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## THE CUSTODIAN COUNCIL – HIGH CHAMBER, VOLLARYN PRIME

The High Chamber of the Custodian Council, the gathering hall of various human allies, was a mess.

Alien delegates of every shape and size filled the enormous, shining white council hall, voices clashing against each other like waves in a storm. Stately banners hung from every wall, the sigils of a thousand worlds – Confluence colonies, alien protectorates, even independent states given audience and semi-autonomous regions. Each represented a voice, and every voice was either shouting in anger or muttering in panic.

Overhead, an enormous holographic display emitted the light of projecting data streams, displaying the severity of the recent events: the attack on Asteria, the burning of Sky Six, Koryx fleets appearing through slipspace, remnants of Confluence frontier fleets still trying to defend remote worlds from the genocidal Krell. It was plastered in front of the crowd in a horrifically beautiful montage of worlds falling like dominos. Red dots blinked, showing galactic coordinates, each a new invasion by the Koryx Pact.

Above it all sat Primarch Custodian Nathaniel Dorian, high on his throne at the end of the room, his gaze cold and unreadable. His glistening white robe spilled out from his seat like a river. He allowed the chaos to continue for a moment, his hand resting on the arm of the throne, as if he was simply waiting for the flood to subside.

It didn't.

The moment persisted, tempers rising, anxiety thickening the air.

Then –

*Primarch Custodian:* “ENOUGH.”

The word echoed with such force it might as well have been a cannon blast. Silence drew itself over the delegates.

The lights dimmed. The Primarch leaned forward, his voice regaining an almost paternal softness.

*Primarch Custodian:* “The Koryx Pact; these are the madmen we are dealing with. You have seen the horrors they have wrought. They strike like thieves in the night... But the night will break. They only want aggression and subjugation, to destroy the order and harmony that we have built.”

Silence followed again, there was no shouting now, no rebuttal, just low murmurs. The moment lingered, and it seemed the council might return to some semblance of order – until **he** rose to his feet. The fox-like creature, short but elegantly composed, started adjusting the diplomatic sash across his shoulders before calmly clearing his throat. His small eyes blinked as he drew breath. No one really watched him rise. His fur shimmered slightly under the Council lights.

*Stekoit Representative:* “The Stekoit species will no longer stand for this hypocrisy. It's over.” ***His words came out in a slow deliberate cadence. The delegates leaned in, caught in the gravity of what was about to unfold.*** “I came here to inform the council, that I'm terminating our agreement. You knew... what it would mean for us when you destroyed our homes, turned them into tomb worlds, polluted them with your relentless industrialist policies.”

For a moment, he searched the eyes of the council. No one interrupted. The hall was his.

*Stekoit Representative:* “Still... You pushed us. When the choice is to cooperate, or to starve... there is no choice.” ***He paused, eyes meeting the Primarch Custodian's directly.*** “And as you lived in excess, you forced us to smile... to thank you... but you failed to see what was building beneath the surface. FESTERING...”

His tail flicked once. His gaze dropped for half a second, catching in his throat. When he lifted his head, there were tears in his eyes – nobody could tell whether they were authentic or for effect.

*Stekoit Representative:* “I no longer agree to your terms. From now on... you will agree to mine.”

And with no further word, he turned and began to walk away, moving swiftly, with his robe fluttering slightly behind him, before disappearing through the grand council doors as if the hundreds of burning eyes on his back meant nothing to him at all.

In the stunned silence that followed, the council erupted – again – into chaos. Voices rose again in panic and fury, demanding answers, calling for arrests, retaliations, among other things. The chamber filled with the sound of unresolved anger and the stark realization that another enemy had just been carved from their own ranks and joined the Koryx.

Before the hall could descend into further chaos, the Primarch Custodian lifted his hand once more, and yet again, slowly, the hall quieted. The Primarch Custodian didn't flinch, his voice filled the hall again, now steady and severe.

*Primarch Custodian:* “It is true that we’ve erred. We’ve failed those who entrusted us with peace and protection. But we can amend what’s been wrong. There’s no time left for pride – We can no longer afford the luxury of wasting time.”

His hands clasped behind his back.

*Primarch Custodian:* “We will overcome this. Together. The past years have shown the weakness of our division. The timing has never been more dire – The Zalkahn, the Krell, they do not distinguish between Free Reach or Confluence, Terran or otherwise – it’s us or them. And from today, I declare that the Ithrium Protocols... are no longer ratified. We will no longer be defined by the xenophobia that it legalized. We will no longer anchor our empire in fear of the past.”

There were audible gasps from the hundreds of human governors and delegates of colonial protectorates across the floor. Even those among the most jaded aliens turned ever so slightly for a reaction, many delegates blinking at each other. The Ithrium Protocols were legal segregation of non-human races and were the backbone of Confluence xenocracy since 2812. This was an unimaginable decision.

*Primarch Custodian:* “We will not crumble before the enemy. The Confluence doesn’t break.”

His eyes scanned over the crowd of faces – if you could call half of them that.

*Primarch Custodian:* “This talk of enmity... this talk of dissent – it ends... NOW. Today marks the beginning of a new, brighter chapter for the Confluence Hegemon. Every species will have a stake in this fight, and every species will enjoy the fruits of our common, inevitable victory.”

He raised one fist, the other behind his back, and a dozen holoscreens lit up, broadcasting his old, stone-carved face across the galaxy.

*Primarch Custodian:* “As custodians, we will lead the charge against this terrible crisis that threatens to end us all. Beginning today, WE. STAND. AS. ONE.”

His words rang out – the crowd silent again, not even murmurs were there. Decades of brutal suppression and subjugation, civil unrest and infighting, all seemingly reversed now to face a common threat. Whether or not this unity could last was another question entirely, but perhaps the Confluence truly could change.

Perhaps.

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## ASTERIA – DEEP BELOW COLONY-17

Velvet hadn’t said much since Jack entered, her back to him, fingers flying across the terminal’s interface, her vivid purple eyes darting between the readouts as her fingers danced across the terminal’s keyboard. Jack looked around the dim maze of cables and the large corridor they were in. The place wasn’t exactly old. It was ancient – relic-like, with weird patches of pulsating purple lights across the walls. It felt wrong. Quiet in a way that mocked him, teased his instincts. Jack walked around the place, as if the boxes and terminals of various sizes all around him somehow felt important enough for him to inspect. Everything about this place had an alien air to it, but not the Zal’kahn kind. No, this was something older – Xaltheran, they had said. He’d heard snippets of their pre-Iridian extinction powers in older war-logs from some veterans. But... eh, history wasn’t his forte.

*Jack:* “Could’ve at least tried to make this place look less like a haunted space dumpster.”

Velvet didn’t even pause her rapid-fire typing to look up.

*Velvet:* “You wouldn’t recognize style if it hijacked your ship and left you stuck on bumfuck nowhere in nothing but your underwear and a bad attitude.”

*Jack (poking one of the terminals):* “That doesn’t mean I’m not right.”

*Velvet:* “It’s Xaltheran. Ancient. Beyond you, Centurion.”

They let the silence sit for a bit, featuring aggressive typing, until Velvet suddenly spins around in her chair, hand outstretched like a bill collector.

*Velvet:* “Give me your chip.”

Jack turns to her, glances from her hand to her face.

*Jack:* “My what?”

*Velvet:* “Your Confluence tracking chip. You know, the thing that tells Big Brother where you are. Hand it over.”

*Jack:* “No. You are not authorized to possess this technology.”

Velvet sighed and leaned back against the console, looking up at him.

*Velvet:* “Listen, your chip's range is limited due to your suit's configuration, if you let me extend its capability, we can locate other fallen pods nearby. Troopers? Your comrades? I can use the tech to ping signals tied to those trackers. Your chip's high Confluence clearance makes this easier. We will need every pair of hands if we wanna have any hopes of fending off the xenos, and I don't care if those hands are drenched in the blood of innocents.”

Jack's first instinct was to flat-out refuse—again. But, annoyingly, he knew she had a point. And if Nash's pod was actually down here, it'd save them a ton of time. With a sigh so quiet it barely counted as one – like he was already over this whole ordeal – he tapped a compartment on his wrist gauntlet. A section of his armor slid open, revealing several tiny chips nestled in deep slots. Jack pulled one out, and the panel sealed itself with a soft click. Wordlessly, he handed it over.

*Velvet:* “Good soldier. See? Not so bad handing me your super-secret tech, isn't it?”

*Jack:* “You're only allowed access to the basic Positioning System protocols.”

Velvet takes it quickly, flipping it between her fingers, not even bothering to look at the Ascendant who looms over her like a walking iron bulwark. She immediately slots it into her terminal, powers it up, and begins typing.

*Velvet:* “Aww, you even kept it warm for me! And here I thought all that armor was just for compensating.”

*Jack:* “I could list forty-seven ways to turn you into a wall decoration right now.”

*Velvet (inaudibly chuckling):* “You know, for a walking tank, you've got quite the fragile ego. It's adorable, really.”

*Jack:* “Forty-eight.”

Velvet's sharp eyes were busy scanning the streams of data pouring across the screen. The soft pinging of systems reaching out into the depths now filled the room. Jack's discomfort only grew more pointed. Something didn't feel right under all the cables and steel across this place. He tightened his grip on the rifle.

That's when he heard it – a sound, too faint for normal human ears, a scrape or shuffle that echoed briefly from the far end of the chamber that was too dim to be seen by the naked eye. Jack immediately raised his rifle, taking aim at the vague shadows among the stray crates and equipment. His response was automatic, a trigger finger ready to send whatever it was into oblivion.

Velvet, however, didn't even flinch, completely unfazed as she glanced over her shoulder with an almost disinterested look.

*Velvet:* “Easy, Centurion. You're about to give the kid a heart attack.” ***She calls out to the darkened corner in an unexpectedly soft, gentle voice.*** “Alexander, it's alright. Come out.”

*Jack:* “...a kid?”

From behind a stack of metal crates peeked a small head, wide eyes looking out at them nervously. A boy – apparently no more than four, if Jack had to guess – shuffled into the light slowly, holding a disheveled alien figurine toy that had seen much better days, his gaze flickering between Jack's immense armored figure and Velvet. The kid crept closer, eventually running to Velvet's side and clutching onto her leg. He cast cautious glances at Jack's towering form, his gaze curious, then skittish, then back again. Jack lowered his rifle, though the edge in his posture remained.

*Jack:* “Didn't take you for the ‘single mom’ type.”

Velvet breaks into a soft, almost melancholic chuckle, brushing a hand through the boy's messy hair. The edge in her words softens for the first time.

*Velvet:* “No. He's my... Well, not 'mine-mine' kid, but close enough. His parents were my friends, and Confederate. Confluence decided they didn't like rebels raising families, and his parents were no more. So, I'm looking after him now.”

The explanation was simple enough, but the undercurrent of bitterness in her tone didn't escape Jack's notice. Though, frankly, he had no real response to give her. Jack simply stared at the kid; eyes unreadable behind his visor. Velvet noticed the look – or lack thereof – and gave a short, mirthless chuckle.

*Velvet:* “Lemme guess. Sympathy isn't exactly wired into Ascendant subroutines?”

*Jack:* "It's just not my department."

Jack replied in his usual flat tone, checking his weapon instead of making eye contact. Velvet sighed quietly, glancing down at the boy again. He was peering up at Jack with something between awe and alarm, his small fingers clenched around Velvet's leg. The terminal beeped, snapping Velvet's attention back to the screen. She leaned in, her eyes scanning the map that had just appeared. Four red markers dotted the landscape, each one representing a crashed escape pod. Jack stepped forward, his gaze locking onto the map.

*Velvet:* "We've got multiple locations for crashed pods within a 250-mile radius. Their survivors might be miles away from the original crash site, but we can still try." *She zoomed in on the map with a keystroke.* "Which one do you want us to start with?"

Jack's gloved finger tapped a spot, that signal to the far southwest hills of the city. While other dots were constantly flickering due to their pods' low power and damage, the spot to the hills had two signals, one flickering and likely being the crash site of a pod, and the other being stable and a couple miles away – and Ascendants often had tracking chips with much more longer battery life. It was Nash. Velvet's purple gaze flicked between him and the map for a moment. She quirked an eyebrow.

*Velvet:* "Can I ask?"

*Jack:* "I know a guy. Could be his crash site."

She tilted her head, but she didn't push further. Instead, Velvet connected into her earpiece, tapping it twice.

*Velvet:* "Malik, it's Velvet. Send down a squad to the lab. We need some muscle that isn't wrapped in ego and power armor. Oh, and an escort for Alex. Yes, the kid's priority - shocking, I know. Move your ass."

A murmur of words buzzed through the earpiece as Velvet straightened up.

*Jack (motioning to Alexander):* "He coming with us?"

Velvet's lips twitched – not quite a smile, but something like it. She placed her other hand on her hip, trying to manage the debate without rolling her eyes.

*Velvet:* "What do you think, genius? I'm not dragging a kid into a battlefield."

*Jack:* "Sounds like something you would do."

His tone is monotonous enough to be mistaken for seriousness. Velvet actually laughed this time, the sound bouncing off the walls in low, mocking it-isn't-hostile-but-isn't-friendly-either amusement.

*Velvet:* "The genocide machine is worried about children? Now that's funny."

She gave Jack a final glance, then knelt beside Alexander. She ruffles the kid's hair gently again, her voice low.

*Velvet:* "Some friends are gonna come stay with you, okay? I'll be back."

The boy nodded, still glancing nervously at Jack's towering form. Velvet kisses Alex on his forehead then stands back up and turns back to her console, downloading the pods' coordinates to a datapad she had on her person, as she addresses Jack.

*Velvet:* "They'll be here soon. You in a rush?"

Jack didn't answer, his attention now focused on Alexander. The boy's wide eyes met Jack's visor, and for a moment, the Ascendant felt something uncomfortable twist in his chest. He remembered being that small once. Scared. Alone. But that was a lifetime ago – before the wars, before the armor, before everything.

Not that it matters now. Things don't get better. They just become tolerable.

Velvet noticed the silence, her gaze softening as she looked between Jack and the boy.

*Velvet:* "You don't have to feel bad for him, you know. He'll survive. Kids are tougher than they look."

Alexander, emboldened, with the fearless curiosity only kids possess, approached Jack.

*Alexander:* "Are you a robot?"

*Jack:* "...No."

*Alexander:* “But you look like one.”

*Jack:* “I’m just a man in a big tin can.”

*Alexander (looking down, fiddling with his toy):* “A scary tin can.”

*Jack:* “I get that.”

*Alexander (after a short silence):* “Mama told me that you harm people... are you going to harm us?”

Jack was quiet, he couldn’t really give a definitive response. Velvet steps up beside him.

*Velvet:* “He’s never seen an Ascendant before. You’re probably the stuff of nightmares for him, Centurion.”

Jack felt a twinge of... something. Guilt? Regret? He pushed it aside as the rebel squad arrived, the sound of approaching footsteps echoing down the tunnel increasingly louder. Nine armed separatists strode into the room, their armor mismatched but functional, their weapons a mix of Confluence tech and alien gear. Malik led them, his purple-tinted hair catching the faint light as he entered.

*Malik:* “Got your backup right here, Vel. What’s the plan?”

*Velvet:* “We’re going pod hunting. Through the tunnels. I need one of you to stay here with Alex.”

One of the rebels, looking like a stocky man with a scar running across his cheek, groaned audibly.

*Jot:* “Babysitting duty again? Seriously?”

*Velvet:* “Yeah, you’re the lucky one, Jot. Sit the kid, enjoy the peace and quiet.”

*Alexander:* “I don’t need a babysitter!”

Jot grumbled under his breath but didn’t argue. As he moved toward Alexander, the boy shot him a suspicious look, then darted behind a crate, peeking out cautiously as he sticks his tongue out at the man just for spite.

*Malik:* “Looks like he’s not your biggest fan.”

*Jot:* “I’m not a fan of this either...”

The rest of the squad was already gearing up, checking weapons and equipment. Jack glanced at the tunnel entrance at the other end of the corridor – massive, industrial doors etched with Xaltheran symbols. Velvet placed her hand on a panel, and the door slid open, revealing the dark, dimly lit tunnel beyond. The air inside was stale. Velvet drew her sidearm, cocking it with a flick of her wrist as she glanced at Jack.

*Velvet:* “Welcome to the rabbit hole. Ready for a stroll through alien history?”

*Jack (deadpan):* “Can’t wait.”

Within the tunnels were several buggy-like vehicles that have been parked in here for a while, Confluence-made. The tunnel was wide enough to allow several dozens of them to be here with a spacious lane in the middle. Jack, Malik, and Velvet got onto a vehicle, behind them three others sat in another buggy, and in the back four Reavians drove four other vehicles which would be used to transport the marines they were going to rescue, before all of the buggies rumbled along the massive underground tunnel, their engines humming through the dimly lit passage. The tunnel stretched on endlessly ahead, filled with ancient barely-functioning technology mixed with strange alien flora, growing in unnatural, bioluminescent patterns, the tunnel itself illuminated only by worn-out purple lights flickering at the corners, casting long slanted shadows over the rough cave mous walls.

Dust kicked up from the tires, and the tires' rhythmic slapping against the cracked floor created a steady echo. It was the kind of long drive that bred a particular boredom.

Velvet couldn’t stick to the quiet.

*Velvet (yelling over the engine noises):* “This tunnel system was built by the ancient Xaltherans, long before we even knew what fire was. They were a race of beings with incredible technological prowess that dwarfed even the Iridians in their prime! They could manipulate particles on Planck levels, travel BILLIONS of light years in literal seconds, even go back in time —”

She sat in the front passenger seat of the lead buggy, her legs propped up on the dashboard in a position absurdly casual given the gravity of everything, idly twirling her handgun between her fingers.

Jack sat in the back, helmet on, silent like a stone, the dim glow of his visor reflecting off the dark interior. On the driver's seat, Malik was splitting focus between navigating the buggy through the tunnel and trying not to visibly show how disinterested he was in Velvet's infodumping. He glanced at Velvet from the driver's seat, subtly annoyed.

*Malik (under his breath):* "Here we go again."

Velvet, oblivious or uncaring, continued rattling off information about the ancient civilization that constructed the tunnels. She pulled a few strands of her white hair back behind her ear.

*Velvet:* "They were eerie geniuses! These tunnels aren't native to Asteria only, they spanned countless worlds throughout Xaltheran history. Though the Xaltheran technology on the other worlds I traveled to had their energy and resources drained or mined. On Asteria, I think the architecture is geared for something like transportation or even planet-wide weaponry of sorts, probably no longer functional by now. But if my research is correct, these tunnels should lead us to something much more important. Called the Veilspire. I don't know exactly where it is, yet, but given enough time, we can send search parties and excavate for—"

The others had heard Velvet's ramblings before – field lectures on alien architecture, stories of long-dead empires, and all the like. Their faces reflected various levels of boredom. Meanwhile, Velvet pressed on.

*Velvet:* "And it all connects to our present. The Zalkahns didn't *just* come for war. They didn't just pick up one day and decide to throw everything away to fight us. They planned. They know about the Xaltheran technological capabilities, and they are after it. I think what's called the Wyrms Gate is their primary goal, and they could activate it if they reach the Veilspire before we do. The tech the Xaltherans left behind... It's not just some random artifact, by the way- It's quantum manipulation. We're talking reality-bending capability. Bend the laws of physics, time, teleport armies wherever the hell you want them anywhere in the galaxy at any time—maybe even more. The Zalkahn want it because it gives them the power to wipe their enemies off the galactic map! Us included."

There was a grumble of frustration from the buggy behind.

*Rebel 1 (yelling over the comms):* "I swear to the stars of Empyrean, if she tells me more about mystical aliens, I'll jump out of this damn vehicle."

*Rebel 2:* "Imagine yourself listening to a crazy podcast on the radio."

Jack didn't respond. He could hear the impatience in the squad behind them, and likely in the one behind that too. Jack stayed quiet, trying to focus on the distant rumble of the buggies' engines, mentally drowning out Velvet's ongoing explanation. Velvet continued on anyway.

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They have been driving through the labyrinthine tunnels for an hour by now.

*Velvet:* "That Wyrms Gate is here, on Asteria. It's why they attacked with such an overwhelming force – they wanna make sure Asteria is theirs, so they can start excavating for the Gate early." ***Her voice took on a conspiratorial tone, more animated now.*** "The spires in Colony-17 are probably hiding the Entry Point underneath them, I think. Confluence guys gave it a try, but they had no idea what they were even looking at, so they just gave up the entire deal, and here we are now – hindered back because the empire is too lazy to care, facing potential annihilation if the bad guys get their hands on this tech before we do."

Then, Jack heard something. A very faint noise, made even harder to detect thanks to Velvet.

*Jack:* "Velvet."

She paused, mid-sentence, glancing back at him over her shoulder.

*Jack:* "Shut up."

The bluntness of it made Malik snort, choking on a giggle as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Velvet shot a death glare at Jack but relented, settling back into her seat, grumbling.

*Velvet:* "Touchy..."

But Jack wasn't even looking at her. His helm tilted toward the nearby end of the tunnel, head angled slightly, as though he was listening for something beyond human range. His hand rose mid-chest – a signal to slow down or halt altogether. The buggies started to decelerate as Malik glanced at him, a frown forming.

*Malik:* "Something wrong?"

Before Jack could answer, the faint **thump** of distant gunfire echoed through the tunnel. Followed by the unmistakable crash of exploding ordinance. Faint but unmistakable, growing steadily louder as the squad moved closer to the exit. Gunfire. Explosions. Muffled through rock and stone and the engines' noise at first, but clearly discernible now. They were coming from beyond the thick metal doors at the end of the tunnel, from the surface. Everything stopped. The vehicles were off, the engine noise dying abruptly as boots hit the sanded, alien stone beneath. Velvet's eyebrows shot up as she began listening harder, finding herself surprised by the Ascendant's reflexes.

*Velvet:* "Don't tell me you actually heard this from—"

*Jack:* "I don't think I want to hear you say another word for the next five hours."

Jack unbuckled and hopped out of the vehicle. Malik cut the vehicle's engine, and the others followed suit, the squad disembarking in neat movements. They stood before the massive door – ornate with alien carvings – sealing the tunnel's exit. Velvet moved to the nearby control panel and started tapping keys.

*Velvet:* "Give me a sec... this thing's old. Tech's barely keeping up with my genius—"

With a low grind, the alien doors slowly slid open, revealing Asteria in its twilight majesty – multiple moons hung low in the sky, casting the landscape in shades of deep purple and blue. The night would've been serene... except for the sharp echoes of a firefight not far off. In the distance, between jagged and rolling hills dotted with sparse trees, there were flashes of light – gunfire lighting up the night sky, accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of battle. Explosions popped faintly in the distance.

*Malik:* "That doesn't sound like a welcoming party."

*Rebel 3:* "Damn... someone's been having fun out there."

Jack stepped forward; his silhouette tall against the moons' glow. He gestured to the squad, and they moved swiftly, keeping low as they advanced toward the gunfire. The violet landscape swept past them, the shadows from oddly twisted trees and jagged rocks making the already-alien terrain feel all the more unfamiliar. They advanced, moving cautiously through the purple landscape in a tight formation, trying to make minimal noise. The night sang – yelps, screeches, the crack of gunfire that grew louder the closer they got. Almost surreal under the violet hue.

*Velvet:* "This isn't your average skirmish," *she adjusted her sidearm as she jogged to keep pace.* "Sounds like a full-blown warzone up ahead."

Jack's eyes locked on the flickering lights of the firefight just beyond the next ridge. His entire body was a coiled spring, ready to snap. The battle noises were very clear now – the sharp crack of rifles, the hiss of energy weapons, and the guttural roars of Zal'kahn soldiers.

*Malik:* "Bet you ten creds we're walking into a slaughterhouse."

*Velvet:* "You think I carry cash this far out?"

Just as they crested a slight ridge, only a few hundred meters from the firestorm below, the squad screeched to a halt as they saw it. A small squad of human marines pinned down against the edges of a hill, exchanging desperate fire with a group of Zal'kahn troopers. At least two dozen aliens were advancing with methodical precision, squeezing the marines into a tightening circle. The marines were outnumbered and their ammo was clearly running dry.

Jack raised a fist, signaling the rebels to hold position. He scanned the battlefield, his visor picking up the shimmer of energy shields on the Zal'kahn Juggernaut lumbering toward the marines.

*Velvet:* "Juggernaut. Great. I was hoping today would be easy."

*Malik:* "We're gonna hit them, right? Before they turn those marines into paste?"

*Jack:* "We will flank them."

He pointed to a narrow outcropping of rocks that ran parallel to the battlefield, offering just enough cover to get them into position behind the Zal'kahn forces. Without waiting for further discussion, Jack moved. The squad followed, crouching low as they weaved between the alien flora and rocks.

The plan was simple. Hit the Zal'kahn from behind, force them into a crossfire, and give the marines a fighting chance. Jack's instincts kicked in, with every step calculated and every movement precise. The ground seemed to vibrate beneath their feet as the firefight grew closer.

They reached the outcropping, the Zal'kahn soldiers just ahead, their backs turned as they focused on the marines. Jack signalled to his team, raising three fingers. The rebels, despite their ragtag appearance, moved with surprising discipline, their weapons at the ready.

*Jack:* "On my mark. Three... two..."

Before he could finish, one of the rebels stumbled as his foot was caught on a rock. The metallic clatter echoed loud as a bell. Instantly, the nearest Zal'kahn turned, its grotesque, molluscoid face twisting into a snarl.

*Jack:* "Now!"

The squad opened fire; Bullets and energy rounds shot out as they ripped into the unsuspecting Zal'kahn troopers. The aliens reeled in shock, their formation collapsing as they scrambled to react. Jack moved with his predictable lethal precision, as he cut down one trooper after another, each shot finding its mark with minimal inaccuracy.

*Velve (crouched behind a boulder, firing controlled bursts from her sidearm):* "I hate when they look surprised."

She muttered, blasting a Zal'kahn trooper in the chest. Malik, grinning slightly, tossed a grenade into the midst of the stunned aliens. The explosion sent several Zal'kahns flying.

*Malik:* "Suck on that, you squid-faced vinshins!"

The marines, seeing the rebels' sudden assault, seized the opportunity. They pushed forward, unloading the last of their ammo into the disoriented enemy.

*Marine:* "Push! Don't let them regroup!"

But the Zal'kahn weren't so easily defeated. From the chaos, a Juggernaut emerged – heavily-armored Zal'kahn, his massive energy shields absorbing the rebel and marine fire as he advanced with terrifying calm. Jack's visor highlighted him in red – a target too well-armored for standard weapons.

*Jack:* "Focus fire on the Juggernaut!"

The rebels and marines concentrated their fire, but the Juggernaut kept coming, shrugging off the barrage as if it were nothing. One of the rebels fired a plasma round at point-blank range, only for the Juggernaut to grab him by the throat and crush him with a sickening crunch.

*Rebel 1:* "Jarn, no!"

*Rebel 2:* "You alien scum! He owed me 50 credits!"

*Malik:* "Focus!"

The Juggernaut was closing in, his heavy steps shaking the ground, but then, from the distance, a massive shadow loomed. Jack turned just in time to see it – a figure leaping from the rocks, landing with a thunderous crash behind the towering aliens.

Nash.

The Juggernaut turned, too slow to react, as Nash's armored fist slammed into his face, with the force of the blow sending cracks through his helmet. The beast staggered, and Nash didn't stop, his blows raining down like a storm, each one more brutal than the last. The Juggernaut crumpled under the onslaught, his shield fizzling out as Nash delivered the final, bone-crushing punch.

Nash breathed heavily as he wiped blood from his knuckles, standing over the fallen alien. He turned, his visor locking onto Jack, who was already approaching with his squad.

*Nash:* "...You're late."

*Jack:* "You're welcome."

Before either of them could speak further, Nash's gaze shifted past Jack to the rebels following behind. His posture tensed, muscles coiling like a predator about to strike. In an instant, he shoved Jack aside, drawing his weapon.

*Nash:* "Rebels!"

*Jack (catching his footing, raising a hand):* "Nash, wait!"



But Nash was already in motion, his weapon trained on Malik and Velvet, who were stepping forward cautiously, hands raised.

*Malik:* “Whoa, whoa, easy there, red man.”

*Velvet:* “Let’s not shoot the people who just saved your life, yeah?”

Jack stepped between Nash and the rebels.

*Jack:* “They’re with me.”

Nash hesitated, his weapon still raised, his breathing still heavy.

*Nash:* “With you?”

*Jack:* “Yes. They’re not the enemy today, Nash.”

Nash’s visor flicked between Jack and the rebels, his grip on his weapon tightening before, slowly, he lowered it. His gaze fixed on Velvet sharply as he recognized her.

*Nash:* “You.”

Velvet raised an eyebrow, as her eyes glinted with amusement.

*Velvet:* “The one and only.”

*Nash:* “You made that garbage propaganda poster.”

*Velvet:* “Hey, in defense of six-years-younger-me, I didn’t know it’d end up being *that* cheesy.”

*Nash:* “You had me standing on a pile of dead rebels with fireworks going off in the background.”

*Velvet (shrugging):* “Artistic license.”

*Nash:* “I hated it.”

*Velvet:* “So did I, if that helps.”

Jack sighed internally, watching the strange exchange. Nash shook his head, turning back to Jack, his voice a low growl.

*Nash:* “She’s with us?”

*Jack:* “Unfortunately.”

*Velvet:* “You love me.”

Nash ignored her, turning to his marines, who were already regrouping, checking ammo and tending to their wounds. Of the ten men he landed with, only five remained in walking condition. Nash’s jaw clenched, his focus narrowing.

*Nash:* “The Zal’kahn won’t stop sending patrols.”

Jack glanced at the marines – battered, exhausted, but alive.

*Jack:* “What’s your situation?”

*Nash:* “I landed with ten men. Five of them are dead. If you were thirty minutes later, the rest of us would’ve been gone too.”

Jack gave a subtle nod, his helmet hiding the flicker of concern that crossed his face. Nash’s armor was cracked, and his movements were stiffer than usual. He turns around and walks to the body of a dead marine and picks up his dogtag, staring at it silently for a few seconds as it dangles from his fist. Here, Jack noticed something. Nash was fixated. Obsessed with keeping his men alive. Jack had seen that look before. It never ended well.

*Jack:* “We need to get away from here. Come with me to the rebel hideout.”

*Nash:* “I don’t trust the separatists.”

*Jack:* “You’re running on fumes, Nash. We have to regroup.”

Nash’s grip on the dogtag hardened, but before he could argue, Velvet stepped in.

*Velvet:* “Seven’s right. We need to fall back. Regroup, resupply, and figure out our next move. And besides, I’m sure you never tried sleeping in a Confederate bunk bed. Might be worth checking out.”

Nash stared at her, but Velvet just smiled, unfazed.

*Velvet:* “Trust me, Ascendant. You’ll wanna try that sturdy handiwork out. I guarantee it can even withstand your weight!”

Nash wasn’t convinced, but he didn’t argue. He glanced at his marines, then back at Jack.

*Nash:* “Fine. For lack of a better choice.”

*Jack:* “We will head back the way we came; through the tunnels.”

*Nash:* “Are they secure?”

*Jack:* “For now.”

The group began to move, retreating back toward the tunnels post-haste. Velvet lingered for a moment, her eyes scanning the distant horizon, where the faint glow of something ancient and powerful pulsed through one of the nine spires stretching to the clouds just as the sun was setting.

She didn’t mention it to anyone, not yet.

FOLLOWS. . .