort, she spotted the ejector seat button. It seemed like her savior. She slammed her fist into it.

The seat unlocked, falling away, releasing her foot. A thrill of fear ran through her as she realized the ejection rockets would go off, slamming her into the ground and killing her; but they must have been destroyed in the explosion.

She tugged at the straps, undoing them, finally falling free of their constricting grip. She rolled over, crawling desperately away from the wreck, before collapsing, her cheek pressed against the cold rough concrete.

Around her, the distant echoes of the battle resonated through her limp form, inaudibly. She could lay here now, give up, die. It was comfortable here, even on the grimy floor, its coolness numbing her burns. She sighed.

Then she pushed herself up onto her knees. Shakily, she stood up, and turned back to the wreckage. She spotted her crash kit, trapped under a piece of metal. She went over, grabbed the strap, and tugged hard, pulling, until finally the fabric tore, and out spilled provisions, a compass, a knife, and a pistol. She picked up the pistol and knife, and left the rest behind. With one last look at her burning fighter, she turned on her heel and made for the door.

They had taken her wings, but they hadn't killed her. Not yet.

When the final rung came in sight Gideon almost let go of the ladder with relief. His calves and biceps burned with the effort, his back already aching in protest in the cramped vertical tunnel.

Some kind of grate covered the top of the shaft. He groped around in the dark, feeling for a lever, until his fingers wrapped around something thin. Growling, he wrenched it back and forth, until finally, with a creak, it gave way. Careful not to lose his balance, he pushed up, swinging the grate back. He gingerly slid his fingers over the rim, and pulled himself up the last few rungs, swinging a leg over, and standing up.

They stood in a small room, just outside it a hallway, the seams between wall and floor lined with small red lights, equidistant. There was little other light. Gideon felt a chill in his neck. Then he turned to pull up Anna, who brushed his hand away and pulled herself up.

"What is this?" she muttered.

"No idea," said Gideon.

"Feels like a control room around here somewhere."

"Yeah," said Gideon. He moved forward carefully, peering out into the hallway. A heavy, vault-like door sat at one end; at the other, the passage turned sharply left, out of sight.

"This way," said Gideon, "Door's gotta be it."

"How are we going to get through?" said Anna, looking at the door. A great ridge ran across its

middle, as if a massive bar slid through it, beneath the metal.

"No idea," said Gideon, "You're the one who's supposed to be able to hack into this stuff."

"I can try, but I make no guarantees," said Anna grimly.

They moved toward the door.

"Seems awfully quiet for a control room," said Anna, "I don't see a console. Maybe it –"

With a low, flat, ominous tone, the door beeped and began to slide open, screeching.

"Shit, shit, get back," said Gideon, teeth gritted.

Anna stumbled, her gun clattering to the ground.

"Anna!"

He lunged for her, but a single shot cracked through the air. Stinging pain flared through his arm; he cried out, dropping his gun. He slipped, tumbling onto his back, clutching at his bloody wound; he saw Anna roll over, reaching for her weapon, saw a shot pierce her thigh. She screamed.

"No! Anna!"

Two louse soldiers stood in the door. Past it, Gideon could see a massive room, a wide control panel sitting before a massive ringed vat, which glowed a sinister orange, a rail running around the edge. The walls and ceiling were glass, the iron grid that held it together framing the stars as it did the glass. Closer stood a man in a long cloak, two daggers hanging from his belt, a mask with fang-shaped eye slits over his face. He held a handgun the size of a brick.

Gideon recognized him at once, from the drawing Orion had shown him.

Timeless.

Smoke burst into the air. Orion realized his stupidity. The second chamber, almost identical to the first, was full of Dhaika. In his haste, Orion had underestimated Timeless. And now they were going to kill him with a smoke-grenade. He would be blind. They could see easily, with their infrared goggles. Orion dropped to a crouch behind two low walls, as the thick gray swirls grew around his eyes. His mind raced furiously, thoughts rushing ahead of each other, clawing each other down in desperation. Trapped. Was this how it ended? He could run, but the Dhaika would mow him down long before he made it to the doorway.

Then suddenly, blinded though he was, he saw them. Two behind him, standing tall, approaching carefully, wanting to finish him with a single bullet. They stood in the open, entirely exposed, so confident that Orion could not retaliate.

He sprang to his feet, wheeling around, and put two bullet holes in each Dhaika's head. The others opened fire, but Orion ducked down again, and their bullets scattered overhead, fruitlessly. Orion stayed low, springing back up again to gun down two more Dhaika. As they fell, Orion dropped the empty gun. He replaced it the carbine of one of his fallen foes, and crawled fast along the ground, behind a bench. He reached a column, and crouched behind it. One Dhaika came around the corner, gun swiveling wildly; Orion sprang up, grabbed it by the neck, tucking his gun barrel under its chin before pulling the trigger. Flecks of something hot splattered Orion's face as the Dhaika's head jerked back. He let it fall, then sprang back behind the wall as retaliatory bullets lashed out at him.

He sprang out of the other side of the column, firing as he ran, killing another Dhaika who staggered backward in shock as Orion's bullets struck him. Two left. Orion slid in behind another column, ducking, sliding out his clip. Maybe ten rounds left. Reloading would be suicidal; surely both his remaining foes were stalking him right now, the surprise factor of the smoke gone. And he was pinned down behind this column.

Then he saw them again; one coming from one side, one from the other. They would pop out at the same time, and Orion would kill one, but the other would finish him. It was over. Left or right. That was all the choice he had. Left or right. Unless ...

In a flash, Orion tossed the carbine to the floor, and pulled out the two machine pistols he'd taken

earlier, held them out on either side, arms straight, eyes straight ahead. Then, in a flash, he knew; his fingers squeezed each trigger simultaneously. A split-second pause sent a spike of fear through Orion's brain. Then he heard two heavy thuds as each body collapsed.

He stood up. All twenty-four Dhaika lay dead; eight in that warehouse, eight in the last lounge, and eight here. Orion picked up the carbine again, reloaded it, and continued on, cautious. Timeless had said twenty-four, but so far he was proving to be full of surprises.

"Shouldn't we try to get up to them?" said one of the soldiers behind Myron.

"No. They ... they chose what they were going to do. Likely they're dead now. That's what happens when you don't follow the damned plan."

"So we're just going to leave them?" she said.

"Yeah. We're gonna leave them."

"What if they found the control room?"

"Then they ought to radio us and *tell* us."

"What if they're being shot at because they *did* find it and can't – "

"Enough!" hissed Myron, "Pointless questions! I've lost two people to stupidity and insubordination so far. We finish the mission. Properly."

"Yes sir."

They rounded a bend. Myron spotted a pair of doors, and a panel on the wall next to them, buttons glowing a pale, sickly lavender color. An elevator. He moved up fast, shotgun swiveling back and forth. No one. He pushed the button, the doors sliding open with a screech.

"Room for all of us if we squeeze," said Myron.

When they were all inside, Myron reached between two other soldiers to push the button.

"Top floor," he said.

The door slid shut, and the dull whirl of motors began as the elevator climbed.

WRITE MOAR

orion trapped in elevators. Timeless taunts him through intercom as he fights Dhaika

moar before this

"I ought to cut your delicate little throat now," said Timeless, "It would be the prudent option. But I prefer to let you watch. The weapon will finish charging in barely a few minutes now, and when it fires, it will cleanse your wretched race from this planet. And then, once every ounce of hope is drawn out of you, when you are curled up crying on the floor, I will let you die."

Anna twitched on the floor, trying to turn herself away from the window.

"No," said Timeless coldly, and he hooked his heel around her shoulder, spun her fetal form around to face the night.

She forced herself up, shakily, propping herself on her elbow, then her hand, pushing herself up until she was sitting. She glared at Timeless.

"You don't like it? This is the price for your weakness," said Timeless.

She spat at him, her face writhing with hatred. Timeless lashed out, kicking her hard in the jaw. There was a crack, and she was flung back onto the floor.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear enough," said Timeless, "You *will* watch this. Pitiful defiance, trying to make me finish you off now, it won't work. I will get to see your anguish."

He jammed his foot into her stomach. She let out a muffled yelp of pain.

"Stop it," yelled Gideon through gritted teeth, from across the room. Timeless turned away from Anna so fast Gideon could have sworn he had blinked. There was a click as Timeless withdrew his pistol, pulling back the hammer with his thumb, pointing the massive handgun at Gideon where he lay.

"I have no more need for you," said Timeless, "In fact, I don't why I haven't shot you yet."

High above, glass shattered. A black form descended, from the broken windows above, holding two machine pistols, the long magazines extending down from the guns like fangs. They sputtered to life, ripping into the dozen or so louse soldiers who stood behind Timeless. By the time the figure landed, he had shot half of them, and the other half were dead before they could raise their weapons.

Timeless shot back, but the figure darted behind another control panel, and the missed shots sent up geysers of sparks.

"You're such a fool, Orion," he said.

Orion's retort was a wave of bullets. Most of them hit, knocking him back onto the floor, his knives almost slipping from his grip. The guns clicked sharply, echoing emptily around the chamber.

"Such a fool," said Timeless.

He strode toward the control panels, peering around them, pointing his gun here and there. The red fangs of his eyes swiveled around, searching.

Then something clanked from behind. Timeless turned, and a knife scythed his gun from his hand. Orion slashed at Timeless, but he backpedaled, out of range, and drew his own knives. They faced each other for a few seconds, before colliding in a whirl of slashes, dodges, kicks, and punches. Then they broke apart again.

"I see you don't have Quicksilver anymore," said Timeless, "Nor did you the last time we fought, at that sky bridge. It is sad, isn't it? One of the few ways you could delude yourself into thinking you could kill me, and it's gone."

"I killed your twenty-four Dhaika," said Orion, "Myron and his soldiers have surely killed the rest by now. How do you feel about that?"

They clashed again, a dizzying flurry of blows. Orion jammed his knee into Timeless' stomach, so that he bent forward just enough for Orion to duck under his shoulder, and kick him in the back of the knee. But Timeless folded into a roll, springing up again just as Orion turned to pursue him. Several fruitless slashes later, they were back at equilibrium, facing each other.

Gideon looked around, spotting a dead louse in the shadows near the wall. He began to crawl, arm-over-arm, toward the corpse; perhaps he could take its gun without being noticed. He looked to Anna; she wasn't moving.

Back between the control panels, Orion pressed Timeless furiously. He could not believe it, after all these years, all the times he had fought this man, and still he faced him. But no more. This would be finished tonight.

He slashed high, and Timeless ducked ... right into the path of Orion's other knife, which sank cleanly into his forearm. Timeless winced, his grunt of pain muffled behind that fanged mask.

But then he simply held up his arm, and Orion watched, behind the torn fabric, as the gray flesh began to heal itself. He could not see Timeless' face, but Orion was sure he was grinning.

He dodged a low thrust, sidestepping it, retaliating fast before Timeless could slash again. He had to hold the momentum, had to run Timeless out. Behind him, the vat of energy glowed menacingly, out of sight, only its light visible behind that guardrail. Another hazard. Or another advantage.

Timeless kicked him in the shin, a split-second distraction that allowed his knife through, allowed it to score a line along Orion's wrist and elbow; but Orion used Timeless' minor moment of triumph to swing a wide punch, slamming into the side of Timeless' neck, hitting soft fabric, releasing a sharp grunt of pain. Orion punched Timeless' other shoulder, then slashed across with his knife, hooking the straps of his enemy's mask, and ripping it free. It clattered to the floor, and Timeless backpedaled.

There it was, the thin, clever face, with the gray flesh and olive-black pupils. Orion had seen it before, yet again it unnerved him, to look his foe in the eyes, to remember that he thought, maybe even felt. This was a man.

But this man had killed his family, and Orion sprang forward in rage.

Timeless blocked his blows again and again, but Orion never ran out, turned each fruitless thrust

into a deadly backslash, dodged Timeless whenever he could, freeing up his knives to strike back. Both of them ducked, bobbed, and wove across the floor, between the control panels, furiously, the largest panel ticking away, counting down, barely three minutes left now.

At last, Orion hooked one of Timeless' knives from his hand. The other swung at his side, but he caught it in his knife's guard, and twisted it. As they wrestled in one hand, Orion slashed with the other, going for Timeless' throat, for the kill.

A brutal blow to the chin blindsided him, knocked him to the floor. Timeless kicked him hard in the chest, and he staggered back. Orion heard a swishing sound, before a dull pain flared in his forehead, and he knew no more.

## When Myron

She was dead. Emma was dead in his arms again. He knelt by that stream, the dead hulk behind him, looking at her corpse, her eyes wide in surprise, little else left of her pretty face...

His parents were falling, as Macalavay rumbled in the distance, their final moments spent plummeting amidst the buffeting wind...

Xenia was sliding away from him, as the hallway cracked in half before him, reaching for her, looking at her eyes, wide with fear, confusion, and desperation...

Calana's blood was all over his hands, spots of it in her muddy brown hair...

Julia was dying, her face turning pale, all those years ago...

Cassiopeia was telling him she loved him...

*Goodbye, sister,* thought Orion as he remembered, *Perhaps I will see you soon.*

He had never believed the words he had preached to those people in Alderheim. He saw their faces now, solemn, in the early morning sea air, the distant sound of the waves echoing around him, reading the wisdom that there would be a reward for the dead.

Then he saw them dying, ripped to shreds by louse bullets, blown to pieces by hulk rockets, crushed under the treads of tanks, as Alderheim was overrun. There was no reward.

He saw Trielle holding his children.

Leo and Zoey. Would they survive this weapon? Would Trielle? Would they grow up deformed, as in Orion's nightmares, ears melting into their chins, eyes out of place, foreheads swollen so that their necks could not hold up, arms stunted and stubby, flailing uselessly? Trielle sobbing over the twisted products of her womb?

No, no. That could not happen.

The room swam back into his vision in slow doses. He heard faint crying; he spotted Anna, laying on the floor, Timeless standing over her. The timer was stopped at sixty seconds.

"I see you've come to," came Timeless' voice, cold and amused, "Your friends never came. They are ... otherwise engaged. Plenty of Dhaika to keep them busy. The elevators no longer work besides. You are alone."

"You're wondering why I stopped the timer, aren't you? Why I would risk the success of this weapon, give you even the slightest chance of stopping it? There's a failsafe. And I wanted you to appreciate what's going to happen."

Orion tugged at his bonds. He was tied to a railing, and tightly, the ropes around his shoulders, his feet dangling, toes a few inches from the ground.

"It's been so many years, Orion," said Timeless, pacing now, back and forth in front of Anna wounded, weeping form, "So many times we've fought. You are worthy opponent. Your father was a worthy opponent. Did I ever tell you that? Oh yes, he was. Your mother, too. The finest examples of your pitiful species. Strong, promising, but weak in the end. Turning their backs in their greatest moment

of triumph.”

Timeless stopped before Anna, looking down at her as she moaned in pain, a twisted smile on his face. He was enjoying it, Orion knew, reveling in her anguish, probably found it erotic. But then Timeless raised his eyes to Orion again, and his expression became serious.

“You deserve some answers, though. If only to make my victory complete. It only seems *right* after all this time. You lost so much, you are about to lose it all, and that is inevitable. And I will enjoy it, enjoy telling you it all.”

“A thousand years it's been, Orion. A thousand years this long war has gone on. How many billions has it claimed? A trillion maybe? More? And I've been alive for all of it. I was there at the beginning. At Faien'roh, where you and that girl wandered into that cave. Found that orb, made you *remember* things? The whole place gave you flashbacks, didn't it?”

“*Mertigui*, Orion,” said Timeless, grinning at Orion's confused expression, “You think you are a god, don't you? You are Chosen, you can see things a split-second before they happen. I could shoot at you right now, and you'd flinch out of the way before I'd even drawn my weapon. But that's not how it happens, Orion. You are ever so extraordinarily sensitive. It passes best through male genes, hence why you and your father were the strongest examples. But your mother; well, she had it too. It was a genetic mutation they created so long ago, something in the mind, a mix of extreme empathy and intuition. Uncanny reflexes. And the slowed aging, well, that's a side-effect. Everyone would be like that if they'd had the balls to use it back in my time.”

“But they didn't. God damn GIGA, and the entire world. They didn't know they wanted it. But in the end, they created themselves. They created *us*, Orion, the perfect race.”

Orion writhed against the bonds, but to no avail. He'd never heard Timeless speak like this before, almost like a real person. And it unnerved him.

“What the hell is GIGA?” said Orion.

“Global Initiative for Genetic Advancement,” he said, “It was an organization, oh, a thousand years ago. Wanted a perfect people. And the other people, they didn't like it. But the lice are not some mad laboratory experiment, Orion. We are not escaped monsters gone insane. We knew we had to cleanse the world. Omnicide after omnicide, and it wouldn't do. You killed yourselves, Orion. Your race is suicidal.”

“So killing us is the answer?” Orion shot back, straining against the ropes again, his face livid, “Slaughtering us because of our ancestors mistakes?”

Timeless shook his head, disapprovingly, his face disappointed.

“Your mind is so narrow, Orion. You'd do it again. If every living Dhomezi blinked out of existence, now; if this timer stopped forever, it would only be starting another one. Until you just do it yourselves. We just try to break the cycle.”

“Liar,” spat Orion.

Timeless cackled.

“Oh, am I, Orion? Am I a liar?”

He turned, pressed a button on the console in front of the timer. Across the great chamber, high on the wall, a great screen flickered to life, showing sixty seconds left, the black windows all around it. Timeless pressed a button, and videos flickered to life, in faded color, in black and white. Blossoming nuclear clouds. A camera slowly panning across fields of corpses. None of them lice. People stood over them, walking amongst them with rifles, almost boredly.

Piles of dead bodies. An aircraft, one so archaic Orion did not recognize it as such for a second, flew overhead, the drone of its propeller punctuated by the heavy stutter of its machine guns. A stream of bombs falling away from another plane, to trace a streak of red along the ground so many miles below. The blossom of an atomic fireball, tinting the air orange with heat, turning a house into matchsticks in the withering wind. One man gunning another down, coldly, mindlessly. Orion could not tell if it was from a war, or from something else. There were no lice in the videos.

The screen went black.

“That is who you are, Orion.”

He said nothing, merely twisted at his bonds some more. Then he relaxed at last, surrendering to them. They still dug at his wrists, burned them whenever he shifted the slightest amount.

“Your race calls itself the whos, because you don't know who you are. You came to this world so long ago, your history forgotten, the lessons of your past forgotten. You killed each other three times with nuclear bombs. Over what amounted to nothing. And no one will know how many times you slaughtered each other, incompletely, in between those times. Over land, ideas, beliefs. You stole from each other, even when this world offered you anything you could want.”

“The Dhomezi were created to be the ultimate beings, Orion. They would never want for power, they would never want for love, they would never want for an idea. They cannot think for themselves anymore. They live to slaughter weakness. The feeling you feel when you fall in love, Orion Green, the feelings you had for that woman, Calana, the one I shot in the back. Every little spike of joy you felt watching her, talking to her, making love with her, that is the same feeling that surges through a Dhomezi soldier when he kills. The feeling is no different – *no* different – because they were created that way. The chemical reactions are the same, Orion. Rewired.”

“The Dhomezi will never revolt, never demand better wages, never demand better food, never demand a better life. They will never crave freedom, because they do not care for it. Every pathetic weakness has been drained from them.”

Outside, the battle raged. Orion watched glowing streaks crawl across the night sky, stained by smoke from dying ships.

“The mass production you killed yourselves with, reduced yourselves to worthless children who squabble over the best toys, we turned it against you. We breed thousands per hour, unleash them on you, an unrelenting tide that will soon scrub you from this world. You will not be improved on. You will be replaced.”

Orion glared at Timeless.

“You're wrong,” he said, “We are better. We don't fight each other, we don't nuke the whole damn world – you, *you*, you're the one doing that now. You tried to exterminate us, but if anything, you made us stronger for it.”

“It's temporary,” said Timeless, “Of course you band together when you have a common enemy. But were it all over, you would get restless. In twenty years, in thirty, you would start it up again. Your kind craves war.”

Orion shook his head, but said nothing.

“There it is, Orion, laid bare. All the illusions, washed away.”

“That's the world you want?” said Orion, “Don't lie to me, Timeless. You were a person, once. You felt happiness, you felt empathy. You can't tell me this grimy mechanical hell is what you want. It's a lie.”

“It's not a lie, Orion. I represent the ultimate success, the final prevailing of our idea. I *changed*, you see. I have become so much better, in body as in mind. I can live for so many thousands of years, without the population explosion that GIGA was so damned worried about back then. All of us can.”

“A thousand years of slavery,” said Orion.

“You miss the point,” said Timeless, “Your entire race is cursed, condemned to live. The spark that makes up your consciousness is inherently painful, your mortality, your listlessness, your purposeless weighting on you underneath it all. You would wish to die after all that time. We need none of that, need no fulfillment, no satisfaction. It has been cleansed from us, and we will cleanse what remaining misery there is in the world, until there is no more.”

“You're insane,” said Orion.

“Am I?” said Timeless, approaching slowly now, “You want to live forever? With the anguish of your dead parents, of your dead sister, of everyone you loved left behind? You want to live out all the

years that the Chosen genes could give you?"

"Death is easier, Orion. Your kind is a failure. But you are no different from them. Weak, and shortsighted. Pathetically self-absorbed, even when you pretend to aspire to some greater good. That is where you came from Orion. That is everything."

"You're still insane," said Orion. Timeless turned, slammed the button so that the countdown started again, then began to approach slowly.

"I'm going to kill you now," he said, "Cut your throat in just the right place so that you live long enough to see it. The Fourth Omnicide, the one that ends them all. Your people will choke to death on the Dholeska."

"So will yours."

Timeless' face flinched ever so slightly.

Orion held up a vial. Timeless stood barely two meters from him now. His cold black eyes widened, then he let out a cruel chuckle.

"You'll slay a few million of mine, then," said Timeless, "But it's a double-edged sword, the Dholeska. It will finish your kind entirely. And you will be trapped here, Orion, to watch it happen."

"No I won't."

A cold sensation ran down Orion's wrist as the band, hidden under his sleeve, rolled down, the metal shaping itself, the nanobot fluid raveling and unraveling, until it formed into a shining dagger in Orion's hand. Timeless stiffened in surprise.

In a flash, Orion cut himself free. Timeless sprang forward, but Orion slashed his arm, and kicked his ankle as he sprinted by. He heard a grunt from Timeless, then a swishing sound, as a whirling dagger caught the vial from his Orion's hand, knocked it so that it skittered along the floor, under the railing, and into the pit below.

Orion whirled around, meeting Timeless as he charged. He'd already drawn a replacement knife, and both swished inches from Orion's cheeks as he ducked back, then slashed the blows away. They fought brutally, Orion renewed by his escape, his muscles invigorated. He cut high, low, letting Timeless block his blows. The opening would come, and it would come soon.

He threw a kick at Timeless, who dodged it, and slashed at Orion's leg. But he snapped it away, whirling around in another kick that swept Timeless from his feet. But Timeless rolled over, back to a crouch, and parried Orion's follow-up thrusts perfectly.

"I know you, Orion," said Timeless as they fought, "You are a fool thinking you can beat me, when I know you so well."

They danced around Anna, who was barely conscious now; he could see dark trickles of blood running down her back and stomach. Orion caught Timeless' overhead stab with his arm, their wrists slamming together, then slicing at Timeless' hand. But Timeless slashed back, cutting a line along Orion's cheek. They stumbled away from each other, both wounded, Timeless' back to the railing now.

Orion did not waste a second, charging, swinging as he ran, knocking both of Timeless' knives wide. Quicksilver clattered from his hand. The other knife sank into Timeless' throat.

Timeless grabbed Orion's shoulders, as he pushed him back over the railing.

"You have lost, Orion," Timeless gurgled, "Your pitiful antidote is gone."

"It's not an antidote. And it's already in there," said Orion, "You cut the power to the elevators, and I paid a little visit to your capsules while the power was out on the whole floor. Trust me, your Dholeska is more than a little contaminated. And it's going to kill the lice, Timeless, the same way you tried to kill us."

"Liar," Timeless spat, but his eyes widened, "You cannot kill me, besides. That wound will heal in seconds."

"You said you understood our race, understood the whos," said Orion, "Said we were worthless, that we would kill each other over nothing. Well maybe we've learned our lesson, Timeless, maybe we haven't. Maybe you're right." He twisted the knife. "But there's one thing about us you'll never

understand Timeless. You'll never understand love, caring, integrity, purpose. You'll never understand the urge to create, to grow and nurture."

He pushed Timeless back against the railing, so that both of them were bent over it, muscles straining against each other. He looked into the black eyes, the pale flesh, the wicked smile; and past it, the bubbling energy below.

He thought of Trielle now, and his heart sank. But he had to be strong. For her. For Leo, and Zoey. For Myron. For his sister, and mother, and father. For everyone."

"Most of all, Timeless, you'll never understand self-sacrifice."

He kicked against the ground, grabbing tightly onto the Timeless as his eyes widened in sudden surprise. They tipped over the railing, Timeless' legs flailing desperately. It would be over in a second, thought Orion, closing his eyes as the sickening plummet began. But before he did, his eyes swung back over the edge, at the doorway; he spotted figures rushing in. Not the glowing red lenses of his enemy, but eyes; Myron's eyes. They met, for a split-second, before Orion fell away, clinging to Timeless, driving him down with him.

Then they hit the pool, and hot agony spread over him. Timeless screamed, but Orion did not. It was over. Finally, after so long, it was over.

Myron could not believe his eyes. Orion. Orion had vaulted himself over. With Timeless.

The clock had barely five seconds left, but Myron did not care. Even as powerful shock waves shook the floor, as the weapon launched whatever it was meant to, Myron sprinted for the railing, unbelieving. It could not have happened.

Gideon and Anna lay on the floor; alive, he could tell. But Orion.

He hit the railing

MYRON PICKS UP QUICKSILVER BEFORE LEAVING, then they go to empty dholeska capsule and escape though that

With finality Orion pulled himself onto the concrete ring. He was dead. He could tell. The burns were permanent. He hated himself, suddenly, knowing he had killed himself, that he would not last another minute. But there was no other way.

Timeless lay dead across from him, almost nothing left. His corpse smoked, the air wavering from the intense heat.

Orion lay his cheek on the roughness, clinging to its sensation. He felt the first wave of lightness, that would tear him away from his body into white fuzz, into nothingness, into death.

He thought of Trielle; he loved her. He loved his children he would never see, only hear their cries, and say his love once. Over a radio. What would they grow into?

He began to cry, freely, not from pain, not from loss, but from the finality of it. He thought of the distant years in Macalavay, his youth, when the end to the war had seemed so near. Thoughts of Julia, of that other world.

The ground was shaking as the weapon fired, but Orion cared not. It would scathe the world, but the whos would survive. They could rebuild, and the lice could not. And in that infinitely far future, maybe there could be peace.

He sobbed now. He remembered Sarengarth, slaying Diomitrick, marrying Xenia, the first siege of Sarengarth that had filled him with awe and fear as those clouds of ships descended from the sky. The countless missions he had flown, the journeys to Arsthonna and Faien'roh, meeting Calana, finding solace in her, then love. The hours above the clouds, looking down at the swarms of louse ships migrating eastward, the endless, hopeless tide. The beacon that Sarengarth had been.

Emma dying, Sarengarth falling, his captivity, that he had risen again, found hope and love even after losing it so many times. Even with Alderheim destroyed, he had not lost Trielle.

Seeing Myron again, after thinking him dead for so many months. Finally marrying Trielle,

hearing her tell him she was pregnant, that Orion would have children, that the Chosen genes would be passed on.

He looked at Timeless again. They were not a lie. They were real. How could there be such a twisted idea of perfection, when it was sitting right before him, in the life he could have had, that he should have had.

Guilt washed through him as he thought of Trielle, how she would spend the coming years. But she was strong. She would live. So would Leo and Zoey. There was hope.

Then the missiles hit, and there was nothing.

End.

Dhaika throw smoke grenade, using their heat vision to shoot when orion is blind. Orion uses chosen intuition to "see" them and kill them all. Dhaika are reckless in the smoke so don't use cover, orion slaughters them easily

orion trapped in elevator

Orion bursts into control room after gideon and anna are captured, mows down lice soldiers around timeless with dual machine-pistols.

gordon and anna sneak away, back behind, to climb ladder. Myron doesn't realize til later, calls them on radio, they refuse to come back. End up in control room first, with orion, who is on other side of building, fighting 24 dhaika in groups of 8 alone. Second group comes exactly the same way as the first, orion knows because he knows timeless.

Timeless left it all but undefended on purpose, could not compete with orion's "formidable pilot skills," wanted to kill orion himself

lice eventually begin trying to genetically modify whos into lice, using surgery, etc.. Called the Turning by those who resist in the cities. Many suicide bombings, etc.. Propaganda films playing day and night about the new, better.

Power struggle within; Timeless eventually gains complete control, overthrowing the warlords who otherwise had command. The malevolent spirit that is the true leader of the lice remains a mystery, but part or all of its name is Lhocansthka.

small corner stronghold attacked while orion is visiting thrynnne, cassiopeia's old friend.

attack mountain for dholeska information

myron and aldrick are shot down, orion flies on, uses his squadmates as soldiers.

they are almost all massacred, orion and two others slip into vent.

orion fights 4-armed superhulk, takes data cube, discovers location of losue superweapon to destroy the world

underthrown fleet flies to west to take down weapon

brie, pilot is introduced. borderline-crazy piloting

trielle has orion's children. but he is not there. he manages to see them though, and send back a video saying how much he loves them

soldiers anna and gideon introduced.

attack superweapon from all sides. huge battle lasts nearly a week

finally get to weapon after stealing some more dholeska information

orion has idea to invent nanobot to "infect" dholeska virus, cause it to infect lice.

brings canister with him on mission

Orion is shot down, kills twenty-four dhaika total alone, then goes up to where timeless has wounded gideon and anna. fight with timeless. orion ends up captured. bracelet (quicksilver) transforms into dagger, he cuts himself free

timeless says he knows orion's every motion, and that he can't beat him. orion says there's one thing you'll never understand timeless. sacrifice.

throws himself into pit of energy with timeless just as myron enters.

anna is shot in head as they try to escape.

brie takes them to tone of the empty dholeska canisters, they strap in and escape the nuclear blasts

eventually rejoin fleet. tide of nukes is heading east

find location of ancient who data cube with history stuff inside of data of louse dholeska canister. head there. befriend city. gideon stays behind to help them defend against skitterstings landing in Npehnari feather fliers, is overrun and killed.

they escape, myron and brie are shot down. myron finds data cube with geiger counter on top of dune, is shot twice by gunpod. vest saves him. runs off, shooting down some more lice. runs down dune, back to landing craft, they take off, brie mows down attackers with chain gun on side.

keep flying. gathering forces from small nations, preparing for huge battle with louse fleet forced eastward by tide of nuclear bombs. myron points out to aldrick that "orion was the real diplomat"

they keep heading north, ready to converge with the louse fleet in the final battle.

Aldrick spends time with trielle, tells her about his time in the forests near tangata, how he used to have a crush on cassiopeia when she and orion were so famous as the heroes of sarengarth, etc.. also says trielle is brave, he could never bear to bring a child into the world

Night before huge battle.

He stood on the balcony, his hand on the back of his head, feeling where his hair curled in the hollow of his neck. Aldrick gazed out at the flickering field of glowing pinpricks: the rest of the fleet, only visible by their lights in the black void of night.

“Lo,” muttered Myron as he approached. Aldrick had barely heard him; a prick of shame ran through his head that his fine-tuned forest ears had not caught the footsteps sooner.

“It’s a nice night,” said Aldrick, in a low growl that made it sound unconvincing.

“It is,” said Myron.

“They say that courage is fear that has prayed,” said Aldrick.

“You’re praying?”

Aldrick shook his head.

“Not a religious man?”

“No,” said Aldrick, “Never.”

Myron grinned.

“Me neither. But sometimes I ask the Revenant for something here and there. Inspiration, if nothing else. Morale, you know?”

Aldrick nodded.

“You ought to stay inside,” said Myron, “Don’t get yourself too restless and sleepless. I need you and your boarding party in tip-top shape tomorrow.”

“Brie is off messing around with some video thing.”

“I already talked to her. Can’t do much past that, can I? Girl’s crazy. Makes her one hell of a pilot at least.”

“She came onto me,” said Aldrick, looking at the stars.

“What?” said Myron incredulously, “Don’t screw with me, are you serious?”

Aldrick nodded. Myron raised his eyebrows.

“Wow. I assume you held her off?”

Another nod.

“She was drunk,” said Aldrick simply.

Myron scoffed.

“Such a gentleman. You’re young, Aldrick, younger than me at least. There’s a battle coming. Chances are some of us won’t make it through. Now I have a wife who I love very much, but you don’t. It might sound disgraceful to you, but I wouldn’t look down on you getting a bit of tail before the end of the goddamn world, you know?”

“It’s already happened?”

“What? Brie?”

“No,” said Aldrick, “The end of the world.”

Myron said nothing for a moment, simply watched the slow, undulating movement of the lines of cruisers in the distance, as turbulence wafted through them gently, like waves at sea, but in the air.

“To be honest, Aldrick, I can’t believe it either,” said Myron. He sighed. “I wish I’d known Orion was planning to do that. He won. He beat Timeless. He changed the Dholeska. Millions of lice will die now. Their own weapon will do what we could not.”

“And the nukes?”

Myron shook his head.

“Who knows? It’s forcing the entire fleet east, it has to be having some effect.”

“It’s already killed so many!” said Aldrick, “All those people we left Gideon with, who

Second attack on louse positions across from Aljabro; whos need artillery to bombard lice. Aldrick wounded in first attack, but they manage to destroy one anti-air turret. Fleet is occupied, and is vulnerable to fire from fortified aljabro besides.

Myron sat alone in his office, poring over aerial photographs. HAS photographs. The one constant in all the war had been those floating strongholds, the eye in the sky. Myron had considered it, going up there, hiding. Oddly, it seemed to be safer up there, high above the cloud-floor, occasionally dipping down to take a picture.

The lice were dug in well. Out of range of Sarengarth's batteries, with Fehrwen and Scerwile still all but abandoned. So was Togroff.

It seemed strange to be planning another attack just twenty-four hours after the first had partially failed, but Myron knew relentlessness was key. Breaking those anti-air turrets would be like cracking the shell. One was down, at the cost of having Aldrick for the next mission. Three were left. They would have to take them in one swipe this time. The lice would already be prepared, lying ready and waiting.

The door swung open. It was Trielle, dressed in a gray Underthrown uniform.

"I want to go on the mission. I want to come with you."

"No," said Myron, not looking up from his plans.

"You're down a man with Aldrick wounded," said Trielle, "I can fill it."

"Out of the question," said Myron, glancing up at her.

"I'm a soldier."

"You're a mother," said Myron.

"I'm a soldier!" Trielle insisted, "You need someone good. Someone to make sure you don't fail. We need Aljabro. We need those artillery positions to get Aljabro."

"And so if you die, I ... what? Raise Leo and Zoey by myself?" demanded Myron, "I did it once. I won't do it again."

"If we don't get Aljabro back, they won't be alive to be raised!" Trielle shouted. Then she stopped, shrinking slightly.

Myron looked at her, his steel-gray eyes widening a bit.

"Please," he said, "Please don't make me do this alone."

"I have to get them back," said Trielle, shaking her head, "I need it. I need to fight them, show them that I still can. They'll never notice, but I will. I have to prove ... I have to prove they didn't beat me. By taking Orion."

"Orion chose the means of his own death. He killed Timeless, something no one else could do."

"They still took him!" said Trielle, "They forced him to do it, and we're going to finish the job he started. I want revenge."

"I'll take it for you."

"It's not the same," said Trielle, "It never is, and never will be."

Myron sat back, considering her.

"I can't be helpless anymore, Myron," she said, tears limning her eyes suddenly, "I just can't."

"You *aren't*," said Myron, "You found your daughter in a ruined town full of wolf-beasts."

"Stalkers," she said.

"Whatever."

"That was Orion, not me."

Myron scoffed.

"No it wasn't. He told me. Said he would've died if it hadn't been for you. I'm sure he told you that," said Myron.

Trielle just looked down at her knees.

"You're one of the best soldiers, one of the strongest people I've ever met, Trielle," said Myron. He sighed. "And I've known a hell of a lot of people."

“Then let me prove it,” said Trielle.

“I can't. You're too valuable.”

“They're growing up without a father,” said Trielle, her voice breaking, “You think it'll matter worth a damn if they lose their mother, too? They won't even remember it.”

Myron stared at her.

“You can come,” he said, “But do not take a *single* unnecessary risk, do you understand?”

She gave him a watery smile.

“Aren't unnecessary risks how we win?”

“Not this time.”

Her grin faded.

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

## Returning to Sarengarth

When they were barely an hour away, Myron met with Aldrick and Trielle on the bridge of the *Broken Arrow*, huddled in the corner, away from the many crewmen who worked busily over control panels, a quiet enclave of whispers.

“What are we going to tell them?” said Trielle, “That we found nothing? That we just came back? Gave up?”

“It's the truth,” said Myron, “If we don't tell it, the other hundred-or-so people on this ship will. The simple fact of the matter is, Sarengarth is the safest place for us right now. For our people.”

Aldrick nodded in agreement. There was little else to say; they remembered the gray, scathed world they had wandered through the last few weeks. The memories sank against them, and they were silent for several minutes.

Trielle leaning against the wall, arms crossed, Aldrick standing firmly, Myron sitting on the inset bench along the wall of the bridge. What point was there in lying? The world above was horrid and dead, so much so that a life in concrete tunnels, rarely if ever seeing the sun, was far better.

“I'll speak when we arrive,” said Myron, “I'll explain that you can't walk half a klick out there without running into a dozen Dholeska psychos. Tell them half the world is ash and the other half is wreckage.”

“The world's coming back,” said Trielle softly, staring past them into the distance, out the front window, where the late-afternoon horizon hung wavering slowly. Myron looked up at her lost eyes, then nodded.

“It is. But it's not back yet.”

“A few more years, right?” said Aldrick flatly, “Ought to be meadows and puppies by then.”

“Shut up, Aldrick,” said Trielle.

“No sense of humor,” said Aldrick.

Silence returned in the wake of his words. It was not dark in the bridge, by any means, but a heaviness hung in the air as the ship rumbled beneath them, churning its way home, back to safety, back to the stronghold they had known as the one safe place in the world. And even it had been overrun once and made all but uninhabitable again when the Fourth Omnicide had come. Myron's mind spiraled back to Woebarren, to Macalavay, to Peter and Emily. What would they think of the world now, their life's effort wiped away in nothingness, their children dead, their grandchildren huddled in a maze of tunnels, growing up without knowing fresh air. He felt his fingers gripping his thigh tightly, stronger and stronger, until he could bear the thoughts no more.

“Well, you should get ready to land,” said Myron to both of them, “The kids will be happy to see you, Tri. I'd bet my life on them missing you.”

“What's left of it,” muttered Aldrick.

“I plan on living another sixty-six years, Aldrick, and even by then I'll still look a lot damn better than you do,” said Myron, “Go get everyone packing up and ready. Your silver tongue ought to motivate them. They'll be off the ship in no time.”

Trielle grinned. Even Aldrick managed a hint of a smile. They turned and left, wordlessly. Myron sat alone, staring at the floor, letting it be a blank canvas for his memories of Peter and Emily, which he indulged for some time. What other comforts did he have?

Myron stood on the bridge, tall and proud, as the branches of Sarengarth came into view, spindling silhouettes against the darkening sky. The ship's engines had taken on a purring drone, warm and satisfied, as though it knew they were almost home. They sped up the mountainside, up the battered Inzar Slope, the fledgling scrub trees shuddering in the wind as they roared overhead.

As they came over the crest of the hill, they found the trunk of Sarengarth dark and light-less.

Myron held up his hand.

"Slow her down a bit," he said, "No lights. Lice must have gone by, and they wanted to pass inspection. We're going to have to go in a little more carefully. Take her down to one-fifty and drift in. *Slowly*. It's not a race."

The *Broken Arrow* shuddered as it began its descent, half-rocketing, half-gliding toward the nearest ship bay. It did not respond to their approach, remaining obstinately dark.

"What the hell is going on?" said Myron, "Someone spooked them enough to leave the lights out?"

"Might be trying to conserve energy, captain," said one of his lieutenants, seated directly in front of him, "They weren't expecting us back for another week, remember."

"I remember," said Myron, but he felt slightly reassured.

"I think it's the most likely theory," she said.

Myron watched the trunk grow larger in his vision, until it engulfed his entire field of view; at least, that he could see through the ship's respectably-wide front windows. Fourteen years later he still marveled at the sheer size of the tree-city.

The landing bay was now vaguely illuminated by the ship's front lights, but past it, Myron could see nothing but murky gray. They eased in slowly, the engines amplifying as echoes bounced off the walls, screeching as the ship neared the floor. Then it touched down, with a sharp jolt, and came to a rest. Myron looked around at the landing bay. Nothing seemed awry; not much different than how they had left it. No guards. Or perhaps they were hidden.

"Cut the engines," he said.

As they dwindled, he turned to his first mate, Yutten.

"I'm taking a small group to check things out, make sure everything is okay. Get the passengers ready to disembark, let them out into the landing bay if you want, but keep them close to the ship until I get back. Understood?"

"Understood," said Yutten, inclining his head in accord.

"Good," said Myron, "I'll be back."

He turned and swept from the bridge, pacing quickly through the hallways. Something felt wrong. Had the lice followed them? Had they gotten here first, and the people here had abandoned everything, huddled deeper in the tunnels to evade detection? It didn't add up.

He found his quarters, where Abby lay reading. Her face, serene as it was beautiful, contorted as he entered.

"What?"

"You," she said, "You've got a look on like someone died. What happened?"

"Dunno," said Myron, "No lights. No one in the landing bay. I'm grabbing Tri and Aldrick and we're going to figure out what the hell's happening."

Abby sat up instantly.

"I'm coming," she said firmly, looking around for her shoes and jacket. Myron watched her for a second. No, he didn't want her going, when there might be lice swarming about for all he knew, Sarengarth locked in an underground siege, and having to look out for her, too. But he wouldn't. She had taken care of herself against the lice, especially the Dhaika at Gethryo. He sighed.

"Of course," he said, grabbing his own jacket from the desk, and his bandolier of shells. He turned to her.

"I'm going to get Aldrick and Tri. Meet me in the exit bay in five, okay? We're going first to check it out."

"Okay," she said, tying her shoes without looking up.

He pushed out the door, back into the hallways, where more people were milling about now, heading for the doors, the knowledge that Sarengarth might be under attack, or simply abandoned, unknown to them. He turned a corner, finding Aldrick and Trielle standing in the hallway talking.

"You can't expect him to give it up, Trielle," said Aldrick firmly.

"Give what up?" said Myron. Both of them jumped; he had come around the corner so quickly that they had not spotted him.

"Nothing," said Aldrick, "What's up?"

"Lights are out," said Myron, "Grab your weapons, we're going out to investigate."

Trielle's eyes widened.

"What the hell? Why?"

"No lights. No nothing. No one's here from what I can tell. So we're erring on the side of caution, letting everyone get out of the ship, but not any further 'til we make friendly contact. Better safe than sorry, right?"

Trielle looked bewildered. Aldrick lay a hand on her shoulder.

"The kids are fine, Tri. Everyone's fine. It's just a mix-up, and we have to be sure."

She nodded, her blue eyes locking piercingly with Myron's. Something in them said that this was all his fault, that he had been the one to lead them so far from home, to rove over a world of nothing, all in search of some ancient battleground, some forgotten knowledge. For the first time, something akin to fear settled in the base of Myron's chest.

"Exit bay in five," said Myron, turning on his heel and walking off. Neither said a word.

He quickened his pace, heading for the armory. It had made it hard to sleep, keeping his shotgun in his room, and so he had left it in the armory since they had left Gethryo. The images of slaughter they had seen, of mindless butchery over nothing, haunted his sleep. He did not want a gun in his room.

It was stupidity, but it would fade. He found the door and slid it open. The room was empty, assault rifles and submachine guns sitting on racks, waiting calmly. He paused, waiting for some panic to overcome him. When none did, he smiled with satisfaction, and stepped into the room, going for his trusty shotgun, hanging alone from a hook in the corner, looking positive weather-beaten next to the fresh, crisp, new guns that surrounded it. He plucked it up in his arms, holding it, examining it, as if checking for dents in an already-worn weapon. Then he swept over the pistol rack, finding the revolver he had taken from Gethryo. He reached for a ring of cartridges, sliding them in, and spinning them around with a ratcheting sound. He tucked the weapon in his hip holster, and slid his regular pistol in the other side. Confident now, he returned to the door, slid it open, and headed out into the hallway.

Being armed earned him prolonged glances from those around him, but he ignored them. It was nothing they hadn't seen before. If it panicked them ... well, perhaps they had reason to be panicked.

He pushed his way through the swarmed crowd in the exit bay – holding a shotgun helped part the waters – until he found Trielle, Abby, and Aldrick standing by the door. Brie was with them.

"Aldrick said you were going to check things out. You want me along?"

"No," said Myron.

"Why?"

"You're a pilot, not a soldier."

"I can take care of myself."

"That's not the point. Stay here, help Yutten keep everyone under control."

She rolled her eyes.

"Alright."

Myron moved toward the door, the others following. As he passed Brie, she caught his arm.

"Is everything really alright out there?" she asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"I have no idea," said Myron.

She held his arm a moment longer, before releasing him. They walked past, through the open doors, and into the landing bay.

They moved carefully through the mazes of barrels, away from the ship, towards the nearest door. Myron had no idea where it went; he couldn't even remember if this was the landing bay they had departed from. But they all led further in, and further in was where the answers were.

Something clattered on the other side of the hangar. Trielle froze; so did Myron, a second later, looking over at the source of the sound.

"You see it?" he whispered. She shook her head.

"Let's keep moving," said Aldrick, "If we jump at everything, we'll never get anywhere."

"Something fell over!" Trielle hissed.

"Yeah, because the ship vibrated the hell out of the floor. Anything precarious was shaken up pretty good, and eventually it slides over. You ever have a messy room, Tri? Stuff just randomly falls over."

"I've lived in plenty of messy rooms, Aldrick. That was – "

"Enough," said Myron, "Let's keep moving."

They reached the door, silence but for the their footsteps and the quiet babble of conversation far behind them. Myron looked over his shoulder, at the faint patch of warm yellow escaping from the insides of the *Broken Arrow*. Then back at the door before him. He sighed, then reached for the console on the wall, pressing the button to open it.

It refused to move. Myron punched the button again, and again, then, frustratedly, flipped open a small compartment under the button, grabbing a handle and pulling. A sharp click followed, then a slow, dwindling hiss.

"Manual release," he muttered, "Pain in the ass to open. Give me a hand, Aldrick."

"Got it."

They forced their hands into the grooves of the door, pushing hard. With a creak, the heavy door began to slide open. When it was halfway open, Myron held up his hand, moved through carefully. The hallway was visible for barely a few meters, before becoming entirely dark. He turned back to the others.

"Flashlights," he said, "Please tell me someone brought them."

Trielle reached into her bag and produced several. They each took one, and began to attach them to their guns.

"Okay," said Myron, "There ought to be a power station with a backup fuel cell down the hallways a little ways. Should get us light at least. Keep your flashlights going til we get there. I'll take point, Tri behind me, and Abby watch the back."

"Sure," muttered Aldrick. The others nodded assent.

"Let's go."

They stepped through the gap in the doorway, one by one, moving carefully down the hallway, flashlight beams catching faint traces of dust in the air. Myron's shot straight ahead, Aldrick wavering around near the ceiling. Trielle's light flashed about on the floor, almost distractingly.

"Shit," she said suddenly from behind them. Myron turned.

"What?"

She pointed at a space on the floor. Myron turned; Aldrick flashlight swiveled faster, illuminating what hers had just a second before.

"Blood," said Aldrick, looking at a dark patch soaked into the concrete, "Could've just said that, you know."

Myron stared at it, feeling his stomach harden.

"I ... I don't know, maybe some slipped and fell," said Abby.

No one replied to her.

"Let's keep going," said Myron.

They turned left, then right, then another left. Myron was not sure exactly where the power station, he was going on memory, and a cursory one at that, trying to recall what he had passed by on the way down here a couple weeks before. Of course it hadn't been *here*, but Sarengarth had relatively consistent construction. For a reason.

Then he spotted a dim red light next to a door, blinking intermittently every two seconds. In the

near-pitch-darkness, relieved only by the slender white beams of their flashlights, it seemed almost sinister, but it filled Myron with relief. He restrained himself from running toward it as they approached.

Aldrick opened the door slowly, and Trielle peered inside.

"Some panel thing. I don't know which button it is."

"I do," said Myron, "I think."

Aldrick chuckled dryly in the dark. Myron pushed past him and into the control booth, shining his flashlight back and forth across the panels; until at last they came to rest on a lever: "Emergency Reserve."

"Found it!" whispered Myron triumphantly, wrapping his fingers around the lever and pulled triumphantly. It resisted, reluctantly, but then gave in and swiveled forward, and with a sharp click and buzz the lights came to life, the white light almost blinding.

"Oh, fuck!" shouted Aldrick. Myron's eyes darted up.

"What the – "

The power station sat at the back of a large storage room holding two cargo elevators. A ramp sloped down before them, separated from the power station only by a paneled window. One of the panes, shattered, was tinged red. Beyond it, among the crates and barrels, wandered at least two dozen Dholeska creatures, their mouths agape, their skin raw and bubbled, their eyes black, pupils huge even in the bright light. They turned.

Aldrick raised his carbine, but Myron slapped it down. Even as he did, he heard a burst of gunfire from behind him; Abby.

"Don't shoot!"

But it was too late. Trielle and Aldrick joined her, filling the room with bullets. The sound tore at Myron's ears as the bullets tore at Dholeska flesh, and the creatures fell three at a time, until they all were dead.

"That better not mean what I think it means," said Trielle, panting, her eyes wild with fear, "That ... had better *not* mean what I think it means."

"I ... they can't. They would have gotten away," said Aldrick, "They..."

He looked at Myron for support; but neither of them could find the words.

"We need to go find them, now," said Trielle, pushing the door open, heading down into the storage room.

"Tri, wait!"

Her fist struck the buttons to summon one of the elevators. Myron walked out after her

"Trielle – "

"I have to find them!"

"This is not the way – "

"You don't know!"

"You think I don't? I have a daughter down there too, damn it! You can't go off half-cocked like this, and – "

The elevator was coming, and along with its mechanical whirring came a cacophony of growls. Before it had even fully risen, Dholeska were climbing over the edge, and into the storage room.

One tackled Trielle before she could fully turn around; another pounced on Myron. He shot it dead, but another grabbed his shotgun, and a third grabbed his legs. He fell, drawing his revolver blindly as the creatures' gritty fingernails wrapped around his throat. He fired blindly, writhing against the Dholeska monster's grip.

Then he felt hot droplets on his arm, and the thing sank against him. He rolled over, seeing Aldrick thirty feet away, shooting at the Dholeska as they poured from the elevator shaft. From behind him, he heard Trielle's gun firing, in bursts of three shots. Aldrick shot one Dholeska dead, then another, then shoved another to the floor and fired into its chest. Then he ran to Myron, heaving the dead body off of him, then hauling him to his feet.

"I'll get Trielle!" he roared, "Go with Abby, get back to the ship, get a team together!"

"Alright!" Myron roared, stumbling back. He grabbed his shotgun from the floor, pumped it, then fired into a trio of Dholeska, shredding their warped skin. One fell; the others staggered forward.

Trielle stood near the other elevator shaft, leaning against the safety railing, shooting at Dholeska as they rushed toward her. In between shots, she hammered on the button to call the second elevator. The fallen Dholeska collapsed all around her, some slumping into the empty elevator shaft, falling hundreds of feet...

Another Dholeska grabbed at his shotgun, nearly pulling it from his grasp. It hissed and spat at him. Myron reached for Quicksilver, at his belt, and whipped it out, sinking it into the Dholeska creature's chest. The knife slid from his grasp as he tried to pull it free. He sprinted back to the control room, where Abby was reloading her gun with shaky hands.

"Let's get out of here. Back to the ship."

"What about Aldrick?"

"He's getting Trielle. He said to get out of here and get help."

They looked through the bloodstained glass, as Aldrick fumbled with his carbine, trying to reload it. A Dholeska ran up, snarling, but he kicked it to the ground, finished reloading, shot it dead, then fired into the others.

"Alright, let's go," said Abby.

They ran back, slamming through the door, the hisses and wet, heavy footsteps of the creatures behind them sending fearful chills up their backs. Myron hurled the door shut behind him, right in one creature's face. Back out the door, into the hallway. They had to get to the ship, get a search party together. They couldn't take on the Dholeska by themselves.

For a moment there was nothing but the dimness, the slapping of their frantic footsteps, and the heavy panting of their breath. Then they found the hangar, the door still ajar.

"It's still open!" Abby cried between gasps for breath.

"Just run!" roared Myron, legs pumping, already tiring. He looked over his shoulder; at least two were following, already rounding the corner, barely ten meters behind them.

They sprinted through the open door, skidding to a stop. Myron ran to the door, pushing against it hard. It creaked, beginning to slide shut, but far too slowly.

"Abby, help! Push!"

She pushed, but the door didn't move.

"I can't, Myron!"

"Just push!"

"I'm too weak, Myron, I can't budge it."

Myron grunted hard, and pushed the door harder. Barely a meter to go, but well enough room for the creatures to fit through one at a time.

Even as he thought it, one sprinted out, slamming into Abby. He kept pushing, hearing scuffles to the side. He turned his head, just in time to watch Abby fire her pistol into the creature. It jerked with each shot, before falling. But as soon as she straightened up, another ran out, nearly colliding with her.

"Abby!"

"Just push the damn door shut!" she cried, grabbing the thing's slimy wrists, and twisting them away from her. Myron turned back to the door, heels grinding, back plowing. Abby grunted, throwing her weight sideways into the creature, throwing it off balance. It stumbled into its fellows, stemming the tide for a second, enough for her to raise her pistol again, and fire into them, killing two, who collapsed to their knees. Blood flecked Myron's cheek; he cursed, and wiped it away as fast as he could. The door was almost shut now.

The last Dholeska to make it through the door went for Abby as the others had. Myron ignored it, the door barely a few centimeters open now. Then he heard her shriek.

He turned his head; Abby was pinned on her back, the pistol on the floor a few feet from her

splayed arms. The Dholeska creature had wrapped its pustule-encrusted fingers around her throat.

Myron reached for his pistol, aiming it frantically, squeezing the trigger over and over, before realizing it was empty. He dropped it, reaching for his shotgun, before realizing, as he brought it to bear, that it was empty, too.

A single crack echoed across the hollow hangar, jerking the Dholeska creature's head to the side. It went limp. Myron rushed to Abby, heaving the corpse off of her. She looked at him, dazed. Myron helped her up, and looked across to see their savior.

Brie strode toward them, a couple other soldiers behind her. She held an assault rifle in her arms. Myron's look of shock must have shown, because she laughed.

"Didn't think I could make that kind of shot, did you?"

"No," Myron admitted.

She frowned.

"Dholeska inside?"

"Yeah. Everywhere."

"Shit. They must have spread through the entire... city. Oh god."

Myron nodded slowly. Brie gazed at the floor, mouth agape, as if searching the concrete at her feet for some kind of answer. Then she raised her eyes again.

"Trielle?"

"Ran onto an elevator. Aldrick went with her. She's looking for the kids."

"Oh..." said Brie, her voice fading helplessly. She staggered to the side, leaning against the wall. Myron looked at her for a moment.

"We've got to get a search party together," he said, "Get down there as fast as we can, find Tri and Aldrick, find Thrynne and the kids, and whoever else is still left alive."

"Okay," said Brie, staring at her feet.

"Come on," said Myron, "Only way we can save them is to do it now."

She nodded, then rocked forward on her heels, straightening up and following him as he walked back toward the ship. Myron looked at the few who already clustered around the exit doors, unloading supplies, probably expecting a warm welcome, a return to family and friends in the safety of the under-city of Sarengarth.

How wrong they were.

Aldrick's gut pounded and pulsed. The ratcheting sound of the elevator only made it worse. Beside him, Trielle bit her lip, her face worried but determined.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Aldrick demanded suddenly. Trielle turned a glare on him.

"What do you mean? My kids are down there. I'm not leaving them alone with the goddamn Dholeska. Are you crazy?"

"*You're* crazy!" Aldrick shouted, "Running off alone?"

"I can handle myself," said Trielle, looking down, checking the magazine on her rifle.

"That's not the point," said Aldrick, "None of us have a clue *what* is going on here, and you're running off down there, leaving two *more* people for Myron to have to look for, and two less people to look for them with!"

"You didn't have to come," Trielle muttered. Aldrick scoffed.

"Right. And leave you alone."

"Like I said, I can take care of myself," said Trielle.

"I don't care," said Aldrick, "You think you can watch your own back that well? Whenever we fought on ships, *no one* went anywhere alone. No solo missions. No stupid fucking glory hounds running off!"

"I'm not looking for glory!" Trielle spat, "I'm looking for my children! You think they don't

matter, I don't care what you think! I'm finding them *now*, not waiting for Myron to sit on his ass and come up with a plan.”

“That plan is what keeps us from getting killed!”

“That plan will be what kills my children!”

The elevator stuttered, their knees almost buckling. A sharp hiss echoed violently in the enclosed space, and Aldrick plugged his ears. Then it lurched, dropping them several meters suddenly. Trielle gasped; Aldrick grunted, trying to brace himself against the wall. Instead he scraped his knuckles. The elevator stopped a couple more times, stalling, before continuing on again.

“We haven't been gone that long,” muttered Trielle, “Elevator shouldn't be acting up already.”

“Even a freight one,” said Aldrick, agreeing.

“Then what ... oh god,” said Trielle, her voice growing suddenly faint.

“What?”

She pointed. Aldrick turned, and started; a body, or what had used to be one, had been caught in the gear mechanism. Mangled beyond recognition, Aldrick could not tell whether it had been a person, or a twisted Dholeska monster.

“That's not pleasant,” he muttered under his breath.

The elevator continued on, motor grinding slowly. Then, a crack of light appeared at their feet, growing larger as they descended.

“We're here,” said Trielle, pulling the bolt back on her rifle. It snapped forward, just as the elevator dropped enough for them to see the room. A long hallway, wide, walls lined with crates here and there, a forklift with chipped orange paint parked in between two of them. At least a dozen Dholeska, many in gray worker uniforms, meandered about. Aldrick held his breath.

“Ready?” whispered Trielle.

“Yeah,” said Aldrick, a tinge of resentment in his voice.

The first creature turned just as the elevator was a few inches above the ground.

A dozen of them waited silently, crouched behind barrels, as Myron approached the door, holding a crinkled rubber packet in his hands. Plastic explosives. It would blow the door down, hopefully kill a few of the Dholeska monsters, and stun the others long enough for a relentless volley of lead to take them down. Myron had no idea how many creatures had amassed on the other side of the door; even as he approached the solid metal, he heard faint pounding from the other side. He sighed, and steadied himself.

He pulled away the covering on the adhesive strip, and carefully pressed the packet against the door. He fiddled with the little dial on the side for a moment, then, in one sudden motion, ripped it off, tearing a small cord that ran around the packet, binding it together. He stared at his handiwork for a moment. Then he turned and ran.

No sooner had he dashed behind a crate, than the explosive detonated. Even from ten meters it left Myron's ears ringing, and a jarred feeling in his legs and stomach. He straightened up, to see a twisted piece of metal laying crumpled on the ground, shredded bits of Dholeska splattered on the hallway inside. The explosion had directed most of the blast inward, minimizing the shrapnel flying out, but sending a scathing volley of it down the hallway. Perhaps none of them had survived. Perhaps they could simply walk in undaunted.

Something sprang from the settling dust, stamping out that wish. Myron reached for the assault rifle he had leaned against the crate, and took aim at the first creature out, putting it down with a few quick shots. But even as he swiveled his aim back to the door, three more came out, almost stumbling over each other.

“Now!” Myron shouted.

The others behind him opened fire, the sound echoing painfully around the hangar. The first three

Dholeska-infected folded over almost instantly, the wave of bullets cutting through those behind them effortlessly. The creatures fell dead everywhere, until, at last, after surely three dozen had been killed, the tide of bodies stopped. The guns fell silent, with nothing to shoot at.

Myron stood up cautiously, peering down the hallway. It seemed empty, yet the darkness could easily be hiding a dozen more Dholeska creatures. They would not be waiting, though. He had never heard of the things springing an ambush.

He turned back to the others. Brie and Abby were already approaching him, the other twenty or so behind them, cautiously emerging from cover.

"That was too easy," said Brie suspiciously.

"We were prepared," said Myron, "It's not going to be so easy in the tunnels and hallways, in close quarters with the things."

"What other choice do we have?" said Brie.

"A smaller group," said Abby, "All these people, they're just going to trip over each other. I'd take ten. Maybe fewer."

"Fine," said Myron. He looked at the crowd of people behind his wife. Not all of them were soldiers. Not even most of them. Most were crewmen, or simply civilians who had come along on the journey west in hopes of finding a new life in the colony. Surely many had hoped to stake a first claim on fresh land, then sending for their families to come to them. Myron realized many of them would never see their loved ones again. He cleared his throat.

"Alright, line up!" he called. Slowly, they fell into a rough arrangement, scared looks on their faces in the grim gray light.

Myron walked along them. He stopped before a young man in gray. One of the crew. He stood straight, his sharp eyes staring straight ahead.

"You," said Myron, "What's your name?"

"Elliot," said the man.

"Good. You're coming with us, Elliot."

"Yes, sir," he said firmly.

He walked further along the line, stopping again in front of a younger woman. She wore civilian clothes; blue cotton pants and a white blouse, tinged with stains. She looked up at Myron for a second, before her eyes darted away fearfully.

"Your name?"

"Holly," she said, almost timidly.

"You're in, too."

She nodded.

Myron stepped back, sizing up the others. He pointed to two who looked like soldiers, wearing green fatigues.

"You two," he said, pointing, then beckoning. They stepped forward.

He selected three more crewmen, and two more civilians.

"That's nine," said Myron, "Plus the three of us makes twelve. Happy?"

"Sure," said Abby.

"You'd better be," said Myron, "I don't want to lead more people to die than I have to."

"We'll ... be fine, Myron," said Abby, shaking her head, as if convincing herself.

"Right," said Myron, "Let's get going."

The first Dholeska to turn was shot dead almost immediately, two bullets striking the amorphous mass that had been its head. As it fell, two more sprinted for Trielle and Aldrick, where they stood in the elevator. Trielle put a three-round burst into each one, and both staggered back.

Aldrick dashed out of the elevator, to the side, putting his back to the wall. Firing from the hip,

he killed one of the stunned Dholeska creatures, then turned to fire into the others. Bullets ripped through the small gathering, sending one staggering against the crates to slide to the ground. The others, merely grazed, hissing and sprang forward, toward Aldrick.

Trielle poured bullets into her charging foes, until her rifle ran empty. With a grunt, she slammed the butt of her gun into a hissing face right before it reached her. It stumbled over, landing hard on its leg. Gritting her teeth, she reloaded a new magazine, and shot the creature on the floor as it tried to stand, bursting its blistered flesh, until it stopped moving.

Across the room, she watched Aldrick put down the last few creatures. One managed to reach him, and with a swift motion it swiped the carbine from his hands. Trielle raised her rifle, panic spreading through her suddenly. But as she did, Aldrick ducked back, behind the creature, drawing his knife and jamming it into the creature's stomach. It screeched, and with a solid punch Aldrick knocked it to the floor. It writhed on the ground, curling over, trying to get up again, but Aldrick merely retrieved his carbine and fired a single shot into its chest. It stiffened, and lay still.

Trielle went to him, where he stood over the corpse of the last Dholeska creature. Aldrick stared down at the body, gun hanging loosely at his hip.

"She looks familiar," said Aldrick faintly.

"She?" Trielle asked incredulously.

"Yeah," said Aldrick, "You can tell, barely."

"How does she look familiar?"

Aldrick shook his head.

"I don't know. It's nothing."

He turned away from the creature, and began to walk toward the hallway.

"How did it spread so fast?" Trielle wondered aloud.

"I don't know. Must have gotten in through the water. Or the food. Or the air ducts for all I know. Somehow we're not infected by it."

"Maybe we're immune," said Trielle.

"I doubt it," said Aldrick, "Probably just haven't been exposed enough yet. Hell if I know, though. I'm not an expert on these things."

"Right," said Trielle.

"So where are we going next?" asked Aldrick.

"I don't know," said Trielle, "Further along this hallway, I guess. Find another elevator, if we can, down to the living quarters. I'm sure I can find them from there."

"And what if –"

"Shut up."

"No, Tri, I mean what if Myron and the others are still looking for us?"

"Then they'll find us when they find everyone else."

"I ... damn it, Trielle, don't you see how selfish this is? Myron's got a daughter, too, you know. He knows how you feel."

"So he told me," said Trielle, "His actions show otherwise."

"Look, Tri," said Aldrick, dropping his voice, "I'm sure they're still alive. They've got Thrynn with them. She's resourceful enough. So is Maria. They'd find a safe place to hide."

"Nothing's safe here!" Trielle cried, "Ten more people, twenty more people, it's just more prey for the Dholeska! You think they can't smell that many easily? I ... we have to go alone! Myron's probably poring over a map right now, whereas you and I, we actually have a shot at finding my children!"

There was a screech from the hallway.

"Oh no," she muttered.

"You woke them up," Aldrick muttered.

"Shut up!" Trielle hissed.

A few shuffles filtered down the hall to them.

"I think it's just one," said Trielle.

"Okay," Aldrick whispered.

"Let's get it," said Trielle, "But quietly. With a knife."

Aldrick nodded.

They began to approach, slowly, their footsteps barely audible. As they rounded the corner, they saw a single Dholeska creature, head swinging side to side as it slowly ambled toward them.

"Don't move," whispered Trielle.

"What?"

"Don't move!" she hissed.

She stepped around the corner. The thing tensed suddenly as it spotted her, and Trielle did not waste any time. She sprang forward, hooking her elbow around the creature's throat. It raised its arms to defend itself, but Trielle had already whipped out her knife and plunged it into the back of the thing's neck. It stiffened, and fell, Trielle's back straining to let it down slowly.

As she straightened up, she sighed with relief. Aldrick approached her.

"Nice," he said.

"Yeah," she muttered. She turned around, to a pair of silver doors behind her.

"Look in here?" she said.

"I have no idea what's in there," said Aldrick.

"Neither of us do, Aldrick," said Trielle, "But there might be survivors in there."

"Or more Dholeska creatures," said Aldrick.

"Then we kill them," said Trielle with a smile, tugging at the door, "Bit of help?"

Aldrick sighed, and stepped forward. They tugged fruitlessly for a few seconds, until Trielle, with a grunt, threw herself back, yanking the stuck doors apart.

As Trielle pulled them open, her expression twisted from smirk to grimace. Before them was a cafeteria, probably for the dock workers, with long rows of clean chrome tables. Here and there, bowls of half-eaten, forgotten food, and discarded silverware lay about. But Trielle took a slow step backward, gazing around at easily thirty Dholeska-infected, many still in pus-stained work clothes, wandering between the tables. Some were sitting, slumped over, perhaps resting.

There was a clanging sound, as Aldrick's foot bumped something on the floor; a bar.

"Damn it!" he grunted. Several of the Dholeska creatures turned, roused by the noise.

"Go, get out!" Trielle cried, "Close the fucking door!"

They stumbled back out into the hallway, Aldrick slamming the door shut, but it caught an inch before it closed, a hand reaching around the doorframe. Panicking, Aldrick rammed his shoulder into it, crushing the wrist, twisting it badly. He heard screeching from within, and then a series of thumps as many more bodies slammed into the door. The rubber of his boot soles ground against the concrete as he struggled to hold the door shut.

"What do we do?" Aldrick growled.

Trielle glanced around.

"There!" she cried, "A door, twenty meters down. We can hide in there!"

"For how long?"

"I don't know," said Trielle, "But they'll break out of there in a few seconds."

"You think I don't know that? I know!" Aldrick roared, slamming against the door with renewed fury.

"Okay," he said, "Get over to that door. Make sure it opens. Once it does, get ready to cover me, alright?"

"Yeah," said Trielle. She turned and ran for the door, twisting the doorknob, pulling it open.

"It's a little storage closet!" she called.

"It'll ... have to do," Aldrick replied, his endurance failing, "On three!"

But before he could start to count, his foot slid dangerously, and the door swung open. He

tumbled over, crawling desperately as the horde broke free. He scampered to his feet, and ran, desperately, eyes bulging, for Trielle. He barely heard her gun crackling over the determined hisses from behind him. Several dropped, but he heard nothing more than their pitiful screeches. He felt an arm grab his shoulder. He twisted, throwing it off, but almost stumbling. If he fell on the concrete now, he knew he'd be ripped apart before he could stand again.

He sprang through the door right after Trielle, the creatures right on his heels, slamming it shut behind him. He locked it, bolted it shut, then fell against the wall, his lungs heaving. Beside him, Trielle sat, panting also. Outside, the things banged on the door, but it was a far smaller one, and only a couple could fit in front of it at a time.

"Okay, we're trapped in here," she said.

"Until they break the door down," said Aldrick.

They sat, looking at each other for a few moments.

"You know," said Aldrick, in between breaths, "I understand you now. Why you did what you did. Maybe it was stupid, but I get it."

"Yeah, well, you do stupid things when you love people," panted Trielle.

"Still wish you hadn't," said Aldrick.

"You ever have kids?"

Aldrick scoffed.

"Me? No one would ever want to have kids with me. Can't say I blame them."

"I don't know about that," said Trielle. Aldrick met her eye for a second.

"All the same, it's not like I ever had much time to think about it," said Aldrick, "Shipped out into the army as soon as I could. Wasn't much else in the world for me."

"Well, imagine it was ... your father, or mother down there," said Trielle, "Someone you'd do anything for. You'd certainly go to rescue them, wouldn't you?"

Aldrick sighed.

"Like I said, Tri. I get it."

He stood up, looking around.

"Let's find a way out of here."

Myron slammed his fist into the door console, his mind pulsing with visions of Aldrick and Trielle, already dead. The doors hissed apart, the others in formation behind him, clutching their weapons shakily. Myron scratched his forehead, pumped his shotgun, and forced himself to focus.

The doors were barely a meter apart when they opened fire. Myron heard muffled screeches from the other side of the door. He reached for his belt, feeling the cold, textured steel of a grenade. He yanked it off, pulled the pin, and flung it against the door, bouncing it off the edge of the inside wall. Immediately he dropped to a crouch. The door muted the sound of the blast, but Myron still felt it jarring at his teeth.

Within barely ten seconds, the makeshift army of twelve had reduced the Dholeska within to shredded, withered forms. Myron peered in, then looked at Abby. He nodded to her, and they moved in, Myron first, Abby second, and the rest of them behind her.

One of them was struggling back to its feet, half of its hip eaten away by bullets, custard-yellow fluid splattered on the floor behind it. Myron put it down with a shotgun blast to the chest. He spotted a couple of the civilians behind him starting. He grinned.

His grin disappeared when he spotted one of the Dholeska he had killed, barely an hour ago, lying on its back, with Quicksilver sticking out of its chest, a long slash mark preceding it. He knelt next to the creature, and tugged the knife free, wiping the pus and blood on the dead creature's torn garments, then sliding back into his belt.

"Where do we go now?" came a voice from behind him. He recognized it as Elliot, the

Scene with trielle and aldrick descending on elevator, ending with it descending into a hallway with at least a dozen

scene with myron brie and abby and others waiting ready as they open doors, kill dholeska that come out, then advance inside

scene with trielle and aldrick fighting their way to a room with a door they can lock, ending up trapped in there

scene with myron and company advancing back to elevator room, recovering Quicksilver, going down elevator.

Scene with aldrick and trielle crawling through air duct, as there is no other way out of the room.

*It keeps going.*

*How many have died in the war with the lice? How many billions? Trillions perhaps? Our great world, which takes months to encircle even at ten thousand kilometers per hour, enveloped in a flaming war for a full millennium, left scathed and cleansed in a horrid fire that twists life and melts flesh, and yet both sides have risen again, from the bloody, bloody ashes to fight each other anew.*

*Sixty-six years have left me ragged, sore, empty within. I watched my friends die, I watched their children die, and now their grandchildren, I must protect. Is that my place? My purpose? A steward to the Green family, their strange cognition, the eternal father to children who are simply being raised for a long, brutal life, and then slaughter?*

*Did Peter suffer, I wonder, when he died? Did Emily? When they took that missile for their son and I, what was in their minds? I have faced death again and again, with no foresight to shield me, and I wonder how I have not been finished yet. But I have never truly come to thinking my final thoughts, what I will leave behind in this place when I go, and what it will matter.*

*Will it?*

*I see these young soldiers, fresh nerve, ready to fight, the deaths of friends flashing in their heads as they strike back. But over time their sharp minds will be sanded down, their souls shaved from boulder to pebble, a tiny spark that turns on a light to see itself, then shuts it off in shame. What do I have to show for my years of strain, besides fields of bodies and flattened fortresses? And yet there is no way the condemned, unspoiled as they are, can see what lies ahead. And there is no way I can impart my knowledge on them.*

*What there is left I can do, is continue Orion's work. I loved his father as a brother, and him as a brother just the same. Isn't it strange, to know two men, a generation apart, as closest friends, yet each of them are gone now, and I am alone. No one has been with me since the beginning. Even I barely remember it.*

*But I can continue their memory.*

*Orion found things, saw things in the ruins of Faien'roh. That and whatever led him there from Arsthonna must have been important. I know he told me everything, yet somehow I think he knew that he let on, even to himself.*

*And so we ventured to the west again, but not as far, under the guise of searching for a colony. I wonder now if I was the only one who knew that would be impossible. And we returned to find the final hiding place, that last little corner where we could tuck ourselves away, devastated.*

*I have but one clue to go on, and that is that the Dholeska virus was not without precedent. The Emortilla virus, or Maltho-X as it was known later, was from years ago, where our goddamned people fought ourselves. I watched, and I watched Abby's eyes as she watched, and I saw that horror; the one when your own brother raises a knife against you, when the secrets of the mind are stripped away, truth laid bare, our basest desires exposed. I wanted to hide from those images, shrink them into nothing, tuck them away as our forefathers surely did.*

*But the Emortilla was far worse than the waves of bullets, cutting into bone, scything through endless ranks in vast fields of war. It was as the Dholeska is, perhaps even more potent. I must campaign to destroy it, and to find a cure. There was a cure, one that immunized the world against the virus. Yet they did not pass it on, and laziness let what stores of it fade away, discarded, as there was no longer a need for them.*

*But there is now.*

*I will find it.*

*I will make Orion, and Peter, and Emily, and Cassiopeia – all of them, everyone who ever suffered for us, suffered in this long, twilight war, matter.*

*They did not die in vain.*

Even as the dawn broke over the sea, Brie did not cease her attempts to sleep. The bluish light blurred through the window, falling onto her face. At first she hid from it, burrowing her face under her pillow. But it was inevitable, and with a groan she pulled herself from her bed.

She wondered whether to shower, whether the wakefulness it would bring was worth its frigidity. There was no warm water out here; what electricity they had, was needed for far more important things, and any oil for the heater had run out long ago. It was still summer, yet in the dim, spacious rooms of the outpost here, the chilled air ran between the legs, across the stomach, over the neck, making one shiver.

At last she surrendered, and the creaking handle on the faucet let loose a spattering torrent. A drop sprang onto Brie's shoulder as she stripped her clothes away; she winced. Already it was cold.

As the water hit her she sucked air through her teeth, cursing herself for her stupidity. Yet she felt alert, just for the agony to become even more poignant.

She lingered in the freezing shower for just a few moments, scrubbing herself clean, then twisting the faucet knob violently. It screeched in protest, and she felt the urge to slam it, with the heel of her hand, the heel of her foot, whatever it took to dismantle it.

As she dressed, a knock came on the door. She started, and a shiver ran up her legs and spine, magnified by the many droplets of water still clinging to her. Gritting her teeth, she wrapped a towel around herself, and went to answer it.

Cracking the door open, she saw Myron's face, lightly lined, his gray eyes emotionless.

"What is it?"

"Sorry to interrupt," said Myron, "We're leaving?"

"This morning?" Brie was aghast.

"Yeah," said Myron, "We've done enough. Time to head south."

"

## Looking for the cure

The journey north took but a week, yet seemed to take far longer. The world below, ashen and forbidding, could be faintly seen through the smeared windows, yet their eyes rarely fell down there. More often they stayed within, until at night, when they could look out at the distant, growing mountains. Lights twinkled on their slopes, so faint as to be chilling, a metropolis built on a mountainside that was but a dot from so far away.

"I wonder if there's anyone left out there," said Trielle to Aldrick one night as they gazed out the window together. He held her hand loosely, in his gray nightclothes. His weary eyes squinted.

"There has to be someone with all those lights," said Aldrick.

"Could be lice," said Trielle. Aldrick shook his head.

"Wrong color lights," he said, "Yellow. Orange. Not that damned purple color."

She chuckled, and gave his hand a squeeze.

"We should get to bed."

"We should," Aldrick grunted wearily, "But it's nice to look out the window once in a while."

She led him to their quarters, adjacent from those Marie and the children shared. Both of them slid under the cool sheets, their rustling fading to leave the ever-present humming of the ship's engines as the only noise to contend with.

"Andromeda asked me where we were going," said Aldrick, "Earlier today."

"She's asked me that already," said Trielle, "I told her."

"Maybe she thinks you're lying."

"Why would she think that?"

"No offense," said Aldrick, "I guess I'm like the fun uncle or something."

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her the truth," he said, "That we're going to find a cure to make people better. So they don't die anymore. Why, what did you tell her?"

"Mostly the same thing. What else is there to say?"

He rolled over, to meet her eyes in the dark. She sighed.

"She's never seen someone die before. Other than shooting those damned Dholeska things, and she ... she didn't know what she was doing."

"She knew what she was doing, Tri. She did it a hell of a lot better than a lot of people could –"

"That's not the point!" hissed Trielle. Aldrick recoiled slightly.

"I'm sorry, I ... you should be proud of her."

"I am," said Trielle, "I am. It's just ... I don't want her to grow up too fast. That's not ... Orion didn't give up his life for that."

It was Aldrick's turn to sigh.

"Sixteen years ago, I would have laughed in your face. Signed up for the army, special forces. Boarding parties. Should have been in school. I've told you all this."

"Yeah," said Trielle.

"The point is, anyone who grows up in this world, has to do it fast. It's the only choice they've got. Someday, it might not be."

Across from him, Trielle looked lost.

"We sacrificed so much," she said, "Fought so hard, and it feels now like it was for nothing. It always drove me, to keep Orion's kids from growing up in the same war-sunken hell Marie did."

"They're Orion's children, Tri. This is what they were born for. Shit, if anyone can handle it, they can. You weren't in Sarengarth all those years. You didn't hear all about what he did." He chuckled, "Seriously bad-ass stuff."

Trielle smiled, but it sank away quickly.

"I was barely nineteen when he came to us," said Aldrick, "We were gearing up to fight, no

thanks to that Diomitrick bastard. Emasculated the city, left us all waiting like bait so he could enjoy his worldly pleasures. Won't ever forget his name."

He shook his head firmly.

"But your husband, he came with those others, told Diomitrick what he needed to hear. Overthrew him, took the city, got it into gear. That winter ... I swear, I thought we wouldn't hold, but we did. And it was because of him. He's the one who discovered the Guire suits. He and his sister, you should have heard it on the news every night. Raids on Maalsuur, Wahagar, every other hellish fortress, all pulled off by them. He was a legend."

Trielle chewed her lip.

"He always made it sound so... humble," said Trielle, "But I could tell, by how they looked at him. The Sarengarthians who knew him."

"I don't know how the hell his mind worked," said Aldrick, "He had something. Something your children have, Tri. They're young, but they've got it in them."

She squeezed her eyes shut, and when they opened, they glistened with tears.

"Why them?" she choked, "Why not someone else?"

Aldrick looked at her helplessly for a minute, as she broke down into quiet sobs.

"Because they can, Trielle. They might live to see the end of this war. To have peace, children of their own."

She sniffed.

"Will we?" she asked, her cheek on her pillow, staring at the sheets as Aldrick watched her. He considered for a moment, then reached for her hair. His hand ran along it, gently, stroking her.

"Yeah," he said at last, "We will."

They drew close to each other, the scent of her orange hair filling nostrils, and calming him. He sank into the pillow, their legs tangling together, until sleep found them.

Their destination, Jakaramo, drew into sight just after breakfast. They met with a river, following it up the slopes, between great cliffs, rocks, and small mountains that dotted the sides of the larger ones. Great waterfalls tumbled into ephemeral mist, and faint outlines of boats could be spotted, even harbors, in the quiet eddies and pools of the massive churning river.

They look in archives in Jakaramo for location of ruins, then go there. After leaving, Timeless' lieutenant catches up to them. Don't forget that Bren exists, and Brie.

"We've got a problem," said Brie. A frantic beeping issued from her radar console.

"What?"

"We've got two pursuers," she said, "Well, six actually. Two small cruisers, four Scorpion fighters as escorts."

"Where did they come from?" said Myron, aghast, "We weren't followed!"

"Apparently we were," said Brie, "They must have concealed themselves in the rocks."

"I'm getting us out of here," said Myron, sitting down at the controls.

"You can't fly for shit, Myron," said Brie, "You're going to take us out of here manually?"

"Yeah," said Myron, adjusting a knob. A control wheel popped out, slowly extending with a hiss. He reached for it, but a slender hand stopped him.

"Let me do it," said Brie.

"It's my damn ship."

"You'll crash us into the cliffs."

"Then warn me before I do," said Myron, gripping the wheel tightly, and pulling back. The ship lurched upward. Brie rolled her eyes.

"We need to get around that plateau ahead," said Myron, "If we can circle around that, they'll be blocked from getting to us."

"Unless they go over it."

"That'll cost them too much time," said Myron, shaking his head. The *Arrow* turned, matching the curve of the cliffs, its rocky facade rushing by in a blur out the windows.

Brie watched the louse ships following on the radar, keeping together in a close formation.

"They're not splitting up," said Brie.

"They know we'd pick them off if they did."

Further the mesa, the radar signal became fuzzier, then faded. The blips disappeared, one by one.

"I lost them," said Brie.

"It's fine," said Myron, his brow furrowed in concentration. The *Arrow* still hugged the wall of rock, above the river many kilometers below. Around the other side, it began to climb, the river growing closer as the slope ascended, the many churning waterfalls reaching it higher and higher. Directly ahead, the river leveled off, and as they flew over it they were barely a hundred meters above the water. Beyond, an open gulf of air signified the end of the maze of cliffs and mountains. They were free.

From around the side of the cliff, four Scorpion fighters swooped into view. Myron lurched in surprise, angling the ship away from them. The fighters opened fire on the *Broken Arrow*, spraying cannon rounds that splattered off the front of the ship. One struck the bridge, denting the window but not penetrating it.

"Shoot back, shoot back!" Myron shouted, desperately trying to wheel the ship around a cliff and out of the way. But the fighters doubled back, and Myron felt the ship shake under his seat, and heard the unmistakable sound of missiles impacting. When the rumbling stopped, Myron turned back to the bridge.

"Damage report?"

"We've lost two EIRG guns on the starboard side," said a crewman behind him, "The rest of the damage is superficial. Scratched the armor."

Myron shook his head angrily.

"What about the missiles?"

"We've only got a few left..."

"Do it!"

"Yes, sir."

Myron heard a few beeps on the console behind him.

"Missiles away," said the crewman.

"Good," said Myron. He kept flying.

The *Arrow* sped low over the water, toward the gray sky in the distance, already tinted orange in some places by the sinking sun. Further up, the river turned to a lake, and towering supertrees became visible in the distance.

"We can lose them in there," said Myron, "Brie, where are the cruisers?"

"They're behind us," said Brie, "They followed the fighters. But they're losing on us."

"What about the fighters?" Myron called back.

"One down. The others evaded them."

"I thought our missiles were better than that," Myron muttered. Something felt off about the situation. Two small little cruisers, in the middle of nowhere, happening on them...

"Do you have a visual on those fighters?" Myron shouted back.

"Not yet," said a crewman.

"Get one."

“Yes sir.”

They had reached the supertrees now, and Myron wove the *Arrow* between the titanic trunks. Barely any of the late-day light filtered through the foliage above, and it took Myron's eyes a moment to adjust.

“What are you thinking?” said Brie quietly.

“I'm thinking it's that lieutenant,” said Myron, “Hunting us down. Who knows why? Maybe he wants to kill Leo and his sisters. Maybe he wants information. Maybe *we're* close to learning something, and he wants to stop us.”

“Maybe it's just a patrol that got the drop on us,” said Brie.

“I doubt it,” said Myron, “Why aren't they calling for backup? Why aren't we seeing a half dozen battleships on our screen by now? And what the hell are two little cruisers doing out here in the first place?”

“I don't know, but ...”

A beeping from the radar screen interrupted them.

“They're gaining on us now,” said Brie, “We're going to have to make a stand at some point.”

“How?”

“There's a clearing ahead. We swing wide, make it look like we're trying to stay in the trees, then curve around and give them a nice broadside. Then we're on open, clear ground. Your favorite.”

“Let's do it then,” said Myron with a grin, “We might make it out of this yet.”

“Turn left, so we can give them our starboard side.”

“Port side,” said Myron, “We're missing two EIRGs on our starboard.”

“Yeah, that,” said Brie.

The *Arrow* curved behind a thick tree trunk, the louse ships disappearing off the radar again. Then the trees were gone, and gray clouds hovered over the tiny forests and hills below. Myron felt centripetal force push him against his seat as the *Arrow* strained in a tight turn.

“Ready all batteries! Aim at those cruisers!”

There was a chorus of affirmation and busy button-pushing.

“Fire on my mark!”

Myron looked out the side window; he could see the two dark shapes barreling toward them. He watched on the radar, until they were lined up perfectly.

“Fire! Fire now!”

The *Arrow* shuddered as its four EIRG batteries fire in rapid succession. A second later, like the echo of thunder, the louse ships fired back from their front guns. Myron forced the *Arrow* down a few degrees, and the shells narrowly missed.

“Keep curving,” Myron muttered to himself, “Let's give them a run around.”

But the louse ships were turning, too.

“Ready another broadside!” Myron cried, “Let's blow the shit out of them, before they can fire back!”

He could not tell how much damage they had done. One louse ship was trailing smoke, but Myron couldn't tell if it was really smoke, or just exhaust. The louse ships were straining for the chance to give the *Arrow* a broadside, but Myron's ship could turn faster, and within seconds the ships were almost parallel.

Smaller specks appeared near the louse cruisers on the radar screen.

“Missiles,” said Myron, “Ready the laser countermeasures.”

Out the window, against the gray sky, he could see bright white dots scurrying toward them, trailing crimson fire.

The first louse ship was lined up perfectly for another broadside.

“Fire the railguns!”

The second volley did more than the first; explosions blossomed all over the closest louse

cruiser, and it began to list to the side. Fires burned all over it, and one of the engines was certainly crippled. It fired a flurry of missiles, as if in a panic.

The *Arrow* descended, hoping to dodge the swarms of missiles. Myron watched the blips draw closer, then disappear as the lasers did their work. But one slipped through, then another.

"Brace!"

The impact nearly threw Myron from his seat; Brie fell to the floor hard with a sharp cry of pain. Myron turned, but she was already pushing herself up.

"Fly the damn cruiser! I'm fine!"

Shaken, Myron turned back to the controls.

"What did we lose?"

"Two more EIRGs down," came a female voice, "Port side."

"Not again!" Myron growled in frustration. He felt a pull on the back of his seat, and Brie used it to haul herself to her feet. His mind scrambled. They were losing.

"Ready the missiles," said Myron, "Target them on the wounded ship. Let's finish it off."

"Fighters," muttered Brie, pointing to the radar screen. She sounded dazed.

The fighters had indeed returned, flying toward the *Arrow* from behind.

"Damn it," muttered Myron, "We can't handle those, too."

"Run," said Brie, "Let's get out of here. Maybe we can lose the wounded one."

Myron wheeled the *Arrow* around again.

"Get ready to use those missiles," he commanded the others on the bridge, "We'll need them to cover our escape. Target the fighters first. And someone get on the anti-air guns!"

The crewmen hurried to obey. Myron pushed forward on the throttle, speeding low over the forests and hills. Streams of gunfire flew from behind the ship, spraying the Scorpion fighters. One louse cruiser kept up, barely a few clicks behind them. The other lagged behind, struggling. Then, in a brilliant white flash, it exploded. Myron grinned.

Forest turned to desert. The Scorpions fired missiles, but the *Arrow* shot them down before they even got close, so the fighters resigned themselves to speckling the back of the ship with cannon fire, and trying to get close enough to shoot at something more vulnerable and vital.

The lone remaining cruiser traded fire with the *Arrow*, but it was out of missiles. The *Arrow* wasn't, and Myron used every one he had.

"Aldrick!" Myron shouted into radio, "Aldrick!"

"I'm here," Aldrick's crackly voice replied, "What's happening?"

"We've got fighters on our tail. You're the best shot I've got. Get down to those anti-aircraft guns in the back of the ship, and do what you can!"

"Will do," said Aldrick.

It was just the two cruisers and four fighters now, speeding over the rocky desert as the sun set, the refuge of a luscious forest in the distance, supertrees and giant mountains beyond them.

"We've got to make a play to win at some point," said Brie, her fingers curled tightly on the back of Myron's seat, "They've got more guns pointing forward than we do pointing back."

Myron nodded in agreement.

"Look, I can get the kids out of here if I need to," said Brie, "Tri and Abby can help me. We can take the escape shuttle."

Myron stared straight ahead, at the distant mountains, reaching so many kilometers into the sky. He wondered if he kept going, if he would make it to the top of one of them before being shot down.

Probably not.

"Go get it ready," said Myron.

Aldrick braced himself against the wall each time the ship tilted, hurrying down the narrow

corridor to the anti-aircraft guns. A terrified-looking woman scurried past, ducking under his arm and squeezing by. Aldrick ignored her.

The floor suddenly leaned forward, and Aldrick had to cling to the railing to avoid being thrown face-first onto the metal grate at his feet. When the ship went level again, he continued on, pulling the handle down on the door, and stepping into a glass-metal bubble, four toothed barrels protruding from the front, a seat with controls behind them.

He vaulted into the seat, and grasped the control stick in one hand, flipping switches with the other. A heads-up display appeared on the glass, full of numbers, distances, and symbols. Aldrick pulled the control stick, and the seat and guns tilted back. He grinned a little.

The grin disappeared when he spotted the four Scorpions, weaving back and forth in a tantalizing dance. Behind him, the louse cruiser lurked, stable and brooding.

His fingers wrapped around the trigger as he spun the guns to face the first fighter. Then he squeezed it, and the four guns chattered in unison. The Scorpion banked left in surprise, but not fast enough; a stream of glowing white cut across its wing, and smoke bled from the wound. The Scorpion began to list in the air; Aldrick took advantage, swinging the gun around and aiming just in front of the cockpit, leading the Scorpion with a line of lead that shredded the engines. The Scorpion burst into flame, and dropped fast.

Aldrick grinned again.

Then the other Scorpions fired back.

Trielle opened the door, surprised to see Brie.

"What's going on? Who's shooting at us?"

"We've got two cruisers on our tail. Or, we *did*. One now."

"Lice followed us?"

"I don't know, Tri."

Trielle's eyes bored into Brie, who sighed.

"Look, Myron thinks it might be that lieutenant," said Brie, lowering her voice, "From Gethryo. The one with Timeless' symbol."

"Him? Why?"

"He might be after the kids. End their lives, end their bloodline."

"I'm not letting that happen," said Trielle.

"Neither am I," said Brie, "Get your weapons, meet me in the shuttle bay as quick as you can. I'm going to look for Abby and Marie."

"Yeah, I will," said Trielle, "Thanks Brie."

"Don't mention it," said Brie, "I don't like that bastard any more than you do."

She walked off, and Trielle turned back to her room, ducking under her bunk, pulling out her back, finding her vest and rifle. She slung the vest around her, zipping it up, then slid magazine after magazine into the pouches around her stomach. She heard footsteps behind her.

"Mommy? What are you doing?"

It was Zoey. Trielle turned to her.

"I ... I'm just getting ready, Zoe. There might be a fight. I ... get your brother and sister. We need to be ready to get out of here."

"Are we gonna get hurt?" Fear shone through the youth in her voice.

"We ... no, Zoe. I won't ... that won't happen."

Zoey just stared at her.

"Go get Leo and Dromeda. Go."

Zoey nodded and hurried off.

Trielle turned back to her bag. One magazine left. She looked at it for a moment, then picked it

up and slid it into her rifle, pulling back the charging handle with a snap. She thought of the strange lieutenant, in the halls of the ancient temple in Gethryo. She remembered the four fanged eyeslits that mocked his master. Then she thought of her children. He was after them.

"I'm going to kill you," she whispered.

A wave of cannon fire washed over the back of the *Broken Arrow*, cracking the glass bubble Aldrick sat in, but not penetrating it. His heartbeat surged in elation. He whirled the guns around, firing at another Scorpion as it tried to grow closer. It spun wing over wing, trying to somersault to the side, but Aldrick chased it relentlessly. Bullets chewed at the wing, and the Scorpion quivered dangerously.

Its fellows returned fire, and sparks lit the metal around Aldrick. There was a sharp ping, and a whistling; one of the cannon shells had punched through, hitting the door behind Aldrick. A cold trickle ran down his neck; they might not miss again.

He spun his gun away from the wounded Scorpion, and fired at the other two, spraying between them. The gun barrels were glowing a dim red near the center, but Aldrick didn't care. If he stopped to let them cool, it would give the Scorpions the perfect opening to finish him off.

The Scorpions danced around, weaving back and forth, but Aldrick chased them doggedly with the guns. One caught a burst of fire across the cockpit; Aldrick watched the glass shatter, and the wind take away what was left. The Scorpion kept flying, pilotless and toothless, slowly sinking away.

The other fired back furiously, even as it swung side to side, so that streams of cannon fire flew away to the side harmlessly, wasted. Aldrick fired quick bursts at it when he could; the ammo counter was running low. Finally, he got a lucky hit, striking a fuel main. The fighter burst into flames, holding steady for a second, before exploding.

"Yeah!" shouted Aldrick, pounding his fist on the dashboard.

Then he spotted the other Scorpion, the wounded one that had not quite fallen from the sky.

"You think you're getting away, huh?" said Aldrick, his lips curled into a cruel smile. He spun the gun to face the Scorpion, lining up the sights.

"I got you."

As he fired, the Scorpion launched a missile, streaking toward the *Broken Arrow* fast. Toward Aldrick.

"Oh shit," Aldrick muttered.

The next thing he felt was a solid blow to his front, and a wave of heat. The tinkling of broken glass filled his sore ears. He writhed forward, but a sharp pain in his gut stopped him. The wind tugged at him invitingly; the glass was shattered, and he would be sucked out if he didn't get out of here.

Agony ripped at his stomach as he forced himself to the door, opening it. The wind slammed it against him, nearly knocking him to the ground. Grunting fiercely, he threw himself onto the floor, crawling forward. He struggled to his feet, gripping the door handle tightly. He pulled it shut with such force that he fell onto his back again.

Silence, except for the purring engines, was all that was left, except for the stabbing, pulsing pain. He looked down; pieces of metal had torn through his whole body. There wasn't a lot of blood on the outside, but Aldrick could feel it within. Sickening reality set in, and he began to hyperventilate. He had to get to Myron. He had to get to Trielle.

He began to crawl along the grate. He wondered if that woman who'd pushed past him before, would be the last person he'd ever see alive.

Marie found Trielle just she was leaving her room, the children in tow.

"Where ... Brie was looking for you!" said Trielle.

"She found me," said Marie, "She said to meet her

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. Brie's looking for Abby, then she's going to meet us."

"At the shuttle?"

"I think so."

"Alright, let's go," said Trielle.

They hurried down the corridor, past the panicked others. Trielle felt selfish as she watched them; but maybe when the shuttle left, Timeless' lieutenant would pursue them instead. Maybe they could get away, and the *Broken Arrow* would survive. She hoped it wasn't too much to wish for.

Myron wove the *Arrow* from side to side, fishtailing to evade the louse cruiser's guns.

He pushed the throttle to the maximum, straining the ship's engines beyond their normal capacity. If they didn't make it out of this, there would be little use for them anyway.

He heard footsteps behind him. He didn't turn back.

"Myron?"

Bren's voice.

"What?"

"You sent for me?" he called to Myron.

"Yeah," said Myron, without looking back, "Get everyone ready for a crash."

"Who?"

"Everyone on this ship! We've lost all but one of our guns, and I can't count all the systems flashing at me right now."

"You think we're going down?"

"Most likely."

The forest neared them, a growing green carpet. They were running out of time. Myron took a deep breath, then turned back to his crew.

"Let's bring her around."

The *Arrow* creaked as it turned sharply, losing speed. Myron held onto the controls.

"Get ready to fire that railgun! Aim for the bridge, it's our best chance!"

"Yes sir!" came a shout from somewhere.

The ship's creaking was suddenly punctuated by the booming of an EIRG. Myron watched the louse cruiser swing into view out the left window. A split-second later, fire blossomed across the louse cruiser's bridge.

"Yes!" Myron shouted.

Cheers echoed from around the bridge as they watched.

But the crippled louse cruiser did not slow.

"Oh, shit, it's not stopping!" Bren shouted.

Myron stared in disbelief for a second, as the cruiser barreled toward them.

"Dive, dive!" he shouted, slamming the controls forward. The *Arrow* tilted forward, but not soon enough. Myron looked back up, to see the louse cruiser growing larger and larger, until it was close, too close...

"Damn it, no, *no!*"

Then the shock of impact, from head to toe, knocked him into blackness.

He awoke to sharp pain, something pressing down on his legs, and the droning of rotors. Immediately, he tried to roll over, but could not. He strained against it for a moment, trying to get up on all fours, trying to reach for whatever was on him, to lift it up so he could pull his leg free. But he could not, he couldn't bend that far forward. He was pinned down.

“Help!” he shouted, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. He heard no reply, but the sound of rotors overhead. What was it?

He twisted his ankles relentlessly, until he felt a release, somewhere, and the warm feeling of blood rushing back into his legs. Grunting, he worked himself free, feeling a scratch here or there. At last, he tugged his foot free.

He rolled over onto his stomach, then looked up. An umbrella of metal, torn from the wreckage of the *Broken Arrow*, blocked out the sun. Myron could see patches of bright daylight around him.

The tangy scent of blood filled his nostrils. He saw a crushed form ahead of him; it was one of the bridge crew, a slab of metal over her crushed chest, and blood bubbling out of her face. Myron crawled further; there were more dead further along. Myron felt a start of shock when he saw Bren. The man's face was barely recognizable. A beam as wide as Myron's arm pierced Bren's back, ringed with blood and torn flesh. Nausea grew in Myron's stomach, and he turned away, trying to focus.

One of the bridge crew had a pistol strapped to his belt; Myron took it. He ducked under low-hanging wires and stepped over sharp shreds of steel, making his way through the wreckage.

The pain of impact pulsed in Trielle's stomach. She sat up, looking around at the wreckage, at the bright sunlight past the shade. The sound of rotors pulsed in her ears. Dangerously close.

“Marie!”

The tangy echo of her voice faded into silence. The cracking of gunfire replaced it.

“Marie!”

A moment of quiet, then:

“Mom!”

She was nearby.

“Marie! Where's Leo and Zoey? Where's Drom?”

“Right here!”

Trielle crawled toward Marie. She could see through a crack in the metal; two louse craft had landed, had survived the crash somehow, and louse soldiers were advancing toward them. She could see their red eyes.

She found Marie behind a twisted metal wall. Leo, Andromeda, and Zoey huddled behind her, muted terror on their faces.

“We're exposed here, Marie, we've got to get out.”

“How?”

“We run. We run for the rest of the wreckage, and we try to get to the forest.”

Trielle peered out, rifle leading.

“The main wreckage is that way, maybe thirty meters. The forest is behind it. We *run*, we can make it, okay?”

“Okay,” said Marie.

“Keep the kids close,” said Trielle, her heart buzzing tremulously, “Ready?”

“Ready,” said Marie. She turned to Leo and the others, “You stay right behind me, okay?”

Their small heads nodded.

“Go!”

They dashed out into the hot sun, Trielle first, then Leo and Andromeda, then Zoey, then Marie at the back, making sure no one fell behind. The wreckage they'd huddled in sat between them and the louse soldiers, blocking their line of fire. The main wreck grew closer.

Then a shadow flashed over them, and the rotors' humming grew from dull to sharp. A louse gunship, thick and black, swung wide over them, the downdraft spewing dust. It stopped, and hovered ominously above them.

“Fuck!” Trielle screamed, “Run! Run faster!”

She slowed as they reached the wreckage, and turned back. Leo ran past her, and ducked into the wreckage, just as the gunship started firing.

Plumes of sand leaped into the air all around them, and Andromeda screamed. She dove under the wreckage, her older sister following her a second later. Marie was further back.

“Marie! Come on!” Trielle shrieked.

The stream of gunfire washed across the sand, cutting through Marie, spitting blood from her chest and stomach onto the sand. She collapsed to her hands and knees, screaming in pain.

“No!” Trielle ran forward, but the gunfire swept back, missing Trielle by inches, filling her face with sand. She stumbled back, barely able to see. But she could see Marie, and she watched the bullets hit her, again and again, knocking her face down. She did not move.

“Marie! No!”

Bullets skipped around Trielle; desperately, she crawled back toward the wreckage.

Coldness leaked through Aldrick's stomach; it felt like liquid death. He heaved himself to his feet. He had landed behind a chunk of one of the *Broken Arrow's* engines. His arms and legs ached; he had landed hard, but he had been lucky. Just a few feet away lay a man who'd fallen farther, skull cracked and oozing blood. He had a gun next to him; an assault rifle. The stock had snapped off in the impact, but it could still shoot, and Aldrick ran for it.

He started when the gunfire began, and he almost dropped the gun, but he kept running, toward the main bulk of the wreckage. He slid into cover behind a plate of metal, and peered out. Two louse landing craft sat near the rim of the forest, almost a hundred meters away. Aldrick squinted at them. Clear, blank face masks. Dhaika.

His heart began to pound. Just moving his arms hurt, let alone holding a gun aloft to shoot it. And his stomach; that would surely kill him if he didn't get medical help soon.

But there likely wasn't any medical help left. Not for miles and miles.

He raised the rifle to his shoulder, sighting in on the lead Dhaika, and squeezed the trigger.

Trielle sobbed hysterically into her palms. She could not bear to turn and look at Marie's body. No, Marie. Not her body. She wasn't dead. She wasn't.

But when she turned around, she was laying there, in the dust, her white hair stirring in the wind. Her entire back matted with blood, the same blood that stained the surrounding sand.

Her fingers felt numb wrapped around her rifle. She looked at Leo and Zoey, their confused faces, and felt no different. She wanted to fall forward, into blackness, and escape this. Go back a few seconds, change things. She'd made them run out. She could change it.

Each heartbeat felt like a tremendous effort. She made it to her feet.

“We've got to keep going,” she said through dry lips. Her own withered voice shocked her. She herded the children into the wreck, further into the dimness, leaving Marie's body behind.

Aldrick squeezed off shot after shot, ducking back when the Dhaika returned fire. Some of the shots came close to him, but most didn't. They were more focused on moving up to the wreckage. Aldrick took aim as they dashed from boulder to boulder. Sometimes he shot, other times he didn't; he only had one magazine. Thirty rounds, maybe fewer. He planned to make them count.

He heard something behind him; footsteps. He turned, rifle ready. It was more than possible some Dhaika had sneaked up closer.

Instead, he saw a man and a woman with a bag over her shoulder; no one he knew, but their faces looked familiar.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"We survived the crash!"

"Good for you!" Aldrick shouted, "Cover me, will you? There's twelve of them and one of me!"

They took cover amongst the wreckage.

"They're moving through the boulders," said Aldrick, "Shoot 'em when they run between. Keep their heads down. It's your best chance to stop them from moving up."

"Those boulders?" said the woman, pointing.

"Yeah," said Aldrick. He leaned out, and fired a few shots; a Dhaika ducked behind a rock.

Aldrick grinned. Another ran out of cover, spraying wildly in his direction. He fired three times, and it dropped to its hands and knees. Aldrick aimed for its head, and squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked.

"Shit," Aldrick muttered, "I'm out."

The woman reached into her bag, and tossed a magazine to Aldrick.

"Thanks," said Aldrick.

He reloaded, then took aim again, shooting bursts at the approaching Dhaika. One leaned out; Aldrick caught him in the shoulder, and he staggered to the ground. Another ran from one boulder to another; the woman shot it dead.

"Two down," muttered Aldrick, "Ten to go."

The Dhaika were coming, and Trielle watched them through her rifle sights. Her auburn brow furrowed. Images of Marie flashed in her mind, and her hands shook. She forced the thoughts away.

They came close enough. She fired a single shot, shattering a Dhaika's mask. It collapsed, and the others dashed in different directions, scurrying for cover. She shot again and again, one bullet at a time. One stumbled, hit in the leg. She kept shooting, until it stopped crawling.

The others had found cover, though, and they fired back. Trielle ducked.

"Get back! Get back!" she shouted at her children. They moved further in. Gritting her teeth, she rose again. Four Dhaika ran toward her, taking advantage of the suppressive fire. She fired a burst into the first one's chest, and it collapsed. Another raised its carbine, but Trielle killed it, too. The others fired as they ran, but Trielle ignored the bullets and kept shooting. One fell; the other made it behind a boulder, barely thirty meters away.

Trielle ignored it, and shot at the others, but they had as good of cover as she did, and they knew where she was. A hailstorm of bullets landed around her, and she was forced to duck back and run. Then she felt a sharp pain in her leg, and suddenly she was on the ground. She gasped from the stinging agony, feeling heat on the back of her calf. Arm over arm, she crawled forward, toward where her children waited for her, wondering if she would be with Marie before the day was over.

Myron kept moving toward the back of the ship. Or at least, what had used to be the back of the ship. The others would be in that direction.

He found Abby and Hannah crouching next to a man dressed in crew uniform.

"Abby!"

Myron ran up and embraced her, then Hannah.

"You're alive."

"Yeah, for now," said Abby, "We've still got to find the others and get out of here."

"There's a gunship up there," said the man.

"How do you know?" said Myron.

"I can hear it. I know the sound. It'll cut us down before we make it half way to the forest."

"So we need to take it out."

"I ... it'll kill you first. It –"

"What's your name, crewman?"

"I ... Rubin, sir."

"Rubin. You stay with my wife and daughter. Guard them with my life, do you hear me?"

Rubin nodded.

"Good. You got a weapon?"

Rubin held up a pistol.

"Standard issue, sir, your orders."

Myron nodded, and turned to Abby.

"Try to find Trielle and the others. Once that copter is down, you run for the forest. No matter what. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

He kissed her once.

"Keep Hannah close."

"I will."

She turned, taking Hannah's hand, and walked off. Rubin followed. Myron went in the opposite direction.

"Where you are going?" said Rubin.

"I'm going to the armory. There's got to be some leftover rocket tubes in there."

"You can't be serious..."

"Oh I am," said Myron, "I'm going to knock that gunship out of the sky."

The Dhaika had reached the closest boulders. Aldrick could see the breath filter under their sleek masks. He could see their fingers around the triggers of their guns.

His hands ached from the recoil; he had used all but one of the magazines for his rifle. There were at least four Dhaika left. Maybe five. And those were only the ones he had seen.

They wanted the children. There was no other explanation. They wanted Trielle's children. Orion's children, but he had never met them. They were hers.

He thought of her smile, the way her round cheeks brought warmth to her face. He thought of her fiery hair, the fierce expression on her face when she fought. Especially to protect her children. She lived for them. She deserved better than this.

Each time he fired his rifle, he felt the recoil twinge in his gut. The coldness was spreading, a strange sort of sensation that felt less like pain, and more like death. And it would only get worse.

He sighed, and turned to his companions.

"Get out of here. Give me the mags you can spare, then get out. Head for the woods."

"What? Why?" said the woman.

"We can't win this. You're better off running away."

"What about you?"

"I'll hold them for as long as I can," said Aldrick, "Then I'll join you."

He had no intention of joining them.

"That's stupid," said the woman, "You can't just –"

"He's right, Gail," said the man. He reached into his bag and pulled out two more magazines, and tossed them at Aldrick's feet.

"Coward," Gail muttered.

"Survivor," said the man, "They're Dhaika. And there will only be more of them the longer we stay here."

"There's one gunship," said Gail, "There won't be any more."

"Just get out of here!" Aldrick shouted.

Gail looked cowed. She turned to Dane.

"Fine. But I'm taking my bullets with me. They'll follow us."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Aldrick muttered. His rifle chattered as he fired at a Dhaika peeking out of cover. He missed, but it ducked back.

"Let's go," said the man. Aldrick heard them stepping over some torn metal. He turned his head, to see Gail's boot disappear around a corner. He nodded to himself, then turned back to the Dhaika.

The armory had been crumpled in the collision, and its contents were spilled everywhere. Oil dripped from the ceiling in places, and Myron jumped when a drop landed on his shoulder. He stepped among the scattered guns; rifles, submachines, pistols, plenty of magazines for all.

He spotted something under a bent weapon rack; he made for it immediately. His shotgun and revolver, side by side, lay underneath. Bending down, he pushed up with all his strength, lifting it up, and dragging both guns out with his foot.

He picked them up, holstering the revolver and slinging the shotgun. He moved on, between the toppled shelves, until he found a few scattered rocket tubes. He searched through them for a launcher, the sound of the rotors, and the stuttering of the copter's chain gun, driving him on. He found one, and picked it up, fumbling with the back, sliding a rocket tube into the back.

There was a patch of sunlight next to his foot. Myron looked down at it, then up, to where a gaping hole had been torn in the ceiling, ringed by bent hoses that hung down. Above was blue sky.

Myron turned around, grabbing the nearest weapon rack. He dragged it across the floor with a muted screech, kicking detritus out of its path as he did. He leaned it against a wall, right under the hole, and tossed the loaded rocket launcher up with it, throwing up another few rockets for good measure. Then he climbed up the shelf, bending a piece of rebar out of his way. The locker began to tilt. He leaped up right as it toppled, holding onto the edge. He swung a leg up, and rolled onto the top of the ship. He found his rockets, and spotted the gunship hanging in the sky, firing down at the wreckage.

He peered through the scope. Below the gunship, groups of Dhaika moved through the sand and boulders, trading fire with the survivors of the crash. Among them, he spotted a mask with fang-shaped eyeslits, holding a rifle, watching but not shooting.

Timeless' lieutenant.

He considered squeezing the trigger then and there, but he only had four rockets. Four chances to take down that gunship. And that would be everything. He could deal with the lieutenant later.

He lined up the thin crosshair on the gunship, holding his breath. He squeezed the trigger, and felt searing heat behind him as the rocket shot forward. The gunship began to dodge, but not quickly enough; the rocket hit near the back. Wounding it, but not crippling it.

It's gun swept toward him, punching a line of holes in the top of the ship. Myron dropped behind a fold in the ship's exterior. He reached for another rocket tube, then stuck it in the back of the launcher, twisting it to make sure it fit.

He rose cautiously. The gunship was shooting wildly in his direction, but I didn't seem to know quite where he was. He wasted no time in taking advantage, and fired a second rocket. It streaked past, hurtling harmlessly into the sky.

"Damn it," Myron muttered, "Don't get cocky."

He fit another tube. It wouldn't be long before the Dhaika noticed him, and before some opportunistic sniper drew a bead on him. He dropped to a crouch, propping the launcher on his knee, aiming carefully through the sight. He settled the crosshair directly over the gunship's cockpit, following it as it swung side to side, before stopping still in the sky. The gun fired again, and bullets landed all around Myron. But he forced himself to focus, and squeezed the trigger. The rocket flew fast, and slammed into the gunship's cockpit, blowing it apart in a blossom of flame. It began to list, then spin, tumbling into the forest, where it crashed with a deep boom that Myron felt in his gut.

He slammed another rocket into the tube, and turned to where Timeless' lieutenant had been. But

he was gone, and the Dhaika had noticed their gunship going down. Bullets pinged off the hull where Myron stood, and he fired his final rocket toward the boulders, barely aiming, before jumping down. He crawled down the side of the wreckage, back along the edge, back toward Abby and Hannah.

The Dhaika had her pinned down; she could hardly lift her head without weathering a hail of lead. She took the opportunity to reload her rifle; four magazines left. There were still five Dhaika out there, and they were fierce adversaries. They knew when to duck, when to shoot, and where.

She would need more ammunition.

She heard the crunching of broken glass behind her; she started in shock. But it was only Abby and Myron, and another man, with Hannah in tow.

“Trielle!” said Myron.

“Myron! Don't come any closer!”

“Where are the kids?”

“Leo's here. So are Drom and Zoey. I...”

“Where's Marie?”

“She...”

“She what? Where is she?” said Myron.

“She didn't...” Trielle's eyes filled with tears. She shook her head.

“Shit,” Myron muttered.

Trielle turned suddenly, poking her rifle out of the wreckage. Her gun barked again and again, her fist tightening around the grip of her rifle. Her knuckles grew white. The return fire forced her back again, and Myron saw the fiery look of hate on her face when she faced him again.

“Get my kids out of here, Myron, so I can kill the rest of these fuckers.”

“We'll carry them out. Me, Abby, and Rubin. Get them to the forest. Hell, you come with us, you can carry Leo, and – ”

“No, he's safe here. We have to wait for Aldrick.”

“I ... Aldrick might be ... we should get out in the forest while we still can.”

“Get Drom and Hannah out there. And Zoey. Come back for me and Leo. Someone has to cover our retreat. Might as well be me.”

There was a scream of pain from somewhere else in the wreckage, somewhere far. Trielle ignored it.

“Go,” she said. The finality in her voice made Myron turn to the others.

“Let's get out of here,” he said, “Come here, Hannah.”

She walked up to him, and he slid his hands under her shoulders and hoisted her onto his back.

“Abby, you take Andromeda, and Rubin, you take Zoey. Get to the other end of the wreckage and wait. We go for the forest at the same time. Got it?”

“Got it.” said Rubin.

“Yep,” said Abby.

They set off, children on their backs.

Trielle did not watch them go; she spotted two Dhaika rushing from cover at the same time. She fired at one, but the surprise threw her shot off, and she missed. Each ducked behind a boulder, closer than the last. The Dhaikas' leap-frogging had bought them ground.

She swiveled her rifle between them, waiting for one to pop out. One did, and she squeezed the trigger. Her rifle clicked sharply. The Dhaika's rifle didn't, and bullets landed all around Trielle. She felt a hot pain in her leg, then her arm. She gasped, and dropped to a knee, face furrowing in pain.

By the time she regained her composure, it had been at least ten seconds. More than enough time for the Dhaika to move up. She looked to her rifle, on the ground nearby. Reloading it would take too long. She reached for the pistol at her hip, and pulled it out. She tugged on the slide, and leaned against

the wall, feeling the hot blood run down her leg. She tried to stem the flow with her free hand, clamping it down on her thigh, and hoping the bullet hadn't hit an artery...

She heard sloshing in the sand outside, and a strange screech. The sound sent chills down her spine; it sounded familiar.

Suddenly, a Dhaika ran into the wreckage, its smooth face mask surveying quietly. It turned to where Leo huddled in the corner, and raised its carbine.

Trielle fired without thinking, and the first shot hit the Dhaika in the knee. The second and third missed, but the fourth hit it in the neck. Trielle fired again and again, emptying her magazine into the Dhaika's body, until it was dead.

"You... do not... my son..."

She staggered back, falling against the wall of the wreckage. Leo peered out curiously.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm ... I'm fine Leo."

"You're bleeding."

"It's just a scratch, Leo. Like you used to get sometimes when you played with your friends."

"Oh," said Leo, "When is Myron coming back?"

"Soon, Leo, soon," said Trielle, trying to keep the pain out of her voice, "Just stay back there, keep out of sight, okay?"

"Okay."

The rustling and screeching returned. Whatever it was, it was getting closer. Trielle took her hand away from her thigh to reload her pistol. But fresh blood spurted from the wound, and she put her hand back instantly.

"Damn it," she muttered. She looked around, then tried to reach another magazine from her vest pouch. Her fingers shook, and she dropped the pistol.

"Damn it!" she whimpered in frustration.

She sat back. It would be seconds before the rest of the Dhaika made their way into the wreck.

"Leo?"

"What?"

"Come here for a minute."

"Why?"

"I need your help. I ... come help me. Come help your mommy reload her gun."

They found Brie huddled near the edge of the wreckage, holding a pistol in her hands, peering out into the light. His footsteps alerted her; she tensed, and pointed her pistol at Myron.

"It's me," he said, "Do I sound like goddamn louse to you?"

"Footsteps all sound the same," said Brie, "Especially in a burning shipwreck, with a shootout going on."

Myron nodded in assent.

"Where are the others?" said Brie.

"Tri's with Leo, covering our retreat. We're getting the kids out. Bren's dead. I have no idea where Aldrick is."

Brie's face fell.

"I should look for him."

"No. Brie, you're a pilot, not a soldier."

"I'm just going to find him."

"He might be in the middle of a fight, and you'll get caught in the crossfire. Hell, I'm near certain

he *is* in the middle of a fight right now. Trielle's helping him, fighting the Dhaika. So is whoever else is left here."

"What do I do then?"

Myron looked at her for a second, then lowered Hannah from his shoulders, and unslung his shotgun.

"Take Hannah. Go with Abby and Rubin into the woods. Stay there with the kids. I'm going to find Aldrick."

"Alone?" said Brie.

"I'll be fine," said Myron.

Abby nodded.

"He will," she said.

Brie turned to Abby, then back to Myron.

"Bring him back safe."

She hoisted Hannah onto her shoulders, and set off through the wreckage. Rubin followed.

"I love you," said Abby.

"I love you, too," said Myron.

She turned to go.

"Hey."

"What?" said Abby, turning back.

"If I don't make it back by dusk, head north. There ought to be a lake or something that way. Don't ... don't come looking for my body. It's not worth it."

"I won't need to."

"Hope not."

He turned away, stepping over a hose, ducking under a shredded metal wall. Abby tightened her lips wistfully, then turned to follow Brie and Rubin.

Aldrick heard the gunship go down, but he couldn't see what caused it. But in the silence that followed the droning rotors, he heard the sounds of shooting, and a shout that he recognized.

Trielle.

She was further down. If he could find her, there was a good chance Myron was with her.

He fired a few more times to cover his escape, then got up, hissing and gritting his teeth. It hurt to move, as though he was walking with a skewer in him. He crawled over a shattered shelf, and ducked under a snapped pipe, following the sound of the gunfire.

He spotted her, sitting under a large fold of metal. Leaning against the wall, her back to the Dhaika. Leo was in front of her, crouching next to her. Was she dying?

He couldn't get to her; it was too open a space, the lice would gun him down first. He peered out to see six Dhaika, barely fifteen meters away. A gaunt, wolf-like creature ran among them. A stalker.

"Trielle! Look out!" he shouted.

The Dhaika turned to him. In panic, Aldrick shot one dead, then ducked back. The resulting barrage ricocheted everywhere, punching holes in the metal, letting in spots of light.

When he rose up he heard Myron's voice.

"Aldrick! There you are!"

There was less joy and more panic in his voice.

"Yeah," said Aldrick, "Stay down! The damn Dhaika have a bead on me. Where are the others?"

"In the woods, with the children. Except for Leo. And Trielle."

"We're all that's left?"

"Afraid so."

Aldrick turned away.

"Go get Tri and Leo. I've got the rest of these."

"You're insane."

"I'm fucked, Myron. They ... they got me. There's no way I'm making it out of here. Least I can do is cover your retreat."

"What do you mean, they got you?"

Aldrick turned, showing Myron the black stain that covered his stomach and thighs.

"Just go," he said, his expression pleading.

"I ... I'll get Trielle out of here. But you follow the second we're gone, you hear me?"

"Sure, whatever," said Aldrick, raising his rifle and aiming carefully, "Just go get her. They don't deserve to die here today."

"No one does," said Myron quietly, but he turned and went.

Brie dashed up the gravelly hill, Hannah weighing on her shoulders. The others were just behind. The refuge of the trees waited ahead. Over her shoulder, Brie could see the Dhaika closing in on the wreckage. There were more now; at least two dozen. Even Trielle and Myron couldn't kill that many.

A rock jumped into the air nearby; at least one Dhaika had chosen them as a new target.

"They're shooting us!" Brie shouted to Abby and Rubin, "Run faster!"

They scrambled up the hill, bullets landing around them. One shattered a rock in front of her feet; the fragments flew up and stung her cheek, and she yelped in surprise.

"Into the woods, into the woods!"

They reached the top of the hill, sprinting into the trees, not stopping until they could no longer even see the edge of the forest.

Brie was the first to slow down, panting. She began to lower Hannah from her shoulders.

"Hannah?"

She heard nothing.

"Hannah?"

She set the girl down in front of her, panicking. Hannah's wide brown eyes stared into hers. Then she sniffled. Brie sighed in relief.

"Is she okay?" said Abby, setting down Andromeda.

"She's fine. I just ... I panicked for a second," said Brie.

"This should be far enough," said Rubin, "Myron can find us here."

"Who are you, anyway?" said Brie.

"I'm Rubin."

"Yeah, that's what Myron said. But *who* are you? I know you're not a pilot or anything. You crew? Soldier? Civilian?"

"Crew," said Rubin.

"They give you any wilderness survival training?" said Brie.

"No," said Rubin.

"Well, it'd be about to come in pretty damn handy, if you had," said Brie, sitting down, "We're about to be stuck in the woods for a few weeks."

There was some rustling in the distant trees. Brie raised her pistol. Abby motioned for the children to hide. But Brie held up a hand.

"They look like ours."

Abby rose, to see a man and a woman, each holding an assault rifle, bounding through the ferns and leaves toward them. They slowed when they saw Abby and Brie.

"You're from the ship, right?" said the woman.

"Yeah," said Brie, "You, too, I assume. Anyone else make it out?"

"Not that I know of," said the woman.

"There's a man back in there, still fighting, but he told us to go."

"Who?"

"Dark brown hair, brown eyes... I don't know."

"Aldrick?"

"Yeah," said the woman thoughtfully, "Probably was him."

Abby and Brie exchanged worried glances.

"Myron will find him," said Brie, "They'll find us out here. It'll work out."

But she could tell Abby didn't believe it. And neither did she.

The voice distracted Trielle; it sounded like Aldrick.

Then the creature pounced on her, sweeping the pistol from her hand. She screamed, feeling the claws grab at her, feeling it pin her to the ground, tearing her arms away from her chest so she couldn't defend herself, and leaving her throat exposed.

Three sharp gunshots, and Trielle felt the creature shift. She pulled her legs free and kicked at its stomach, rolling to her feet. She reached for her knife, seeing Leo standing there, pistol in hand, pointing it at the creature. It, too, sprang to its feet, and made to leap at Trielle again.

But Leo shot it again and again, until a bullet went through its eye, and it stiffened and fell.

Trielle looked at her son, gaping. Then the adrenaline faded, her leg gave out again, and she fell back to her knees.

She heard footsteps; she looked up. Myron, breathless, stood before her.

"Tri, we gotta go."

"Where's Aldrick?"

"He's covering our retreat. What ... what happened to you?"

"Dhaika got lucky," panted Trielle.

"I ... I can't carry both of you."

"Leave me," said Trielle, "I'll help Aldrick."

"No. You can't stay. Just ... here, I'll help you."

He bent down, sliding an arm around her shoulder.

"Leo saved me," she whispered as Myron hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Come on, Leo," said Myron, taking the boy's hand, and leading him back through the wreck.

Leo followed, the pistol still dangling from his other hand.

The Dhaika abandoned all pretense of caution now. One dashed forward, running for the cover of the wreck; Aldrick cut him down with a stream of bullets. He felt his heartbeat in his ears, as though he could hear death approaching. Already it was harder to breath. It wouldn't be long now.

Another dashed back for the boulders, firing as he ran. Aldrick weathered the fire, then lined up a single shot on the louse's back. He squeezed the trigger, and watched the soldier stiffened and fall hard on his stomach.

They kept shooting; a bullet stung Aldrick's shoulder, then his thigh. But he ignored them. He let the blood flow freely. He would kill them all. Trielle and her children would escape.

He heard talking from the alcove where Trielle huddled. Then he saw movement; nothing he could make out clearly. But he swore he saw a mane of red hair swishing out of sight. He smiled.

"Good luck, Tri," he whispered to himself.

He sprang to his feet, firing a burst into a surprised Dhaika who huddled near the wreck a few meters away from him. Its fellow dashed back for the boulders, but Aldrick cut him down. The others returned fire, but Aldrick just ducked back down. He stepped carefully down the wreck, to another opening, where he poked his rifle out and shot one Dhaika dead. The others turned to shoot back, but

Aldrick was already moving again.

Another bullet pierced him, through the chest. He fell, feeling the air leaking from his lung. But he staggered back to his feet, reloading his rifle as he went.

At another opening, he shot a Dhaika twice in the chest, and another in the head, as they approached the wreckage. Another fired back from behind a boulder. He kept moving.

There weren't many Dhaika left; one ran out from behind a boulder, trusting its fellow to cover for it. Aldrick shot it in the head, emptying half his magazine in the process. The other half went to holding back the one behind the boulder. Then his rifle clicked empty. He reached for his vest pouch.

One more magazine.

He shot the Dhaika behind the boulder, then ran out into the open, hoping there were no more, hoping he could reach the forest. Maybe, just maybe he could spend his last moments in Trielle's arms. It was a beautiful vision. It drove him forward.

A bullet hit him in the ankle; he fell hard on his side. He shot from the ground, hitting the Dhaika in the chest and leg. It dropped; another, off to the side, came forward. Behind it stood a caped figure, wearing a mask with fanged eyeslits, rifle in its hands...

Aldrick shot the Dhaika dead, and moved to fire at Timeless' lieutenant. But he shot first, and the bullet shattered Aldrick's rifle, knocking it from his hands.

"No," Aldrick grunted.

The lieutenant fired, over and over, into Aldrick. At least half the bullets hit him, and by the end of it Aldrick was barely conscious. He was dead. It was over. He begged for the next bullet to hit his head.

The lieutenant strode forward. He kicked Aldrick's broken rifle away, then hauled the man to his feet, slamming him against the side of the wreckage. The lieutenant drew a pistol from his belt, and held it up, pointing it straight at Aldrick's heart.

"You are dead."

"I know," Aldrick spat.

"You're pitiful," said the lieutenant, his cold voice growing fainter as Aldrick began to fade, "You stay and fight, die, when you could have escaped."

Aldrick felt something against his back; the tiny pistol digging into his shoulder blade, slipping down his back. He slid his hand toward his belt.

"You think you're a hero, don't you? It's pathetic, how your kind thinks. You saved no one. I'll find those children anyway."

He squirmed in the lieutenant's grasp. Something small and heavy fell into his palm; he felt his fingers wrap around it tightly.

"You're not a hero, Aldrick Nauss. You're a useless sacrifice," said the cold, crackly voice, "You fought for nothing."

"No, I didn't," said Aldrick.

They fired at the same time; Aldrick twice, the lieutenant once. Two bodies fell; Timeless' lieutenant with a hole in his forehead, Aldrick with a final, fatal wound in the heart. But in the last seconds, Aldrick saw the lieutenant dead. Trielle's children ... well, they would live through today. He smiled at the thought.

Then his eyes closed, and he died.

Trielle heard the gunfire stop, and she tugged at Myron's arm at the top of the hill.

"Is he..."

"He's dead, Tri, he can't have survived."

"The shooting's over, though, Myron. We've got to go back. He might be hurt. He might be --"

"He was already hurt. Tri, he was already dying."

“What?” said Trielle. Beside her, Leo paused.

“He ... got hit in the stomach. I don't know when. Maybe during the crash. Maybe before, during the chase. But it ... I could tell he wasn't going to make it.”

“No!” said Trielle, pulling on him, “We've got to go back! He might be okay!”

“We can't, okay, we can't! He didn't do all this so we could wander back and get fucking shot!”

“He might have won, Myron! You want to leave him to die alone! You want to leave him – ”

Her words were interrupted by two gunshots. Or maybe three. The sound struck their words dead for a moment. Then Trielle began to sob.

## Attacking the Skygun – ambushed and shotdown by relentless' fleet

The tricopter skidded along the ground. The screeching metal tore at Myron's ears, and he could see Trielle's face contorted in discomfort beside him. At last, the crippled aircraft ran out of momentum, and the sounds of battle filtered into the quiet cabin.

The other soldiers began collecting themselves; no one was dead, but the tricopter was on its side, and the soldiers helped each other out of their restraints. Trielle clicked her seatbelt open, stumbling against what had once been the floor. Myron followed suit.

Like a baby bird cracking free of its egg, he lifted the side-door over his head, and slid it back, peering out of the tricopter. Gazing across the concrete landscape before him, he spotted the closest leg of the skygun was just a few hundred meters away. In the night above, white streaks flung themselves toward the tower in rows, crashing into it in brilliant blossoming fire.

When it was clear, he climbed out of the tricopter. Trielle came out next, the rest of the soldiers following her. They took cover behind a low wall, crouching down.

"When I say, you spread out, and move toward that tower," said Myron, "Keep in cover, don't stop pushing forward. The longer it takes us, the more lice we'll be fighting."

The soldiers nodded in assent. Trielle met Myron's gaze, the flashes in the night sky visible in her blue eyes.

"Go."

They ran out, guns swiveling. Trielle opened fire almost immediately, striking a louse soldier crouching behind a barrel. A wild burst of machine gun fire skittered off the ground, ricocheting off a stray barrel, forcing them to duck for cover.

Myron leaned out, spotting a machine gun nest in a metal tower, two pair of red eyes watching them. They were close. He turned to Trielle.

"Probably thirty meters at most, to the left of the skygun."

"Alright," said Trielle.

"On three, light up that tower!" Myron shouted to the other soldiers.

"Yes sir!" came an erratic shout.

"One... two... *three!*"

They rose to their feet, and sprayed the tower with bullets. Spent casings showered the ground, and Trielle took careful aim before letting off a single burst, then another, then another. She dropped down, and Myron shouted.

"Down! Down! We got 'em."

"They're dead," said Trielle.

"Keep moving! Forward! Forward!" Myron shouted.

They climbed over crates and up concrete stairways. Louse soldiers popped out from time to time, but Myron's squad was quicker, and gunned them down. Still, one soldier fell, then another. A sniper bullet struck a third. By the time they reached the final stretch, the base of the skygun within sight, four of the ten soldiers were dead.

Myron shot a louse soldier in the head as he ran from one bundle of crates to another. Behind him, Trielle fired a burst into a second louse as it fled. Then she dropped behind a crate.

"It's wide open up ahead!" she shouted, "How the hell are we getting in there?"

"We're gonna clear it before we cross. Then we move in, fast."

"Why don't you call for air support or something?"

"They're all busy blowing the hell out of the tower defenses. Wonder why we haven't been shelled into dust yet?"

There was a pause.

"Alright."

Myron turned his neck to shout to the rest of his soldiers.

"Hold here! You see any lice, you kill them now while we have cover, 'cause we sure as hell won't when we're running those last fifty meters!"

Myron raised his rifle, scanning for any hiding places that might hold lice. He looked to Trielle, who was doing the same thing.

"I don't see anyone," said Trielle, "I think they either ran away, or they're already –"

An explosion filled Myron's vision with dirt and dust, and a wave of heat knocked him back onto the ground. He heard a scream of pain, somewhere, through his ringing ears. As he staggered to his feet, another explosion blew a bundle of barrels to pieces farther away.

*Mortar*, he thought, as he coughed in the smoke and dust.

"Trielle!"

She was laying face down, covered in scratches, a knife-sized shard of metal stuck in her back.

"Trielle!"

Slowly, clumsily, she got back to her feet.

"I'm fine," she moaned.

Myron rushed over to her. Already blood was seeping from where metal met flesh.

"I'm fine!" she shouted when he grabbed her shoulder.

"Tri, you're hurt."

"No time!" she shouted, "Are we clear?"

"I ... didn't see anyone," said Myron helplessly, "Move forward!" he shouted to the other soldiers, who obliged.

"You're not in a good shape, Tri," said Myron, as the soldiers advanced past them, "We need to get you to –"

"I'm fine, I can fight," she said, "Let's keep going."

"Tri, stop!" said Myron, grabbing her shoulder as she walked away.

"There's no time for this, Myron! Cover for me."

"I ... okay," said Myron.

They moved across the open ground, seventy meters that seemed to be twice as far. No more lice rose to fight them. They broke into a run; the doors to the closest leg of the skygun tower grew larger and larger in their vision. Mortar shells crashed around them, but Myron could not see where they were coming from. The bombardment, if anything, spurred them to run faster.

Halfway across, a loud crack drew their eyes upward; a great chunk of metal, house-sized, tumbled down and dashed itself to pieces on the ground. They kept running; Myron watched the dark stain on Trielle's back grow larger. She winced as she ran.

The lice nearest the doors lay dead, their remains a gory mess. The aerial bombardment had blown their machine gun emplacement to smithereens. But Myron gave them nothing more than a glance. The other soldiers were already inside.

Myron realized that they were the first soldiers to reach the doors; perhaps the other forces had encountered more resistance. Looking back over the battlefield, he heard the crackling of gunfire, and saw flashes here and there.

"Myron!"

He turned back, seeing Trielle.

"Explosives?"

"Yeah," he said, reaching for his rucksack. He tossed it to Trielle, who turned and ran to the other soldiers. The blood had reached her waist now...

They moved down the hallway from the entrance, toward a brightly-lit chamber they could barely see any of.

"We're gonna want to set it up in there," said Myron, "It's not the center, but it'll be enough."

"Yeah," said Trielle, "How long should I set it for?"

"Ten minutes," said Myron, "That should be long enough for us to get clear."

Trielle nodded.

“Tri, we really need to – ”

A burst of gunfire severed his words short. He heard a shriek of pain, then the deafening cacophony of return fire.

“Point's down!” came a shout from the front.

“I'll take it,” said Trielle, moving past the other soldiers.

“Tri...”

She did not answer.

“Tri!”

They entered the chamber, and the shooting started almost instantly. One louse stood atop a set of machinery near the center of the room. Trielle fired a burst into his chest, and he collapsed. The other soldiers sprinted in after her, spreading out. Louse fire cut one down; then Myron heard another cry of pain from further in. He ran in after them, rushing to the right, ducking behind some more machinery. Bullets pinged and ricocheted around him. Myron leaned out, and spotted a louse firing from a hallway across the chamber. He lined up the sights and fired back; the louse ducked back, and Myron ran for the center.

“Trielle!” he shouted. She had the explosives, and the center of the chamber would be the best place to plant them.

She ran out, bullet skipping off the concrete around her feet. She reached Myron.

“Put them here,” said Myron, “Set for ten minutes, put them here, then we'll get the hell out.”

“You got it,” she said, unslinging the backpack, “Give me some cover.”

“I will,” said Myron.

She went to work on the explosives; Myron dashed from cover to cover, motioning for the other soldiers to move up.

He spotted louse soldiers in the hallways across from them, and to the sides, moving up cautiously. The whos shot back immediately; a few lice crumpled, the others returned fire.

Myron shot one through the throat, and another in the leg as it tried to dash past its fallen comrade. But a third replaced it, and shot at Myron, forcing his head down. He looked to Trielle; she was busy pushing buttons on the explosives.

Then it was finished, and she slung the backpack onto the top of the machinery she hid behind. Then she took out her rifle.

“Alright, bomb's in place!” Myron roared, “Get the hell out the side passage, we'll cover you.”

The soldiers ran, one by one, shooting as they ran. One louse peered out to shoot; Myron brushed him back with a hail of fire from his rifle. A sharp click; empty. He ducked down to reload.

Across from him, Trielle's rifle chattered determinedly. He heard the muffled shouts of louse soldiers, and when he got up again, his gun fresh and full of bullets, he saw three more louse bodies than before.

Another soldier ran past; Myron turned, and saw that he and Trielle were the only ones left.

“Tri! We gotta go!”

She shook her head.

“What the hell, Tri!”

“Ten minutes is too long! There are too many!” she shouted back.

She fired a burst from her gun, one that shattered a louse's face mask and sprayed the wall with blood. The others returned fire, and one by one they moved into the corridor. Myron shot one dead, but the lice spotted him, and he had to throw himself to the ground as a wave of return fire swept over him.

“Myron, get the hell out of here!”

He crawled, arm over arm, toward the side passage, toward freedom, as bullets ricocheted everywhere. One bounced off the machinery that sheltered him, inches in front of his face, spitting sparks onto his fingers.

He heard a thud, and a yelp. Straining his neck, he turned, barely able to see Trielle leaning against the smooth metal, her face speckled with blood. He kept crawling.

Finally, he reached the end of the machinery. He sprang to his feet, and dashed for the corridor. Louse bullets followed him, but they missed, and Myron flung himself against the wall of the hallway. When he leaned out, he spotted a louse aiming at him; a burst of fire forced him to duck back.

Trielle was still behind the machinery, still by the bomb. She was trapped; at least a dozen lice were moving through the room, hiding behind whatever cover they could find. She leaned out, fired, then ducked back, and one louse fell, then another. But they were getting closer.

Finally, Myron threw himself around the corner, firing at the louse that had pinned him down. It staggered back, hit in the chest, and before it could fall, Myron swiveled to fire at the others, spraying bullets around the chamber. A few lice ducked down, and one collapsed, but the rest shot back. Myron retreated as the bullets struck concrete all around him.

He couldn't see Trielle anymore; he could only hear the rapid footsteps as the louse soldiers closed in around her. He squeezed his eyes shut. He should do it. He should stick out his neck again, take whatever bullets came his way. Give her time to run for the door. Leo and Andromeda; they needed her. They needed her more than they needed him.

He heard a burst of gunfire; three staccato shots from Trielle's rifle. Then the chaotic crackling of the lice shooting back. Then he heard her cry out.

"Fuck you!" she screamed, desperation in her voice.

More bursts, more frantic now. Another cry of pain.

"Myron!"

The voice tore at him. He had to help her.

"Fuck!" she cried.

A louse soldier appeared at the end of the hallway; Myron's muscles tensed. But a bullet cut through its throat, and it slumped to the ground.

He heard a wet thud from further in the room. Trielle screamed again.

"Die! Damn it, fucking die!"

The weakness in her voice propelled Myron forward. The lice paid no attention to him now, thinking he had fled. He shot one louse dead, then another, before they realized he was there. One raised its submachine gun, but before it could, it jerked to the side and collapsed, three bloody holes in its chest. Myron turned to look at Trielle. Her front was covered in blood, and at least two dozen louse soldiers lay dead in the chamber. Most of them hers.

Myron leaned out, then fired as he ran for the center machinery. One louse fell; another shot back, but Myron ran on, uncaring. Another bullet struck Trielle; he realized in shock she must have been hit half a dozen times now. She fell back, moaning, eyes squeezed shut, her forehead glistening with sweat, lines of blood streaking her arms like veins.

"Trielle!"

Suddenly, her brow furrowed, and she threw herself, teeth gritted, back out into the open, firing at the lice that still streamed into the chamber. Two fell from a single burst; another stumbled forward, shot clear through the head; a third louse staggered to the side, wounded in the leg. Myron raised his rifle, and shot twice, finishing it off.

"Myron, what the fuck are you still doing in here?"

"I'm getting you out!"

"No one is getting out, there's too fucking many!"

"I'm not leaving you here!"

"Help me kill them!"

Another bullet struck her in the side; Myron watched her hip burst open, splattering the ground behind her with blood. She made some noise between a sob and a shriek. Myron roared in frustration, and stood up, firing at the louse soldiers as they poured in, not bothering with cover, nor caring for their

casualties. He shot one in the chest at least four times, before it sank to the ground. Another tried to dash for cover, but Myron cut it down with a wave of bullets. As his gun clicked empty again, he spotted another, aiming at him. Then Trielle's gun barked, and flung it to the ground, and Myron nearly leapt in surprise. He could not believe she was still standing.

The hallway was thick with lice; Myron spotted a dead louse on the ground, just a few steps away. A smooth black grenade hung from its belt. He pounced on it, ripping the grenade free, and pulling the pin.

"Cover me, Tri, I got a grenade!"

She did not answer, but her gun fired, spraying down the hallway. Myron poked his head up, and flung the grenade as far as he could. It bounced down the hallway, and as he ducked down it went off, sending a gut-wrenching shockwave through the chamber.

Silence came in the wake of the grenade blast; no sound, save for the beeping of the explosives, could be heard. Then he heard the clatter of a rifle falling to the ground. Trielle slumped against the machinery, gazing blankly into the distance.

"Tri, no, no..."

He ran to her; her eyes snapped onto his face, islands of life on her dying body.

"We only got a few minutes to get out of here," he said.

She just shook her head.

"Yes!" he roared at her, sliding his arms under her shoulders. He slung her rifle over his back, then hoisted her up, and made for the door. He gave the chamber one last glance; at least thirty lice were dead, their corpses strewn everywhere.

He hobbled down the corridor with her, feeling her hot blood seeping onto his neck. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and adrenaline drove him on. Trielle was so light, but she felt heavy in his arms now. They went from the faded orange lights of the corridor, to the darkness outside, where the line of white glowing lights stretched forever into the night sky, and the bursts of fire above them drowned out the stars.

He staggered through the concrete maze, nearly stumbling down the stairs. They barely made it into a trench, when the first of the explosives detonated. The shock of the blast nearly flung Myron to the ground; his innards tingled from the force of it. He set Trielle down, as shards of metal tumbled end over end above them. Her head lolled back, the stark light illuminating her pale face.

He dropped to his knees, and cradled her head. She could not be dead. Not yet. But she said nothing, and there was so much blood...

"Myron," she said softly. Her emaciated voice shook him; he felt his eyes grow hot with tears.

"I can almost see the stars," she said. Myron looked up; he could barely see a few faint pinpricks. In the distance, there was a deep wrenching sound, as metal beams bent and cracked. The tower was collapsing, slowly; already, the lights of the skygun tower had tilted out of alignment. Past the point of no return.

"I don't want to die, Myron."

He gulped, and swallowed. The tears spilled onto his cheek, and he leaned down to hold her. Part of him screamed to reach for his radio, to call for help, to hope against hope. But he couldn't; all the help in the world couldn't save her now.

"When's it gonna end?" she whimpered. It sounded like a child's lament to Myron; her voice sounded like it belonged to another. Like it didn't belong here. Like this was a nightmare.

"Someday, Tri. Someday... it'll be over."

"It's never someday, is it?"

He had no answer; he only felt the heat of her labored breath on his cheek.

"I ... I didn't want this," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"I know, Tri, I know. I didn't..."

His voice caught in his throat. Trielle gasped suddenly, a sticky cough that went on until she spat

blood onto Myron's shoulder.

"Tri?"

She sobbed.

"Oh, I didn't want it to be like this," she said weakly.

"Don't go, Tri, please don't."

She coughed again, harder, over and over, as though nothing could clear her throat. Then she gasped, and fell against him, blood streaming from the corner of her mouth.

"No..." she whispered, "Please no... please let it end."

His tears blurred her face; he wiped them away. Then he saw her blue eyes, blank and still, and suddenly she became heavy in his arms. Myron felt his vision grow fuzzy as he stared at her. She wasn't breathing.

"No. No!"

He forced her back, putting his hands over her chest, pushing down hard, over and over, trying to start her heart again. She did not move. He kept at it, a sharp pain in his stomach growing stronger and stronger, until it was too much. He collapsed against her, strangled sobs clawing at his insides. He lay there for minutes, his cheek on her stomach, tears streaming down his face and mingling with the blood.

When his tears were spent, he simply panted, gasping for air. Already she felt colder; the realization drove a spike of reality through him. It was over. She was gone.

He heard scratchy footsteps, and a distorted voice. Fear, then hatred, pounded in his heart. He spotted a pair of red eyes turn the corner, and a new, terrifying feeling filled him. He sprang forward, tackling the surprised louse soldier to the ground. It wriggled under him, but Myron grabbed its head and slammed it against the ground, over and over, before its helmet strap snapped and fell off. Myron dug his fingers under the louse's mask, ripping it away. He pulled his knife from his belt, and jammed it into the louse's gray forehead; it screamed in pain, but Myron ignored it, and stabbed it again, and again, Trielle's face flashing in his mind with each blow, until the louse's cries became gurgles, and its face a bloody mess.

He stood up, staggered back, found a fist sized piece of rubble, and pounced on the dying louse, roaring like an animal, slamming the rock into its skull, until it cracked and gave way, until there was nothing left but flattened bone and brain.

Nausea rose in him, and he staggered away, past Trielle's dark form. He collapsed to his knees, and fell forward, the collapsing skytower creaking in the distance, the railguns above echoing like thunder. He broke into sobs again, losing himself in them, until at last they faded, and he rolled onto his back, utterly spent.

His fingers groped at his belt, finding his radio. He could have saved her with it, he could have called for help, and maybe she would have died in a tricopter, at least, instead of this forsaken concrete trench. Anger pulsed through him, and he almost threw it away. But instead he switched it on.

"It's ... this is Myron Brown. We planted the explosives, mission was a success. I got split off from the rest of my squad. I ... I need a tricopter at my location, soon as possible."

The radio clicked off. Above him, the air battle continued like distant, sepulchral thunder. The skygun tilted far to the side now, crumbling against the ground. Myron looked up at it, then back at Trielle's body. He could not think straight; his mind spun in ephemeral thoughts that died as quickly as they began. He could not believe she was dead; she was not, she was just hurt, the tricopter would be here soon to save her. Thoughts of Leo and Andromeda pushed their way into his head for a split second; but he could not endure them. All of it felt like a mistake; he wanted badly to go back, to do it over, to find some path that didn't end in losing her.

He lost track of the minutes until the tricopter finally arrived, though he doubted it was that long.

It was impossible to sleep that night. He lay awake, turning the words over in his head. How could he tell Leo and Andromeda that they had lost their mother as well as their sister. How could he tell Hannah? Or Abby?

The numbness had faded, and an ache in his chest had replaced it. His muscles could not move; he felt a restlessness, an urge to get up and see her, to force it into his mind that she was dead.

He could not think of their victory. Sarengarth was safe, for now. The city would endure, once more, as it always had. The darkness of late autumn would not be so hopeless after all. He could weather it with Abby, with his daughter, his Leo and Andromeda, and with Brie.

But not with Trielle.

He rolled onto his side again, feeling the grief rise in his chest. He wanted it to come out, desperately, but it clogged up inside him, and his body racked with dry, forced sobs. A memory came to him, of the seacoast, when they had journeyed there. He remembered the sunset on Trielle's face; she was talking to him. Saying something. Smiling. What was it? He had forgotten.

It occurred to him he would never hear her voice again.

He grew silent, surrendering all hope of release. He stared into the darkness of his room, into the vague shadows, the line of light under the door.

"I love you, Tri," he murmured, "I... please come back."

They were the only words he spoke until morning.

Brie found out from Quentin. She lay on her back in her bunk, the fuzzy growling of the ships engines only aggravating the tightened knot in her. She hadn't seen the body; that was the only thing that could make her believe it. Dead pilots always seemed to slip away; she never saw their corpses. Never looked into a pale face to have proof they were dead. Maybe that was why she was a pilot, and not a soldier.

She lay in numbness for what had to be hours. Some moments, she wanted to die herself, just to escape it. Trielle was free from it now. For a split-second, Brie was jealous of her; at peace, away from this horrid war.

It was at that moment that Brie began to wonder how her own life would end. How Quentin's would end. How Myron's would end. Mortality meant something entirely different to her; it was something she spent every moment in battle defying, not something that lingered forgotten out of mind. Each time her fingers grew white around the control stick, or hot fear rose on the back of her neck as a missile streaked by, she came close. It would happen eventually, to her and to all of them. And it would be in a wave of bullets or fire. Not from old age like it should be.

Her thoughts circled around each other, nipping at her. She wanted desperately to sleep. She considered drugs, but feared if she left the room, her composure would shatter completely. So instead she lay in darkness, then in the half-light of dawn, as the ship rattled on to freedom.

By the next morning, they were far from Balbonnar, nearing the staging area at Throgon. Myron watched the clouds whisper over the mountains silently, as the sun poured orange all over them, casting the shadow of the *Usurper* onto the rolls of gray. Occasionally when they passed under a cloud, the sunlight darkened, and he could see his reflection in the window. His eyes were underlined with purple bruises; he had not slept. The image of Trielle's dead face had struck him over and over, as the hours passed, etching its way into finality.

He heard footsteps behind him. He turned. It was Jessa.

"We're descending in a moment," she said, "Admiral Symes has sent for you."

"Okay," said Myron tiredly.

She gave him an expectant look.

"I'll be there in a moment."

Satisfied, she turned and walked off.

Myron turned back to the window. He had called Abby before coming out here; interference had muddled her choked sobs, but they had stabbed at him, breaking through the crust he'd already built around the pain. She had not believed his words at first; then she had cried. After several moments, she promised to tell the children. Then she had hung up, leaving a silence that seemed consumptive in his tiny, dimly-lit quarters. So he had come out here.

With a sigh, he pushed himself away from the window, leaving a faint hand-print where he had leaned against it. He set off toward the bridge, ignoring the wrenching density that remained in his gut. It would be there for a long time. There was no use in letting it stop him.

Jessa and Brie followed him between the many parked cruisers at Throgon, toward the complex atop the hill. The thin morning mist chilled the air, and the muddy grass squished under their boots like sponge. Myron looked back at them from time to time. Brie did not look like she had slept much, either.

At the central complex Myron asked a guard for Admiral Symes, and two of them escorted him, with Jessa and Brie in tow. As they walked through the gray hallways, Myron watched the military men and women hurry about, content in their occupation. None of them would remember Trielle. None of them would ever know her.

The planning room was as he had last encountered it, and Admiral Symes was talking to another man, who left as soon as he saw Myron approaching.

"You asked for me?" said Myron.

"Yes," said Symes, "I need to talk to you about something."

"What?"

"Come with me." Symes turned from the table.

"What about Brie and Jessa?"

Symes paused for a moment, his grizzled, weary face staring at the two women.

"Yes, I supposed they can come, too. This is confidential information, though."

"Who are we gonna tell?" said Myron.

Symes simply nodded, and walked toward a back room. They followed.

Inside was a table, with several images spilled out from an envelope. Symes picked one up, and handed it to Myron.

"Recognize it?"

Myron looked at the image. It was a zoomed-in photograph of the bridge of a louse cruiser. He could even see the pilots and crew inside.

"Recognize what?"

"Look there," said Symes, pointing. Myron followed his weathered finger, to a faint figure on the bridge. A mask that he vaguely recognized.

"Timeless is dead," said Myron, "Dead for years, now."

"That is not Timeless," said Symes, "But we believe it is one of his ... disciples. His name is Kriegloth, from what our intelligence can gather. The name means 'Relentless.' He led the fleet that ambushed yours. He wanted to protect that skygun. He wanted to destroy Sarengarth."

"All the lice want to destroy Sarengarth," said Myron impatiently, "What's so damn special about this guy?"

"He nearly succeeded. Had reinforcements not arrived, he might have destroyed your fleet, and stopped your from destroying that skygun."

"So he's dangerous," said Myron, "We'll take him out."

"That's not it," said Symes, "We don't know much about Timeless and his ilk, but we do know they come from very high up in the louse hierarchy. Something within Casa Novak itself. Perhaps

somewhere deeper, more powerful. All I know, is that he is the best the lice have to offer. And I doubt we've seen the last of him, or his fleet."

"We kicked his fleet's ass."

"Barely," said Symes, "And though superior numbers."

"Well, I'll keep those around then."

"Myron," said Symes, a serious look on his face, "Be careful. That's all I'm asking."

There was a pause as Myron met his eyes.

"I'll be careful," said Myron.

"Thank you. Now, I do need a debrief from you."

"Jessa will give it to you," said Myron. He turned to her, "I'll meet you two back at the ship."

Jessa nodded, somewhat unwillingly. Myron turned back to Symes, nodded in farewell, and stalked off, past the guards, back through the hallways, into the gray morning, back to a ship full of no one he knew.

They left Throgon an hour later, passing over the great sea beyond it. Myron spent most of it on the bridge, watching the status screens do little, watching the crew do little. There was plenty of conversation, but most of it had little to do with the ship's operation, and more for the crew's plans for when they returned. It had been a victory, after all.

At the halfway mark, Myron left the bridge behind, heading for his quarters. He would clean his gun, or read, or do something to take his mind away from the endless spiral it had been in for nearly twenty-four hours now.

He rounded a corner in the ship's many corridors, and nearly bumped into Brie.

"Oh, sorry," she muttered.

"Fine," said Myron, moving past her.

"...Myron."

"What?"

She did not answer for a second; he turned around.

"You okay?"

He looked off to the side for a second.

"No."

"Me either," said Brie, "I haven't slept. Almost passed out when Jessa spent half an hour debriefing Symes. I didn't have much to say."

"You never say as much as you have to say, Brie."

"I guess not," she said.

There was a pause, as crew and soldiers walked back and forth past them, oblivious.

"You know we're going to kill that bastard, Relentless, right?" said Brie.

"Mm," said Myron.

"We *are*," said Brie, "It ... it won't bring her back, but it's the least we can do."

"It doesn't matter at all, Brie."

Her eyes shone suddenly. She shook her head.

"No, I guess it doesn't," she said, her voice wavering.

Myron took a step toward her; she fell into his arms, and he felt her nose pushing into his chest. He leaned down to whisper to her.

"Keep it together 'til we get back, okay Brie? Just hold it in. We'll ... we'll have time back at Sarengarth."

"Why not now?" she murmured into his chest.

"Cause ... hell, I don't know. I just don't want them seeing us like this. We've got to project strength, you know. Even if we're not strong at the moment. Just ... part of leadership."

She drew away, and looked at him with a watery smile.  
“You sound like an idiot sometimes,” she chuckled.  
Myron smiled back.  
“Whatever. Let's just get home.”

They flew through the night, and through the entire next day. Myron lost himself in his duties; Brie went through maintenance with all of the squadrons aboard the *Usurper*. As the sky darkened, they flew over the Wothcaster, and Brie joined Myron at the bridge to look down at the city. The blinking, skeletal towers, thirty kilometers tall, glinted in the tiring sun. Faint flashes appeared on them, as the who siege cruisers fired at them. They had been gnawing at the city for months; without louse support from Balbonnar, perhaps they would finally make some headway.

Past Wothcaster, the sky darkened. Myron watched the other ships in the formation fade, from dark hulks against an orange sky, to lattices of light wavering in the black. They twinkled like the stars. He remembered seeing Trielle at the window in times like these, watching the cherry red and lime green, as they blinked against the distant fields of stars.

Something began to throb in Myron's stomach. He had thought little of Trielle; when he had, it was like a sharp jab that he quickly pushed away. But now he was alone; nearly everyone else had gone to sleep. There were four others on the bridge, watching the instruments, watching the radar.

Myron turned away from the window, walked through the dim light of the bridge, his boots clanking on the metal floor. He went to the bathroom, with its sterile light and pale ceramic tile. He leaned over the chrome sink, twisted the faucet, and splashed water on his face. He looked up at the stained mirror, at his grizzled chin. He was old, no matter how well the anti-telomerase drugs had worked. His forty-year-old face did nothing to change that.

Through the mirror he stared at the wall behind him, his own face blurring out of focus. He imagined Trielle there, her smile and her twinkling blue eyes. The eyes of the woman who had loved Orion, and had bore his children. The eyes of a woman he had grown to love as a ... daughter? A sister? A friend, at the least.

Then he saw her, with the ground shaking, as she died in his arms, her colored cheeks pale. Her blurry eyes out of focus. His sank down to his muddled reflection in the metal sink, but all he could think of was seeing his face reflected in her dead eyes.

“Man up,” he muttered to himself, “Man the fuck up, Myron.”

He straightened up, then slammed his fist down on the edge of the sink, and dropping to his knees. He hung his head next to the faucet, and sobbed. He tried gamely to keep a growl of anger in his anguish, but after a moment, he gave up on that, too.

The glow of Sarengarth shone on the horizon like a rising moon. Myron felt a mix of relief and dread as he saw the city approach. The next days would be full of grief. He thought of avoiding it, of simply flying to another city, Mirricidum perhaps, letting Brie go in his stead. But that was cowardly. He couldn't leave Abby to deal with the children alone. And he couldn't stand to be alone himself.

The landing bay was abuzz with activity; they had already received the news of the battle's outcome, and they were eager to welcome the victors home. The *Usurper* slid into the bay first, along the skeletal catwalks and railings, settling into its dock. A thunderous series of clangs ran along the ship's body as it locked in to the supports, and all eyes on the bridge turned to Myron.

“Shut it down,” he said, “We're home.”

Switches flicked one by one, muttered communications between crewmen, and the ever-present buzz in the floor began to fade away. Myron dismissed the crewmen, then stood for a few minutes at his post. The bridge emptied, and before long, Myron was alone. He listened to the silence, looking out the

front window of his parked ship, at the crowd that swarmed outside.

"You coming?" came a voice from behind him. He turned; it was Brie, standing by the entrance to the bridge, a hand on her hip.

"Yeah," said Myron, "Just doing a few final checks."

"Looks like you're just standing there," said Brie with a smirk.

"What do you know about post-flight checks, Brie? Anything?"

"Nope. Nothing. I do know that's not what you're doing, though."

Myron sighed.

"Yeah, I'm getting off," he said, "It's peace and quiet for the first time in a couple weeks, okay?"

"You've had plenty of time to yourself. I've seen you walking along the deck, looking out the window."

"You're relentless, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," said Brie, "Only when it matters."

They looked at each other for moment.

"The kids are gonna need you, Myron."

"I know."

"I'm sure you want to just fuck off and hide. I know how that feels, Myron. It's what I did after Orion died. It's what I did after Aldrick died. But you can't do it."

"Why not?" said Myron, glaring out the window and away from Brie.

"You're all they've got left. Leo and Andromeda. I don't know about any of that destiny shit that Orion always talked about. Never believed in it. But if anyone's kids have got it in them to lead us, it's his and Tri's. And you owe her that."

Myron stood up, turned away from the window and back to Brie. Shakily, he walked toward her, staring past her shoulder. Then he wrapped her in a hug.

"Don't die," he whispered in her ear.

"Not planning on it," she said.

They broke apart. Silent, Myron walked past her. Brie stared at the empty bridge for another moment, smiled faintly, then followed him.

The catwalk was full of crewmen, their families, and plenty of others who had simply come to celebrate. Their chatter echoed in the cavernous landing bay. A wave of cheers greeted Brie and Myron as they walked down the boarding ramp; Myron reciprocated halfheartedly, waving his arm in reply.

Further down the ship, on another ramp, black caskets were being slowly unloaded from another ramp. They could not be even a tenth of the casualties they had suffered; but the other bodies had been lost. Myron felt a thrill of dread, realizing Trielle was in one of them, but he turned away. There would be time later.

Abby stood among the crowd, in a black dress. Her face seemed smoother than when he'd last saw it. Her cheeks creased from a wide smile, but even from a distance Myron could tell it was touched with sorrow.

Her warm arms wrapped around him, and for a moment he sank against her, kissed her. When she drew back, their eyes met, and in an instant, something was communicated between them. A mix of relief, and fear. Their smiles faded as they understood.

"I'm glad to be back," Myron stuttered. He brushed some hair out of her face.

"You look tired," Abby said, "Let's go up a couple levels. There's a restaurant, you can get some dinner. Brie, too."

"Alright," said Myron.

They walked away through the crowd, out of the landing bay, past the gate that divided military from public, into the heart of Sarengarth. One of the many atria that wound its way through the city, tiled

with granite, led them to an elevator. The walk brought Myron's legs back to life, though the rest of his body felt weary. Blood pooled in his tired fingers, and they felt thick and numb. He wanted to sleep.

They had the elevator to themselves, and it hissed softly as it ascended, the people below dwindling into dots. It slid past dark tunnels where the scars of the attack, seven years ago now, were still visible. Dust and debris littered the floor; scaffolding clung to the walls. The elevator tube seemed to suck the sound from the air, leaving an eerie silence.

"What restaurant is it?" said Brie.

"It's called Danvers'," said Abby, "I ate there a couple times, while you two were gone. Didn't have much else to do."

"Who took care of the kids?" said Brie.

"They took care of themselves, for a few hours. They're old enough to be on their own."

The weight of the words sank in.

"They haven't slept since the news," said Abby, "Don't know when they will. Drom was just crying for an hour, before I came to get you two. I left Leo with her."

"How is he?"

"Better. If that actually means better. Maybe he's saving it for later."

"How's Hannah?"

"She's been avoiding them. Honestly, I can't blame her," said Abby, "How are you two?"

"I don't know," said Myron, "Shouldn't have let her come along."

"Don't," said Abby.

"I don't know if the charges would have gone off without her," said Myron, "They shot her at least a dozen times. I got to ... I got her out of there. I was with her, when ... when she died."

He met his wife's watery eyes.

"At least she wasn't alone," said Abby.

Brie stood silent, leaning her head against the elevator window. Myron saw a tear slide down her nose, but he ignored it.

At dinner they talked of other things, trying to keep the subject on anything else. Solemn music played somewhere in the half-empty restaurant. The dim lighting made Brie's pale face stand out. Myron tried gamely to laugh with the others, but his heart wasn't in it.

After dinner, they parted ways with Brie. Myron and Abby walked along the fast-emptying corridors, toward a central elevator that would take them to their apartment.

The elevator was crowded, as the larger ones always were, and it growled as it climbed furiously through Sarengarth, higher and higher. Myron sat next to Abby on one of the benches

The pulsing of the music seemed hollow to Myron as he sat in the cheap wire-framed chair. The celebration around him felt like lukewarm water. He sipped his drink cautiously. Abby had gone somewhere, to talk to a friend, leaving Myron alone. He truly was alone, now. A few months ago, he could have passed the time with Aldrick. Or Trielle. Or Brie. But they were gone now, for the sake of all this frivolity.

He wondered where Leo and Andromeda were, what they were thinking. They were seven-year-old children, already without a mother and father, and a sister as well. Myron had been nineteen when the lice had taken the valley, and he'd had barely anyone to mourn. Had that really been forty-seven years ago?

His weathered fingers closed around his glass again. He looked down at the bulbous, faint reflection of himself, surrounded by warped pinpricks of light. He turned the glass, as if to turn away the reflection. But of course it did no good, and after a moment, he simply looked away from it.

Men and women a quarter his age wandered about, chatting happily. Almost all were civilians; he could tell by their faces. But even the ones who had seen combat, who had a look to their face that never quite went away; even they smiled and laughed. The carnage and horror was forgotten, at least for tonight. Before long, it would all be forgotten, and a new battle would begin. That was how it had always gone.

He wondered if he was the only person, among the hundreds around him, who remembered Peter and Emily Green. They had given their lives – not just died, given every waking moment they ever had – to fighting the lice. They had sacrificed themselves for Orion; had they not, he might never have come to Sarengarth. The great city might never have been liberated from Diomitrick's rule. It might have fallen, unprepared, to the lice, from the very first winter onslaught.

Yet they chatted on, oblivious to that truth, oblivious to the millions who had died forgotten in so many places, left behind a hundred thousand kilometers away. Memories of heroes were drowned in the chaos of war.

Abby came back, smiling, and holding a drink.

"It's been so long since we've celebrated. Let's dance, Myron. Be happy."

He just shook his head. Abby's face gained a sour quality.

"Come on, Myron."

"No. Just let me sit. Please."

"Brie wouldn't have wanted this."

"How do you know what she would have wanted?"

Abby sat down. She reached for Myron's hand; his eyes closed as she took it.

"Myron... I know you cared for her. We all did, and we all do. But it's over now."

"We can't just let them be forgotten," said Myron.

Abby looked at him, frowning. He raised his eyes, and met hers.

"It's ... it's what happens, right?" he said, "People just ... forget."

"Maybe," said Abby, "Maybe that's what we want. For them to just ... forget this damned awful war. As much as they can. What good does it do Trielle and Aldrick if we remember them? There's nothing left of them, Myron. They aren't ... they aren't looking down over us."

Myron stared down at his drink again, seeing his sorrow-gripped face more clearly now. The mental echoes of his wife's words pulsed like the beat of the music, slowly solidifying into his head. He took a long sip. Then he sighed.

"I still don't want to dance."

"Fine. You want to go home?"

"Sure."

He got up, and followed her, weaving between the clumps of people, away from the swirling lights. The music faded as they walked, to more sober corridors, all but devoid of life. A couple walked here and there, but otherwise they were alone.

fix this but keep the general idea

The final raid