

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK
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THE PYRITE VICTORY

By Christopher Lazariuk

-for Charles-

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Pyrrhic Victory: (n.) a victory that comes at such great cost that it was not worth achieving at all.

Iron Pyrite: (n.) the most abundant mineral on Earth, also known as ‘fool’s gold.’ Since Dr. Thomas Zhang’s chemical re-engineering in 2025, pyrite-based electricity has irreversibly propelled humanity into its next era of civilization.

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OVERTURE: THE PYRITE VICTORY

2040. Autumn. Spring Pines, Oregon.

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1.

The electric airbus was cold and humid. Water droplets hovered in the air when the artificial gravity hiccuped in the passenger cabin. A few large globs splattered onto the young women sitting within the cabin's harness rows. Cries of frustration swelled about the rocking vessel hurtling Earthward.

"Attention passengers," the guidance system chimed, sterile and cheery. "We are now beginning our atmospheric descent. Please remain seated until the ship has made landfall."

The airbus' pyrite-cell engines whined. The passengers, all graduates of the government's new regional mining school, exchanged murmured worries over the pinging and clanging of debris that beat against the ship's hull shielding. When the airbus gave a heaving shudder and its engines cut out, someone in the back of the cabin sobbed with fear.

Mei Ling Zhang sat belted into her own harness just four rows ahead of them, focusing on her breathing to take her mind off the woman's wailing. Space was nothing new for her, unlike most of her fellow classmates. This had in fact been one of Mei's smoothest rides yet.

Their free fall was dampened with an abrupt shake as the molybdenum-M-Drive core's reverse thrusters kicked to life. Mei felt a faint flutter in her stomach, and she wondered to herself

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if working in the pyrite mines would be a breeze compared to her time in the desolation of Karman Space, building satellites for the Orbital Navy. She was almost optimistic that after a decade of war and hard labor, life was looking up at last.

“We have now arrived at Spring Pines, Oregon,” the guidance system blared, “a New Prospect Frontier mining town. Please stand by for processing and inspection.” The cabin brightened and the overhead harness light flashed green.

Mei unbuckled herself and worked to tie her braided jet-black hair into a bun while she waited to disembark. The Korean woman sitting beside Mei whimpered, shaken by her first descent and fumbling at the buckles of her harness.

“Let me help you,” Mei said, all too familiar with the new and frightful sensations of space flight. She flashed a warm smile and made to unbuckle the woman’s harness. Her seatmate came to her senses and slapped Mei’s hand away.

“Don’t touch me!” the woman’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, hurrying to unbuckle herself. “Everyone will think I’m colluding with a traitor.”

Mei’s smile fell faster than the airbus had descended.

“I’m not—”

“I heard your name during roll call!” the woman hissed, shrugging off her harness. “Your family brought *ruin* on all of us.”

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Mei's ears popped before she could reply. The pressurized cabin's portside exit hatch slid open ahead of them. An armed guard stepped onto the craft, donned in full body armor and helmet, a visor descending from its brim to cover her face from view.

"Alright, ladies, free ride's over. Shake it off and hop to," the guard's low and throaty tenor cracked across the cabin. "Consider this your first day on the job, and you're all wasting company time."

The passengers lingered in their seats, disoriented by their landing and perturbed by the callous welcome.

"Move your asses!" the guard snapped, rousing them to gather up their personal bags and make their way for the exit. Mei's seatmate shot her a final glare as she stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"You stay away from me. You hear?" The woman lurched down the aisle for the exit without another word. Mei sighed and watched her leave, her hopes of a future free from the past already dashed. She followed the next row of passengers to the exit ramp, pulling out her identification papers to hand the guard as she approached.

"Looks like you don't play well with others," the guard said, snatching her papers from her hands to examine. "'Zhang?' You're not that traitor's daughter, are you?" the guard exclaimed, looking up from her ID. "That why your little 'friend' was so nervous around you?"

Mei stood stoic, knowing that any response would provoke the same outcome.

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“It’s bad enough we caught the admins in bed with the Arties,” the guard said, convinced of Mei’s identity by her silence. “Now we gotta watch out for spies and defectors, too. You even pass your loyalty test?”

“Years ago, with flying colors,” Mei replied, doing her best not to give the guard the satisfaction of rattling her. “I was released from detainment and took a position with the Oh-En’s orbital construction crews after the war.”

“Oh? Well, thank you for your service!” the guard replied without sincerity. “That almost makes up for my brother dying overseas because of your worthless father.”

“I had nothing to do with my father’s crimes,” Mei countered before she could help herself. “I’m an upstanding citizen. My family has already paid for my father’s debt.”

“That’s news to me,” the guard said with a scoff. “I never got a penny for his funeral costs. There’s no forgiving *your* father. You’ll be paying interest on his debts until the day you die. Now get off my ship!” she ordered, prodding Mei out of the exit port beside her before she could protest.

Outside in the pre-dawn nightscape, the landing pad was bustling with activity. The light plants sprouting up from the tarmac’s edges cast a washed-out glow on the guards swarming the airbus, armed with particle rifles. When the passengers descended, they were ordered to relinquish their possessions and fall in for inspection. Mei surrendered her knapsack to them and joined the line of women waiting to be frisked for contraband. A sickly chemical stink wafted downwind from the mines’ nearby tailing ponds. The air crackled with the dry static of encroaching snowfall, and Mei struggled to suppress a shiver in the bitter wind.

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A pair of guards passed the waiting line, gripping their rifles tight against their chests and hollering for their escort to catch up. Mei watched a group of women and old men, all dressed in tattered office attire, march for the airbus. Artificial light glinted off the handcuffs cutting into their wrists. The man at the front of the procession was badly bruised from an altercation he'd no doubt lost. The guards ushered them up the airbus ramp, shoving at the woman in the rear who stumbled at its landing. The guards followed their captives inside and the vessel's engines whined to life once more as the cabin door seal shut behind them. Mei knew from experience that wherever they were being taken was nowhere good.

The guard who'd roused them all outside approached the lineup as the airbus leapt into the air and disappeared into the clouds.

"My name is Lieutenant Karen Murphy," she proclaimed. "I am second-in-command of the Hellcats security teams here at Spring Pines." The Hellcat removed her helmet, holding it in the crook of her hip and glowering at the line of women with impatient eyes and a plain, hateful face.

"This will *not* be a routine processing. We've just arrested the administrative team for collusion with artisanal miners. The Hellcats have been ordered to keep Spring Pines running until replacements can be hired on."

A distant *crack* rang out above them as the airbus triggered its M-Drive. Mei looked up to see the vessel bolt across the expanse of mountain sky, carving a streak of blue light in its wake.

"*Anyone* who makes contact with those thieving Arties will be prosecuted with *extreme* prejudice." Lieutenant Murphy found Mei in the lineup and stood not two feet away from her.

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Mei felt the woman's cold stare crawling up her spine and bundled her jacket tighter around herself to suppress another shiver.

"Toe the line," Murphy continued, "and we'll get along just fine while you pay President Simon back for your fancy 'mining school' degrees. Now hurry up and get chipped!"

She gestured at the row of booths waiting at the tarmac's edges. A Hellcat waited at each to implant them with their employee data chips. After twenty minutes of shivering in the cold, Mei was ushered into an open booth. The attending security officer snatched her right arm and clamped a chip implanter onto her bicep. The C-shaped clamp was burning-warm against her skin.

"These data chips keep an active fix on your location at all times," the guard explained. "They also form a direct link to your company credit account, which is the *exclusive* currency in NPF communities. You'll be living on credit until your paychecks catch up with your debt."

"What?" Mei flared with anger. The chip implanter scratched her as she pulled herself away from the guard. "No one told me I'd be forced into debt with a damn *tracking device* in my arm when I was hired on. Oh-En *space stations* don't have monitoring policies this strict!"

"Murphy, we got a trouble-maker over here!" the guard stuck her head out of the booth and hollered. Mei's pulse rose as Lieutenant Murphy shoved her way into the cramped space to square up against her.

"Zhang," Murphy said, one hand resting on the pistol holstered to her hip. "In the water ten minutes, and you're already rocking the boat."

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“No, ma’am, I—” Mei’s confidence wavered and her words failed her when the Hellcat took a step closer.

“You can consider this your first strike,” Murphy declared. “Don’t tempt me with a second. If you don’t get chipped right now, we’ll have you shipped off on the next airbus so you can go back to dodging space debris in orbit. Do you want the job, or not?”

Mei looked between Murphy and the guard waiting to implant her data chip. After a beat of begrudging thought, she offered her arm to them in defeat. The guard made quick work programming her chip and squeezed the implanter tight onto her flesh. Mei hissed at the stabbing sensation of the implanter piercing her skin. The guard took no notice of her discomfort as she pulled away the clamp to reveal the welted mound sprouting from Mei’s bicep.

“Very good, Zhang,” Murphy said. “We just might make an upstanding citizen out of you, after all.” She leaned out of the booth to call up to the line of new hires. “Next!”

The guard who’d implanted Mei’s data chip shoved her searched knapsack into her arms and pushed her away for the waiting commuter bus beside the booths.

“Good morning!” a spry girl barely out of her teens waved from the driver’s seat as Mei climbed aboard the dusty EV bus. “Welcome to Spring Pines!” she said with a smile. Her dark brown hair was slung around her shoulder in a messy ponytail sticking out of a weathered ball cap.

“Does this cost anything?” She rubbed at her welted bicep, still throbbing with dull pain.

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“Shit; this is the last free ride you’ll ever get,” the driver laughed. “Come on, we gotta keep to schedule.”

Mei smiled with morbid relief and took the open bench seat behind the spunky driver. Mei’s smile faded when her seatmate from the airbus boarded. The woman cast her another resentful glare as she made her way past Mei for the rows farther back, where several people she knew were sitting.

“You’re a warmer welcome party than the security teams,” Mei said to the driver, doing her best to ignore the whispering behind her, doubtless her seatmate’s gossiping with their friends about Mei’s family name.

“I like to stay positive,” the driver offered when she saw the silent exchange in her rearview. “There’s enough bad energy around here as it is. Why charge things up more?”

She pulled the bus doors shut after the last passenger boarded and threw the vehicle into drive.

“My name’s Grace,” she called back to Mei as she drove. “I only just got to camp myself to spend the winter break from school with my father.”

Someone coughed behind Mei. She looked around to notice more than one woman casting her wary looks now, muttering in hushed tones. Word was spreading fast about her family and Mei was losing allies at every turn.

“What’s your name?” Grace asked.

“I’m Mei.” She tore her eyes from the women casting her dirty looks to answer Grace.

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“Are you with custodial? Medical?”

A line of billboards rushed past them on the road. *Heading underground? Mask up; it's the law!* one proclaimed in bland black font. *Caution: Arties prowling*, another billboard warned, spray-painted over with expletives in bright neon red.

“I’m actually the new hire for the prospecting and rescue teams,” Mei explained as the bus lurched over a pothole.

“Small world!” Grace exclaimed, carefree on the bumpy ride. “My father Trevor is with the prospecting teams. How’d you get hired on? Family connection?”

“Sort of.” Mei’s teeth chattered as the bus careened down the rock and gravel road on its worn suspension. “My father worked for New Prospect Frontier years ago, but he died when I was still young. The Career Placement Test tossed me to NPF because of my family history in the mining industry. If I had to guess, they just wanted to keep a closer eye on me.”

“Wow!” Grace marveled as she drove. “You got lucky the Career Placement Test put you out here,” Grace offered. “It’s great money if you stick it out for the long haul when your debt’s paid off. Your father must have been a great man if the government hand-picked you for their private mining operation.”

“Depends who you ask,” Mei shrugged, the back of her neck still tingling from the people staring at her with resentment. “Some folks would say he brought ruin on all of us.”

“Why, what did he do?” Grace asked. “Sorry, but you haven’t actually mentioned his name.”

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“Thomas Zhang.” Mei grit her teeth, waiting for Grace’s friendliness to evaporate. Half the bus already knew; there wouldn’t be much of a chance to hide the truth after today anyway.

“That’s the guy who invented pyrite power-cells, isn’t he?” Grace asked, rounding a sharp corner to pull into the mine complex’s staging ground. “Space flight, M-Drive rockets, all that stuff?”

“Yeah... we wouldn’t be mining pyrite or exploring the solar system if it wasn’t for my father.” Mei looked out the window, letting her focus soften on the rolling pine trees and winding roads.

“Didn’t... did he really try to defect with his research?” Grace asked as politely as she could. “The news always said he started World War Three.”

“I never really knew, myself,” Mei admitted. “I was just a kid. But President Simon is the one who declared war, not Thomas Zhang, and the Oh-En launched Operation Pyrrhic Victory years after my father’s death.”

“It must be hard, living in his shadow after everything that’s happened,” Grace offered, pulling up to the bus’ assigned parking space and throwing open its doors once more.

“It is,” Mei nodded, making for the exit before any of her ‘admirers’ could cross paths with her again. “Everyone’s got a chip on their shoulder from it, and I’m the only scapegoat they can find.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Grace nodded to Mei as she stepped down from the bus. “I’ll see you around town. Say hi to my father Trevor for me.”

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“Thanks, I will,” Mei called up from the pavement, ignoring the unending glares from the disembarking miners. “It’s good to know there’s still a few decent people left around here.”

“Aw, everyone out here’s decent enough, Mei,” Grace laughed again. “They’re just rough around the edges; hard living makes hard people, and it’s been a rough decade for all of us.”

“Rougher for some than others,” Mei remarked and followed the other new hires to the nearby employee facilities to outfit herself for a day of work in the pyrite mines.

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2.

“-power brownouts to be expected in the coming days as mineral shortages continue to plague the power grid’s supply chain. The Orbital Navy has rejected state requested relief aid, focusing their resources instead on President Simon’s continued expansions into space for viable off-planet fuel and water sources. Meanwhile, construction of several dozen water treatment plants is underway along the coastline to combat pyrite mining’s–”

Bailey switched off the radio, unable to bear another barrage of current events. She drove on in silence punctuated by the sound of air whistling past the open slit in the company truck’s window. The old antique EV rocked its way across the early morning Oregon highway that stretched through the late autumn valley. The sun had just begun to shed light on the forests winding past her at seventy miles per hour, a blue-orange glow casting long shadows over the horizon from the mountains beyond the tree line.

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A Hellcat patrol approached her on the road. Bailey waved, muttering to herself through her teeth as she offered the security officers a fake smile when they passed. When McEnroy and his office team had brokered a trade deal to make peace with the local Arties, the Hellcats tore their plans to hell and turned the mining town into a military garrison to re-ignite their hunt. The trigger-happy devils were doing more harm than good, prodding at wounds that had nearly healed.

Bailey heaved a wheezing cough and pounded at her chest before fishing a bottle of aspirin from her center console. She pinched the steering wheel in place with her knees and popped three tablets into her mouth to swallow dry, jerking her wheel in surprise when the truck's tires grated against the ruts of the breakdown lane. Her aching head pulsed an argument against the whistling air, forcing Bailey to roll the window up entirely and retreat once more into the local news to distract herself from the urge to pull over and vomit.

“—fifth anniversary of Liberated Patriots Day, marking the wartime detainment camps’ closures approved by the Simon administration. The camps housed upwards of one hundred thousand American citizens for the duration of the war on grounds of suspected treason. Flags will be set to half-mast to honor the sacrifices of the detainees who joined the Orbital Navy’s construction crews to prove their patriotism, preserving American prosperity through Operation Pyrrhic Victory...”

Bailey pulled into the company staging ground and backed into her usual spot tucked behind the storage shed. She killed the engine and sat in the silence, hesitant to open her door and step back into another grueling day in the pyrite mines. She looked at herself in the rearview mir-

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ror, noticing the white-silver streaks sprouting through her thick red hair and the wrinkles creasing along her face that consumed more freckles each year. She ran a hand through her hair. Her fingers caught a sturdy knot that yanked hard at her scalp. Bailey cursed in aggravation and jumped out of the truck.

Across the road, the grimy commuter buses filed into the lot, carrying the laborers in for their shift. She shuddered to look at them, remembering the cold mornings spent waiting for them like a school child until she'd finally been promoted. As captain of the prospecting and rescue teams, she'd been granted her own vehicle privileges after nearly a decade with the company. Bailey pulled up the hood of her jacket against the chill and made the walk for the office trailer to clock in.

"We've got a green hat for you to train today, Bailey," Diane, the aging shift supervisor, said from the administrative cubby that overlooked the employee clock-in station. "She pulled a stint with the Orbital Navy's construction crews before mining school. She should fall in without too much trouble."

"The old detainee satellite crews?" Bailey asked. "Half of those poor bastards died before they even made it back to Earth. They've got to be tough as nails." She scanned the data chip embedded in her arm. The machine gave a dull, tinny chime. "What's their name?"

"Mei Ling. She's Thomas Zhang's daughter," Diane replied.

"You can't be serious," Bailey whipped back to face Diane, her sudden movement nearly ripping the tattered chip scanner from its wall mount.

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"I wish I wasn't," Diane admitted, her face contorting in a mixture of pain and worry.

"Mei Ling Zhang's been hired onto the prospecting and rescue teams. Keep her out of trouble, would you?"

"I won't; Diane, I can't—" Bailey's words caught in her throat as a spasm of coughing doubled her over.

"Thomas may have saved your life back in Alaska, but he's still a traitor to the rest of the country," Diane explained when Bailey's coughing subsided. "Someone has to watch out for that poor girl before someone around here tries to settle their own score for her father's crimes. You owe that much to Thomas."

"I don't need *anyone* reminding me what I owe Thomas Zhang," Bailey snapped. "I'll watch out for the damn kid," she muttered and made for the door. "You didn't tell her about me, right?"

"I've got more class than that Bailey," Diane murmured, turning back to her paperwork. "You want to rehash the past, that's your decision." She reached up and rubbed at her temples. "Whatever happened to the last fourteen years?"

"I couldn't tell you. I went and drank them away," Bailey said, trying in vain to shrug off the weight that pressed hard on her shoulders with the news she'd just received.

Diane snorted. "See you around, Bailey."

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“I’m telling you, Trevor!” Dawson crowed at his coworker when Bailey stepped into the dirty employee changing room. “President Simon says the war could kick off again if the Chinese keep trying to disable the GSN’s satellites.”

The bands of reflective material taped around Dawson’s jumpsuit flashed painful jolts of light into Bailey’s eyes from the harsh lighting above them. She squinted harder against the brightness as she marched past the rows of dented gray lockers, tuning the world out for as long as she could before taking command of the crews.

Trevor and Dawson, the only men among the two-dozen people in the room, argued on a bench while they buckled their worn leather tool pouches to their hips and shook life into their old bones. Scattered haphazardly about the room’s edges and other benches were women, old and young, and several boyish looking teenagers preparing their own equipment and sliding into their jumpsuits.

“The hell do you know, Dawson? You think you’re the only one that listens to the news?” Trevor clapped back as he donned his own tan jumpsuit. “No one can disable the Global Surveillance Network before the Oh-En’s particle cannons blow them to dust.”

“And what if it’s the real thing?” Dawson goaded. “You ready for a fight?”

“You talk as if both our flat-footed asses weren’t already stamped four-eff.” Trevor snatched a foam mug from the bench and slurped up a mouthful of coffee. “There’s men enough filling out the ranks these days.”

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“Those ‘men’ are a bunch of kids- teenagers with more hormones than sense,” Dawson remarked. He smirked at the younger miners in the room, who did their best to disregard the old man’s banter. “It won’t take much to overwhelm our ground forces if the GSN goes down.”

Trevor snickered. “Quit watching so much daytime news,” he said. “It’ll rot the brain cells you haven’t already killed huffing coal dust.”

“Why don’t both of you go back to huffing coal dust and leave us civilized folk some peace and quiet?” Bailey grunted when she managed to wrench her locker door loose from its stuck hinges.

The room full of prospectors roared with hooting laughter, Dawson and Trevor included.

“What crawled up your hole and died, Bailey?” Trevor said with a guffaw in his hoarse baritone. “Get to drinking too hard last night?”

“What do you think?” Bailey replied. “My head’s splitting.”

“The Captain’s goin’ soft; can’t handle her liquor no more!” Trevor coughed phlegm into his hand and cackled.

“Go ahead, laugh it up.” Bailey leered at the snickering faces of her subordinates as she tugged her jumpsuit free of her overstuffed locker. “The second you’re out that door, I own all your asses for the next twelve hours.”

“Yes, *ma’am*!” Trevor grinned and gave a mocking salute. “Permission to report, *ma’am*, we’ve got ourselves an occupying force today.” He pointed a knobby finger to the front of the

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long changing room, where Mei had found her way from Grace's bus to suit up. "Here's our proof the war's back on, folks!" Trevor said. "We got ourselves a Chinese spy!"

The butt of Trevor's joke made no reply as she prepared her things, turning away from the rest of the room's laughter at her expense.

"Green hat," Bailey called out as she zipped up her jumpsuit. All conversation died around them as the new hire turned to face her, calm and focused.

"You pass your loyalty test?" Bailey asked, knowing the room full of miners was listening. Her stomach churned and she prayed that it was the hangover and not guilt weighing down on her at the sight of her deceased mentor's daughter.

"I'm here, aren't I?" the girl replied, refusing to break her focus from Bailey to acknowledge the rest of the room's staring at her. Bailey was more than a little impressed by the rookie's resolve.

"Damn straight. We're all patriots here. Right, folks?" Bailey looked around as the miners grunted their replies, some without sincerity. "They're just hassling you," she said to Mei.

"Speak for yourself!" Dawson said. "If you think I'll let some spy get us all killed sabotaging—"

"Stow it, you inbred hick! I'm speaking to *Zhang*!" Bailey shouted. "She's done more for this country than your geriatric ass ever did!"

"Zhang?" Trevor's eyes widened beside Dawson while a buzz of murmurs circled around them at Mei's name. "You...?"

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"I'm Mei," the green hat replied. "I think I met your daughter Grace? On the bus into camp?" she said.

"That's...right," Trevor nodded as if lost in a dream.

"It's best to ignore Trevor and Dawson, Mei," Bailey thumbed back to the two men.

"They've been miners all their lives. They're both just crotchety old millennials."

"Fuck you too, *Captain*," Trevor snickered, deflated. He strapped his tool belt tighter and strode from the locker room into the morning sun. Dawson followed after, shooting a quizzical glance back at Bailey as he left.

"Are we having a staring contest or what?" Bailey looked around the room at the prospectors still watching Mei. "Move out, people!"

Lockers clattered shut and the prospecting crews filed out of the room for the trucks waiting to drive them to the mines. Bailey waited for the traffic to ebb past them and out the door before stepping closer to Mei and smiling as sincerely as she could, hoping the girl wouldn't notice how bleary her eyes felt. "I'm Bailey Parker, your team captain."

"Mei Zhang," the girl said, her eyes softening as she reached out to shake Bailey's hand.

"Good to meet you... Mei..." Bailey broke from the handshake as quickly as she could and pulled her hardhat on, plugging its headlamp into the charging cable sprouting up from her belt. "Well, time's wasting and we've got quotas to hit. Let's get to work."

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The convoy of work trucks made its way out of the parking lot, kicking up plumes of dust behind them as they barreled through the Oregon valley. Once they'd driven a quarter of the way up the mountain, the trees split apart to reveal a clearing leading to the fresh-renovated entrance to a decrepit gold mine. Rusting jack leg drills, abandoned crates of steel railway spikes, and battered iron mine carts were scattered beside a ramshackle shed standing vigil at the clearing's edge.

A pair of Hellcats stood guard beside the mine's entrance, watching the convoy slow to a halt for the prospectors to unload. Bailey caught sight of one pointing at Mei crawling down from the truck's tailgate-entrance. They exchanged unheard words and clutched their rifles tighter in hand. Bailey hurried to get the crews outfitted with their air tanks and call the morning meeting to order before Mei could notice.

"Alright, this is nothing new, folks," she called out when the prospecting team gathered around her. Each had donned a full set of the latest model SCBA breathing equipment, brought in with the convoy on the supply truck. Their preferred exploration tools bulged from their hip pouches. Masks hung limply on their rubber hinges from the sockets fastened snugly around the faces staring impassively back at Bailey. The sun had finished rising and the sunlight cast a yellow haze on the musty dankness creeping out from the mountain behind them. Bailey cleared her throat and spat.

"We've got orders to do a full exploration of precursor site 3633: Sidewinder Valley Mine. Finding at least one viable pyrite reef is the end goal for today's exploration."

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“What’s the first Fresh Air Base?” Dawson asked, his voice muffled and kazoo-like behind the mask he’d already sealed in place. The dual-hosed facemask fed its air lines into the Self-Contained-Breathing-Apparatus on Dawson’s back, uniform with the rest of the crew’s equipment. The top-of-the-line oxygen tank and filtration systems looked like bulky jetpacks.

“Have we got a spot in there that’s safe to breathe, or what?”

“The preliminary crew came through a couple days back and found a stope two-thousand feet in,” the team’s navigator, Alex, interjected. Bailey turned to the wiry miner. His peach fuzz beard and bright red hair were sharp against his hard, pale cheekbones. Bailey nodded for Alex to continue.

“The chamber had a roof section cave in some time back. There’s good ventilation and a lot of adit shafts spidering off into the mine. That’s our primary FAB. We’re flying blind from there, so I’ll be updating the nav-tracker as we go.” He raised his fist to display the mapping device strapped to his forearm. “The reserve crew’s ready on standby and supply runners will be at our backs with fresh air tanks.”

Bailey turned to Mei, standing across from her in the circle. “Stick with me until you get your bearings, green hat. I want you on me like glue. Clear?”

“Clear,” Mei nodded.

“Good. Everyone keep tabs on your Canaries’ battery levels,” Bailey continued, gesturing to her jumpsuit’s belt where her own gas meter was attached. “I don’t care what kind of damp it gets to chirping over. You hear it squawking, call it in and regroup. Clear?”

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“Clear,” everyone agreed.

“Simon says: start digging, folks.” Bailey tossed up a hand in a dismissive wave and led her six-body crew of prospectors into the mine, each sealing their oxygen masks in place and stepping wide over the clutter underfoot.

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The dry morning haze began to thin away as Mei followed Bailey deeper into the entrance tunnel, her crewmates at her back. Even with the aid of fresh oxygen pumping through the thick tubing of Mei’s SCBA, the air hung stale and heavy around her. She concentrated on her breathing to keep her mask from fogging over, determined not to make a fool of herself on her first day.

The toxic damp gases seeping out from the mine’s innards set their Canaries chirping in soft infrequent blips. As the light from the entrance behind them grew faint, Bailey toggled on her torch lamp, shining a beam of thick yellow light through the engulfing darkness ahead of them. More lights stabbed through the tunnel behind her and Mei turned to see each miner’s electric torchlight blink to life atop their hardhats. She hurried to mimic the action.

“Bailey for topside,” Bailey’s kazoo-filtered voice rang out over the radios strapped to the front left shoulder of each miner’s jumpsuit. “Torches lit and arriving at our one-hundred-foot mark. Traversing.”

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“Topside for Bailey,” came the un-muffled voice of the reserve crew’s captain on the surface. “Clocking you now. Seventy minutes to oxygen half empty.”

Mei felt the world press around her as they marched into the mountain. Her eyes widened at the pang of fear coursing through her chest. She looked around at the tunnels jagged walls flecked with a dull mineral speckle, steeling her nerves to the alien world enveloping them all.

“I’m seeing major signs of pyrite disease in the reef here,” Mei said, noting the mineral wall’s abnormally dull pallor.

“The humidity caused the pyrite to oxidize and released the damp we’re moving through,” Bailey remarked, her headlamp bobbing as she nodded back to Mei. “Hopefully it’s drier inside. That gas will rust away anything it touches.” Bailey choked on the end of her words and began to cough, a brief but violent hacking that reverberated through the shaft.

“Even our lungs,” Trevor said in bitter sympathy behind them.

“Yeah. Breathe enough of it in and your lungs will rot, too.” Bailey conceded without enthusiasm.

“Is there any way to stop pyrite disease once it’s started?” Mei asked as they marched onward.

“Once the damp’s taken hold of something, the damage is irreversible. Any minerals will just crumble into dust after there’s been enough exposure,” Trevor answered.

“I know that; I meant when it affects the lungs,” Mei countered. “Rescue training focused on *preventing* pyrite disease, not curing it.”

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“There is no cure,” Bailey said as she halted the line in front of a fresh-looking wooden barrier. “The damage is done once it’s done.” She wrenched the barrier’s planks free from their bolts and led them forward into the awaiting Fresh Air Base.

#

When Dawson finished parading about the FAB with his Canary held high, he gave the thumbs up that air quality was good before wheezing out a wet cough that forced him to tear away his mask and hack his chest clear. Everyone unsealed their masks and took in a breath of the fresh air creeping through the wide ceiling hole just fifteen feet above their heads.

“Ten-minute break, people,” Bailey ordered. “Switch out your air for fresh tanks and take a knee.” Bailey’s voice echoed through the chamber and out the hole in the ceiling. True to Alex’s word, the crews before them had brought in powerful lamps and a generator, wired everything up, and left it ready to be plugged in.

Trevor got the generator running and flicked the lights on, which washed the walls with a sterile pale glow. Simple PVC support beams protruded upwards from the ground to hold up the ceiling and keep its hole from widening. Several of these thick plastic beams had been knocked down from their vigil to lay forlorn on the ground. At least a half-dozen smaller tunnel shafts spread chaotically from the center of the chamber in winding curves and causeways.

“Were they even pretending they had a plan when they built this thing?” the miner who had laughed earlier asked the room as they unfastened their mask and let it drop to the side. Her sharp blue eyes glittered in the lamplights.

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“That makes it sound like they have a plan when they build these things today, Vera,”

Trevor said as he knelt to remove his SCBA and fiddle with its oxygen tank. “The ignorant bastards above us get half a sniff of fool’s gold and send everyone to hell for it.”

“You need a vacation, Trevor,” Vera replied in annoyance. The team scattered about the FAB on their break, checking the equipment left by the prelim crews. The supply runners followed up behind the team and delivered fresh oxygen tanks and water rations.

“See you in an hour with more gear,” one of the runners called as they wheeled their carts back for the entrance.

The crew mulled around on their break while Mei stood attentive, looking around and taking in her new surroundings. Alex marched the perimeter with Bailey, tapping at his nav-tracker’s surface and troubleshooting logistics. Movement above her head caught Mei’s eye, and she looked harder at the hole in the ceiling. Brush and leaves sprouted about its edges, swaying in a passing breeze. A massive thorny bush dangled over the edge of the hole by the few strands of root still clinging to the thin layer of dirt on the rocks above. Tufts of brown fur clung to its barbs.

Something must have torn it loose topside, Mei mused to herself. A deer running from a predator, maybe.

“Anyone want some jerky?” Dawson asked the room. Vera and Trevor both approached him as Dawson opened a baggie of trail jerky he’d kept in his hip pouch. As he passed the meat around, its sweet aroma tickled at Mei’s nose, relieving her from the acidic-metal-and-rock tang of the mine’s air. She was about to ask for a bite of her own when a deep groaning rumbled

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through the tunnel beside them. Her eyes widened as the rumbling resounded through the chamber once more, closer now and angry.

The prospectors fixed their gaze on the shaft's mouth. A grizzly bear emerged from the darkness, drawn by the noises and the scent of dried meat. It lumbered into the stope, limping on its massive front right paw. The bear stopped in its tracks and stood on its hind legs, taller than anyone in the chamber, scanning their faces one by one before locking eyes on Dawson and his jerky. Its ears pricked back and the bear's lip curled in a frothing growl.

"How in the—" Dawson squeaked in petrified disbelief.

"Dawson, *move!*" Bailey hollered when the grizzly lurched forward and charged. Dawson turned to flee the bear, which closed the distance between them in three leaping bounds despite its wounded paw.

Vera ducked from her place behind Dawson, snatched a storage container the size of a briefcase from the ground, and swung it at the creature's snout. The bear pulled back from the swinging container and the blow glanced off its flank. It roared and swiped at her in retaliation. Vera's SCBA caught the blow, saving her torso from being cut to ribbons. The grizzly's claws gashed a hole in the oxygen container on her back and tore off the hose feeding up to her mask. Vera fell to the ground, her damaged SCBA hissing in her face. The grizzly barely paid her a second glance, resuming its charge for Dawson's fleeing figure and lunging forward to strike. The man barely had the time to dive out of the way of its pounce, landing on the ground with a painful thud and losing his grip on the bag of jerky.

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Just fifteen feet from Mei, the bear sniffed, casting a single passing glance at the fallen meat before turning again on Dawson, who struggled to stand from the heavy fall he'd taken. Mei backed away from the scene, choked with fear and slipping into the darkness of the tunnel shaft behind her to keep out of harm's way.

"Fuck off outta here!" Trevor shouted as he ran up from behind the bear with a probing cane, cracking a solid hit across the grizzly's ear with the long aluminum rod. The hit took the bear by surprise, knocking the creature onto its bad paw and causing it to trip over itself.

Bailey seized the opportunity to rush in and drag Dawson out of the creature's shadow. The bear shook itself back to its senses and whirled to face Trevor, rearing up on its hind legs to roar with a deafening echo.

Mei's Canary squawked at her hip, reminding her that she'd forgotten to breathe. She resealed her mask and looked down at the gas monitor: its carbon monoxide sensor was blinking. She twisted around to face the tunnel into which she'd crept. It was a small shaft, eight feet wide at most, winding downward into the earth, cluttered with debris and the rotted wooden rail system that ran along its floor. Decaying ceiling support beams stood up along the shaft's edges in chaotic intervals. Mei took a bounding step deeper inside and was satisfied when the Canary squawked louder with discontent.

"Trevor, get back!" Bailey hollered unseen from behind her. There was no more time to think about the ludicrous plan rolling through Mei's mind. She knelt and gathered up a fistful of rocks in her hand. In the main chamber, the grizzly had wrestled the aluminum probing cane away from Trevor and pinned him to the ground, ignoring the squirming man's groans from un-

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derneath its paw. Mei took careful aim and pelted the bear in the eye with a rounded rock. The grizzly roared in surprise and leapt off Trevor, who gasped and crawled away shaking while the bear pawed at its wound and snorted. Mei hurled another rock and another at the grizzly, missing both frantic tosses. A small trickle of blood ran down from under its eye as the bear regained its composure and turned for Mei, foam and saliva dripping from the corners of its mouth.

“Come on! Come on, damn you!” Mei shouted at the bear. It obliged with enthusiasm. Mei turned and fled down the mineshaft, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the grizzly had followed her. The massive creature eclipsed the entire mouth of the shaft as it chased after her, only its dark and shambling silhouette visible from the bright work lights behind it. Mei had trapped herself with the bear, wherever the tunnel was leading her.

Her early days of mine rescue training flashed into her mind as she hopped over a large rock and fled. “Don’t run,” the instructors had said. “If you hit danger, don’t run; you’ll end up worse off because of it.” As the grizzly’s grunts of exertion and rage echoed through the cramped mineshaft behind her, Mei knew confidently that in her shoes the instructors would be running too.

Mei ran for her life, the Canary squawking louder as she traversed deeper into the shaft. The sound filled her with a grim relief: the mine’s toxic gases would be her only chance to survive. The ground shook from the thundering steps of the grizzly bear as it chased her, skirting the clutter that had slowed Mei’s pace with ease. Mei’s mask grew fogged from her ragged breathing, leaving her nearly blind with only her headlamp to guide her to safety in the dark tunnel.

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How much damp does it need to inhale to suffocate? Two thousand PPM? Three? The thought did little to ease Mei's rising panic. The Canary's pulsing squawks were the only thing that steadied her heartbeat as she ran from, and into, certain death. Somewhere far behind them, Bailey was shouting her name, powerless to save her from her own plan and screaming for Alex to get a fix on Mei's position.

Mei slipped on a loose rock and tumbled to the ground. A rustle of air whooshed past her head, a massive paw swipe meant for her midriff. The bear's paw knocked into an old support beam, which burst from the force of the strike and collapsed in a shower of splinters. Several rocks came loose from the ceiling. A sharp stone the size of a baseball came crashing down beside Mei's hand, barely missing her fingers. The bear groaned in pain and swatted at its head as another falling stone pummeled it in the snout. Without a thought, Mei scrambled to her feet and ran on, desperate to gain more distance from the predator.

In the darkness, she heard a weak whining cry, and wondered if the behemoth of an animal had begun to wear down. When its earth-shaking bounds resumed after her through the tunnel, Mei realized through a distant fog of adrenaline that the whining was coming from low in her own throat. She kept moving, scanning the ground for rocks, debris, and ruts waiting to ensnare her. Another fall would undoubtedly be the end.

Mei barely looked up in time to avoid colliding with the heading of the mineshaft. She clawed at the rock face, mortified that she really had come to a dead end. The bear closed the distance to Mei in the near darkness and brought a paw hammering down in front of her. She jumped to the side, barely avoiding the crushing force of its blow. The bear stepped closer to

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properly snuff the life out of her when a massive cracking splintered the earth beneath them. The floor gave away and the two fell together fifteen feet down into the chamber below.

The impact stunned them both as dust plumed around the debris pile that crashed down with them. Mei's head swirled with dizziness. Her oxygen mask was badly scratched and her hard hat had tumbled off, its lamp flickering. In the back of her mind, she knew she had to stand but couldn't find the will to command her legs. She reached for her hard hat and turned its light on the rustling beside her. The bear shrugged off the debris and rock piled onto it and staggered to its feet once more. The pair stared each other down as the Canary's squawking chimed a single sonorous high note, the last warning for a critically lethal level of toxic damp gas.

"Go down. Just go down," Mei whispered, too depleted to feel anything but faint annoyance. The grizzly swayed back and forth, bloodied, concussed, and suffocating on the carbon monoxide in the chamber. It hunched forward and lumbered toward her in a lurching gait. Mei made a flailing attempt to pull herself along the ground and away from her death at the hands of the creeping tank of an animal, still unable to find the energy to operate her rubbery legs.

"Go down. Please," Mei begged in defeat. The bear's shadow danced in the single beam of light from her lantern as it limped closer, swaying as it came. Its massive head had just reached her shins when the bear groaned and collapsed onto her. The pair lay in the darkness together, Mei's Canary muffled by the catatonic creature lying on her lower torso.

Somehow, Mei mustered the will to pull her legs out from under the bear's neck. She dragged herself to her feet and backed away, afraid to breathe and risk rousing the bear awake. She only stopped when she felt the smooth cold touch of the mine's wall against her back. She

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stood there, her lamp trained on the bear's motionless muzzle, watching the shallow breaths still pumping from its chest and the steam escaping from its maw.

Mei ignored the voices calling out from the shaft above them. She had no room to move or think. She could only stand frozen against the wall, staring at the claws that had come so close to tearing through her, the jaws that could, even now, snap to life once more and finish what they'd started.

A rope unfurled from the ledge where Mei and the bear had fallen and Bailey rappelled down. She crept toward the creature and hammered the pointed end of a chisel through its skull to make sure it stayed put before making her way to Mei. When the captain laid a hand on her shoulder, Mei jumped back and cowered against the wall, only coming to her senses as Bailey's voice broke through her fog of panic.

"Easy!" Bailey's voice was kazoo-like from behind her mask, her hands up to calm her crewmember. "You're okay. Mei. Hey. Hey, Mei. You're okay. Look at me."

Mei turned shivering with adrenaline to Bailey, whose face was nothing more than a faint outline in the dim light behind her oxygen mask. Bailey slowly reached down and toggled Mei's Canary to silent mode, returning the chamber to a blanket of smothering quiet.

"What were you thinking?" Bailey asked in disbelief. "You could have gotten yourself killed!"

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“One thousand parts per million carbon monoxide lethal in humans, five minutes or less.”

Mei whispered with glassy eyes. “Two thousand, two minutes...Grizzly’s body composition... three humans...five?”

“Mei. Take a breath.” Bailey held her by the shoulders. “You did good. You damn near gave me a heart attack, but you saved Dawson, Trevor; hell, all of us. I don’t know how that thing got in the mine when we had the barrier up, but I’ll be tearing someone a new asshole when we call it in to security.”

“The ceiling...” Mei whispered, stepping back from Bailey’s touch and placing a hand on the wall to steady herself. “...the bear was chasing something...a deer... and fell through the ceiling... it must have been trapped and starving down here for days...”

“That’s some pretty solid detective work, Mei,” Bailey said. “As far as I’m concerned, you’ve earned your keep on my crew.”

“Vera?” Mei asked, still struggling to slow her heartbeat.

“She’s good,” Bailey replied. “Cracked rib, but that’s getting off light when a six hundred pound killing machine gets hold of you. Trevor’s doing about the same.”

“And Dawson?” Mei whispered, gripping Bailey’s outstretched arms for support as her legs melted to rubber again.

“Dawson took a pretty nasty hit, but we’ve got him stabilized.”

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Bailey led Mei to the hanging rope she'd descended from. "He'll be out of commission for awhile, but he'll pull through. Come on; let's get you out of the damp. We're done for the day."

"But the reef," Mei retorted, still dazed. "We're giving up on the pyrite reef?"

"You found it, Mei," Bailey laughed. "Look behind you."

Mei followed the path of Bailey's headlamp beam and noticed the wall she leaned against for the first time. The unmistakable marble sheen of iron pyrite glimmered along its surface.

"The precursor miners must have given up on mining out this tunnel for whatever reason," Bailey gestured about the chamber at the rotting wood all around them. "All this rotting wood built up the CO in here and smothered the oxygen. Good thing, too, or this pyrite reef could've oxidized just like the stuff above us, and you'd be dead. That was fast thinking with the bear, but it was a half-cocked suicide mission for damn sure. Don't be so quick to dive on a sword next time! I never would have forgiven myself if you got killed on my watch."

"I didn't have time to think," Mei managed, faint on her feet. "The bear would've killed Trevor..."

"Yes, it would have." Bailey clapped her on the shoulder in the darkness and reached for the harness attached to the end of her rappelling rope. "Let's get out of here. You earned yourself a drink, green hat."

#

4.

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The prospecting team changed out of their jumpsuits with adrenaline-filled bursts of playful banter that curdled Mei's stomach. None of them had come as close to a terrifying end in those tunnels as she had. The world around her fogged while Mei unzipped her dirty jumpsuit. It was several hours until the numbness in her fingers passed and the harsh ringing in her ears settled. She realized that she'd been operating on autopilot too long when she looked down to see a pint of beer chilling her hands. Bailey brought her to the bar, after all, and judging by the empty glasses set in front of Mei, they'd already started a second round of drinks. The dull roar of tipsy conversations swam around her as she came to her senses, still reeling with claustrophobic shock.

"You still look a little green, Mei," Bailey said into her drink beside her. "Drink more, you'll feel better." Mei lifted her beer to her face with numbness still prickling at her skin. A wave of warmth rushed through her with the crispness of the ale working its way down her scratchy throat, rousing her out of her fog.

"So what's your story?" Bailey craned her neck from where she sat on the barstool beside her drinking companion. Her salt-and-peppered red hair slipped off her shoulders and dangled over her pint glass. From behind Bailey, Mei made eye contact with Grace, who waved and smiled from her table with her father, Trevor. Both seemed less than sober.

"There isn't anything else you'd rather do with your life than crawling through the mines, waiting for your ticket to get punched?" Bailey shuddered as she took a gulp of beer, blocking Grace from view when she leaned back in her seat. "The money's better than everywhere else these days, but that's only if you live long enough to pay off NPF's damned credit line."

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“The Career Placement Test threw me where it wanted, just like it does to everyone else,”

Mei admitted. Across the crowded bar, the local band began to trickle in with their equipment through the back door. Mei was quick to notice they were all young men, most barely out of their teens. She hadn’t seen more than a handful together on solid ground in years, not since the draft had swept them all away to war. Even in Karman Space, the Oh-En’s construction colonies had been bolstered with women while the men were tossed to the war machine.

Her eyes caught a glint of light from a bass drum being hauled on stage. She turned to see the band’s logo, FOUR EFF UNDERGROUND, emblazoned across its front. Alex, navigator-turned-musician, carried the drum proudly before him, laughing at a soft-spoken joke from the band’s singer. Mei was impressed he’d regained his composure from the grizzly attack so quickly when a part of her still shook itself numb against the memory.

“You could’ve tried to find something else for yourself with your experience working zero-G construction, though,” Bailey countered. “Why start over from square one?” Mei turned back to watch the captain toss back another shot of whiskey.

“I wanted to learn more about my father.” She frowned and reached for the collar of her shirt, where a diamond-shaped pyrite pendant, polished pristine, dangled from a metal chain.

“This was a birthday present he’d mailed me,” she explained when Bailey’s eyes widened at the sight of the pendant. “I got it in the mail after he died, right before we were escorted into detainment.” Mei leaned forward, resting her elbows on the bar and kneading at her hands to warm them. “I’d like to think I could’ve done something to help him if I’d been there when he

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died. Maybe if I'd been there to save him, I could have asked why he'd throw our lives away by committing treason."

"I'm sure his crew did everything they could to keep him safe back then," Bailey said after sputtering into her drink. "Things go wrong in the mines. You were there today yourself."

"You don't need to talk down to me with that naïve well-wishing." Mei clenched her fist around the pyrite pendant.

"All I know is, Thomas Zhang would roll over in his grave if he knew his daughter was crawling into the mines after him." Bailey drained the rest of her beer with a shaking hand. "I doubt you've got a whole lot of friendly faces looking your way because of his name, either. About everyone you'll run into out here lost someone to the war."

"I don't need you to remind me that people were racist long before there was another war," Mei said and shook her head with a tired sigh. "When I was a child, I overheard a few of the work stories my father told my mother at night. They used to call him 'Jackie Chan' to get under his skin. He always took it on the chin, though. I don't know that I could've done the same. But maybe that's why he defected: they made him feel 'un-American' for so long he just made his peace with it." Mei raised a quizzical eyebrow as Bailey choked back another swallow of beer. "Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing; wrong pipe is all," Bailey said, glancing away. "Mei, do you know anything about the project that your father was working on when he died?" she asked, casting a sidelong look at Mei.

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“It was at Crest Basin, an old NPF town out in Alaska,” Mei answered, taking another sip from her drink. “But my father’s work was classified. I never knew the secrets behind pyrite-cells, or how the molybdenum-Drive launches ships at a quarter light speed, or the particle cannons that could melt buildings into slag.”

The hairs on the back of Mei’s neck pricked up, and she turned around to see if someone was watching her. The women in the bar laughed and yelled and vented their frustrations to each other, oblivious to her presence. People were betting on a game of pool at the edge of the dance floor, cheering when a player sank their ball. Mei sighed and rubbed her neck.

“I always get dirty looks whenever people learn I’m his daughter,” she confided to Bailey, looking into her drink once more. “They usually hold me responsible for him, as if five years in detainment and another five building the Oh-En’s damned surveillance network wasn’t enough to ‘prove my loyalty’ to America. I’ve never managed to escape my father’s shadow, even after a lifetime of paying for his sins.”

The sudden swishing of Bailey’s denim jacket shook Mei from her train of thought. She looked back to Bailey to see her hurrying to leave.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Mei asked.

“I’m fine. Just wanted to get some air and have a smoke,” Bailey replied, waving her away. “The band’s starting up soon; you should stick around.” Without another word, she fled outside into the late evening chill. Mei watched the bar door shut behind Bailey, the tinted windows on either side of the door rattling with discontent.

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“You’re Thomas Zhang’s daughter?” The bartender leaned over to her, palms pressed into the countertop where he’d been clearing glasses and polishing the surface with a rag.

“Yes; I’m Mei,” she replied with a twinge of wariness.

“I heard about that stunt you pulled on your shift this morning. Pretty impressive work for your first day, saving everyone from a grizzly like that.” The bartender tossed his rag over his shoulder and turned around to grab a pint glass and pour himself a round. “I guess it runs in the family.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mei asked.

“You don’t know, kid?” he grinned. “Your daddy was a goddamned hero back in ’26, ‘traitor’ or not. Him and Bailey saved half a dozen miners at Crest Basin when the graphite bombs hit.”

“Bailey knew my father?” Mei asked, the air rushing out of her lungs.

“Of course. She owes him her life,” the bartender said. “It’s good to know the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” He set down his fresh beer before grabbing a rocks glass and pouring a shot of whiskey.

“Name’s Bruce. I’ve been running the bars NPF sets up for their mining towns since the company started back in ’24. This place was even more of a shithole before we came along, if you can believe that.” Bruce laughed and shook his head. “But I worked at Crest Basin too: Thomas was a regular of mine. He’d always talk about you when he’d had a few in him. You

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were just about the only thing that kept him going.” Bruce nudged the shot of whiskey across the bar toward Mei and raised his pint of beer with warmth.

“To Thomas Zhang,” he declared. “May he rest in peace.”

Mei could hardly feel herself raising her gifted shot glass to toast her father. Bruce emptied his drink in two quick gulps before tossing it into the sink beside him. “You ever run into trouble with these drunks, you come see me. You’re welcome here!” he called back to Mei and began taking drink orders from the growing crowd, which had lined up to grab one last round before the show started.

Mei felt miles away from it all, submerged in bitter shock. She realized that she was still holding her glass mid-air. Mei downed the shot and set the empty glass down. She leaned back against the bar to mull over the bombshell that had detonated in her lap.

On stage, the band finished its set-up. The singer nodded to his bandmates and grabbed the microphone nestled into its stand before him. He was lanky and lean with a crop of scruffy red hair that was buzzed away on his left side, from which it was neatly coiffed and parted.

“Hey, everyone, good news!” He called to the bar patrons with a sheepish grin. “We’re Four-eff. That means we got to miss the draft and join the rest of you poor bastards underground!” The crowd jeered back at him in annoyance.

“Thought you’d get a kick outta that!” The singer laughed. Alex tapped his drumsticks together in their starting rhythm and launched the band into fast paced mountain blues-rock.

#

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*Staring at the ceiling
 waiting sleepless for the sunrise
 Whiskey on the breath but for a workingman
 that's no surprise
 Stumble through the day, catchin'
 Smoke up in these bloodshot eyes
 Crossin' through the pickets getting glances
 From the union guys*

#

*Woah, oh no
 It's been too long I've gotta go home
 Woah, oh no
 I've seen too much, there's more to be shown*

#

The air in the bar grew hazy with the dust and grime kicked up by the off-duty miners gathered on the dance floor to thrash away with thirsting aggression to the music. The framed mining pictures hanging on the walls shuddered with the vibrations of their dancing. The room seemed to close in around Mei and she struggled to breathe.

#

*After hours in the hole he
 Crawled up top the heard the strikers beck and caw
 They circled 'round his diesel
 'til he sped out from the angry maw*

#

*Tempers boilin' over, them union boys
 Chased him down, foaming at the jaw
 They beat him bloody, cussed him hard,*

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And kicked him right out of the Union hall

#

Woah, oh no

It's been too long I've gotta go home

Woah, oh no

I've seen too much, there's more to be shown

#

Mei took a final gulp of her beer and stood, her fingers tingling. She weaved her way through the dance floor for the exit, desperate for a breath of air. A drunken woman grabbed Mei by the arm and pulled her in close. The denim-clad dancer's dyed blonde hair whipped at Mei's cheeks as she twisted away, startled out of her racing thoughts.

"Relax, cutie; you look like you've seen a ghost!" the dancer said in fluent Mandarin, slinking closer to her and blocking her path to the door. She brushed her hair out of her face and Mei realized that she, too, was Asian-American.

"I feel like I have," Mei replied in Mandarin. Her chest tightened and she worked harder to breathe.

"It's so good to see a familiar face around here!" the dancer laughed, oblivious to her distress. "You're Bailey's new prospector, right? My name's Angela. What's yours?"

"Mei," she croaked, disarmed by the woman's cheer. She cleared her throat and spoke in English. "I'm sorry, but I don't know much more than that."

"Good job, Zhang; you just cost me ten cred-coins!" Angela cackled in English with callous glee. "I can barely speak it, myself," she explained, rocking on her feet to the band and forc-

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ing Mei to sway with her. “It’s good to know you didn’t get caught up with the losing side like your father did. Where’s your family from? Singapore? New Seoul?”

The instrumentals swelled as the band’s guitarist leapt into the final licks of his solo. Angela’s breath was moist and warm on her neck as they danced. Mei’s throat seized at the sensation.

“Seattle,” she replied, fighting the urge to wretch. “Sorry, but I need to get some air.” Mei slipped out from Angela’s embrace and shoved her way through the crowd while the band played on.

“Watch your back around Bailey!” Angela called after her with a cynical laugh. “That miserable drunk will drag you down with her!”

#

*When he was out of work for days, his foreman
Rode out for his country home
Not a soul around, he found the
barn door open, creaking with a groan
The foreman crept inside
And doubled over with a gagging moan
‘cause the Scab was swingin’ from the rafters
Crows had picked him clean to the bone*

#

*Woah, oh no
It’s been too long I’ve gotta go home
Woah, oh no
I’ve seen too much, there’s more to be shown*

#

A brisk lashing of late autumn air whipped Mei's face when she stepped outside. The heavy door swung shut behind her on the entrance stoop, muffling the music and reveries. A distant crack rang out as an Oh-En patrol ship bolted through the empty sky, streaking blue light far above them in Karman Space. Mei watched it carve a trail across the horizon, grateful for the night air's cooling caress on her burning skin.

"Bailey!" Mei shouted, her breath pluming from her mouth in the cold. The muffled cries of the band inside the bar were greeted from across the street by a groaning generator on the town's otherwise silent block.

"Over here," Bailey replied from the edge of the alley beside the bar, where the back entrance stood illuminated by a bare bulb glowing above it. Bailey sat on the concrete step in front of the side entrance, smoking. A small pile of cigarette butts had blossomed up between Bailey's feet.

"That stuff will kill you, you know," Mei said as she leaned against the brick wall opposite Bailey.

"Nicotine's the least of your worries when you've got damp to worry about," Bailey replied and flicked away her finished nub. It bounced with a spark of ashes against the rusty cellar door beside the stoop on which she sat. Mei could feel the faint vibrations of the bar's overpowered speakers through the bricks she leaned against.

"The bartender said you knew my father," Mei said. Her voice cut through the silence like a shout that forced her heart into her throat.

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“Of course I knew him,” Bailey replied. “He was a god damned hero. If it wasn’t for Thomas Zhang, six people would’ve died.”

“Including you,” Mei said, undeterred.

“Including me. Trevor too.” Bailey looked down at her feet, sullen faced. Mei had no more room for surprise. “Saving me isn’t what killed Thomas, though. I’ll bet you Bruce didn’t mention that part.” Bailey smirked up at her with humorless eyes.

“No, he didn’t,” Mei replied. The captain sighed and rubbed her eyes, unable to meet Mei’s piercing gaze as she explained herself.

“The world’s gone to hell, Mei. I spent the last fourteen years watching it spin out of control since the Oh-En tricked us into thinking we’d been invaded.”

“What are you talking about?” Mei countered, shoving off from the wall with impatience. “The Russian military invaded Alaska with the help of the Chinese regime.”

“That’s just the propaganda they fed you, Mei,” Bailey barked another humorless laugh. “There was no invasion; this was all President Simon’s doing. Thomas tried to stop it at Crest Basin... stop the war. That’s what killed him. God forgive me, I helped him do it.” Bailey swallowed back the tears that taunted her eyes and stared hard at the brick wall in front of her. Mei, speechless, could only wring her hands to keep calm and listen.

“It was all for nothing,” Bailey muttered. “The world still went to shit, and millions of people are still dead. About the only thing I got right back then was the mailing address for the letter I delivered to Thomas’ daughter.”

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Mei's skin went cold. She reached up to her collarbone once more to clasp the pyrite pendant in her hands. Bailey stifled an unwanted sob at the sight of the pendant and lurched to her feet. She plucked her cigarettes from her jacket pocket to stick another into her mouth with a shaking hand.

"Why didn't you tell anyone the truth?" Mei asked, flaring up against Bailey for the first time.

"We're low people in low places Mei," Bailey murmured while she lit her cigarette. "What could we do that would actually help?"

"So you just did *nothing*?!" Mei shouted. "I've been persecuted for a *decade* from ignorant bigots who thought my father 'betrayed America.'" Mei crossed her arms against the cold. Inside the bar, the crowd cheered as the band finished another song.

"Who do you think lobbied for NPF to establish a dedicated mine rescue team?" Bailey said, exhaling another deep plume of smoke. "I'm the only reason we're not all dead already from a tunnel collapse or worse. I've worked for NPF since Crest Basin because I don't want to see what happened to Thomas happen to anyone else." She coughed and spat a wad of phlegm at the ground beside her. "And NPF fought me every step of the way. They're the only bad guys I *can* stand up against, not President Simon or the Orbital Navy or even the fucking Hellcats. The prospecting and rescue team is all I've got."

Mei was wrestling with her vocal cords to speak when the bar's main door flung open from around the corner with a rattling bang. The commotion brewing inside spilled out into the night. Bailey hurried after Mei, who was already moving to investigate the distressed shouting.

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The bar's patrons were gathering outside around a one-sided brawl between Trevor and Alex, who'd already tumbled to his knees in the snow.

"Square up, you dickless queer!" Trevor's gravelly baritone boomed as he stalked closer to his rival.

"What in the hell's going on, here?" Mei demanded, rushing between Trevor and his adversary.

"Stay outta this, kid!" Trevor shouted back at her, his nose crimson red from drinking. "I've got to teach this girl-boy a lesson." The band's singer pushed through the crowd, jumping between the fighters alongside Mei.

"Everybody take a breath," he implored, holding up his hands to stop Trevor's advance. "It was a misunderstanding, that's all!"

"This disrespectful sum'bitch doesn't get away with making a pass at my daughter on my watch!" Trevor hollered in his face.

"Whatever point you had to make, I'd say you've made it already," Mei said while Alex stood and wiped blood from the fresh crack in his lip. He grinned.

"Is that all you got, Trevor?" Alex said, clenching his fists in the air. "You hit like a girl, you fat prick. I should know."

Trevor roared, shoving the singer out of the way to charge for Alex. He made it three steps before Bailey came clotheslining from the side, knocking the drunk to the ground. Trevor howled, clutching the side of his head in pain.

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“What’s got you so riled up, old man?” Bailey rubbed at her fist, waiting for Trevor to regain his equilibrium. “Did you forget how to play nice like we talked?”

“If it was anyone else was throwing punches like that, they’d stand to get shot full of holes, Bailey,” Trevor groaned and staggered to his feet.

“You’re already so plastered that you can’t stand up straight, Trevor,” Bailey countered, her heart-to-heart with Mei already forgotten in the face of her crew’s infighting. “What’s this about? Why are you getting into it with Alex?”

“This son-of-a-bitch had his tongue halfway down my daughter’s throat!” Trevor hollered, waving an arm at Alex.

“I kissed *him*, Daddy; leave Alex alone!” came an alto cry from the bar as Grace shoved her way outside. Her dark hair was torn loose from its braid as she ran into the street, still fitting an arm into a torn flannel jacket in her hurry to stop the fight.

“Damn it, Grace!” Trevor clenched his fists at his sides. “I didn’t lose half my family in the war just so some coward of a girl-boy can have their way with you.”

“Coward?!” Alex shouted while the crowd hissed and jeered at Trevor. “Let these folks clear out of the way and we’ll see who’s the coward, you bastard!” Mei raised an arm against his collarbone to hold him back as he moved to close the distance between them.

Trevor fumed and stepped toward Alex, ready to accept the challenge. He was stopped in his tracks by the explosive burst of a gunshot. The crowd scattered from the bar’s entrance as Bruce stepped outside, lowering a smoking revolver from up in the air where he’d fired it.

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“That’s enough!” Bruce hollered to the crowd, weapon at his side, cleaning towel tucked forgotten into his beltline. “Between the energy shortage and the water crisis, there’s enough to worry about; we haven’t got the manpower to be picking fights with each other, too!” He waved the hand that wasn’t gripping his gun between Trevor and Alex. “Y’all clear out right now, or we’re bringing the Hellcats into this, and they won’t be half as friendly as me.”

“Grace,” Trevor said to his daughter with soft fury as he zipped up his jacket against the cold. “We’re heading home.”

“I’m not—” Grace was cut short by the venomous glare thrown at her by her father.

“As long as you live under my roof, you’ll do what I tell you, girl. Move it,” he commanded. “And you,” Trevor wheeled back to face Alex and spat at the ground. “Stay the hell away from my daughter.”

Trevor stomped down street and away from the bar. Grace looked to Alex one last time, deflated. He offered a weak smile and nodded for her to go. Grace returned the nod and followed her father homeward. Bruce watched them depart before retreating into his bar. The rest of the crowd reluctantly dispersed with him; some heading back inside for another round, others shuffling away down the street into distant silhouettes beneath the streetlamps. Before long, only Bailey, Mei, and Alex were left standing in the descending flurry while the band’s singer approached Alex to inspect his lip.

“What an asshole.” Mei exhaled at last. The singer laughed before he could help it, catching Mei’s eyes. She felt an unfamiliar knocking in her chest as she looked back into his deep blue irises.

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“Trevor’s been through a lot,” Bailey offered. “His son died fighting on the New Korean front. His brother died in West Ukraine after that, and his wife passed from cancer two years ago. The last ten years did him wrong.”

“The last ten years did *everyone* wrong,” Alex muttered beside her, wincing in pain at the crack in his lip for the first time. “That doesn’t give the worthless drunk an excuse to go popping off on whoever he wants.”

“Yeah, you got that right,” the singer replied. He looked away from Mei and held Alex by the chin to examine his cut. “The old man really got the drop on you. You must’ve been rounding your way to second base to get that kind of rise out of him.”

“Grace was the one trying to make a scene, Sam,” Alex rubbed at the back of his neck as he explained. “She jumped into my arms when I got off stage for our break. I guess she’d been sneaking drinks from someone and got a little too much courage in her. Trevor’s had his suspicions about us for awhile; I guess Grace just wanted to take a stand after I proposed to her last week, and she needed to get liquored up to do it.” Alex laughed. “I’ll bet it went a hell of a lot worse than she thought it would.”

“Well, congratulations on the proposal,” Bailey chuckled, no longer sparing Mei a passing glance.

“I can take care of the rest of the show, Alex.” Sam offered, glancing back at Mei before he could help it. “We’ll do a few more acoustic numbers and break down your drum kit for you and all that. You should get yourself cleaned up.”

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“Yeah, okay,” Alex nodded, pensive. “Thanks, Sam.”

“Come on, then, lover boy,” Bailey said. She put an arm around Alex’s shoulders, walking with him down the street. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink after this night out drinking.”

“Where are you going?” Mei called after them beside Sam, still dizzy from the whirlwind evening. “We’re not finished talking!”

“I’m done airing out my dirty laundry for one evening, Mei,” Bailey called over her shoulder as she walked homeward with her crewmember. “Besides, Alex needs patching up.”

Mei watched them go, snowflakes tumbling into her hair. She realized Sam was still standing with her in the street. His cheeks reddened when she looked in his direction.

“Well, I’d better get to it,” he said, thumbing back to the door. “Did you want to come in? Watch a few more songs?”

“Thank you, but I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day,” she replied.

“Well, thanks for your help with Alex. I’m Sam, by the way,” he called over his shoulder as he strode for the door.

“Mei Ling,” she nodded back. When the bar door closed behind Sam, another crack boomed down from the sky as an Oh-En patrol ship bolted after its companion through Karman Space, looking remarkably like a blue-tinted shooting star. Mei clutched at her pyrite pendant and walked homeward alone.

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ACT ONE: ECHOES FROM THE PAST

2026. Summer. Crest Basin, Alaska.

1.

Thomas Zhang stumbled into his ratty apartment's bathroom to vomit after a post-work drinking session with the labor hands at Bruce's Bar. He then promptly crawled into bed, still wearing his boots. The apartment was splayed with the faint pale glow of the corner television, which he'd forgotten to turn off. Thomas examined the TV with a single bloodshot eye to observe the live interview between President Simon and Bradley Owens, the local primetime newscaster. He gave up on focusing when his eyes throbbed with exhaustion and buried his head into the pillow. With luck, the newscast would lull him to sleep.

"—increase our domestic mining yields if we are to preserve our fledgling energy grid and manufacturing potential, or we will face severe shortages soon on everything from power to electronics and transportation. Our entire infrastructure will crumble unless we end our dependence on foreign minerals during these times of conflict across the ocean."

"I must address the elephant in the room, Mr. President: our stockpile of these crucial rare earth minerals, including refined pyrite, is already diminished. Some argue that the environmental damages caused by increased mining activity would 'undermine' efforts for a green tomorrow, if you'll forgive my pun."

"Well said, Bradley. That's why we intend to uphold every precaution necessary to stave off any environmental dangers. But our mineral stockpile is inadequate to meet the nation's needs in the long-term. Starting now, the Federal Bureau of Domestic Mining will provide tax

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incentives and subsidy bonuses for both public and private enterprises to increase domestic mining. If we want a clean tomorrow, that means getting our hands dirty today. Simon Says: start digging!"

He'd hardly drifted off when a jackhammer's frenetic thunderclaps outside jostled him awake. Thomas groaned in pain and wiped spittle from his lips. He sat up to examine the analog clock in the corner, its metronome beat drowned out by the construction crew in the road. It was just turning noon; he'd gotten off shift at sunrise and been drinking at Bruce's Bar all morning. Thomas had four hours to sleep off the booze dragging himself right back into the mines for work.

Thomas hobbled to his feet, switched off the TV, and swept aside the blackout curtains hanging from the studio apartment's front window. He hissed as bright daylight prodded at his eyes. The road crews jackhammered outside his home, oblivious to Thomas' pain. He shoved against the window, scraping the swollen wooden frame open to stick his head outside.

"Hey, cut that out; some of us are trying to sleep!" he called to the men outside.

"Aw, piss off, Jackie Chan; it's the middle of the day!" the foreman shouted from the street curb where he scowled at his labor hands. "If you've got a problem with remembering what time it is here in America, why don't you go back where you came from?"

"Why don't you come over here and say that to my face! Chicken shit racist!" Thomas hollered, but the foreman waved him off and made for the asphalt mixer to check its contents. Thomas spat before slamming the window shut. The effort sent him reeling in another wave of alcohol-induced nausea.

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“Damned laborers,” he muttered when the room stopped spinning. “Neanderthals. Every one of them.” As important as he was in the mines, Thomas was powerless outside of his own research division, and the construction crews scurrying about Crest Basin always made life harder for him if they could manage it.

Thomas stalked over to the studio apartment’s kitchen space to stick his head under the sink. He gulped mouthfuls of tangy-metallic water from the faucet before splashing his face and running his hands through his tangled, scruffy black hair. Dim slivers of light pierced the curtains on every window, casting thin rays about the room in which dust and dirt floated. The hovering particles were the lingering traces of a life in the mines that Thomas had long since given up on escaping.

He rubbed at the bags under his sunken eyes and glanced at the calendar taped to the refrigerator door. Another batch of molybdenum-carbide samples would arrive within the day and the military’s next batch of weaponized M-Drive cores was due to ship three weeks afterward. General Andrews would undoubtedly billow smoke and fire down Thomas’ throat to have them built within two, especially now that Thomas had played his hand by attempting to resign. The general had threatened to kill him then, forcing Thomas to re-consider where he stood with the Orbital Navy, and where the Oh-En stood with President Simon’s administration.

Thomas grimaced and rubbed at his neck, scanning through the calendar’s rows. He happened upon today’s date, where he’d some time before labeled “MEI LING’S BIRTHDAY” in its comments box. He’d have to find a chance to call her on a company phone and say a few words. Between his virtual enslavement to the Oh-En’s production schedule and security’s ban on private communications, Thomas now rarely spoke with his daughter, who was already turning fif-

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teen, and the resulting rift between them was only growing. It often kept him awake during his after-hours drunken hazes when he'd failed to bury his guilt at the bottom of a pint glass. Soon, he'd be missing all the biggest moments of her life if he didn't escape his indentured servitude. Not that General Andrews would make it easy for him. The general had already proven himself mad enough to propose live combat testing for their new particle cannons; Thomas had little faith left that Andrews would bluff about hanging him if he tried to leave. He may as well have been sitting on death row for whatever retribution General Andrews had in store for him already for stalling his research. But so long as the Oh-En's armada was still in its infancy, Thomas Zhang was the key to fulfilling General Andrews' dreams of global domination. He was safe, if only until he'd outgrown his usefulness.

Thomas buried the thought, hoping that Mei Ling could forgive his absence if she was impressed with the gift that he'd made for her after a spark of inspiration: a handmade pyrite pendant. The leftovers of this pet project still lay strewn about the kitchen counter, covering the tattered field journals that contained his personal research notes: rock polishing materials, wire cutters and simple jewelry making equipment. Chunks of extra pyrite flashing speckled gold as his gaze flitted across them.

The diamond shaped cube of pyrite he'd cut and polished for the pendant was smaller than a quarter, smooth despite its many grooves and ridges, and shone a beautiful luster of glimmering gold-bronze and copper tones in the dim light. He'd twisted sterling silver wire about the mineral and looped a metal chain through its eyehole. The pyrite pendant sat pristine amidst the chaos of its creation beside the envelope addressed to his wife's home in Oregon and the note he'd scrawled to go with it: *Happy Birthday, Mei. You are the spark that sets my world alight.*

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“Something will have to change,” he declared to the empty room when he’d nestled himself beneath his bed covers again. “They can conquer the planet over my dead body for all it matters.”

After his wake-up alarm proclaimed his failed attempts at a few hours’ sleep, Thomas made his way in to work along the single road that cut through the vast Alaskan tundra. The mountains in the distance bloomed a luscious green, accented by the spattering of snow atop their peaks that sparkled in the fading daylight. Thomas’ sleek, new pyrite-cell electric truck kicked up dust as he carved his way through the maze of side roads leading to the precursor strip mine that had been repurposed for his work.

Dust plumed ahead of him as a convoy of security vans approached from the opposite direction. Aerial drone units tailed the vehicles, darting back and forth along the convoy’s path to scan the vast stretches of open nature around them. They were the largest operating force the military could spare without satellite-based espionage catching wind of the government facility hidden below the mine’s deepest tunnels. To the ignorant, a thermal scan would reveal nothing more than the throbbing heat signature of a subterranean mining project.

The lead vehicle flashed its lights for Thomas to stop and pulled up alongside him on the road.

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” the driver leaned out from her window and called to him. “I wanted to check with you about the status of the manufacturing facility before we move ahead with today’s plan.” The young woman’s brunette hair had come loose of its bun and hung in a loose ponytail over the edge of her door. “Is your research team ready to mobilize equipment?”

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“Mobilize for what, Carol?” Thomas countered with a twinge of nerve. “Is there a safety drill? I haven’t been informed of any upcoming exercises.”

“Sorry, doctor,” Carol exclaimed in surprise. “I thought you’d been involved with coordination.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” Thomas snapped. “Is General Andrews poaching researchers from me? He knows he can’t cut me out of these plans!” Thomas seethed from the seat of his truck.

“If General Andrews hasn’t briefed you himself there’s nothing I can tell you,” Carol replied, nervous. “It’s need-to-know only. I’m sorry to bother you, sir.” The soldier threw her vehicle in drive and made off before Thomas could question her further. A bad taste crept into his mouth as the drone units sped off after her in the rearview mirror. He continued down the road, mulling over the news.

Since Thomas had failed to resign under threat of execution, General Andrews was finding more and more ways to keep him uninformed of the military’s business, robbing him of the executive powers he’d agreed to when he’d enlisted as head scientist. Now it seemed that the general was coordinating with Thomas’ research team behind his back in some further plot to undermine his authority. Thomas resolved to get to the bottom of the betrayal when he could question his researchers in person. Peterson would do; the boy was new to the project himself, an intern who studied Thomas’ work on pyrite-cells with the fervent passion of a devotee.

Thomas found a parking spot at the company staging ground and stomped up the rickety metal stairs of the office trailer to clock in, struggling to calm himself from the schemes and theories racing through his mind.

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“Morning, Diane. Ah; evening, I guess,” he waved to the night shift administrator as he scanned his ID badge. “You haven’t heard anything about upcoming safety drills or mock tunnel evacuations have you?” he asked the young woman.

“Nothing I’ve been notified about, why?” Diane replied from her administrative cubby set opposite the clock-in station, her rich brown hair shining beneath the fluorescent lights.

“Just a tip from security that the people up top are making their usual power plays,” Thomas replied. “I’ll get to the bottom of it.” He reached into his jacket pocket for the freshly sealed envelope containing his daughter’s birthday present. “While I’m here, I’ve got a favor to ask you. Think you can manage to sneak a personal letter onto the company mail plane for a rush delivery?”

Diane reached under her Plexiglas partition to take the envelope from Thomas. “What is it, a love letter?” she joked when she examined the address.

“Just a hobby project,” Thomas laughed, relieved by the woman’s camaraderie. “I made my daughter a birthday present.”

“That’s so precious, but I’m afraid the mail has already gone out today. We won’t be sending out another for a week or so. Would you like me to hold onto it until then?” she offered when Thomas’ face fell.

“No, I’ll keep it,” Thomas decided. “I may want to rewrite the note that goes with it if I can think of something cleverer than what I’ve got.”

Diane handed him back the letter and Thomas pocketed it inside his work vest. “Thanks anyway,” he said, making for the door. “Here’s hoping we find the next pyrite reef so we can keep pace with the military’s damned order requests.”

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Diane laughed and shook her head. "Listen, Thomas; before you go. I've arranged for a new hire to shadow you while you make your rounds overseeing production tonight. Does that sound okay?"

"No it doesn't!" Thomas snapped before he could help himself. "I can't risk being slowed down when I have to get to the bottom of whatever my research team is up to." Thomas wrung his hands, hating himself for taking his frustrations out on Diane. "Why do we need a new guy?" he asked when he'd taken a deep breath. "Someone go and drag up on us?"

"No, Thomas, no one quit," Diane explained. "You didn't hear? One of the heavy equipment operators got into a fight with a few of the soldiers Friday night after a poker game got heated. He's in the ICU."

"I didn't know that," Thomas rubbed at his forehead. "The laborers have been warned not to fraternize with our guards." The mendacity of the Alaskan Tundra was fast spreading cabin fever through the soldiers' garrison, and their continued disruptions were proving more troublesome to Thomas' work than they were worth.

"I don't understand why the mining bureau even mandated military oversight of the complex," Diane muttered. "We're just hauling pyrite out of the ground like any other mine in the country. What's there to guard?"

"Well, you never know," Thomas lied. "The Russians have been probing around the Canadian border lately now that they've gotten troops and equipment from the Chinese to shore up their defenses; there could be trouble coming." He'd been instructed by General Andrews at the project's start to keep his work secret from his own staff at New Prospect Frontier, 'to deter foreign threats from interfering with research vital to American prosperity.' The cryptic notion

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did little to reassure him of Andrews' intentions for the Orbital Navy's armada once Thomas' work allowed them to take flight into space.

"What's the green hat's name?" Thomas changed the subject before Diane could talk him into a corner.

"Bailey Parker: young blood, fresh out of school. Comes from a family of coal miners and seems a little cocky about it. You know the type." She shrugged, sipping from a mug of tea.

"Yeah I do," Thomas nodded. "Don't worry, D. I'll make sure he toes the line. The little smartass is probably still so full of puberty he can't help himself."

"Well, there's one thing you should know about Bailey," Diane leaned forward in her seat, her coy smile returning.

"Is he the CEO's son or something? I hate going easy on green hats, D. People get killed that way in the mines," Thomas shuddered.

"No, Thomas," Diane shook her head with satisfaction as she leaned back in her chair.

"Bailey's a woman."

#

"Morning. Ah; evening, ma'am," Thomas stammered as he walked up to the new hire after the pre-shift meeting outside. The sun was shrinking fast below the horizon line. When their shift ended in twelve hours, the world would still be coated in early morning twilight.

Thomas suppressed a groan as logistics played out in his already cluttered mind: training a woman to work in a mine full of surly men was always a point of friction. He would have to keep tighter watch over the miners to ensure they didn't harass the poor girl more than anyone else on the job, a chore he neither had the time nor the patience to—

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“Ma’am? What’re you talkin’ about, old-timer; I’m young enough to be your daughter!”

Bailey flashed a half-grin at Thomas as she stuffed the bun she’d made of her long red hair underneath her hard hat. The girl radiated confidence through her wide-eyed cheer.

“Yes, you are, I guess; you’re a couple years older than her though,” Thomas admitted. He cleared his throat, trying in vain to shove away the frightening vision of his daughter working in the pyrite mines. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m just not used to seeing many women in the tunnels.”

“I don’t bite, I promise,” Bailey said with a smile. “I guess I’m supposed to shadow you today so you can show me the ropes?”

“Right. That.” He shook his head and donned his hard hat. “Alright. Throw your gear on and let’s grab a seat on the drift runner. We’ve got a train to catch and a long ride ahead of us.”

#

2.

Bailey’s eyes widened as the walls closed in around her. Their train car crept into the mouth of the cavernous tunnel standing at the entrance to the mine. She sat opposite Thomas in a cramped iron passenger compartment covered in mud, rust, and filth. Its open window holes showcased a mineral-flecked rock wall rolling past them with frenzied speed. She couldn’t help but feel powerless, unable to do anything but wonder if her life was even in her hands anymore.

After a ten-minute ride along descending tunnel tracks, the train came to its fourth stop and Thomas stood from his seat. He climbed down from the train, waving for Bailey to follow him onto the wooden platform erected beside the adjunct tunnel looming out at them. Half-a-dozen miners jumped from the train with them. The adjunct tunnel, an ‘adit’ shaft, tossed back

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echoes of the train's horn while it belched two long wails to announce its departure. The conductor pulled away from them down the tracks that stretched as far as Bailey could see. When she turned back to look the way they'd come, the entrance was long gone.

She scoffed at the fear coursing through her and steeled herself to look around. The only light left to see by was the pale yellow-white glow of the industrial bulbs strung along the edges of the walls. They cast a sterile, empty sheen on the twenty-foot-tall tunnel. Bailey took several sluggish steps toward Thomas, encumbered by her outfit: a pair of rain boots, a reflective orange vest over her waterproof coveralls, and a green hard hat top-heavy from the weight of the battery-powered lantern drilled into its front. Her ears popped from the pressure in the air.

"It's like walking on the moon," Bailey marveled aloud as she soaked in the terrain. She wondered if her father and his father before him had felt the same sensations the first time they'd set foot in the coal mines back east, all long since shut down or re-purposed for pyrite mining. A sour smell of acidic, moldy dirt hung in the air.

"Hey, Jackie Chan! Any news from the Emperor when they're going to invade?" A grizzled miner no younger than forty-two stepped out of the adit beside them. The rest of the crew was already shrinking into the smaller tunnel, their lanterns bobbing dimmer in the distance.

"I spoke to him last Tuesday," Thomas replied with an unconcerned smile. "He said they were still waiting for Quality Control's go-ahead before shipping a fresh batch of missiles to drop on the border. I wouldn't worry, though, Trevor. After seeing you in action last night, your liver will probably give out long before you have to worry about getting dragged into a war."

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The grizzled miner gave a grating laugh. Bailey watched them volley banter back and forth in bemusement, waiting to introduce herself.

“You’re one to talk trying to drink me under the table,” Trevor said, coughing into his hand. “The way you pound back your booze, I’d guess you’re the one who designed their damn nukes and you’re trying to drown your conscience.”

“We’re all guilty of something,” Thomas shrugged. “Besides, we finally fulfilled the military’s last order request. I’d say that merits celebrating.”

“Right until they throw us *another* damned rush order,” Trevor replied. “Ungrateful bastards.”

Bailey crossed her arms and clucked her tongue. Trevor had yet to cast her a single glance of acknowledgement as he spoke with Thomas, and it was grating hard against her pride.

“What the hell do they even need so much pyrite for?” Trevor continued, oblivious to Bailey’s discontent. “Refining the stuff doesn’t reduce material volume *that* much.”

“They’ve been asking for something more complicated than the usual,” Thomas explained far too vaguely for Bailey to follow. “It requires us to condense a much higher yield of pyrite, and they’ve been demanding mass quantities of product for military application.”

“Sounds like they’re gearing up for something,” Trevor remarked. “Maybe we’ll see some action in this war across the ocean after all. Here’s hoping they don’t throw you in prison for suspected espionage.” Trevor chuckled and pulled a device the size of a brick from his work vest to give it a shake. The black brick emitted a single faint blare before falling silent. “Did you

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bring another Canary in with you?” he asked. “Day shift drained ours on us without juicing it back up.”

“No, I haven’t,” Thomas replied. “Anchor it to the charging dock before we head inside. The tunnel was already checked for damp, yes?”

“Yeah, the thing had just enough juice in it for me to make a walk-through before the screen died.” Trevor gestured back at the adit with a thumb. “We’ve got the vents filtering out the damp and pumping down clean air from topside already; we shouldn’t have anything to worry about all shift.” Trevor shambled his way to the platform’s workbench to place the Canary on its charging dock.

“If the Canary’s not charged within an hour, call up for a replacement,” Thomas ordered and stepped into the adit, waving for Bailey to follow as the tunnel swallowed him. Bailey obeyed, gritting her teeth that Trevor had yet to give her the time of day.

“Hold up there, Thomas,” Trevor called as he marched back for them, head down to watch his footing on the slick muddy wood. “We’ve had some trouble with the jackleg and I could use your help. One of the green hats on day shift probably got to messing with the damn thing, and now it’s acting up. All these pimply little shit stains right out of high school are going to get us killed, mark my words.”

Trevor looked up and noticed Bailey for the first time. He laughed in a ragged, heaving cough when he caught sight of the color of her hard hat. “They went an’ pulled it on you, too, Thomas!” Trevor held his side, laughing harder. “They’re fixin’ to have you train your own replacement so they can deport your ass! You been spying on us after all, or what?”

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“It wouldn’t take a trained spy to get the drop on your loud-mouthed ignorant ass,”

Thomas snapped before Bailey could protest against Trevor’s back talk. “Shape up and listen. This is Bailey, the new labor hand. She comes from a family of coal miners like you, so you should have plenty to trauma-bond over.”

“No shit?” Trevor cocked his head with renewed interest in her existence. “Hell, we’re practically family. Maybe you’ll turn out to be worth a paycheck after all, green hat.”

“Thanks,” Bailey said without sincerity. “I’ll make sure I don’t get you killed.”

“Come on and show me what the problem is with the drill,” Thomas ordered. “I have work to do.”

Trevor led the way through the adit. Bailey followed behind them, feeling the ten-foot-tall rock walls close in tighter around her. Rivulets of ground water poured from cracks in the jagged ceiling so heavily that it seemed like the tunnel was raining. Bailey stumbled through the deep muddy puddles along the uneven floor. Despite her full outfit of new rain gear, water fast found its way into her boots.

“This is more running water than I’d expected to see down here,” Bailey huffed. The acid-sour smell of wet dirt and mining slurry grew stronger as they trekked deeper. “Some of these puddles look almost thigh-deep.”

“This whole mine is just a few years reopened,” Thomas said while he paused to inspect a ceiling brace. “We’ve had to drain out most of the tunnels, which has made dealing with damp a

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headache. I'm just thankful we've been able to salvage so much of the mineral yield for my research."

"You mean pyrite power-cells?" Bailey suggested.

"Right, and that's just the beginning," Thomas replied, offering a smile back at her in the dim tunnel. "Electric vehicles, charging stations, solar panels, even spaceships. My work is revolutionizing green energy. Pretty soon, everything will be running *on* pyrite or made *with* pyrite." Something his words rang hollow to Bailey, like a tour guide who'd given one too many speeches, and she wondered how much of it Thomas even believed.

"Too bad it's never enough for the people up top, no matter how much we dig up." Trevor laughed as he splashed through the filthy puddles, in his element and without a care in the world, tearing Bailey away from her own thoughts. "We do a good job, and the military goes and *doubles* their order for next time."

"You're right, Trevor," Thomas conceded. "But so far, my research teams have had more than enough samples to fuel our work deeper in the mine."

"Well, usually when there's gold, there's pyrite." Bailey offered, doing her best to impress them. Her grin died when she noted neither of the men had humored her cheer.

So much for starting off on the right foot, she mused as they splashed deeper into the adit, passing several offshoot tunnels even smaller in size jutting away from them. The bare bulbs of light hanging from the ceiling flickered unreliably in their plastic cages. Somewhere in the

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depths of an offshoot tunnel, miners hacked and coughed from the tangy ozone stink of acetylene torches and singed welding rods as they worked to repair a broken belt line.

At the last offshoot tunnel, an excavator rig hauled rock and mud from its innards and dumped each payload unceremoniously onto the conveyor belt at the side of the adit shaft. The excavator's treads screeched in poorly oiled disrepair. The operator driving the machine saw Thomas approaching in the tunnel and waved with glee, half standing from his seat to holler over the screeching treads.

"Hey, Jackie Chan! You better call up your cousins and tell 'em to pack some cold weather gear if they're fixin' to invade! There's only a few weeks 'til the cold snap hits us."

"You know how family gets," Thomas shouted up to the driver. "They never listen to a thing you tell them. They probably won't even recognize me when the shooting starts."

"Well hell; you better remember to wear an American flag wherever you go, unless you wanna end up in someone's crosshairs!" the excavator driver laughed before guiding his machine into the offshoot for another load of slurry.

"Your inbred ass can't even drive an excavator straight," Thomas clapped back when the driver backed into the wall with a crunch. "I'm not too worried about your aim. Quit running your mouth and watch where you're going; that's an order!"

Trevor snickered beside them. Thomas offered Bailey a begrudging grin, shaking his head and cussing out the driver under his breath.

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“Why do you let everyone call you Jackie Chan?” Bailey asked Thomas when the excavator’s roar faded in the distance. “You’re letting these backwater hicks walk all over you.” She waved ahead at Trevor, whose eyes flashed with sudden anger as he whirled to face her.

“Woah now, kid.” Trevor raised a hand up as he stomped back through the puddles to face Bailey up close. “I’ve known this man for five years. Who the hell are *you*?” he challenged her. “Shit, Thomas *earned* that name for goin’ full kung fu on some asshole from swing shift that didn’t like taking orders from an Asian.” Trevor laughed. “Knocked the fucker’s teeth right out of his head *and* fired him on the spot.”

“He swung first,” Thomas corrected. “And it was just a lucky punch is all. I don’t know kung fu, Trevor.”

“All I know is, everyone down here knows better than to get on Jackie Chan’s bad side.” Trevor clapped Thomas on the back.

“I’ll speak for myself next time, thank you.” Thomas shrugged off the man’s touch. “This is nothing I haven’t dealt with for years,” he explained to Bailey. “So long as the people under me are doing their jobs, they can call me whatever they want. The world has changed far less than we’d like to think it has. Take it from someone who’s reminded of that more often than you.”

Bailey nodded, embarrassed, and offered no reply. They walked past the side tunnel for the adit’s heading, where the jackleg drill leaned motionless against the dead-end rock face. The mobile chassis on which it was mounted sat cold and silent on its metal treads.

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“What’s the issue, then?” Thomas said, waving at the powerful jointed hydraulic drill. Its ten-foot-long bit was detached and leaning against the chassis on the tunnel floor. The chassis’ rotating swivel aimed the jackleg away from the heading and its side panel was opened to examine the machine’s innards. The machine covered two thirds of the tunnel’s width with its girth.

“Damn thing’s got no hydraulic pressure,” Trevor guessed. “One of the hose lines must have cracked after day shift shot their dynamite.”

“Tell me you didn’t just let the thing run until it pissed away all the fluid it had.” Thomas eyed the jackleg’s hydraulic line with a furrowed brow.

“Man, I’m no green hat,” Trevor replied. “Keep insulting me, see what happens.” The two men huddled around the drill’s open panel. Bailey stood back from them, uncertain of what to do or where to even stand while she waited, irked deeper that she’d been ignored so long and hesitant to interrupt their banter. The vent that snaked along the ceiling poured fresh air from its end near the tunnel’s heading, and Bailey inched her way closer to catch her breath when she felt its breeze on her face. A soft rumbling echoed through the vent and the air stopped flowing. Before Bailey could mention it to Thomas the lights flickered out, flashing on again after frightful moments of subterranean darkness.

“Are the electricians doing something with the booster stations?” Trevor asked. “That’s the first power surge I’ve seen down here in months.”

“No,” Thomas replied with worry. “I heard a rumor from security about my research teams preparing for something, but I haven’t got anything scheduled for them.”

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“Shit. Maybe they *are* trying to pull a fast one on you,” Trevor exclaimed.

“All the more reason to finish up with your drill so I can get to the bottom of things. Bailey?” Thomas turned and called to her. “There’s a red tool kit in the green lock box at the mouth of the adit. It should have tape and sealing tools, hopefully a few spare parts. Think you can handle the walk out to grab it?”

“I’ve got legs, don’t I?” Bailey said, trying her best to sound sure of herself and abandoning the vent from her concerns. If the lights had kicked back on, the air vent would doubtless follow.

“Hop to, then,” Thomas nodded before turning back to the jackleg to troubleshoot with Trevor. “We’ve got to get this heading drilled out for them to load another round of dynamite.”

Bailey hiked her way back through the grungy tunnel. The distant echoes of men at work bounced at her from the adit’s offshoots. She stumbled twice in the near darkness, cursing to herself. When she popped out onto the platform once more, Bailey’s legs felt rubbery on the flat wooden planks from the exertion of the walk.

She spied the green lock box near the edge of the platform. There was a small, dusty bench beside it, littered with clutter. A coffee pot and microwave were tucked into the back of the bench. Bailey’s bile rose at the prospect of ingesting anything that had come from either filthy appliance.

Atop the workbench sat the Canary that Trevor had been touting when they’d arrived, sitting cradled in its charging dock. The dock’s flickering light proclaimed that the gas-detecting

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device was fully charged. Bailey picked it up and turned it over, examining the few sparse buttons and arrow keys sitting below its small, blank screen, which would normally display the Canary's damp readings.

Bailey punched the power button on the device, which gave a shrill chirp. Its screen lit up for a brief moment before going dark again. She gave it a rough shake. The Canary squawked once, betraying its non-functioning lights.

Bailey pocketed the Canary in her vest to show Thomas and tossed open the lock box lid and dug around the mess buried inside, hunting for the tool bag below. She found it buried beneath the clutter, forcing Bailey to haul with all her might against its strap in her effort to lift the bag from the lock box. The box's lid swung shut from its hinge as the bag came free of its clutches, barely missing Bailey's fingers in the process.

She trudged back into the adit, struggling harder to walk as the tool bag swung in front of her on its strap, banging into her thigh with every other step. She tripped on an unseen rock and fell, curling instinctively to her side and knocking against the ground with a painful thud that left her reeling.

"Damn it all," Bailey whispered as pain shot through her elbow. She stood and dusted herself off. Her leg was already coated in a filthy sheen of muck and tunnel water. The Canary chirped in her vest pocket, brought to life by the shock of the fall. Bailey paid it no mind, picking up the tool bag once more and wrinkling her nose against the acrid-sour scent in the air. The jackleg and the men tending to it were spitting distance away when the Canary's chirping resumed. To Bailey's surprise, its pulsing, sonorous squawk did not stop.

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“That the Canary?” Trevor looked up from the jackleg past Thomas, who turned to Bailey as she fished the device out of her vest pocket.

“I don’t think it’s dead; I think there’s just something wrong with the screen,” Bailey suggested as Thomas approached to take the device from her. His outstretched hand disappeared in the sudden blackout that flickered through the mine.

“Another power surge?” Thomas’ voice rang muted in the cramped tunnel when the lights came back on. “This isn’t right.”

“Hey, the air vent’s not on,” Trevor noted with distress. Bailey’s stomach sank and she wondered with horror whether she’d made a grave error in ignoring the malfunction. Thomas snatched the Canary away from her and held it at arm’s length to probe the air. The device squawked in rising alarm at the damp settling around them.

“The ventilation is compromised,” Thomas explained. “The damp is unsafe already; we need to get out of—”

An explosion that rocked the adit spat a tongue of flame from the offshoot tunnel behind them. A man’s screams followed in its wake.

#

3.

Thomas’ ears were ringing and he felt lightheaded. The tunnel was dim in the auxiliary backup lights strung from the ceiling every fifty feet, which cast a faint red glow on the smoke

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curling through the air in choking tendrils. A hand gripped him by the ankle when he stumbled forward on shaking legs. Thomas looked down to see a yellow rain suit huddled at his feet.

“Thomas...” the yellow lump moaned.

“Trevor.” The world sharpened around him as Thomas knelt and took the man by the arm to hoist him to his feet. Trevor yelped when he tried to stand.

“My leg,” Trevor moaned. “It must’ve gotten twisted in the blast.”

Thomas looked around, desperate to find a scaling bar or a shovel for Trevor to use as a cane, while the multitude of disaster scenarios that could be threatening the mine and his research swarmed his thoughts.

Bailey materialized through the smoke in front of him, covering her face with a rag to keep from choking on the smoke.

“What happened?” Bailey shouted when she shambled close enough to see their faces.

“Are you hurt?” Thomas asked, ignoring the girl’s confusion.

“N-no,” she decided after probing at herself, still dazed from the blast.

“Bailey, listen to me,” Thomas called back to her. “We’ve got to evacuate the tunnel. The welders must have ignited an explosion from their torches when the damp settled in. It won’t be long until the smoke chokes us out. Trevor’s hurt his leg and I need your help moving him.” Bailey trained her glassy eyes on Trevor, who had hunched over Thomas’ shoulder in pain.

“Bailey!” Thomas shouted, hoping to jar the girl out of her shock.

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“Right. I’m here,” she said, rushing to Trevor’s side.

“Good,” Thomas nodded. “Before we get moving- you still have that Canary on you?”

“Yeah,” Bailey gestured at her vest pocket. “It stopped chirping, though.”

“I don’t care if the thing starts singing jazz. Any noises at all, you tell me.”

The trio crept toward the exit at a snail’s pace, smoke burning at their eyes and throats while they hauled Trevor along like contenders in a five-legged race through the thickening smoke. When they passed the closest offshoot tunnel, the Canary squawked at Bailey’s hip. Thomas tensed up, hesitant to move.

“There’s someone down there!” Bailey shouted. Thomas turned to the offshoot shaft and saw a single faint light wobbling through the smoke a hundred feet away, undoubtedly a welder who’d survived the blast.

“Keep moving,” Thomas ordered, adjusting Trevor’s weight against him. Bailey cast an incredulous look at him.

“But what about—”

“If we go in there without oxygen, we’re as good as dead,” Thomas explained. “Save yourself before you save anyone else. Now go!”

Bailey obeyed and they splashed on through the filthy waters pooled at the smoke-cramped adit’s floor. When they burst from the mouth of the adit, Thomas gasped for a gulp of smoke-free air. He scanned the platform, grim recognition sinking in that they were the only ones to make it out. They set Trevor down on a storage box away from the entrance with a mutual

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heave before Bailey wiped tears from her face with the back of her hand, sputtering from the stinging smoke.

“The oxygen masks are over here,” Thomas said and hurried for the yellow storage box opposite Trevor. Inside were a dozen sealed containers, an oxygen mask packed tightly into each one. Thomas handed one to Bailey and tossed another to Trevor, who tore open the container and began strapping its mask to his face.

“These masks have one hour of oxygen.” Thomas explained as he opened his own container and gestured to the contents. “Full face covering with attached hose line, oxygen tank with waistband strap.” Thomas showed Bailey the switch at the top of the oxygen tank before strapping it to his waist and activating the device’s airflow.

“Your turn. Put it on.” He gestured to the container in Bailey’s hands. His voice was muffled and distorted by his mask, its rubber vibrating like a kazoo. Bailey followed his example and put the device on with shaking hands.

“What now?” She asked, her mask fogging over with her ragged breaths.

“I’m taking as many of these containers as I can grab and heading back in there for whoever else is inside.” Thomas declared, loud and slow to be understood from behind his mask.

“They won’t stand a chance without them. Stay here with Trevor and radio for a drift runner to get us out. I don’t trust that the trains won’t derail on us if the rest of the mine’s been compromised.”

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“Thomas, I’m not letting you go back in there alone!” Bailey clapped back. “It’s a death trap!”

“Exactly. We’re the closest thing they’ve got to a rescue team and you’re a green hat.”

Thomas scooped up the remaining oxygen masks in his arms and prepared to head back into the adit. “If you come with me, I need you on your ‘A’ game. Peoples’ lives are on the line. Are you coming or not?” he demanded.

Bailey swallowed hard and nodded. “I’m with you.”

“Great.” Thomas handed her a stack of oxygen masks and turned to Trevor, who had already pulled himself up to the dented metal box of the mine phone hanging from the wall beside him. He snatched the phone from its cradle and coughed into the receiver.

“Adit Four to surface. Four to surface.” He waited for a reply, jaw set tense, before shaking his head and turning to Thomas and Bailey. “I’ll keep trying for someone. Don’t worry about me; get the others out of there.”

“See if you can find out what’s going on while you’re at it,” Thomas called over his shoulder. “Let’s move, Bailey!” His new hire followed him as he swept his way through the tunnel-smoke.

#

Thomas and Bailey searched for survivors for the better part of twenty minutes, scrambling over debris and rubble through the offshoot tunnels and racing to outpace the spreading fire to pull as many miners to safety as they could find. Their first discovery was the badly burned

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body of a welder. They'd extracted three men still breathing when a train's horn preceded the screeching of brakes. They burst into the main tunnel with a fourth miner, laying eyes on Trevor waiting aboard the rescue train that had pulled to a rocking stop before them.

"The cavalry's finally here!" Bailey cried beside Thomas, huffing so hard her face was barely visible behind her mask. Thomas wasn't in much better shape after trudging back and forth through the smoking tunnel, dragging dazed or barely conscious survivors to safety one by one. Trevor leaned against the edge of the open top conductor's booth at the train's front. Beside him, the conductor was bent over the controls, re-priming the engine for their immediate egress.

"There are no drift runners?" Thomas asked, still kazoo-voiced. He swallowed hard against the cottonmouth scratching at his throat.

"Where've you been?" the conductor answered with a nervous shout. "The whole damn mine is being evacuated! You're lucky we had *anything* to extract you on this level."

"The Canary is reading carbon monoxide levels through the roof from the fire," Bailey called out, approaching the edge of the platform where Thomas stood while the gas monitor squawked in her hands. We have to get moving."

"You think I'm sticking around here for my health?" Trevor called back. "Get in, already!"

Thomas climbed up beside Trevor in the conductor's compartment while Bailey guided the injured miners to the train's caboose, where a single passenger car was coupled. She signaled that they were aboard and the conductor released the emergency brake. The train lurched forward

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with a jolt and picked up speed. The air whisking past Thomas' face felt like a miraculous gift: they were finally on their way to safety.

"Jimmy over here was just saying this wasn't an accident," Trevor hollered into Thomas' ear over the train's screeching axels.

"What do you mean?" Thomas demanded, brushing Trevor aside to speak to the operator himself.

"We lost communications, lights; hell, damn near everything was cut topside," the conductor yelled over the clanging train and cranked the throttle lever. "The electricians managed to get our emergency backup generators running, and that's when calls from security started flooding in." He stole a glance at Thomas as he drove. "It's the goddamn invasion!" he said. "It's really happening!"

"*Security* told you this?" Thomas' skin crawled as the truth dawned on him: he'd underestimated his enemy. General Andrews had hatched a much darker plot than Thomas had dared consider.

"Why would anyone invade *us*?" Trevor wondered. The train hit a bump in the rail and his shoulders jostled Thomas' bicep in the cramped booth. "We haven't got any resources worth their time! The Russians and the Chinese have both got their hands full across the ocean. Dragging America into the war would turn things against them!"

"That's right," Thomas said in renewed terror. "Both of you listen to me. The military—"

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The passenger car bucked up, struck by a bursting exhaust pipe that ran the length of the tunnel wall. The steel pipe spit its metal clasps into the side of the train with enough force to rock it on its suspension. The burst pipe hissed with damp leaking into the tunnel behind them.

The men in the conductor's compartment jerked back from the force of the passenger car pulling against their momentum. The rear car bucked and slipped off its coupling, freeing the train from an uncertain tug-of-war. Jimmy regained his balance and hit the brakes to bring the train to a halt. The passenger car continued to teeter-totter on the railway for several yards behind them before skittering off its track and derailing. It skidded to a stop just behind the train, knocking around the wounded miners within until it settled in the mud.

Moans of pain and scattered curses rang out in the tunnel's dimly lit haze. Thomas' ribs ached from colliding with the side of the metal compartment. He turned to see Jimmy and Trevor probing themselves for injuries.

"Of all the times for a derailment," Jimmy explained, grabbing a metal jack from the compartment's floor and hopping down from the train. He kicked aside trash and mud to inspect the tracks.

"How is everyone doing back there, Bailey?" Thomas called to the passenger car behind them, straining to hear over the miners' groaning. He jumped down to slough through the mud for the passenger car's rear, passing the massive dent the rupturing pipe had left its side. When Thomas shined his light into the compartment, the men inside were untangling themselves from the mess of limbs they'd been reduced to. There was no sign of Bailey. Somewhere in the dis-

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tance back the way they'd come, the damaged Canary that Bailey had kept with her was crying a long and sonorous wail of danger. Thomas' breath caught in his throat at the sound.

"I need as many hands as I can get to lift this train car back up onto the tracks!" Jimmy shouted before setting his jack in place and cranking it as high as he could muster. The passenger car's mud-sunken wheels were lifted teasingly out of reach of their rightful place on the rails.

"You heard him," Thomas waved at the banged-up miners. "Everyone who can help, shake it off and hop to." He left them to their task and followed the Canary's wails back through the tunnel, his footsteps *shluck*-ing in the slick mud.

Thomas pieced together the betrayal as he made his way through the mud: his researchers had made a deal with General Andrews somehow, and were staging a fake invasion to allow their particle weapons live-testing opportunities when the president declared war in retaliation. Andrews no doubt hoped to ensure Thomas didn't get in their way by forcing him to escort a new hire through the mines and become caught up in the ensuing chaos with everyone else.

Thomas walked the full two hundred feet back to the site of the ruptured pipe, struggling to find a solution to the budding global crisis in front of him. Without Thomas' help, the Orbital Navy would be fully constructed and flight-worthy within the year and General Andrews would sweep across the planet with an unstoppable armada. If Thomas could manage to *destroy* the manufacturing facility below the mine, the Oh-En' propulsion program would be crippled; their launch date would be drastically pushed back. With luck, the sabotage would prevent General Andrews from seizing control of the entire planet under the guise of 'military intervention.'

He found Bailey on her knees in the mud, straddling a track rail and struggling to stand.

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“...help...” Bailey moaned breathlessly at the sight of Thomas approaching.

He knelt and pulled her to her feet, only to watch her knees buckle as she collapsed into the mud once more. Thomas cursed and aimed his light down to discover that Bailey’s oxygen mask had cracked along its face. The choking damp was invading her lungs with every breath she took.

“Bailey, stay with me,” Thomas demanded. The piercing Canary wail in her vest pocket became too much to bear. He grabbed the half-broken device and tried in vain to turn it off before hurling it away in aggravation. Its wailing Doppler-effected back at him in a haunting echo as it soared off into the darkness of the tunnel. Bailey reached up and grasped his outstretched sleeve with surprising strength. An unbidden memory came to mind of his daughter’s childhood, when her fingers had curled around his sleeve in a similar fashion while he’d tucked her into bed.

‘Stay with me,’ Mei Ling had begged him. *‘Don’t leave.’* Thomas sat with his daughter then until she fell into a soundless sleep.

Bailey coughed and her grip on his sleeve loosened. Thomas snapped back to attention, praying she was fainting from the fall and not the gas.

“You stay with me, Bailey!” He took a final deep breath of clean air and tore his oxygen mask free to snug it up to Bailey’s face, casting aside her own ruined mask. Bailey’s foggy gaze sharpened as she realized what was happening. She slapped at his arms as he worked, trying to stop him from giving her his own oxygen supply. Thomas overcame her easily and hoisted her onto his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

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“I won’t leave you,” he said to her. Thomas sloughed his way back for the train, panting with greater and greater exertion from Bailey’s weight, the harsh walking, and the suffocating air. Oblivious to his strife, the miners righted the train car onto the tracks with a metal clang and an exhausted cheer. The sound of their victory pulled Thomas from the wave of dizziness sweeping through his head, and he hurried forward to meet them. His vision was growing spotty by the time he finally reached the passenger car and placed Bailey inside.

“Jesus, Thomas! Are you out of your mind?” Trevor said when he saw the man’s maskless face. “Whatever happened to ‘save yourself before anyone else?’”

“Just drive,” Thomas rasped, collapsing onto the floor of the passenger car beside Bailey.

#

Bright light stabbed at his eyes and Thomas was dimly aware of floating, or rolling, as the world swam back into existence around him. A medical oxygen mask covered his mouth and nose, its long hose dangling down from his side. He tried to move his arms but found them restrained. Pins and needles rushed into his fingers and toes.

“I’m here, Thomas; it’s alright,” Mei Ling’s voice whispered as the grime was wiped from his forehead. Thomas realized he was moaning. “We made it out; we’re going to be okay,” Mei continued. A door slammed shut beside him and Thomas’ eyes finally adjusted to the light. He turned his head with effort, expecting to see his daughter sitting in the ambulance that solidified around her. When his blurred vision subsided, it was Bailey’s face that materialized before him, a medical oxygen mask covering her mouth and nose as well, pumping clean air from the canister beside her.

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“Where am I?” Thomas croaked, gagging on his cotton ball tongue.

“We’re alive, for starters,” Bailey explained, wiping at his face with the wet rag in her hand. “We made it out of the tunnel and there were rescue vans waiting for us.”

“You’re alright?” Thomas wheezed.

“Yes,” Bailey said, coughing into her oxygen mask. “I hit my head when the train car derailed. The medic thinks I may be concussed, but I’ll live. Thomas, you saved me...”

Thomas’ eyes flitted away from Bailey as he sighed with relief.

“Jimmy was right Thomas,” Trevor’s voice rattled as he swam into view beside Bailey on the ambulance bench they shared. “We really are being invaded; I heard the gunfire myself when we hit the surface.” The gloved hand of an unseen attending medic probed at Thomas’ torso, massaging for possible contusions. “It’s got to be the Russians,” Trevor pondered.

“...no...” Thomas pled.

Trevor clicked his tongue, oblivious to Thomas’ discovery. “I don’t like it anymore than you do. They set off some kind of EMP so we wouldn’t see ‘em coming; security called it a graphite bomb. It knocked out their drones, cameras, everything.”

“Where...where are we going...” Thomas managed to whimper. His lungs were heavy and every gulp of air felt empty, doing little to aid the sleepy sensation enveloping him.

“All non-combat personnel have gotten orders to load up the last of the injured and fall back to Crest Basin to help with evacuation efforts,” The medic replied beside him, “security’s holding off the invaders as long as they can.”

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Thomas craned his neck to the other side of the ambulance to watch the medic ready an IV drip connected to the needle protruding from his left arm.

“Can’t...” Thomas struggled against the straps that secured him to the ambulance stretcher. “Can’t leave...” he moaned. “The mine...”

“Bullshit, let ‘em have the damned pyrite,” Trevor grunted. “We went above and beyond the call of duty already today; it’s time the soldiers stationed here earned their paychecks.”

“Stop the van,” Thomas ordered.

“Sir, we can’t do that,” the medic answered. “You need to rest. We’ve been instructed by security to—”

“Stop the van!” Thomas screamed. “I am the head researcher on this project, and I outrank every one of you. I order you to stop this van and untie me!” Thomas’ vision grew spotty again from the exertion of shouting, and for a moment he wondered if he would fall unconscious once more. The medic obeyed and radioed for the driver to pull over, unstrapping Thomas from the stretcher with reluctance. Thomas massaged life back into his muscles with hands that felt as heavy as mallets while he sat up with effort.

“Thomas, you need to lie down; you inhaled enough gas to fly a blimp!” Bailey pleaded, barely suppressing a cough herself as she spoke. Thomas paid her no mind.

“Tell the driver to turn around,” Thomas said, clutching at the oxygen mask that gave him precious little air. “They can’t take control of the mine.”

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“But it’s just a pyrite mine,” Bailey said. “Why is it so important the Russians don’t get the secrets to electricity that’s been on the market for years?”

“We aren’t being attacked by the Russians,” Thomas replied, fighting a wave of nausea. “And they’re not after the pyrite.”

#

4.

It was a moonless night, and the sky was bursting with the full expanse of the Milky Way. The medic helped Thomas down from the ambulance and handed him the duffel bag of oxygen masks he’d requested. Thomas dismissed him to evacuate before making for the row of drift runners long since abandoned at the mine’s entrance. The re-enforced utility buggies were the safest bet at making it through the mine.

“A fucking *weapons* lab? Are you serious, Thomas?!” Trevor shouted as he followed the scientist out of the ambulance, hobbling on his splinted leg with the aid of a single crutch.

“It’s not a weapons *lab*, it’s a *manufacturing* facility,” Thomas explained. His fatigue caught up with him and his pace slowed. “A new power-cell for particle propulsion technology, using pyrite and molybdenum-carbide... we’ve been building centrifuges here for artillery cannons and engine systems... for a new class of spaceships.” He panted while Bailey jumped down from the vehicle’s tailgate after them. The medic, late already for the rendezvous point at Crest Basin, wished them well, tossed a pair of oxygen masks at Bailey, and closed the ambulance’s

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back doors before hopping into the cab with his partner and driving off. Trevor turned to watch them speed away in shock.

“Bastards,” Trevor cursed to himself as he watched the ambulance shrink into the distance, trailing dust behind it. “They went an’ left us behind to watch you get yourself killed, Thomas!”

Thomas placed a hand against the cold metal of the nearest drift runner, forced to face Bailey when she held its doors shut against his grasp.

“Start talking!” she demanded. “What’s going on?”

Thomas nodded and took several deep, ragged breaths.

“I’ve been working for a new branch of the military since I invented pyrite power-cells.” He swallowed and looked up in shame at Trevor and Bailey. “I’ve been chained to their research contracts for five years: particle cannons, rifles, anything to ensure the American military’s global dominance. Once I discovered the secrets to particle propulsion, they demanded I mass-produce engine centrifuges for a new line of military vessels. The bastards want to conquer the planet.”

“Why would you go along with this?” Bailey asked. “Thomas, that’s a dark road.”

“If I stopped, it would have put my family in danger,” Thomas gasped into his oxygen mask. “The Oh-En would have found a way to punish me. Foreign powers would have found a way to kidnap me.”

“You could’ve put up a fight at least!” Bailey exclaimed in disbelief.

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“It was my life’s *work!*” Thomas shouted before a fit of wheezing seized him. “I’d just discovered how to travel at speeds humanity could never fathom! Pluto in a *day!* I couldn’t leave it unfinished.” He reached for the door handle to the drift runner’s cab but doubled over when his coughing overcame him. When his breathing settled he looked up, ashamed and depleted.

“Bailey, the Orbital Navy staged this attack to jump into the war abroad. If I don’t destroy my manufacturing facility, they’ll have everything they need to conquer the planet. General Andrews has to be stopped.”

“You don’t have to go alone,” Bailey implored, setting a hand on his shoulder. “Let me help you.”

Thomas was about to protest, but the look in her eyes and another wave of heaving wheezes took the fight out of him. Bailey opened the drift runner’s back door and helped Thomas inside before looking back to Trevor, who stood several feet from them, leaning on his crutch. “We’ll need a driver,” she said.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Trevor cried, tossing his hands up in resignation. “Fine. I’m stuck here, anyway.”

#

Thomas found a clipboard in the drift runner and used the back of a work order form to sketch their route before reclining in exhaustion on the back bench seat, leaving Bailey to deci-

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pher his chicken scratch notes on the already tattered paper. A solid line traced their path downwards, terminating at Thomas' facility a mile and a half below the earth's surface.

"Where are we going? Which way should I turn?!" Trevor demanded from the driver's seat while they barreled down the mine corridor. Bailey held her light closer to the map Thomas had drawn them. They were once more outfitted with working oxygen masks and fresh canisters of air to combat the thick black smoke billowing around their mining vehicle while its lights prodded into endless twisting tunnels.

"The second left coming up," she exclaimed. Trevor was shifting gears to turn when Bailey gasped. "Third left! Third left!" Trevor jerked the wheel, skidding the drift runner out of the turn on its wide-set wheels to keep it barreling on course. Its high clearance made little difficulty overcoming the debris and obstacles before them, so long as they avoided the smaller tunnel shafts like the one into which Bailey nearly steered them.

"Damn it, kid; make up your mind!" Trevor gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles as he nosed them forward through the hellish smoke.

"What do you want from me? It's my first day!" Bailey looked back at Thomas in the rear passenger seat, who was struggling harder to breathe where he lay. "Thomas, what are we looking for when we get to the lab?"

"Immersion chamber," he coughed. "Where we meld molybdenum casings around refined pyrite alloys before atomizing the interiors with geothermal energy."

"Try using English!" Trevor shouted, wiping sweat from his neck as he drove.

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“We drilled a hole in the earth,” Thomas shook his head and wheezed. “We use it to build the M-Drive power cells. If we destroy the immersion chamber, the whole facility is useless.”

“How do we destroy it then?” Trevor replied, braking hard against a fallen beam that leapt out of the smoke. “The fire in here seems to be doing a damn good job of tearing the place apart already!” He cut a sharp turn into the third shaft from the left, staring hard into the tunnel ahead.

“First right!” Bailey pointed for the shaft that burst into view through the smoke and Trevor brought the drift runner skidding through its turn.

“The facility is sealed from the rest of the mine,” Thomas explained. “Fire won’t work. Seismic dampers.” He swallowed hard against another wave of rasping coughs. “...cut power to the seismic dampers...” He clasped at his chest, heaving and coughing, unable to speak from the exertion of breathing.

“Shit, Trevor, he’s getting bad.” Bailey set the map on the dashboard and unbuckled herself from the passenger seat to tend to Thomas. Trevor grabbed at the loose fabric of her work vest and pulled her back down.

“You’re staying with me!” he snapped. “I need a navigator and Thomas won’t be breathing any better if you’re back there holding his hand!”

Bailey took a sharp breath to calm her fear and picked up the map once more. “Second right!” she called as the tunnel sloped steeper downward.

#

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The facility was one massive room with a concrete floor, long deserted by the research team (along with, much to Thomas' dismay, their entire stock of prototype molybdenum-Drive cores.) Bailey could only nod in shock when Thomas revealed the proof of their treachery.

Above them, the jagged earthen ceiling had been rock-bolted and wire-netted before a spray foam coating was painted over its every inch to maintain its structure. Columns of hydraulic pistons propped up the ceiling in a half dozen rows along the facility, each as wide as Bailey from shoulder to shoulder. Bucket-segmented conveyor belts piled with heaps of rock and minerals had been paused in their labors hoisting materials down from the chutes above. The mastication vat that waited to be fed at the belt's end began the facility's long assembly line.

Bailey marveled at the sheer number of devices and machines she could not recognize that wrapped around the room's edges, including what looked like an industrial sized oven, tall steel drums rigged up to blue rubber hosing, and a chemical drip standing vigil above a heap leach pad where a pile of pulverized rock was soaking in an acid bath. On the opposite side of the room, what looked like a jet turbine engine stood looming over a dedicated terminal, twenty feet tall. Bailey's eyes widened at the sight of the sleek turbine that proved evidence of Thomas' stories: a space-worthy propulsion system.

"So this is where our tax dollars go," Trevor muttered. He brought the drift runner to a stop at the computer terminal beside the seismic dampers in the center of the room. A close standing bundle of three, the dampers were massive coils winding tightly around the hydraulic piston in their centers. Each one burrowed up into the ceiling above. The devices surrounded a

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heavy-looking hatch welded into the ground, undoubtedly the immersion chamber they'd come to destroy.

"That's the ship engine you built?" Bailey asked when they pulled Thomas out of the back seat and half-dragged him for the seismic dampers, pointing at the turbine that stood three times as tall as her.

"The Molybdenum-Drive," Thomas croaked through his mask. "The next step in interstellar travel..." He tried to walk with them as they held him up, his feet tripping up beneath him. "I only ever wanted to take us into space."

He heaved a rattling breath and rested his head against the computer terminal's cold metal when they set him down. Thomas lifted an arm with effort and pointed across the room to the facility's service lift. The chain-link fence before it was large enough to drive the drift runner right through when opened.

"Thomas, you can barely breathe," Bailey said, standing at the terminal's controls. "Tell me how to work this thing and I'll get it done." She tapped a few keys, hoping to bring it to life. The screen flashed blue.

TWO PHASE IDENTIFICATION REQUIRED; the computer droned at them in an atonal robotic voice.

"Thumb print..." Thomas gasped, reaching for the black pad set before the keyboard beside him. Bailey took his hand and guided his thumb into place while Trevor helped to hold him up.

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RECOGNIZED. PASSWORD DICTATION REQUIRED FOR SPEECH PATTERN
ANALYSIS.

“...meiling,” Thomas mumbled kazoo-like.

INVALID SPEECH PATTERN. SYSTEM LOCKOUT WILL COMMENCE UPON
SUBSEQUENT—

“Mei Ling,” Thomas pulled his mask away from his face to unmuffle his voice.

SPEECH PATTERN CONFIRMED. FULL ADMINISTRATIVE ACCESS GRANTED.
WELCOME, DOCTOR ZHANG.

The computer chimed and its screen flickered. Thomas gasped hungry breaths of air as he placed his mask on once more.

“Okay, Thomas; we’re in,” Bailey said, leaning over the keyboard. The screen displayed an array of files. “What am I looking for?”

“Backup power... sub-routine,” Thomas groaned as he supported himself against the computer terminal’s edge. Bailey found the correct window and blinked hard as streams of data readouts splayed across the screen. Several lines were flashing red.

“Seismic Damper... Re-route power... service lift...” Thomas instructed. The computer screen flashed red at Bailey’s prodding.

WARNING: FACILITY STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY AT RISK OF COMPROMISE
UPON DEACTIVATION OF SEISMIC DAMPERS. DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE? The
computer warned.

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“How long do we have to get out of the tunnel?” Trevor asked.

“Long enough,” Thomas rasped. “Drive west...for Crest Basin. I will stay... overload the prototype engine. Explosion will... collapse the mine...destroy the immersion chamber.”

“Thomas, what are you talking about? You’re coming with us!” Bailey demanded. “Don’t tell me *this* was your plan!”

INCOMING VIDEO MESSAGE. A notification lit up the corner of the screen. Thomas brushed Bailey aside and tapped at the computer terminal, bringing up a camera feed of a thick, square-jawed man donned in a decorated blue-grey officer’s uniform that Bailey could not recognize.

“General Andrews,” Thomas croaked.

“Zhang?!” the man glowered. “We thought your terminal was glitching from the graphite bomb. I’m shocked you even made it down there, the research team said the place was a ghost town. What in God’s name are you thinking, trying to destroy our facility?!”

“Saving the world...from my inventions... from you...” Thomas gripped the edge of the terminal and stood as straight as he could muster to oppose the general.

“You can’t stop this, Zhang!” Andrews reddened at the notion. “We’ve got your research data *and* your prototypes! You’ve already taught your team all about your secrets! It’s only a matter of time until my armada is flight-ready.”

“Who does this prick think he is?” Trevor snarled. “I don’t remember voting for you; what gives you the right to throw our lives away for your war games?!”

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“You damned civilians don’t have a clue about the conflicts looming on our borders!”

General Andrews replied. “Unifying the world under one flag is the *only* way to ensure global peace!”

“Global... imprisonment,” Thomas rasped.

“Zhang, so help me—”

Thomas cut off the feed with a burst of furious key tapping.

“Humanity’s future is not meant for one man to decide,” he said to himself. Thomas pushed off from the terminal and reached into his torn and muddied vest. He produced a tattered envelope, its ink smudged and nearly illegible. He held it out to Bailey. “Gift...for my daughter,” Thomas whispered. “Mail it. Please.” Bailey took the envelope with numb hands, searching for the words to change his mind. Thomas tapped the terminal’s ‘execute’ command. A warning alarm blared from the ceiling as the service lift’s barrier began to raise itself.

“He’s made up his mind, Bailey,” Trevor said. He set a hand on her shoulder and pulled her away from the computer terminal. “There’s no time to figure out another way. We’ve got to move or all this was for nothing. You’re alright, Thomas,” he nodded to the scientist. “I always gave you shit, but you’re alright.”

Thomas nodded back before Trevor grabbed his crutch and hobbled to the drift runner to fire up its engine. Bailey hesitated to follow after him, turning to take one last look at the man who’d saved her life and was now sacrificing his own to protect the world from his inventions.

“Bailey! Move it!” Trevor bellowed from the drift runner’s cab.

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“Go,” Thomas waved her off and turned back to the computer terminal to ready his fate.

“Keep my daughter safe.”

#

The hazy orange glow of sunrise was peeking over the mountaintops behind them when they emerged on the surface. The lift rattled to a stop in an alcove tucked away in the mountains around them and hidden from the roads nearby. Trevor hesitated to shift the drift runner into gear, glancing at the rearview mirror with uncertainty. When he caught Bailey looking at him, he drove them westward for the road waiting past the mountain alcove. Bailey ran her fingers along the envelope Thomas had given her, brushing dirt from his scrawling handwriting. Neither of them spoke.

When the ground shook with the unmistakable rocking of the mine’s collapse, both were terrified that the very ground beneath them would tear itself open. Trevor drove faster while Bailey craned her head back to see a massive cloud of smoke rising over the mountains. Trevor broke the silence with a rattling cough when they’d managed to make it a safe distance away.

“We can’t tell anyone what just happened,” he declared.

“What do you mean?” Bailey demanded. “The country needs to know they’re being lied to! Thomas—” her words cut short as a fit of coughing seized her.

“What do you think the military will do if they find out that we helped sabotage their weapons facility? Or if the goddamn Russians or the Chinese found out we were involved and tortured us for anything we knew?” Trevor shot her an impatient look. “It would only draw the

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wrong kind of attention to us. To our *families*. We did our part. There's nothing left to do but hope that Thomas' sacrifice was enough and go about our lives."

Bailey clenched her jaw and held the letter close to her chest.

"Alright. We bury it with the mine," she murmured. They settled into pained silence once more as Trevor drove on for Crest Basin.

#

ACT TWO: PYRITE DISEASE.

2040. Autumn. Spring Pines, Oregon.

1.

The recurring night terror was all too familiar for Bailey, and no less comforting: smoke. A lung-ful of damp. The Canary's shrill braying. Thomas hoisting her up through the darkness.

Bailey rolled out of bed with her eyes still closed, thrashing herself awake. The morning alarm drilled into her ears as she caught herself on the floor and stood, tangled up in her bed sheets.

Bailey muted the alarm and leaned against her bedpost. She clutched at her chest, trying to steady her heartbeat between sputtering gasps for air. Another night of echoing memories wound its way around her wakefulness, reluctant to relinquish the vice grip on her insides. Bailey worked fast to steady her breathing before wiping the sweat from her face and checking how long she had until clock-in time. She cursed when she realized her gaffe in setting an alarm at all: day shift was on stand-down for an emergency company meeting, which wouldn't even start for

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six hours. Bailey sipped at the glass of water on the nightstand beside her and lay back down, praying in the back of her mind that the past would let her rest in peace, for once. When she opened her eyes again, she was late. Bailey dragged herself out of bed and brewed a thermos of coffee, topping off the rim with a generous pour of whiskey before throwing on some clothes and making her way out the door, headed through the biting cold for the town hall.

#

The town hall stood in Spring Pines' center, several streets away from Bruce's Bar. The administrative offices on its upper floors were abandoned and dim when Mei found her way up the building's steps. It seemed that the Hellcats preferred their own haunts from which to prowl. Sunlight poured through the many windows inside the great hall, converted into a meeting room with its rows of cheap metal chairs facing the crude stage set up at its far end. Mei sidled past a row of women for an empty seat in the quickly crowding space. As she sat, she took in the rows of laborers gathering around them and spied Bailey creeping inside the hall.

"Hello, Captain," Mei said, offering a stiff nod when Bailey found an empty seat behind her own and tapped her on the shoulder to say hello. Mei chewed back a fresh mouthful of questions and accusations at the sight of Bailey's bleary smile, still perturbed by the captain's confession the night prior. Mei knew better than to dig up their past surrounded by eavesdroppers. She didn't have to fight her urges long before a pair of Hellcats marched onto the small stage set at the end of the hall, rousing the room silent and bringing the town meeting to order.

Mei watched a clean-cut executive wearing a tucked-in navy blue polo shirt stride past the Hellcats for the microphone stand set center stage. He introduced himself as Dan Fitz, the

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newly appointed company representative from New Prospect Frontier. The de-facto mayor of Spring Pines stood before the rows of cheap metal folding chairs, each one occupied with a laborer fretting over their job prospects. The walls were lined with dozens more attendees waiting with palpable nerve to hear news of their futures in the aftermath of the admin personnel's mass arrest.

"What happened to James McEnroy?" Trevor shouted from the sidelines of the hall. "You hauled his ass off to prison for trying to negotiate with the Arties, didn't you?" Murmurs of agreement rose from around the room. The Hellcats exchanged a furtive glance from where they stood behind Fitz.

"Mr. McEnroy and his administration have been deposed for attempting to poach company employees to the locals," Fitz said with a poker face and a wave of his hand. "Let me be clear: the Arties are criminals, and 'leasing out' personnel and mines to aid in their activities will not be tolerated."

"They were trying to keep us working!" a woman shouted from the side of the meeting hall. "What do you expect when we're all guessing whether we'll be laid off in a week?"

"Even so," Fitz countered, "we maintain a *zero*-tolerance policy at NPF. Everyone connected to 'McEnroy's Insurrection' will be rooted out and ejected from Spring Pines within the week."

"And what about the rest of us?" the woman at the side of the meeting hall called out again. "Are we getting our lay-off notices or what?"

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A ripple of agreement spread through the meeting hall. Fitz shifted at the mic stand, visibly flustered.

“I know that everyone’s heard the rumors,” Fitz explained, “so let’s just cut to the chase: we’ve lost the bid for next year’s biggest land parcel and Spring Pines’ pyrite yield is shrinking every quarter. We need to send some folks home so we can keep this place running at all.”

“Are you gonna be straight with us or what?” Trevor shouted from the back of the hall. “Who’s going home? We’ve got mouths to feed!” Mei twisted around in her chair to search for the old man, who she found leaning against a door frame beside the exit with a distrusting leer plastered to his face as he watched Fitz.

“I *am* being straight with you on this.” Representative Fitz flattened his polo shirt against his chest once the room quieted. “We’re preparing to winterize the project here and it’s just not feasible to keep every mine running at once, burning away more energy than we extract. Several crews will remain at Spring Pines to mine out the sites already in operation while the prospecting teams continue explorations at potential new mine sites. We’ll be handing out layoff notices after this meeting to everyone we’ve decided to let go. *Temporarily*. Rest assured, we will be in touch when more work opens up.”

“And when’ll that be?” Bailey hollered from behind Mei after a hard swallow from her thermos nearly choked her.

“We’re hoping that sometime before the end of next calendar year the mining bureau will have a new land parcel for us,” Fitz replied through pursed lips, his cheeks flushing with anger at their interruptions. “In the meantime, this is the situation we have in front of us. You want to

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keep working? Hand over any laborers connected with McEnroy's Insurrection." The rumblings of discontent grew louder throughout the room as Fitz adjourned the meeting.

"It's like they *want* us at each other's throats," Bailey muttered into her thermos while Mei stretched life back into her legs. "At least we know that prospecting and rescue is here to stay."

The gathering dissolved around them as the meeting's attendees filed outside to assemble into smoking circles and gossip cliques.

"Why is the mining bureau hoarding all these land parcels when there's precursor mines everywhere you turn these days?" Mei worked up the courage to ask Bailey, suppress her knotting stomach and burying the questions she'd wanted most to ask.

"They're trying to slow down our environmental impact," Bailey replied. "Less active mining towns makes it easier to regulate the industry." She sipped at her thermos while they waited in line to make their way to the exit. "As if anyone from the mining bureau's actually going around inspecting this shit show. The lazy bastards don't even set foot in the mines when they show up."

"You're saying that no one's actually working to clean up the mines?" Mei asked. "The instructors from mining school made it sound like the industry's improved its standards, that the water crisis is just from *existing* damage from acid drainage."

"You eat *all* the bullshit they fed you?" Bailey snorted. "They didn't have clean water where I came from since *before* the world turned pyrite. 'Clean energy' didn't make a damn lick

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of difference, and the water's not getting any cleaner just because we're doing better than we were digging holes in the ground."

"I guess I really did miss a lot while I was floating around in space," Mei admitted. "My father thought renewable energy would save the world, not destroy it."

"Nothing comes from nothing," Bailey replied. "Just because the sun's got power forever doesn't mean we've got the materials to build a million solar panels every year, or that the stuff isn't dangerous if it rusts. There's no saving humanity from its own rabid consumerism, Mei; find something good, chances are we'll fuck it up."

"You're in a wonderful mood today, aren't you?" Mei muttered as they descended the worn stairs leading from the town hall doors, touching down on the muddy slush below.

"Bad night's sleep. Don't worry, I'm taking my medicine." Bailey chuckled, swigging from her thermos again before offering it to her. "Care for a sip? I made it Irish."

"It's a little early to drink, Bailey," Mei countered with a quizzical look.

"A day off is a day off." Bailey nipped at her thermos again. "Just because these bastards own the beds we sleep in and the air we breathe doesn't mean they own my free time."

Bailey walked with Mei past a group of women gathered by the brick wall beside town hall's entrance. Several of them lit cigarettes and kicked at the dirt while they talked. Behind the group a tattered, faded poster hung against the wall, flapping in the wind. President Simon's cartoonish wolf-grin accompanied his familiar Uncle Sam finger point. *Simon Says: Start Digging!*

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the caption read. Two of the women beside the poster laughed at an unheard joke. Mei turned from the poster to see Vera chuckling with them, bruised but vibrant.

“How about we hear what’s so funny?” Bailey nudged Mei with her elbow before striding into the group, where Vera was mid-way through a story.

“—and he goes, ‘but I’m disabled; cut me some slack.’ I said ‘disabled? You shot your leg off to dodge the draft! If I can work the mines with a busted rib, your lazy ass can change a diaper!’” The circle of women crowed with laughter while Vera tugged on a cigarette.

“I take it Brendan’s still having trouble pulling his weight back home, Vera?” Bailey asked as Mei came up beside her.

“Oh, Bailey,” Vera shined a toothy grin. “You can’t fault my cousin for having trouble pulling his weight: he’s only got one good foot and he’s got his dick in both hands, half the time.” The circle of women erupted into cawing laughter. Mei found herself smiling with them. “That poor wife of his never knew what she signed up for,” Vera said, a grin spreading across her face.

“It’s good to see you laughing, Vera,” Mei said. “Don’t you think you should take it easy while that broken rib heals up, though? You got pretty banged up yesterday.”

“It’s just a rib,” Vera said, shrugging. “What good is resting going to do to fix it? I’ll just swap out with Alex as navigator and run support for a week or two.” She flicked away her cigarette and waved goodbye to the women in the circle, gesturing for Bailey and Mei to follow after her as she walked.

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“Have you visited Dawson in the infirmary yet, Cap?” Vera asked, stuffing her hands into her jacket pockets.

“I wasn’t sure he’d care to see anyone from work if he’s not getting paid,” Bailey snorted.

“Well, I was headed there anyway if you wanted to tag along,” Vera offered. “I got a message from the infirmary that he wanted to see us. Something important, I guess.”

“I’ll go,” Mei said.

“Hell, you’re the reason he’s still breathing, Mei,” Vera laughed. “I’d say he’s got some bowing and scraping he owes you.”

“I had an idea is all...” Mei replied, embarrassed to be reminded of her impulsive bravery.

“Well, c’mon, then,” Bailey grunted. “Let’s get on with it.” She gulped down the last of her coffee before tossing the emptied thermos into the knap sack slung over her shoulder. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and huffed a visible cloud of air in front of her flushed cheeks. “Winter came early this year.”

They walked down Main Street, which was blanketed with an already trampled sheet of powdery snow from the flurry the night before. Pedestrians, all off-hours laborers for NPF, swarmed around them, occasionally stepping aside for what few vehicles passed by: delivery trucks, public transport buses, and the rare private rig.

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“The infirmary’s about a half mile’s walk past the mess hall, just around the corner,” Vera said to Mei, pointing ahead of them and wincing in pain from lifting her arm too high. “Damned rib won’t let off,” she muttered, holding her side.

“Well, you’re headed for the right place,” Bailey smiled as they walked. “Maybe bum some pain pills from Dawson when we get in? I’ll bet he’s stocked fuller than a candy shop by now.”

“I’ve already got pills.” Vera wrinkled her nose at the thought and shook her head. “I don’t want to end up using the things unless I’m in a bad spot. The last thing I need is to end up addicted and breaking a bone on the regular just for a re-up.”

“You’re joking, right?” Mei asked, unable to read Vera’s sober expression.

“She’s completely serious,” Bailey answered. “More than a couple miners end up hooked and get to scheming over which body part they should take a hammer to when no one’s looking.”

“This place just gets worse and worse.” Mei shook her head. “They kept saying the mines were the best place to be back in school, but this is worse than the Oh-En’s construction colony. Why is everyone here putting up with all this mistreatment?”

“Money can be a persuasive thing,” Vera replied. “Mining is the industry that’s booming and no one else is paying a decent wage. People these days put up with a lot more than a broken rib when the alternative is starving.” They rounded a street corner and the mess hall stood beside them, warm and welcoming.

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As they approached its entrance, a scrappy little dog scurried out of the open door, carrying away a half-eaten chicken leg. It bore a collar and a warm looking sweater, despite its rag-tag appearance. An older woman with ebony skin and thick black hair trotted out from the mess hall after him.

“Calvin, get back here!” she called to the dog. It paid her no heed, scurrying further away with its trophy.

“lo, Naddy,” Vera waved.

“Calvin’s acting up, Nadine?” Bailey smiled when the woman caught up with the dog and scooped him up in her arms. He clenched the chicken leg in his mouth, unrelenting when Nadine tried to wrestle it free from his jaws. She groaned and turned to the group approaching them, offering a hurried kiss to Vera while Calvin struggled to free himself from her grip.

“Hey, V. Bailey,” she nodded. “Little bastard snapped off his leash when my back was turned and someone dropped a drumstick on the floor. Even when I think he’s too old to go and run off on me, he finds a way to drive me up a wall.” Nadine pulled a coiled leash from her pocket and clipped it back onto the dog’s collar before setting him down and brushing dirt off her jacket. The dog sat down in the snow to gnaw at his stolen chicken leg.

“Well, you’ve got to give him some credit for staying so spunky for a senior citizen,” Bailey replied. “Old Calvin’s been on the job longer than most of us, after all.”

“Don’t I know it.” Nadine knelt down to pet her dog. “He’s lucky I love him.”

“Did you get your layoff notice, Nadine?” Bailey asked.

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“No, I volunteered,” Nadine replied with a grateful smile. “My last day’s a week from now.”

“No shit!” Bailey whistled. “Well, at least you won’t be sticking around for another winter here.”

“Oh, she is,” Vera laughed. “She’s just retiring to play housewife while I earn us that bread-money.”

“Woof. Letting your wife wear the pants doesn’t suit you, Nadine,” Bailey remarked. “You’ll go stir crazy here if you haven’t got a drilling team to lead.”

“I need a break from the tunnels, Bailey,” Nadine admitted. “My hands are getting shaky from working the jacklegs and Vera and I have saved up enough to manage on her income for awhile. Camp rules allow employees’ spouses to stay on site, so I’ll just volunteer to do kitchen work for the mess hall to keep busy.”

“You, a chef?” Bailey cackled. “I never would’ve known you’d had it in you. We’ll be losing one damned good mining expert when you go; I’d never trust any green hat with a drill down in the tunnels.”

“I know it,” Nadine nodded. “Sorry, I don’t think I’ve met you?” she turned to Mei, who flushed in embarrassment.

“I’m Mei,” she answered. “I only just came onto the project with the prospecting and rescue teams under Bailey and Vera.”

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“Well, between the winter weather and almost every admin we had getting arrested, you picked a hell of a time to sign up.” Nadine shook her head at the thought.

“We were about to visit Dawson in the infirmary, Naddy,” Vera crouched to scratch behind Calvin’s ears. “I guess the old man had something he wanted to tell us. Did you want to come?”

“I’ve only got an hour until I have to report for graveyard shift and I’m starving,” Nadine replied. “You three go on; I’ll see you later.” She kissed Vera goodbye and made her way back into the mess hall, tugging Calvin inside behind her. Vera watched her go, blowing a kiss when Nadine looked back to see them standing in the snow where she’d left them. The sight of their love was the most comforting thing Mei had seen since she’d arrived in Spring Pines.

#

Vera led them another several blocks past the mess hall to the infirmary on the edge of camp. The utilitarian building was an eggshell white, two floors, and couldn’t have held more than thirty patient rooms. They followed the attendant nurse’s directions to Dawson’s room on the second floor.

“There’s that geriatric sum’ bitch!” Bailey hooted as she marched past the bedridden Dawson and flopped down onto the vacant infirmary bed by the window. “Sheesh, they really set you up, didn’t they?” she put her arms behind her head and looked to Dawson, still grinning. “Let *me* get mauled by the bear, next time.”

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“Good to see you too, Bailey,” Dawson said in a faraway voice. He hardly looked up from his old and wrinkled hands while he tugged at the patient bracelet attached to his wrist. An uneaten tray of food rested on its stand beside his bed. “Thanks for coming.”

“What’ve they been pumping into you, Dawson?” Vera gestured to the IV drip hanging at his bedside. “You seem damn near catatonic.”

“I’m sorry I almost got us killed, Vera,” Dawson mumbled into his hands.

“What are you talking about, old man?” Vera replied and walked to the foot of his bed to inspect his uneaten meal. “You didn’t put that grizzly down there. It’s better for us that it came sniffing after your jerky. If we’d been split up to explore the tunnels and ran into the thing *then*, one of us would be getting buried right now.”

She saw a plate of gelatin and pointed at it, looking up to Dawson with an unspoken hunger. The old man waved a rheumatic hand at her. Vera wasted no time grabbing a fork from the tray and hounding down the dessert. Dawson looked up and saw Mei standing in the doorway, waiting to find her place in the group. “Green hat,” he muttered, as if trying to jar his memory.

“You got anything to say to Mei, Dawson?” Bailey quipped from the spare bed. “She did save your life, after all.”

“Yeah. Thanks, I guess,” Dawson said without enthusiasm.

“It’s nothing.” Mei clasped her arms in front of her, feeling like an alien in the face of Dawson’s lukewarm gratitude. “I just had an instinct, is all.”

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“Sharp kid,” Dawson nodded. “You shouldn’t be wasting your life working the mines like us.”

“Hell, what else is there to do, Dawson?” Vera asked through a mouthful of gelatin. “Pyrite mining’s just about the only steady gig going right now for any of us. It’s for damn sure all the government thinks we’re good for with their ‘career placement tests.’”

“That don’t make it right.” Dawson ran a hand through his dark grey crop of short-buzzed hair.

“What’s your deal, Dawson?” Bailey swung her feet out from the edge of the bed she’d claimed and sat up. “You’re more of a mope than usual today. Did you invite us here just to give us career advice?”

“They’re sending me home, Bailey.” Dawson turned to her with exhausted eyes. “Permanently ineligible to return to active work duty.”

“What?” Vera coughed on the mouthful of banana that she’d helped herself to. “NPF’s forcing you into retirement just because of a little scratch you got from a bear?”

“No,” Dawson shook his head. “When I got admitted to the infirmary, they ran a bunch of tests: blood work, x-rays, the whole nine yards... they found a shadow in my lung when they weren’t even looking.”

“Pyrite Disease,” Bailey deduced, her face flashed a shade of green. Vera put her hand up to her mouth to chew through the distressing news. Their reactions left Mei feeling colder than before, standing in the doorway like a spectating ghost.

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“How far along is it?” Vera asked, setting her half-eaten banana down beside the gelatin container.

“Far enough along that NPF’s given up on treating it,” Dawson replied and rubbed at his hands. “The cheap bastards don’t want to pay my medical bills to keep me working. They’re giving me the heave-ho and leaving me to figure it out on my own.”

“They would do that?” Mei asked, the only one in the room shocked at the news.

“You really are a green hat,” Dawson laughed. “I’ve got myself an expensive death sentence. They’re claiming it was long-term damp exposure from ‘incorrect usage of company equipment,’ but no one from the mining bureau is going to come sniffing around to see whether that’s true. Those government suits are all in corporate’s pocket; they won’t risk losing their access to pyrite at the rates they’re getting from NPF.”

He shook his head and grunted. “Maybe it really has been brewing for awhile and I never noticed it flair up. Either way NPF is denying responsibility and sending me packing.”

“But you can still fight it,” Vera offered. “Take them to private court. You’ve followed safety protocols to a ‘T’ the entire time I’ve known you!”

“Yeah, and maybe I’d win,” Dawson guessed, “but not before I burned through all my savings and choked to death on my own lungs along the way. I’ll need every penny I’ve got just for treatment.” He leaned back in his infirmary bed, resigned to defeat.

Bailey pursed her lips and looked down at the linoleum flooring. “Jesus, Dawson; I don’t know what else to say.”

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“Say you’ll quit mining before you end up with a shadow on your lung too,” Dawson demanded. “Say you’ll stop saving dumb bastards like me from the mines just so they can hop right back underground to scrape up someone else’s pyrite.”

“Dawson, I can’t—” Bailey started. Dawson’s glare cut her short.

“We’ve all heard how much you’ve been coughing, Bailey,” he said. “It’s a hell of a lot more than I ever did. Mark my words: find yourself a different career or you’ll end up in this infirmary bed twenty years faster than I did, waiting to die.”

“God damn it, Dawson,” Bailey snapped and stood up, clenching her fists. “Stop talking like you went and gave up on living already!”

“Listen green hat.” Dawson turned back to Mei, ignoring Bailey’s fuming. “Take some advice from an old man who’s been around the block. Don’t trust the company or the government to look after you. They’ll skin you alive if it saves them a dollar.” Mei could only nod. Bailey scoffed and stormed out of the room.

“Dawson, listen,” Vera said. Dawson held up a hand.

“Between you and Bailey, the two of you should be able to knock some sense into each other’s heads,” Dawson muttered. “You’re better off jumping ship and living on poverty wages from whatever work you can find than spending another day in the mines for NPF. Don’t make my mistakes: quit chasing dollars and adrenaline for a company that isn’t looking out for you, or you’ll end up old and alone, waiting to die.”

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He folded his hands in his lap again and resumed working at the hospital bracelet on his wrist. Vera opened her mouth twice, searching for words that wouldn't come. She finally leaned forward to squeeze Dawson's shoulder before sulking out of the room. Mei realized that she was alone with Dawson and felt more alien than ever.

"Remember this, Mei," Dawson said without looking up. "This is the only thing that comes from a life in the mines, toeing the corporate line and chipping at lumps of fool's gold just for the Oh-En to shoot their fucking rockets into space."

"I'm sorry," Mei said, bowing her head.

"Don't mention it. Just go, kid. I hate long goodbyes."

#

Mei met Vera outside of the infirmary just as she was hailing a bus back into town with the miners coming in from shift. Mei's disappointment weighed heavier when its doors swung open, revealing Angela sitting in the driver's seat instead of Grace.

"Well, you sure do get around, don't you?" Angela declared, flashing Mei a sardonic smile. "Maybe you're really a spy after all." Mei ignored her teasing and followed Vera into the bus, scanning her data chip on a wall-mounted reader to pay her fare.

Both were quiet on the ride as Dawson's news hung over their heads. Mei watched the town's grocery store and work apparel shops sweep past, fuzzy and distorted through the grimy window. Their bus turned down the residential road running parallel to Main Street's shops and pulled to a stop at the cul-de-sac of cramped apartment buildings that awaited them.

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Mei said her wan goodbyes to Vera and marched for her apartment, a three-story bundle of twenty closet-sized rooms with a single communal bathroom on each floor. The drab set-up was more luxurious than the rows of tattered cots from the detainment camp that had been Mei's home during her teenage years, and far roomier than the sleeping cubby she'd been assigned during her time in orbit with the Oh-En after that. The extra amenities did little to impress Mei. In fact, the housing complex felt less like a home and more like a barracks: bare of color and life.

Mei held up her data chip to the building's entry scanner, which unlocked the main doors with a *click*. She climbed the smoke-and-piss smelling stairwell for the third floor, eager to crawl into bed and shut out the world for a few hours while the dust settled in her mind. The scene in the dingy hallway shook her from that fantasy with negligent venom: a team of Hellcat security officers had gathered themselves outside the apartment adjacent to Mei's room, blocking her way home while they attempted to coax a miner out into the hall with their usual flair.

"Kaylee Minsk, open up!" The Hellcats' leader pounded against the locked bedroom door. "You're under arrest for your involvement with McEnroy's Insurrection!"

"McEnroy reached out to *me* about joining up with Shea!" a woman cried from inside the room. "I didn't want anything to do with the Arties!"

A security officer turned and aimed their particle rifle on Mei in an unspoken warning when she tried to pass them. Mei raised her hands and stopped in her tracks, her hopes of a few hours' rest dashed with the wood splintering from the doorframe against the Hellcat leader's powerful kick. The woman in hiding wailed a high-pitched scream while a third Hellcat dragged

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her out by the hair, pinning the thrashing woman down in the hallway to throw handcuffs on her wrists.

“I wasn’t working with McEnroy, I swear!” the woman named Kaylee sobbed. The Hellcats dragged her to her knees and set her against the wall while their team leader marched several rooms farther from the scene to pound her fist against another door.

“Jane Chambers! You in there?” the Hellcat bellowed. “Come out now! You’re under arrest for your involvement in McEnroy’s Insurrection!”

“You got something to say?” The officer brandishing her rifle demanded when she noticed Mei still standing there, dumbstruck.

“No, I’m just trying to-” Mei shook her head, waving to her bedroom door.

“Clear off!” The security officer snapped, thrusting a gloved finger to the stairwell entrance. “We’re sweeping this entire floor for McEnroy’s co-conspirators. Stay out of our way.”

Mei fled the apartment building, knowing well enough to leave when the getting was good. She found herself out in the snow once more, bereft of a destination, unable to shake her troubled thoughts or the feeling that her ‘fresh start’ was anything *but* that. She wondered to herself if the mining industry had always been so cruel to its own employees, or if her father’s inventions really had damned them all to a life of indentured servitude for an unloving company.

Mei wandered through Spring Pines to clear her head, its sounds fading from focus, along with the passerby on the street. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she failed to hear her name being called until a hand was clasping her shoulder. Mei jumped, looking up from her

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shoes to see that she'd wandered all the way back to the mess hall. Grace was standing beside her on the sidewalk, her usual brightness muted by concern that had creased its way into her face. Behind her, Trevor emerged from inside the mess hall, a steaming mug of coffee still in his hands.

"Mei, take it easy!" Grace said when Mei's pulse was slow in settling. "It's me, Grace, remember?"

"Sorry," Mei replied. "I just stumbled onto the Hellcats while they were making an arrest in my apartment," Mei replied. "What is 'McEnroy's Insurrection'? I've been hearing about this all day."

"Daddy would know better than me," Grace said, turning to Trevor as he approached. "Daddy! Tell Mei about Representative McEnroy."

"You dragged me out here just to give the green hat a lesson in current events?" Trevor said when he caught up to them. "Look, James McEnroy did his best to look out for all of us, and that's what landed him in hot water." He explained, sipping at his coffee. "He heard the Arties around here got a new leader and ended up making a deal with her to keep as many people working as he could, even if it meant teaching Arties how to mine pyrite and leasing a few precursor mines to 'em to keep them out of our way. Him and everyone he dragged into his mess are about to do hard time or worse."

"So they were non-violent offenders?" Mei replied. "The Hellcats didn't have to be so brutal about their arrests. I just had a gun aimed at me for trying to get to my own bedroom."

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“Well, there’s a reason the Hellcats are so brutal, rookie,” Trevor said. “Not to mention how much they’ve got on their plate running security *and* admin. But don’t let anyone fool you, kid: the Arties haven’t always played nice.” Trevor kicked at a patch of snow on the ground and shook his head. “We’ve had miners killed, robbed, and raped in the past. The locals only even settled down this last year or so after some combat vet named Shea started teaching the Arties basic decency. Too little, too late, in my eyes; the Hellcats were right to arrest McEnroy for colluding with them.”

“Anyway, I’m glad to run into you, Mei,” Grace broke the tension to announce. “My father has something he needs to tell you.” She crossed her arms and stared Trevor down when he’d lingered too long in the growing silence between them. Mei watched Trevor shifting on his feet, unable to meet his daughter’s eyes while she watched him hesitate to speak.

“Well, Daddy?” Grace said. “Are you gonna to make good on what we talked about earlier?”

“Fine.” Trevor took a swig of coffee and wiped his mouth with a shirtsleeve. “Zhang.” he mulled the name over in his mouth as if tasting something bitter.

“Yes, Trevor?” Mei asked, wary of the man’s out-of-character sincerity.

“Grace went and gave me the business for flaking off on you last night. And much as she’s earned herself a whipping for what she’s getting up to with Alex, she’s right.” He shot a quick glance at Grace beside him, who flinched at the flicker of anger in his eyes before he turned back to Mei.

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“I lost my brother and my son in the war...” Trevor confessed. “It’s made me a miserable son-of-a-bitch at one time or another. You saved my life and I owe you some respect. I’m sorry.”

“I- I understand,” Mei stammered. “It’s been a long decade for all of us.” She watched Trevor chew on the inside of his cheek, his wrinkles working themselves over while he forced himself to dredge up painful memories.

“Very good,” Grace nodded in satisfaction, crossing her arms in front of her. “I’m glad I caught you, Mei; it took me all night to knock some sense into my father’s head.”

“Grace. You did the right thing having me do this,” Trevor said, stiff and uncomfortable. “But I need you to head inside so I can speak with Mei alone.” He thumbed back to the mess hall. Grace began to protest, but made her exit when Mei nodded for her to leave.

“There’s more I gotta say,” he began when Grace had fallen out of earshot. “Something I’ve got to make right.” Trevor was stone-faced as he spoke to Mei.

“My father saved your life in Alaska,” Mei guessed, bundling herself tighter against the sudden chill and clutching at her pyrite pendant.

“So you know the short of it, then.” Trevor looked around to ensure no one passing on the sidewalk would overhear. “Bailey never could keep her mouth shut when she’s had a few in her.” He rattled a throaty chuckle that died as quickly as the smile on his lips.

“No, your father wasn’t a traitor, kid,” Trevor admitted. “The Oh-En staged an invasion to drag us all into the war and framed Thomas for it. We helped him destroy his research facility to keep the Orbital Navy from throwing away thousands of innocent lives... but all we really

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managed was to slow them down. The Oh-En already had all the designs they'd needed, and they used the Second Gold Rush to hoard enough pyrite for their armada *and* the surveillance network's satellites." Trevor scoffed to himself. "Even the guns they've got aimed at the whole planet for our 'protection.'"

"Why did you and Bailey hide the truth?" Mei asked, biting back the anger rising in her throat that she'd buried all day. "Why did you let them drag my family name through the mud? Drag us into the detention camps and brand us traitors?"

"It was my call; I convinced Bailey to keep quiet." Trevor hung his head. "The Oh-En's got ears everywhere and more power than God, even back then. They'd have had me and Bailey thrown into detainment right along with you the second we raised our voices... it wouldn't have saved your father's honor and it wouldn't have kept the world from turning to shit."

"My mother *died* in that camp, Trevor!" Mei screamed, ignoring the looks she drew from a trio of miners leaving the mess hall.

"I'm sorry, Mei. I was a coward." Trevor held his coffee mug in both hands, staring down into its contents. "I blamed your father for the people I lost to the war for a long time; if he hadn't gone along with the Oh-En's plans, the world probably wouldn't be the mess that it is. But I wouldn't be here at all if he hadn't pulled me out of that mine with Bailey's help. I wish I'd done more for him when all was said and done."

"Thank you for telling me," Mei whispered in a daze as the truth, which had taken root deep within her, seized hold of her insides. She felt a heat rising through her: the fear and pain and suffering, the years of hard labor she'd undertaken to escape detainment and 'prove her loy-

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alty' after her mother's death. The public disdain she'd faced after her freedom was already won. It was all built on President Simon's lies. Mei's fury sank deep into her bones and shook the air from her lungs.

"Right," Trevor cleared his throat and made to head back for the mess hall. "Well, it's getting late and I'm no damn good at this kind of stuff, so I'm going to grab Grace and head out," he said. Grace was already racing outside when he turned to leave, leading Vera out to them.

"Trevor! Where the hell is Bailey!" Vera shouted. "She's not answering her phone!"

"What do I look like, her secretary?" Trevor replied, shirking off the mantle of sincerity with which he'd approached Mei and settling into his familiar brazen attitude with grateful zeal. "It's her day off just like everyone else's. What's wrong?"

"There's been an accident in the mines," Vera explained. "Nadine's drilling crew is trapped underground!"

#

2.

"You're telling me you burned through your main battery and all six of your back up charges on top of that?" Dale demanded aghast as he laid a hand on the pyramid of rechargeable electric car batteries mounted on his counter. "Where in the hell did you get off to?"

"Shit, Dale, what does it matter?" Bailey groaned in exhaustion. "I had to get out of town to clear my head awhile. Before I knew it, I was damn near kissing the coastline."

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“You went and drove six hundred miles on a *whim*?” Dale rubbed his dirty-blond goatee in bewilderment. “You’re liable to get one hell of a company tax on your re-charge; you’ve already hit your employee fuel ration this month.”

“Just bill me for it.” Bailey leaned forward for Dale to scan her employee chip, too exhausted to endure another person’s judgments. “If I wanted a lecture on being miner of the year, I’d stay sober for those useless town hall meetings.”

“Alright, smartass.” Dale aimed an aging transaction logger at Bailey’s arm, scanning the chip in her bicep to charge her employee credit line. He carted the dead pyrite batteries into the back of the garage. He returned a few minutes later with a stack of polished, fully charged replacement batteries. “Here’s a set that’s juiced up and ready for your reserves,” he said when he’d returned to the check-out counter. “The truck’s plugged in right now, should only be a few minutes until the main battery is charged. Need anything else?”

“Yeah.” Bailey kicked at a stain on the concrete floor. “Got any smokes?”

She stepped out of the garage, flicking a lighter in front of her face and taking a long drag of nicotine. Bailey had burned through her last pack not long after storming out of the infirmary that afternoon, and the moon was already standing vigil in the sky opposite the sunset. The charging depot’s sprawling array of solar panel awnings blocked most of the skyline, but Bailey could still see one or two stars piercing the depot’s perma-noon glow in defiance. The rows of vehicle charging stations hummed in a droning chorus.

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Bailey sighed and massaged at her chest. She brought the cigarette to her lips for another hit of nicotine, hesitating when the cloying smoke crept up into her nostrils. A pang of shame coursed through her. She flicked the cigarette away in disgust.

“God damn it, Dawson.” Bailey crossed her arms in front of her and braced against the biting wind that whistled through the depot. The mostly empty lot of solar panels and battery charging stations stood looming overhead like a forest of steel and concrete canopies. Parked haphazardly apart from each other on the asphalt below were several EVs hooked up to the new universal charging docks humming beside them. Her early-model truck, bereft of the equipment necessary to interface with the upgraded infrastructure, was cast into the dingy back garage and chained to the depot’s only remaining last-gen charging dock: a twitching fire-hazard of cabling that served anyone unable to afford the newest advance in EV technology.

A single tractor trailer hummed past her on the main road, doomed itself to ride another fifty miles before finding its own high-capacity charging depot for the customized pyrite-cells that it ran on.

Her phone began to ring, shaking her from the near trance of staring after the truck’s fading headlights. She’d only just turned it back on when she rolled into the charging depot.

“Bailey here,” she answered the incoming call.

“Cap, where have you been?” Vera said into her ear. Her usual cocky cheer had been replaced with a cold urgency that sent Bailey’s stomach tightening into a knot. “We’ve been trying to get hold of you for hours.”

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“I went for a drive; it’s my day off. What’s the situation, Vera?” Bailey demanded.

“Rescue mission. You’re going to want to come in, Cap. Naddy’s people are in trouble.”

Bailey ran inside and unhooked her truck from its decrepit charging dock before slamming a backup battery into the power supply under the vehicle’s dashboard. She was peeling out from the garage before Dale had a chance to step away from his work terminal’s display feed, calling after her in confusion.

#

An hour later, Bailey was shoving her way past the emergency personnel gathered around the ventilation shaft which fed down to Black Meadow Mine, half-changed into her mining gear and demanding to be brought up to speed when she reached the rescue operations tent her team had thrown up in her absence. Trevor, Mei, and Alex were all donned in their jumpsuits and SCBAs. Vera stood with them, equipped with two sets of sixteen channel radios and a high-powered torch light instead of her rescue gear. Nadine, suited up with her own breathing apparatus, was running through a checklist of supplies by the stacks of equipment set beside the tent. Work lights hummed, sprouting up around the heavy crane that screamed on its treads to re-position itself over the ventilation shaft while laborers hauled away the vent’s dome top for their soon-to-come descent.

“Glad you finally made it, Cap,” Alex said to her before launching into their mission briefing.

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“A few hours ago, a crew of Artisanal miners blasted their way into Black Meadow mine.” The tent’s work lamps hanging above them pasted a clammy complexion on Alex’s face with its harsh false daylight. The timeless warning blares of heavy equipment pierced the cold night air.

“For as long as the Arties had to have been mining to blast their way into Black Meadow, the Hellcats must have gotten lazy, negligent, or both. Maybe they made a deal with McEnroy and didn’t know he got shit-canned. Not something to worry about now.” Alex unstrapped the nav-tracker from his arm and handed it to Vera. “Vera’s guiding us from the surface while she handles topside operations tonight. Nadine’s drilling crew was in Black Meadow when the Arties blasted through the shaft wall and caused a tunnel collapse. Nadine was on the first level of the mine with some of her people during the blast and managed to make it out. The rest of the team is still trapped underground.”

“Thank God Nadine’s safe, at least,” Bailey sighed.

“Not as safe as you’d think,” Vera muttered ruefully beside Mei while she strapped the nav-tracker to her forearm and pored over its screen.

“She volunteered to join the mission with us,” Alex explained when Bailey cast him a questioning stare. “We need a drilling expert to help clear debris and she wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Nadine never does,” Vera said. “That girl is going to give me a heart attack, mark my words.” She held out her forearm to project a live map of Black Meadow from Alex’s nav-tracker into the air above. The mine rescue team watched a cluster of green dots blinking at the edge

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of the tunnels sketched into the map. Bailey was relieved to see that Drilling Crew Three's data chips were still transmitting their vital signs.

"The crew fled into the mine rescue chamber located on their level," Alex explained. "They've got air and water, but they're badly banged up." He shoved a finger through the mound of green dots marking their position on the surface. "The ventilation shaft up here leads down to the lower level. Once the construction crews finish preparing the shaft, we'll be lowered the full five hundred feet down by crane."

"And here you had me worrying," Bailey said, grinning. "They're building us our own expressway; this should be a cakewalk."

"Never is," Alex corrected. "Once we hit the collapsed tunnel section, Nadine and the crew who managed to escape with her will clear out the site and shore up the tunnel's supports before we continue. Supposedly there's water flooding into the tunnel from the blast that could prove treacherous."

Alex looked up at them all from the map feed once more, arms akimbo. "As if all this wasn't enough, upper management has ordered us to make our way back into the Artie tunnel to prospect for mining viability and search for additional survivors once we make contact with the rest of drilling crew three."

"How two-faced can you get," Mei said with disgust. "They're back to business-as-usual and the dust hasn't even settled."

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“We all know NPF’s priority is pyrite, not people,” Bailey replied, rubbing at her eyes as she exhaled. “We’ve got our work cut out for us. Let’s get moving.”

#

3.

The crane’s anchors were thrown down and its winch cabling system coupled onto a metal cage large enough for six to stand in. As Mei stepped out from under the rescue operations tent, she felt detached and aloof from the swirling frenzy of activity around her, far too swept up in Trevor’s confession to care for much else.

She filed into the cramped cage after her crew while Nadine’s drilling team waited with their cartload of equipment for a second trip down. The crane’s winch whined to life, its cable taut against the cage’s top. The cage wobbled into the air, hovering a moment before the crane hoisted them over the ventilation shaft with expert grace and lowered them into the earth. The smothering compression sensation of sinking underground pressed around Mei as the light above was eclipsed by the cage’s top.

Their lanterns shone yellow against the cracked shaft walls as they descended. No one spoke. Mei gripped the waist high handrail welded into the cage and concentrated on her breathing. The air grew mixed with the acid-sour scent of the mine and its cloying plumes of smoke that crept up to meet them.

When the cage thudded against the bottom of the ventilation shaft with an echoing clang, the team piled out. Mei was almost excited to be able to stretch her limbs again. Behind her,

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Trevor unhooked a collapsible rolling stretcher from the storage compartment on the cage's side. He shoved it into Mei's hands and fished out a bag of medical supplies and a pair of emergency oxygen masks before closing the compartment.

"Trevor to surface: you're clear to lift the cage," he rasped into his shoulder-mounted radio as he stepped back from the heap of metal, shrugging against his SCBA's harness to shift the weight of its oxygen tanks on his back. The cage was lifted out of sight in a heartbeat, leaving them trapped in the tunnel with nowhere to go but forward.

"Stay sharp and watch your footing," Bailey called back from the head of the line. Behind her, Alex reached into his tool bag and pulled out a handful of chemical glow sticks. He cracked them and gave the bundle a hearty shake, tossing one to the ground every few steps as they moved to better light the way through the tunnel. The artificial light did little to allay the otherworldly feeling sinking once again into Mei's bones. She huffed and followed the line, hauling the collapsible stretcher at her side.

"Vera for Bailey," Vera's voice crackled through the echoing silence. "The adit you're traversing terminates at an intersection with the main tunnel, about two hundred feet from your current position. You'll be making a left-hand turn from there to head for the site of the collapse. We've got Nadine coming down in the cage with a load of ceiling supports and more respirators. Her team will follow behind you once you've gotten a lay of the land."

"Hard copy, Vera." Bailey replied as they marched. Moments later, the cage clanged to the ground behind them again. The scuffling commotion that followed was a relief to Mei's ears: anything was better than the smoky silence through which they crawled.

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“Bailey for topside,” Bailey chimed again over the radio as she held up an arm to stop the crew when the adit opened up into another tunnel. Mei set the stretcher against the wall, grateful for a chance to catch her breath. “We’ve hit the intersection. Starting to see signs of debris.” Mei followed Bailey’s lantern as it crept up toward the ceiling.

“I’m still seeing rock bolt supports holding their place in the ceiling,” Mei declared. “That’s a good sign for structural integrity.”

“It’s no surprise; we build our shit right,” Trevor said behind her. “Only a damned senseless Artie would dig a tunnel without re-enforcing the ceiling as they go.”

“Cut the chatter and focus; lives are on the line,” Bailey spat. Mei eyed the rivulets of water dribbling down from the rock-bolts in the ceiling and questioned just how much water was flowing above them. The water had already grown ankle-deep around them.

“Nadine plus two, traversing with equipment now,” Nadine’s voice rang over the radio fractions of a second after echoing toward them from behind.

“We read you, Nadine,” Trevor raised his light behind them, swirling it in a wide circle to signal the landing party to come ahead. “Path is clear for you to follow up.”

They turned left and continued their march through the main tunnel, Alex tossing glow sticks as they went. Mei felt more water dripping on her shoulders in the dark but was afraid to look up for fear of slipping in the steady-rising puddles around them. When they approached a large heap of impassible rubble that spilled into the tunnel’s side, Bailey held up the crew once more.

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“This looks like the collapse,” Bailey declared to the team. “Tunnel looks like it’s barely holding.” Mei trained her light on the mounds of rock ahead of them. The metal transformer boxes for the ventilation system, torn off their mounts, lay warped and dented beneath bits of rubble near Bailey’s feet. A crack in the ceiling sprouted from the edge of the rubble pile, where the wall had fallen inward to reveal the jagged, uneven mouth of the Artie tunnel. There was just enough space between the rubble and the ceiling for someone foolish or desperate to crawl up, if they were willing to brave the torrents of water raining down from the tunnel shaft’s ceiling.

The rescue team made way for Nadine and her assistants, who followed up behind them with their cartload of equipment while Nadine pulled open cases from its undercarriage to assemble their tools. Mei recognized the device they pieced together from textbooks she’d studied a lifetime ago: the rock bolt thrower, a tripod mounted drill that operated on a sparkless battery source. The device was designed to punch massive bolts into rock, using pointed ends that acted as their own self-tapping screws. Once anchored in place, a single bolt would support several tons of weight in the ceiling.

Nadine kicked the drill in place and heaved its harpoon-like front end upwards. Its barrel cut through the curtain of water raining down on them.

“Bolts away,” Nadine proclaimed into the radio before squeezing the trigger. The bolt thrower’s piston head shot up into the ceiling, hammering a pointed bolt deep into the rock surface with little difficulty. The water’s flow did not ebb.

“Reload!” Nadine punched the safety latch and lowered the bolt thrower’s muzzle, spitting back the mouthful of water that splashed into her face. One of her assistants moved to load

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another heavy bolt into the device, while another moved forward to throw up the next temporary ceiling supports. When the round of preparation was completed, the assistants stepped back with everyone else to await Nadine's command.

"Bolts away!" she called again. The next bolt tore a crack into the ceiling. A large rock fell from the ceiling above Nadine, narrowly missing her feet. She had no time to be thankful, as the high-pressure water geyser that had slipped the rock free vomited down strong enough to knock Nadine to the ground. Her assistants helped her to her feet while the rescue team backed out of the way of the flooding tunnel collapse.

"*Reload!*" Nadine shouted over the roaring water. They readied themselves in the pelting downpour and Nadine fired a bolt less than a foot away from her last to compensate for the crack that had formed.

Mei marveled at their masterful work as the trio hopscotched their way forward, bolting the ceiling back together to stem the flow of water above them. Soon, the waterfall thinned into a steady trickle, veining out from their rock-bolts in frightful but holding spouts.

"This isn't looking good, but there's nothing to be done about it," Nadine declared. "Kelly, get on the jackleg. We need to move forward."

Nadine's assistant assembled a jackleg drill from their remaining equipment cases and humped it into place beside Nadine.

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A screech of worn machine treads ripped through the tunnel while the jackleg chiseled apart the rock blocking their way forward. Nadine's second assistant appeared in the pseudo-darkness, sitting atop a small bulldozer that had been lowered into the tunnel after them.

The excavator sloshed through the rising waterline to haul away several buckets of debris from the collapse. With every bucketful, Nadine was able to throw another bolt up, five feet at a time. The trio fought savagely against the cascades of water still seeping down from the damaged tunnel. When they'd cleared a path for Bailey and the team, the assistant killed the excavator's engine, leaving the lights trained on them while she waited to resume clearing debris.

"We'll keep at it here," Nadine called to the rescue team from beside the bulldozer. "You'd better get moving. We're holding back too much water pressure to keep stable for long; it's going to take everything we've got to keep the roof from coming down."

"Right," Bailey nodded. "Vera, where are we headed?" she radioed while the others prepared to march on. Mei lifted the stretcher once more, which was growing heavier by the minute. She peered up through the crumbling hole in the wall where the Arties had blasted through. Its smoking mouth was a paltry sign of life.

"You're looking for the second adit on your left," Vera chimed back to Bailey. "The refuge chamber should be some three hundred feet after that."

"Copy," Bailey replied. She took one last look back at Nadine and her crew, who were already busy preparing their equipment for the next round of bolt-throwing. "Keep your head on your shoulders, Nadine," she said. "Call it in if there's trouble."

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“Shit, you talk like I haven’t spent the last ten years underground,” Nadine waved her off and tightened her air tank’s straps.

“Good to see your confidence showing,” Alex offered as the team marched over the rubble and deeper into the tunnel.

“Not seeing signs of any Arties on the other end of the rubble yet,” Mei heard Nadine announce as they crept farther away. “They probably retreated before detonating their payload. Maybe they were lucky enough to survive.”

Mei shifted the portable stretcher to her other hand with effort and cast her torch light on the tunnel wall as they walked on. Water streamed from webbing of cracks, pooling in large puddles that had risen up to their calves. Not ten feet ahead, a geyser of water was spouting out from a rupture in the tunnel wall. The muddy rain that pelted down on them tripped up Mei and Trevor both as they passed.

“The whole tunnel will flood if it’s like this for much longer,” Alex said, tossing another glow stick to the ground, where it bobbed in the rising waters. “I give it a day at best before there’s no saving anyone still trapped down here.”

“We’re coming up on our turn-off,” Bailey exclaimed, leading her team past the derailed train car lying forlorn and useless at the intersection. Mei followed the team into the mouth of the refuge chamber’s adit. A structure soon emerged from the darkness before them, shining pale white in the light of their headlamps. A large bulkhead door squared off the front of the unrelenting metal hull. It seemed almost like a chunk of submarine sunken beneath the earth, protecting its pressurized cargo of survivors from a painful death.

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“Bailey for topside. Laying eyes on the refuge chamber. Entering now.”

The captain led the way forward, grasping the handle of the main bulwark door and gazing into the portcullis before heaving at the lever. As the door cracked open, air rushed inside to relieve the pressurized interior. The door’s hinges groaned in anger while the rescue team filed into the entry room, where another bulwark door stood sentry.

Mei turned to watch Trevor latch the door shut behind them and hold up a hand, calling for the team to wait while the chamber re-pressurized with clean air. Mei looked around: the small entry room glowed red in the stark light standing vigil above the second bulwark door. From behind its portcullis, a pale feminine face breathed a sigh of relief at the arrival of their rescuers.

“What took you so long?” the driller moaned through an intercom built into the wall. She brushed aside a knotted strand of silver-blond hair that had come loose from the headband of gauze wrapped high on her forehead. The filtration light above the bulwark door flashed green, and Mei was laying hands on her mask to unclasp its seal and get a breath of fractionally less claustrophobic air when Alex caught her by the wrist.

“We won’t be long,” he warned. “Stay suited up.”

The interior of the chamber was a rectangular space that couldn’t have been more than twenty feet long, big enough for twice the number that occupied it now. Simple benches had been welded in place along its walls and a squadron of spare oxygen canisters stood vigil in a far corner, strapped in place beside a stack of supply containers. Two containers had been taken down and opened, their contents strewn in the chaos of the day: medical gauze and water can-

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teens, respirators and soiled coveralls cut free from their owner's limbs for rags and makeshift tourniquets.

The trapped members of drilling crew three were scattered about the room and in poor condition. One woman lay shivering on the ground, a torn flannel shirt draped over her torso. Two of her crewmates knelt beside her, keeping pressure on a laceration to her thigh and working to keep her conscious with tense small talk. A fourth miner was sitting on a corner bench, wheezing into an oxygen mask rigged up to the canister beside her. Her eyes flitted onto Mei with glassy disinterest.

"We were damn near on top of the blast radius when they blew their charges," the driller exclaimed as she ushered them inside. "They must've hit the plunger on their payload when they figured a shift change would have the tunnels emptied out."

The driller gestured to the woman on the floor. "Stacey got hit in the thigh with some shrapnel. She's been bleeding; we think it might've hit an artery. Nance over in the corner got trapped under some debris and choked down enough smoke to kill a horse before we managed to dig her out. Between keeping the two of them stabilized, there's no way we could've self-evacuated."

"Mei, get that stretcher ready," Bailey ordered. "Trevor, help me with Stacey. Alex, go check on Nance." The team sprang into action, making up for lost time.

Mei prepared the stretcher, struggling with mounting frustration to work its storage clasps free. When she'd finished readying the stretcher and readying, Mei looked up to watch Alex

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check Nance's pulse while he plagued her with questions. Nance nodded yes or no to each question as she heaved into her oxygen mask.

Alex fitted one of their spare portable respirators over her head and lashed its canister to her waist. On the ground, Bailey and Trevor finished applying a fresh tourniquet to Stacey's thigh and re-dressed the wound before fitting a respirator over her face.

"What about you?" Mei turned to the driller who'd let them inside. "Are you alright?"

"What?" the driller asked, shaken from her focus on the scene.

"Have you taken any serious injuries?" Mei said, inspecting the bandages around the driller's head.

"No, I... Reggie and Terra were a safe distance away from the blast," the driller explained. "Something fell on me while I was bringing everyone in here, but it didn't keep me from moving. I threw some gauze on and worried about the others." She wiped at her temple, where grime and dried blood had smeared. Mei took the driller by the shoulders and toggled her torchlight to its lowest setting before shining it in her eyes.

"Your pupils are dilated," Mei declared, switching off her light again to fish a bottle of water from her bag.

"I'll be fine," the driller replied, brushing away from Mei and swaying more uncertainly than before. "I got off lucky compared to the others..." The woman's shock overcame her and she toppled forward into Mei's arms. Mei grunted in exertion, lowering the woman to the floor.

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“Vera to Rescue,” Vera chimed over the radios. “I’m reading a spike in Jan’s vitals up here. Something wrong?”

“Mei to Vera: Jan fainted on me, she’s potentially concussed,” Mei replied. “I’m keeping an eye on her now. Will report if her condition worsens.”

“Hard copy,” Vera crackled back.

“Drink this... Jan,” Mei ordered, cracking open the bottle and holding it in front of the driller’s face. Jan complied, nursing at the bottle in dizzy gulps.

Bailey and Trevor lifted Stacey up on a three count and placed her on the stretcher, strapping her in snug for the difficult walk out.

“Bailey for topside,” the captain drawled into her radio. “We’ve rendezvoused with the refuge chamber and stabilized personnel for transport. Two wounded. One in critical condition—”

“Three wounded, Captain,” Mei corrected, looking up from Jan. Bailey looked down at the pair, noticing Jan’s head wound for the first time.

“Damn it, three wounded,” Bailey corrected herself. “Have the cage lowered for immediate extraction. We’ll meet you there.”

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4.

Smoke rushed into the de-pressurizing entry chamber as the rescue team made their escape. The trail of floating glow sticks they followed threw a dim green pallor onto them as they

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trudged through the now knee-deep water. Mei felt water sloshing into her boots and groaned in discomfort. When they made their way back to the Artie tunnel, they discovered that several rock-bolts had slipped from their places in the ceiling. Torrents of water retched down unabated in their absence. Nadine was bleeding.

“Damn bolt kicked back on me from all this water I’m pumping through,” she admitted, holding pressure on a rag that was tied around her head and growing filthier by the moment.

“Are you good to walk?” Bailey asked at the head of the line, sparing little thought for Nadine’s condition while she held the stretcher-bound woman with Trevor. While they were stopped, Mei examined Nadine’s work: the entrance to the Artie tunnel was fully excavated, sloping upward on a steep incline that flattened out just above her shoulders. Water poured down in a filmy waterfall from the ceiling cracks above, making their inevitable ascent an arduous climb.

“I can walk, yeah.” she heard Nadine say to Bailey.

A flickering light deep in the Artie tunnel caught Mei’s eye, no bigger than a star in the distance, blinking out as quickly as it had appeared. Mei squinted hard through the haze of grime on her mask and leaned closer to the Artie tunnel to watch the light flash once more in the depths of the smoke.

“I’m seeing light here,” Mei called up to the team while they re-gathered themselves to make their exit.

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“One problem at a time,” Bailey’s muffled voice trickled back to her. “We’ve got our hands full as it is and we’re already at oxygen half empty.”

“Captain, what if they don’t have that kind of time?” Mei replied, afraid to budge from her place and seal the fate of whoever waited in the Artie tunnel behind its fog of smoke and dust. “If the roof collapses and Black Meadow floods, we’ve got no other way in; the Arties will die before we can get to them.”

“I don’t give a damn about the Arties!” Bailey snapped. “We’ve got our hands full helping *our* people. I’m not wasting oxygen just to save a few thieves!”

“Captain.” Alex lifted Nance’s arm from his shoulder and offered her to Reggie as he approached Bailey. “Nance is doing better. I can peel off and do a quick pass with Mei while we have an opening. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Fine,” Bailey conceded. “Stay together and don’t make me regret this. Let’s move, people!” She led the train of miners down the tunnel for the extraction cage.

“Thanks,” Mei nodded as Alex hiked back to her past the glow sticks floating in the water at their feet.

“Hell, if I was bleeding out in there, I’d want the same treatment,” Alex said, reaching for his radio. “Alex to Vera: Mei and I are traversing the Artie tunnel. You got a fix on our location?”

“Copy, Alex,” Vera replied. “You’re floating off my grid, but I’ve got you on my nav-tracker. Charting your progress now.”

The tunnel shaft into which they ascended was barely seven feet high. The ground they

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tread was dry, just out of reach of the subterranean water now flooding Black Meadow. The tunnel walls were jagged and uneven from the Arties' haphazard blasting. Its bare rock face was speckled in rich copper and bronze hues, peppered with the faux-golden sparkle of iron pyrite.

"This area really is mineral rich," Mei conceded.

"Makes you wonder whether the Arties got lucky, or if they knew something they shouldn't have," Alex mused.

"Whatever they knew, they didn't know enough," Mei replied. "They're the ones that hit water."

The cramped shaft opened into a wider chamber with more tunnels running along its sides. Alex knelt by the mouth of the closest tunnel to inspect the rusted steel rails installed on their floors.

"No way the Arties brought in enough materials to install these," he said. "This must be a precursor mine they re-purposed."

"Look: there's another vertical shaft in the center of this chamber," Mei declared, pointing her light up to the ceiling, where a wide hole opened into the seemingly endless darkness above them. "I'll bet this was the shaft the precursors used to hoist materials up to the surface." Mei eyed the darkness above them and reached for her radio. "Mei to Vera. You still got a fix on my location?"

"Affirmative, Mei," Vera replied. "What's up?"

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“I’ve got a potential secondary extraction point: I’m standing under an old shaft; it looks like it heads all the way up to the surface.”

“Bailey chiming in. Send the crane team those coordinates, Vera. Have them get to work readying a closer entry point to the Artie tunnel. Well done, Mei.”

“Look at you go, green hat!” Alex exclaimed behind her with pride.

She shrugged off the compliment and stepped around the vertical shaft’s edges, fearful of standing directly beneath it. She scanned the corners of the dark chamber with her light while Alex crept up to join Mei, looking around at the gaping mouths of the tunnels surrounding them.

“The tunnel floor slopes upward across from us,” Alex said. “That’s probably the way back to the surface. This whole mine is way too complex for the Arties to chisel out without the Hellcats finding them. The place had to have been built during the Second Gold Rush and left to rot.”

“But how was it kept secret?” Mei asked. “The mining bureau would have had a record of the mine, wouldn’t they?” When she peered into one of the smaller side tunnels, her light was swallowed in the void.

“There wouldn’t be a record if this mine was never reported.” Alex peered into the tunnel beside her before unclipping his Canary from his waist belt. The device, thrown on silent mode for the mission, blinked in distress. He stepped toward the sloping tunnel, holding the Canary up to test its innards.

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“The air quality’s not as bad as you’d think down here,” Alex said. “I wouldn’t de-mask, but someone could definitely hold out awhile waiting on a rescue.”

“Should we head in deeper?” Mei thumbed toward the would-be exit tunnel sloping upward away from them.

“It’s not safe,” Alex replied. The SCBA hoses snaking down from his mask grated against his shoulder straps as he shook his head. “There’s no guarantee we won’t run into trouble and this mine looks too complex to manage alone. You’re sure you saw something?”

“I swear I saw a light down here,” Mei said, already unsure, herself.

“Hello!” Alex shouted into the chamber. His voice echoed through the tunnels around them. When his own replies faded from the stale air, Alex made to hike out the way they’d come, waving for Mei to follow.

“...help...” came a mewling call from the exit tunnel, barely louder than a whisper. Mei twisted back to look, straining against the weakened periphery vision of her oxygen mask. A light flickered in the darkness, not more than the size of a blinking star.

“I’ll be double goddamned,” Alex muttered. Mei was already moving, bounding through the tunnel over rock and timber, tripping over the rotted wooden beams splintering up from between the rails. She caught her fall on the edge of an overturned mine cart that was too well maintained to be a relic of the past.

“Mei, don’t run off like that!” Alex shouted, making the ascent after her.

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Mei leaned against the cart to steady herself as she waited for him to catch up. The mine cart shifted against her weight and a soft thud knocked against her feet. Mei aimed her light downward and stifled a scream when she discovered a human hand spattered with grime, reaching out from behind the cart's edge. She took a heavy breath before following the arm's length, stepping around the side of the cart to find the limb's owner slumped against the bloodstained metal. Mei knelt and took the body by the shoulders to set it sitting. A man's weathered face was revealed in her headlamp light, bearded with salt and pepper hair. His eyes were half open and distant, his skin cut and filthy. Blood coagulated from a large gash above his forehead.

"Hey, hey buddy; can you hear me?" Mei asked. "We're here to help." Mei traced her light around the rest of his body. His left arm was smashed and bloody, undoubtedly a wound inflicted during the tunnel collapse. She tore off a glove and reached under his jaw to check for a pulse. His flesh was cold, his vein still. Mei took her hands from his shoulders and the man slumped back down against the cart with a sickening clang that nearly made her sick.

"Jesus," Alex murmured as he came around the cart to view her discovery while Mei grabbed at her radio.

"Mei for topside, I've got one deceased Artie in the tunnel, cause of death likely falling debris from the collapse."

"Copy that," Vera replied. "Bailey is on her way back to you now. Heard, Bailey?"

"Bailey chiming in: the water's getting rough over here, waste deep already and we haven't reached the intersection. If you're still looking around, you'd better hurry up."

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“He didn’t put himself in this mine cart and topple it over like this, Alex,” Mei said as she stood and looked up toward the exit. “Someone called for help, and it wasn’t him.”

“Hello!” Alex called again into the darkness. The light flickered on once more, close enough to outline its owner lying on the sloped ground ahead of them.

“...help...” the voice called again. As they approached, Alex reached into his tool bag and cracked his final glow stick, revealing the gaunt face of a young man. He was about the same age as Alex, clutching a handheld flashlight that sputtered on the last of its battery. The man was lying on his stomach, struggling to hold himself up as he faced them.

“My name is Alex, this is Mei; what is your name?” he spoke slowly and clearly as he knelt at the artisanal miner’s side.

“Tommy,” the Artie replied.

“We’re here to help, Tommy,” Alex said. “Can you walk?”

“My leg... my leg is busted up,” Tommy answered, moaning.

“It’ll be alright.” Alex propped up the man’s head for Mei to fit an oxygen mask onto his face after she’d rummaged it free of her tool bag.

“Did Shea send you?” Tommy asked.

“Who is Shea?” Mei replied. “We’re with NPF,” she explained as she tightened the mask straps to Tommy’s face.

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“No!” Tommy cried and struggled to bat them away from him. “Don’t turn me over to NPF! Shea; take me to Shea.”

“Hold still!” Alex exclaimed. “We need to check your leg!” Tommy ignored him and continued to struggle against his rescuers. Alex cursed and pinned him down, slipping in the mud.

“NPF will arrest me,” Tommy wheezed in Alex’s arms as Mei leaned in to probe at Tommy’s leg. “I’ll be thrown into the Oh-En’s prison colony.”

“If you don’t come with us you’ll be dead inside an hour,” Mei warned, holding down Tommy’s legs as he kicked against her touch. “Just like the old man over there.”

“Uncle Brian,” Tommy whispered, falling still. “Uncle Brian’s really dead?”

As Mei drew breath to reply, a blinding light probed down into the darkness from the mine’s unseen exit ahead of them.

“I’ve got voices in the tunnel!” a woman shouted behind the distant light. “They’re still here!”

The harsh *crack* of a particle rifle blast echoed down the mine’s looming corridor. Mei dove for the floor beside Tommy when the bright blue beam flashed past them, disintegrated a rock face not thirty feet away.

“Hellcat security! Stand down and surrender!” the voice demanded.

“FRIENDLIES! FRIENDLIES!” Alex screamed, crouching low and raising his light. Particle fire rained down on them, his warnings unheard. Alex dove for the ground beside Mei and

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Tommy in the erupting tunnel. “Goddamn Hellcats!” he roared. “They should know we’re down here. What are they thinking!”

“Zulu, on me,” a commanding voice shouted in the distance. “Put them down!”

“Alex, they’re still shooting!” Mei cried. “We’ve got to retreat.” Mei crawled back down the tunnel on her stomach along the rusted railway. Alex and Tommy were quick to follow, left with no alternatives to save themselves from the Hellcats’ itching trigger fingers and the beams of blue death streaking through the air above them. The walls around them erupted with bursts of rock and dirt. A cluster of particle beams tore through the wooden beam supports along the tunnel edges as they sidled past. The ceiling began to crumble down in massive chunks behind them. Mei’s radio crackled to life at her shoulder as they made their crawling retreat through the cacophony.

“Bailey for Alex and Mei. Nadine’s bolts didn’t hold: the roof collapsed on us again and the flooding has gotten too extensive to salvage the tunnel. Can you hold tight until the crane teams prep that precursor shaft?”

“Not unless you want the goddamn Hellcats to blow us to pieces!” Alex hollered into his radio as they shambled away from the particle fire. “They just showed up and started shooting. Vera, get on the horn and tell them there’s friendlies down here!”

“They operate on a private channel! Vera exclaimed in horror. “I can’t hail them!”

“Then get that crane ready for us *now*!” Mei shouted at her radio. “We’ll be shot full of holes by the time they ask our names!” She strained with the exertion of crawling blind over the

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strewn tunnel debris, terrified to raise her head an inch higher to guide her way. She felt Tommy bumping into her from behind and pressed on. The ground beneath them bucked from the force of a particle beam tearing its way through the nearby rock.

“They’re going to bring the tunnel down on us!” Alex shouted beside her when the dirt raining down on them thickened into a murderous cascade. Mei was dragging Tommy to his feet and slinging his arm over her shoulder before she could think. Alex followed her impulse, diving under Tommy’s free arm. They raced five-legged down the mine from the debris still falling from the ceiling. A stone glanced off of Mei’s shoulder, sharp and painful. She ignored it and ran with Alex and Tommy, desperate to survive even five more minutes. Behind them and the growing pile of rubble, the Hellcats were screaming inaudibly to each other. Their shouting grew muffled as the collapse filled the tunnel, floor-to-ceiling.

“They trapped us in here,” Mei gasped, breathless, when the trio had reached their entry chamber. The tunnel behind them was choked with smoke and dust that flowed its way upward through the precursor shaft in the ceiling. “Those monsters didn’t even wait to *identify* us.”

“They thought we were Arties,” Alex said. He dusted himself off and marched to the opposite end of the chamber for the flooded entrance, which once led to Black Meadow. Muddy water frothed up from the freshly amassed boulders that had fallen loose from Nadine’s rockbolts: the way they’d come was completely sealed shut. “I guess the Hellcats didn’t want to risk taking fire from some artisanal miner who was afraid of getting arrested.” He broke into nervous laughter that sent a chill up Mei’s spine. “God forbid the Hellcats feel unsafe.”

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Tommy sat himself on the ground beside them, staring up at the precursor shaft and end, hundreds of feet out of reach.

“I’m sorry you both came looking for me,” he moaned. “I’m sorry for this.”

“Stop talking like that,” Mei demanded, following his gaze. “We just have to wait for the extraction cage. We’ll be okay as long as we’ve got oxygen.” They sat together and waited for its arrival in the near-darkness. Water pooled around their feet from the flooding at Black Meadow in a slow and steady spread.

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Their oxygen tanks were nearly depleted when Vera’s crews sawed the precursor shaft open. The extraction cage knocked against the shaft walls as it was lowered down, piercing their ears with deafening bangs. The trio, shin deep in water, had little room for complaint.

Mei, Tommy, and Alex were lifted out of the tunnel and up into the expanse of the night sky. The big open nothingness around her almost reminded Mei of her first spacewalk. She drew a calming breath and looked below them. The surface around the precursor shaft was a frenzy of activity, all in preparation for their rescue. The cage knocked them against each other as it banged down onto solid ground once more.

They stepped out of the cage, unable to celebrate their survival before the Hellcats swarmed them, already on site and awaiting their prey. A security officer shoved Mei and Alex aside to pin Tommy to the ground and cuff him. The Artie wailed in pain when another officer kicked him in his broken leg to stop the boy’s thrashing.

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“What are you doing, you savages?” Mei shouted. “Get off of him!” She rushed for the Hellcat straddling Tommy when a second security officer tripped her up and slammed her into the ground. Mei’s SCBA hose line hissed loose. Her vision dazzled with sparks from the force of the fall.

“Who the fuck are *you*, approaching us from behind like that?” the Hellcat declared, setting a knee on Mei’s chest and aiming a pistol in her face. Alex backed away from them both, raising his hands in submission and nearly tripping over the extraction cage’s metal edge.

“I’m the woman you people *shot at* for doing her job!” Mei spat back. The Hellcat pulled off Mei’s mask to get a look at her face. She was growing red from her anger and constricted breathing. “You almost got two NPF miners killed!”

“You’d best watch your tone, or we might just finish the job.” The officer prodded at Mei’s temple with the cold metal of her gun barrel. “Stop interfering with a lawful arrest.”

“Commander Briars!” Bailey’s voice cut through the air around them. “Get your people in line before they choke my rookie to death!” Mei caught her standing at the edge of the bystanders, all watching powerlessly as the Hellcats took control of the site. Another Hellcat brushed her way through the line of miners, donned in their uniform body armor with a crimson panther emblazoned on her chest. The woman wore no helmet.

“Was that an *order* you just gave me, Parker?” she asked. Her brunette hair was wrapped in a tight braid behind her scalp.

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“No...*ma’am*.” Bailey admitted, locking onto Mei’s frightened eyes with powerless sympathy.

“Good,” Briars nodded, making her way to Mei’s side. “What’s your name, green hat?” she asked.

“Mei Zhang,” Mei spat, still trapped beneath an armored knee-cap and heaving for what precious little air she could.

“Zhang?” Briars clicked her tongue. “I heard a rumor from Murphy that you’d found your way into our little mining town. I suppose insubordination runs in the family.” The Hellcat commander knelt by Mei’s side, speaking with gentle authority. “I think Murphy would call this your second strike, but I understand that some of my people were a little ‘overzealous’ in the mines to stop the Arties. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Mei was growing hoarse, her vision spotty.

“And that is a very unfortunate work-related incident,” Briars replied. “I can assure you my people will be reprimanded for wasting their munitions and endangering company assets. But this Artie?” she pointed at Tommy laying cuffed in the crab grass, groaning. “His friends shot up one of our rigs in their hurry to escape. I don’t care what ‘deal’ McEnroy made with them; they’re a swarm of rabid dogs in need of euthanizing. I’ll put a *bullet* in his head in front of everyone here if I think that will keep my people safe from those gold-digging yokels. And I’ve got a bullet for anyone lifting a hand to stop me from making a ‘lawful arrest.’ Is that clear?”

Mei nodded, her sternum crushing heavy down on her lungs.

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“I said: is that clear?” Briars asked, quiet and intense.

“Yes,” Mei replied, tears stinging at her eyes.

“So: are you trying to interfere with a lawful arrest?” Briars asked, lifting her eyebrows in a telling warning.

“No...” Mei’s tears trickled down her face, filling her mouth with the bitter taste of saline.

“Good.” Briars stood and tapped her subordinate on the shoulder. “Dresden, get off of her. Help Mitchels throw the Artie in our rig. Stay out of trouble, Zhang. That’s an order.” Briars walked away without another word to Mei or Bailey. Her personnel did as they were ordered, releasing Mei and hauling Tommy to his feet before marching him for their waiting SUV. The Hellcats filed into their vehicles, leaving the rescue teams to break down their equipment and head home in the uncomfortable aftermath. Mei lay on the ground, shaking with nerves from the Hellcats’ apathetic brutality and struggling to re-compose herself. When Alex knelt to help her to her feet, she batted his hands away and stood on her own through hitching gasps for air.

#

A biting wind blew into the rescue team’s truck through the tailgate’s open window. Sleet descended from the night sky on the drive home. Water dripped down from the roof onto the crew’s SCBA gear and tool bags, piled up in the center of the personnel compartment.

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Mei rested her head against the truck's cold metal, troubled thoughts plaguing her mind.

Vera and Alex mumbled inaudibly, fussing over the nav-tracker to examine their collected map data.

"Hell of a long day," Trevor mumbled, lurching forward in the corner opposite Mei to rest his forearms on his thighs.

"You don't know the half of it," Bailey replied beside him, half-asleep already.

"What's going to happen to Tommy?" Mei worked up the courage to ask from her seat opposite Trevor.

"Who?" Bailey asked, cracking one bleary eye open to cast a sidelong glance at Mei.

"The kid we rescued from the Artie tunnel," she replied. "Where are the Hellcats taking him?"

"Mmm. First, he's headed to the infirmary along with our people for treatment," Bailey answered, leaning forward in her seat. "After that, the Hellcats will interrogate him so they can bring his crew in, maybe hunt down the Arties connected to McEnroy's Insurrection. Then he's slated for the Oh-En's prison colony, or something else just as awful. The kid will probably be dead within a year."

"Is there going to be any trial?" Mei demanded, unsatisfied. "Do the Hellcats play judge, jury, *and* executioner around here, or was *firing* on us and *choking me out* just a 'work-related incident'?"

Bailey's lips grew thin across her face as she struggled to suppress a venomous retort.

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“You’re going to lose sleep thinking about it, Mei,” she managed. “We’re low people in low places. The Hellcats won’t think twice about biting your head off if you provoke them.” Bailey groaned, massaging at her temples as she leaned back against her seat once more. “Look, you did well today. I’ll even toss you an extra brownie point for playing hero again. But the Artie’s not our problem anymore and there’s nothing you can do for him.” She crossed her arms and squeezed her eyes shut.

“At least I did *something*,” Mei flared.

“What?” Bailey’s eyes snapped open in a burst of fury.

“You heard me, *Captain*,” Mei declared, her chest tightening. “That boy Tommy would have *died* if we didn’t get to him in time, and you wouldn’t have lifted a *finger* to save him. The Hellcats would have *killed* us if we hadn’t dragged ourselves to safety. And we would have *died* in those tunnels if I hadn’t thought to use that precursor shaft to escape. You barely had a thing to say about it when one of them had me *pinned to the ground*. Why did you bother coming to work? Did this distract you from your *drinking* time?”

“You’re treading thin ice, Mei.” Bailey balled her hands into fists against her thighs, her jaw clenched.

“My father’s dead and you’re not, and *this* is what you’ve made of that blessing.” Mei turned away in disgust. “What a waste.”

“That’s not—” Bailey choked on her words and stared at the floor while Mei prepared another volley of her suppressed malcontent.

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“Do you even—” she started.

“That’s enough, kid!” Trevor shouted, fed up with their bickering. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride. We’re off the clock and you’re ruining my peace and quiet.”

Mei chewed on her lip, replaying the last thirty minutes in her mind and feeling fresh tears stinging at her eyelids. Beside her, Bailey began to sob.

#

ACT THREE: THE GATHERING STORM

2040. Winter. Spring Pines, Oregon.

1.

Bailey called out of work that morning after another night’s restless nightmares, desperate to drink herself numb. She lurched into Bruce’s Bar the moment the barkeep opened his doors at eleven, slipping into her favorite seat at the counter and ordering a double scotch. Bruce set a rocks glass in front of her with a worried look before turning on the TV and starting into his chores. Bailey shot a glance at the flashing screen: the midday news coverage for the ‘Liberated Patriots’ Day’ celebrations was ending with a rerun of President Simon’s Pyrrhic Victory Address.

“My fellow Americans. It is with a somber heart that I announce the success of Operation Pyrrhic Victory. At 2:15 PM EST on December 30th, the Orbital Navy journeyed into space on its maiden voyage, thanks to the construction efforts led by our Liberated Patriots. Our spacefaring armada opened fire on the Earth’s vast blanket of satellite arrays, rendering foreign sur-

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veillance, communications, and military technologies immobilized. Thereupon, the Oh-En deployed the Global Surveillance Network, a worldwide particle cannon defense grid that will finally ensure a lasting peace for America.

As I'm sure sharp rebukes against my administration will be made in the coming days, I would like to remind the American people that a victory for the U.S. is a victory for the world, pyrrhic or otherwise... ”

“Fucking slavers,” Bailey muttered into her scotch. She ignored the lunch rush flow and ebb around her, hardly offering a nod when a familiar face waved hello. By lunch, when she was beyond intoxicated, Sam slipped into the bar. The singer from *Four Eff Underground* nodded to Bailey and Bruce as he entered.

“Hey, Peterson,” Bruce called to him. “Felt like playin’ a set today?” he asked at the sight of the guitar case hanging from Sam’s grip.

“Yeah; I was just looking for an excuse to practice, so I figured I’d stop in while it was slow.” Sam crossed to the stage and readied a barstool while Bruce killed the TV and followed after to prepare a microphone. Sam ran a quick set of scales to warm up, meandering his way into a song when Bruce finished fussing at the mic’s cables. His soft acoustic guitar strumming was counter-pointed by a few phlegmy coughs from the bar’s scarce patrons. Bailey listened with relief to the gentle distraction of Sam’s worn steel string, warming her drink between her hands.

#

Ten thousand feet underground

Work lights shine like buried constellations

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

I made a wish upon a blinking star

But it didn't whisk me away

Back to a home I hardly knew

They tell me wishing's just for children

But I can't help it

It's the only thing that I know how to do

#

A group of women stepped inside the bar, a frigid draft following after them.

"No one's going to strike over some rookie getting abused, Tessa; that's just ridiculous."

Bailey looked up from her drunken haze to see her ex-girlfriend Angela debating local politics with a flock of cronies. The woman cast Bailey a bitter look as she shepherded her friends to the pool table at the side of the bar. Bailey did her best to give them the cold shoulder, in no state to risk starting something she'd regret. On stage, Sam ignored the staccato click-clacking of the pool players' cue ball knocking into place.

#

Twelve hours in the mud and grime

Scraping by on overtime

Just to spend one more night with you

Blowing holes in the ceiling

Catching raindrops leaking from

Someone else's pot of gold

This life will be the death of me

Before we're through

#

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

“Why don’t you care about that rookie Zhang, Angela?” One of the pool players asked.

“That could have been any of us thrown to the ground out there.”

“What, I’m supposed to be friends with her just because we look alike?” Angela replied.

Bailey watched Angela’s reflection on the blank TV screen that hanged from the corner in front of her, unable to spare herself from the pool players’ gossip. “It’s not our problem, Denise.”

“The Hellcats have been getting aggressive since they kicked McEnroy’s people to the curb. You can’t deny that,” Denise countered.

“Hellcats are going to be Hellcats,” Angela said. “I’ve been around long enough to prefer them to the Arties. We’ve lost more than a few good people over their damned land disputes. Whatever Zhang was thinking, trying to help that kid, it’s on her she got choked out.”

Angela’s dim TV screen reflection tossed her platinum blonde hair back and leaned over the pool table. She caught Bailey’s eye through her own reflection while she lined up her shot.

“You know anything about it, Bailey?” she asked, offering a cold smile at her. “The way I heard it, your rookie got real chummy with that Artie waiting down in those tunnels all night for an extraction. Maybe he let it slip where his people were camped.”

“I don’t know anything more than you, Angela,” Bailey replied into the TV. “I came here to drink, not to talk.” Angela blew a kiss that set her skin crawling.

#

Hoarding all my pennies in a jar

Dreaming of the life we’ll live next year

When we’ll race into the sunset

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

*Draggin' up for anywhere but here
 But pretty thoughts and idle hands
 Don't do much good to pay the bills
 Down in the mines, these fantasies
 Won't keep me safe, but I'm dreaming still*

#

"The Hellcats are breaking into people's homes and dragging them out, though, Angela," Denise said as she readied her shot at the pool table. "It's got people scared."

"No one's going to risk getting on the Hellcats' bad side over some Artie-sympathizer," Angela declared. "Forget a traitor's daughter; Zhang's not worth it. We'd never stand a chance against the Hellcats in a strike, anyway."

God, just let me drink in peace, Bailey thought, Mei's reproach burning harder in her mind.

#

*Tell me that it's worth it
 Tell me that you'll stay
 Tell me that you'll wait until I'm free
 Even if I'm old and gray
 Tell me if I take a knee
 You'll blush and nod your head
 And we'll spend the money that I earned
 Once we're cold and dead*

#

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

"Are you going to make the shot or what, Tessa?" Angela demanded.

"Right; sorry," Tessa replied, tearing her eyes away from the stage to make a distracted attempt at a bank shot. Her friends laughed when Tessa scratched her cue ball and set in to teasing her.

"That's just proof enough right there, Denise," Angela laughed. "People don't care enough about 'Zhang' to strike."

#

*Twelve hours in the mud and grime
Scraping by on overtime
Just to spend one more night with you
Blowing holes in the ceiling
Catching raindrops leaking from
Someone else's pot of gold
This life will be the death of me
Before we're through*

#

With his last song finished, Sam unslung his guitar and placed it once more in the hard case waiting at his feet. He stepped off the stage in silence save Tessa's distracted clapping, which was quickly snuffed out by a not-so-gentle elbow nudge from Denise to take her next shot. Sam ignored them all and approached the bar just a few seats away from Bailey.

"Thanks for letting me play this afternoon, Bruce. I really needed the practice." He set his guitar against a stool and took the fresh pint of beer the barkeep offered him.

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“No problem, Sam,” Bruce smiled at the musician. “It’s always good having you. The drink’s on me, kid.”

“Thanks.” Sam slipped himself onto a stool and gulped back a swallow of beer. When he looked up from his drink, he faced Bailey with a look of concern. “How you holding up, Bailey?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you skip work once in five years. Are Alex and Trevor getting along without you?”

“Figured the rookie could keep him out of trouble for the day,” Bailey murmured. “I split the team up, sent ‘em on maintenance detail.” She stared off into space with her drink held close, unwilling to face Sam. “That last one you played was good,” she deflected.

“Who’s it about?” Bruce asked from behind the bar counter, taking up the bait Bailey had thrown. “You never mentioned you had an old lady, Sam.”

“No, it’s not like that,” Sam said, a meek mid-thirties shadow of his performing self that hunched forward to tear at a napkin. “I was trying to remember someone, I guess.”

“Hm. Well, if you’re in the market, that one girl at the pool table’s had her eye on you,” Bruce replied. He shot Sam a sly grin before turning the news back on and heading for the cellar.

The broadcast honoring the GSN’s construction crews had already ended, and Bradley Owens’ face creased with concern down at them from the TV, his wizened baritone a perpetually urgent calm.

“—assist refugees displaced by recent space debris showers from Operation Pyrrhic Victory’s damage to our skies. The Simon Administration denied clean up crews entry into Karman

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Space, citing the security risk in allowing non-military personnel across the Karman Line. In other news, opposition is still fierce over President Simon's refusal to re-instate presidential elections—

"Jesus, Bruce," Bailey moaned. "Can't we drink in peace? I didn't take the day off work just to be reminded how shitty things are. I've got no control over any of it; why should I care?"

"Suit yourself." Bruce wiped his hands on the seat of his pants to switch the television to the weather channel, which thrummed with gentle elevator music while a graphic display projected a massive storm cell rolling over Spring Pines by nightfall.

"Gee, that's so much better!" Bailey declared with sardonic bite. "Nothing like a snow storm to take a load off your mind."

"If you want royal treatment, pay your tab for once?" Bruce replied. "What's eating you today, anyway, Bailey? Usually you've got a shit-eating grin on your face and a witty joke to spit out, even if you are miserable."

"I didn't come here for a therapy session, Bruce," Bailey said. "Next time I—" the words caught in her throat as a fit of coughing tore through her lungs.

"You should get that checked out," Sam suggested from beside Bailey. "It could be early signs of Pyrite Disease. They've got these new anti-oxidation treatments I've been reading about that could be worth a try."

"Thanks, Sam," Bailey said, "but I didn't come here for a doctor's appointment either." She took a sip of beer to clear her throat.

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The women at the pool table laughed behind her at a low spoken joke from Angela.

“Christ, can’t I drink in some peace and quiet today?” Bailey bemoaned, too drunk to realize she was half-shouting.

“You should learn a lesson from brooding Bailey, Tessa,” Angela called from behind her, loud enough to make sure Bailey heard. “Don’t just drink yourself to death feeling sorry for yourself. Take a chance and live a little before you end up like her.” Angela nudged her friend’s arm in the TV’s reflection and nodded Sam’s way.

“Fuck you, Angela,” Bailey spat, too drunk to do much but grip the bar and fight off the spins.

“Like you’ll ever get another chance, Bailey,” Angela laughed. “You blew that one a year ago. Come on, let’s go talk to him,” she nudged her friend again.

“Angela, you’re embarrassing me,” Tessa replied from beside the pool table. “Just let it be.”

“Fine, I’ll talk to him *for* you.” Angela set down her pool cue and squeezed into the bar stool next to Sam, tossing her hair back and flashing him a smile.

“Excuse me... Sam, right?” she asked, leaning forward on the bar to touch his forearm.

“Yes?” Sam replied with visible discomfort, having observed the entire ordeal.

“My name’s Angela; you’re that Oh-En wonder boy, aren’t you?” She flashed a wider smile, giving his arm a squeeze. “My friend Tessa over there’s been staring at you wide-eyed all day. You should go talk to her.”

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“Sorry, I’m actually...” Sam’s eyes flitted onto Bailey in desperation. Bailey only watched in bemusement, sipping at the water Bruce shoved into her hands. She raised her glass and toasted him with a wry smile.

“What, you’ve got a thing for Black Lung over here?” Angela thumbed back to Bailey without casting her a passing glance. “I can tell you from experience; that wannabe dyke’s not putting out any time soon.”

Bailey nearly choked on her drink.

“You’ve got some nerve,” Bailey managed to croak when her coughing had settled, clenching her fists against her thighs.

“You should meet Tessa,” Angela said, ignoring Bailey’s fuming as she cozied up to Sam. “She’s been crying to us about her ex-boyfriend all day. He just dumped her while he was on shore leave from the Oh-En’s outposts in Karman Space. After that song you just sang, it sounds like you could show her how a real crewman would treat a lady.”

“Sorry, but if she’s friends with *you*, Angela, I doubt she’s a catch,” Sam replied before he could help himself. Tessa started crying from the pool table at Sam’s rejection. Angela leapt from his side and shot him a venomous look as she made to cradle Tessa in her arms.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but I warned you that whole band is full of fake men and queers,” Angela spat at him from her friend’s side.

“How dare you!” Sam snapped, standing from his bar stool to challenge Angela.

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“Oh, look who’s found some backbone!” Angela replied. “Isn’t the only reason you’re with this ragtag mining outfit because the Oh-En ousted you?” Angela’s eyes widened in mocking recollection. “Wait, that’s right! You fucked up and got a crewman killed up in orbit. How’s your math these days, anyway, Sam?”

Sam grabbed his guitar and fled the bar into the bitter wind. Bailey watched him leave in drunken disbelief. Behind her, Tessa sniffled against Angela’s shoulder.

“I told you no,” Tessa sobbed.

Bailey stumbled to her feet and faced the pool players for the first time, far too disgusted to keep quiet.

“Where do you get off buzzing around like you own this place when you’ve never set one foot underground, you fucking *truck driver*?”

“As if you’re one to talk skipping work just to drink yourself into a stupor,” Angela replied. “You’re no better than that beta-boy; miserable and alone, dragging everyone down with you.” Angela tossed an unconcerned wave at Bailey when Tessa broke from their embrace.

Bailey swallowed hard, feeling her eyes well up with unwanted tears. She took a long, slow breath before making for the door.

“That’s right, go on!” Angela called after her as she went. “Clear the bug out of your ass and get fucked, Bailey. Maybe the Artie’s allowed conjugal visits!”

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Bailey spun and took three great drunken strides to Angela before slapping her back-handed in the face. The woman recoiled and dropped her pool cue to the floor as she reached up to her cheek in pain and shock. Angela's friends gasped.

"Woah now," Bruce exclaimed, only just returning upstairs from the storage room, and far too slow to stop Angela from raking her nails across Bailey's arm in a barely avoided swipe at her face.

In the few seconds it took for Bruce to hurry from the bar and break up the fight, both women were already bloodied. Bailey's arm had tightened around Angela's neck in a headlock. Angela bit down on Bailey's forearm until she lost her grip. Angela whirled around and spat in Bailey's face before jabbing two swift punches to her ribcage.

Bailey took the hits like a seasoned miner, leaning back to deliver a head-butt to her opponent's nose that knocked Angela to the ground. Bailey was diving on top of her when Bruce wrapped his arms around Bailey's waist and yanked her away.

"Break it up!" he bellowed. Tessa and the pool players hurried to attend to Angela, who writhed on the ground clutching at her nose (along with a clump of hair torn from Bailey's scalp.)

"Damn it, Bailey, calm down!" Bruce squeezed her close to keep from being struck. Bailey's yelling melted into heaving, coughing sobs. She collapsed weeping into Bruce's arms, thumping the side of her head against his chest.

#

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

2.

The company truck lurched through the snow, laden down with ice melt and supplies for the day of shoveling in store for Alex and Mei. Somewhere twenty miles to the south, Trevor and Vera were speeding along their own route, breathing fresh air on the job and savoring every second of it for the rare treat that it was.

“So, how’d you end up on the prospect and rescue teams for NPF, if you don’t mind me asking?” Alex cast Mei a friendly glance from behind the wheel while he steered the supply truck around a sharp curve in the mountainside. “You seem higher caliber than most of the poor saps around here.”

Alex and Mei took the northern winding path, cutting through the forests and mountain roads of rural Oregon. Several inches of snow had fallen early that morning, and the rusting plow truck they’d been assigned for the day spat rock salt from its tailgate in brief spurts to ration material for the harshest points in the road (and for the heavy blizzard that was forecast that evening).

The piercing sunlight shone against the white oceans of snow around them. The trees sagged under the weight of ice clinging to their branches. Mei felt a wave of agoraphobia creeping up from somewhere deep in her subconscious. After spending so much time underground, the beautiful open spaces and bright lights were at once mesmerizing and frightful.

“I had to learn quick how to keep ‘essential’ if I wanted a roof over my head,” Mei answered. “Working with my hands always came naturally to me. It’s kept me fed my whole life.”

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“So you never studied his work?” Alex asked.

“My father’s inventions were always a mystery,” Mei replied. “It’s probably the only reason I convinced them to release me during my ‘loyalty test.’ The Zhang family name has a lot of baggage.”

“Sam would probably be able to fill you in about all that,” Alex offered. “He’s a metallurgical chemist over at Minerals Processing; I’m pretty sure he studied up some on your father’s work.” He braked hard against a snowdrift that threatened to set the truck skidding on the black ice beneath it. Alex toggled the switch connected to the tailgate’s ice melt hopper, which spat another gulp of salt mix onto the ground behind them. The truck’s defrosters roared against the windshield as it blew tropical warmth into the cab and barricaded them from the cold outside.

“Sam is your bandmate, right?” Mei asked. “The singer? You guys put on a good show.” She gave a wan smile, recalling their unceremonious meeting during Alex and Trevor’s fight just two nights ago. Alex laughed and took a swig from the thermos of coffee sitting in his cup holder.

“You should tell him that and see how red he turns,” he said. “He can barely hold a conversation off stage with how skittish he gets around people, but the guy’s a hell of a performer.”

When they approached the mouth of their first mineshaft, Alex swung the truck around to back toward the mine’s entrance before throwing it in park. “We’ll need to clear the snow before we can lay down our supply drop.” Alex said, snapped once more into work-mode. “Hop out and grab a shovel; we’ve got half-a-dozen spots to hit after this, and we need to make sure we get the ice melt spread before the blizzard tonight.”

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“Why are we bothering with this if it’s only going to snow again?” Mei asked when she joined Alex at the tailgate. The crisp mountain air whipped at her face.

“We’re getting paid,” Alex shrugged. “We might as well do something while the Captain’s taking the day off. Besides, if we don’t clear the snow that’s already fallen, it’ll be twice as high after the blizzard.”

“They never mentioned ‘grounds keeping’ in our job description,” Mei huffed after tossing a heavy shovel full of snow over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Alex laughed, leaning on his shovel. “It’s hard to always make a full work week out of rescue missions and explorations, so NPF added general mobility and grounds keeping to our list of responsibilities to keep us on full-time.” Alex bent over his shovel once more, kicking a bundle of snow up onto its blade. “I don’t mind much; so long as I get paid, I’ll do whatever they need. Besides; if we don’t take care of this, who will?”

It took forty minutes of intense snow shoveling to dig out the mine’s entrance, pry open the frozen latches of its front gate, and set the supply cache they’d brought just inside. Alex jumped behind the wheel again to toggle a generous hopper spray of salt-sand mixture at the mouth of the shaft, and they were spitting up snow to hurry off to the next site.

Alex lowered the blade of the plow as they lurched down the winding forest roads, arcing fountains of white powder to their side. A single vehicle approached them in the oncoming lane, matte black against the snow. A wide double-sided plow blade was rigged to the vehicle’s front end. As it crept closer, the glint of snow tire chains and a dim blue glow radiating from the rig’s undercarriage burned at Mei’s eyes.

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“Stay sharp,” Alex warned. “That’s a Hellcat security patrol.” He reduced his speed to drive past the large SUV on the snowed-over road. The armored SUV’s headlights flashed once. Alex cursed and flashed back, rolling to a stop beside the vehicle.

“What are we doing?” Mei asked over the swishing of the truck’s windshield wipers.

“Stay quiet and let me do the talking,” Alex ordered, his humor drained. He rolled down his window to greet the stone-faced woman sitting in the SUV’s driver seat, donned in matte-black body armor atop a leather under-suit. Her hair was wrapped high on her scalp in a tight shrewd bun of dirty blonde. The shining aviators resting on her nose cast a funhouse distorted reflection of Alex’s face back at them.

“What brings you out here without an escort?” The Hellcat demanded, reaching out with a chip scanner wand for Alex’s outstretched arm.

“We’re with the prospecting crews,” Alex declared while the driver scanned his data chip. A second security officer stepped out of the SUV’s passenger seat to perform an inspection on the truck, fully suited in her own winterized body armor and sporting a heavy-looking rifle.

“Us and another two-man team are prepping the roads for the encroaching blizzard,” Alex explained to the Hellcat. “We’ve got some containers for supply drops and that big hopper on the tailgate for spreading ice melt. We’re not hauling valuables, so we decided to save on fuel consumption and skip the escort.”

“Show me the route you’re taking,” The driver demanded, reaching with a gloved hand padded at the knuckles for the nav-tracker that Alex produced. The security officer performing

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the inspection finally made her way to Mei's side of the truck and stood looking at her, her gaze imperceptible behind her polarized helmet visor. She twirled her hand for Mei to lower her window and a *whoosh* of bitter cold rushed into the cab as Mei did what she was told.

The gruff woman produced another scanner wand to inspect Mei's data chip, keeping one hand at the ready on her rifle. Mei noted the glow pulsing from the rifle's stock, much like the SUV's undercarriage. There wasn't a doubt left in her mind: the Hellcats were equipped with particle rifles and M-Drive powered rigs, classified tech that only the military had access to. Tech that her father had invented. Weapons that had almost gotten her killed the night before.

"Zhang?" The security officer examined the scanner wand's data readouts. "You're that traitor's daughter who tried getting the drop on Dresden last night," the Hellcat remarked with cold indifference. "You pass your loyalty test?"

"With flying colors." Mei nodded, swallowing her pride in the face of the Hellcat's particle rifle. "I even served with the Oh-En's Liberated Patriot crews. I've always supported the flag."

"Just remember which flag you're supporting," the security officer glowered. Mei bristled at the remark while the driver handed Alex their nav-tracker.

"Stick to your designated stops and you should be fine," the driver conceded. "Next time you're mobilizing over such a wide area, inform security. We're tightening the leashes out here because of the Arties that have been sneaking around."

"Yes, ma'am," Alex nodded. The security officer standing beside Mei's window remained vigilant until Alex pulled their truck away from them and crept onward.

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“What was that about?” Mei demanded when Alex finally exhaled. “Why the hell are our own security teams sporting itchy trigger fingers on us?”

“The Hellcats aren’t *our* security, they’re *New Prospect Frontier’s* security.” Alex glanced back at his rearview mirror as he drove. “Former military, an all-female battalion turned private militia. You saw for yourself last night; the Hellcats don’t fuck around.”

“An all-female battalion?” Mei asked, trying to suppress the pang of anxiety rising in her throat at the memory of her assault the previous night. “I hadn’t realized that many women served.”

“The draft only ever affected men,” Alex explained. “But everyone else was still allowed to sign up, so long as they didn’t require hormones or medications for their orientation. No way to have access to routine meds while you’re at war or shooting around in space.” He bit his lip and shook his head. “At least that’s how they justified excluding us from the military. If you ask me, it’s just more of that old-world bullshit that’s too ingrained to die.”

“Why are the Hellcats so suspicious of their own people?” Mei asked.

“Ever since McEnroy’s Insurrection, everyone’s a suspect,” Alex guessed. “NPF threw the Hellcats to the wolves out here, expecting them to run security *and* facilities. They’re probably jumping at every shadow they come across. Look, they’re tailing us to make sure we’re headed for where I said we would.”

“Jesus,” Mei muttered, craning her head at the armored SUV following them a safe distance away. “That rig’s got an M-Drive core,” Mei said, watching the frightful glow of its under-

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carriage pulse blue. “It’s bad enough they’ve got a set of particle rifles. How did the Hellcats get their hands on Molybdenum Drives?”

“NPF’s mineral yields go straight to the Oh-En, and the Hellcats have friends in high places because of it,” Alex replied. “President Simon would rather melt every American in the state of Oregon down to slag than lose out on another few pounds of pyrite.”

When Alex rounded their turn onto the next winding mountain road, the Hellcats continued onward, satisfied that his story checked out. Mei heard the distinct *crack* of an M-Drive kicking on, and the glowing rig raced through the snow at double speed.

“Their vehicle looked like it could cut through a mountain,” Mei said when they pulled up to the next mine site and hopped out of the truck to grab their shovels.

“One of them probably could,” Alex replied. “Those SUVs of theirs are one step short of tanks; their M-Drives have been reengineered to favor traction and handling over raw speed, but I’d still bet on them in a race. The Hellcats are always ready for things to turn sideways, in case someone tossed another graphite bomb at us. Not like that’d happen, though; the GSN’s particle cannons would blast it out of the sky the minute the rocket launched.” He croaked a bitter laugh, leaning on his shovel to catch his breath. “And it’s our duty as upstanding Americans to mine the pyrite that keeps our defense grid humming.”

“My father’s research is what let the Orbital Navy launch their armada,” Mei admitted. “If he hadn’t engineered pyrite power-cells and M-Drive cores, there’s no way any of our ships would’ve gotten off the ground.” she rubbed at the pendant hanging from her neck, shaken by the thought.

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“And now we’ve got the Hellcats breathing down our necks if we don’t toe the line,”

Alex nodded back to her in the snow. “It’s a shit-show no matter how you look at it, Mei. Don’t let yourself get caught up thinking about it. Come on, this place looks good enough. Let’s throw down the supplies and head out.”

#

When Alex and Mei finished their rounds and returned the work truck to its staging area, they caught the shift change commuter bus home. Grace squealed with glee when they marched up the entry stairs. She refused to set off for Spring Pines until she’d been given a kiss from Alex.

“You two are cute,” Mei smiled while they packed themselves tighter into the back rows of the cramped bus.

“Thanks; I don’t really know how I got so lucky,” Alex marveled. “Grace is about the only thing keeping me going out here.”

When they pulled to a stop on Main Street, the fleet of miners within leapt out from its confines in billowing throngs. Alex pecked a goodbye kiss onto Grace’s cheek and stepped out after them, waving for Mei to follow.

“You know, Mei, you and Sam would probably get along,” Alex suggested when they clamored down into the snow and braced themselves against the late afternoon chill.

“Oh?” Mei smiled, feeling herself blush and trying to suppress the innocent wave of infatuation rippling through her.

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“Come on; I’ll introduce you two for real,” Alex offered. “Sam likes to play acoustic sets at the bar on his days off. Come on, I promise there won’t be a fist fight this time.” The pair trod along the slush-covered street, headed for Bruce’s Bar. Mei was grateful for the rare sensation of normalcy enveloping her. For all the drama of the past seventy-two hours, today had been about as ‘normal’ a day as she’d ever experienced.

They passed the Spring Pines internet café, where a line wrapped around the block to rent a fifteen-minute time slot on one of the dozen computer terminals set up for community use.

“Is it always normal to wait that long for internet access?” Mei asked, pointing at the building.

“They must be trying to get their screen time in before the blizzard cuts off our communications,” Alex guessed. “It’s supposed to be a bad one.”

“We really aren’t allowed our own private communications access year-round, then?” Mei watched the crowd of tired miners stamping their feet against the cold, waiting for the opportunity to catch up on their lives and hear from relatives a world away.

“It’s just easier for NPF to monitor us this way. It probably keeps people from draggin’ up on the spot when they see how much better life in the outside world can be,” Alex laughed.

“How is this supposed to benefit anyone?” Mei demanded. “I’ve been here three days and I feel as much a prisoner as when I was in *detainment*.”

“It’s a shit situation, Mei,” Alex agreed. “But it’s not like it’s changing tomorrow, is it?”

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When they rounded the corner and Bruce's bar crept into sight, Sam hurried out from its entrance into the cold, his acoustic guitar case knocking against his leg.

"Sam? Sam, wait up!" Alex called, running up to his bandmate. Mei followed fast, unwilling to be left forgotten in the road. Sam stopped in his tracks and turned to meet them.

"Alex, hi," Sam said, seeing him for the first time.

"Are you already finished playing?" Alex asked, gesturing for the bar beside them at the sidewalk's edge. "I was hoping we could catch the tail end of your set if we got out early enough. I'm sorry, pal."

"It's fine." Sam stole a brief nervous glance at Mei. "Bailey saw some of the show, but there was...an altercation, I guess."

"What did Bailey do?" Mei asked. Sam turned back to her in surprise.

"Uh, no, nothing. There were some pool players who'd been drinking. They were harassing me; Bailey tried to step in. I left before things could get out of hand, though. I didn't want to cause a scene."

The door to the bar burst open behind him and Angela emerged, bloodied and crying. She was led stumbling out into the streets by her three friends. Tessa stopped to cast a forlorn look at Sam before marching off with them.

"If that's how you left it, I'd hate to see what your definition of a 'scene' is," Mei said as they watched the girls disappear down the street.

"I left before anything happened," Sam sputtered. "I don't know who—"

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"I'll give you three guesses," Alex said with an eye roll. Like he'd conjured a demon, Bruce escorted Bailey outside, shuddering against the cold without a jacket.

"Alex!" Bruce called when he laid eyes on the group, holding Bailey out at arm's length in a desperate offering. "Bailey's had too much and she popped off on Angela. Now she's a sobbing mess."

"I haven't had too much, Bruce. Want me to count the alphabet backwards? I went and practiced for you," Bailey joked, but the usual pep in her sarcasm was missing, betraying her frayed nerves and her puffy eyes. Bruce ignored her.

"Get her home for me, would you?" he called to the group as he made his way back inside. "I've got a bar to run."

Alex sighed, watching Bailey shuffling on her feet to stay warm with her eyes cast down in shame. He turned and put a hand on his roommate's shoulder.

"Sam, this is Mei. You met the other night; she's Thomas Zhang's daughter. Have fun making friends." Alex strode away from them, removing his coat to wrap around Bailey's shoulders. He led the captain away from the bar, leaving Sam and Mei alone in the street to flounder through their introductions.

"You're really Dr. Zhang's daughter?" Sam asked when their friends had faded into the grayness of the flurry. Mei nodded.

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“Alex mentioned you were a metallurgical chemist,” she replied. “I hate to disappoint you, but I’m not the scientist my father was.” Mei shook her head at the thought, looking back at Sam with sudden wariness. “Who was he to you?”

“Good reaction,” Sam sighed. “The work I’ve done, well... I’ve studied a lot of his research during my time with the Oh-En.”

“You served? You probably know more about him than I do,” Mei conceded, thinking fast to change the subject. “...I saw *Four Eff Underground* play the other night.” A wicked grin spread across her face. “You guys were good.”

“Really?” Sam asked, his face flushing crimson. Mei burst out in a spasm of sincere laughter.

“Alex told me you’d turn red, but I didn’t believe him.” Mei replied.

“Yeah, old habits die hard,” Sam laughed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “You should see us play again, sometime.”

Mei nodded and shivered. “Listen, I’ve been outside in the snow all day. I’m going to head home; maybe I’ll see you around?” Sam nodded and waved goodbye while Mei turned to leave. She managed several steps before Sam called out to her.

“Hey, wait!”

“Yes?” Mei stopped in her tracks. Snowflakes settled onto the coarse braid of hair spilling over her shoulders.

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“Would you like to grab dinner with me?” Sam asked. “I was just about to head down to the mess hall.” He smiled. She smiled back.

“You know what? Sure.”

#

3.

Bailey’s vision sharpened with false sobriety as they walked through the fresh chilled evening air, and before long she felt enough herself to admit to Alex that she’d swung first.

“You really just wound up and slapped your ex-girlfriend when she insulted you?” Alex asked with a begrudging grin on his face as he walked Bailey homeward. “Man, that could’ve gotten you fired, but I wish I could have seen the look on Angela’s face when you put her in her place.”

They bundled themselves tighter against the wind as they walked into the flurry descending on the camp. Dark storm clouds gathered in the west, blowing closer with every gust of wind that heralded the impending blizzard.

“Why did you ever date Angela in the first place?” Alex asked. “She’s got more screws loose than the heavy equipment out here.”

“I was lonely,” Bailey replied. “We’d both hang around Bruce’s bar through last call every Friday. Angela made a move on me one night, and I went with it. We weren’t usually sober when we were together...” Bailey watched one of the overhead lamps across the street flicker to life in sporadic bouts of corrosive failure.

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“It didn’t take long to realize that I just didn’t swing that way, no matter how hard I pretended or drank,” she continued. “Angela didn’t take it well when I broke things off; trash talked me to anyone who would listen for a few weeks, tried to turn some people against me, all that petty shit. But then we got on with life and learned to share bar time. She just picked the wrong day to poke the fire.” Bailey rubbed at her sore eyes, which only burned harder in the crisp winter air.

“I get that,” Alex nodded. “But Angela’s a bitch, that’s never been news. What’s really eating you, Bailey?”

“Dawson got to me when I visited him yesterday, Alex.” Bailey’s head began pounding with a fresh migraine while she searched for a half-truth that wouldn’t betray her past. “NPF is getting rid of him. He’s got Pyrite Disease.” Saying the words left an unpleasant taste in her mouth and made Bailey wonder if she’d caught one too many acidic snowflakes on her tongue.

“I heard,” Alex said, kicking at a mound of snow as they walked.

“Well, the old bastard tried to have a come-to-Jesus meeting and convince me to hang up my hard hat before I ended up like him,” Bailey admitted.

“You have been coughing a lot,” Alex said. “Maybe he’s got a point.”

“Is everyone my fucking doctor these days?” Bailey growled.

“Hey, don’t bite my head off, I’m just trying to look out for you.” Alex’s stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. “You’ve got more friends out here than you want to admit, Parker; thinking otherwise is on you. You’re really just going to ignore that cough and ride out another winter,

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trudging through the mines and gulping down a lungful of damp every time you change your oxygen?" Alex whistled long and low, cocking his head in exclamation. "It's not what I'd do. Not after a decade of it already, Cap."

"I don't know," Bailey shuddered again. "I'm burnt out, Alex, and I'm tired of feeling so damn powerless over everything. The Hellcats threw Mei on the *ground*, and I couldn't do anything to stop them. I didn't even care. All I wanted was to get drunk and go to bed. But Mei kept digging at me in the truck..." she stopped in her tracks to think it through as she spoke, still reeling with cresting waves of inebriation.

"NPF doesn't give a shit about us," Bailey decided. "They showed their colors the second Dawson needed them, just like always. We're digging up the pyrite that'll power interplanetary *battleships*. For what, Alex? So the Oh-En can build a few more space stations to police us from." Bailey stomped a mound of slush on the road in frustration. The slush caved away beneath her boot with a cathartic *squelch*. "They stole our futures from us. Robbed the *meaning* from our lives. And they expect us to be *grateful* to them for a job maintaining their war machine."

"I know it," Alex nodded. "But because we were out here, you and me and the others, there's a few people resting up in their infirmary beds right now instead of in a metal coffin underground. That's got to count for something." He stopped to face Bailey in the snowfall

"You inspired all of us to look after our own people out here," Alex said, his eyes locked on the captain in admiration. "Not NPF or President Simon or whoever else we're stuck working for before we're dead. When Mei took down that grizzly, you were on her tail the whole time,

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ready to fight the thing with a *chisel*. You've saved more than enough of our people from the mines to prove you mattered."

"Yeah," Bailey sniffed, only half-reassured by Alex's pep talk. "But if I leave the rescue teams, what else is there? I barely qualify for work outside the industry; saving people from those mines is all I know how to do and I'm too worn out to start from scratch."

"That's no excuse not to start when the alternative's a tombstone," Alex warned. "Save yourself; you've already saved everyone else."

"I'll think about it, I guess." Bailey heaved a heavy breath of relief as a fresh wave of sobriety swept over her. "Thank you, Alex."

"Come on. If you're feeling so low, let's go visit Nadine in the infirmary," Alex offered. "Vera mentioned she would be getting discharged tonight; you can cheer each other up. We can even stop by Dawson's room if you want to give him a piece of your mind."

"Yeah, okay," Bailey nodded. She straightened her posture and shook off her grief until she was walking with the bounding strides of her old self.

#

4.

Mei and Sam stood in the dinner line at the mess hall, sliding empty trays along the metal rack beside them as they inched their way forward for the army of kitchen staff behind the counter to serve them. Rowdy jeers and mumbled conversation flooded the air, and Mei was re-

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lieved to soak up the warmth inside. At the opposite end of the mess hall, the breakfast counter was thrumming with life for the night shift workers just beginning their daily routines.

“You mean your family never saw a penny from your father’s research?” Sam asked. Their introduction had fast delved into the harsh realities of the past when Sam had wondered aloud why she was pyrite mining after spending four years with the Orbital Navy’s construction crews, a job that could have landed her work anywhere in the country. Mei welcomed the conversation for the sincere compassion in Sam’s eyes, a rare thing in her experience.

“My father forfeited any patent rights to his research when he signed his employment contract with the government,” Mei explained. “He was hired help, just like the miners. And the Oh-En’s ‘Liberated Patriot’ detainee crew wasn’t the resume builder you think it was.”

“I would have thought your family was being compensated for your father’s discoveries. He revolutionized space travel, for God’s sake.” Sam held out his tray to receive a hefty scoop of mashed potatoes from the hair-netted server behind the glass partition. Mei followed his example and they shuffled along down the line. “The Oh-En’s got *archives* of Thomas Zhang’s work. They wouldn’t exist without his discoveries.”

“Honestly, it wouldn’t have mattered.” Mei held out her tray to receive her own dollop of potatoes and they plodded forward in line. “Our assets were seized after my father’s death when my mother and I were sent to the military’s detainment camps for suspected collusion against the state.”

“Why would they persecute the Zhang family for your father’s crimes?” Sam asked. They both held out their trays for a hefty serving of mixed vegetables.

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“I’ve given up trying to find excuses for people’s prejudice,” Mei shrugged. “Every time you’d think the world’s moved on, disaster strikes and everyone jumps three steps backward, hunting for a scapegoat.”

The next cafeteria worker gave them both a thick slice of meatloaf. When she held a ladle full of steaming, soup-looking gravy out to them, Mei declined the offer. Sam in turn took a double portion for himself, reducing his plate to a sludge-looking mess.

“I never knew Dr. Zhang’s family had been targeted; it was never publicized,” Sam said warily. “I’m sorry. Treason’s one thing, but just being *related* to someone’s a god-awful reason to throw you and your mother in detainment without trial.”

“We never got a reason either. I was detained for five years. I had to join up with the ‘Liberated Patriots’ just to get out.” They approached the end of the line and stood before the cashier. Sam set his tray down on the scale beside her register. The cashier tapped at the calculator beside her and jotted down the transaction she’d prepared.

“Twenty-forty-three.” The cashier held up a scanner wand to Sam’s data chip. The scanner chimed the transaction’s completion.

“They explained how company credit works, right?” Sam asked, looking back at Mei as he took his tray in hand once more.

“Vaguely,” she replied. “No one bothered to throw me a manual on living in a company town like this. I’ve been hitting the ground running since I got here.” Mei gestured to the chip embedded in her arm. “I had to borrow a line of credit to pay for my room and board until my

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first paycheck comes in next Friday,” she admitted. “And this thing in my arm is giving me goosebumps every time I remember it’s there. This place is wrong.”

“They’ll sink their claws into you if they get a chance,” Sam shook his head with empathy. “The bastards don’t want you making money, they want you making debt. You end up in the hole the second you get here, and you spend your first year in camp digging yourself in deeper with their damned interest rates.”

“You’re holding up the line, folks,” the cashier demanded, bleary eyed.

“I’ve got this,” Sam offered when Mei set her own tray on the scale. “No sense giving them even more of your paycheck before you’ve had the thing delivered to you.” Before Mei could protest, the cashier tapped away at her calculator and scanned Sam’s data chip once more.

“Next!” The cashier shouted past them, aggravated for her rhythm to be interrupted. Sam and Mei took their trays of food and stepped away from the register. The mess hall was a large common space, with electric heaters blowing down on the room from its four corners and several massive fans rotating slowly above the ceiling’s support beams.

Long benches lined the mess hall in symmetrical rows. Sam guided Mei to one of the two-seater high tables dotting the room’s edges. They were early for dinner, but already the mess hall was half-filled with miners and laborers from all shift schedules. Mei looked on with bemusement as they passed a woman dining on a bowl of oatmeal with a side of bacon while her friend wolfed down a dish of meatloaf and potatoes beside her.

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“We got lucky.” Sam set his tray down on the tabletop he’d chosen, peeling off his coat to hang it on the back of his high chair. “Usually, the high-tops are prime real estate. If we’d come an hour later than we did, it’d be standing room only in here.”

Mei followed Sam’s example before perching herself on her chair. The window beside her had fogged over from the snowfall outside. The heater above them spat warmth into her bones, and Mei felt her cheeks tingling.

“It’s nice in here.” She took a deep breath of calm, feeling out of harm’s way for what felt like the first time since she’d been brought onto the project.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cozy in the wintertime,” Sam agreed. “I’ll go grab us a couple of coffees. Be right back. Don’t worry, this one’s on me; I’m owed plenty of water rations from the side work I pull with the electricians.”

“I’ll have a tea, actually, if they have it.”

Sam held up a finger in acknowledgement as he walked away. Mei sat back into her chair, soaking in the mess hall’s liveliness, smiling with relief to hear laughter after the tense days of her first week on the job. The wind whistled against the window outside. She looked down at the tabletop as she picked up her fork and set into her meal, immediately assaulted by the rubbery blandness of the cafeteria food.

Her eyes wandered across the plethora of graffiti scribbled into the table’s wooden surface. *Morgan sells cabbage by the side of the road*, a caption read. *Simon Says: eat ass!* read another. Mei stifled a laugh as she scanned the table. Her face fell when she found a racial slur

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carved into the wood. She ran a finger along its contour, feeling the carved grooves of the letters scraped into the tabletop.

“They didn’t have much of a selection for tea.” Sam carried two steaming mugs to the table with him as he approached. “I managed to snag you some Earl Grey. I hope that’s alright.” He set the mugs down and took his seat across from her. His smile faded when he saw the look on her face.

“Mei? Are you alright?” He followed her gaze to the hate speech carved into the table and turned a shade of red that matched his hair. He rummaged through a coat pocket until he pulled a black marker free from its depths and scribbled over the carving to blot out the phrase. Despite his efforts, its indentation could still be seen in the light glinting off the tabletop.

“Sam.” Mei reached out and gripped his forearm when Sam groaned in frustration and picked up his dinner knife to scratch away the phrase from the wood. “Whoever you’re trying to cover that up for, you’re not doing it for me. If you scratch out someone’s tabletop graffiti and give yourself a pat on the back for it, I’ll still be getting asked whether I ‘passed my loyalty test,’ wondering who’s even an ally out here and knowing nothing’s changed.”

“Sorry.” Sam set down his knife, ashamed. “I just never paid it much mind.”

“Exactly,” Mei replied. “You’re privileged enough to get through the day without someone vomiting their hate onto you. That’s never been the case for people like me.” Mei took a sip of tea, biting back the bitter tang of over-steeped Earl Grey.

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“But why are you still here putting up with all of this if the government persecuted your family?” Sam asked in shock. “If I were in your shoes, I’d have half a mind to grab a plane out of the country the second I was released.”

“Because this is my *home*,” Mei declared. “My father made sure we understood that and worked to be a force for good, no matter how ignorant or bigoted the people around us became.”

She stared hard down at the carving, rubbing at her pyrite pendant with one hand. She leaned back in her chair, depleted. “Until this week, I’ve toed the line and played ‘Patriot’ for their rigged system. Studying what they told me to study, building their war machine, pledging allegiance to their flags while my mother died of whatever fever ravaged our camp that they never bothered to treat. And lo and behold, I get here and find out that our imprisonment, my father’s ‘defection,’ was nothing but lies and deceit. If I left America now, then who would make it right? So help me God, I’ll find a way to hold Simon and the Oh-En accountable.”

“I’ve got to say, Mei, hearing that kind of passion coming out of you to change things, you’re wasting your time in the mines,” Sam said in amazement. “You should have gone into politics.” Mei flushed and took a long sip of tea before adjusting her braid, which had gotten caught by the back of her chair. She pulled the braid apart to tend to the mess it had become.

“Your turn,” she nodded to Sam. Her long black hair billowed down to hang at the base of her ribs in front of her, shining a deep luster in the light of the mess hall as she prepared to work it into a new braid. “How did one of the only men on this project end up working for NPF, instead of becoming some hotshot in the military? Why leave the Oh-En?”

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“Everyone’s got skeletons in their closet.” Sam took his eyes off Mei’s nimble fingers working at her hair and gazed down into his coffee. “I’m not really supposed to talk about much more than that...”

“I guess everyone’s got secrets out here but me!” Mei rolled her eyes in annoyance. “After I give you my family’s whole sob story, that’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Alright, fair,” Sam winced. “I was a researcher with the Oh-En’s particle weapons and propulsion division. That’s why I’m so familiar with your father’s work, Mei. I was with the group that kept at it.” He glanced up and saw her watching him as she finished her braid. Sam swallowed and continued.

“Your father’s prototype particle cannons were powerful enough to give us an edge in the war, but we still had to win with old-fashioned elbow grease. Too many Americans died fighting, and the ceasefire we’d agreed on with the Russian-Chinese alliance would never have lasted. That’s when Operation Pyrrhic Victory was first conceived.”

Sam took a long sip of coffee. Mei noticed a slight tremor in his hands as he set the mug back down.

“The Orbital Navy decided that the key to global peace was complete control of aerospace. Communications, transportation, trade; everything on earth was dependent on the satellites in orbit. Rendering them nonfunctional would put everyone in the dark ages again, leaving the Oh-En the only combat-ready force on Earth.”

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He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced. “Our final challenge was engineering a craft for the Molybdenum-Drive propulsion system that your father designed. Your father built hundreds of M-Drive cores before he died. We just had to figure out how to put them in a working ship.”

“The M-Drives. How do they work?” Mei asked. “What’s the secret to my father’s research?”

Sam took a breath and rubbed his hands together, taking a quick look around to check for eavesdroppers before leaning in and beckoning her closer.

“If refined pyrite is atomized within a vacuum-tight centrifuge of molybdenum-carbide, its molecular structure is forced into compression. It holds its form as a gas, under immense pressure and friction. The atoms ionize when an external current is induced into the centrifuge, amplifying that friction.” Sam traced a circle on the tabletop and ran his fingertip back and forth along its confines.

“That friction of the particles moving around in such tight proximity develops a concentrated static charge stronger than a lightning bolt. Then a catalyst makes contact with the centrifuge. All that static energy is released with a spark, a guided jolt of energy as powerful as a nuclear blast. A vessel could accelerate to half the speed of light in milliseconds with the power of a single particle bolt... You could get to Pluto in a day at a *fraction* of that speed. A full fleet of those ships could destroy every satellite in orbit and police the world with ease. So we got to work.”

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Sam swallowed again, wary of getting swept up in his own narrative. He looked out the window in shame. “I was young and so focused on the beauty of the science that I didn’t stop to reflect on what it was being used for. I just wanted to take us into space.”

“You sound like my father,” Mei said.

“I don’t know if I can take that as a compliment this time,” Sam replied with a sad smile. “Operation Pyrrhic Victory won America the world. I ended up with an honorable discharge after my next routine psych eval diagnosed me with a severe case of post-traumatic stress. The Oh-En doesn’t like the notion of its crewmen having an emotional breakdown while they’re floating around in orbit.”

He emptied the last of his coffee and looked away, gazing at the people coming and going for dinner. “I took a hiatus from it all, tried to do some soul searching and move on from what we’d done, but before too long I needed the money more than I needed my mental health, so I put my education to work the only way I could as a civilian: refining pyrite for NPF to sell back to the Oh-En. So here I am, like everyone else, pretending this system isn’t broken, powerless to make it any different.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” Mei said with sincerity. “I wouldn’t have guessed you were in the military just looking at you.”

“Well, being up in space for months on end doesn’t help your bone density.”

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“Believe me, I know,” Mei laughed with Sam at the thought. “We were building GSN satellites for months on end in zero-G. It felt like I had perpetual food poisoning after so much time floating around in Karman Space.”

The rising tide of traffic proclaimed the dinner rush had reached its stride. The thrumming conversation that filled the space when they’d arrived grew to a roaring din of noise. A tray of food clattered onto the floor, followed by a wave of cackling laughter that rippled along the air. Sam and Mei relished the moment together, a barrier broken down between them.

“Well, look who we’ve got here!” Vera announced as she strolled up to the table, a tray of food in hand. “I was wondering where you got off to, Mei. I guess we should have given you a couple more sites to prep with Alex to even out the workload some more.” Vera laughed before hissing in sudden pain and reaching for her side with one hand.

“How’s that rib of yours holding up, Vera?” Mei asked.

“I should have taken the day off like Bailey,” she moaned. “I could barely lift a shovel out there today.”

“And you had me shoveling twice as much because of it,” Trevor grunted behind her with his own tray of food. “It took us almost until dark just to make our rounds.”

“We were about to grab a table if you two cared to join us?” Vera offered, gesturing toward one of the last empty benches a pace away. “I wanted to grab some food before picking up Naddy from the infirmary.”

“We’ve actually been here a while already,” Mei confessed.

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“It’s not like you’ve got anywhere else to be with this blizzard looming over us, kid,”

Trevor replied.

“I guess you’re right,” Mei nodded. “I could stay for another cup of tea and wait out the storm awhile.” she stood to gather her things. “Coming, Sam?”

Sam looked between Mei and her coworkers.

“Sure, why not?” he picked up his guitar case to join them.

#

5.

When Bailey and Alex reached the infirmary, the snow was falling in strength. A Hellcat security SUV was parked curbside at the infirmary entrance, flashing its over-bright headlights into the street. Its undercarriage hummed with the sickly blue glow of its M-Drive core. When Alex and Bailey stepped through the entrance lobby’s sliding glass doors, the Hellcats standing guard at its sides cast unsettling glares at Bailey and Alex. She forced herself to nod at the Hellcats, chilled by the tension they radiated. Bailey never got on with the security teams, but they’d never felt like *threats* before now. The concerned fear she saw in Alex’s eyes confirmed her suspicions. Bailey felt the guards watching her for the long moments they waited at the receptionist’s desk. A chill ran up her spine that she couldn’t blame on the booze still in her system. The receptionist finished her typing at last and turned her attention upward to them.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just had to finish sending out an email.”

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“That’s alright,” Alex replied. What’s with the extra security here?” He glanced back at the guards. Bailey remained silent, smelling the sterile ammonia-death on the air and remembering how much she hated hospitals.

“The Artie they brought for treatment dragged the commotion in with him,” the receptionist answered. “The Hellcats have been loitering around all day waiting for Dr. Hassan to declare him well for transport to detainment. I’m all for it if we can get some peace and quiet around here.” The receptionist rubbed her temples. “Damn Artie’s got me feeling like a prisoner at my own job.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Bailey replied, “but you chose the wrong company to work for if that’s the problem.”

The receptionist laughed. “Who will you be visiting today?” she asked.

“It feels like that list is always getting longer,” Alex said with a shake of his head. “The girls from drilling crew three are still here recovering?”

“That’s right,” the receptionist nodded, tapping at her computer to pull up her patient records. “Reggie Wilson and Terra Mennings were released earlier this morning in good health; however, the others are still waiting on their final evaluations for discharge.”

“What room is Nadine Daughton in?” Alex asked, resting his elbow on the receptionist’s counter as he leaned forward to peer at her screen.

“Daughton, Daughton...” The receptionist thrummed her fingers against the keyboard, scanning her files. “Room four-oh-four,” she finally declared.

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“Oh, yeah?” Bailey smiled, remembering the empty bed she’d laid in yesterday. “Sounds like Dawson finally got himself a roommate.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.” The receptionist furrowed her brow in confusion. “Mrs. Daughton is the only occupant of that room.”

“Well, where did you move Dawson?” Bailey asked, irritated that her bubble had been burst.

“Dawson Granger?” the receptionist asked, peering up at them from behind her computer with nervous confusion.

“Yes,” Bailey said, irate. “He’s the only Dawson you’ve got in here. Did he get a private room or something?”

“No, ma’am; Mr. Granger was discharged this afternoon and escorted onto a transport bus out of Spring Pines.”

The cheer melted away from their faces and a cold numbness washed over Bailey’s skin.

“He was just diagnosed with Pyrite Disease,” Bailey found herself shouting. “Where in the hell do you get off discharging him so soon? He still hasn’t even healed up from the *bear* that attacked us on shift!” The Hellcats shifted on their feet behind her.

“Miss, please stay calm,” the receptionist warned. “Mr. Granger was officially severed from his company ties this afternoon. We weren’t allowed to treat him anymore if we’d wanted to. A security team packed his bag and sent him on a bus home.”

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“He didn’t have a home,” Alex jumped in with worry. “He lived on the road. Where did you send him?”

“*They* probably sent him to Portland or Eugene to make his way from there,” the receptionist corrected. “It’s completely out of our control.”

#

“They can’t *do* this!” Bailey shouted as she stormed into the infirmary room. Nadine lay in the window-side bed where Dawson had chastised Bailey just yesterday. A fresh set of bandages was wound around Nadine’s temples and the color had returned to her face. She stared out into the encroaching blizzard, her arms crossed, lips pursed in thought. Alex stood motionless by Dawson’s empty infirmary bed, his hand resting on its railing.

“They came for him just a few hours after I was admitted,” Nadine explained from the window side bed. “Vera already left for her work shift. I couldn’t manage to get in touch with anyone else.”

“Did he mention what he was planning to do?” Alex asked, staring at the empty bed where Dawson should have been. “Where he’d go, anything like that?”

“He didn’t have plans,” Nadine finally admitted. “He said there wasn’t much point in fighting it, that he was just going to pitch his tent wherever they sent him and wait for the Pyrite Disease to take him. He barely had any light left in his eyes when he told me.”

Nadine brushed a strand of hair from her face and cast them both a wary look.

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“Sad as it is about Dawson, there’s other things we need to talk about,” she said. “More than a few drillers have come to visit, and there’s a *lot* of unrest with the laborers: first the Hellcats evict innocent miners over ‘McEnroy’s Insurrection,’ and then they shoot up their own people with reckless abandon in the Artie tunnel last night. I don’t know about you two, but Dawson’s heave-ho is my own last straw. It’s time we organized a strike.”

“Jesus!” Alex rushed to the hallway to check for eavesdroppers before easing the door shut and creeping closer toward them. “Watch what you’re saying; security’s all over this place!” he hissed. “What’s even gotten into you, thinking we stand a chance at striking against NPF?”

“Where do *you* get off singing songs about the ‘good old union days’ with your little band if that’s how you feel about it, Alex?” Nadine retorted. “That all just for fun?”

“There’s a difference between singing to a roomful of drunks and trying to incite a crowd,” Alex whispered, pointing an accusing finger at Nadine from across the room. “The Hellcats would put down anyone holding a picket sign within an hour.”

Nadine clenching her fists against her infirmary gown in rising anger. “Are you going to sing the same tune when you get evicted from the only home *you* have for catching Pyrite Disease on the job?” she demanded, clenching her fists against her infirmary gown. “You gonna tuck your tail and hide like the coward Trevor thinks you are?”

“That’s—” Alex caught himself raising his voice. He bit his lip and sat on Dawson’s old bed, breathing hard and slow through his nose.

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“She’s right, Alex.” Bailey froze mid-stride from her pacing. “NPF’s been playing us for years. It’s time we stood up to it.” She scanned the faces of her colleagues, settling on Nadine’s bandaged forehead. “Half the town’s already gotten their layoff notices; barely anyone’s got anything left to lose. If we can get enough people to join the strike to hold up production, that empty suit Fitz would *have* to hear us out.”

Bailey crossed the room to lean against the windowsill beside Nadine, looking out into the encroaching blizzard through her dim reflection.

“What’s to keep the Hellcats from gunning us down when we refuse to work?” Alex asked.

“Because then there will be no one to mine their pyrite at *all*,” Bailey said with a toss of her hand. “They can’t miss their deadlines; we’re more valuable to them alive than dead. If we can get *everyone* in the community to back the strike, we can force their hand when the whole operation screeches to a halt. NPF won’t risk angering the Oh-En with an unfulfilled pyrite shipment, that’s for sure.”

“This is too much,” Alex tossed up his hands. “I need to get some air.” He was out the door before anyone could get a word in against him.

#

4.

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When Alex stepped into the infirmary hallway's sterile lighting, he closed the door behind him and leaned against it to steady himself. Bailey's talk of striking made sense. But it was a drastic decision, nonetheless.

Alex counted down the days in his head. With barely five weeks until his twenty-sixth birthday, he'd only just finished his three-year residency to pay the government back for his education costs. To risk throwing it all away now and start from scratch, with a black mark on his resume for abetting in a labor strike, was a gamble he wasn't sure he could afford. Just thinking about the weight of the decision set his ears burning with anxiety.

Alex pushed away from the door and walked down the hallway to stretch his legs. When he rounded the corner, he saw a Hellcat standing guard at a room down the hall in their uniform matte black armor. A single fluorescent light buzzed in a corner behind her, casting a long shadow on the guard. He paid her no mind and continued walking. When Alex was just fifteen feet away, the Hellcat craned her head and held out a hand while brandishing her particle rifle.

"Stop," she ordered. Alex snapped out of his racing thoughts and complied. "This end of the infirmary is off limits while we prepare the prisoner for transport." The Hellcat lowered her hand and clenched her particle rifle in a tight grip. Its glowing maw betrayed a venomous bite that Alex wanted no taste of. "What's your business here?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize the 'prisoner' was being kept in this area." Alex raised his hands up to his waist in hopes of pacifying the guard. "I'm here visiting one of the miners who was injured at Black Meadow. I was with the rescue team that evacuated our people from the tunnels."

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“What a hero! Thank you for your service; now kindly fuck off.” The Hellcat jerked her rifle’s muzzle toward the hallway from which Alex had approached. “I haven’t gotten any word that you’re even cleared to be on site.”

“That’s because you have no authority over my infirmary,” came a throaty alto voice from behind Alex. He turned to watch a doctor stride past him in a white lab coat, her silver-white hair billowing out from the distressed bun atop the crown of her head and the stethoscope dangling from her neck. The rich bronze skin around her face was deeply wrinkled. Alex caught a faint scent of cinnamon as she passed him carrying a bundle of fresh looking clothes in the crook of her arm.

“Dr. Hassan.” The Hellcat stood straighter and softened the grip on her weapon. “I’ve been given orders to secure this wing for the prisoner’s transport. I’ll have to ask—”

“You’ll have to stand down.” Dr. Hassan stopped in front of the guard and stared her in the eye. “The last time I checked, this is *my* infirmary, and I control its goings-on. It is only by the reluctant permission I’ve granted the security teams that you have the ‘authority’ to stand guard if your prisoner attempts to escape. And from what I understand, it would be quite a difficult feat to outrun a Hellcat on a broken fibula.”

“But Doctor,” the Hellcat countered, her confidence wavering. “We’ll be mobilizing within the hour to escort him to lock up before the blizzard hits in full force.”

“Until I’ve declared him well, he remains a patient of this facility and you will take him nowhere,” Dr. Hassan said, crushing the last defense the Hellcat had ready. “Now stand down so I can do my job.”

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“...yes, ma’am.” The Hellcat marched past the two of them, casting Alex a single warning look before she shrank away into the halls, her boots echoing on the linoleum tile.

“I’m sorry for that,” Dr. Hassan said to Alex. “Those jackals gave up on telling friend from foe. It’s shameful. You say you were a member of the rescue team that saved Tommy?” She stared Alex down with the powerful gaze that had disarmed the Hellcat moments before.

“Yes, Doctor,” Alex stammered.

“I would say he owes you a debt of gratitude then.” Dr. Hassan gestured to the room door beside them. “I was just about to perform his final medical assessment before deeming him fit for travel. Would you care to join me? I’m confident that Tommy could use a friendly face right now.” Alex accepted, taken aback by the gesture. Dr. Hassan knocked twice on the door with an upturned fist and cracked it open to announce her entry.

“Good afternoon, Tommy,” Dr. Hassan said with professional cheer as she entered the room, her lab coat swishing against the doorframe. Alex followed and closed the door behind him. The room was a mirror-twin of the one where Nadine was recovering: sterile and blank. Tommy lay in the bed at the room’s end, gaunt in the fading light that spilled across his face from the snow-laden window. A large cast was fitted to his left leg. His left eye was bruised and swollen. Alex felt a pang of apprehension that it had come from the Hellcats during their interrogation.

“Hello, Doctor,” Tommy murmured with a passing glance.

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"I've brought you a visitor," Dr. Hassan explained, setting the bundle of clothes on the nightstand by Tommy's bed. "This is Alex. I understand you've met."

Tommy turned his gaze once more onto Alex, who shifted uneasily in the emotionless stare looking back at him.

"We found you last night, got you out of the mine." Alex admitted to Tommy.

"Thanks, I guess." Tommy looked out the window to inspect the frost gathering against it. "You probably should have left me, though. I already got a beating for my troubles. By this time tomorrow, I'll have a one way ticket into the Oh-En's newest orbital prison and NPF will send their goons to track down my entire family to join me."

"If you'll be so kind as to hold out your arm?" Dr. Hassan asked. Tommy complied, and the doctor attached a blood pressure cuff to around his bicep. "No dizzy spells?" the doctor asked, jotting down a note on the room chart she'd procured from the foot of his bed. Tommy shook his head. Dr. Hassan removed the cuff and plugged her stethoscope into her ears. After listening to his breathing, she nodded and stepped back.

"It's impressive that your people ventilated the mine so well. Your lungs didn't take as much of a beating in the tunnels as the damp exposure could have caused."

"This is it then, Doc?" Tommy asked, still looking into the frosted window. "I'm fit for discharge?"

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“Unfortunately, yes,” Dr. Hassan replied. “Despite my best efforts, there’s nothing else I can advise to prevent your removal from my care. I’ve brought a bundle of fresh clothes for you.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Tommy nodded in a hoarse whisper. “Thank you for trying.”

“I’ll give you some privacy to change.” Dr. Hassan gathered herself and prepared to leave. “Alex, would you mind helping Tommy into his clothes? His cast is a rather difficult obstruction, and it’s not often we have a masculine face to lend a hand.”

“Actually, I...” Alex stammered again, displaced by the doctor’s request.

“Best of luck to you, Tommy.” Dr. Hassan slipped out of the room, the door latching shut behind her. The silence that enveloped them felt more claustrophobic to Alex than any day he’d spent in the tunnels.

“Well, throw me a shirt, I guess,” Tommy murmured, fumbling to unclasp his infirmary gown from its fastenings. Alex did as he was asked, helping the artisanal miner change into his clothes so he could be taken into custody.

“They’re going to force me to enlist, aren’t they?” Tommy asked him as he raised his arms over his head for Alex to slip an undershirt onto his torso.

“Probably,” Alex admitted as he tugged the shirt down with stiff hands.

“And I’ll be sent to the Canadian border or shipped off to New Korea to guard the jungle, won’t I?” Tommy asked when Alex pulled the sleeves of a flannel jacket across his arms and helped to button its front.

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“That or long-term orbital detainment,” Alex conceded, reaching for the pair of jeans that Dr. Hassan left behind.

“God, I never wanted this.” Tommy’s voice cracked while he choked back tears.

“You wouldn’t have been in this mess if you hadn’t dodged the draft and joined the Arties,” Alex said, hardly convincing himself as he spoke the words.

“And what’s your excuse to dodge the draft?” Tommy glared at Alex, half-dressed. “I don’t see *you* wearing blue-grey fatigues. Have you got a medical condition, or were you just a coward?”

“I’m trans.” Alex bristled, balling up the pair of faded blue jeans in his hands. “The draft doesn’t apply to me; I’m not even allowed to enlist.”

“Must be nice to have a get out of hell free card.” Tommy pulled down the lower half of his infirmary gown without concern. “Not having to fight President Simon’s senseless wars and getting a free mining education from the Career Placement Test sounds like pretty easy living.”

“You’ve got some nerve coming at me like that when I saved your life!” Alex threw the jeans into Tommy’s lap. “I joined the mine rescue teams to make as much of a difference as I could in my own way. That doesn’t make me a coward no matter *who* says it, and I haven’t got a damn thing to prove to you,” he declared. “What have *you* done that earns you the privilege to be so self-righteous? How many people have you risked *your* life to save when they blow themselves to hell in the mines?”

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“I guess you’re right,” Tommy muttered. “Still, don’t act like it’s some ‘beautiful privilege’ you’re being denied when they tell you you’re not allowed into the military. I didn’t vote for things to go this way, and neither did you. If you want to trade places with me and sign up to be cannon fodder at the border, catching shrapnel in the ass or PTSD for your troubles, or swinging a hammer in zero-G for the Oh-En’s next surveillance station, you go right ahead.”

“No, I’m- I’m good.” Alex reddened with shame.

“Yeah. Same,” Tommy nodded. “But that’s looking like what’s next for me anyway, Alex. They already chipped me.” He pointed to his right arm, where the fresh red welt of an implanted data chip throbbed. “No way I’d be able to hide from anyone with this *thing* inside me. I’m half-way to hell already. So are you going to help me put my pants on or what?” he finally asked, gesturing at the obtrusive cast covering his leg.

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m—” Alex was interrupted by Tommy’s snickering.

“I share a co-ed living space with two dozen people,” the Artie shrugged. “The world’s gone to shit and I’ll be dead within a year. What difference does it make what kind of equipment you’re working with? We’re all drowning in the same toxic ocean.”

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but was too surprised by the unassuming tolerance the Artie had shown him. It was more than he’d been offered by countless ‘law-abiding citizens’ in the past.

“Why’d you and your people do it, Tommy?” Alex asked as they struggled to fit the baggy pant leg over his cast. “Why cross NPF? You knew it would be a death sentence.”

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“Because nowhere else would hire draft dodgers. What choice did we have? We had to make a living.” Tommy wiped at his eyes. “I told the Hellcats the same thing I’ll tell you now: NPF started this. That liar McEnroy gave us his *blessing* to start mining. My family was just taking back the land that was ours in the first place before the mining bureau seized it.”

“What do you mean, ‘your land’?” Alex asked in surprise. “You’re not from Timber Bluff?”

“Of course we are, but that’s not where we came from.” Tommy squirmed into his pants with Alex’s help. “My family owned half the land in Spring Pines County. We were ranchers for generations. When pyrite subsidies took off and the Second Gold Rush hit, we got our cattle land prospected, grabbed a shovel, and started digging like patriotic Americans. NPF found the public records of the prospectors’ findings and tried to buy our land, but my father would never sell.” Tommy finished settling into his clothes and glanced out the window.

“The federal government declared eminent domain on behalf of NPF and evicted us from our own homes without compensation. My father destroyed as many records of the mines we’d started as he could, but NPF found them one by one until all that was left was Dry Water.”

“The mine you were working in when we found you?” Alex handed Tommy a worn leather belt to loop through his jeans.

“We’d been staying at Timber Bluff in Daphne O’Shea’s camp with the other artisanal miners in the region. While McEnroy was still negotiating with Shea, my father tried to convince her to have teams sneak into Dry Water with us to mine on graveyard shifts when NPF wouldn’t notice. She never agreed to it...said that it wasn’t worth risking the truce. Then my father died of

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Pyrite Disease a year ago, and that got my Uncle Brian scheming. He went over Shea's head and made a deal with McEnroy himself. Our profit-shares would pay for two NPF miners' salaries; your admin just wanted to keep as many warm bodies on payroll as they could, the poor bastards. We rounded up the men of the family and anyone else at Timber Bluff willing to help dig." Tommy balled his hands into fists in his lap, fully dressed in his ill-fitting clothes. "We managed a few months of mining before McEnroy's people were arrested. Laid low just fine after that and kept mining until we hit your people yesterday. You know the rest."

"You're not worried I'll tell the Hellcats what you just told me?" Alex raised an eyebrow, leaning against the nightstand as he spoke.

"The minute the Hellcats walked into this room, their leader was beating me for information," Tommy replied. "They know we came from Timber Bluff and that McEnroy let us start digging. But the way that woman's eyes lit up when she heard Daphne O'Shea's name..." Tommy shuddered at the memory. "I was terrified just to be in the room. She acted like it was personal that one of Shea's people stepped on her territory. I just hope that the others who got out managed to warn the camp." He shook his head again.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. Really."

"Yeah," Tommy nodded. "Thanks, I guess."

The infirmary room's door burst open and the Hellcat from earlier stalked inside with a second guard following fast behind her.

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“Oh, look, it’s the hero!” the Hellcat laughed when Alex flinched at her entrance. “Dr. Hassan may have given the Artie visitation rights while she was here, but she’s just signed off on his release. He’s officially in our custody, and we don’t do conjugal visits. Now kindly, sincerely, *fuck off.*”

She thumbed back at the open door with contempt. Alex made his way out of the infirmary room, giving the Hellcats as wide a berth as he could. The metallic clicking of handcuffs rang out and Tommy shambled out of the room after him, struggling to walk on the single crutch he’d been granted with his hands cuffed in front of him. They made it just a few steps into the hallway when Tommy stumbled, the crutch nearly slipping out from under his arm.

“Hurry it *up*,” the second guard snapped, gripping her .45 caliber side arm as she shoved him. Her particle rifle dangled at her side, its strap slung casually over her shoulder. Off-balance already, Tommy tumbled to the floor, hissing in pain. Alex found himself kneeling to help him up before he was thinking.

“*Back up!*” the guard demanded, shoving him away for good measure. Alex stumbled back, nearly falling himself. “Keep your hands off the prisoner!” the guard shouted, training her pistol on him.

“He’s got a broken leg,” Alex exclaimed. “How do you expect him to walk on crutches if you’ve got his hands cuffed?”

The guard groaned with impatience, but moved to uncuff Tommy and pull him to his feet. Alex took another step back, afraid to further anger the Hellcats. The guard lowered her pistol to clip the cuffs once more to her utility belt. Her partner stood in the open doorway, keeping her

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rifle trained on their prisoner. As Tommy stooped to pick up his crutch, a flicker of movement caught Alex's eye. He looked up to see Bailey rounding the corner of the hallway, oblivious to the goings-on before her.

"There you are!" Bailey called to Alex with still-drunken mirth, startling the Hellcats and Tommy alike. "What in the hell kind of a party are you getting up to? I let you out of my sight for fifteen—"

Movement flashed along Alex's periphery vision as Tommy lunged for the Hellcat's pistol, which was aimed uselessly at the floor. The Artie twisted as he fell, wrenching the gun from the guard's loosened grip and placing her between himself and her partner's particle rifle in the process. Tommy aimed the handgun up at his captors with the skill of a lifelong hunter.

"Drop your weapons and put your backs against the wall!" Tommy shouted. The Hellcats stared at him in shock. "Fucking do it!" He cocked back the hammer of the .45 in his hands.

"Oh, Christ!" Bailey cried from down the hall. Alex ignored her, too petrified to move. The Hellcats followed Tommy's orders, dropping their particle rifles and backing away, hands raised.

"Now toss me the keys to my room, cuff yourselves to each other, and head back inside," Tommy ordered, nudging the barrel of the .45 at the door.

"You're making a mistake, kid," the first guard warned as the second prepared their cuffs. "There's another half-dozen of our people a stone's throw away and it's about to turn into a raging blizzard outside. You think you'll get far on a bum leg when we're tracking you already?"

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“You make a pretty good point,” Tommy confessed as they tossed him the keys and shuffled inside. “I’ll take my chances anyway.” He stood with effort and closed the door on them, locking it and pocketing the key. Tommy stooped again to sling the discarded particle rifles over his shoulder. When he stood, he whirled his pistol onto Alex. “Bad news: you’re coming with me.”

“What? No, I’m not—” His words failed him as the hungry black pit of the pistol’s muzzle stared him in the eye. He raised his hands up in defeat.

“Help me walk,” Tommy demanded. Alex came closer to let the Artie wrap an arm around his shoulder. He dug the barrel of the .45 into Alex’s ribs for good measure. “For what it’s worth, it’s nothing personal, Alex,” Tommy apologized, coughing once. “Fire exit. Now.”

“Alex!” Bailey called in shock, powerless to stop them as her friend was ushered down the hallway. They rounded the corner and were gone.

#

“Where are you taking me?” Alex asked as they crept out from the fire exit’s stairwell into the blizzard outside. They sidled along the building’s edge for the front parking lot, nearly invisible in the whiteout of thick snowfall.

“We’re going to Timber Bluff,” Tommy answered. “I need to make sure Shea gets her people out of there. But we need a good set of wheels. If we’re in for an inch...” They rounded the infirmary’s corner and Tommy nudged Alex toward the Hellcat SUV parked at its front. “... we might as well be in for a mile.”

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“You’re crazy!” Alex muttered in shock. Tommy ignored him and walked them right up to the open passenger window of the vehicle. He pressed Alex against the side of the SUV and stepped back so he could train the particle rifle on him along with the guards inside. They’d completely missed Tommy’s coming from the heavy snowfall and were beyond surprised at their prisoner popping into view.

“Out of the car, now!” Tommy ordered, the stolen particle rifle glowing with blue venom as it stared down the Hellcats. The guards exchanged glances and did as they were told, stepping several paces toward the infirmary to deter Tommy from firing on them. “Get in and drive, Alex,” Tommy ordered. Alex had no choice but to obey, and crawled over to the driver’s seat to raise the snowplow blade at the rig’s front end.

Tommy was following him into the SUV when the guards took their chances and opened fire. Electromagnetically charged particle beams streaked blue past the hood of the vehicle, filling the air with the stink of sizzling ozone. Alex hit the gas and triggered the M-Drive with a silent prayer. The rig bucked up in the snow and peeled through the parking lot. The Hellcats’ rifle fire burned holes into the rig’s tailgate, which dripped liquid metal into the melting snow as the tank of a vehicle disappeared into the blizzard, its engine and passengers unscathed.

#

ACT FOUR: THE ARTISANAL DILEMMA

2040. Winter. Spring Pines, Oregon.

#

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1.

While the maelstrom outside howled, the Hellcats with whom Bailey had been engaged roared. She'd barely managed to call Vera before the Hellcats found her in Nadine's infirmary room. She was taken into Dr. Hassan's office for Commander Briars to interrogate them both over Tommy's escape. After her attempts to strong-arm them for a scapegoat bore no fruit, Briars had been left with no choice but to call Representative Fitz from a secure channel on Dr. Hassan's private computer terminal to report the abduction and her team's failure.

Bailey sat waiting in a rigid visitor's chair in the corner of the office beside Dr. Hassan, sobered up from the time and shock that had passed over her. The doctor simmered with anger at having her office commandeered by 'insolent jackals.' Lieutenant Murphy stood beside the Commander, keeping watch on their detainees while Briars leaned forward at the computer to address Representative Fitz.

"Do you have any idea what this means, Briars?!" Fitz's voice rattled the computer's speakers. The storm worked its way through the airwaves, cutting through the transmission in heaping drops of static.

"I understand the gravity of the situation, sir," Briars replied, "but the Artie can't possibly get far in this storm." She leaned on her knuckles against the computer desk. Her brunette hair had slipped out of its bun and spiraled down past her collarbone in a crimped mess of ponytail.

"Commander Briars, do I need to remind you of the predicament you've put us in?" Fitz demanded. "If they make it to Timber Bluff and warn their camp, we could lose *priceless* M-Drive-powered equipment to the Arties, not to mention *any* chance of bringing the perpetrators

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of the Black Meadow incident to justice. Once they've slipped through the cracks, the Arties will be emboldened to continue mining on our land. If they *don't* make it to Timber Bluff, I've got a dead employee to explain to headquarters! Our standing in the mining bureau's bidding wars for the upcoming season's land parcels will be *crippled* if the government catches wind of *your* incompetence at dealing with these criminals!"

Commander Briars shifted on her feet, her jaw clenched as she absorbed her superior's admonishment. Bailey was impressed with her fortitude, despite the cruel demeanor the woman had always shown the miners of Spring Pines and the resentment Bailey had built for her over their time together at New Prospect Frontier.

"Yes, sir," Briars nodded, stoic. "The situation was a failure and I take full responsibility, sir."

"You're damn right, you take full responsibility!" Fitz roared, unseen from Bailey's seat across the room. "It's bad enough you let McEnroy's Insurrection get off the ground, but this? If NPF loses even a *single* land parcel bid because of this, I'll use every connection I have with the Oh-En to make sure you're reenlisted for another tour of duty. *Prison* detail!"

Bailey couldn't tell whether Fitz was bluffing. She exchanged a glance with Dr. Hassan, who didn't like what she was hearing any more than Bailey did.

"You're going to assemble your best people, and you're going to *personally* track them down," Fitz ordered. Commander Briars gave the smallest of nods to Murphy beside her, who marched from the room in bounding strides to begin coordinating mission preparations.

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“We’ll need to wait until the blizzard’s passed to begin the hunt,” Briars answered Fitz.

“Have you lost your mind?!” the executive bellowed, the speakers popping in displeasure against his voice. Briars squinted at the comment, betraying the faintest sign of anger. “You’re going to waste what precious time we have to catch up to them because you’re afraid of a little snow?” Fitz continued, oblivious to Briars’ simmering rage.

“Sir,” Briars said through clenched teeth. She spoke with great restraint as she addressed her superior’s half-cocked challenge to her intelligence. “If I lead a team into that blizzard, we could lose one of them to the elements, and our tracking capabilities will be severely impaired until the storm passes. In the interest of preventing *any* of our personnel from losing their lives and keeping us from... losing the bidding war on our next land parcel... I advise that we prepare a team to mobilize within twelve hours once the storm has passed.”

Dr. Hassan’s computer was silent while the NPF representative weighed his options. Bailey shifted in her seat when Briars caught her watching the show.

“You have one chance at this, Commander,” Fitz warned at last. “Mess this up and you can consider yourself a resident of our mining town in New Korea, wondering when you’ll catch a bullet in the head from insurgents during guard duty.” The line clicked as the NPF representative ended the call.

Commander Briars took a deep breath and reached up to grasp the computer’s screen. She thought a moment, stone faced, before calmly exhaling. Briars then lifted the computer screen over her head and hurled it against the wall. The cables connecting the monitor to its terminal snapped. Bailey flinched and covered her eyes as the screen shattered on impact.

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“How dare you!” Dr. Hassan shouted at the commander as she stood from her seat.

“Dr. Hassan, I am in no mood to be talking to you right now,” Briars warned as Murphy returned to confirm that word had been delivered to the platoon.

“Are you and your feral pack of misfits quite finished ransacking my office?” she demanded. “I have patients to treat.”

“We’re done.” Commander Briars waved them off as though swatting at a fly. “Count yourselves lucky I don’t have the time to bother with you, or else I’d have you both locked up in holding. Murphy, we’re moving out,” she declared her subordinate. “That old bitch Shea is going to pay for working her people on our turf. We’ll blow that camp to cinders and shoot *right* through their damned hostage if he gets in the way.”

“You’re not worried about the collateral damage if the Artie’s hostage is killed?” Murphy asked, glancing quickly at Bailey and Dr. Hassan, who the commander had long since written off.

“This isn’t the war, Murphy,” Briars exclaimed, pulling the door open and ushering her second officer out after her. “We’re free women, contracted to do our jobs as *we* see fit. They’re not paying us enough to worry about some damned fool of a miner.” The Hellcats stormed out of Dr. Hassan’s office, leaving Bailey to stare at the shattered computer on the ground for several long minutes until she was sure they had gone.

“If you’ll excuse me, I suppose I have a mess to clean up,” Dr. Hassan finally said, kneeling by her smashed computer screen to pick up the pieces.

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“Me too,” Bailey decided. “I’m sorry, Doctor.”

An uncomfortable hush filled the infirmary’s hallways outside Dr. Hassan’s office, and the Hellcats’ fading footsteps reverberated in Bailey’s ears as she made her way through the infirmary for Nadine’s room with restless bounding strides.

God, I hate hospitals, she thought to herself, clenching her hands into fists to stop the nicotine craving that tingled up from her fingertips.

#

When the mine rescue team successfully braved the storm’s howling winds to gather in Bailey’s small apartment, the captain stood hunched over the small round table on its tiled floor of kitchen space to study the fearful faces assembled there.

Nadine was busy at the hot plate nestled in the kitchen’s cramped corner, self-discharged from the infirmary after Bailey had delivered the news. She boiled a ration of water for coffee and tea, unable to stand still from her nervous fidgeting. Trevor sat by the front door, leaning into the window beside it to smoke a cigarette through its open cracks. The wind that crept inside blew the smoke from his cigarette tip inward, tickling at Bailey’s nose with a fresh nicotine craving. Vera stood beside Trevor, leaning against the door with her arms crossed in front of her bruised ribs. Mei stood opposite Bailey at the table, an analytical stare on her face as she absorbed the captain’s every gesture. Sam sat on the corner of Bailey’s unmade bed tucked away into the far side of the room, his guitar case propped against its edge. His fingers drummed along the case’s top with trepidation. Beside the bed, Bailey’s liquor cabinet stood uncharacteristically

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untouched. With Alex's life on the line, she was too concerned with his rescue to be anything but (mostly) sober.

"...so that's how it is." Bailey shoved herself off from the table and crossed her arms in front of her. "The Artie's got maybe two hours' head start already with Alex. The Hellcats are prepping a pursuit team right now to track them down and wipe out the Artie camp the second the storm passes. There's no way that we can convince Fitz to call off the attack, either; he'd never listen to a couple of miners like us. If we don't get to Timber Bluff before the Hellcats, Alex is as good as cannon fodder."

"This isn't our jurisdiction, Bailey." Trevor flicked his cigarette nub out the window and heaved it shut with a groaning effort. "Going off after Alex in that blizzard's damn near suicide as it is. I'm not looking to make it through all that just to get caught up in a gun fight with our own security teams."

"Which is why we move fast and slow the Hellcats down along the way," Bailey replied. "We've got to think of something."

"Bailey." Nadine crept up behind her and slid a mug of coffee in front of the captain. "Even if everything goes right and we get Alex out of there, what you're asking isn't just a company infraction that could cost us our jobs. The Hellcats are the *law* out here. If we spit in their eye like this, they'll kick off a witch hunt and throw anyone involved with this *under* the jail."

"I'm open to suggestions," Bailey muttered as she lifted her mug of unwanted coffee to warm her hands.

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“The Hellcats can’t be everywhere at once,” Vera declared. “People are already talking about striking. What if we rally everyone together and march? The Hellcats will have a hard time suppressing the strikers *and* hitting Timber Bluff in full force.”

“Will we be able to get the town’s support fast enough?” Mei asked.

“It’s a long shot, but it’s possible,” Nadine replied, mulling over the notion. “If we got all the crew supervisors on board, they could make sure their teams followed suit. Night shift is canceled because of the storm. Maybe Bruce can host a little snow-day drinking party at the bar: free booze all night. He’s pro-strike already; he could help us.”

“Alright, so let’s say a strike at Spring Pines slows down the Hellcats, splits their attention,” Mei interjected. “How do we beat the Hellcats to the Arties and get out of there without being discovered? Those rigs they’re driving are M-Drive powered, for god’s sake; there’s no outrunning them. Even then, we’re unarmed: who’s to say the Hellcats won’t gun us all down with their damned particle rifles when we strike?”

“So we sabotage their weapons and vehicles,” Sam murmured from the corner of the room. “Leave them in the stone age, just like us.” Everyone turned in surprise.

“You a super spy all of a sudden, egghead?” Trevor rasped a throaty laugh. “Are you going to sing them to death while everyone makes a break for it?”

“No.” Sam stood and walked to the table to join the discussion, forgetting his meekness in the face of his friend’s danger. “I moonlight with the maintenance crews whenever the Hellcats’ charging stations need electrician work done; I know my way around the equipment. If I

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can get into their hangar, I can overload the charging stations while their equipment is still hooked up and fry their circuitry... it would leave the bulk of their mobilization and weapons capabilities neutralized while they saw to corrosion repairs. Some of their particle rifles could even short out and detonate on them if they use them in the field.”

“You really *do* think you’re a super spy!” Trevor laughed again. “You’re talking about sneaking into a building stuffed full of soldiers. What’s a scrawny kid like you going to do to get past the guards? Turn invisible?”

“I’m the one volunteering to dive on the sword,” Sam countered, clenching his fists. “It’s my risk to take. Alex is my friend and I’m doing this.”

“Not alone,” Mei answered. “I’ll go with you and make sure we bring the power down.” Sam nodded at Mei in shocked appreciation.

“If the Hellcats’ weapons are put out of commission, we really might stand a chance at winning the strike,” Nadine marveled.

“Damn straight,” Bailey declared, knocking her fist against the table. “We can even have a team make for Timber Bluff tonight, brave the storm and reach Alex before the Hellcats.”

“Well, you all can do this without me.” Trevor stood up from his perch. “I’m too old for this life as it is; I’m not in the mood to race through acid-snow blizzards and dodge bullets from both sides to save a guy I hate.” He made for the door. Vera blocked his way, her eyes flaring with anger.

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“You aren’t going anywhere, Trevor,” Vera said. “Like him or not, Alex is one of us.

Trade places and he’d be doing the same for you, even if you did try to knock him out when you were drunk.”

“Alex isn’t my problem!” Trevor fumed. “I’ve got a daughter to think about. If something happens to me out there, how’s Grace going to manage on her own? She can’t even support herself; she’s still got two years left of her post-CPT schooling!”

“Maybe you should think about how Grace would feel if you *didn’t* help us,” Bailey said. “Do you think your daughter would forgive you if you just let her fiancé die?”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Trevor scoffed. “No one’s said a damn word about that to me.”

“Because Grace knew you’d never allow it,” Vera retorted, giving up the efforts to play good cop against the crotchety old millennial. “Alex loves that girl as much as you do, and he’s a skilled miner who’s proven himself a more than capable provider. They’re good together, Trevor. Happy.”

Trevor’s face contorted in a mixture of expressions as he processed the news of his daughter’s secret engagement.

“If you want to look after Grace, you’ll help us save Alex,” Bailey offered, softening her tone. Trevor sulked back to his perch by the window, cracking it open with a rush of cold air to light another cigarette. The others exchanged glances with each other as they decided how to proceed.

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“If Mei and Sam are handling the Hellcats, I’ll handle organizing the meeting at Bruce’s,” Nadine declared. “The town will be half drunk and talking strikes in no time.”

“Two voices are better than one,” Vera uncrossed her hands and placing them firmly on her hips. “I’m with you, Naddy. I wouldn’t be much good on the road with this busted rib I’m nursing, anyway. Besides, talking shit is a personal pastime of mine. Twenty bucks says I’ll pull in a bigger crowd than you.”

“You’re on,” Nadine grinned. “We’ll gather up everyone we can at Bruce’s bar and make ourselves heard loud and clear.”

“Who’s going to handle Timber Bluff?” Mei asked, looking around at the team.

“I’m going,” Bailey decided. “Alex is my crew and my friend, too. I’m not leaving him for dead.”

“You’re going to go alone?” Mei replied.

“No,” Bailey grinned, looking across the room to Trevor, who locked eyes on her with knowing dismay. “I’ve got a driver.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Trevor mumbled. “Screw it, then. Let’s do this.”

#

2.

“So, do you actually have a plan to disable the Hellcats’ vehicles, or were you just puffing out your chest back there?” Mei asked as she trudged through the blizzard beside Sam. The

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wind pelted snowflakes the size of coins into their eyes and they both hunched forward, shielding their faces with an upraised forearm against the tainted precipitation.

“I’ve got some notion of how to get it done,” Sam replied. “But I’ll need to swing by my workshop to grab a few things.”

“How are we getting past the guards to get to the charging station?”

“No clue.”

“What?” Mei guffawed. “I thought you said you had a plan.”

“I said I knew how to disable the charging stations,” Sam shrugged. “I’m winging it from there.”

“Great.” Mei stuffed her hands into her coat pockets. The cuffs of her jeans were growing wet from the snow. “Well, you said you run maintenance for them sometimes. Do they have a back entrance? Anywhere that’s unguarded?” she asked.

“Honestly, the whole damn place is a fortress,” Sam admitted. “They don’t call it ‘The Lion’s Den’ for nothing. There are cameras watching every entrance and exit. The whole platoon is probably milling about in there, waiting out the blizzard. I don’t think we’ll manage getting in without being seen.”

“We really lucked out, didn’t we?” Mei groaned as they approached the small building that served as Sam’s workshop. Sam unlocked the door and switched on the lights. The hanging fluorescent bulbs flickered to life, displaying an already cramped room shrunken further by a black metal walk-in cage which consumed half the floor space. A computer desk and small sofa

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took up most of the standing room outside of the metal partition. Inside the cage was a workbench and tool rack, beside which stood shelves of rocks, minerals, and jars of labeled chemicals.

“Welcome to my office.” Sam gave a toss of his hand as he stepped inside, unlocked the cage, and began packing a small duffel bag with the tools he’d need for the job.

Mei stepped into the shop after him and looked at the framed pictures lining the one wall bare of equipment: an older couple, likely Sam’s parents, smiled at her. Several diplomas and certifications hung beside the photo, the most prominent of which was a framed service medal from the Orbital Navy that flashed in the fluorescent glare. Nestled in the corner, near the computer desk, was a photo of a younger Sam kissing a beaming young woman on the cheek. Both wore blue-grey military uniforms. They leaned against the railing of an observation deck with the Milky Way’s starlit void shining behind them.

“This your cousin, or something?” Mei asked, gesturing at the picture and doing her best to hide the twinge of jealousy roiling through her as she eyed Sam from behind the cage’s mesh.

“No, that’s Vanessa,” Sam replied, looking up to acknowledge the photo before returning to his rummaging. “We were engaged, back when we served together in the Oh-En... she was a test pilot for the experimental ships we were developing.” He tapped at the labels of the various chemical jars waiting for him on their shelf.

“Where is she now?” Mei asked, biting the inside of her cheek to hide her dismay.

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“Vanessa died in a shuttle explosion caused by an engine failure during test flight,” Sam explained with the distant cool of someone who’d buried his pain a long time ago.

“I’m... I’m sorry.” Mei turned red with embarrassment. She stepped back from the photo and approached the caged Sam to take hold of the mesh that separated them.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sam murmured while he searched his shelves. “It wasn’t your fault, it was mine. I fudged the math on atmospheric resistance in one of our final prototypes, and her ship broke apart when she activated her M-Drive below the Karman Line. It’s why I failed my psych eval.” He cursed when he came to the end of his shelf empty-handed. He massaged at his temples and leaned against the shelf. “I must have shipped off the last of my pyrite samples already. We’re dead in the water without some.”

“What do you need the pyrite for?” Mei asked, reaching for the pendant hanging from her collarbone.

“Refined pyrite is energetically volatile,” Sam explained. “Too much in a battery cathode leads to an unmanageable electrical output; the current resistance is lowered, and the energy flows too strong too fast. Let it go running unnoticed, and the circuitry will fry in whatever’s being fed power. I need to add pyrite to the charger cathodes for the sabotage to work.”

“I’ve got some.” Mei joined Sam in the cage, unclasping her necklace chain and holding the pendant out for him to examine. “Will this much be enough?”

“What? It’s refined?” Sam asked in surprise, holding the pyrite pendant up to the light to examine more closely. “Where did you get this?”

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“My father gave it to me as a birthday present a long time ago,” Mei answered. “It’s been with me ever since he died.”

“Interesting...” The pyrite pendant’s ridges glinted in the yellowed light of the cage as Sam inspected the mineral. “It’s incredibly well preserved; he must have thrown a protective coating on it. I’ll need to remove the sample to examine it. Are you alright with that?” he raised an eyebrow as he asked. “This will destroy your father’s pendant.”

“...yes.” Mei swallowed back the doubt creeping up her throat. “My father would have wanted some good to come from his inventions. If it’ll help us save Alex, do whatever you have to.”

Sam plucked a set of pliers from the wall and pulled the pyrite loose from its wire socket.

“Sorry,” he said when he caught Mei wincing. He donned a pair of gloves that sat waiting on the workbench and grabbed a chemical jar from the shelves. He unscrewed its cap to tap a pinch of clear liquid onto the pyrite, which sizzled as it reacted to the chemical. He then produced a small file from the tool rack and began scraping back the pyrite’s translucent coating until he was satisfied with his work. He unscrewed a second jar to splash a different liquid onto the pendant. Its sizzling almost instantly ceased. He picked up the chunk of pyrite with his pliers once more and lowered it to just a few inches above Mei’s metal necklace. The chain was pulled up into the air, wrapping tight around the dripping mineral. “This is definitely a chunk of highly refined pyrite,” Sam announced, pulling the chain free with surprising difficulty.

“What did you do?” Mei asked in shock. “I’ve had that pendant for years; it’s never done that!”

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“I just used a fast-acting acid bath to strip its coating, is all. This sample is incredibly magnetic, probably traces of molybdenum carbide in the structure. Your father must have made an early experiment of his into a gift, and that protective coating dampened its magnetic effects enough for you to safely wear it. This is more than perfect for what we need.”

He pulled a small specimen bag from the drawer beneath the workbench and dropped the pyrite inside, sealing it shut with a nod. He slid the specimen bag into a side pouch of his duffel and slipped its strap over his shoulder. He looked up and realized for the first time how close they were standing to each other in the cage. Their eyes met in the overdrawn silence that followed, and Mei felt a fluttering in her chest.

“We need to figure out how to get inside now,” Sam finally said, adjusting the strap against his shoulder and clearing his throat before sidling past Mei out of the cage. She followed after him, eyeing a twin pair of grey maintenance jumpsuits hanging from the coatrack in the corner of the room.

“Who’s the second jumpsuit for?” Mei asked, a spark setting alight the embers of an idea.

“That’s a spare assistant’s suit,” Sam replied. “Like I said, the facilities department loans me people to help maintain our energy grid. But the last girl got electrocuted changing out a pyrite-cell; it’s just been me ever since.”

“This is perfect,” Mei grinned. “How’s your acting?”

#

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When Sam burst into the Lion's Den dressed in his maintenance suit and desperate to escape the blowing storm outside, the guard on duty at the entrance hall nearly jumped in shock. Mei followed behind, donned in the spare uniform, brushing snow off the brim of the ball cap set low on her forehead.

"Sam?" The guard remarked. "You're not scheduled to run maintenance in here tonight."

"Hey Claudia," Sam nodded with a snuffle. "Good to see you. Still practicing your scales like we'd talked?"

"I'm trying to, but life always gets in the way." The Hellcat smiled before she could help herself. "We'll have to have another lesson sometime. But enough about me; what are you doing out in this blizzard?"

"I drew the short straw with the maintenance crews," Sam explained. "They're getting reports that the blizzard's causing power outages around the work camp. I'm just going to have a look at your outlets and charging stations to make sure everything's stable."

"Hm." Claudia cocked her head. She looked past Sam's shoulder at Mei. "And you are?" she asked.

"This is Mei." Sam slid the shoulder strap of his duffle bag back in place as it slipped from his shoulder. "She's shadowing me for the day so the maintenance crews won't need to rely on me so much for pyrite-cell maintenance work. Claudia, can we hurry this up? We've got a lot of work to do."

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“Mei... you’re the girl who tried to pull Dresden off that Artie last night,” Claudia said with dawning suspicion. “What are you doing following Peterson around?”

“I’m just trying to keep out of trouble and help out anywhere I can,” Mei replied.

“Well, let’s get you scanned and make sure you’re authorized to be here,” Claudia said, thumbing back down the hallway.

“Claudia, you know how things go around here,” Sam pled. “McEnroy’s insurrection has Admin whittled down to just Diane these days. She couldn’t get the paperwork processed in time before the blizzard touched down. Think you can make an exception? I really need her help to take a look at the power systems.”

“Sam, you know I can’t,” Claudia replied.

“Alright, fine. We’ve got to get moving then; we have too many sites to hit before the blizzard shuts us down.” Sam turned to leave, waving for Mei to follow him. “Here’s hoping your power grid doesn’t short out. I’d hate for a vehicle’s battery to die in the middle of a mission.” Claudia clapped a gloved hand onto his shoulder to keep him from fleeing into the snow.

“Wait,” she said, turning him back around to face her. “You up to a few more lessons next week?”

“Always,” Sam grinned. Claudia took her hand from his shoulder and sighed, waving them on down the hallway.

“In and out, make it quick.”

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“Yes, ma’am!” Sam saluted and marched off with Mei in tow, both struggling to suppress the shock that their plan was working. He led her through the bare hallways of the Hellcats’ compound, pretending to inspect power panels and outlets whenever a security officer passed them. With their maintenance jumpsuits on, few paid the pair any mind.

“It looks like they’re planning to mobilize the entire platoon,” Mei whispered as the Hellcats hurried back and forth around them, preparing for their soon-to-come mission.

“Come on. The armory’s power supply room is this way.”

The room in question was stuffed with cleaning supplies when they made their way inside. Sam scoffed and sidled past boxes of detergents and upturned mop buckets to reach the far wall, which was riddled with wall-mounted circuit panels.

“This is the easy part: I just need to re-wire these nodes,” Sam explained while Mei closed the door behind her and prayed that no one would come looking for a broom. “The current flow will be reversed and the M-Drive cells on their rifles will corrode overnight. The things will be like time bombs whenever they pull their triggers.”

Mei held her breath, listening against the door for anyone approaching and gritting her teeth in apprehension whenever footsteps passed in the hallway outside.

“Done. See? Like it was nothing,” Sam nodded to himself when he shut the final circuit-panel and made his way through the clutter back to Mei’s side. “There’s bound to be a couple particle rifles left in service after this, but the fewer, the better for us. Come on; the EV charging station will take more work.”

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They left the power room and turned a corner into the main hangar, where a dozen armored SUVs were parked in neat rows on the concrete floor.

Each vehicle had a thick black cable snaking from its rear end that fed into the back wall of the hangar, where the EV charging station quietly hummed. Several Hellcats patrolled the catwalks above them on the hangar's second floor, each dismissing the 'maintenance crew' with a passing glance. Sam set the duffel bag down beside the charging station and began to unscrew the cylindrical machine's side panel.

"Here," he whispered. "Put on these rubber gloves, take this screwdriver, and remove the casing for the pyrite. It's the gold cube hanging in the middle of the circuit board. I've got to prep the system and mix chemicals."

"Right." Mei followed his directions while Sam tapped away at the computer terminal connected to the charging station. Mei pried the casing free to reveal a thick cube of refined pyrite clamped in place by an insulated tong.

"Okay." Sam tapped a final key and the charging station powered down with a barely audible whirl. "It's safe to disconnect the pyrite now. Take hold of it and gently pull it free of the socket. There's a cable feeding into it from the other side; be careful not to jostle it or we could lose it in the panel's wiring."

Mei grasped the cube of pyrite in her hand, its cable feeding back into the charging station's innards unperturbed.

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“Now the conduit port screwed into the back of the cube needs to come off,” Sam instructed, crouched at his bag to prepare his chemicals. “Be careful; the pyrite is brittle. Handle it too rough and the form will crumble.” Sam found the specimen baggie that held her pendant and unsealed it to pour in the chemical bath he’d prepared at his shop. Mei tore her eyes away when the baggie full of chemicals began to bubble, diving into her work to repress the pain of her destroyed memento.

When she uninstalled the port from the brick of pyrite, Sam donned his own rubber gloves and lifted Mei’s pendant piece out of the specimen bag. The chunk of pyrite dripped with the effervescent chemical soak. Sam took hold of the pyrite brick and pressed the pendant into its back end. A soft sizzling and the faint smell of ozone tickled at Mei’s nose as the pieces fused together. Sam then replaced the port, careful to ensure its conduit made contact with the booby-trapped cathode.

“That’s it, we’re done,” he whispered when Mei re-installed the brick of pyrite into the circuit panel. It looked much the same as it had before, with Mei’s pendant hidden in plain sight. Sam toggled the charging station on and muted the circuitry malfunction warning system.

“Sam Peterson,” a voice growled from behind them. They both turned to see Commander Briars standing before them in her training fatigues, arms crossed, a malcontented snarl spreading across her face.

“Commander Briars,” Sam nodded in surprise.

“Claudia sent word you were slinking around in here,” Briars said. “You have thirty seconds to explain what in seven hells you’re doing in my hangar, and what in the hell *Zhang* is do-

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ing here.” She pointed an accusing finger at Mei, whose heart leapt in her throat when Briars looked her dead in the eye. The choking sensation of a knee crushing down on her lungs swept over her, still imprinted on her mind from the night before.

“The blizzard’s playing tricks on the power grid,” Sam replayed their fabricated alibi. “I needed help making my rounds to check that everything was okay.”

“I haven’t been informed of any power failures tonight,” Briars squinted with distrust.

“Well, it’s caused a lot of confusion,” Sam answered. “Everyone’s scrambling to batten down for the storm.” Mei could see his muscles tense up while he struggled to remain composed under Briars’ probing stare. “The circuitry on your vehicles and equipment could be damaged by the storm if I don’t look.”

“Consider your look taken!” Briars replied. “We’re in the middle of preparations for a classified mission. You’d best move out before I have you placed on ‘unpaid leave’ for a week. And you.” Briars turned on Mei, who had crouched to pick up their duffel bag. “You’re just everywhere you don’t belong these days, Zhang. I thought I warned you about keeping out of trouble? How do I know you’re not spying for the Arties, trying to settle a score for your father’s—”

“What makes *you* think I’m supposed to stand here and take this harassment from you?” Mei snapped, looking Briars in the eye as she did so. Sam bristled beside her, trying to hide his shock.

“Say that again,” Briars threatened.

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“Gladly,” Mei said with an unrelenting spark of defiance. “The war is long over, Commander. I’ve loyally served my country for years. I’m enough of a patriot for President Simon to have a holiday in my honor! If you take issue with my working here, we can escalate this to the admins. Maybe Representative Fitz will have something to say about how his top security officer has been managing her priorities.”

Briars grit her teeth in fury. Her lips curled as she prepared to fire back at Mei.

“Commander!” a security officer called down from the catwalks above. “We’re getting a call from Mess Hall that the blizzard’s causing a power surge. They need maintenance to take a look at it before the water purifiers die.”

Briars swallowed her venom and cocked her head back toward the hangar’s entrance. “You’d best hurry up before I come up with an excuse to throw you both out of my town for insubordination.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mei nodded, taking the lead to exit without a glance back. A stunned Sam followed behind.

“And Peterson!” Briars’ call stopped them in their tracks. Sam craned his head back.

“Yes, Commander Briars?” he replied.

“Don’t think you’re off my shit-list for Crest Basin just because you served,” Briars admonished. “Screw me over, and I’ll make you wish you’d stayed in orbit.”

“Yes, Commander,” Sam nodded, and he hurried after Mei out of the Lion’s Den.

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“What did Briars mean when she mentioned Crest Basin?” Mei asked, squinting against the wind that beat into their faces outside the hangar. “You worked at Crest Basin with Bailey and Trevor, too?”

“Something like that,” Sam grimaced. “I’ll explain it another time, if we make it through all this. Right now we’ve got to focus. Come on, the others are waiting.”

#

The bar was buzzing with life when Sam and Mei stepped inside. True to their word, Nadine and Vera had managed to wrangle every foreman, supervisor, and crew leader they could by offering them drinks on the house to rage away the blizzard. Many miners were already drinking themselves rowdy in celebration. Bruce was running circles around himself behind the bar to keep up with the orders.

“You were late rigging the power at the mess hall, Vera,” Sam said when Vera met them at the door. “Any longer and we would’ve been made.”

“In case you’ve never listened to yourself talk, you’re a little cryptic when you explain how those damn circuit breakers work,” Vera scoffed. “But hey, I killed the power like you asked and you made it here in one piece. Good job.”

“Have you heard from Bailey?” Mei asked, ignoring Sam’s aggravation.

“Her and Trevor are on the move.” Vera led them through the crowded bar toward the stage, where Nadine had just finished wiring up a microphone to the speaker system and setting up its stand. She heaved a gasp of relief when Mei and Sam said their hellos.

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“Thank god you two pulled it off!” She hopped down from the stage to hug them both.

“Is this everyone?” Sam asked when they broke from the embrace.

“This is everyone who’s anyone,” Nadine declared. “If we can convince this room full of middle management to strike, they’ll have an easy time making sure the people under them get on board. Loyalty goes a long way with the crews.”

Mei surveyed the room. Several faces were already turning toward them to hear the news that was too important to wait out the blizzard. Reggie and Terra from drilling crew three waved to Mei from their seats beside a softly wheezing Nance at the side of the room. Several tables closer by the stage, Mei spotted Stacey and Jan. The entire drilling crew had self-discharged from the infirmary to lend their support to the strike.

“What’s the hold up, already? I’ve got drinking to do!” Angela called from the bar, unfazed by the pounding she’d taken that afternoon from Bailey’s fists and already nipping at her fourth drink with a swollen lip. The room full of women jeered with her in agreement.

“Alright, then,” Nadine nodded next to Mei. “I guess it’s time we did this.” She hopped back on stage and tapped at the microphone to make sure the speakers were working. A sea of curses replied to the feedback that assaulted the room. “Hello, everyone. I’m Nadine,” she said, taking hold of the microphone stand with sudden nerves.

“We love you, Nadine!” Reggie cried.

“Take your shirt off!” Terra wolf-whistled.

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The roomful of women erupted in laughter and playfully catcalled up at the stage. Nadine blushed, holding up her hands to calm the crowd.

“Wonderful as it is to see you all, this isn’t a social occasion,” she explained. “We’ve all been complaining for weeks and months and years about how bad things have gotten for us. How it feels like NPF stopped caring whether we lived or died, scraping pyrite out of the ground just so they can siphon every penny from our pockets with their damned credit lines for the ‘privilege’ to be working here.”

Reggie and Terra led the charge to start a wave of foot stomping amidst the cheers that rabbled through the bar.

“I know a lot of you have gotten laid off, just like me!” Nadine declared. “For what? So the Hellcats can play prison guard with the people left working? So that Dan Fitz, or some other suit with mud for brains, can kick us out of our homes just to boost their profit margin?”

“It’s bullshit!” Stacey shouted from a seat near the stage where she sat beside Jan with a leg full of stitches. “We would’ve *died* in Black Meadow if the rescue team hadn’t made it in time.” She nodded back to Mei, who flushed with surprise that she’d made a few allies in camp after all.

“We’ve all been down in those tunnels!” Nadine cried, impassioned. “We know what it takes to mine pyrite. And they’re telling us to do more with less to line their own pockets a little thicker with *government money*!” She was almost shouting now, seized by her own anger. Mei felt its wavelengths reverberate through her own chest along with the rest of the room.

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“President Simon doesn’t care. He gave the mining companies the keys to the planet so he can build a global empire in spaceships that run on *our* pyrite. Made *by* our pyrite! All while our planet is burning down in front of us!”

More murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd.

“They locked up James McEnroy for trying to do some *good* around here, and they replaced him with that snake Dan Fitz!”

The room jeered louder. The resentment that had been festering for weeks among the whispered conversations of the miners was finally bubbling over.

“NPF couldn’t care *less* about us!” Nadine shouted. “How many coworkers have been kicked out of town when they got sick working in the mines? How many of you haven’t had a clean glass of water today because the rations are restricted? It’s time we made ourselves heard and stood up for our rights as miners, as Americans, as *humans*. It’s time to *strike*!”

Nadine pumped her fist into the air. The roller coaster she’d taken the crowd on tipped over the edge and crashed back down to earth. Many were on their feet cheering, riding the wave of spirit her speech had instilled in them.

“You think we stand a chance against the Hellcats?” Angela called from the back of the bar over the crowd’s heated debate. “You all saw what they did to everyone involved with McEnroy’s Insurrection. They’ll squash every one of you like *ants*!” She shoved aside her empty glass and stood from her barstool. “You’re living in a fantasy if you think striking will change a damn

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thing. They'll just line you up to shoot you and bring in the next warm body to clean up the mess!"

"The Hellcats will have trouble shooting *anything* after the mess we made of their equipment!" Mei countered, jumping up on stage beside Nadine to rally against Angela's rebuttal. "They're distracted and unprepared; now is the best chance we'll ever have to band together and stand up for our rights!"

"What, you think just because the war's over and you've been on the job a week that makes you one of 'us,' Zhang?" Angela replied. "Remind me why we should listen to a *traitor's daughter* about our best interests. You were diving on a sword to save that damned Artie last night when he nearly got our own coworkers killed!"

"Angela!" Bruce's booming voice silenced the room with cutting finality. "Sit your self-entitled ass down and let the adults speak!" He slapped his rag down on the bar counter and stepped around its edge. Angela recoiled as if struck amid the guffaws of laughter that rippled around her. Bruce hooked his thumbs into his belt and strode to the front of the stage. "I've lost too many good friends to put up with your insults to my clientele." He set a hand on Mei's shoulder and gave a gentle nod once he'd climbed up beside her. She made way for him to speak.

"I've been working in the industry since before the Second Gold Rush started, and I've never seen it worse for us than it is now," Bruce declared. "Nadine and her people are giving you the chance to take control of your lives again. It's time to stop wallowing and make a *change*."

He gestured to Mei, glaring back at Angela as he did so.

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“Thomas Zhang’s daughter has saved more of you in a week than the Hellcats have in five years! Where do *you* think the loyalty issues are? With an innocent mine prospector, or with the security force that’s too busy policing to do any protecting? *We* keep this community running, and there’s still mining to be done here for years to come if it’s done right. We don’t need NPF or President Simon sucking the earth dry without a shred of accountability, tossing us *pennies* to shovel pyrite into their war machine.”

“So what do we do?” Reggie called out. The room clamored their agreement. Mei was afraid to exhale; they had almost won them over.

“We use this blizzard against them and force a complete project shutdown.” Mei leaned into the microphone beside Bruce, who backed away with enthusiasm. “When the blizzard passes, we leave the mines snowed in. We don’t process their pyrite. We don’t deliver their shipments. We gather the whole community together and *march* for town hall, demanding Fitz come out to hear our demands.” The plan they’d concocted was solid enough to sway the miners to cheer. Mei looked down to the edge of the stage, where Vera and Sam were nodding their approval and prodding at her to continue reeling in their audience. Mei obliged.

“I’ve been here less than a week, and I’ve already seen my fill of injustices,” she said. “My father may have been a lot of things, but he didn’t tell NPF to strip away their workers’ rights and throw sick people out into the cold! You all know by now that the Hellcats have *already* held a gun to my head. How many times have they held one to yours? Ask yourselves, where is Dawson Granger? *Where is Alex Kellers?*”

Nadine’s jaw dropped and a frightened look swam onto her face beside Mei on stage.

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“Mei, should we—” Nadine stammered.

“His name deserves to be spoken,” Mei replied, turning back to face the bar’s expectant patrons, emboldened in her strategy.

“Alex Kellers was kidnapped just a few hours ago by the Artie who’d escaped from custody. The Hellcats are planning to gun him down along with the Arties that took him just to make an easier job of covering up their *ineptitude!*” Mei found herself laughing as her fear of their security teams loosened its grip on her chest for the first time. “They’ll have a hard time of it with broken weapons blowing up in their faces! And you’re right, Angela!” She shouted back to the bar. Her adversary pricked up her ears and watched with begrudging interest. “The Hellcats wouldn’t think twice about throwing away every one our lives. You know what I have to say about that? Fuck them! We’re not their playthings!”

“What if the Hellcats still have working weapons when we strike?” another miner called out. “We can’t stand up to even a handful of particle rifles firing on us!”

“Commander Briars will take any equipment left working in the morning when she leads a hefty security detail out of town to hunt down the Arties,” Sam interjected from the foot of the stage. “If we march tomorrow, we can sway Fitz to our side while the Hellcats are off playing war, and end this without a drop of blood spilled. We’ve all got to work together for this to work.”

The room vibrated as the bar full of miners debated the decision to strike. Mei stepped back from the microphone to watch their futures being decided. The room debated five full minutes before Nadine grasped the mic stand in her hands.

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“All in favor of striking *now*: say aye!” she shouted, raising her fist into the air.

“Aye!” Bruce boomed on the spot beside Mei. A thunderous agreement followed him.

“Opposed?” Nadine called, lowering her fist, eyes locked on Angela, who shrank down into her beer in defeated silence.

“The ayes have it,” Nadine nodded. “Spring Pines is on strike. Tomorrow, we march on town hall.” Mei stepped down from the stage with Nadine as thunderous applause filled the room.

#

3.

“Let’s get on with it, then,” Bailey said to Trevor, who steered her fully charged company truck out of the carport and into the snow. Even with snow chains on their tires, they struggled to in the loose powder, creeping forward at a pace too slow for either’s comfort.

“You heard it from me first, kid: this is a shit plan.” Trevor switched on the high beams, attempting in vain to pierce the blankets of snow descending all around them. “What are we even going to do when we get to Timber Bluff? Ask them nicely to give up their hostage?”

Bailey groaned in annoyance beside him, shining a flashlight down on the nav-tracker Vera had given her. It displayed the route Mei and Alex had prepared just that morning for snow clearing in bright green. Near the edges of the screen, a single flashing dot waited at the last position Alex’s data chip had transmitted before he’d left their tracking range.

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“If you think the plan needs improvements, I’m always open to suggestions.” Bailey tapped at the device to inspect their route. “Besides, you and I are old pros at this kind of thing. It’s just like old times, Trevor.”

“Don’t go thinking I’ll wait on you to pull your heads out of your asses before egressing the fuck out of there this time,” Trevor laughed, watching the windshield wipers dash back and forth in front of him. “And back then, people weren’t shooting back. Not like now. The Arties don’t have the same weapons ban we’ve got to deal with; they’re all probably armed to the teeth. We’re walking into a death trap and you know it.” He gripped the wheel tighter to keep the old truck from jerking away from him in the snow, reaching up to heave a rattling cough into one hand.

“Well, we’ve got Gertrude sitting in the backseat, don’t we?” Bailey thumbed to the old cloth bench behind them. The antique wood stock of a well-oiled double barrel shotgun protruded from the bag behind Trevor, zipper drawn up to the edge of the weapon’s metal to keep it in place for the journey ahead. “I never would have thought that your old contraband shotgun would actually come in handy before today. Gertrude won’t seem very intimidating from more than ten yards away, though.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Trevor grunted. “I don’t see you bringing any firepower to the table.” He engaged the remote plow control on the truck’s center console, lowering the blade to cut through the unrelenting blizzard.

They sliced their way along the road, tossing snow aside in thick sprays. The pair drove in silence, Bailey scanning the map for the route ahead, until they approached the Hellcat securi-

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ty checkpoint at the edge of Spring Pines' perimeter. Trevor was forced to slow to a stop in front of the lowered gate arm beside the guard booth. The lone security officer on duty, cold and miserable, slid her window open to leer at Trevor.

"What's your business trying to leave the camp in the middle of this blizzard?" the Hellcat demanded.

"Oh, gee, a plow truck driving through a blizzard with a hopper full of ice melt sitting on the tailgate," Trevor said with dripping snark. "I *wonder* why they'd be driving around in the snow? Maybe we should call in the *president* to solve this mystery."

"Watch your tone, old man." The Hellcat pushed off from her chair in anger. "Why are you and your partner setting out to take care of the roads *now*? Why not wait until the end of the blizzard?"

"You talk like someone who's never shoveled snow a day in her life." Trevor rasped a hearty laugh. "If you don't keep fighting back the snow as it comes down, it'll all get ahead of you and you'll have twice as hard a time clearing the roads safe when it's all over. Now are you going to raise the gate and let us do our jobs, or do you want to grab a shovel and join us? I'm freezing my ass off."

The Hellcat toggled the gate's control, raising it up for them to pass through. "If something goes wrong in that blizzard, no one's coming to the rescue until the snow's done falling," the guard warned remarked a shred of concern.

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“Yes, ma’am.” Trevor saluted before throwing the truck into drive and pulling out of the complex. When they’d managed to get a hundred yards down the road, Bailey exhaled beside him.

“That was pretty slick, Trevor,” Bailey said. “I’ve got to say, I’m impressed.”

“What do you mean? I’ve always been a hit with the ladies.” His wrinkly, grey-stubbed skin folded over itself as he grinned at Bailey. “So where am I going, Cap?”

“My guess is, they’ll have made a stop at one of the mine sites Alex and Mei prepped this morning to grab supplies.” Bailey pored over the map again, tracing her finger along the route she’d guessed Alex would take. She tapped the nav-tracker to highlight a mine at the screen’s edge, the resting place of Alex’s position marker. “This location is the farthest out west and the closest site to Timber Bluff.” Bailey looked up, squinting to follow the truck’s yellow-white headlights through the blizzard’s dark fog. “I’d say we keep straight another half-mile, then curve west toward Timber Bluff. The mine entrance is just another fifteen miles straight after that.”

“Copy that,” Trevor nodded. They settled into an uncomfortable silence, pierced by the sharp whistling of the blizzard’s winds.

“How are you holding up, Trevor?” Bailey turned to ask, fiddling with the dials on the truck’s console to adjust the defrosters.

“Are we having a therapy session or something?” Trevor snickered.

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“No, it’s just that we’ve got time to kill and I figured—” Bailey caught herself and bit her lip. “Forget it. May it be on the record I cared enough to ask.”

“It’s just another candy coating on the same old shit sandwich, Bailey,” Trevor shrugged. “There isn’t a single thing this past week that’s been a surprise to me. Once you hit my age it all just starts to glance off of you.”

“But about Grace,” Bailey said.

“There’s nothing to say about Grace.” Trevor snuck infrequent glances at Bailey as they spoke, afraid to take his eyes off the road for too long. “She’s a grown woman and she went and made her choices. I haven’t got much time left, Bailey,” he admitted. “You’re not the only one skipping doctor’s visits because you’re afraid they’ll catch a shadow on your lung and kick you out of the industry.”

He gripped the wheel tighter, staring hard out into the blizzard to concentrate. “Alex is a cocky little shit. But he’s got balls. He’s hard enough to survive in this fucked up world, and that’s what matters most to me for Grace. I won’t be around to keep her safe for much longer; I figure I’ve got four or five years left in me before my ticket gets punched, if I’m lucky.”

“You’re saying you’re alright with it, then?” Bailey asked in surprise.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Trevor rasped another bitter laugh. “I still think Alex needs a boot in the ass, but if he’s serious about my daughter and not just chasing tail, I’d be willing to let him look me in the eye and ask for my blessing.” He shook his head with a huff. “That little

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shit had better strap on some knee pads for the groveling he'll have to do to make up for us pulling him out of the fire, though."

"Well, you're right about that," Bailey laughed with relief.

"What about you?" Trevor asked. "Have you thought about what Dawson told you before he got shipped off?"

"Yeah. It's damn near the only thing I've thought about, lately. But I can't just quit the life, Trevor. This is... it's home. And after Mei ended up in camp, I got to thinking about Alaska... and Thomas... it just doesn't feel right to turn my back on everything going on when there's so much unfinished."

"Like what?" Trevor snorted. "Striking? Re-sparking the unions? Carving out a 'brighter future' for the miners? It's a pipe dream, Bailey; we lost the fight years ago. It's time everyone woke up and smelled the ashes."

"Still," Bailey clenched her fists on top of her knees. "I'm not going to bury my head in the sand and let NPF treat us like disposable playthings anymore. *We're* the ones who make this world turn, not those fucking suits a thousand miles away."

Bailey nearly jumped from Trevor's sudden burst of heaving laughter.

"I knew you still had that spitfire in you, kid," he chuckled. "Fuck 'em in the neck. We can at least go down swingin' if they're fixin' to put us in the ground." Bailey joined in the laughter as they crept along through the snow.

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“I think my time underground really might be done, though,” Bailey said when their cheerful spirits ebbed. “I’d better start thinking about who’ll replace me as Captain for the prospecting and rescue teams. Alex would never take the job; he’s not a fan of playing team leader.”

“I see a lot of you in Thomas’ girl, you know,” Trevor said. “Give her some time to get her beak wet, she’d probably make a good captain.”

“I think she’s been getting her beak mighty wet already,” Bailey replied.

“Yeah, you’re definitely right about that.”

When they arrived at the mine an hour later, the blizzard let up enough to make hopping out of the truck a tolerable affair. Trevor trained his headlights on the mine’s entrance, leaving the engine running as they zipped their parkas tighter and gloved up to brave the elements. The almost-buried sets of footprints in the snow that waited for them confirmed Bailey’s suspicions, and they nodded in satisfaction as they came upon the entranceway’s wooden barricade: the wood paneled cover had been hastily removed and tossed to the ground.

“Jackpot,” Bailey said, shining her light on a ransacked supply cache. Its containers lay strewn along the wall, thrown open and rummaged through until all the food, water, and warm clothes two people could carry had been pilfered. “They couldn’t have been here that long ago. Look, there’s a used MRE packet that’s still warm.” Bailey prodded at the food bag cast onto the floor of the mine.

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“I’ve got some used med kits here.” Trevor knelt down by the wall of the mineshaft to examine the bundle of bloodied rags beside the med kits. “I’ll be damned; it’s their data chips,” he muttered to himself at the sight of the amateur surgery remnants. “That Artie’s no fool.”

“Look, there’s even used sutures,” Bailey noted. “They must have stitched each other up. Their trail won’t stay warm for long; we’ve got to hurry.”

“You take a turn at the wheel; I want to be ready with Gertrude if things turn south.”

#

4.

The blizzard’s last stray snowflakes were settling to the ground. Alex eased the SUV around the winding curves in the access road, watching Timber Bluff’s wastewater disposal sites rolling by. Steam rolled off the sickly yellow-speckled tailing ponds scattered on either side of the road, melting any snow that touched their acidic surfaces.

Alex was impressed by the Arties’ collection sites for their acid drainage; usually, tailing ponds were an afterthought of the ignorant or uncaring, who for far too long and in too many places had ignored the toxic seepage their pyrite mining created. Such disregard for the environment was one of the main causes of President Simon’s ban on private mining, a shortsighted remedy to cure a long-term ailment.

“Shea runs a tight ship around here,” Tommy explained when he noticed Alex examining the tailing ponds as he drove. “She’s trying to turn over a new leaf for the artisanal miners in the area. Stop mining like criminals and start mining the smart way. The sustainable way.” He kept a

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loose grip on the stolen .45 lying in his lap. The Hellcat particle rifles lay propped against the door beside his feet. Tommy rubbed at the fresh stitches on his arm, admiring the view outside.

Alex knew he was ensnared in their flight to Timber Bluff: the battery on their stolen rig was nearly depleted, and would never last the journey back home through the snow should he somehow overcome his captor. His own throbbing stitches were a reminder that wherever he went now, no one would find him.

“Who is this Shea you keep mentioning?” Alex strained against the weight of his eyelids after the long night of driving through the blizzard. “She’s your leader?”

“Something like that,” Tommy replied, rubbing his own eyes in exhaustion. “Shea’s a decorated combat veteran. She’s seen more tours of duty than I can remember the names of, even worked security for a few foreign soil pyrite refineries during a few of her deployments.” He swigged at the water canteen they’d swiped from the mine earlier that night and handed it to Alex, who gulped down hungry swallows of the offered water.

“You speak pretty highly of her,” Alex said, wiping his mouth with the back of a sleeve and handed back the canteen.

“Shea’s saved all of us, Alex,” Tommy replied. “She got the Arties to turn over a new leaf; stop acting like criminals and start acting like a community. Before she came along out here, people were dying in the mines every day. Most folks had never even worn an oxygen mask before. She taught us how to mine, almost brokered a truce with McEnroy that would’ve given us a season of lessons in safe mining practices from NPF’s people.”

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Tommy waved up as they neared the first security checkpoint. Spotlights shined down from the sentry towers standing vigil at its sides. Several warning shots were fired into the ground in front of their rig, forcing Alex to hit the breaks with a yelp.

“NPF security vehicle!” came the amplified voice of a guard. “Come to a stop and state your business.”

“What are they doing, Tommy?” Alex asked as the glow of the spotlights enveloped them in a blinding halo.

“We’re riding through Artie territory in a Hellcat rig,” Tommy answered with an upraised eyebrow. “How did you expect them to react? Just keep calm and let me do the talking.” Tommy clamored out of the SUV, hissing with effort from struggling down into the snow on his broken leg.

“Tommy?” Another voice called down to them from one of the sentry towers. “Is that you, boy?”

“It’s good to hear your voice, Delancey,” Tommy called back, careful to keep his hands visible while he proved his identity to the skittish guards.

“Where did you get that security van?” Delancey’s voice echoed down. “And what in seven hells has gone through your mind, trekking through this blizzard? Shea’s liable to string you up for the deal you and your family made with McEnroy, mining on NPF land without her go ahead.”

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“It was *our* land first, Delancey,” Tommy hollered up, growing hoarse from shouting in the cold. “I need to report to Shea, and I need to do it yesterday; there’s big trouble coming.”

“She won’t be too pleased to have her beauty sleep interrupted, but you can find her at HQ. I’ll radio ahead and tell them you’re coming. Who’s your driver? Did anyone else make it out alive?”

“No,” Tommy’s voice faltered. “My driver is one of the NPF miners who saved my life... I had to take him hostage to escape from those damn Hellcats.”

“Jesus, Tommy, you kidnapped the guy that saved you?” Delancey laughed. “That’s cold-blooded; Shea’s going to have your head on a silver platter for this.”

“The Hellcats are going to have all our heads on a platter soon if I don’t brief Shea on what I know,” Tommy replied. Alex watched from the driver’s seat, careful not to take his hands from the steering wheel.

“Hurry up and get that thing off the roads, then,” Delancey called down. “With your luck, some drunk will blast you away without thinking twice for rolling through town in that thing.”

Tommy nodded and crept back into the SUV. “Move up,” he ordered, pointing to the compound in the distance. Alex eased them through the snow and into Timber Bluff.

#

“You have thirty seconds to tell me why you’re standing in front of me with a goddamned *hostage* from NPF!” Shea screamed from the balcony as Tommy escorted Alex inside HQ’s lobby. The staircase beside her curved down into the atrium with simple precursor elegance. Alex

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looked around to examine the utilitarian lobby. Its sparse pale lighting spread through the ground floor. Hallways jutted off in either direction to the various offices and meeting rooms that housed the bones of the local artisanal mining operations. Scanning the sleeping attire Shea wore, Alex guessed that the upper floors housed high-ranking personnel as well.

Shea was tall and lean, a boney elder woman whose stature had not diminished with her age. Her long white hair was neatly tied back, and the powder blue pajamas she wore matched the piercing cold eyes that stared down at them. Shea clutched the balcony's railing with a talon-like grip and fumed down at them.

"I'm sorry, Shea," Tommy answered, humbled to attention. "My family and I disobeyed your advice and reopened my father's mine when McEnroy offered us a deal. We made a mistake and blasted into an NPF tunnel."

"I'm well informed about that part," Shea spat. "Your cousins Bryce and Terrence are the only ones that came back. They're on latrine duty until further notice."

"Thank God they're alive." Tommy slumped forward in exhaustion. He fast remembered himself and stood at attention once more. "I was saved by NPF's rescue team... this man, Alex, was one of the people who saved me." Tommy gestured to Alex standing beside him. "The Hellcats were going to turn me over to the Oh-En...if I hadn't escaped, I'd be on an airbus to New Korea by now or worse..."

"It probably would have done you good to have someone whipping your hide across the ocean for a few years, boy," Shea retorted.

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“Yes, ma’am,” Tommy nodded. “But please listen, ma’am: you need to know what’s coming your way. The Hellcats are planning to attack Timber Bluff in retribution for Black Meadow, and our negotiations with McEnroy’s people. We have to evacuate before it’s too late.”

Shea gave a brief crack of laughter at the thought. “I appreciate the misguided sentiment, Tommy, but NPF already forfeited this ground when they declared it ‘mined out’ to the Bureau of Domestic Mining, and it’s officially been reinstated as public land for use as benefits the state of Oregon and its citizens. Timber Bluff is our home. We’re not tossing aside what we’ve built here every time a brainless yokel and his kin makes trouble with the neighbors.”

Alex cast a glance at Tommy, who returned the gesture with a look of nervous fear creeping across his face.

“Ma’am,” Tommy swallowed before continuing. “With all due respect, the Hellcats could be coming for us all right now. Their—”

“Stop talking!” Shea held up a hand to Tommy’s protests. She turned her eye to Alex, who shifted on his feet at the unforgiving stare burning from Shea’s eyes. “You. Alex. You’re not military, I take it?”

“No, ma’am,” Alex croaked. “I’m just a miner...I got caught up in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the right thing.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Shea replied. “You may have heard stories about us out here that say otherwise, but let me say for the record: times have changed. I’ve dragged the local Arties kicking and screaming into living like ‘civilized’ people again. You’ll be kept on site until the storm

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has passed and the roads clear up. We'll charge up that stolen rig of yours and you can see yourself off within a day with my apologies."

"Thank you...ma'am," Alex nodded with relief.

"But Shea, the Hellcats!" Tommy was silenced by the piercing glare Shea shot him again.

"We're done here," Shea said, pushing off from the balcony's railing. "Find somewhere for our unwilling guest to sleep. I'll figure out what to do with you in the morning, Tommy. If the Hellcats come knocking you'd best be prepared to hand yourself over to make this right." With their meeting adjourned, Shea skulked back to bed. Tommy bit his lip and looked around the room. Alex was too exhausted to care.

"Well, come on then," Tommy finally said. "I'll find you a bed for the night."

#

"Tommy? Tommy, you're alive!" Bryce clamored down from his bunk in a hushed whisper. Several hisses of anger rose from the long hall of bunk beds as the members of the work camp were roused from their sleep. Bryce paid them no heed, stumbling down from his bunk to embrace Tommy in a crushing hug.

"Hey, Bryce," Tommy grunted. "Easy on the leg; it's been through a lot."

"It's good to see you, Tommy." Bryce whispered in the dark, lit only by Tommy's flashlight held low to the ground so as not to disturb the sleeping miners. "I'm so sorry we left you behind. We thought you'd died."

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“It’s okay, Bryce.” Tommy stifled a cough. “I had a hell of a time getting back here, but I’m okay. I tried to warn Shea about some serious trouble coming our way, but she wasn’t having any of it. Are there any spare bunks lying around? I’ve got to find somewhere for my friend Alex to sleep for the night.”

“Oh, so we’re friends now?” Alex struggled to suppress a cynical laugh at the notion after getting dragged to Timber Bluff against his will at gunpoint. Bryce led the way through the columns of bunks to a row of empty beds that waited for them. He gestured to the nearest.

“He should be good for the night in this one,” Bryce offered. “Tommy, you may want to grab the one next to him. Some people thought you weren’t coming back and ended up scrapping over your top bunk spot by me. The bed’s occupied now.”

“Thanks, Bryce,” Tommy said.

Bryce hugged him again before heading back to bed. Tommy tucked his stolen pistol beneath his pillow and sat with difficulty to unlace his shoes. Alex took his cue to crawl into the bed that had been offered to him, ready and willing to leave his own problems to be settled in the morning.

“Alex?” Tommy muttered beside him as he slid his bulky cast between the bed’s covers. “I really am sorry for today. And I wanted to thank you...really... for saving me before, in the mine.”

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“Yeah. Sure, Tommy,” Alex replied. “Maybe next time don’t point a gun at people you’re trying to make friendly with, though.” He was drifting off the moment he’d slipped placed his head upon the pillow.

It felt like Alex had barely closed his eyes when he was jostled awake again. He struggled against the groggy sleep that had taken hold of his senses to hear Tommy’s urgent whispering as another person shook him awake.

“—have to get up, Alex; there’s trouble.”

“...who’s ah?” Alex muttered in sleepy confusion from his bunk.

“Your people showed up looking for you,” Bryce answered. “They got into a shootout with the guards at the sentry tower...”

#

5.

Trevor was groaning in pain below the ice melt hopper while they huddled behind the bullet-riddled chassis of their company truck. Beside him, Bailey was scooping Gertrude off the ground and cracking its barrel open to pull its spent shell casings free.

“What in the hell were you even aiming at blind firing both barrels?” Bailey moaned as the tower sentries peppered the ground around them with suppressing fire.

“At least I had the sense to bring a damn gun!” Trevor shouted over the bullets flying past them. “Damn! The bastards got a piece of me,” he moaned, gripping his right arm. “Goddamn Arties!” Blood seeped through the cracks in his fingers.

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Bailey glanced up from their cover behind the tailgate where they'd retreated. The duffel bag in the backseat, which bore their spare shells, was a suicidal sprint five feet forward before she'd reach the paltry cover of the open truck door beside it. Bailey shifted her gaze between the ammo and Trevor's bleeding wound. She cursed and decided to tend to the latter.

"You couldn't have the sense to try talking to them first, Trevor?" Bailey chastised the old man as she snapped the double-barrel shotgun closed and leaned it against the truck.

"They shot first," Trevor growled. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Those were *warning* shots. They just wanted to stop us. I had it under control!" She pulled a pocketknife from her jacket and tore Trevor's shirtsleeve away from his wounded arm, tying a makeshift tourniquet with the ribbons she cut. "It looks like the bullet only nicked you," Bailey said, handing him a shred of fabric to keep pressure on the wound. "You'll be alright."

"Oh, gee, what a relief!" Trevor shouted in sardonic anger before tilting his head back against the tailgate. "You hear that, fellas? We're gonna be alright!" he screamed at their unseen aggressors. "I don't think they got the memo, *Captain*."

"If we don't die here, I'm going to kill you, Trevor," Bailey muttered as she cradled Gertrude in her arms once more. She took a deep gulp of air, steeling herself to dash from behind the tailgate to the open passenger door. If there was any luck on her side, Bailey would reach the ammunition waiting in the cab without being shot full of holes. She took two sharp inhales to get her blood pumping, and bounded out from behind the tailgate.

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Shouts of distress rang out and the door in front of her was rattling with bullets. Bailey dove into the cab of the truck, slinking low with her knees on the floor and her head resting on the tattered cloth passenger seat. She reached around the side of the seat, wrenching her arm closer for the duffel bag waiting on the rear passenger bench. Glass shattered around her and men were shouting in the distance. Her fingers were wrapping themselves around the strap of the duffel when the shooting stopped.

She yanked on the strap, pulling the duffel bag as close as she could to the car seat and rummaging one-handed around its innards. When she felt the box of shells brush against her fingertips, she withdrew her prize and turned from the cab to stare down the cylinder of a gun barrel.

“Drop the shotgun,” the man behind the rifle ordered. Bailey was left with no choice but to comply.

#

In the crimson-orange sunrise, Bailey could see the long conveyor belt in the distance that carried freshly mined ore to its waiting heap leach pile beneath the roof of a converted barn. The chemical additive tanks that snaked into the building’s side were enough for Bailey to guess that the Arties had adopted NPF’s mining methods after moving into the abandoned work camp.

The buildings that sprouted around them were in rough shape after years of usage and multiple changes of ownership: smashed windows and roofs missing sections of their shingling, knocked down sections of old barbed wire fence, a driving path heavily rutted with tire treads. Opposite the heap leach barn, a small fleet of vehicles was lined up at a jury-rigged charging sta-

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tion, waiting for their fill of pyrite-charged solar juice. Bailey spied the stolen SUV that Tommy and Alex had used to escape Spring Pines and could have cried with relief.

Upon arrival at the complex's main building, Bailey and Trevor were thrown into a grey room, bare save a stainless-steel metal table and two sets of folding chairs. An Artie tended to Trevor's arm, stitching him up before leaving them both alone, locking the door behind him.

Bailey sat in a chair and rubbed at her eyes. They had already made a mess of things, and the rescue mission had barely begun. Her phone, cradled uselessly in her truck's cup holder, was their only lifeline to Spring Pines. They were as alone as Alex was, wherever he was.

"Well, I'll admit it," Bailey said. "That could have gone better."

Trevor and Bailey looked at each other and burst out laughing, reveling in how poorly their situation had developed. They didn't have long to wait before two guards entered the room, armed with simple bolt-action rifles. An old woman with a resilient figure dressed in drab work clothes followed behind them.

"I'm Shea," she declared as she took a seat at the opposite end of the table, lacing her fingers in front of her on its cool metal. "You'll have to forgive my people for the hostile reception. Usually when someone fires warning shots and yells 'stop right now,' they expect you to comply, not to start lobbing shotgun blasts from fifty yards away like a damned fool."

"Shea... you're in charge out here?" Trevor asked in surprise. Shea cast him a bothered glance before turning her attention onto Bailey.

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“We’re a free community,” she answered. “We don’t have a single person ‘in charge.’ But I suppose you’d call me something of an authority figure, since everyone else would forget how to breathe if they didn’t get a daily reminder.” Shea leaned back in her chair and examined her captives, a tired and impatient look in her eye. “This is not the first time tonight that I’ve been kicked awake to put out someone else’s fire, so let’s start this off by saying that I am not in the best of moods. Who are you, where are you from, and what do you want?”

“I’m Bailey, this is Trevor. We’re miners. From Spring Pines.” Bailey struggled not to glance at the armed guards flanking the old woman sitting in front of them.

“You’re with NPF, then.” Shea beckoned a guard to her and whispered in his ear. The guard nodded and left the room to fulfill his orders.

“We’re not *with* NPF.” Trevor corrected. “We work *for* NPF. Those bastards will be the first to tell the difference. And I guess you’re the closest thing there is to ‘Queen of the Arties,’ making deals with our admins and getting us all caught up in a shit storm for it.” Trevor leaned forward, his fists clenched on the tabletop. “You want to explain why you let your primates run wild, blasting tunnels wherever they want and nearly getting good people killed?”

“McEnroy and I had not finished our negotiations before he was arrested,” Shea explained. “My people went ahead with mining on NPF land after I’d expressly forbidden it. I didn’t trust McEnroy to keep us or himself safe. Turns out, I was right. If the Arties ever stood a chance at a peaceful coexistence with NPF, it’s long gone now.”

“Cry me a river,” Bailey replied. “Where is Alex, the crewman your underling Tommy used as a human shield to escape?”

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“He’s safe,” Shea explained. “I’m guessing you intend to instill some kind of ‘justice’ along the way to saving your friend. Why would you be the ones to come, though? Why not inform the Hellcats and have them take care of the situation like the trained soldiers they are?”

“Before coming here, I overheard the Hellcats’ plans for Timber Bluff,” Bailey replied. “They have no intention of saving our friend. They’re planning to wipe out your entire camp to make a point to any other Arties in the area not to tread on NPF ground... Alex is just cannon fodder to them. They’re going to bury it away in company paperwork to get away with murdering him along with all of you like it’s just another workplace incident.”

“You do realize you’ve ruined their element of surprise?” Shea raised an eyebrow, betraying nothing behind her stern gaze.

“Just because we’re employed by NPF doesn’t mean we’re their boot lickers,” Bailey answered. “Since McEnroy’s Insurrection paved the way for the Hellcats to take over, they’ve been coming more unraveled every day, treating us like prisoners. We’ve all had enough of it; Spring Pines is organizing a strike as we speak.”

“I have to say, I didn’t expect to hear about a miners’ uprising on NPF land when I came down here this morning,” Shea laughed, slapping at the metal tabletop. “I’m glad. Those worthless pricks in charge of NPF should work for their money occasionally. Even so, a spit in the eye like an escaped prisoner and a stolen M-Drive-powered rig wouldn’t sit well with them.”

“That’s right,” Bailey replied. “My people and I have done our best to slow the Hellcats down. They would have been here by now in full force if it weren’t for us. We have no fight with you or the rest of the Arties. We just want Alex back unharmed.”

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“You’re invested in your people. I respect that,” Shea nodded. “Too many folks these days have lost their principles. It’s half the reason the artisanal miners have gotten their reputation. I’ve made it my duty to fix that.” Behind her, the room’s single door opened, and Alex was locking eyes with Bailey as he burst inside.

“You came for me!” he whispered, his eyes widening further at the sight of Trevor sitting beside Bailey. “You actually came for me,” he repeated in sincere shock.

“Save the hugs and kisses for the end of this, kid,” Trevor grunted before tossing his unwounded arm accusingly toward Shea. “We’re not done yet. Will someone tell this old bat we all have to get out of here before you end up shot to hell when Briars and her people show up?”

“Carol Briars is leading the assault herself?” Shea perked up in surprise at the name of the Hellcat commander.

“Yeah,” Trevor huffed. “The evil bitch has been ruling with an iron fist ever since she arrested McEnroy’s people. Why, you know each other?”

“We served together during the war,” Shea grinned. “In fact, I was her platoon leader. I always admired her convictions, even if they did get her discharged. I only even started negotiations with McEnroy’s administration because I thought Briars would have empathized with what we were trying to do. Sad to say, I wasn’t surprised when she turned McEnroy over to NPF. Some people just can’t get over the past.” Shea pushed her chair back and stood, rapping her knuckles against the table.

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“If Carol Briars is leading the attack herself, she really is out for blood. I suppose I owe Tommy an apology.” She turned to the guard standing at her left side. “Leon. Sound the wakeup call and assemble all able-bodied men at muster point Charlie in thirty minutes, combat ready.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the guard replied before clicking his heels and marching from the room.

“I thought you weren’t their leader,” Bailey said in renewed suspicion.

“Not in the day-to-day, no, but security is a different story,” Shea remarked as she examined the pockmarked wall of the interrogation room. “You’re looking at an old bitch that’s tamed more than one pack of war dogs; the one thing I’ve always known is fighting, and the Arties here will follow me to Hell just to have someone standing up for them who knows how to put their talents to good use. After all, half of them are combat veterans. What else is there for an old soldier who can’t let go of the past?”

Shea turned back to the group and leaned onto the table, her eyes cold steel.

“If Carol’s looking to start a fight with me, it’s not for some damned mining accident. She’s trying to dig up the past. Let the bitch try; we’ll have a few surprises waiting for her.”

“We’re not leaving, then?” Alex asked, trying to mask his visible distress.

“No, friend,” Shea replied. “We’re going to make the Hellcats *wish* we had.”

#

ACT FIVE: A PYRRHIC VICTORY

2040. Winter. Spring Pines, Oregon.

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#

1.

Fresh snow crunched underfoot as Commander Carol Briars stepped out into the early morning sunlight, dressed in full body armor, sporting her particle rifle over her shoulder. The air was crisp, and every exhalation that steamed from her lips contorted in a twisting cloud before her face. It was refreshing to be at war again.

“Commander,” Lieutenant Murphy reported over the radio. “The repairs from last night’s circuitry damage have been completed on rigs Alpha, Charlie, Delta, Echo, and Zulu. Their M-Drives are still offline, but main power is flowing. We’ve distributed all working particle rifles among the Timber Bluff strike team; they’re ready to deploy for Timber Bluff on your orders.”

“I’ll be joining them shortly in Alpha,” Briars answered. “I’m just getting some air first. I want repair crews working steady to bring my guns and vehicles back online. Make it clear that last night was no accident, and that the culprit could still be in camp. I want suspects in hand-cuffs by the time we’ve finished our mission.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Murphy replied.

“Start with Sam Peterson and that Zhang girl he brought snooping around our hangar last night,” Briars added. “Two and two makes four, and they fit the bill the easiest. Hunt them down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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Briars took another calm breath as she surveyed the clean white blanket of powder the blizzard had left in its wake. A smile crept across her face. Shea was already playing against her, forcing her onto the back foot with a preemptive strike that nearly immobilized them. And if things went south, they always had their atmospheric defense fighter docked at Outpost Bravo. A barrage from its particle cannon would make a quick end to their rivals at Timber Bluff, if only the Oh-En would clear them to fly. No matter. Briars finally had the chance to settle the score with her former commander after years of rumination and the insult to her authority that McEnroy's insurrection had besmirched. She'd strangle Daphne O'Shea with her bare hands if it came down to it. Shea deserved no better for turning her back on Briars after years of service together under General Andrews.

"I'll see you soon, Sergeant Major," Briars murmured to herself, marching for the front of her convoy. When the strike team piled into their vehicles, the two-dozen seasoned soldiers were tense and focused. Briars approved of the razor's edge nerves her team radiated. Daphne O'Shea was not a force to be underestimated. When Briars settled into Alpha rig's front passenger seat, she toggled on the comms system and took hold of its microphone.

"All personnel be advised: we are leaving New Prospect Frontier controlled territories. As of this moment, all unknown persons encountered are to be treated with extreme hostility. We are to wipe out all traces of Artie occupation at Timber Bluff. I don't want any more rats nesting there once we're gone."

"Zulu chiming in," static crackled in over the radio as a Hellcat team leader spoke. "Are we to treat the NPF hostage as hostile as well?"

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“Affirmative,” Briars lied. “We’ve received reliable intel that the kidnapped miner struck a deal with the Arties and has defected from NPF employment.”

“Hell, this is going to be a cakewalk!” Charlie rig’s radio operator chimed in with a snicker. “What have these backwoods bumpkins even got to fight back with? Bolt-action hunting rifles?”

“Do not get complacent, people!” Briars reprimanded over the snow chains grating against ice and gravel as they sped on through the snow past an NPF billboard: *CAUTION. ARTIES ABOUT*. “Even with inferior firepower, the Arties weren’t born yesterday. There are seasoned combat vets among their ranks and I will remind you all that former Sergeant Major Daphne O’Shea is in command of their forces.”

Briars had witnessed Daphne O’Shea’s tactical genius firsthand after Russian forces broke through the European Wall in West Ukraine. Shea had called in a danger-close airstrike from their atmospheric defense fighters to push back the advancing line, an overwhelming force that outnumbered their squad fifty-to-one. The fighter ship’s particle cannon blasted down a curtain of blinding blue light in front of their team’s noses, ripping a trench ten feet deep and a thousand feet long. When the dust had settled, any enemy forces left un-vaporized were making a fast retreat. The particle cannons’ inescapable destruction had been their only saving grace that day, and half the platoon had been blasted to hell just to win. With enough bravado during her tour of duty to bring a particle bombardment down on their own heads, Shea would have more than a few tricks up her sleeve in retirement. But Briars had never quit.

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The Sergeant Major never should have met with that sap McEnroy. Briars grinned at the thought. Shea could have hidden under her nose for years. But the Sergeant Major underestimated Briars' resolve and poked her head out from hiding, pretending that bygones could be bygones while she played politician with NPF and the Arties. Now they would settle the score that had been brewing since they invaded their own country together in Alaska.

"I figured you all could use a real skirmish after standing around on security detail for months," Briars said to her strike team over the comms. "O'Shea's wanted for organizing artisanal mining operations against company assets. We're bringing her in, dead or alive. Clear?"

Each team radioed in their approval as they made their way to Timber Bluff.

#

Dan Fitz woke up early to watch Briars' convoy kicking up snow as they left Spring Pines. Standing on the roof above town hall, he felt warm confidence running through his veins: they had already set their plan in motion to suppress the local Arties and the remnants of McEnroy's Insurrection. Within the day, Spring Pines' rebellious streak and the Arties' camp of thieving murderers would meet its end.

Fitz retreated from the cold for his penthouse apartment downstairs and brewed a pot of coffee in his elegant, marble-topped kitchen space. He flattened his polo shirt against his pudgy stomach as he waited for the bubbling percolator to chime its brewing cycle's completion.

Through the window above the sink that overlooked Main Street, Spring Pines sparkled white with thick blankets of undisturbed snow. It rang discordant to Fitz's eye; with the blizzard

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passed, the surface crews should have started shift to clear the roads and walkways. But only the Hellcats' roughshod plow work carved a narrow path through the streets a single vehicle wide. Only three functioning Hellcat rigs could be spared from the strike team after the incompetent fools' circuitry went haywire. They performed plow duties during the storm's final hours in preparation for the strike team's departure. Now, it seemed, in the tardiness of the clearing crews, that the broken-down rigs would be put to more urgent use.

The percolator finished bubbling and chimed in his ear. Fitz grumbled at the incompetence of the security teams and mining personnel alike as he poured himself a mug of coffee, adding several heaping spoonfuls of sugar and blowing long and slow at the steaming mug's rim before leaning forward at the sink to take his first sip. When Fitz looked up, dozens of townspeople had burst out of their homes and into the street, bounding through the snow for the travel lane the Hellcats had plowed. They appeared so suddenly it seemed as if the marching townspeople had risen up from beneath the snow itself. Even from inside, Fitz could hear the rallying cries of the miners charging straight for town hall.

"Seven hells!" Fitz abandoned his coffee and fumbled for his company-issued phone.

#

When Briars' plow-ended SUV sliced its way across the NPF border and into Artie territory, the comms crackled to life.

"Lion's Den to Briars, come in Briars," the Spring Pines radio operator chanted.

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“Go for Briars,” the commander replied, irked that the mission was being interrupted and knowing now beyond a doubt that Shea was playing against them.

“Ma’am, the miners have gotten unruly; all labor hands have halted production. The entire town is marching through the streets. Representative Fitz is requesting our aid at town hall to strong-arm them.”

“Do I have to do everything myself?” Briars clapped back. “Have all reserve platoon members attend the meeting and manage those crowds. You’re authorized to use whatever force you deem necessary. Keep those snowflakes in line, soldier.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the radio operator replied. “But with our particle weaponry down, Fitz is afraid to take chances. He’s requesting you return to deal with the strike yourself.”

Damn you, Shea. Briars grit her teeth. This was the Sergeant Major’s doing, it had to be. One of McEnroy’s insurrectionists must have slipped through the cracks and—

“Give me that damn thing!” Fitz’s voice crackled over the radio. “Briars!” he hollered in terror, broadcasting to all vehicles in her convoy. “Get back here; we need your people to defend NPF assets at Spring Pines before the townspeople revolt.”

“Sir, you have given me my marching orders already,” Briars responded with disdain. “I have assessed the situation and the multiplicity of threats before us and deem your unarmed miners to be the lesser concern. If we hit Timber Bluff, we cut down McEnroy’s Insurrection at the root. The strikers won’t have a leg left to stand on.”

“Do you mean to tell me you’re disobeying an order?!” Fitz fumed.

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“I am continuing the mission already underway for the safety and preservation of NPF properties and employees,” Briars spat back. “I will attend to one matter at a time. But if it will placate you, I’m detaching team Zulu from our unit to assist. One full squad is more than adequate to suppress your strikers. Copy that, Zulu?”

“Zulu copies. Returning to Lion’s Den.” Briars watched in the rear view mirror as Zulu’s SUV peeled off from the convoy, making a U-turn for Spring Pines.

“Briars to Lion’s Den: be notified that radio silence is to be maintained excepting military operations and extreme urgency. Keep that man-child Fitz off the comms. Briars out.”

Commander Briars tossed the microphone onto the dash and gripped her particle rifle, relishing her temper-risen pulse. They could terminate her employment that day, for all it mattered. The mission was in motion and the score would be settled between her and Daphne O’Shea once and for all. Hell, NPF would probably give her platoon a holiday bonus once those short-sighted fools saw her bring in results.

The loss of Zulu left the strike team’s members at twenty, split between Alpha, Charlie, Delta, and Echo rigs. They were still a force to be reckoned with, but they no longer had the overwhelming numbers that Briars wanted for their assault against the unknown. She smiled again. It had been too long since she’d questioned their capabilities.

“Approaching Timber Bluff,” her driver called out as they led the way forward.

“Echo, bring down those sentry towers,” Briars ordered, wary of the tall wooden vantage points straddling the road into Timber Bluff. Echo team obliged from behind her, their driver

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slowing to a stop long enough for two team members volleyed particle fire into the tower bases. Briars watched the streaking bolts of blue collide with the towers in a burst of smoke, fire, and splinters.

“Ram through that debris!” she ordered their driver to lead the charge through the crumbled remains of the sentry towers fallen in the road. Their rigs brushed aside the burning cinders of the tower with ease and roared into the center of Timber Bluff. Her delighted grin faded when she took in the view of the empty town square around them.

“This isn’t possible; there’s no way they could have evacuated the entire camp by now with the blizzard that rolled through,” her driver muttered as they moved forward.

She knew we were coming. A glint of light shined off the patch of snow toward which they sped. Briars leaned forward in her seat for a closer look. It seemed higher set than the rest of the ground, with uneven ripples warbling along its surface. They were nearly upon it when she spied the tarp’s edge protruding from the trap.

“Obstacle ahead,” Briars shouted, “evasive maneuvers!” She reached over and jerked the wheel to the right, refusing to wait for her driver’s reaction time to save them. Alpha rig skirted by the patch of ground as it sped past. Briars craned her head back to watch the wind that rushed into their rig’s wake blow away the thin layer of snow that had concealed a tarp.

Delta rig, riding close behind them in the convoy, was not as quick to react. They rolled straight over the tarp, which crumpled away beneath them. Delta plunged headlong into the deep pit, ramming into the frozen wall of dirt at its end with a painful crunch. The wall collapsed on impact, burying the rig’s front end beneath mounds of dirt and snow.

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“God *damn* you, Shea!” Briars roared, bristling with rage. The Sergeant Major had drawn first blood without even setting foot on the battlefield. Charlie and Echo rigs pulled up beside the pit that Delta had toppled into, where the less battered squad members had freed themselves from their seats and were crawling out of the vehicle with difficulty.

“Charlie reporting, negative contacts,” her comms crackled.

“Echo confirms, negative contacts. Orders, Alpha?”

The vehicles waited in a staggered line, spaced wide and far enough from the mouth of the pit to avoid slipping down to join Delta.

Briars spat out the window. They couldn’t simply abandon Delta, but they were too exposed in the middle of the town square for her comfort, even with the protection of their armored vehicles. The metal roof of the work camp’s main building glared in the bright noon sunlight. The dark window holes below it stared threateningly at her team. There were too many positions for too many snipers.

“Echo,” Briars ordered. “Maintain position and secure our exit. Charlie, detach two squad members to assist with Delta’s wounded. Remaining crew is to sweep every inch of this place until you see signs of life. Alpha, with me: we’re clearing that building.”

Briars donned her combat helmet and lowered its front visor. She gestured for her driver to approach the main building’s promenade. When they pulled forward she hopped out, keeping in cover behind the rig’s armored door. The remaining members of Alpha team were with her when Briars’ boots touched down on the snowy ground. She signaled for Alpha team to take

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cover behind the brick front wall. Two Hellcats took position at either side of the front door, ready to breach on her orders. Briars reached into the SUV to toggle on its speaker system and grabbed the microphone. It was time to poke the bear.

“Daphne O’Shea. This is Carol Briars, acting commander of the Spring Pines Hellcats platoon. You are harboring a fugitive responsible for the destruction and theft of NPF property, conspiracy, and the kidnapping of a civilian. I am authorized to neutralize your band of thieves with extreme prejudice. Hand over the fugitive and surrender!”

Her own words reverberated back to her in a fading echo. Satisfied no surrender would be made, she signaled for her team members to breach.

The closest Hellcat turned her particle rifle on the door’s hinges, obliterating them in generous bursts of beam fire. The hinges melted with the wooden frame and she delivered a single powerful kick to its center. In one fluid motion, the door was wrenched from its hinges and the breacher ducked aside while her partner rushed the newly opened doorway. The breacher slid back in place behind her to guard the Hellcat’s flank in a well-rehearsed choreography.

“Lobby is clear,” the breacher declared as Alpha team waited in position. “No signs of life in adjacent hallways or—”

A hollow boom and a blinding flash of light rang out. The building’s wall shook as gunfire rattled from inside.

“Flashbang; hostiles engaging!” The breacher and her partner swam out from the cloud of smoke that poured from the building’s entrance, trading fire with the unseen assailants inside and

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screaming in pain as their armor absorbed the barrage of bullets pelting down at them from the balcony. Their squad mates fired blindly around the doorway's corners and smashed-in windows to cover the breach team's retreat.

"Alpha, deploy grenades," Briars screamed into her shoulder-mounted radio. "Push them back!" The Hellcats obeyed, laying heavy suppressing fire into the smoking building while a squad member prepared to lob a grenade up into the balcony.

"My rifle's shorting out!" The breacher called from the entrance door, distracting the grenadier from her tossing. "The damned thing's overloading on me. Fall back!" The Hellcat tossed her sizzling rifle into the building lobby and retreated for the SUVs. The rest of Alpha team followed suit, only managing several feet of sprinting before the malfunctioning particle rifle imploded inside, blowing out half the building's front wall.

"All personnel, keep watch on your rifles!" Briars ordered. "More could still be—"

"Commander! Movement on your left," Charlie's radio operator called out to her. Briars craned her head across the hood of Alpha's rig to see an NPF company truck revving to life. The truck lurched into gear and sped toward them from the charging station in the distance. If there was a driver in the cab, they were ducked low out of sight behind the wheel.

"Tires! Stop that vehicle," Briars shouted. The Hellcats rushed to take new cover, the assailants in the lobby displaced enough by the particle rifle implosion to protect their flank. The platoon trained their weapons on the truck barreling for the strike team. The chassis was riddled with holes and its front tires blasted away by the Hellcats' firepower, sending the truck careening off course and crashing into the edge of the main building. Shouts of surprise and pain trickled

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out into the air. The shooting died down and a member of Charlie advanced on the disabled truck.

“There’s no one inside,” she announced when she trained her rifle on the open window. Briars had barely begun calling the teams to regroup when several small sparking canisters fell to the ground around them. The snow erupted into thick grey smoke and gunfire burst from the second floor. The bullets glanced harmlessly off the Hellcats’ rigs with metal pangs. While the soldiers’ reinforced armor protected them, it did little to absorb the bullet storm’s impact. Several women cried in pain from the sledgehammer punches raining down on them from above.

“I’m hit!” a Charlie team member proclaimed in the smoke.

“Taking fire,” another declared with a hiss of pain. “Are those rubber bullets?”

“God damn it, activate thermals!” Briars shouted, tapping at a wrist-mounted control that painted the world in cold blues and warm reds through the thickening smoke. Briars squinted through the painfully bright daylight creeping around the smoke’s edges and fired a streak of deep blue up at the figures peering out from the second floor windows before she was even aiming. The orange specter above her spat a shower of crimson red before slumping to the ground. Briars’ Hellcats bunched up in the smoke and volleyed return fire back at the aggressors with the aid of their thermal vision and their all-penetrating particle rifles.

“One down,” a Hellcat shouted with pride.

“I got two,” replied another.

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Several more of the attackers fell, and the Arties retreated deeper into the building to better cover.

“Rifle’s shorting out!” an Echo team member hollered. “Powering down. Fucking Arties think they can win by playing games with us!” As if on cue, a vehicle emerged from the barn, speeding toward the Hellcats bunched together in the smoke. Through her thermal vision, Briars could only make out the murky blob of the approaching rig before a blinding flash of heat stabbed her to blindness, the telltale sign of a triggered M-Drive core.

“On the right!” she screamed.

“It’s not stopping,” an Alpha team member hollered as the vehicle bore down on them in the smoke, ignoring the particle beams bolting out from the Hellcats’ smoke cloud.

“Scatter!”

The Hellcats fled the smoke as the unstoppable force barreled toward them. Alpha’s driver had left her vehicle to join in the shooting, and could only dive to the ground to avoid the collision. Briars switched off her thermal vision to witness the stolen Hellcat SUV plowing into her own rig’s flank, its undercarriage glowing blue. The vehicle knocked Alpha rig about in a brutal rotation before slowing to a stop in the chaos, super-powered and fearless.

Briars was raising her particle rifle to the attacking vehicle when its back door opened to reveal Daphne O’Shea drawing a bead on her from the rig’s rear end with a scoped rifle. She fired on Briars before the Commander could blink in surprise. Briars’ visor cracked as its reinforced plating absorbed the bullet’s impact. Her head snapped back, and she was knocked off her

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feet as the SUV sped off. Briars heard the strike team's murky chatter through her concussed fog on the ground.

"That was Shea; she really is here!"

"The commander's down!"

"They're making a break for it!"

"Echo, regroup to pursue."

"No," Briars said. A teammate knelt by her side and removed her helmet. "Back," she croaked. "Call them back."

Her subordinate failed to hear her over the cacophony of gunfire as she examined the commander's head. In the distance, the brat-ta-tat of weapons fire rang out. Echo team was pursuing Shea and the Arties out of the compound, *cracking* away with their particle rifles.

"The commander's alive," the attending Hellcat proclaimed on their personal comms. Briars sat up with woozy difficulty.

"Enemy vehicle has been disabled and its occupants are fleeing into a mineshaft," Echo's team leader reported over the radio. "Pursuing on foot. Air and lights on, people."

"Do not pursue," Briars sputtered into her comms. "She's trying to corral you into a trap. Disengage!"

A distant explosion popped in the air. Briars hung her head as Echo's team members cried in terror over the comms, stomping over each other's messages in the confusion.

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“—tunnel collapse, I repeat, the entrance has collapsed on us. We can’t—”

“—Martha’s down; those gas canisters were rigged to blow—”

“Can’t find a way out, which way did—”

The radio went silent.

“Echo, respond,” Charlie’s team leader hailed the missing team as Briars staggered to her feet. “Echo, respond.”

“The Arties are retreating!” her driver declared, marching up to Briars. “They’ve stopped firing. Maybe they’re re-grouping for another trick. Orders, Commander?”

“Carol?” Shea’s vocal-fried tenor cut its way across the Hellcats’ comms. The bottom of Briars’ stomach sank to her feet. “Come in, Carol.”

“Yes, Daphne?” Briars answered. Her mouth was cotton dry.

“I thought I taught you better than this, Carol. Having a big stick is useless if you don’t know how to swing it. You should be happy I’ve been going easy on you. Not one of your people are KIA, if I’m not mistaken. That’s a greater courtesy than you’ve shown my boys. I’d say President Simon would be rather sympathetic to a group of decorated veterans murdered in cold blood for defending themselves with non-lethal force.”

“Damn you, Daphne!” Briars cried. Around her, the Hellcats were scanning the horizon, losing their cool and struggling with panic from the heavy losses they’d incurred.

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“Are you really so bitter about the past that you’re willing to throw away your peoples’ lives just to get to me?” Shea asked.

“Don’t act like honor matters to you now, Daphne!” Briars snarled. Her head was throbbing from the Sergeant Major’s bullet. “There never would have been a *war* if it wasn’t for us, and you were just fine playing errand dog for that sociopath Andrews when I finally grew a conscience!”

For one brief moment, silence answered her.

“It was the only way to ensure global peace, Carol,” Shea replied. “I’m trying to do the right thing, here and now. I thought you would want that, too, that we could work together to make our home somewhere worth living again. It’s the only reason I met with James McEnroy.”

“Commander!” Charlie team’s radio operator shouted from her vehicle before Briars could respond. “Spring Pines just radioed in a distress call; we have to abort mission!”

“Ooh, I heard that, Carol,” Shea taunted. “Does that mean we’re done playing while you clean up your little mess?”

“This isn’t over, you old bitch!” Briars threw her radio to the ground and waved to her people. “All hands, round up the wounded and move out. We’re aborting.”

“Ma’am, what about Echo?”

“I have positive visual on an Artie reinforcement convoy.”

“Confirming; there’s dozens!”

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“Ma’am, orders regarding Echo?”

Her subordinates shouted over the rising waves of gunfire rattling through the air. More and more Arties crawled into the open from their hiding places, pelting the strike team’s drastically reduced members with punishing waves of rubber bullets while the reinforcement convoy advanced on the Hellcats’ position.

“Presume Echo lost, soldier,” Briars ordered. “Abort mission; all strike team members, return to Charlie and Alpha rigs. Move out!” She led their retreat into the remaining SUVs and they bolted out of Timber Bluff, gliding through the melting snow that reflected shimmering blue.

#

2.

Mei led the march for town hall while Nadine and Vera led chants of ‘*Strike!*’ and ‘*Miners’ rights NOW!*’ deeper in the throngs of strikers. Her heart drummed in her chest. Her fingers tingled with the cold. She turned to see Sam chanting beside her as they marched, as caught up in the moment as the rest of the crowd. He caught her eye and nodded. Mei felt a warm confidence running through her veins at how right it all felt; they were finally taking control of their lives after years of toeing someone else’s line.

The strikers grew in number as they marched until nearly the entire town had found its way into their ranks, stomping for town hall in their snow boots and wool gloves and chanting with passion.

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“Attention residents! Disperse now!” Lieutenant Murphy shouted down to them from the top of the town hall steps where she stood vigil with two more Hellcats, armed only with their .45 side arms. Mei ignored the fear biting into her at the sight of them and made her ascent with Sam, emboldened that their sabotage had worked; their oppressors’ particle rifles were absent from their clutches. Murphy and the Hellcats sprang into action the moment Mei set foot on the stairs, swooping down to handcuff her and Sam while the strikers yelled for them to be freed, storming the town hall steps.

“These two are under arrest for suspected sabotage of Hellcat equipment!” Murphy declared to the hissing crowd, which fast roiled around them. Murphy drew her pistol when they pressed too close for her comfort.

“Stop! Stand down!” Fitz cried out as he burst onto the stairs beside the Hellcats from the meeting room inside. “Everyone, please!” Fitz shouted to the crowd, raising his hands in submission. “You want to talk? Fine! Let’s come inside and hash this out like civilized people. Murphy, lower that damned peashooter! And let those two go, for God’s sake! We have bigger problems right now.” Murphy relinquished her hold on Mei and stepped away, holstering her sidearm after a pang of hesitation. The other security officers made way to let the strikers follow Fitz inside. It was almost going too smoothly, and Mei didn’t trust the victory cheer already rippling through the strikers behind her.

“This has to be a trick,” she muttered to Sam as they found their way inside with the others. “Fitz shouldn’t be rolling over *this* easy.”

“I know it. Stay on your toes,” he warned.

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The strikers packed themselves into the meeting room while Fitz assumed the stage, his entourage of Hellcats flanking him on either side of the microphone stand set in front of him.

“Now, I know our last town meeting didn’t settle people down as much as I would’ve liked,” Fitz droned into the microphone, “but that doesn’t excuse everyone from deciding to halt productivity today.”

Another pang of distrust surged through Mei; he had seen them coming and prepared for this confrontation. She and Sam re-grouped with Nadine and Vera at the back of the meeting room to oversee their swarm of strikers, wary of Lieutenant Murphy’s frequent venomous glances.

“He’s stalling,” Vera observed. Mei couldn’t help but agree.

“What is it that’s got you all so riled up first thing in the morning?” Fitz asked the room while the Hellcats shifted on their feet, keeping eyes on anyone who spoke.

“You’re trying to kick us out of our homes to save a few dollars,” Nadine’s driller Jan shouted up to Fitz from her place at the foot of the stage in front of Fitz’s microphone. “But you’ve got a platoon of *fifty soldiers* that barely lifts a finger around here!”

“You all know we need a security detail if we’re going to keep the Arties from damaging company property and jeopardizing your lives,” Fitz countered, struggling to maintain his composure as he gripped the microphone stand.

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“And your people did a *great* job of that at Black Meadow!” Nadine called out from beside Mei. “From my end, it’s pretty clear that the *Hellcats* need a layoff if this place is going to turn a healthy profit!”

“This is a privately owned institution,” Fitz replied. “We take great lengths to make the smartest decisions regarding its operation. Rest assured that—”

“Who’s going to shovel your pyrite when word spreads out of town about how you’re tossing people out in the cold to die like Dawson Granger?” Vera called up. “We want the *Hellcats* off our backs and we want better treatment *now!*”

“Please. I won’t stand for—” More and more miners began to shout over Fitz, refusing to be silenced any longer by bureaucratic neglect.

“You killed James McEnroy!”

“*You’re* provoking the Arties!”

“You don’t even know how to hold a shovel, you dumb bastard!” Jan snarled up at him.

“I won’t have my intelligence questioned by you, you ignorant hole digger!” Fitz snapped. The poorly timed insult to Jan was too much for her to bear. The angered miner reached forward and took hold of the microphone stand, grappling with Fitz for control. The executive’s meager muscles were fast worn down by the driller’s vice-like grip. Mei’s confidence slipped away as she watched the dispute unfold, replaced with the cold dread that their negotiations were falling apart.

“Stop! Everyone!” she pled, her cries unheard by the swelling rancor of the strikers.

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“Someone handle these people!” Fitz screamed at the Hellcats as he grappled over the microphone stand. “Call in Zulu already!” Jan won her battle of tug-of-war for the mic stand and Fitz lost his balance, toppling down from the stage and into the crowd.

“Zulu, form up!” Lieutenant Murphy shouted into her visor’s comm system, stepping toward the edge of the stage and brandishing her pistol at Jan. Two Hellcats crept onto the stage from the meeting room’s back entrance with a pair of glowing-blue particle rifles. They took aim at the strikers closest to the stage, who upturned chairs in their panicked retreat.

“Those rifles are live!” Sam hollered over the shouting as he made for the door with the frenzied people swarming past them.

A glinting sparkle caught Mei’s eye as she followed Sam for the door. She turned to see a thrown bottle arcing through the air from the middle of the crowd. Fitz, who had just gotten to his feet at the front of the stage, dove for the ground once more to dodge the soaring projectile. The bottle shattered against the Zulu team member’s shoulder pad. Her arm jerked from the shock of the blow and an ozone-scented *crack* rang out with an accidental squeeze of her rifle’s trigger that sent a particle beam melting through the ceiling.

Pandemonium settled over the air in a maddening fog. People scattered, knocking against each other in their desperation to reach the exits. Mei and the others were shoved through the meeting room’s main doors and out into the cold. She cast a look back into the chaos to watch a malfunctioning particle rifle erupt in a flash of blue on stage. Howls of pain and fear flooded the air while those unharmed seized their chance and ran.

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When the strikers fled into the streets outside town hall with Mei and the others tucked within their ranks, they were stopped by a blockade of Hellcats standing behind their SUV in the snow's narrow travel lane, armed and ready with functioning particle rifles.

"By order of the Hellcats Zulu unit, martial law is now in effect at Spring Pines," an officer declared over her rig's speakers while her team waited to strike. "All residents are ordered to remain indoors until further notice. Failure to comply will be met with force."

The Hellcats opened fire on the crowd without waiting for a response, taking lazy aim to corral the strikers into dispersing. Several miners were struck by particle blasts and sent tumbling into the snow, their bodies punctured with smoking holes that fast reddened the snow-angels they trampled into the powder. Caught between particle fire behind them and before them, the crowd melted apart in all directions, stumbling through the snow to avoid a sudden death at the hands of their own security teams.

"Move, move!" Vera shouted as she pulled Nadine along and led Mei and Sam through the turmoil for the alleyways jutting out from Main Street. Building mortar and dirt exploded around them from the particle barrage sailing through the air, which was choking up with smoke that stank of ozone.

Nadine was tripped up by a woman in front of her who toppled over from a particle beam to the arm. The crowd surged over them both in their mania to escape the massacre unfolding in the street. Vera was nearly pulled underfoot herself when she came to Nadine's aid. Sam and Mei shielded them from the fast-thinning throngs of fleeing people while Vera hauled Nadine to her feet. When the quartet was up and running again, particle fire chased them into the alley.

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“It’s Peterson!” a Hellcat cried out behind them as they stomped past overturned trash-cans and rusted storage containers down the alleys sandwiched between the sparse rows of buildings that ran through Spring Pines.

“Damn it, this rifle’s shorting out!” Zulu’s team leader announced from the street. “Cease fire! Pursue on foot!”

When they outpaced the pursuing Hellcats with three winding turns, they began trying every back door they came upon, finding each locked. A trio of terrified women sprinted past them in their own flight. The sound of windows smashing in the distance and frightened screams drifted along the air with the moaning of the wounded who still lay bleeding in the streets. Vera led them through the alley to a smoking tent erected behind a locked group home. They ducked inside to catch their breath under cover, Nadine last to enter.

“Those monsters wouldn’t even wait for us to get indoors,” Nadine panted, doubling over to catch her breath. She gasped in shock when she looked up, locking eyes on President Simon’s cartoonish grin greeting her from the *start digging!* poster taped to the wall. She tore the poster down in angry embarrassment. As she turned away from them to kick the poster away, a trickle of blood running from her scalp’s freshly torn stitches caught Mei’s eye for the first time.

“Nadine...” Mei croaked with terror.

“I– what?” Nadine felt for the tickling at her neck that smeared a streak of blood onto her palm.

“Naddy!” Vera almost shouted, rushing over to her spouse to inspect the wound.

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"I'm good, Vera," Nadine held Vera off, repressing her pain as long as she could to keep control of her equilibrium. "I'm cruising on adrenaline. Bruce's Bar is only a block away. It's a whole lot safer to look at my stitches there than in this smoking tent."

"Nadine's right," Sam nodded, eager to find better shelter. "Bruce's is our best bet."

Mei checked to make sure the coast was clear outside the tent and they were moving, fast and quiet, down the alley. They ducked from sight at a passing patrol only once, when they rounded the corner beside the internet café to reveal a pair of Hellcats keeping watch from the street. Long minutes passed until the Hellcats marched off and they were safe to move again. By then, Nadine had grown woozy, leaning against Vera for support with exhausted thanks.

The side entrance to the bar, where Mei and Bailey had spoken not one week ago stood at the end of the alleyway. Mei was quick to note the wall of beer kegs that had been stacked beside it to block off Main Street from the bar's alleyway; Bruce's handiwork, no doubt to deter patrolling security personnel. It took Mei and Sam both pounding their fists against the bar's back door to rouse a response from inside. The cellar door groaned open on its hinges beside them.

"Did you find the others, Tessa?" Angela stuck her head outside. Her face dropped when she caught sight of Mei and Sam standing in the alley with Vera and Nadine.

"What are *you* doing here?" her eyes narrowed. "You gonna lead another march and get us all killed?"

"Let us in, Angela," Sam demanded. "The Hellcats are on the prowl and it's not safe out here." He craned his neck back the way they'd come to ensure no one had followed them.

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“Oh no, not after the mess you’ve caused for all of us!” Angela replied, reaching for the cellar door to shut them out of the bar.

“Wait, please!” Vera moaned, holding Nadine tighter as she watched their safe haven sealing shut in front of them.

“I warned every one of you it would turn out like this,” Angela countered. “Sleep in the bed you made for yourselves.” She had nearly closed the swinging door on them when Mei reached forward and wrapped her fingers around its edges, wrestling the metal frame out of Angela’s hands and heaving the cellar door open.

“Angela, I will drag you out of there and throw you into the snow if you don’t get out of our way,” Mei warned. Angela’s nostrils flared and she advanced another step up toward them, drawing breath to challenge Mei.

“Angela, who are you talking to?” Bruce shouted from below as he climbed the stairs to see about the commotion. “I told you not to open that door! The Hellcats could be- Jesus!” he exclaimed when he got a look at their faces. “I’d almost given up hoping that you four made it off the streets.”

“We’re not off them yet,” Vera corrected from the top of the cellar stairs, cradling Nadine in her arms. “Angela’s playing gatekeeper. Will you let us inside or what?”

“Come down through here,” Bruce waved for them to follow him into the cellar, shooting Angela a cold glare when he passed her on the stairs. “I’ve got the side door jammed.” The group kicked slush and snow down the cellar stairs as they slipped their way past Angela, who closed

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the door behind them and followed in the rear. The bare-bulb lighting within the bar's storage room cast a musty yellow glow upon its rows of kegs and alcohol cases.

"We shouldn't be letting them in, Bruce," Angela moaned while they marched past the dusty liquor bottles. "They'll get us shot to hell."

"Did you see anyone else coming after you four?" Bruce asked, ignoring Angela's complaints as he led them through the cellar and up the rickety stairs to the bar.

"No," Sam answered. "I think anyone who stood to make it to safety already has."

"Let's just hope we didn't lose too many folks out there," Bruce muttered as he reached the top of the stairs and led them up into the bar. He grabbed a first aid box set earlier in the day upon his counter and handed it to Vera. She and Sam led Nadine to a chair at the nearest table before rummaging through the first aid box to see about her stitches.

"I've got some luck, don't I, V?" Nadine mumbled.

"Just rest now, Naddy," Vera cooed. "You did good getting here." She worked to sterilize Nadine's stitches while Sam prepared a suturing kit from the box beside them.

Mei took in the scene inside Bruce's Bar, where a small cluster of Spring Pines' residents had already found their way after seeking whatever shelter they could from the Hellcats' martial law. She spotted Grace sitting alone, rocking in a chair with restless anxiety.

"Mei! You're alive!" She ran over to hug Mei when she made eye contact. "Have you heard from Bailey? Is Alex safe?" Grace implored, breaking from their embrace and looking up at Mei with eyes red and puffy from crying.

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“Not yet, Grace,” Mei replied. “They just need more time.” She hoped she sounded more reassuring than she felt. Grace nodded and sat with her while Angela stalked to the bar counter.

“You’re really just going to let them stay here?” Angela asked Bruce, shooting another venomous glare toward Mei. “It’s *their* fault we’re even in this mess!”

“Angela, this is my bar,” Bruce countered without offering her a glance. “I’m tired of you pretending that you own the place when I haven’t even gotten a ‘thank you’ for letting your ungrateful ass hide in here and steal drinks when you think I’m not looking.” He shoved past her to hand Sam a glass of water and a clean rag for Nadine’s stitches.

“Screw this. I don’t want a damn thing to do with you people,” Angela said, hurrying for the door. She unlatched its deadbolt and cast a final spiteful look toward Mei. “This is on *you*, Zhang. Before you showed up, we were getting along just fine. The damned Arties aren’t your friends! They’ve murdered *dozens* of NPF miners since we started digging, and if you think you’re on the right side of history, just wait until you see what *tomorrow* brings! You and your whole damned family have brought nothing but misery on us all.” She fled into the street, slamming the bar door shut behind her. Long seconds passed before Mei found her breath. She turned to Bruce, realizing for the first time that her hands were shaking.

“Forget about Angela, Mei.” Grace said beside her. “She’s just full of hot air.”

“Hasn’t she got a point though?” Mei asked, gripping the bar for support. “I helped cause this and it’s all turning sideways.”

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"I'm not surprised in the least it's gone this way," Bruce mused as he made his way back behind the bar. "We're outgunned in a bad way, but that doesn't mean it wasn't time to take a stand, kid."

"And if half of Spring Pines is gunned down before this is over?" Mei suppressed another urge to gag at the ozone stink lingering in her nose from the Hellcats' particle rifles.

"Grace, give me a minute with Mei, would you?" The barkeep set a tray laden with canisters of water rations in front of Grace. "Do me a favor and pass these around."

"Okay, Bruce." Grace took the tray and made her way around the bar, handing out water rations. Bruce sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck, settling into the stool in front of Mei behind the bar.

"There's a cost to fighting for your rights, Mei," Bruce crossed his arms, leaning back as he spoke. "Sometimes that even means dying. That's no excuse not to fight when it's the only option you have left to right the wrongs in front of you."

"I know, I just..." Mei winced when Nadine hissed in pain behind her in reply to Vera's stitching efforts. "Angela was right. I've brought misery down on us, just like my father did. My family name is a blight on the whole world."

"You listen to me, Mei Ling." Bruce leaned close with fierce conviction. "Your father's been dead for fourteen years. You've been in town a *week*. You think you really changed that much around here yourself? You just showed up when the powder keg was already rigged to blow. The Hellcats pulled their own triggers today, and President Simon pulled his before them. Don't put *any* of their crimes on Thomas Zhang, and don't put the Hellcats turning feral on *you*."

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Mei was unable to think of an adequate reply before Bruce stood to procure a clear crystal bottle full of water from his top shelf.

“Bailey always crows in my ear about when I’m going to break out my private stock,” Bruce explained, setting the bottle on the counter and snatching two tall glasses from their place on the shelves below. “So just do me a favor and don’t mention this to her. Natural spring water, hand-bottled. Clean. I found a place north of here last summer; I take a trip there every month for refills.” Bruce slid the glass across the bar to Mei, who accepted it, speechless at the gesture. “Thomas would be proud of what you’ve done here,” he toasted her and drank. Mei joined him. The water was smooth and crisp, more satisfying than anything she’d been drinking for the past decade.

Ten minutes later, Sam approached them from Vera’s side, where he’d been shooed away after helping tend to Nadine’s stitches to grant the pair a moment of privacy.

“We should get word to Bailey,” he said, leaning against the bar beside Mei, training his eyes on the circular patterns buffed into its surface. “She can convince Timber Bluff to help us resist the Hellcats. They’ve got guns, and we need them bad.”

“How are we going to get Spring Pines to warm up to the idea of trusting the Arties after this?” Mei asked. “They’re already looking at *me* like I signed their execution papers.”

“If the Arties roll into town and manage to push back the Hellcats, I doubt many people will look a gift horse in the mouth,” Bruce countered. “There’ll be room for disagreement once we get out of this alive.”

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“Besides that, Shea and her people owe me,” Sam said.

“Owe us, you mean,” Mei corrected. Sam cleared his throat and looked down at his shoes.

“Mei, I—”

“Thanks for this, Bruce,” Vera interjected as she set the first aid box atop his counter with a heave before Sam could reply. “Nadine could’ve been a lot worse off if you hadn’t had a suture kit handy.”

“Vera, do you still have your work phone on you?” Sam asked.

“It’s right here.” Vera pulled the tattered old flip phone out of her pocket.

“Thank god,” Sam exclaimed. “You need to call—”

The sudden boom of an amplified voice ringing into the bar from the street disrupted them all.

“This is Lieutenant Karen Murphy, acting commander of the Hellcats security teams. We’ve received reports that Sam Peterson has taken refuge in this establishment with several strike leaders. Peterson and any accomplices are ordered to come out and surrender themselves for arrest.”

“There’s an entire team of Hellcats outside!” Grace gasped as she watched the blurred shadows dancing in the bar’s tinted windows. The bar’s refugees looked up in terror, murmuring to one another at the mention of Sam’s name while Murphy’s voice commanded their attention.

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“Sam Peterson has thirty seconds to come out peacefully before we force our way in.

This is your only warning.”

“Angela must have tipped off the Hellcats,” Vera said. “The bitch really *is* that petty.”

“Sabotaging their rigs was my idea,” Sam said as he shoved off from the bar. “No one else should suffer for that. Maybe if I surrender myself, I can—”

“No one’s surrendering to those damned bruisers,” Bruce declared. “The Hellcats won’t stop at you, Sam. They’ll root out everyone else involved in the strike until they’ve shot up half of Spring Pines.”

“What do we do then, Bruce?” Grace begged as she rushed to meet them from across the room. Bruce tossed his rag onto the table, waving at the room as he did so.

“Guide everyone out of here through the cellar. I’ll keep them distracted as long as I can.”

Grace hurried to rouse everyone to their feet, meeting heavy reluctance for fear of taking their chances on the streets again.

“You don’t have to do this, Bruce,” Sam warned as Bruce slipped through the front door to meet the Hellcats outside, his revolver still holstered at his hip. The barkeep never looked back.

“Place your weapon on the ground and hand over Sam Peterson!” Murphy said outside.

“Let’s *move*, people!” Nadine hissed at the miners still bound to their seats around the bar when Grace’s pleading bore no fruit. She came to a wobbly stand and waved for them to follow

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after her. “If they catch a whiff of *anyone* involved in the strike, they’ll light this place up. And you were *all* marching an hour ago. You want to live? *Move.*”

That got them going. Vera and Grace sped after the strikers to fling open the doors and ready their exit while Nadine ushered the group downstairs. Mei crept up to the edge of the front door, unable to stomach the thought of abandoning Bruce to the Hellcats.

“This is my bar and I’m authorized by NPF to follow my own security protocols,” Bruce shouted outside. “Everyone here has complied with your ‘martial law’ by remaining indoors. Has Representative Fitz warranted these arrests?”

Sam tapped Mei on the arm, crouched low beside her at the edge of the door. “Mei, we’ve got to move. Vera’s watching the exit for us while Grace and Nadine lead the others out, but the Hellcats could cut off our escape any minute.”

“We can’t leave without Bruce!” Mei replied, glancing back at his silhouette shining through the window as he gesticulated at the Hellcats.

“Representative Fitz was killed by an implosion from a malfunctioning particle rifle,” Murphy answered Bruce’s challenge outside.

“Maybe your people shouldn’t have been firing those death beams on unarmed civilians, then!” Bruce retorted. “The way I see it, you’re more culpable in his death than the strikers.”

“We can’t help him; we’ve got to go, Mei,” Sam begged. Mei gave in and followed after him for the cellar stairs while Bruce stalled for time.

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“If Fitz is dead, that means that NPF isn’t presiding over Spring Pines’ operations.

Whose authority do you even report to now?”

“Our own!” Murphy snapped. “We are the law here and NPF leadership will not be contacted until order is restored. Now put your weapon on the ground and hand over Sam Peterson!”

When Mei and Sam reached the stairs, they were dismayed to discover Vera climbing up to meet them while Grace ushered several women away from the cellar door in the storage room below.

“We’re trapped!” Vera announced with a hiss. “There are Hellcats in the alley; Grace got cut off from Nadine. She led these people back inside before I bolted the cellar door.”

“If you’re not reporting to NPF, you people are nothing more than a rabid militia!” Bruce declared outside.

“I’ve had enough of this. Fire at will!”

Bruce’s revolver boomed twice as particle fire shattered the bar’s windows, sending Sam and Mei diving to the ground at the top of the stairs while Vera ducked out of sight. The bar’s interior strobed blue as particle beams bolted through the air. Massive holes blossomed from the walls and the front door was nearly torn off its hinges. Mei choked on the overwhelming ozone stink that had haunted their day. She cowered as low to the ground as she could manage, shielding herself from bits of debris and hissing when scalding chunks of melted glass landed on her skin. The Hellcats’ particle rifles fell silent and Bruce collapsed to the ground outside with a gurgling thud.

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“Breach that door!” Murphy screamed to her people. Before Mei could turn her head, Sam jumped up from his cover behind the bar and stepped outside with his hands raised high.

“Stop; I surrender!” he shouted. Mei craned as hard as she could from her place on the ground to watch Sam stumbling over Bruce’s smoking corpse in front of the bar’s entrance, powerless to stop him.

“On your knees!” Murphy ordered. “Where is the Zhang girl who helped you sabotage our equipment?” she demanded as a security officer threw a pair of handcuffs on Sam.

“She’s dead,” Sam lied. “I’m the one you want! I organized the strike against NPF. I was a member of McEnroy’s Insurrection. Just leave the people inside alone!”

“Briars will have to be satisfied with you, then,” Murphy murmured. “Mitchels, hang back and maintain position here. Dresden’s watching the alley. If anyone else sets foot outside that bar, put them in the ground. Zulu team, form up and move out.”

The Hellcats crept back into their rig and sped off with their prisoner, leaving a single guard behind to keep watch over the miners they’d imprisoned. Mei struggled to peer over the edge of the bar, watching the SUV turn a corner and disappear, leaving a single Hellcat behind to stand guard.

It was several long moments before the dust had settled and Mei allowed herself to take a breath. She crawled through the broken glass and splintered wood that covered the floor, making her way downstairs as quietly as she could. The women in the storage room were huddled low

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along the shelves of liquor. Grace was crying. Vera sat at the foot of the stairs, lifting her head from her hands at the sound of Mei's descent.

"What happened?" Vera exclaimed. "Did Bruce—?"

"He's gone." Mei hurried to her side, her ears still ringing from the firefight. "Vera, they took Sam."

"We're in a bad spot, Mei." Vera bit back her dismay at the news. "I don't even know if Nadine got away from them..." she choked on a sob of fear at the thought.

"Listen to me, Vera." Mei took her by the shoulders. "There's nothing we can do for Nadine and the others but hope for the best. They'll make it."

"What do we do, then?" Grace asked from where she sat, steeling her nerves and wiping at her eyes to regain her composure.

"Sam was right; we call Bailey and tell her what's going on. We need help and it's now or never."

#

3.

"I want a full damage report and casualties list within the hour," Shea instructed a subordinate as she surveyed their ravaged work camp. The afternoon sun spread unrelenting warmth, and the melting snow squelched underfoot. "We need to refortify Timber Bluff to be ready for another assault at any moment."

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“Yes, ma’am,” the subordinate saluted before marching off to fulfill his instructions. The stolen Hellcat SUV that had handed them their victory rolled to a stop just ten yards away from her. Its driver and another soldier hopped out to unload the squad they’d successfully taken prisoner at the mine. The Hellcats, wrists bound and armaments removed, were escorted before Shea and lined up in the snow.

“Awaiting your orders regarding the prisoners, ma’am,” the SUV’s driver declared as he approached. Shea scanned the row of Hellcats, beaten and bloodied but otherwise whole. She had no time to address them before Bailey stormed up to her with Delancey dragging along behind in a futile grapple. Behind them, Trevor, Alex, and Tommy watched the pair struggle, less courageous than Bailey to approach Timber Bluff’s military commander unannounced.

“Shea! Spring Pines just called,” Bailey exclaimed, shoving at Delancey. “Briars’ people have declared martial law; the Hellcats are gunning people down in the streets! We need your help.”

“I’m sorry, but my hands are full managing my own homestead.” Shea waved her off with a dismissive glance.

“Are you just planning to hunker down and wait for Briars to come back for another fight?” Tommy pled, stepping aside from the others and coming as close to Shea as he dared. “We lost good people today!”

“Tommy, of all the people in this camp, you’ve earned the right to speak the least,” Shea said, glaring at him.

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“Then how about the guy your people shot?” Trevor grunted, gesturing at his bandaged arm. “When Briars is finished with Spring Pines, she’ll be marching back here with twice as many soldiers to blow you all to hell. I can promise you that.”

“Don’t lecture me on war, you old fool,” Shea replied. “I’ve been fighting as long as you’ve been digging tunnels.”

“My daughter is at Spring Pines!” Trevor shouted. Several nearby guards gripped their weapons tighter, tensing up against the rising hostilities. Shea held out a hand to still them.

“Shea, you owe us,” Bailey begged from behind Delancey. “If we hadn’t warned you about Briars’ attack, Timber Bluff would be a pile of ashes right now.”

“Hell, the Arties owe *me* for what I’ve been through,” Alex spoke up from behind Bailey. “The Hellcats are disorganized, Shea- vulnerable. Most of their weapons are disabled. Are you going to help us stop them from terrorizing our home, or are you going to watch Spring Pines get slaughtered and wait until you’re the one in the crosshairs to make a move?”

Shea nodded to herself, pondering the notion. She waved to Delancey, who relinquished his grip on Bailey and returned to her side. “Even if I were to agree to help, this isn’t a decision to be made lightly,” Shea explained. “I can’t put more of my people in danger without sufficient time to run reconnaissance.”

“We don’t have time; my team and I can give you whatever information you need about Spring Pines, but we need to move now!” Bailey pled. “Sam Peterson’s been kidnapped, they’re probably torturing him as we speak.”

“Damn it all,” Shea cursed. “Briars finally got her hands on my informant.”

“Your *what*?” Alex balked. “Sam was feeding you information on us?”

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“Peterson was the one who’d reached out to me about negotiating with McEnroy in the first place,” Shea revealed. Alex gaped, unable to process the truth about his friend.

“They have a point about Briars, ma’am,” Delancey advised, ignoring Alex’s outburst. “Striking while the Hellcats are off balance could be the key to Timber Bluff’s survival. We can mobilize immediately, on your orders.”

Shea set her jaw and hummed to herself as she weighed their options. “Alright. We’ll help your people.”

“Thank you, Shea,” Bailey said. “You’re saving our asses.”

“Hell yeah,” Trevor nodded. “It warms my bones to hear we’ll get some help killing those rabid Hellcats.”

“Who said anything about killing?” Shea replied with a bemused titter.

“But you said Timber Bluff would help Spring Pines,” Bailey said, frowning in confusion.

“Peacefully,” Shea corrected. “Rabid or not, the Hellcats are still the closest thing to the *law* around here. Killing *any* of them would give NPF all the ammunition they’d need to make sure the Oh-En painted a target on all our backs. The Arties aren’t the thieves and murderers they used to be. Not on my watch.”

“What do you propose we do then?” Alex asked.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry to interrupt, but the prisoners,” her driver interjected. “What are we to do with them?”

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“We’ll bring them with us,” Shea answered, stepping away from Bailey and her officers to approach the prisoners still waiting at attention. “This is what I propose,” Shea called back to them before taking a deep breath to address the captured Hellcats.

“You have all surely heard of me,” she announced. “I am former Sergeant Major Daphne O’Shea, veteran of New Korea, the Alaskan Conflict, and the collapse of the European Wall. Your commander served under me in West Ukraine, where she disobeyed orders to retreat that would have drawn the enemy into the open for a counterattack. Briars held the line instead, forcing me to re-route the airstrike we’d coordinated. The particle cannons from our ADFs took more than a few friendlies out of commission when they swept over the encroaching enemy line. Our victory that day was earned with the blood of our fellow soldiers, and earned Briars her discharge papers for disobeying orders. Orders from above my own station.”

Her prisoners shifted on their feet.

“There was no reason for the Hellcats to stage an all-out war against Timber Bluff today,” Shea continued. “I would have turned over any wrongdoers sheltering here, had you approached peacefully. Your commander *wanted* blood, and put you all in harm’s way as a ploy at revenge for what happened in West Ukraine.”

Shea scanned their faces, satisfied with the iron resolve she saw that betrayed nothing to her eye. “Carol Briars condemned you to death. I showed you mercy. Within the hour, we will be heading to Spring Pines to end the hostilities between NPF miners and Hellcat security forces. You will remain my prisoners until we can amicably return you to your people, at which time I implore each of you to consider Commander Briars’ reaction to the ceasefire we will offer. Re-

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flect on whether this rogue agent has your best interests at heart, or if she's content to play with your lives like pawns in her senseless games."

She turned from the line and twirled a finger in the air at Delancey. "Round up the men and prepare to move out." She marched from the prisoners and up to Bailey and her rescue team.

"If you and your people want to help, Bailey, you can take that rig that Tommy stole and clear us a path inside."

"Understood," Bailey replied with a twinge of doubt. Trevor and Alex exchanged silent glances with each other.

"I'd like to go with them," Tommy volunteered. "I want to make up for the trouble I caused."

"I wouldn't dream otherwise, Tommy," Shea glowered. "You'll be indebted to these people for this the rest of your life."

#

4.

Sam was dragged into the Lions' Den and tied down to a bare metal chair to await Briars' arrival on site. After being brought up to speed by Lieutenant Murphy, Briars took a single smirking look at their prisoner and ordered her second officer to beat him for ten minutes. Then their interrogation had started.

"Hit him again, Murphy."

Sam grunted in pain as Briars' second officer backhanded him across the cheekbone, splitting wider the deep cut that had sprouted there. He pursed his bruised lips to spit a mouthful of blood onto the hangar floor.

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"I'll ask you again, soldier," Briars said, snickering at the thought of the scrawny scientist having a military record. "Where is the Zhang girl?"

"And I told you," Sam glared at her through the one eye that wasn't swollen shut. "She was killed by your own trigger happy security officers."

"Despite their diligent hunting, my people haven't found the body of anyone fitting her description in the streets," Briars replied. "This is going to be a long night if you don't start co-operating."

"What does it matter if she's alive or dead?" Sam groaned. "Sabotaging the charging station was my idea, my mission. Why do you care about some civilian miner?"

"She needs to be made an example of, just like you," Briars scowled. "If it hadn't been for you two mucking around with our equipment, I'd have put an end to that hypocrite Shea already. No one makes a fool out of me and walks away from it."

Briars paced away from Sam, clasping her hands behind her back. The hangar was empty, save the members of Zulu team who had remained behind to guard the Lion's Den. The rest of the Hellcats' platoon patrolled the streets of Spring Pines, firing on anyone foolish enough to be caught outdoors.

"I've read your military service file, Peterson." Briars brushed a stray piece of lint from her shoulder. "The Oh-En kept you and your cronies busy after Crest Basin, didn't they? I would say it's an honor to be in the presence of such a decorated hero, an architect of Operation Pyrrhic Victory, but even thinking that leaves a bad taste in my mouth." She looked over her shoulder, relishing the cold look Sam gave her as he labored to breathe. "You cozied up to Zhang's daugh-

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ter pretty quick when you're more responsible for his death than I ever was, you backstabbing lab rat."

"I was just securing our research when General Andrews ordered us to evacuate Crest Basin," Sam admitted. "*You* were the triggerman behind the attack, Briars."

"If you're such an upstanding patriot, you'll have no problem giving up the rest of McEnroy's insurrectionists!" Briars whirled back to face him. "Who else is responsible for inciting the miners to strike?"

"You are," Sam countered, "for sitting on your fat asses while Dawson Granger was kicked out into the cold and my friend Alex was kidnapped."

"Murphy, did I hear him correctly?" Briars asked her second officer. "I believe he just called us fat."

"And on behalf of HR, I'm authorized to beat his ass numb," Murphy replied, delivering a powerful punch to Sam's gut that left him heaving for air.

"Clearly you weren't paying attention during the company's employee orientation," Briars said. Her brunette hair came loose from its bun and spilled down in a frayed ponytail. She worked to tie it back in place, pacing in front of Sam with nonchalant amusement. "You mentioned your friend's kidnapping. I'll guess that you mean the miner taken hostage by the escaped Artie last night." Briars took several slow steps closer.

"I'll take it as well that you sabotaged our equipment to prevent the assault on Timber Bluff from jeopardizing your friend's life, not because you give a damn about these slack-jawed miners moaning about their job prospects. You're no hero, Peterson. Burying the past under a *mountain* of good deeds won't earn you redemption."

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Briars came to just a foot away from Sam's face.

"Who leaked the information to you that we were preparing to strike Timber Bluff?" she demanded. Sam muttered inaudibly.

"Say it again with feeling," Briars said, leaning closer. "I'm a little hard of hearing."

Sam hocked and spat a phlegmy wad of blood into her ear. The goopy mess dribbled down her neck and Briars recoiled in disgust. Murphy knocked Sam to the ground and kicked him in the ribs.

"I was going to go easy on you, you damned fool!" Briars snarled. She mopped up the mess he'd made on her face and took a deep breath. "Murphy, drag this waste of oxygen to the charging station."

Her second officer set Sam to sitting in the confines of his chair and dragged it toward the EV charging station behind them in the hangar. The chair's blunt metal legs grated against the concrete floor.

"I'd hoped we could keep this civil," Briars declared, "but obviously you're not interested in polite discussion."

Murphy shoved Sam's chair in place beside the charging station and picked up its main charging cable. She flicked open a utility knife from her belt and stripped the cable of its insulation, exposing the bare wires inside. Sam moaned in horror when he realized their plan. Briars relished his fear. It was the first time she'd seen him crack.

"Since you're such an expert on pyrite tech, I've got Murphy preparing a special little experiment for us," Briars explained. "I'm sure you can recall the kind of juice one of these

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charging stations normally pumps out. Could you remind me just how much *more* electricity is flowing after that little ‘adjustment’ you’d made to the power cells?”

“No!” Sam moaned.

“Yes,” Briars laughed. “That’s what I’ve been waiting for. And here I thought I’d never crack that Oh-En training of yours, Mr. Hero.”

Sam squirmed in his seat as Murphy handed Briars the cable and tapped at the charging station’s terminal. Sparks leapt from the bare wires at the cable’s end.

“Who tipped you off that the Hellcats would assault Timber Bluff?” Briars asked. “I’ll let the answer marinate in your head while we conduct our little experiment here: how long can a man survive being cooked alive by the world’s most powerful battery?” She lowered the cable to just above Sam’s forearm. Electricity arced from its end, lapping at his flesh and scorching the hairs on his skin. Their burnt scent wafted up into the air. “Last chance,” she warned.

“Simon,” Sam moaned at last.

“Simon who?” Briars demanded.

“Simon says: go fuck yourself!”

“Wrong answer,” Briars exclaimed. She prepared to stab the exposed wires down into her captive’s skin when Zulu team’s personal comms crackled to life around the hangar.

“Carol?” Shea’s vocal-fried tenor rasped. Briars nearly jumped at the sound of her rival on the radio.

“Shea!” Briars muttered. The old bitch must have kept the comms radio she’d lifted off Echo team. But its signal wasn’t strong enough to reach all the way from Timber Bluff to—

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“It’s far too easy to get the drop on your sentries, Carol,” Shea chided. “A few good men with a knack for camouflage are all it took to put your entire western perimeter out of commission.”

“Seven hells; Shea’s in the camp.” Briars threw the cable down to the floor and reached for her radio while Murphy killed the power to the charging station.

“Western perimeter detail: report,” Briars hollered into her comms to no reply. “Western perimeter: report!”

“Patrol two chiming in,” a Hellcat responded. “I have a visual on the western gate from fortified cover. An enemy convoy is breaching the perimeter. Guard details are unresponsive. All patrols, be advised—”

“What the hell is this?” another Hellcat jumped onto the comms in confusion.

“It’s Echo team!” another chimed in. “The Arties are marching Echo right through Main Street! Jesus, they’ve got particle rifles!”

“Briars said they were dead; you’re telling me the commander lied?”

“The Arties aren’t shooting; they’re not even training their weapons on Echo team.”

“Orders, Lion’s Den?”

“Hold your fire,” Murphy answered. “Don’t risk friendly casualties.”

“Negative!” Briars screamed into her comms. “All teams, open fire on the intruders!”

“Belay that order,” Murphy shot back over the radio before turning to Briars in shock.

“Have you lost your mind, Commander? Echo team is in the crosshairs; if we engage the Arties now, they’ll be reduced to cannon fodder.”

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“Lieutenant Murphy, I am in command here,” Briars warned. “Shea is using Echo team as a shield to waltz right into camp. I will not be made a fool of in my own territory!”

“Patrol three radioing in,” a Hellcat proclaimed over the comms. “The Arties have cut Echo team free from their restraints. They’re leading them straight for the Lion’s Den!”

Briars whirled about the hangar, breathing hard as the situation slipped from her control.

“How in the hell did these backwoods heathens break through our perimeter so easily?!” She yelled to the members of Zulu team scattered around her.

“All exterior camera feeds have been disabled,” an officer stormed out of the security room and exclaimed from the catwalks above. “Someone local had to have found a way to disable our security systems.”

“I will bury *every* one of those dirt squirrel miners in the holes they’re paid to dig!” Briars clenched her fists in fury.

“Have your patrols stand down, Carol,” Shea’s voice crackled through the room again. “I’m calling for an unconditional cease fire to settle this like civilized Americans, and I’m bringing your people back to you unharmed to prove it. There’s no reason for anyone else to die today. I’ll be knocking on your door in three minutes to discuss this face-to-face.”

“Lieutenant Murphy, I want every bit of firepower we have ready to meet Shea head on,” Briars shouted, pacing the floor of the hangar like a caged animal. “They will not set foot in the Lion’s Den!”

“Commander Briars, I strongly advise we reconsider our position,” Murphy countered. “The Arties are marching peacefully for us with Echo team at their front, and they’ve got their hands on Echo’s particle rifles. Striking now would jeopardize their lives—”

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“This is Commander Briars.” Briars ignored her second officer and hollered into her comms. “I order all personnel to open fire on the Arties!”

“Jesus, I’m not going to have Echo’s deaths on my hands!”

“The commander’s gone mental!”

“I’m standing down, this is FUBAR.”

“Affirmative. Patrol four disregarding Briars.”

“Patrol two following suit.”

“I’ll blow you all to dust, you traitors!” Briars tore her comms radio from her shoulder and hurled it across the hangar. The device shattered against the wall. “Zulu, prepare to mobilize,” she ordered. “We’re falling back to Outpost Bravo to launch an airstrike against this entire godforsaken town.”

Zulu team sprang into action, hasty to avoid the ire of their commander. Briars grit her teeth and watched them work.

“Commander, we’re not authorized to launch a particle barrage with the atmospheric defense fighter!” Murphy abandoned Sam in his confinement to approach her commanding officer. “The Oh-En would have all our heads; our own people would be caught in the ADF’s blast radius!”

“I’m fully aware of the consequences of my actions, Murphy,” Briars snapped. “Once we upload our emergency clearance codes, the GSN will clear us to fly and we can take control over this pit.”

“Commander Briars, those Oh-En clearance codes are for *defensive* measures!” Murphy replied. “What you’re proposing is mass murder!”

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Briars unholstered her side arm and crossed the floor to Murphy in three bounding strides, aiming point blank at her second officer's face.

"Lieutenant Murphy, I gave you an order. Prepare to fall back for Outpost Bravo or be judged treasonous against your superior." Briars cocked the hammer back on her pistol to emphasize her point. The members of Zulu team shifted around her, aghast at the power struggle unfolding before them. Murphy swallowed hard, her eyes wide in the face of Briars' handgun.

"Carol—" she began.

"That's *Commander* to you!"

"I won't let you throw our lives away for your misguided revenge, 'Commander.'"

Murphy dove for the ground, narrowly dodging Briars' squeezing trigger finger and the deafening boom which erupted from the .45's barrel. Murphy rolled out of her dive and pulled her pistol free of its holster to aim up at Briars, who hurried to return fire. Murphy's head jerked back from the force of Briars' next bullet tearing through her skull. Her quick-drawn hip shot grazed Briars' shoulder in a glancing blow to the commander's armor. Murphy collapsed to the ground in a heap beside Sam, who was still helplessly bound to his chair.

"Does anyone else here have an opinion about my fitness for command?" Briars shouted to the hangar, ignoring the trickle of blood running down her arm from where Murphy's bullet grazed her. None moved to challenge her authority. Behind her, Sam started laughing.

"It looks like you played a losing hand, 'Carol,'" he said. "The Oh-En will have your head for this." Briars turned to the battered scientist still strapped to his chair, forgotten mid-torture in the escalation of the moment. He laughed harder when he saw the look on her face.

"Shut up!" Briars demanded.

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“You threw away every ally you had out here because of your misguided pride,” Sam taunted. “President Simon would be proud.” He grinned, his teeth shining red with blood. “Maybe General Andrews will have a few more missions for a rabid dog like you after all, just for old time’s sake.”

“I said shut up!” Briars rushed up to Sam and struck him in the temple with the butt of her pistol. Sam fell over onto Murphy’s corpse, groaning in helpless pain as his head knocked against the dead woman’s body armor. Briars watched him struggling against his restraints. Her upper lip curled back from her teeth as a fitting plan came to mind.

“Untie this heap of trash,” she ordered her remaining subordinates. “We’re taking him with us. Someone’s got to fire the particle cannons, after all.” Zulu team finished loading up their rig beside the back bay’s sliding door while an officer untied Sam, who moaned in horror at his intended fate.

“The M-Drive is operational on your rig?” Briars asked the officer who pulled Sam to his feet.

“Yes, ma’am; we’ve completed repairs,” she replied.

“Good. We’re moving out.” Briars trained her pistol on Sam’s back and nudged him forward while she marched for Zulu’s waiting SUV. Before her remaining subordinates could follow, the front bay door was lifted up to the ceiling on its curving hinges. Echo’s team leader stepped back from the passcode panel outside and joined rank with Daphne O’Shea and the newly freed members of Echo team just outside the Lion’s Den. A full platoon of Arties stood armed behind them.

“Martha, you’re alive!” a Zulu officer cried out from next to Briars.

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“Zulu, open fire!” Briars shouted. “Defend the Lion’s Den!” The members of Zulu hesitated to ready their weapons, the trust in their commanding officer long-since eroded.

“Fire, you damned traitors!” Briars roared. Shea shook her head and clicked her tongue from the hangar’s front bay.

“I’m disappointed in you, Carol,” Shea said, almost mournful. “On behalf of the Spring Pines Hellcats, I hereby relieve you of duty to discuss the terms of a fruitful cease-fire with your platoon.”

“Second!”

“Third!”

The members of Zulu each agreed on the spot. Echo team marched forward on cue, ready to take their revenge on the commander who had abandoned them.

“Have these traitors stand down or I end this son of a bitch, Daphne!” Briars jammed her gun into Sam’s ribs and pulled him close to shield herself. Shea held up an arm to stop her forces from crossing the threshold of the hangar and risk Sam’s life.

“Carol, give it up,” she pled. “Digging up the past isn’t worth throwing your life away.”

“Don’t you *dare* act so pious, Daphne!” Briars cried. “You had no problem using a *hospital* as bait back in West Ukraine, stuffed *full* of civilians! You would have let that madman Andrews blast them all to *slag* if I hadn’t disobeyed orders!”

“You’re repeating my past mistakes, Carol,” Shea warned. “You’re too blind with anger to realize you’ve become exactly what you hated back then.”

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“And what about you?” Briars choked back tears, gripping Sam close for cover. “You think playing diplomat for your band of thieves and murderers will make up for what we’ve done?!”

The soldiers around them stood frozen, watching the standoff between a living legend and their commanding officer unfold.

“It’s not redemption I’m looking for,” Shea replied. “You did the right thing that day, Carol. I’m sorry I abandoned you then, but my hands were tied.” Shea raised her hands and took a single step into the hangar. “I’m trying to do the right thing here and now, Carol. Just like you did back then.”

“You don’t get to convince yourself you’re a hero, siding with the *Arties*!” Briars countered. “I know what you are, Daphne, and I know *exactly* who you’ve gotten in bed with! I’ll bring the *sky* down on your heads; you wait!” she backed away from them, dragging Sam after her into Zulu’s rig. The armored SUV pulled forward and the back bay door swung open on its automatic hinges. Briars gunned the engine and tore out of the hangar, abandoning Zulu team to Daphne O’Shea’s mercy.

#

5.

Vera and Mei hid in Bruce’s storage room, along with Grace and the half-dozen women who’d failed to escape during the bar owner’s fatal distraction. The late afternoon sun was sinking toward the horizon unnoticed. No one dared to leave the confines of the bar’s cellar since their failed escape attempt ended with Bruce shot dead and Sam kidnapped. The dim haze of warmth emanating from the storage room’s overhead heaters did little to stave off the draft that

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wafted in from the shattered windows upstairs. Across the room from the shelves where Vera and Mei sat, Grace huddled close to the others, desperate to stay warm.

“We really made a mess of this, didn’t we, Mei?” Vera mumbled down into the floor, sitting propped against a row of liquor cases.

“I guess so,” Mei replied. She hugged her arms around her knees and did her best to still the chatter sinking into her teeth. “What do you think happened to Sam?” she asked, reaching for her pyrite pendant and remembering with a pang of remorse that it was long since destroyed.

“I wouldn’t bet money on anything good, Mei.” Vera banged her head against the shelving behind her to shoo away the thought. “But knowing Sam, he’d do it again in a heartbeat. He knew what he was doing when he made his choice. He saved everyone here, you and me included.”

“He said he was with McEnroy’s Insurrection when the Hellcats took him,” Mei replied. “Before that, he’d mentioned he was at Crest Basin, too. He never got a chance to explain. Do you know anything about that?”

“It’s all news to me,” Vera answered. “I don’t know that any of that matters now, though. Sam’s lucky if he’ll live long enough to come clean about anything.”

“I just hope we can pull him out of the fire before it’s too late,” Mei admitted.

“Bruce wouldn’t have wanted us to lose faith. Not now,” Vera replied.

The sound of a vehicle rolling to a stop outside caught Mei’s attention, and she crept upstairs to investigate with Vera on her tail. She peered around the corner at the top of the stairs to see a plow-fronted Hellcat SUV parked before the shattered window front. The guard standing

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watch at the bar's entrance lowered her weapon and approached the vehicle, her back to Mei and Vera.

"Thank god someone remembered me!" the guard laughed as she stepped toward the vehicle. "With all the chatter on the radio, I was starting to think we'd been left to- hey, what is this?"

"We're relieving you of duty, soldier!" Tommy called out as he thrust the end of a particle rifle at the guard from the passenger seat of the stolen Hellcat SUV. "Stand down and drop your weapon." The guard, shocked and dismayed to be staring down the barrel of the super weapon, obeyed Tommy's orders and dropped her rifle before backing away from the bar's entrance, hands raised. Tommy kept his weapon trained on the guard while Alex hopped out from the driver's seat and claimed the rifle for himself.

"You'd best head off now," Alex ordered, prodding the rifle toward the street corner down the road. The guard pursed her lips and followed orders, shrinking down the street while Tommy and Alex kept their weapons trained on her. When the Hellcat rounded the corner of the street and disappeared, Alex turned and waved, locking eyes on Mei with remarkable speed. He made for the bar's entrance, Tommy keeping watch for Hellcats from behind the SUV's cover all the while.

"The cavalry's finally here!" Mei shouted down to the storage room full of captives before rushing out into the late afternoon sunlight, Vera and Grace fast on her heels. The women in hiding followed after them into the street, trampling through the snow to make for their homes as quickly as they could.

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“Sorry it took so long,” Bailey said as she hopped out of the SUV. “We had to—” she grunted hard as Mei caught her up in a fierce hug.

“You came back!” Mei exclaimed, burying what ill will she’d had left for Bailey beneath the wave of euphoria to be freed from her imprisonment. “The Arties are helping us, then?” she asked when she pulled away from the embrace. Bailey nodded while Trevor, Alex, and Tommy hopped out to greet the rescue team’s reunited members. Grace sobbed at the sight of her fiancé and nearly toppled Alex over in the snow in her rush to hold him.

“I thought you were dead!” she wailed.

“I’m sorry, Grace,” Alex said, shedding his own tears of joy to finally hold his loved one in his arms again. Trevor was quick to pull them apart and examine his daughter.

“You’re not hurt?” Trevor asked, holding Grace by the shoulders.

“No, Daddy; I was one of the lucky ones.” Grace teared up again and hugged her father close. “Thank you for bringing Alex home to me.”

“How did you get into Spring Pines unnoticed?” Vera asked when Trevor brushed off his daughter’s thanks with an affirming grunt.

“A couple of Shea’s people managed to sneak up on the perimeter guard posts and knock out the sentries,” Alex said with admiration. “They’re some pretty scary combat vets. We drove through after them to tear down the global comm routers and CCTV feeds throughout the whole town. The Hellcats are blind and deaf with half-broken guns. The Arties waltzed right in.” Alex burst into exhausted laughter, which spread infectiously about the group. His mirth vanished in his throat when he finally got a view of the body lying not twenty feet from where they stood. “Is that...?”

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“...Bruce!” Bailey nearly knocked Alex down in her hurry to the bar owner’s corpse. A blanket of crimson-stained snow had thickened around his remains. Bailey crouched to brush the grime from his face, which by some miracle was untarnished. “It’s true, then...” Her breath hitched in her chest and she settled a knee in the snow.

“Bailey, I’m sorry,” Mei exclaimed. “Bruce was a good man, but we don’t have time to mourn him now. The Hellcats arrested Sam a few hours ago. We need to get him out of there before—”

“We can’t just leave him here!” Bailey cried, drawing ragged breaths that misted from her lips.

Before Mei could answer, Vera stopped her with an upraised hand and approached Bailey to squeeze the captain’s shoulder. “I’ll hang back and get him off the street before I look for Nadine.”

“I’ll help you,” Grace said. “I’ve got a few ideas where Nadine would have taken everyone to safety.”

“I- yeah. Okay,” Bailey nodded, breathing hard through her nose twice as she leaned over Bruce. When she stood, her voice was recomposed and her gaze sharpened, though her eyes stayed wide with distress. “What about you, Trevor?” she turned to the old miner, who’d stood to the rear of the group, unwilling to face Bruce’s body or think of its implications. “You knew him even longer than me. You’ve got Grace to worry about, besides. Are you staying?”

“Heh,” Trevor coughed, forcing a humorless grin to deflect the offer to acknowledge his grief. “I didn’t go to all the trouble of saving Alex just to let him get killed now seeing this

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through. Bruce is gone and I taught Grace well enough to keep her head down and stay out of sight. She'll manage fine with Vera watching her back."

"I promise Vera and I will stay safe," Grace exclaimed.

"Thanks for all this, Trevor," Alex bit his cheek to humble himself. "It means a lot."

"Sure. You an' me have got a couple things to talk about when this is over, though, Alex."

Trevor cast Bruce's remains the faintest backward glance before jerking his eyes away and climbing into the SUV.

They said their goodbyes to Vera and Grace before Bailey, Mei, Trevor, and Alex piled back into the SUV with Tommy to make their way through town.

Spring Pines was ravaged.

Storefronts were pockmarked with particle damage. Blood spattered the snow in several torn up patches of ground. A snow boot lay on its side, still smoldering.

"This is too much, even for the Hellcats," Trevor grunted at the sight.

They turned off Main Street and laid eyes on the Lion's Den when an SUV barreled down the street, its undercarriage glowing blue as it approached with uncanny speed. The rig nearly collided with them before Alex swerved hard to avoid the speeding vehicle. The rescue team was jostled inside the skittering cab until Alex managed to regain control of their swerving in the snow.

"What in God's name was that about?" Mei exclaimed from the back seat.

"Shea for Bailey, come in," the radio wedged into the front cup holder crackled. Tommy tossed the radio back to Bailey.

"Go for Bailey," she answered.

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“Briars is escaping in one of their M-Drive powered SUVs with our man Sam. I’ve got my hands full managing the ceasefire negotiations here and you’re the only ones with a rig fast enough to catch her. If you want your friend back, intercept that SUV. It’s out of my hands.”

“Hard copy,” Bailey nodded. “You hear that, Alex?” she called up to their driver. “Follow that car.”

“Already on it!” Alex jerked the wheel and revved the engine to steer their SUV in pursuit of the fleeing rig, already a four hundred yards’ head start away.

“How do we stop them?” Mei asked from the personnel bench in the vehicle’s rear. “These SUVs are like turbo-charged tanks.”

“Yeah, hers and ours both,” Trevor said, gripping his shotgun close. “If we ram into her with the plow we’re pushing, it’ll slow her down long enough for Tommy and I to get a shot at those tires. Rubber isn’t bulletproof.”

“Right.” Bailey leaned forward to rest an arm against the front passenger seat, surveying the road with Alex and Tommy before punching Sam’s data chip ID number into the nav-tracker strapped to her forearm. “Close the gap, Alex. Don’t let that bitch get away.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Alex gripped the wheel tighter and triggered the M-Drive. The jolt of power that shoved its way into the rotors kicked back against the passengers. Bailey fell back into Trevor’s lap from the sudden acceleration, nearly elbowing Mei in the face behind her.

Briars tore through Spring Pines’ western gate, headed northwest along the winding forest roads ahead of them. The rescue team pursued in the wake of melted snow that Briars’ M-Drive scorched into the ground. Their rigs cut through the foot deep snow banks with ease. Pine trees covered in sparkling ice sped past them on either side.

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“Take it easy, Alex,” Tommy begged when they crashed through a deep rut in the road that sent powder and ice spraying up around them. “We can’t save anybody if we’re dead!”

For her own part, Mei had belted into the personnel bench harness behind her and held on for her life.

“If you think you can do better than me with your busted leg, you’re welcome to try!” Alex shouted back. When Briars rounded a tight corner in the road and disappeared, Alex pulled the emergency brake and forced the vehicle into an arcing drift. Mei could have sworn she felt the wheels beneath her leave the ground as the vehicle threatened to capsize. Alex jerked them out of the curve and the SUV righted itself on the road, rocking on its suspension. When Mei found the courage to open her eyes, Briars’ rig burst back into view ahead of them, closer than before.

“DAMN, I love this ride!” Alex cried. His frightened passengers disagreed.

“We’re gaining, keep it up!” Bailey pointed for Briars’ fast approaching tailgate. “Can you make a shot, Tommy?”

Tommy rolled down the passenger window and leaned out as much as his stiff cast would allow, taking aim with his stolen particle rifle.

“Try and keep it steady. I’m rocking around too much!” Tommy exclaimed.

“Less talking, more shooting!” Alex snapped.

They hit a bump in the road and Tommy’s particle beam grazed past the fleeing rig’s armor, melting a hole through an unfortunate pine tree’s trunk. Splintering bark cracked and twisted as the tree’s upper half toppled down. Alex accelerated. Their vehicle redlined with effort to outpace the falling timber through the trail of melted snow Briars dragged in her wake. Mei’s

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breath caught in her throat at the crashing thud behind them. She refused to look back and see just how close they'd come to getting flattened by the falling tree.

Alex closed the gap between their vehicles, ramming into Briars' bumper with his up-raised plow-blade. Metal screeched on metal. Briars struggled to keep control of her rig as it swerved in the snow. Alex pulled around to the driver's side of the fleeing rig as Briars was forced to slow down.

"We're coming up alongside her," Alex exclaimed. "Now's your chance, Tommy!"

Tommy was raising his rifle when he glanced up to see Briars training her handgun on them while she drove.

"Brake!" Tommy screamed. Alex jumped on the brake, jerking them back in time to avoid the bullet that ricocheted off their hood.

"Come on, Sam," Bailey moaned. "Help us out."

"She's got him handcuffed to the passenger door," Tommy announced as they raced alongside Briars. "I got a look inside when we pulled up close."

"Trevor, get Gertrude ready," Bailey ordered. "Alex, come up on the passenger side." Both obeyed and Trevor unloaded both barrels from his shotgun onto the rear passenger wheel of the SUV. The tire was shredded to bits, exposing the wire mesh frame that rolled unrelentingly forward. Briars rammed into their pursuing rig in retaliation, knocking against them hard enough for Trevor to drop his shotgun with a distraught wail. It was lost in the snow behind them within moments.

"Damn it, she's got run-flats!" Trevor shouted in dismay. "She can drive for miles on that shredded tire!"

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Both vehicles smashed against each other, fighting for control of the road. Paint chipped and metal groaned. Alex brought them up as close to Briars' nose as he dared. Sam popped into sight through the passenger window, bloodied and tense. Briars glared back at them from the driver's seat, her face red with fury.

"Disengage or I will blow his brains out, damn you!" Briars wheeled her gun at Sam's head. Alex braked and Briars skittered away on her destroyed tire, struggling to stay on the road.

"We can't keep pressing her like with Sam stuck in the crosshairs," Alex exclaimed as he disengaged the M-Drive. The rig jerked against the sudden drop in speed and Mei had to catch herself from hitting the seat in front of her.

"Keep her in sight," Tommy exclaimed. "We can at least do that much."

"Where is she even going?" Mei asked, queasy from the rough ride.

"This is the access road to Outpost Bravo," Trevor said when he settled down beside Bailey in the mid bench. "It's an old precursor mine that runs straight through the mountains. NPF carved out a private landing pad for the Hellcats on the other side. I'll bet every paycheck I've earned that they've got a ship or two hidden away in their toy box."

"The Hellcats have M-Drive powered *ships*?" Mei was beside herself with shock.

"Atmospheric defense fighters, bought wholesale from the Orbital Navy's surplus," Bailey explained. "They can't leave orbit, but the particle cannons they're carrying will melt Spring Pines down to slag."

"She doesn't have authorization to fly!" Alex balked from the driver's seat. "The GSN would blast her out of the sky before she even made it to town."

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“Don’t be so sure,” Bailey replied. “The Hellcats probably have authorization codes for emergency flights. I wouldn’t have thought she’d be able to fly one herself, though.”

“Sam!” Mei gasped from the vehicle’s rear. “He *built* those damned ships. We’ve got to get him out of there before Briars shoves him into a cockpit.”

“Agreed,” Bailey nodded. “We hang back and pursue, keep our eyes peeled, and wait for our chance.”

#

6.

Briars tore her eyes from her display screen’s damaged tire warning and watched the rearview mirror. The miners pursuing them had fallen back from their attack, pursuing at a safe distance.

“Those damned fools just don’t get the hint,” she mumbled.

Briars pulled up to the entrance of Outpost Bravo, a forlorn looking ten-foot diameter mineshaft in a field of undisturbed snow. She drove straight into the tunnel, tearing through the snow bank that had settled at its edge and parking the rig crooked in its center. She reached for the supply bag stashed in the back seat and pulled a small explosive charge from its innards. After setting the device’s timer for five minutes, she jumped out of the rig, slapped the explosive onto the vehicle’s hood, and primed it before gathering her rifle and spare helmet from the back seat.

“Come on,” she grunted at Sam. “You and me both are getting blown to bits if we don’t move it.” Briars donned her helmet and uncuffed Sam to pull him out of the rig.

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“You’re taking me into the tunnel?” he asked as he stumbled in front of her at gunpoint.

“I don’t even have an oxygen mask; how is this safe?”

“How should I care?” Briars scoffed, toggling her own helmet’s airflow and activating her suit’s built-in Canary, which beeped a chime of discontent. “There’s enough air in the tunnels for you to move your feet. That’s all I need.”

The pair hiked deeper into the mineshaft. Its main power supply had been cut for the winter, leaving the vents offline and the air stagnant with damp. The tunnel flashed with the dim red auxiliary lights flickering above them. Mud splashed heavy underfoot. Briars was forced to shove Sam along as he slipped through the deep puddles that had formed after weeks of unabated leaking from the ceiling cracks above their heads. Briars led them forward until they came upon a pair of trains gathering rust as they waited to haul cargo and personnel through the mountain pass.

“Hop up and drive,” Briars said, tossing a hand up to the open conductor’s compartment of the front train.

“What the hell do you mean?” Sam countered. “I don’t know how to drive one of these things.”

“You’re the scientist; you figure it out!”

Briars climbed aboard after Sam and watched him labor over the controls, muttering to himself as he tried to make sense of the dials, gauges, and knobs staring back at them.

“Throttle, accelerator, horn... engine primer.” He punched the last button and flicked on the headlights of the train. “Ignition...” he flipped another switch and the train sputtered to life.

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"I'm shocked this thing even runs," Sam admitted. He threw the train into gear and eased the throttle lever forward. The train groaned in anger, resisting the urge to move.

"What the hell are you doing?" Briars demanded.

"I said I've never driven one of these before; give me a minute!" Sam fumbled at the controls, working down the list of problems in his head until he came upon the issue. He toggled the lever to release the parking brake and the train rocked its way deeper into the tunnel.

#

7.

Alex pulled up to the mine entrance, where Briars' rig had been abandoned, parked crooked in the slender tunnel shaft.

"We'll have to go on foot from here," Bailey said. "Let's move."

"I'm not going to be much use to you in there with my leg," Tommy called up from the passenger seat, handing Trevor his particle rifle when Mei and the others jumped down from the rig.

"Alex," Bailey hollered from the tailgate, already rummaging through their supply bag.

"Hang onto the other particle rifle and secure our exit with Tommy."

"Understood, Captain," Alex nodded.

"Let's talk this out before we go in there," Bailey said, slipping another oxygen mask into their bag. "Does anyone think we—"

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“We’re wasting time!” Mei snapped. “They’ve gained too much on us already! For all we know, Briars and Sam could be airborne right now.” She ran for the mine’s entrance, sidling past Briars’ SUV as cooling darkness enveloped her.

“Mei, wait!” Bailey zipped up their supply bag and ran after Mei with Trevor at her heels. The pair clamored past the SUV blocking their path and pursued Mei nearly a dozen yards into the tunnel before Bailey managed to catch her by the shoulder.

“Snap out of it, green hat!” Bailey shouted. “You’re going to get yourself killed jumping into action half-cocked like that.”

“We don’t have time for—”

“You’re sprinting into a *mine*! You don’t even have a *flashlight*.” Bailey shoved a hand torch into Mei’s arms, offering Trevor another when he caught up to them, the particle rifle slung over his shoulder. “There’s a reason we follow procedures, Mei. Stop trusting your luck; it’ll run out before long.”

“You brought the masks with you, Bailey?” Trevor asked, sniffing at the air for the first time with a wrinkled nose.

“Of course I did.” Bailey dropped the supply bag to the ground in front of them. “But I’ve got to go back for water and rope. There’s no telling what we’ve got in store for us.”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Mei exclaimed, grimacing at the sight of the oxygen masks she’d neglected to grab herself.

“Forget about it. Stay focused, Mei,” Bailey replied. “Here; take the nav-tracker and get our bearings on Sam’s location.” She unclasped the device from her forearm and watched Mei

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strap it on before turning to make her way for the entrance. Bailey stopped in her tracks with a gasp, staring at the hood of Briars' abandoned vehicle, where a small mound was flashing blue.

"You good, Captain?" Mei asked, reaching out for her shoulder.

"Get down!" Bailey screamed as she dove onto Mei. The explosion that erupted from Briars' rig cast a rolling wave of heat and pressure over the tunnel. The wooden support beams at the mine's entrance walls burst in a barrage of splinters against the vehicle that torqued into a crumpled wreck before them. The ceiling fast collapsed onto itself, filling the tunnel with fallen slabs of concrete, rock, and wood before burying the flaming wreckage in a smothering embrace. A heavy ringing filled Mei's ears as she lay smothered on the ground beneath a thrashing Bailey. She sputtered on the dust enveloping the tunnel and rolled away to keep from being bludgeoned by the screaming woman on top of her.

"Trevor! Bailey!" Alex screamed from the other side of the collapse when the dust began to settle. "Mei!" His voice was distant over the thick ringing still plaguing Mei's ears. Trevor, farthest from the blast, shook the shock from his veins and ran to hold Bailey down, shouting for Alex to dig them out.

"What happened!" Mei coughed again as she turned her torch light on them through the thick smoke.

"Bailey's face is burned bad, Mei!" Trevor exclaimed. "No way she's making it any further. Alex!" he shouted up past the mound of ceiling fallen atop the SUV's smoking fragments.

"I'm here!" came the muffled cry.

"Radio for Shea to bring our people up here with some blasting equipment! Bailey needs real medical attention, *fast!*"

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Mei found the supply bag Bailey brought in with them and fumbled to pull their oxygen masks free. She and Trevor put their masks on with trained ease. They floundered insufferable heartbeats at fitting the third over Bailey's bleeding face.

"What can I do?" Mei asked, kneeling at Trevor's side while Bailey writhed in pain.

"There's not much either of us can do in this tunnel," Trevor said, punching at the ground in distress. "God damn it all; I'm sorry, Bailey." He looked up through the smoke to meet Mei's gaze. "Mei, keep moving or you'll lose them."

"Is Bailey going to make it?" Mei asked as Trevor handed her the particle rifle.

"I don't know. Just hunt down that bitch Briars before she blows Spring Pines to Hell," Trevor ordered. Mei took a final look down at a barely conscious Bailey, who gurgled ragged breaths through her bloody oxygen mask.

"I'll stop her," Mei said. She hurried on into the tunnel, armed with a particle rifle, the nav-tracker, and a single spare oxygen mask. Bailey's kazoo-like cries echoed down the tunnel after her as she crept through the mud. Her flashlight offered precious little light to walk by besides the bare bulbs strung from the ceiling, glowing sickly red. A hundred yards' marching brought Mei upon a single train car waiting ready on its muddy rails. She heaved with relief and climbed aboard to decipher its controls.

#

8.

Sam knocked into Briars' side on the bumpy train car, grunting in pain as they made their way down the tunnel's rusted railways. Her particle rifle bounced against her back at every

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bump. Briars elbowed him back to his side of the conductor's compartment, holding a firm grip on her .45 while Sam worked the train's controls.

"This thing can't go any faster?" Briars leaned against the cold steel of the train car, ducking each time they passed beneath a loose cable hanging above them.

"If I take it too fast, we could derail," Sam countered. "I don't even know where I'm going."

"We're taking a ship from the landing pad across the mountain. That's all you need to know." They managed a half-mile's ride before the tunnel forked. Sam slowed them to a stop at the base of the switch-platform ramp.

"What the hell are you stopping for?" Briars snapped.

"I told you, I don't know where I'm going!" Sam snapped back. "Left or right?"

"For God's sake, the platform's switch is already set from our last personnel transfer; just drive."

Sam nodded and eased the train up onto the platform. They lurched onward along for the descent ramp at its opposite end. Sam eased the throttle forward. The train rocked harder along the platform, struggling to remain on its tracks as it built momentum on the cluttered platform.

"I thought you couldn't take this thing too fast," Briars said. Sam replied by seizing the train's throttle and thrusting it to its highest setting. They were knocked forward as the train's wild acceleration took it careening off into a scraping derailment.

Sam yelped as his banged-up ribs jostled against the unforgiving metal compartment's side. The train skidded to a stop at the base of the ramp and sank into the mud, barely managing

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to keep from tumbling over into the tunnel wall. Briars howled in anger when she regained her balance.

“You stupid bastard; now we’re walking!” She grabbed Sam by the collar of his shirt and threw him down from the compartment. He landed hard in the mud and groaned in pain. Briars jumped down after him, pulled him to his feet, and shoved him forward. The pair stomped through the mud, struggling to make their way on foot through the muck-coated tunnel.

They walked a thousand feet through the faint red auxiliary light when Briars’ Canary began to squawk, a low pulsing chirp that announced the dangerous thickening in the air.

“This place has got damp,” Sam moaned as they passed the silent vent turbines protruding from the ceiling. “I need a mask.”

“You’ll live,” Briars replied. “You miners should be used to huffing gas by now.”

After five hundred feet of trudging through the muck, they came upon another fork in the tunnel.

“This way,” Briars said, pointing right and passing Sam to take the lead. “The hangar’s entryway is just around the bend.”

“No,” Sam declared, rooted to the calf-deep muck in which he stood.

“No?” Briars smiled. “You think diving on a sword *now* will make you the hero, Peterson? You’ll have to save the world twice over to make up for what you’ve done, you damned traitor.”

“I won’t go any further with you.” Sam clenched his fists, his lip curling back from his teeth.

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"I'll bet you haven't even told Zhang about Crest Basin yet, have you, Peterson?" Briars shook her head, clenching her pistol at her side. "Double-crossed her father, and never bothered to apologize."

"I won't fly your god-damned ship just so you can kill everyone in Spring Pines!"

"Suits me fine. You're more useful to me as a hostage, anyway." Briars thumbed back toward the hangar's entrance. "Let's go. Last warning."

"Over my dead body!" Sam snarled, raising up his arms in a woozy fighting stance as he rushed for her. Briars clenched her pistol tight and shoulder-checked the attacking scientist. Sam grunted as he fell to the tunnel floor, spitting back mud that flecked his face. He clawed at the ground for support as he righted himself onto his knees, scraping through the muck for anything he could wrap his fingers around to fight back.

"You're a worthless traitor, Peterson!" Briars shouted. "I'll drown you here in the shit water if you don't keep moving!" She stepped closer, reaching down to pull him back to his feet. Sam bucked up at her touch and swung hard with a chunk of steel rebar he'd snatched up from the mud. The chunk of metal connected with Briars' kneecap, splitting her knee guard and sending her tumbling down beside him in staggering pain.

Sam dove onto Briars, the filthy tunnel water coated them both in muck as they climbed to their knees and fumbled for control of her gun. Briars broke away from the scientist's meager grapple, wheeling her pistol onto him to fire. Sam's swinging rebar knocked Briars' wrist loose, sending her gun sailing away into the tunnel muck. Briars ignored the pain shooting up her arm and stepped around her opponent's guard, delivering a helmet-reinforced head butt that split Sam's forehead open with a satisfying spurt of crimson. Sam staggered back, dazed. Briars was

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quick to seize the scientist's left arm and wrench the rebar from his grip, dislocating his shoulder with a *pop* loud enough to be heard over Sam's own scream.

"You think I *need* you?" she yelled, tackling the scientist to the ground holding him down in the mud. "I was General Andrews' personal aviator for a year!" Briars snarled. "You're nothing but a meat shield to keep those damned miners off my back." Sam sputtered for waterlogged breaths of air and clawed at Briars' arms as she pinned him in the muck.

"I'll level Spring Pines *County* to put down the Arties." Sam's thrashing slowed and Briars gave a wild laugh. "And then I'll line up every one of your strikers for public execution! That'll teach you all not to side with *traitors*."

A distant *crack* rang out and a streak of blue light glanced off her side. Briars stumbled off of Sam, clutching her ribs in shock and pain. Sam gasped for air, retching up the filthy tunnel water that had made its way down his throat.

"Damn you, Shea!" Briars screamed at the electric torchlight bobbing its way toward them. She hobbled away down the tunnel, fleeing the *cracks* of beam fire that chased after her while Sam collapsed in the mud.

#

9.

Mei strapped her spare oxygen mask onto Sam's face and dragged him back to her waiting train car, stopped just behind the derailment she'd discovered. When Mei set him down in the conductor's compartment with a heave, Sam moaned in half-conscious protest. Mei clutched at Sam's shoulder, staring back at her own reflection in his mask's face. Sam fell silent again, save his ragged breathing.

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“I’ll be back for you,” she said, her voice muffled and kazoo-like. “I promise.”

She rose and crept after Briars, her particle rifle clutched to her chest.

The curving tunnel opened up into an expansive cave. The railways she followed snaked into a long asphalt runway, sinking flush against its surface. On either side of the hangar, the hulking derelicts of precursor mining equipment littered the floor, left to rust beside the long-neglected rows of NPF storage containers that lined the runway’s edges.

Mei set her eyes on the single ship in the middle of the hangar’s runway. The atmospheric defense fighter’s nose pointed at the sealed blast doors at the cave’s far end. The cockpit was open and the vessel hummed in its initialization cycle. A forked barrel nearly as long as the ship was grafted to its underside like an alien growth; it was the first time Mei had ever seen a particle cannon, even after years of propaganda war footage. A chill ran up her spine as she approached the city-leveling weapon of mass destruction.

When she came ten yards from the ship’s hull, warning alarms screeched through the cave and the blast doors yawned open, piercing the dim red darkness with the fading light of sunset. Crisp mountain air flooded the tunnel from the opening chasm. Mei swallowed her panic to follow the blood spatter that trailed along the ground toward the ship. She was nearly beneath its starboard wing when a particle beam lanced out at her, striking the asphalt not two feet from Mei and pelting her with its ensuing debris-storm like a swarm of hornets. She cried out in pain and shock, dashing for cover while Briars volleyed more particle fire from her unseen hiding place.

Mei ran, using the ship between them to shield her from Briars’ sights. She dove behind the closest storage container after three bounding strides. The hair on the back of her neck burned with the ozone-flash of a barely missed particle beam.

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“That was a hell of a shot you made earlier, Shea!” Briars shouted over the blast door’s alarm. “Took the meat right off my ribs. Wouldn’t be a good comrade unless I returned the favor!”

Particle beams ripped through the storage container beside Mei as if it were made of paper, punching white-hot holes in its steel the size of quarters and forcing her to hug the ground.

The alarm ceased as the blast doors finished opening. Silence vibrated through the cave, punctuated by the rustling wind and the hissing liquid metal that dripped down from the molten holes beside Mei.

“You couldn’t let go of the past either, Shea!” Briars taunted from the ship’s side. “Too bad you picked the wrong side this time. That guilty conscience of yours will get you killed!”

Mei tore her mask off, desperate to spot her adversary’s position.

“Don’t think I’ll play cat and mouse with you all day!” Briars shouted from behind the ship. “You can watch me eradicate your brigade of zealots, just like you watched General Andrews court-marshal me. I’ll bring a particle barrage down on Spring Pines big enough to wipe the Arties off the map, civilians be damned! If there’s one thing you taught me, it’s to never make the same mistake twice!”

Briars climbed aboard the ship with a scuffling clamor, making her way up to the open cockpit. The heart-stopping sound forced Mei’s hand. She bounded to her feet and leapt from her useless cover, firing her particle rifle directly on the ship. A translucent wall of blue light absorbed the particle beam, dispersing its energy along the surface of the shield, undoubtedly more M-Drive tech that rendered her attacks useless. The shield wall’s color faded and a sharp whining resounded from the ship’s engines.

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Mei fired blindly at the ship, praying its shields would weaken against her barrage.

Several particle beams missed the fighter ship's translucent blue outline by a foot or more, streaking unstoppably onward through the open blast doors and out across the hazy violet skyline like cursed shooting stars.

Briars' ship began to roll toward the open blast doors. Its engine thrusters flashed bright with increasing momentum when the shield wall cracked against her particle fire at last, lancing off the port-side wing in a telling wound.

"Briars!" Mei screamed, taking aim at the ship's glowing blue thrusters and firing. The thruster's vent collapsed with belching waves of fire. The fighter ship's landing wheels snapped off from the strike, forcing the ship to a scraping halt that left it teetering on the runway's edges at the open blast doors. The fighter ship's whirring engines died with a mechanical rattle.

When Mei approached, afraid to exhale, Briars was crawling out from the wrecked cockpit. The Hellcat slipped from her footing and toppled to the ground beside the ship's tail with a painful thud. Her own weapon was nowhere to be seen, likely abandoned or lost in the turbulence of Briars' crash-landing.

"...damn you, Shea," the Hellcat mumbled, casting aside her cracked helmet and struggling to her knees. The woman's hair was matted to her forehead with sweat. Blood trickled down from her ear. "Do it, then. Look me in the eye and do it. Please." Briars looked up at the sight of Mei's exposed face and broke into a pained laughter. "*Zhang*." She dragged herself to the ship's hull to rest against its tail, disregarding the particle rifle still aimed at her from Mei's shaking hands. "That's just perfect. Fuck you too, Daphne," Briars chuckled as she crawled

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away. “Never thought I’d be done in by Zhang’s own daughter.” She steadied herself against the ruined ship, setting one hand against her back for support.

“My name is Mei Ling.” Mei replied, her rifle still trained on Briars.

“I knew your father, you know.” Briars clutched at her ribs, her shoulders heaving with each pained breath. “Zhang trusted the people closest to him, and they ate him alive. You’d better watch you don’t make the same mistake he did, siding with that traitor Peterson.”

“You’re the traitor,” Mei replied. “Not Sam.”

“Is that so? Ask Peterson what he did at Crest Basin, you’ll see for yourself.”

Mei’s heart skipped a beat. She nearly fired on Briars to end the woman’s taunting. The Hellcat coughed up a mouthful of blood that stilled Mei’s pulse.

“Was it really worth all this, Briars?” Mei asked, rocked with an unwelcome wave of pity for the beaten woman in front of her. “You threw your own people’s lives away just for a job that never cared about you.”

“You’re a civilian; you’d never understand.” Briars wiped at her bloodied mouth and flashed a reddened smile. “The things that General Andrews and the Orbital Navy had us do. That doesn’t just go away when the fighting stops and they send you home.” She laughed again, interrupted by her own sputtering cough. “How do you live with the weight of an entire war on your shoulders?”

“I know what you mean,” Mei nodded with remorse. “They played you, Briars. They played all of us. But we can fix this. We can take our world back.”

“There’s no taking back anything.” Briars spat a wad of bloody phlegm. “That bastard of a president’s already conquered the solar system.”

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“Don’t worry,” Mei replied. “I’ll bring Simon to his knees too; you wait.”

“You’re no hero,” Briars muttered. “You think you’ve got a happy ending coming? Shea’s the only thing keeping the Arties from slaughtering every miner out here. Now that you gave them Spring Pines, they’ll turn on Shea the second it suits them, just like they’ll turn on you.”

Briars managed a groaning laugh, shifting her weight off of the hand she kept hidden behind her. “If you ask me, I’d say you picked the greater evil. Too bad you won’t live long enough to find out.” Briars pulled her hand from behind her to reveal the grenade clenched in her fist. Its pin was pulled.

“Briars, wait—”

“Simon says: start digging.” The grenade slipped from Briars’ hand. Mei, already running, heard it clatter into the Hellcat’s lap behind her. Not two breaths later, the explosion tore the ship’s remains apart with the twisting screeches of warped metal. Mei had almost reached the container rows beside the runway when she hazarded a look back. The particle cannon imploded, lighting up the hangar with a massive flash of blue as the exponential force of Briars’ kamikaze strike knocked the ceiling loose. The blast’s rolling shockwave thrust Mei to the ground behind the nearest container aisle.

Boulder and rubble smashed down onto the defense fighter’s wreckage, plugging up the open blast doors. Something massive struck the container beside her, which tipped over with a hollow clang just over Mei’s head. The heavy container’s edges screeched against the next row’s rusty metal wall in its halting efforts to obey gravity.

Mei stumbled to her knees, her eyes still hazy from the flash. She gasped at the thick black smoke reaching up at her in noxious tendrils from the wreckage. Briars’ Canary squawked

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a sonorous high note somewhere in the distance, smothered beneath the earth that had fallen onto her body. Its squawking fluttered into silence with a single hiccuping cry.

Mei ran from the death trap into which she'd fallen, catching herself on the stone wall at the ruined hangar's edges as the cacophony of destruction around her stilled. She spared another look back at the wreckage on the runway, where a pyramid of rock and dirt was piled onto the atmospheric defense fighter's remains, along with any notion of Commander Briars' survival. Mei coughed on the dusty toxic air and re-traced her footsteps through the outskirts of the rubble, searching for her abandoned oxygen mask. She found it two storage containers away, its face cracked down the middle.

#

Sam was waking up when Mei knelt by his side in the conductor's compartment of her waiting train.

"What happened to Briars?" he mumbled.

"I stopped her," Mei said, coughing behind her cracked oxygen mask. "Sam, we've got to get back to the entrance. With any luck, Alex got hold of a blasting crew to clear a path out."

"I'm torn to hell and back," Sam replied. "I'll only slow you down, Mei. Go, I don't deserve your help, anyway."

"Come on, Sam; give it a rest." She choked on her words when another fit of coughing wracked her body. "Stay with me." When her breathing settled, she helped Sam to his feet and primed the train's ignition.

"There's something I need to tell you, Mei," Sam said over the revving train axels. "Briars got to me earlier..."

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“She was just trying to get inside your head,” Mei replied. “She tried the same thing on me.” Mei shifted the train into gear and backed them down the tunnel for the distant entrance.

“I was the one who provoked McEnroy’s Insurrection,” Sam declared. “I convinced admin to negotiate with Shea and the Arties. I was just trying to do some good, for once...”

“There’s no sense dwelling on it now, Sam.” Mei heaved an exhausted sigh that rattled through her mask. “We’re on our way home now. Just let that be enough.”

“There’s more,” Sam strained to be heard over the air rushing past them in the open-top compartment. “Your father... at Crest Basin. I was a junior researcher on his team, barely out of school. It’s how Briars knows—”

“Sam, stop,” Mei begged. “I don’t care what Briars said about—”

“—I wasn’t in on General Andrews’ plans,” he said. “But I went along with it all. It got your father killed.”

Mei eased the train’s throttle forward and the air whipped faster past their faces. She kept her eyes trained on the encroaching tunnel darkness to keep from watching him. “More apologies won’t change any—”

“This isn’t an apology,” Sam replied. “I’m damned for the hand I played in building the Oh-En’s empire. I deserve whatever you think of me now. But you deserved to know the truth.”

“I’ve made enough enemies because of the past, Sam.” Mei suppressed a cough while she repressed her knee-jerk dismay. “If you tried to stop the Oh-En, they would have killed you. You were their prisoner, just like my father.” Mei concentrated on the dim red lights rushing past them to still her mind. “Thank you for saving me,” she finally said. “Earlier, I mean.”

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“Thank you for saving me now,” Sam replied. “Thomas would be proud of you, Mei. I mean that.”

When they arrived at the mine’s entrance, a blasting crew had just finished clearing out debris for their egress. The crisp open air tasted fresh and sweet on Mei’s tongue as she stepped outside. Vera and Trevor hoisted a stretcher-bound Bailey out of the tunnel after her. A distant *crack* rang out miles above the earth, just below the Karman Line. Mei looked up to gaze on the moonless brilliance of the starlit winter sky, where an Orbital Navy patrol ship arced across the horizon line, trailing blue streaks of light in its wake.

#

An excerpt from *Channel 8 News, primetime hour with Bradley Owens* transcript, February 20th, 2041.

The Federal Bureau of Domestic Mining has officially announced the completion of a review against New Prospect Frontier mining company regarding employee rights and safety.

The Bureau’s review was set in motion after national public outcry over the incident at Spring Pines, Oregon, where security teams used excessive force suppressing an employee strike. The strikers enlisted the help of local artisanal miners, fighting back until a cease-fire could be declared.

After a month-long negotiation with the strikers, the NPF-contracted security forces abandoned Spring Pines, citing executive incompetence and disproportionate cost-benefit in continuing to besiege the striking community through the remainder of the winter. NPF representa-

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tives forfeited the Spring Pines land parcel to the state of Oregon shortly thereafter, unwilling to expend further resources to reclaim the region's already partially depleted mines.

The Bureau's review has concluded that criminal charges must be pressed on as yet unnamed individuals within NPF management for their role in the protracted ill-will against their employees. Plans are also now underway to improve industry standards, employee treatment, healthcare, and compensation for the dangerous work of pyrite mining.

The figurehead behind the Spring Pines strike met with us to produce a list of demands within a week of NPF's withdrawal from the area. Mei Ling Zhang, daughter of disgraced scientist Dr. Thomas Zhang, joined the efforts to organize a strike against NPF after suffering protracted abuse from the Hellcats security teams stationed there. Zhang has demanded an end to the federal restrictions against private mining and wrongful eminent domain privileges, as well as the abolishment of the industry's widely-used mandatory credit system, by which pyrite miners have found themselves indebted to their employers through mandatory high-interest-accruing loans.

Most significantly, Zhang has asserted that the strikers are lobbying for permanent corporate liability for mining-related illnesses such as 'Pyrite Disease,' whether they are found to be preexisting, chronic, or acute.

Mining communities across the country have taken inspiration from this example, with miners walking off their jobs in droves and bringing production to a standstill until quality of life is improved nation-wide.

More on this story as it develops.

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#

EPILOGUE. SPARKS OF A BRIGHTER TOMORROW.

2041. Spring. Somewhere in rural Oregon.

#

“Watch your footing coming down; we’ve got some pretty slick outcroppings on the rock face,” Mei called to the team above her as they rappelled down the cliff to the cave floor below. Her harness pulled tight against her thighs as she kicked off from the wall, loosening her grip on the length of rope to make her descent.

Alex slid past her on his own rappelling line, speeding along with bravado. His grinning face was bare of an oxygen mask. The sight unsettled Mei, even though she knew that the cave into which they descended was well ventilated and the air quality safe. Some habits just don’t let go once they take hold.

“What’s the hold up, Captain?” Alex teased as he bobbed beside her, kicking off against the slimy rock wall for the fun of it.

“This isn’t a race, Alex,” Mei warned. “You’ll break your neck if you lose your grip on that rope and go careening down like a sack of bricks.”

“I’ve been rappelling and climbing for years,” Alex laughed. “I’ve got this.” He kicked off the wall with another powerful thrust to rappel down.

“Alex, your rope’s grinding on the ledge topside,” Sam called down from above them. “If you keep jerking around like that, the line will fray.”

Mei looked down at Alex in concern as he opened his mouth to speak, only to see his body jerk from the sudden snag of his rope snapping. Alex’s eyes widened and his face dropped

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as gravity took him in its grip and pulled him earthward, the severed rope spiraling down after him.

“Alex!” Grace screamed from above them, the last in line to rappel, helpless to save her fiancé from hurtling toward the ground. Alex landed with a painful thud after falling the final fifteen feet.

“I’m okay!” he shouted up with a pained laugh as he picked himself up off the ground and inspected himself for damage. “I’ll get a bruise tomorrow, but I didn’t have much farther to fall.” Mei shook her head and followed Alex down.

“Do a better inspection of your gear next time!” she ordered.

“Yes, *ma’am*,” Alex laughed with a mocking salute.

“You almost gave me a heart attack,” Grace wailed when she touched down on the ground beside them and relinquished her rope. “Is this what you guys go through every day?” she asked in terror, trying in vain to shake the image of Alex’s fall from her mind.

“More or less,” Alex shrugged with a playful grin. “Be happy we didn’t run into a mountain lion down here.”

“You’ve run into mountain lions?” Grace squeaked in shock as she rubbed at her palms, still a novice to the finer points of rappelling down a rope line without burning one’s hands.

“No,” Mei replied, “but we got attacked by a grizzly bear once.” She removed her harness and walked deeper into the cave, leaving the hanging ropes behind for their exit and motioning for the group to follow. Grace gaped in shock as she watched them go.

“You’re joking, right?” She called, nervously following when no answer came. “Right?”

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They walked on through the natural tunnel the cave had formed, guiding their way with several small handheld lanterns. The cave's moist, cool air refreshed everyone after hiking uphill beneath an unforgivingly hot sun to reach their entry point, and they were all grateful for the shade.

"Where are you guys taking us, anyway?" Alex asked Sam and Mei as they led the way forward through the dim cave. "I never thought you two would come up with an idea for a wedding present like this."

"You'll see as soon as we round this corner coming up," Sam explained, looking back at Alex. "We just wanted to do something different than the usual."

When the group rounded the corner in question, Alex and Grace were left rooted in place, gasping.

"I got a tip about this little secret from Bruce," Mei said when she caught the soon-to-be-weds staring open-mouthed. "It took some hunting, but I found it."

Before them, a wide cavern opened up over an underground spring. Its crystalline surface glittered in the sunlight that shined down from an opening in the center of the ceiling. Stalagmites and columns speckled with mineral deposits stood guard along the spring's edges.

"You can consider this a wedding present from me and Sam both," Mei exclaimed, crossing her arms and smiling with satisfaction.

"Mei, Sam, this is beautiful," Alex replied. "I don't know what to say."

"Say cheers!" Mei produced a bottle of champagne from her knapsack and popped the cork, sending foam arcing out from its lip as Alex and Grace laughed in surprise. Sam pulled a case of metal drinking cups from his own knapsack for Mei to pour them all a glass.

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“The water looks clean enough to swim in,” Alex marveled as he set his cup down to step closer to the spring’s edge.

“It sure is,” Sam replied. “The pH levels are almost perfect. I came down here myself last Sunday to take some samples for testing. I didn’t tell you to bring your towels as a joke.” He clapped Alex on the back. The clap resounded through the cavern like a gunshot signaling a biathlon’s start. Grace and Alex raced after each other for the water’s edge, stumbling over themselves as they stripped away their clothing to skinny dip in the first clean body of water they’d seen since childhood.

The cave echoed with the splashing laughter of their swimming, while Mei set a blanket down on the spring’s rocky shore. Sam knelt by her, sorting through his pack to prepare a lunch spread of the bread, cheese, and fruit they’d brought with them for the occasion.

“Thank you for helping me get this done, Mei,” Sam said when he’d finished setting their water canteens beside the food and sat himself on the blanket across from her.

“I’m just glad we’ve got something to smile about again,” Mei replied, watching Alex and Grace splashing at each other with childish joy. “We’ve been stuck in the dark for too long. I wanted to lighten things up.”

“You have.” Sam smiled as he reached out to touch her shoulder. Mei stifled an unexpected laugh before jerking away when a spark of static electricity jumped between them, the jolt running through her shoulder with invading warmth. They laughed together when they saw each other’s startled reaction. When their laughter died down and Sam’s touch trailed its way down to her hand, Mei flushed crimson and smiled in half a moment’s thought before leaning across the blanket to kiss Sam, who met her readily.

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“Hey; get a room, you two!” Grace shouted from the center of the spring where she was treading water with Alex.

“You’re the ones without any clothes on!” Mei pulled away from the kiss to call back.

“You should join us,” Alex offered as he backstroked away from them. “The water’s the perfect temperature!”

Sam glanced from the spring to Mei and back again, afraid to make the move to strip down in front of her without knowing whether she’d join him in the act. Mei laughed and began pull off her shirt.

“I’ll race you,” she grinned.

When the four tired of their swimming, they dried themselves off and redressed to share the meal that Mei and Sam had prepared. Sam even produced a small portable speaker and threw on a playlist of Grace and Alex’s favorite songs while they ate. They lounged at the spring for nearly half the day, carried by the immaculate acoustics of the rock walls that encased the cavern.

Mei hadn’t realized she’d dozed off until her eyes fluttered open to see Sam looking down at her, brushing back a strand of her hair. She smiled, feeling calm and safe for the first time in months, and breathed a heavy sigh of relief at the thought. Knowing they’d lingered too long, though, she willed herself to stand.

“Okay, folks; we’d better wrap it up.” Mei brushed the dust from her jeans. “We’ve got a long drive ahead of us if we’re going to make it back in time. We don’t want the bride and groom to be late to their own wedding.”

#

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Alex and Grace were married in the Spring Pines mess hall that night, which had been redressed for the occasion. Many of the guests were Spring Pines' miners, though the men Shea had brought with her from Timber Bluff had lingered in town to watch the ceremony.

When it came time for the ring bearer to reveal the wedding bands, Alex lifted his fingers to his lips and whistled. From the far end of the aisle trotted Calvin, Nadine's scrappy little dog, making his way toward them with a pillow strapped to his back. Grace and Alex's wedding rings tinkled together atop the pillow as the small dog bounced in his distracted zigzagging toward them. An indiscernible scent aroused Calvin's interest and sent him scurrying off course, scuttling beneath seats in his forgetful quest to hunt down the smell.

"Calvin, get back here!" Nadine whimpered in embarrassment while the wedding guests laughed with delight, Alex and Grace included. Nadine hobbled over Vera from their seats and hurried after the dog. She caught up to Calvin she scooped him up in her arms, walking him the rest of the way up the aisle so that the wedding could resume.

At the ceremony's completion, the newlyweds kissed. Vera proclaimed that everyone had been invited for the reception at Bailey's Bar and led the way from the mess hall-turned-chapel. Its interior was much the same as when Bruce had managed the establishment, save for the balloons and ribbons that had been tied up from the rafters for the reception.

Behind the bar, Bailey raced to fulfill drink requests as more and more wedding guests flooded into line. Her rolled-up plaid shirtsleeves were quickly coming loose, and the white apron she'd donned was already spattered with beer from the keg she'd tapped for the occasion. Her silver-red hair had come loose from its ponytail and splayed in her face. Bailey slicked it back after wiping the sweat from her forehead with a forearm.

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“How’s retirement treating you, Cap?” Mei asked when the crowd died away and she could finally approach from the back of the line.

“Hell, it’s got me working like a madman to stay on top of this hole,” Bailey replied, adjusting the eye patch that had been jostled out of place from the left side of her face. “And I’m still not getting used to wearing this damned thing. I don’t know if I ever will.”

“Your burns look like they’ve cleared up nicely, though,” Mei said, gesturing at the side of Bailey’s face.

“It’s just concealer, Mei,” Bailey laughed and waved her off. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in the wedding photos if I was in anything but top shape.” She took the worn out rag from her shoulder and wiped down the counter, buffing it with the same small powerful circles that Bruce had rubbed into its surface after years of cleaning before her. When she finished, Bailey slapped the rag back over her shoulder and grabbed a pair of clean glasses to pour them both a drink.

“So, how’d your first day running the crew go, ‘Captain?’” Bailey asked as they clinked glasses.

“Well enough,” Mei replied. She smiled as she sat on the stool between them, careful not to let her dress catch on anything. “We ran into an equipment snag when Alex snapped his rope line trying to race everyone down to the cave. He fell maybe ten or fifteen feet down. It gave his new wife quite a scare.”

“If that’s all it takes to frighten Grace, she’d better buckle up for their marriage,” Bailey snorted as she nursed at her own beer. Behind them, Grace was climbing onto the stage with difficulty in her flowing wedding dress, skirting around cables and foot pedals for the band’s instruments, which had been readied on the small stage for the evening’s entertainment.

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She stumbled as she reached the microphone, catching her fall on the stand while her wedding veil toppled from her head. A wave of relieved laughter rippled through the crowd watching her.

“If I could just have everyone’s attention, please,” Grace announced into the mic. The room hushed. “Thank you all for coming today.” She scanned the faces of the wedding guests. Her mascara was running from how much she’d already cried during the ceremony.

“I want each of you to know that we have so much love for every person in this room, and I have to thank everyone who put the extra leg work in to help make today so magical. Let’s give them all a round of applause!” The room roared, stomping with joy. When the applause settled, Grace’s smile faded.

“Unfortunately, there are quite a few people close to us who we’ve lost that couldn’t be here today. If it wasn’t for their sacrifices, we wouldn’t be standing where we are right now, so much better off than we were yesterday. I’d like to take a moment to remember them, and to remember my father, Trevor...” Grace choked and swallowed hard to bring herself to continue.

“They say that hard times make hard people, and everyone in this room has had to harden themselves to the times we’ve lived in these past years. Like anyone who knew him, even in passing, would say: Trevor Michaels was not a soft man, or a gentle one. I spent more time around my father than anyone else in this room, and I know from experience: he was rude. Mean. Hard. He was a pyrite miner all his life, and a coal miner before the Second Gold Rush. But he was a good man, and he always provided for me.

Before my father passed from a heart attack last month, he’d finally given his blessing for my engagement to Alex and welcomed him into our family. I’ve never loved my father more

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than I loved him then, for softening up that much for us, and letting go of a past that made him that way so that he could better love his daughter and his family. I'd like everyone to take a moment of silence to remember my father, and everyone else who we've lost in these hard times."

She bowed her head and the room followed her example, growing so quiet that Mei could hear the compression whining from the microphone's speakers. After a full minute, Grace looked up again.

"...thank you," she said with a sniffle. "When my father died, I felt like I'd lost the only family I'd ever had. But looking around this room tonight, I just feel so lucky and blessed to have Alex by my side and this beautiful family right in front of me. Thank you so much."

The wedding guests cheered and shouted their praise and love of Grace and Alex. Grace began to laugh through the tears streaming down her face.

"Now, I know this wouldn't be much of a party without some music," she said, "so I'd like to invite my husband's new band to come on stage and play a few of their songs. Everyone, please make some noise for Artisanal Heathens!"

The room roared with joyous drunken cacophony as Alex, Sam, and their bandmates climbed on stage with their newest member, Tommy. After taking a moment to warm up their hands and tune their instruments, the members of Artisanal Heathens kicked off their newest song, filling the room with the vibrant rhythms of fast-paced rock:

#

I hate to disappoint you, friend

But this is not the end

Those neon diner lights

Ain't fadin' from your sights

THE PYRITE VICTORY / LAZARIUK

'til I couldn't tell you when

#

Little people, little lives

Simon's got his alibis

Lining up his pockets

While fools are

Digging for his gold

#

Fools for gol-

Den fu-tures

Chasing golden futures

Chasing gold, then sutures

#

Mei bobbed her head while Bailey knocked her fist against the bar's counter to the beat.

"Not what I'd pick for *my* wedding," Bailey admitted, "but they put on a good show. I have to give them that." Mei was nodding her agreement when Shea slipped toward them from the outskirts of the crowd with a yellow envelope tucked under her arm. The grizzled old woman looked uncomfortably out of character in a floral-patterned dress for the wedding, and she wobbled on a pair of thick heels that she'd nearly forgotten how to wear. Her white hair billowed behind her in a tangled and unkempt braid.

#

Chipping out a tunnel in the sky

Floating higher than the birds can fly

Simon says demand is how

We justify the need

#

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Taking over Karman Space

Conquering the human race,

Simon calls the shots

Too caught up in his greed

#

And we're still digging for his gold

We're still digging, fools for gold

#

Fools for gol-

Den fu-tures

Chasing golden futures

Chasing gold, then sutures

#

"Bailey, Mei," Shea greeted them, setting the envelope on the bar.

"Hey there, Shea," Bailey said with cheer. "Glad you could make it."

"Any excuse to get drunk on a weeknight is good enough for me to make an appearance,"

Shea replied as she leaned against the bar.

"I had something a little more special than booze in mind," Bailey declared, producing three highball glasses from below the bar. After lining them up, she turned and climbed the liquor cabinet for the top shelf, where a line of expensive booze collected dust. The shelves bore several gaps where bottles had shattered from particle fire last winter, leaving melted holes in the shelf wall to serve as a memorial to the Hellcats' attack. Bailey scanned the labels, muttering to herself as she read, before snatching a crystal bottle off the shelf with a satisfied nod and climbing down. Mei's eyes widened at the sight of the spring water Bruce had shared with her the day he died.

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Bailey wiped the dust off the bottle's neck and pulled the cork free of its end with a *thunk*. She poured each of them a tall glass of Bruce's hand-bottled spring water; crisp, clear, and clean.

"Ladies, I give you Bruce's private stock: natural spring water, untainted by watershed contamination and without a drop of those putrid purifying chemicals in it. The old hoarder never let me try some." Bailey raised her glass and tapped it against the bar counter before holding it up to clink. "To Bruce: may he rest in peace."

"To Bruce," Mei agreed. Shea followed their example and clinked glasses with them. Mei's eyes filmed over and she realized she'd started crying.

#

*If this is how it's got to be
Then all I need is you and me
No sunset's waiting
For our long drive home*

#

*The world'll turn, caught up in strife
We'll watch it burn, content with life
Just know you're worth more to me than gold*

#

*Fools for gol-
Den fu-tures
Chasing golden futures
Chasing gold, then sutures*

#

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“I hate to ruin a night,” Shea began, “but there’s something we need to talk about.” She set down her glass for Bailey to ready them all another round of water while the band played their outro with a flourish. Bailey exchanged an apprehensive glance with Mei as she poured.

“We had a visitor stop by today,” Shea continued. “M-Drive-powered Oh-En truck with a full entourage of soldiers. The ranking officer started asking around town for ‘Mei Ling Zhang.’ Tall guy, broad shouldered. I’d definitely bet on him in a boxing match, but he was a cocky little spit fuck; barely older than you, Bailey.”

“When was this?” Mei asked. “I was out for the day with my team.”

#

And I’m such a fool for gold

I’m just your fool of gold

#

Fools for gol-

Den fu-tures

Chasing golden futures

Chasing gold, then sutures

#

“Just before noon,” Shea replied. “I told them you weren’t in town, and he didn’t take it well. He said he had ‘solid intel that Mei Ling Zhang was here’ and kept demanding to see you. I managed to calm the runt down and offered to take a message.” Shea raised her glass once more and tossed back a large gulp of water. “He said that there’s been an amendment to the military draft: they’re putting together a team to bolster the Oh-En’s space mining program for a mission that was ‘critical to humanity’s survival.’ One of his lackeys pulled this out of their truck and

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handed it to me.” Shea tapped the envelope she’d set on the bar. ““For Mei Ling Zhang’s eyes only,” he’d said.”

Shea drained the last of her water and pushed the empty glass away. “You’ve been conscripted into the Orbital Navy, Mei. I’m sorry to have to throw this at you, but I wanted to at least wait until after the ceremony to let you know.”

Bailey and Mei exchanged another glance while Shea picked herself up from the barstool.

“I’m heading out,” she said. “Classy parties aren’t really my thing, anyway. Don’t worry about my people getting too rowdy on you tonight; I made sure they’ll behave.”

“Thanks for that, I guess,” Bailey said, raising an eyebrow to Shea.

“Right,” she nodded. “Well, y’all have a good night.” The old woman slipped through the crowd and out of the bar. The band’s thrashing outro and the reveries of the wedding guests shrank away from Mei as she stared down at the envelope.

“I’ve been drafted,” Mei repeated in disbelief. She reached out to grasp the envelope but hesitated, nervous to even touch it and be damned to examine its contents. “Why would the Oh-En go to this effort to find me?” she asked Bailey. “Why not Vera or Nadine or anyone else involved with the strike?”

“Your name is the one that made the news,” Bailey guessed. “You’re the poster head for the mining revolution. Maybe they want you out of the picture before you make a habit of upsetting the status quo. Maybe they know you’ve got experience out in space and wanted to get hold of you once you’d gotten some mining under your belt. I doubt the Oh-En knows you’ve caught wise to their lies either.”

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“What do I do, Bailey?” Mei pled. “I finally feel like I belong somewhere, and President Simon is about to rip that away from me.”

Bailey set a hand on Mei’s shoulder, staring back at her with soft warm eyes. “Whether you dodge the draft or decide to play their games, it’s a problem for tomorrow, Mei. We won this round. They can’t take them away. Put it out of your mind; we’ve got celebrating to do.”

“Yeah; yeah, you’re right,” Mei conceded.

Bailey took the envelope from the counter and tucked it beneath the bar for safekeeping. Sam’s voice caught Mei’s ear when the band’s next song ended, and she turned to watch him speak.

“Alright, folks; now that I’ve got everyone on their feet, I’d like you all to step aside and make some room for the bride and groom’s first dance!”

Tommy hurried to take Alex’s place at the drum set. The crowd of wedding guests parted from the bar’s open floor and the newlyweds strolled together for the center of the room, Grace’s arm looped around Alex’s as he led her to the dance floor.

“Here’s a slow one to really get the love in the air,” Sam called into the microphone, making eye contact with Mei from across the room and casting a deep smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. Mei smiled back and felt her own crinkles blossoming on her face. “Let’s all make some noise for the bride and groom!” he shouted.

Tommy tapped out the rhythm for their next song on the cymbals and the band played a soft, lively instrumental number that jazzed up the air.

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Alex and Grace took each other in their arms and danced, swaying and twirling around the room, never taking their eyes from each other as the crowd watched. The couple floated on an island all their own, gliding along the dance floor in their bliss.

Mei watched them dance, feeling the small smile lingering on her face as the warm lights radiated around the room full of people she'd come to know and love. The guests cheered and whistled when the newlyweds finished their dance and Alex dipped his new bride with flair. Mei settled back against the bar and cheered with them, swept up by the waves of warmth swirling about the room. Bailey was right. There was celebrating to do.

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-The End-