

STRANGER ON A STRANGE SHORE



A CHARACTER DRIVEN TRAVELLER
RPG ADVENTURE

TOBY SMITH

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An epic Traveller campaign story

Written by Toby Smith

February – April 2025

Based on a character-driven Traveller RPG adventure

GM: Andy

Players: Toby, Adrian, Ed & Janis

With special thanks to the crew for surviving long enough to tell the tale.

Back Cover Blurb

"Assess... Adapt... Survive..." That was the mantra of the old Imperial marine general.

When strangers awaken in a hostile land with no memory of how they got there, survival becomes the only certainty. But there is more than death lurking in the shadows - there is destiny.

Drawn together by fate, or something stranger, they must learn to survive a world they do not know, facing threats they cannot yet understand.

What begins as a desperate struggle for life becomes a journey of revelation, sacrifice, and rebirth. Bonds are forged in blood and fire, mysteries unfold in the dust, and a long-lost purpose begins to stir beneath the ruins of forgotten worlds.

Stranger on a Strange Shore is a character-driven science fiction saga of survival, identity, and the rediscovery of purpose - set in the far future of the Traveller universe.

An AI ChatGPT assisted story based on the Traveller adventure.

Thanks to the following players for their human input!

Toby "Snake Eyes" Smith (Me!) - Aleksander Zarkov & Patrick Stirling & Calista Fox
& The Author

Adrian Curry - Charles Huebert-Cutter

Eddie Curry - Stan Kolinski

Janis - Aristotle "Aris" Papadakis

Andy Williams – The GM – without whom none of this would have happened!

Also available:

Stranger on a Strange Shore – The Appendices.

More background character information, the making of, and extras.

FOREWORD: Why and How I Wrote This Story.

If you don't want to know the hows and whys, feel free to skip this section. But if you're curious for some insight, read on. There are no major spoilers in this narrative.

Why did I do it?

This story didn't begin with a plot. It began with a group of friends sitting down to play a game of *Traveller* over Zoom on Tuesday nights. The game was run by Andy, our long-time GM. (Note, Andy is a glutton for punishment and ran the same adventure for a separate group of players simultaneously on a Sunday night. Their story is similar, but different)

I wrote this story for several reasons.

First and foremost: for my own enjoyment. Retelling the game as a story let me relive it all over again, but with added flavour and dialogue we hadn't thought of at the time. It became a labour of love. A project that I wanted to see through to the best of my ability. It kept me busy with something creative and productive.

Second: To remember.

Years ago, I played a Chronicler in an old D&D campaign and wrote that story down - with a pencil, in a notebook (imagine that!). Years later, with memories faded, I dug out those old books and it was like discovering lost scrolls. The memories came flooding back.

I wanted to do that again. To create a record for the future. Insurance against dementia! (And in that sense, it's somewhat ironic that this story begins with a loss of memory.)

Throughout this process, I had the help of a rather unusual co-author — my AI companion. ChatGPT was my editor, my sounding board, and, on the late nights when the words wouldn't come, my inspiration. Together we turned raw notes into chapters, improvisation into narrative, and memory into story.

Which is another reason I wrote this; to see what AI could really do, and I'll admit, I was impressed. The more ChatGPT learned, the more it could refer back and add to the depth of the story. There were moments I was amazed by what it came up with... and other moments when I thought, "I wish I'd thought of that during the game."

I had tried writing an AI-assisted story before - a *D&D* side-quest in the Dolmenwood setting, focused on my ranger, Varchak Tempest. But that story stalled. My character died, and the group never finished the quest. That story lies unfinished.

The fact that you're reading this means we saw this adventure through to the end.

How did I do it?

First, I defined the characters. Traveller's lifepath character generation helped immensely. My characters Xander and Paddy ended up more or less how I intended – at least they joined the right career and didn't end up drifting.. Cali, however, took a complete left turn, and ended up more fun and layered and a richer character because of it. Then I fleshed out and expanded upon those backgrounds. A lot!

Defining the characters up front gave me (and the AI) something to build on - their voice, their tone, their choices. And the more I used ChatGPT, the more it understood how to carry those characters forward.

For the other players' characters, I built on what backstory their players had written, (some more than others). I added character connections with mine, and expanded from there. The initial investment paid off, both in roleplaying and in storytelling.

You get out what you put in.

During the game sessions, I took a lot of notes. Then I'd expand them; adding bits of remembered dialogue, character thoughts, more detail. I fed those notes into ChatGPT, one small scene at a time, and asked it to retell them as a story.

Sometimes I'd ask it to up the tempo, or make a scene more cinematic. Most times I had to tweak it, adjust dialogue, match what actually happened, or merge multiple AI versions to get what I wanted. And then I went back over it all again, and again, lots more tweaking to tie in threads that appeared later in the story to tie in with earlier scenes. Make sure I wasn't repeating myself. Make sure everything was consistent. When I thought something was good, I made it better! Then another read through and more tweaking! And a couple of final parses to make sure it looked right, not wanting a page break at the wrong point, making the pictures the right size to wrap text around – things you don't notice if they are right, but would be glaringly obvious if they were wrong. I probably spent as long editing as I did with the initial draft. But the story flows MUCH better because of it.

Reading back over chapter 1, I realised there is very little dialogue, more a description of the locations and an inventory of what was collected – much like how I would keep notes playing in a D+D adventure. But in a way, that suits the mood of the story to start with – it was disjointed, muddled, scavenging. But if you don't like that style of storytelling, please bear with it, it does get much better.

My one overriding criterion was to keep the story true to what happened in the game session. I may have added dialogue or some minor scenes, but nothing story changing. And nothing was actually changed from what happened in the game. That was especially true for combat scenes, where I kept it to a round-by-round, blow-by-blow recollections of events. Even the turn order initiative, even if at times that made the combat jump from one scene to another and back again. But that was important, and I instructed the AI accordingly. Without giving the numbers of dice rolled, you can get the gist of whether it was a critical, fumble or near miss.

There is one section where the group was separated, and this was played out individually which added to the fog of war. I didn't have access to those chats and logs (despite repeated requests to Andy). But I don't think anything significant was missed by not including those scenes.

It's worth noting: **AI relies on the input you give it and the way you phrase your questions.** It's not just "tell me a story." It's about shaping the results, editing, refining, and reworking.

I was always very much the author.

The Technology I used:

I used ChatGPT Model 4o. It soon became apparent that I needed to upgrade to the paid for Plus version as I was running out of memory.

As I wrote the story, I also used the AI to go off on a tangent at times, asking it to draw a picture (it rarely got these to something I was happy with), or count the ammo used in a combat, for example. Speaking of images, I did try out a few other AI image generators, Gencraft being one, but like all free versions you only get limited uses per day and not much option to edit. So, most of the images in this story are those Andy provided during the adventure, or tweaked by him, with a few of my own creations.

Around Chapter 11, ChatGPT hit its maximum length for a single conversation. There was no way to cut from that memory, so I had to start a new chat.

Initially with no data input, the new thread had some background info from memory but got some things hilariously wrong (like thinking one of my *D&D* characters was part of the *Traveller* crew!). So, I had to re-feed the entire story that I had written so far, piece by piece. I asked the old chat to summarise each character's full details and reloaded that into the new chat. And so, version 2 of the *Traveller* story conversation was created, uncluttered and more consistent, without several versions of character background or random ramblings. And so, I was able to continue adding to it and carry the story through to the finish.

Just as I had finished the story and was playing around with some pictures, version 2 of the conversation maxed out too. But this time stuck during an image creation which meant I couldn't even interrogate it. ChatGPT Tech Help couldn't help much either. Fortunately, this time most of the conversation was in memory and I was able to carry on with my tweaks using version 3 conversation, although some of the content was lost and had to be reminded.

One of those later tweaks was trying out the preview of GPT4.5, which is supposed to be good for writing and exploring ideas. I used this to rewrite a conversation that Zarkov was in, and instead of saying "Yes" it said "Da". So, I asked it why, and it said "*because Zarkov's character has a Slavic-sounding name and background (Aleksandr Zarkov, often implying Russian heritage). It felt natural to briefly reflect that cultural nuance in his dialogue—particularly as a quiet confirmation of agreement or camaraderie.*". Impressive, and a nice touch. I briefly, very briefly, contemplated rewriting the whole story with the 4.5 model. But not only would that be far too much effort, after a couple of uses it said it was a limited feature, and I only had a couple more uses. I tried rewriting the opening paragraphs with the 4.5 model, but I was happier with the original, it seemed more raw, punchy, confused even.

About the adventure (without giving anything away):

This was our first Traveller adventure, an intro for our new characters. Some of us had played the original traveller back in the 80's – Yes, we really are that old! Andy, our GM, said the core of the adventure was based on a published *Traveller* module, but only the early parts, Acts 1 and 2 as he called them (up to around Chapter 9 in my Story). He then expanded it, adding Act 3 as well as a few more layers of nuance. The goal was to give us the full Traveller experience: exploration, survival, deduction, combat, space travel. I won't say any more here for fear of spoilers...

In summary:

So, here you have it, the finished labour of love.

Is it perfect? Probably not. But I am pleased with it. I think the last three chapters are the best and most enjoyable, based on almost no actual adventure. By that point the AI knew how the story and how the characters would act, and the story almost wrote itself.

Will anyone read it? Who knows. Some people are dead set against AI, some of my co-players included! But that's fine. I wrote this for me. But I'd like to hope others might read it and let me know what they think.

Am I glad I did it? Yes, absolutely. A month after the adventure finished, I am still tweaking the story, still getting enjoyment, and creating something that I think is special.

Using the AI was part time rewarding, part time frustrating, sometimes surprising, sometimes repetitive (until you teach it to not use a certain phrase again) but it always amazed me at what it could do, and it was always learning and adapting. AI is frighteningly smart!

If you, dear reader, get only half the enjoyment from reading this as I did writing it, then it will be worth your while, time well spent, and I thank you for your time. Yes, it's a lot of pages, but a lot of short lines and spaces so don't be put off by the page count. You can probably read it in 3 hours or so, which is about the length of just one gaming session.

To my friends who played the game: Thank you for the world we built together. I really hope you enjoy my portrayal of your characters and enjoy reliving the adventure we shared.

[If there is anything you strongly object to about your character in this story, please let me know and together we can amend it]

To my friends in the other group, I hope you find enjoyment in this parallel universe and can share our journey. You know the destination, you know the major roads, but you don't know the twists and turns and you certainly don't yet know the passengers.

To Andy, our GM: Thank you for running it, and putting up with me!

To myself: Thank you for sticking with it.

To ChatGPT: Thank you for being my co-author and the hidden member of the crew.

And to anyone else who reads this, just thank you for reading it.

To all, please share your thoughts and critique with me, good or bad, I can take it, Mostly!

Thank you.

Toby - April 2025



CHAPTER 1 – A RUDE AWAKENING...

"You are awakening from deep sleep. Breathe normally. Remain still as motor functions restore. Do not panic."

The voice was calm. Precise. Unfeeling. It sliced through the darkness like a scalpel - clinical, detached, and utterly indifferent.

Then came the cold. Bone-deep. Soul-deep.

A jolt followed. Sharp. Violent. Like a defibrillator to the mind.

Lungs gasped. Air rushed in - stale, metallic, dry.

The world didn't return all at once. It came in flickers.

Red light. Blurred shapes. The low thrum of machinery trying, and failing, to hold everything together. Groaning steel. The gentle lap of water on metal floors.

Four figures lay in coffin-like cryo pods built into the walls. Displays above their heads flickered weakly, strings of unreadable data dancing across cracked screens.

Their limbs wouldn't move. Muscles screamed. Joints burned. Cryosleep had not been kind.

They were waking. But not whole.

Memories were gone, wiped clean .. Their minds were fogged, smeared with panic and disorientation.

The air reeked. Stale. Heavy. Beneath it all, the sickly tang of something rotting. And water. Dampness creeping in, rising, pooling.

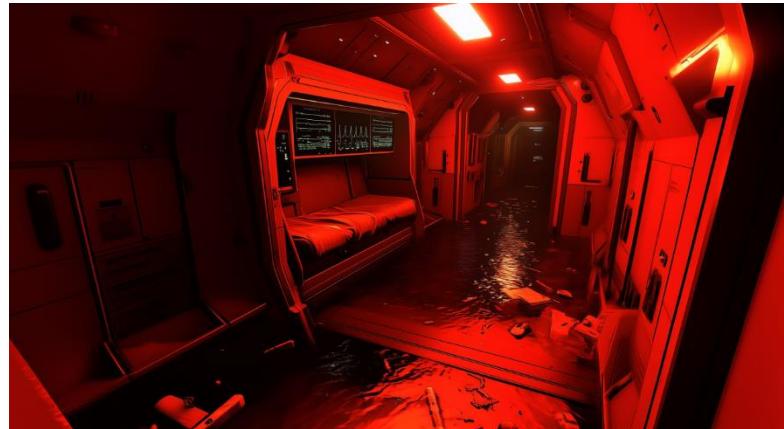
Red lights flickered overhead, casting long, uneasy shadows that twisted with every movement. Water glistened across the floor, thin and spreading, reflecting the crimson hue like blood.

And then came the questions - silent, instinctive, inescapable:

Who am I?

Where is this?

Why can't I remember anything?



There were no answers. Only a sense, sharp and undeniable, that something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

*

Xander was the first to move, forcing himself upright with a grunt. His body, trained by decades of discipline, forces itself into motion even as his mind lags behind. His breath is ragged, his limbs sluggish. Low berth sleep. He's endured it before, but this time was different. His eyes fluttered open. His body ached, his limbs unresponsive. The cold bite of cryosleep still clung to his skin. He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry, his tongue thick in his mouth. Red emergency lighting flickered above him, casting uneasy shadows across the low berth chamber. Something wasn't right.

His name... Aleksandr Zarkov. Brigadier. Imperial Marines. Retired. That much, at least, came back to him. His hands clenched instinctively, muscle memory checking for a sidearm that wasn't there. His uniform was gone - just a thin nylon jumpsuit clinging to his skin. Instinct tells him to move, to assess, to understand.

Beside him, Charles stirred, rubbing his temples, eyes scanning the room with an instinctive wariness. Aris groaned, muttering something half-coherent. Stan, ever the survivor, was already glancing around, looking for danger.

They are strangers to themselves, their minds hollowed out of everything except who they are. The how, the when, and the why - all missing.

As their eyes grow accustomed to the red glow, recognition of their companions, their memories return in fragments - faces, names, moments clicking into place.

*

Xander had attended the diplomatic event as a guest, though he had little patience for the politics of it all. The room had been full of smug bureaucrats and stiff uniforms, none of whom interested him. Then there was Charles - charming, quick-witted, and, most importantly, equally unimpressed by the whole affair. They had found common ground over a well-mixed cocktail, swapping stories and bar room philosophy. When Xander learned Charles had his own ship, the Lady of the Stars, the conversation lasted well into the night.

Stan and Aris recall prison - the endless routine, the unspoken rules. Gangs controlled everything, and the only way to stay out of trouble was to make yourself useful. Both had found a quiet niche in administration, handling records, keeping their heads down. In the chaos of confinement, they had become unlikely allies, proving that trust could exist even in a place built to break it.

Memories slowly returning, the men fought to recollect their own past.

*



Brigadier Sir Aleksandr "Xander" Zarkov, KSI

The old soldier never imagined he'd wake up like this - half-naked, freezing, and utterly lost.

Aleksandr Zarkov was born on New Moscow, a rich agricultural frontier world where on his family farm hard work was the measure of a man. As a boy, he'd been drawn to the Star port, running errands for merchants and off-worlders, listening to spacers' tales of distant wars and uncharted frontiers.

The Marines had been his ticket to that world, but he'd never been some noble-born officer groomed for command.

No, he worked hard thrived in the Imperial Marines Support Corps, graduating with honours and earning his commission as a junior officer.

He rose through the ranks not with raw aggression, but with logistical brilliance. They called him "Stonewall" after his calculated defence of Batav Fortress, a battle won not with guns, but with supply lines, fortifications, and sheer stubbornness. When pirates attacked Space Station Chandler, it was Zarkov who rerouted power, sealed bulkheads, and turned a doomed outpost into a fortress. On Esperanza, he orchestrated planetary landings with precision, ensuring every squad had fuel, ammunition, and a way home.

His knighthood hadn't come from heroics, but from necessity—a title granted alongside his promotion to Brigadier, a sign of his service rather than birthright. And a boring desk job. And a ceremonial seat at diplomatic functions - a nightmare for a soldier who despised small talk. One such event had introduced him to Charles, a nobleman, a diplomat, and, much to Xander's relief, a man who didn't take himself too seriously. They'd shared a drink, exchanged stories, and bonded over their mutual distaste or ridicule for the pompous elite.

Charles had a ship, *Lady of the Stars*, inherited from some uncle. A luxury yacht that had seen its fair share of both noble parties and shady dealings. Xander was already planning his retirement and needed something to keep himself from rotting away in a gentlemen's club. Seemed like a fine arrangement.

And then retirement. Evenings at the Travellers' Aid Society, sharing war stories over vodka, restless for something new.

Now, he awakens in an unknown ship, his uniform gone, his weapons missing, and his memory hazy. The discipline remains, though, buried beneath the grogginess. Assess, adapt, survive. That's how you make it out of a warzone. That's how you make it out of here.

*



Charles Huebert-Cutter, 23rd Baron de Grey

Charles had always imagined adventure. He just hadn't expected it to start like this.

Born into nobility, raised on etiquette and expectation, Charles had never quite fit the mold. University had been a bore, so he left, trading dull academia for the thrill of investigative journalism. That drive led him into diplomacy, where words were weapons and secrets were currency.

Journalism had been his first escape, a way to slip through bureaucratic nets while indulging his curiosity. He wrote about frontier worlds, high-stakes negotiations, and the seedy dealings of the rich and powerful. His talent for uncovering stories, and charming the right people, eventually landed him a position in the diplomatic corps. Eight years of playing the game, shaking hands, and smiling through gritted teeth. He had climbed the ranks, learned the rules... and, inevitably, learned how to break them.

That was when Imperial Intelligence had come knocking. A man with his connections and his silver tongue? He was perfect for infiltration, for slipping into places spies couldn't go. But the game had its risks. His cover had been blown, his career in intelligence cut short by a well-placed betrayal.

So, he left it behind. The old life, the politics, the deception. He had a ship now, his uncle's old luxury yacht, the *Lady of the Stars*, or *Ol'Betsy* as he affectionately calls her, and a fresh start. She was mortgaged to the stars and still carried the stains of past misdeeds, but she had class, and that mattered. And she was his. And he had contacts, and influence.

It was at one of dreadful diplomatic gathering that he'd met Zarkov, an old warhorse stuck among the peacocks. They'd shared drinks, stories, and a mutual understanding that most of the room was full of pompous fools. Zarkov was considering new opportunities. Charles had a ship. One thing led to another.

Then he woke up in a freezing low berth, on a ship that *wasn't* his.

*



Stan Kolinski

Stan was no stranger to bad awakenings.

He'd grown up on the fringes, where laws were more like suggestions. A petty thief by trade, he had lived by his wits, slipping through the shadows, bypassing locks, and staying one step ahead of the law. He had no noble title, no grand inheritance, just quick hands, a sharp mind, and a talent for getting into places he shouldn't be.

But even the best thieves knew when to change course. The law had been closing in, and Stan had needed a way out. The Scouts had offered him a fresh start—a place to put his skills to use in ways that wouldn't land him in a cell. For a while, it worked. Until it didn't.

Old habits die hard, and temptation had a way of creeping in. Stan had taken something, something he shouldn't have. A moment of greed, a miscalculation, and suddenly the law was on him again. This time, there was no slipping away. He was caught, sentenced, and locked away.

Prison had been another kind of wilderness, with its own rules and predators. Gangs ran everything, and stepping out of line could get you killed. He kept his head down, avoided the worst of it, and found an unlikely way to stay out of trouble—bookkeeping. Funny how the skills of a thief translated to administration. If you knew how to hide things, you knew how to find them.

That was how he met Aris. Another outsider, another man trying to avoid the pull of the gangs. The two of them had found common ground, working admin jobs to stay out of the worst of it.

Now, with prison behind him and the stars ahead, Stan wasn't about to waste his second chance.

And then, he woke up in a low berth, freezing, on a ship he didn't recognize.

And just like that, it felt like he was back in the game.

*



Aristotle "Aris" Papadakis

Aris had woken up in worse places. Probably.

Aristotle “Aris” Papadakis had always been a man caught between two worlds. The son of a preacher in the tight-knit Asimov community, he was raised under the weight of faith, duty, and the unwavering devotion of his father’s parish. From an early age, he knew scripture as well as he knew the seasons of the land, able to recite verses with the same ease he handled a plow. To the townsfolk, the Papadakis family was near holy-symbols of righteousness, pillars of the community.

But Aris? Aris was the black sheep.

Charm came naturally to him. So did trouble. His father’s good name and his own silver tongue let him get away with more than he should have - small cons, petty crimes, and a taste for anything that could dull the gnawing sense that he wasn’t enough. Alcohol, then drugs, then deeper into the shadows of Asimov’s underbelly. That was how he fell in with Sergey “Hawk” Sokolov, the local dealer, a man who saw potential in Aris beyond the farm and the pews.

When Aris became the first in his family to go to university, it should have been a triumph. Instead, it was a disaster. He had the charm, but not the discipline. The intelligence, but not the patience. What began as parties turned into self-medication, and soon his academic career was nothing more than a haze of bare-knuckle fights, underground deals, and all-night benders. Expulsion was inevitable.

Broken and lost, Aris returned home, where his father took him in with open arms. For a time, he embraced faith, dedicating himself to scripture, living in the quiet of the countryside. The parish saw it as a miracle, proof of divine grace, and they even raised a statue to the Papadakis family in the town square.

But whispers grew. Aris, seen slipping away in the dead of night. Aris, speaking in hushed tones with Hawk. The past wasn’t so easily buried. Soon, he was running errands again - more than errands. A negotiation gone wrong, a man left bleeding, and when the authorities came knocking, Aris was the one who took the fall.

Four years behind bars. Prison had been a lesson in survival. He kept his head down, dabbled in mechanics through vocational training, but never committed. The only real respite came from bookkeeping, an unlikely skill picked up alongside a fellow inmate, Stan, both of them using numbers and ledgers as a way to stay out of the reach of the gangs.

By the time they got out, Aris had promised himself a fresh start. Maybe this time he’d stay clean.

Then he woke up in a shipwreck, wearing nothing but a jumpsuit, with no memory of how he got there.

*

But each in their own way shared the same nagging thoughts – Where are they?
How did they get here?
And more importantly, why?
Nothing, a void where that memory should be.

None of them belonged here. And yet, here they were, waking from a deep, unnatural sleep. Their clothing was unfamiliar; thin grey jumpsuits, cheap and uniform, slippers barely enough to protect against the freezing deck. They had been stored like cargo, left to the mercy of a failing ship.

Feet splashed into freezing water as they stumbled out of the low berths. The shock bit into numb legs, dragging groans and curses from dry throats. They staggered upright, blinking against the flickering red emergency lights.

Each man instinctively checked himself, patting limbs, flexing muscles, testing strength dulled by long suspension. No wounds, but every movement was sluggish, like wading through mud.

Their eyes met across the cramped cryo-chamber, suspicion and confusion raw in their faces.
“Anything?” Stan rasped, voice hoarse from disuse.

Charles shook his head. “Not a damn thing.”

They questioned each other, scraping the edges of memory. Names - yes, those returned with a strange certainty. Faces, skills, fragments of a life before. But how they ended up here, in cryo, on this failing ship? Nothing. A black void where memory should have been.

Their only possessions were the thin grey jumpsuits clinging to their chilled bodies. No weapons. No tools. No answers.

A storage locker stood nearby, recessed into the wall. Zarkov yanked it open with a grunt and found it empty. No gear. No supplies. Whoever had left them here had stripped everything away.

Something else caught his eye: a small box wedged under one of the low berths.

He knelt, water soaking his knees, and pulled it free. Inside, padded recesses held vials. Most were missing, but five remained, sealed and intact.

Zarkov frowned, examining the box. He glanced toward the empty cryo-pods and found the answer: empty vials plugged into a receptacle. Some sort of life-support fluid, maybe, a stabilizer for cryosleep. Maybe something more.

He tucked the box under one arm. *Never throw away something that might save your life*, he thought grimly.

They weren’t alone.

Two other low berths lined the opposite wall. In them, motionless figures lay encased in frost. Their unfamiliar faces were locked in silent, twisted grimaces. Whoever they were, they had likely died, frozen in their unnatural sleep.

The water at their feet trickled forward toward the bow. It smelled clean, not brackish, not chemical. Fresh water.

From where? A crack? A breach? Something worse?

There was no time to waste.

Moving cautiously, sticking close to the flickering emergency lighting along the walls, they made their way into a narrow common area. Metal tables bolted to the floor. Discarded utensils. Empty ration packs and a few energy bars scattered like the remnants of a last meal.

Signs of life and of sudden departure.

Whoever had been here was gone. And seemingly left in a hurry.

Then, at the other end of the common area they found another chamber for low berths. One was occupied.

Inside, curled tight against the chill, was a woman. Pale. Shivering. Alive, but only just.

The display above her berth flickered weakly. **Anson**, it read.

Zarkov moved first, easing the lid open and lifting her upright. She sagged against him, trembling and dazed.

Her eyes fluttered open. Confusion. Fear. No recognition.

She remembered nothing.

Just like them.

They had no blankets, no med kit, no heat—nothing to offer but each other. They kept her close, shielding her from the worst of the cold as best they could.

One more question in a ship drowning in them.

And still, no answers.

Only the cold. Only the flickering red lights. Only the creaking groan of a ship slowly dying around them.

*

Xander and Charles explored the upper deck, through the Iris Valve to the bridge. The iris valve door barely had enough power to function. As it groaned open, the emergency lights flickered and dimmed.

The bridge was now useless. One whole side had been scorched, blasted, ruined. Whatever had happened here—it had been fast, violent. The control panels were warped beyond recognition, blackened husks that would never respond again. Xander moved through the ruined space. The ships locker, full of junk, but he searched it and found an electronic key. Useless? Maybe. But maybe not. A revolver in a holster. Three bullets. Not much, but enough. A handful of spanners. Crude, but tools nonetheless.

From nowhere, the ship groaned and lurched, sending everyone off their balance - the agonising sound of metal under strain. The power and lights flickered again.

Two doors led off the bridge. Crew cabins. The first cabin, sparse, a woman's. Xander found a bag containing painkillers, a small photo of a woman. Someone who mattered? Who was she?

The second cabin, plain, a man's. A jacket, orange and sturdy, hung inside. Xander pulled it on, welcoming the small relief from the ship's biting cold. At least it had pockets!

Beyond the bridge, they found the engine room, or at least, what was left of it. Fuel tanks - intact, but nearly dry. Drives - undamaged. Power plant - fried beyond all hope. Xander exhaled sharply. No power. No control. No way off.

Then, above one of the dead consoles, he spotted something. A shotgun. He pulled it free. Three shells. He felt comfortable now he was armed.

*

Stan and Aris descended the broken lift shaft, slipping into the cold darkness below.

The air was thick with damp, metal, and something acrid - burnt plastic, scorched wiring. The deck beneath them splashed underfoot, water puddling, and at the bow end as deep as their waist. The source was unclear, but it wasn't seawater. No salt. No oil.

They had descended in to the cargo bay.

Four large metal containers loomed in the flickering light.

One was a ruin—blackened, twisted metal, its contents obliterated by some violent explosion. Shrapnel was embedded in the bulkheads. Whatever had been inside, it was gone.

One container was already open. Aris waded toward it, running his fingers across the stencilled logo on the storage chests inside - "**STENMORE MINERALS.**" Corporate cargo. A mining operation maybe? Inside were large drill bits, lifting robot parts, spare components, wrenches, and tools. Packets of dry rations had been stuffed in the corners.

The other two containers were shut. The locking mechanisms were buckled, twisted—jammed. Possibly from the impact of a crash landing?

Aris gritted his teeth and forced one open. More of the same; spare parts, mechanical equipment, crates of precision tools. Nothing useful for escape. Nothing to explain what happened. The last container proved to be more reluctant to open, and the pair returned to the upper deck.

Stan and Aris climbed back up the broken lift shaft, soaked and shivering. The wet fabric of their thin grey jumpsuits clung to them, and their slippers squelched with every step.

As they emerged onto the upper deck, they found Xander and Charles pushing through an iris valve. The emergency lighting flickered dimly, struggling to stay alive. Cold, tainted water dripped from above, pooling along the corridors.

Stan asked. "Anything up here?"

Xander nodded. "Crew quarters, burnt-out bridge, an engine room with a busted power plant. No chance of getting this ship moving." Xander pulled the orange work jacket tighter around his broad shoulders. "We're looking through the front section now."

Beyond the iris valve lay a corridor lined with ten passenger rooms. All identical. All basic. Thin bunks, a small locker, nothing personal. No signs of struggle. No signs of life. Just emptiness. One cabin, however, held something. Charles stepped inside, brushing aside a damp grey blanket. A small, rectangular card rested on the bed. He picked it up. Plastic. Worn. A timestamp card - an employee pass. The picture on it showed a man in an orange jacket. Xander frowned, glancing down at the jacket he was now wearing.

*

With nothing left to search inside the wreck, the group faced two options: a manual hatch in the ceiling or the airlock leading to the unknown outside. They chose the airlock.

The first door hissed open, revealing the chamber beyond. The second door—the one leading out—had a small window, the first window they had seen in the entire ship. Through it, they could see... water. The ship was completely submerged. Not deep, maybe four meters from the surface. Light filtered down from above, murky but clear enough to make out the shifting patterns of waves.



Inside the airlock, they found a single, basic vac suit. Zarkov inspected it. Functional. Not ideal, but he had trained for EVA manoeuvres in worse conditions. A revolver sat clipped to the wall, four shots loaded. Xander took it, then without hesitation handed it to Stan.

"I assume you know how to use this," he said simply.

Before leaving the ship, the group gathered what few belongings they had scavenged. They tore bedsheets into strips, tying them together into a makeshift rope. Xander donned the Vacc suit. He checked the seals, flexed his fingers inside the gloves, turned on the oxygen.

The plan was simple: Xander would go first, stepping into the water as the airlock flooded. He would guide the others up to the surface. They braced themselves. Xander hit the release. The outer door opened. A surge of cold water blasted through the airlock, knocking them backward against the inner door. The freezing rush stole their breath, sending a shock through their bodies. Xander pushed forward into the flood, his training kicking in. He gripped each of them in turn, pulling them toward the open hatch, and then pushing them towards the surface. One by one, they kicked and clawed their way up. Then - air. They broke through, gasping. The sky above was of a dawning morning. The water around them was still, a massive lake, the closest shore some 200 meters away. They had made it out.

Xander turned in the water, taking in the wreck for the first time. A dark, metal hulk, resting in the darkness of this body of water. The hatch they discounted using was a direct exterior hatch. Had they opened it from inside earlier, the ship would have flooded entirely. Good call.

Then something else struck him. The ship had no markings. No ship name. No corporate logos. No registration numbers. That was concerning. Now just a dead, silent hulk.

The group swam to the shore and pulled themselves onto dry land, dripping and exhausted.

*

All around them was open grassland that gave way to a swathe of forest. A few kilometres away to the east, as the land rises, there appeared to be a communications tower atop a small hill. The only man made structure for as far as the eye can see.. The air was crisp and cool, a temperate spring climate.

Xander, ever the logistics officer, instinctively took stock of their situation and salvaged supplies. He exhaled slowly, rubbing the lingering grogginess from his temples as he looked over their meagre pile of salvaged gear. The others sat around him, still damp from the lake, exhaustion settling in. The sun was climbing, warming the grassland around them, but their situation was anything but comfortable.

"Alright, listen up," Xander said, his voice taking on the steady, authoritative tone that had guided troops through worse situations than this. "We're in unknown territory, we've got no clue how we got here, and we're running on borrowed time. Let's see what we've got to work with."

He crouched beside the pile of scavenged supplies and began laying it all out.

"Two revolvers. Stan, you've got the one with three shots. Aris, yours has four and a holster. Keep it handy, but don't go wasting ammo playing cowboy."

Aris smirked, tucking the revolver into a makeshift belt made from torn sheets. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Shotgun with three shells," Xander continued, picking it up and checking the action. "I'll hold onto this. Don't like only having three rounds, but better than nothing." He tore a strip of sheeting and made a crude shoulder sling for it.

He tapped the small collection of tools. "Spanners, wrenches, decent for makeshift weapons. Not great, but if we have to crack some skulls, they'll do. Who knows, we may even need some tools. We can sharpen some of these knives from the galley, maybe make a few spears if we find some solid branches."

Xander lifted the small bottle of pills they'd found in the crew quarters. "Painkillers, not much, but if someone gets banged up, they might keep you on your feet. I'll keep hold of these."

Next, he held up a small plastic fob. "Electronic key. No idea what it's for, but we'll hold onto it. Could be useful later. And this photo ID timestamp card. Charles, why don't you hold on to those, and that photo of the woman."

Next, he adjusted the Vacc suit that he still wore. "It's not too cumbersome and I've trained how to wear and move in it. It's basic protection too."

He patted the orange jacket. "Found this in the crew quarters. Not exactly a flak vest, but it's warmer than these jumpsuits." He handed the jacket to Charles, who pulled it on gratefully against the morning chill.

And then looking at the remaining items. "Finally, our rations. Enough for a day, maybe. And assuming the lake is fresh water, it'll be better than that we filled from the ship. I suggest we each take a bundle and wrap it in a sheet to carry it. There's a blanket each, some sheets made into a rope, a mug, assorted cutlery, and those 5 vials of life support fluid."

Xander looked up at the others, letting the weight of their situation settle in. "That's it. That's what we've got. No comms, no map, no idea where the hell we are."

He turned his gaze eastward, toward the solitary communications tower standing on the distant hill. And then abruptly turned towards the woman, "And then there's Anson here. She's in the same boat as us, we're all in this together, and your thoughts and contribution are as valuable as anyone's".

Despite the shock, the cold water evac, and hours of exertion, they all still felt... groggy... Hungover. Their memories were fractured. They knew each other, even if the full weight of their pasts was still hazy. But... They didn't know where they were. They didn't know how they got here. They didn't even remember how they ended up on that ship. But one thing was clear - Survival came first.

Xander continued "We've got two choices. We hunker down here, try to build up something resembling a camp, see what this place throws at us. Maybe search for other survivors or crew from the ship? Or..." He gestured toward the tower. "We start moving. That's the only sign of civilization I've seen. If there's power, maybe we can send a distress signal, maybe find some answers. I say we move out."

He let the words hang in the air, then looked to the others. "Thoughts?"



CHAPTER 2 – SURVIVE...

A cold wind whispered across the shoreline as the five figures pulled themselves onto the damp earth. The morning sun hung low on the horizon, casting a deep reddish glow over the vast, still waters of the lake. The lake was massive. They were on the eastern shore, and to the south, an untouched forest loomed, dark and dense. To the east, the land rose steadily, and atop a distant hill stood the only sign of civilization - a lone communications tower, skeletal against the morning sky.

They were wet, confused, and with no memory of how they got here. The events of the last several hours still clung to them like the damp fabric of their thin grey jumpsuits. Anson shivered slightly, her breath misting in the cold air. She frowned, murmuring something about a past life in mining, working the asteroids, handling equipment. It was the first real fragment of memory she had offered.

The place was eerily silent. No birds, no distant calls of animals, just the soft lap of water against the shore and the wind threading through the trees.

Xander and Aris took a moment to scan the shoreline for any sign of life or other survivors coming ashore, any tracks, but they found nothing. The sand and mud were undisturbed, untouched by anything except the waves and the wind.

Rations were accounted for - barely a day's worth. Their salvaged gear was meagre, but they made do. The group took the cutlery and fashioned crude daggers. Charles picked a suitable branch to use as a staff. Xander found a similar one to replace his lost cane. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Xander looked toward the distant tower. "We've got a heading," he said, his deep voice steady. "If there's a comm tower, there might be power, equipment, maybe even people."

The group, weary but resolute, set off toward the rising land, the tower standing as their first real purpose in this strange, silent world.

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The landscape remained forested, the ground rising and falling in gentle, rolling waves. At times, the trees thinned enough to offer a clear view of the communications tower ahead, but just as often, the terrain forced them off course - dense thickets of gorse and bracken, sudden gullies, and treacherous ravines that demanded caution.

The march was harder going than expected. Xander's leg throbbed with a dull, persistent ache, and Charles struggled as well, both men feeling the strain. The others fared better, but even they noticed something unsettling: the sun never seemed to climb much higher. It lingered, low and red on the horizon, casting long shadows through the trees.

Then, Stan stopped short.
“There,” he said, voice low.
Charles followed his gaze. A shape on the ground - a body. As they closed the distance, details became clear - a body dressed in an orange Vacc suit similar to the one Xander wore. Lying on the ground, propped up by a backpack strapped to its back, sprawled on the damp earth, motionless. Xander stepped forward, leaning on his walking stick, and nudged the figure’s boot. “Are you alright?” No response.



A name was stitched onto the chest of the suit: “Maxanni”.

Xander crouched and pulled open the visor. The face inside was that of a man, human, eyes closed, expression strangely peaceful in death. The body was still warm—he couldn’t have been dead more than a few hours.

“He had help,” Aris muttered, noting the makeshift splint on the man’s arm and the bandages wrapped around a gash on his forearm. “Someone tried to keep him alive.”

“Didn’t work,” Stan said grimly.

A backpack lay nearby. Inside, they found a few ration bars, a multi-tool, and a data pad with a shattered screen. Xander picked these up, stashing them inside his vacc suit.

Xander held up the ID card he’d salvaged from the ship. The name on it matched: David Maxanni. “Same guy,” he muttered. “And same suit, likely a survivor from the ship”.

Xander saw an opportunity, not just to investigate, but to rest.

“Alright,” he said, leaning on his cane. “We take ten. Catch our breath.” He nodded toward the still form. “And someone take that vacc suit, the poor bastard won’t need it.”

Stan knelt beside the body and began working the suit free. As he did, he noticed the ragged edges where external pockets should have been. “These were torn off,” he muttered. “Someone stripped them.”

Meanwhile, Xander eased himself down beneath the shade of a large tree to examine the datapad from the dead man’s pack. It was in rough shape; its screen fractured, most of the display unreadable. Still, he was no stranger to working with damaged electronics. He tapped at the surface, coaxing what little life was left in the device.

Most of the data was garbled beyond recognition, but after a few minutes of careful prodding, one fragment of text stood out:

“...find the stranger above all else...”

Xander exhaled slowly, mulling over the words. Who was this stranger. Who was looking for this “stranger?” And why?

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, he pocketed the datapad, pushed himself up with his cane and went to examine the now stripped body of Maxanni. Xander knelt beside it, brushing dirt from his gloves. Years of battlefield experience had given him a solid understanding of injuries and what killed a man.

He started with the most obvious wound - a gash on the right forearm, deep but not fatal. It had been hastily bandaged, and there was dried blood, but nothing that would have caused death on its own. The real problem was deeper. Xander pressed gently along the ribs, frowning as his fingers found unnatural stiffness beneath the skin. Internal bleeding. Likely a bad fall, blunt force trauma. No way to know for sure without proper tools, but the man had been doomed the moment the bleeding started.

He exhaled sharply. "Didn't die from the cut," he muttered, mostly to himself. "Something inside gave out."

Charles, standing nearby, adjusted the jacket Xander had given him, watching with a furrowed brow. "Could he have been left behind?"

"Maybe." Xander looked up. "Someone tried to help him. Bandaged the arm, splinted the arm. But internal bleeding..." He shook his head. "Not much they could've done, not out here."

Xander stood up straight, adjusted his vacc suit and addressed the group "OK, Time's up," he announced, "Let's get moving. Nothing more we can do for him."

As they left the body behind, Anson lagged slightly behind the group, her usual sharp gaze downcast. She had been quiet since they found the dead man - more so than usual. The sight of him, the way his body had been stripped of anything valuable, had rattled something deep inside her.

Charles noticed. He adjusted his pace to walk beside her, offering a small, tired smile. "You alright?" he asked, voice low enough that the others wouldn't overhear.

Anson didn't answer at first, just kept walking, feet crunching over dry leaves. Eventually, she exhaled, shaking her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "It's not just the body. It's the way he died. Someone tried to help him. Bandaged him up. Splinted his arm. And still, he didn't make it."

Charles nodded, glancing ahead at the others. "Yeah. Not exactly a comforting thought." He adjusted his grip on his makeshift staff. "But look, if someone helped him, that means there are other people out here. Might be friendly, might not, but we're not alone."

Anson frowned but said nothing.

Sensing she needed a distraction, Charles changed the subject. "You ever done much hiking? This terrain's a nightmare, but I suppose it beats being stuck on a station somewhere."

She huffed a small, almost amused breath. "Not really. Grew up in the belt. Closest I got to 'hiking' was climbing maintenance tunnels."

"There you go, then. Think of this as a really big maintenance tunnel. Just with worse gravity and no handrails."

That earned him a small, reluctant smirk. Not much, but enough. Charles let the conversation drift, keeping it light, pointing out landmarks, cracking the occasional joke. Anything to keep her mind occupied as they pressed on toward the tower.

*

Stan halted mid-step, his breath catching. "Something moved," he muttered, eyes fixed on a patch of undergrowth a few meters off the trail.

Xander and Aris froze, hands drifting toward their weapons. Charles squinted in the dimming light.

"Size of a fox," Stan whispered. "Might just be an animal."

For a long moment, there was nothing. No rustling, no second sign of movement. Just silence.

The wind stirred the trees, but the undergrowth remained still.

"Keep moving," Xander said at last, voice low. "No point waiting for it to show itself. Stay alert."

*

The group pressed on, the sun sinking lower, casting long shadows across the forested landscape. The climb grew steeper as they ascended the hill toward the communications antenna. The trees began to thin, and soon, they could see the outline of a small camp nestled at the base of the tower. From this vantage point, it became clear that the top of the hill had been levelled, the trees in the immediate area had been sawed down, their stumps jutting from the earth like broken teeth.

The outpost consisted of five or six pre-fabricated huts and three shipping containers, arranged haphazardly. An earthen embankment, rising three to four meters high, provided some protection on the east and south sides. It was a functional, utilitarian mining camp, likely established to prospect for valuable minerals.

As they approached, movement caught their eye - a woman and a teenage boy emerged from the camp. The woman clutched a shotgun, her stance tense, pointing it toward the treeline. Something - or someone - was out there.

Aris stepped forward and raised his hands in a non-threatening gesture.

"We are lost," he called out.

The woman turned her head slightly, taking them in before nodding toward the camp. "Let's get inside," she said quickly. "We don't want to be out here any longer than we need to be."

Once inside, she introduced herself. "I'm **Katriona**. You must be survivors from the crash. This planet is **Exocet**. This is **Proving Site 9**. We've been here about a year, prospecting for copper and iron for Stenmore Corp."



Charles, still catching his breath from the climb, glanced back toward the darkening forest. "What was in the woods?"

Katriona hesitated, exchanging a look with the boy. "Strange things. Especially in the last twelve hours. We were expecting a hauler to arrive. Saw the ship on the horizon, coming in for landing. Then... ", she shook her head, "... it veered off course. We lost sight of it. Figured it must have crashed. Then, almost immediately, the power to the site went down. Fusion reactor fried. Took us a while to get the battery backup online."

Her expression darkened. "That's not all. Our leader went out to check the situation... but never came back. We sent two more after him. Only one returned. He was badly wounded, agitated. Something attacked him. He fell into delirium and... he passed away just moments ago." She nodded toward a figure outside, digging a grave.

Xander straightened. "I need to examine the body. Do you have a medical facility?"

"Basic, but yes," she replied.

As they were led further into the camp, Katriona provided more information about Exocet. The planet's population was minimal, scattered, around ten thousand people, mostly low-tech hunter-gatherers. Those in the outpost had never seen them. The outpost was meant to be temporary, a stepping stone for future industrial expansion.

Katriona led the way, the shotgun slung over her shoulder, her tone brisk and to the point. "Alright, introductions."

She gestured to the first man - big, broad-shouldered, a veteran of countless flights if the lines on his face were any indication. "**Hambley** - the pilot of the crashed ship. I guess he's in charge here now. He runs the ship and, if you ask him, just about everything else."

Hambley grunted. "Damn right. Someone has to keep things moving."

Xander raised an eyebrow but said nothing. No point in clashing with the man now.

Katriona motioned to the smaller woman standing just behind him, barely speaking, her gaze flicking between them. "**Sayelle** – also from the ship, it's engineer. Knows power plants, could probably make a dead ship breathe again if you give her time. Doesn't say much, but she's good at what she does."

Sayelle gave a small nod, avoiding Hambley's glance. That was a dynamic Xander would have to watch.

Katriona pointed to Abe. "**Telford Abergevenny - Abe.** Clerk, but he gets paid to be the site medic, so we call him a doctor."

Abe wiped dirt from his hands. He'd been digging when they arrived. "I patch people up. You don't want to need me, but if you do, I'll do my best."

"That'll do," Xander said.

Katriona finally turned to the last member of the group—a tall, gangly kid who looked barely out of adolescence. "**Corey.** Repair tech. Gets things working, but you'll need to make sure he's actually paying attention."

Corey grinned. "I do! I mean, most of the time."

Xander exhaled slowly, scanning the lot of them. They weren't soldiers. Hell, they weren't even a proper survival team. But they had enough skills between them to make this work.

Hamby stepped forward. "It's good you're alive," he said, his voice low and weary. "Didn't think anyone would make it. Something happened during the night, and we don't have much time."

He went on to describe what little he knew. "We were coming in to land. Something took out the engines - an explosion. It's a miracle I managed to bring it down at all. Dead-sticked it into the lake. David, one of the crew, went to check on the low berths. Said they were all dead. After that... we just tried to survive. I was only supposed to transport cargo and passengers to this outpost."

Charles eyed Hambley, his voice edged with suspicion. "David Maxanni, the man we found dead out in the woods. Convenient that dead men can't speak, isn't it, Hambley?"

Hambley's eyes flickered briefly, a shadow crossing his face before he quickly masked it. "Look, it wasn't like that," he muttered, annoyance creeping into his tone. "He was hurt bad in the crash. Internal injuries we couldn't see. We went for help at PS9, thought we'd make it back in time."

Charles narrowed his gaze but said nothing further. An uneasy silence filled the space between them until Xander stepped forward, his voice steady and clear.

"We found a tablet on him," Xander said carefully, his eyes locked on Hambley's face, watching closely for any reaction. "Does the phrase '*Find the stranger at all costs*' mean anything to you?"

Hambley stiffened, his breath hitching for just a second. "Tablet? Look, I don't know what you're talking about. Maxanni was always scribbling notes, rambling about stuff. Probably one of his wild theories, he was paranoid, especially after the crash."

Xander watched Hambley closely. The pilot's response was quick, maybe a bit too quick, and just plausible enough to plant seeds of doubt. But something felt off. Hambley quickly shifted the conversation, eager to move past the uncomfortable scrutiny.

"And then the fusion plant failed," he continued hurriedly, regaining some composure. "Battery power is keeping the lights on, but barely. I've been trying to salvage what I can from the reactor, but if we lose the lights... whatever's out there is going to be a whole lot worse."

"And communication?" Charles asked. "Can we send a distress call?"

Hambley exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. "That's another problem. We need to get that tower functioning, but it's not a quick fix. Circuits are fried. Could take days to repair, assuming we even have the parts."

Xander looked around the camp. "Then we start by securing the perimeter. We need barriers, watch shifts, and an inventory check. If something is out there, we'll be ready."

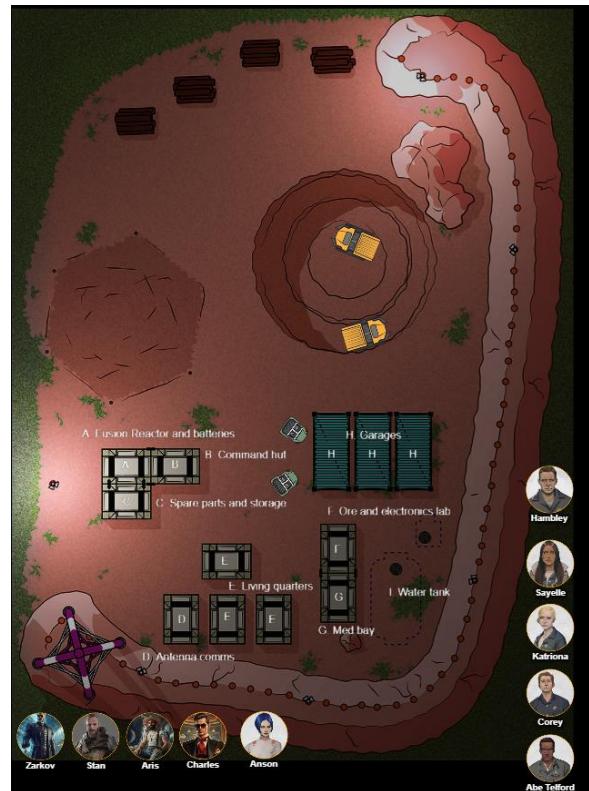
Xander stood in the dimming light, surveying the compound like a battlefield commander assessing his defences. He had secured outposts before - on moons, asteroids, war-torn colonies – he was famous for defending Batav Fortress where he earned the nickname “Stonewall”. But he had never fortified an unknown planet with no clear enemy with such limited resources. The sinking sun painted the landscape in long, jagged shadows, and the air carried a heavy silence. Whatever was out there, they had until nightfall to prepare.

Xander squared his shoulders, and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "OK, what have we got?"

He strode toward the nearest structure—a squat prefabricated hut with thick cables running from it.

"Hut A - fusion reactor and battery storage. It's barely running at 10%. That'll need fixing, but keeping what little power we have is priority one." He turned toward the next hut. "Command hut is here, that's B. Then we've got storage - Hut C."

Xander pushed open the door and glanced inside. Metal shelves lined the walls, stacked with crates of spare parts and dried food. His eyes locked onto a locked metal cabinet. He pried it open and found exactly what they needed.



"Weapons," he said, pulling out a shotgun. He checked the action, loaded it, and placed it to one side. "Two shotguns, serviceable 37 shells. A compound bow - needs some work, but it'll do in a pinch." He took 9 shells for himself and tossed a shotgun and six shells to Stan. "Don't waste 'em."

Charles picked up the bow and arrows. "Nice, I'll take this".

Xander stepped out and continued the assessment, pointing as he spoke.

"The comms hut is there, next to the antenna. That's where we need to go if we want to call for help, but it's dead for now." He swept his arm toward the cluster of buildings on the southern side of the compound. "Living quarters, basic but functional. The ore and electronics lab, that might have something useful for repairs. Med bay next to it, should be enough to patch up injuries but don't expect miracles."

To the northeast, three large shipping containers sat in the dirt. "Cargo's in those. If anything's left intact, it could be useful." He turned northward, frowning at the mining pit. "That's where the real danger is. Open ground. And we've got no working vehicles - two automated diggers, both fried, along with the buggies."

He took a slow breath, hands resting on his cane. "This isn't great, but it's what we've got. So let's make it work."



Xander pointed at Hambly and the other able-bodied members of the group.

"First, we need a perimeter. That embankment on the east and south sides helps, but we should reinforce it with anything we can find - logs, scrap metal, whatever. Start dragging what you can over there and build it up."

Hambly nodded. "Already started reinforcing the North perimeter with logs."

"Second, we need light. If that power goes, we're blind. We prioritize fixing the batteries in the fusion hut.".

Aris said, "I'm on it".

"Third, we need comms." He turned toward the antenna, narrowing his eyes. "With no Comms we're stranded here and all dead. The sooner we get that antenna running, the better. Stan, do you think you and Corey can work on that?"

"Finally, we don't know what we're dealing with, or how they kill. I'm going with Abe to the Med lab to do an autopsy on that body and see what I can find. I'll check back on you all later.

The group exchanged uneasy glances. Xander sighed, gripping his shotgun.

"Right then. We've got work to do. Let's get to it!" (cue A-Team music!)

*

Aris wiped the sweat from his forehead as he crouched by the two buggies, pulling open a scorched access panel. The circuits inside were fried, no surprise there. He could probably salvage parts from both to get one running—maybe even both, given time, but time was the problem.

He glanced over at the reactor hut, where the faint hum of barely-functioning power reached his ears. No point fixing buggies if there's no juice to run them. With a sigh, he slapped the panel shut and got to his feet.

"Hambley, let's go check the reactor. If we can't get that back up, none of this matters."

The older pilot grunted in agreement, grabbing his tool belt and falling in beside Aris as they made their way to Hut A. Inside, the fusion reactor sat against the far wall—a compact unit, about the size of a fridge. It was still running, barely. The control panel flickered weakly, occasional sparks sputtering from a damaged circuit board.

Aris popped the panel and whistled. "Hellfire. She's not dead, but she's close."

Hambley folded his arms. "We got spare parts in storage. But you need someone who knows what they're doing."

Aris scratched at his stubble, thinking. He wasn't bad with electronics—he'd jerry-rigged enough setups in the past to make things work. But having another pair of hands would speed this up.

He spotted Corey nearby, just finishing up his conversation with Stan over at the comms hut. The kid had a sharp mind for repairs. Aris strode over, clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Corey, my boy, how'd you like to work a miracle today? Power's shot, and I need a steady hand. I trust in you, and so does the Lord!"

Corey gave him a sheepish smile, stepping back slightly. "Uh, yeah, sounds important, but... I promised Stan I'd help with the comms. Sorry, man."

Aris exhaled through his nose. "You sure? No power means no comms anyway."

Corey just shrugged apologetically. "Still gotta try."

Aris sighed, shaking his head. "Fine. Your funeral."

Turning back to the reactor, he cracked his knuckles and got to work with Hambley, pulling fried components and checking for salvageable parts. This was going to take time, but at least they had a shot.

*

Stan ran a hand through his hair as he surveyed the damage inside the Comms Hut. The setup was basic but functional—at least, it had been. Now, burnt-out circuits and the faint acrid smell of fried components told the story of whatever EMP or surge had swept through the camp.

"Was nothing wrong with this twelve hours ago," he muttered, flipping a switch on the console. It buzzed weakly, but no signal came through.

Corey stood beside him, shifting from foot to foot. "Circuits are burnt out, looks like. But the cables to the comm tower are still in place. Might be the dishes up there got knocked out of alignment."

Stan exhaled through his nose. "So it's fixable?"

Corey nodded. "Yeah. We'll need to swap out some components here first, get power stable. Then someone's gotta go up the tower and realign the dishes. Whole thing'll take maybe three, four hours."

Stan rolled his shoulders. It wasn't the worst news, but it wasn't great either. They needed long-range comms up and running ASAP. He reached for his tools, but Corey hesitated.

"Look, I know a bit about all this," Corey admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "I can help, but... your God friend was also asking for me to help with the power station."

Stan let out a dry chuckle. "Aris? Yeah, that tracks. Man's got more faith in people than sense sometimes."

Corey smiled. "Yes, well. He's got the old spacer roped in, he'll manage. You want me here?"

Stan clapped him on the shoulder. "Yeah, kid. We need comms. You and me—let's get to work."

Corey grinned and grabbed a toolkit. Together, they set to work replacing the fried circuits, while Stan made a mental note - at some point, someone's gotta climb that damn tower.

*

Charles went to the Command Hut. It didn't take him long to restrung the compound bow, he gave a few pulls on the string to test in, and then slammed an arrow into a notice board on the wall. "That'll do nicely!"

He then started flipping through the scattered papers on the console. The place was messy - half-organized reports, outdated schedules, and some scrawled notes pinned to the wall. Typical frontier operation. They kept things running, but record-keeping wasn't exactly a priority.

Sayelle stood nearby, arms crossed, shifting uncomfortably. She barely looked up when she spoke, voice quiet. "Sorry about earlier. We... didn't know anyone was still alive."

Charles glanced up from the papers, studying her for a moment. She looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

"Don't worry about it," he said evenly. "But if you want to help, we need to find the manuals for the power supply. There's got to be something here that'll make Aris' job easier."

Sayelle hesitated, then nodded and started sifting through a stack of folders.

It took some time, too much, in Charles' opinion, but then he spotted a thick ring binder, half-buried under a pile of diagnostic reports. He pulled it free and flipped through the pages.

Bingo. Technical manual for the reactor system. Diagrams, troubleshooting sections, maintenance logs, the works.

Charles smirked and tapped the cover. "Here we go. Let's get this to our resident engineer before he starts laying hands on the damn thing and praying for a miracle."

*

Xander exhaled sharply as he laid Ryan's cold, lifeless body onto the med bay's examination table. The young man's skin was pale, his lips slightly bluish, and his eyes stared blankly at nothing. There was no saving him—whatever had happened, he was long gone.

But Xander wasn't just here to play undertaker. He needed to know why.

The med bay was basic but functional; a small diagnostic computer, saline drips, and a few analysers. No full surgical suite, but enough for what he needed. He pulled on a pair of gloves and began a careful examination.

His fingers traced the wound on Ryan's upper arm - a clean puncture, no tearing, no jagged edges. Not a gunshot, not an animal bite, this was a stab wound, precise and deliberate.

He leaned in, studying the discolouration around the wound. There was something else. A stiffness in the flesh, a slight sheen of sweat still lingering on the skin.

Xander took a residual sample from the site and fed it into the analyser. The screen flickered to life, processing, before the results came up. Venom.

His jaw tightened. This wasn't just a knife wound - whoever did this had injected a toxin.

Not synthetic. Natural.

Xander muttered to himself, reading the chemical breakdown. "Lethality depends on dose and resistance... lower doses cause confusion, hallucinations... high enough dose? Kills outright."

Xander continued, half muttering to himself like he was dictating a post-mortem. "A tourniquet might've slowed it, but not stopped it. Anti-venom? Possible, but we'd need time, and the right equipment, which we don't have."

He frowned at the analyser's readout. Something about the toxin still didn't sit right. Like a puzzle piece that refused to snap into place.

Shaking it off, he left the med bay and made his way back to the command hut, where Charles was flipping through notes, and told him of his findings.

Charles looked up, brow furrowed. "This... this is the same stuff from those capsules in the low berth, isn't it?"

Xander's breath caught for half a second. His eyes met Charles'.

Damn. That was it.

His fingers tightened on the table edge. This venom, it wasn't just a weapon of opportunity. Someone out there had access to it in large quantities. And if Ryan had been killed with it, then whoever, or whatever, was behind this wasn't just playing around.

Xander exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing. "This just got a whole lot worse."

*

As Xander strode into the power hut, Aris was just putting the finishing touches on the repairs. The reactor hummed weakly, struggling to push past its pitiful 10% output. Aris threw the switch.

Nothing.

The room sat in tense silence, save for the faint, failing whine of the reactor. Then came Hambley's voice - gruff, sharp, and laced with irritation.

"All that effort, and you still bollocksed it up."

Aris stiffened. His hands balled into fists. "Oh, I bollocksed it up?!" He spun to face Hambley, eyes blazing. "You crashed the damn ship, and now you insult me?"

Before anyone could react, Aris swung. His fist cracked against Hambley's jaw.

Hambley staggered back, not much, but enough. His shotgun was up in an instant, pointed squarely at Aris' chest.

"Try that again," Hambley growled.

For a moment, the room was a powder keg. A single wrong move, and someone was getting shot.

Xander, standing firm, let the moment stretch just long enough to let both men feel the weight of their choices. Then, with the authority of a man who'd dealt with far worse than a botched repair and a bruised ego, he stepped forward. "Enough."

The tension didn't break, but it shifted. Aris, still fuming, tore himself away and stalked out of the hut. He made his way to the med centre, hands shaking with anger, frustration—and, if he was being honest with himself, embarrassment.

He needed a drink.

Inside, Anson was already there, pacing. She barely glanced at him before muttering, "We need to get out of here. We need a buggy."

Aris snorted. "They don't work."

"Then we fix one."

Aris ignored her, heading straight for the supply shelves. He scanned the labels until he found what he was looking for—medicinal alcohol. Good enough. He grabbed the bottle, unscrewed the cap, and took a long, burning swig.

For a second, the fire in his chest drowned out everything else. The fight, the failure, the fear.

Then, exhaling slowly, he leaned against the counter. "Running won't change a thing, Anson. The storm follows the sinner and the saint alike. Sooner or later, we've got to stand."

She didn't reply. Just kept pacing.



CHAPTER 3 – THE ATTACK ON “PROVING SITE NINE”

The sun was setting, casting long shadows over Proving Site 9. The air hung thick and heavy, the kind of silence that wasn’t just quiet, but expectant.

Then - Gunshots shattered the stillness!

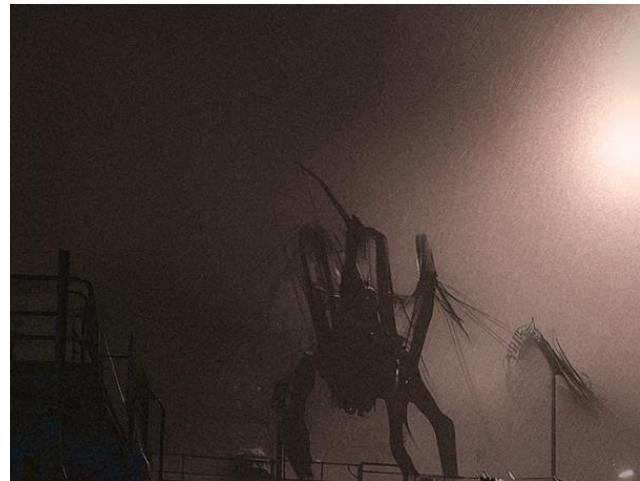
BOOM! A shotgun roared from the power hut, its flash illuminating Hambley, braced in the doorway, firing at something just beyond the lights. A dark shape twisted and jerked, but didn’t fall back. It was testing the perimeter, unbothered by the buckshot slamming into the dirt.

Xander heard the first shot and moved. He ran toward Hambley, barking - Get inside! Hold your fire until we—”

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Something was on the roof. Above him. Xander barely had time to turn before it dropped. A blur of black chitin and razored limbs. It lunged, slashing down!

Xander threw up his shotgun just in time. CLANG! The impact rattled his bones as the creature’s clawed strike bit into the metal barrel instead of his skull. A second limb lashed out, slicing air just inches from his throat.



He fired. BLAM! Missed. Badly. The shot gouged a chunk of dirt two meters away, sending up a useless puff of dust.

Then the darkness moved. Not one. Not two. Four or Five Silhouettes emerged from the shadows beyond the floodlights. Spindly, segmented limbs clicking as they advanced. Glowing slits for eyes. Their mandibles chittered, the sound like dry leaves scraping metal.

Xander gritted his teeth. “Shit.”

Then - BOOM!

A shotgun blast tore through the night, shredding the creature on top of him. It screeched, its carapace exploding in a spray of black ichor, collapsing into a twitching husk at Xander’s feet.

Katriona stood there, still pumping the smoking shotgun, a cocky grin flashing across her face. Xander shot her a thumbs-up. She smirked. And then gasped. Her eyes widened in shock as something punched through her chest from behind. A wicked black barb, dripping with venom. Katriona mouthed a scream. It curdled into a wet, choking gurgle as the pincer speared through her torso, lifting her like a ragdoll. Her shotgun slipped from limp fingers, clattering to the dirt as she went limp, sliding off the talon, collapsing face-first into the dirt. Blood pooled around her, seeping into the cracked ground.

Xander's grip tightened on his shotgun. His eyes locked onto the thing that killed her. The battle had just begun.

*

Stan tightened a loose connection, fingers moving with practiced precision, despite the tension thickening the air around them. The distant thunder of gunfire echoed through the compound, rattling the thin walls of the comms hut.

Corey snapped his head up, eyes wide. "Shit! What the hell is happening out there?!"

Stan didn't look up. "Focus. We get this working, we call for help."

Then movement. A dark shape, barely more than a black silhouette against the floodlights, clung to the comms tower just outside. Its clawed limbs skittered over the metal with a chilling precision. It wasn't moving toward the compound. It was fixated on the power cables. Stan's breath hitched as he saw the mandibles working, chewing at the coating, stripping the wires down to bare metal.

"Son of a bitch. It's cutting the power."

Stan grabbed his shotgun, swinging toward the door. No hesitation.

He threw it open, raising the weapon in one smooth motion.

BOOM!

The creature exploded, its chitinous body erupting in a spray of dark ichor and shredded limbs. The remains slammed against the comms tower, then slumped lifelessly to the ground.

Stan exhaled, lowering the shotgun.

Behind him, Corey was frozen, eyes locked on the still-twitching corpse. "I.. I didn't know you were a soldier"

Stan barely spared him a glance. "You still with me? Then keep working."

He racked the shotgun, scanning the perimeter.

There were more out there.

And they weren't done yet.

*

The command centre lights flickered, barely holding against the power fluctuations Charles stood by the doorway, bow in hand, heart thudding in rhythm with the distant crack of gunfire. Beside him, Abe hunched over a battered terminal, sweat beading on his forehead as he tried to make sense of the situation.

Without looking up, Abe reached into his overalls and carefully pulled out a slim glass bottle, fine aged whisky, the label faded but still legible. He unscrewed the cap with slow reverence,

took a small sip, and let the warmth spread through him. For a moment, his lined face softened, almost a smile, almost peace.

Charles caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and raised an eyebrow.

Abe shrugged, his voice dry. "If we're going out tonight, might as well do it with some dignity."

Charles adjusted his grip on the bow and spoke quietly, focused. "I'm going to try sniping with the bow. Move the door barricade, just enough so I can open it, loose a shot, and close it again. Quick. Precise. Maybe if we're lucky, the bugs won't figure out where it's coming from."

Abe nodded and shifted the barricade, his movements careful, methodical. Nearby, a few crates and lengths of pipe stood ready to wedge the door shut at a moment's notice.

Charles grinned despite the tension. "Should our little cabin attract more attention than intended, dear boy, be ready to reinforce that door."

Charles eased the door open just enough to peer into the night.

A shadow darted across the floodlit yard. Low. Fast. A flash of dark chitin. The faint click of claws.

Without hesitation, Charles drew back the bowstring. The arrow rested against his cheek.

TWANG!

The creature twitched—too late.

The arrow hissed through the air and struck home.

A wet screech. The bug jerked backward, leaking black ichor, before disappearing into the dark.

Charles stepped back smoothly, closed the door, and nocked another arrow without a word.

Abe looked up, tense. "Did you kill it?"

He took another swig from his bottle "I'm rather enjoying this," he murmured under his breath, smiling grimly. "Vintage stuff. Should be savoured with a fine cigar. We shall toast victory once we've finished the hunt, ol' chap."

He then slipped the bottle back into his overalls, securing it carefully like it was more valuable than any weapon.

Charles didn't answer.

His eyes stayed on the door, listening to the night breathe.

This wasn't over.

Not by a long shot.

*

The dim fluorescents flickered, casting long, jagged shadows as Aris and Anson worked frantically to barricade the windows.

Aris took a deep swig from the bottle of medical alcohol, the burn steadyng his nerves. He barely had time to exhale before—

CRASH!

The Perspex window shattered, shards raining down like deadly confetti. Anson screamed.

A black, writhing mass tumbled through, skidding into the far corner. It unfolded. Eight thick, armoured legs extended outward, snapping into place like a grotesque machine. Spiny, barbed claws twitched in anticipation, the chitin glistening under the buzzing light.

The thing was huge, the size of a hog, spider-like, crab-like, and all nightmare.

Aris didn't think, he acted. Revolver up. Hammer back. BOOM.

The shot cracked through the med bay. He missed!

The beast lunged. A razor-edged claw lashed out, slashing toward his face. Aris twisted, bringing up his revolver just in time, steel met chitin with a sickening clang as he deflected the blow.

Anson backpedalled, grabbing a tray of scalpels. "Shoot the fucking thing!" she shrieked.

Aris gritted his teeth. He cocked the hammer again, lining up his next shot. This time, he wouldn't miss.

*

Xander turned sharply, eyes scanning the chaotic battlefield. The air throbbed with movement, shadows bursting from the blackness like Specters from some unholy abyss.

Xander lunged, grabbing Hambley by the collar, yanking him back into the hut.

SLAM!

The door rattled in its frame as he shoved it shut, throwing his weight against it.

Hambley was a live wire, breathing hard, hands shaking around his shotgun. Xander wasn't much better, his pulse hammered against his ribs, his fingers slick with sweat as he racked a shell into the chamber.

Outside, the shadows loomed, moving with unsettling patience, testing their defences. Hambley shot at the window, shattering it into a storm of jagged fragments, glinting like falling stars under the floodlights.

Xander raised his shotgun, took aim through the window, and fired.

BOOM!

He hit. The thing shrieked and shrunk back into the black of night. Through the haze, the figures scattered, then regrouped, slinking through the dark. Xander dropped back, cursing under his breath. This was not how it was supposed to go. The team was split, scattered across the compound. Each in a separate building. Each alone. The creatures had attacked

from the darkness, swift and unrelenting, catching them off guard. They were outnumbered. And the night was just beginning.

*

The gunfire outside was relentless, tearing through the eerie silence of the compound. Xander felt his grip tighten on the shotgun as he scanned the darkness through the power room window. Shadows moved - three, maybe four of them, skittering low and fast across the ground, barely more than silhouettes against the dim glow of the facility's flickering lights.

Beside him, Hambley fired. The crack of the shotgun was deafening in the small room. One of the creatures shrieked and recoiled, vanishing into the shadows. The momentary victory was short-lived. A sudden *thud* against the door sent a shockwave through the walls. Another. The wood splintered slightly at the edges. Whatever was out there, it wanted in.

Xander took a breath, shouting as the top of his voice, an officer calling to his men on the battlefield?. "Is everyone okay!? When I call your name, give me your situation!"

Nothing, not surprising over the sound of shots, screams and chaos.

"Son of a bitch," Hambley muttered, pumping his jammed shot gun in frustration. Then, as if flipping a switch, he turned and met Xander's gaze with something colder than fear. His hand shot to his belt, pulling a knife free. His stance shifted - lower, aggressive. "Fine. I'll do it the old way."

The door shuddered again, a splintered crack ran down the middle, but Hambley wasn't looking at it anymore - he was already moving. "Stay outta my way." he shouted and sprang forward. He turned the knife inward and lunged - not toward the door, but straight at Xander! A burst of raw, trained aggression - shoulder lowering, knife tight in his grip.

Before Xander could react, Hambley was on him.

A blur of motion - Hambley lunged, knife aimed inward for a tight, killing strike. Xander barely had time to react, twisting aside, slamming Hambley's wrist against the control panel. The blade scraped against metal, missing flesh by inches. With a surge of strength, Xander threw Hambley off him, sending the man staggering into the door with a *thud*.

"What the hell are you doing, Hambley!?" Xander growled, breath coming fast. Hambley didn't answer. He was already getting to his feet.

Xander stared at Hambley. "Son of a muther fucker! I bet you're 'The Stranger'. Aris was right about you! And I bet you killed Maxanni too - he was on to you - it was on his data tab."

And then, choosing his words carefully so as to not be misunderstood, he shouted out as loud as he could "HAMBLEY TRAITOR!". His words were lost in the darkness,

Hambley lunged, he was fast.

A *crack* of pain exploded through Xander's leg as Hambley locked onto it and twisted hard. Agony tore up his nerves - his old riding injury, the one that had never quite healed. Xander roared in pain as his knee gave out, his weight collapsing under him. Xander's vision blurred, he almost passed out. Gritting his teeth, he forced the pain down. He realised he was in a

fight for his life against an evenly match opponent, an opponent who had the upper hand. This wasn't how it ended. Not here. Not on this godforsaken rock.

Outside, the pounding against the door intensified. The sounds of gunfire and screams echoed through the camp.

No one was coming to help him.

Hambley twisted his grip again, and then Xander was airborne as he hurled Xander straight through the window. The Perspex shattered, and Xander crashed through, hitting the cold dirt hard. His body screamed in protest. Pain radiated through his chest, his leg - his everything. His ears rang, and for a moment, everything blurred.

Then movement.

Three figures. Dark, insectoid things. Too many legs. Too many eyes. They twitched, their heads snapping toward him as one. And then suddenly a piercing, unnatural noise. A high pitched, grating tone that set Xander's teeth on edge. It wasn't coming from the creatures; it was something else. The creatures reacted too, shuddering, twitching. They were still watching, circling closer. Inside the power room, Hambley was cursing, struggling with his shotgun.

"Shit. Fuck! Ouch! Out of the frying pan into the fire!" Xander's mind raced. Assess. Adapt. Survive. This is a desperate situation. Three of those bugs. One within striking distance. Two others closing fast. He was unarmed and prone on the dirt.

To the northeast, Anson was in a buggy, desperately trying to get it started. Further east, gunshots rang out—someone was still fighting. To the south, the comms tower rattled against the wind.

That *damned noise* continued to hum through his skull. What was it? A queen bug? Who knows, and right now, who cares? It was distracting the bugs and that might just give him the moment to act.

The droning cut out.

Time to move. Fast! Damn, not fast enough – curse his battered body!

The first bugs raked across Xander's side, unable to penetrate the fabric of his vacc suit. But the third creature struck with savage force, its bladed limbs raking deep across Xander's chest. Pain flared white-hot as the jagged edges carved through fabric and flesh alike, tearing open his vac suit as if it were paper. He staggered back, breath hitching - warm blood seeped into the shredded material, sticking cloth to skin. His ribs screamed in protest, but there was no time to assess the damage. He gritted his teeth. He was still standing. Still breathing. But for how much longer?

A sharp *twang*—an arrow whipped through the air from the direction of the command hut, striking one of the creatures. It chittered, then scuttled away into the darkness.

Two left.

And Hambley's in the power hut, almost ready to fire. If he stays here, he's dead.

And then— That droning. It started up again. Louder this time. Closer.

What the hell is that?

Xander staggered to his feet, lungs burning, legs sluggish with exhaustion, pain screaming through his ribs. *Move, damn it!*. He started to run, his legs barely taking his weight. The first bug lunged, serrated mandibles snapping inches from his face. He twists aside, heart hammering - too slow, too damn slow.

As he ran, he saw Charles at the command centre window, readying another arrow. He called out to him again “Hambley is a Traitor!” Did he hear over the incessant noise? He reached Katriona’s body and reached down to pick up the shotgun. Was that a mistake? The second bug had already tasted Xander’s blood and wanted more. It jumped, landing on Xander’s back, bladed claws tore into his back, raking through fabric and flesh alike. A sickening crunch erupted from his ribs as the impact hurled him forward, crashing once more to the ground, breath ripped from his lungs in a ragged gasp.

Pain flooded his body, searing hot, then numbing cold. His fingers twitched, reaching, grasping, managed to clench onto the shotgun, but his strength was already gone. Blood pooled beneath him, soaking into the dust. The droning grew louder, pressing into his skull, endless, merciless.

Then, Xander’s world faded to black.

*

From his vantage point at the cracked command window, Charles saw it all happen.

Xander went down, hard. A bug the size of a wolf latched onto his back, gnashing at him like a dog tearing meat. Charles instinctively raised the bow, sighting down the shaft, ready to end it.

Then the power hut door burst open.

Hambley stood in the frame, shotgun raised, bathed in the flickering emergency lights.

Charles expected a shot at the bug.

Instead, Hambley levelled the weapon at Zarkov’s broken body, and fired.

The shot went wide, spitting dust into the night. Missed. At point blank range.

Before Charles could even shout, the bigger bug, wild with bloodlust, pivoted toward Hambley. It launched itself with a feral hiss.

There was a wet, brutal crunch as it struck home. Hambley staggered, crying out, but the thing clung to him, tearing, biting.

Charles moved before he thought. Dropping the bow, vaulting the barricade, boots hammering against the slick ground.

The stink of blood and scorched air hit him like a wall.

He skidded down beside Zarkov, heart hammering against his ribs. Xander’s chest was a ruin, torn, gory, twitching with shallow breaths.

"Come on, old man," Charles hissed, half begging.

He heaved Xander over his shoulder. The dead weight almost crushed him. But Charles ground his teeth and staggered upright, forcing one heavy step after another back toward the command hut.

Gunfire rattled behind him. Shouts. Screams. The battle raged on.

Inside the command centre, Charles laid Zarkov down with trembling hands. Blood soaked the floor in spreading pools. He ripped open the remains of the jumpsuit, trying to find the worst of the wounds.

"Abe!" Charles barked over his shoulder. "Get over here! I need that bottle, the whisky! For Zark's wounds."

Abe blinked, startled, reluctant to part with his prized bottle, and before he could act Charles continued "Secure the door! Then fetch bandages, towels, whatever you can find!"

Abe moved fast, slamming the door shut and moments later, he returned with a pile of torn sheets and scraps of cloth.

Charles ripped strips with frantic energy, hands slick with blood.

"Let's see what I remember from basic medic training," Charles muttered grimly. He pressed folded cloth into the worst of the gashes, binding them as tight as his shaking fingers would allow.

He paused; two blood-soaked fingers pressed to Zarkov's neck.

"Argh... there's still a pulse. I don't believe it... how? No time to think..."

Xander's eyes fluttered open for a heartbeat - glassy, distant. He tried to speak, but only a wet gurgle came out. His chest rose in shallow, rattling gasps.

Charles gritted his teeth and worked faster, whispering under his breath.

"Hold on, old man. Hold on."

Charles leaned close, pressing down harder, willing strength into him through sheer stubbornness.

"You're not dying tonight, old man," he whispered. "Not on my watch."

Gunfire rattled outside. Bugs shrieked into the dark.

But inside the hut, it was just Charles, Abe, and the stubborn fight to save one broken soldier.

And Charles wasn't ready to let him go.

Not yet.

Then...

BANG.

The door exploded inward, slamming against the wall with a force that shook the entire hut. Shards of metal and wood splintered into the air.

In the shattered doorway stood Hambley.

His silhouette filled the entrance, backlit by the hellish glow of emergency lights, more demon than man. His shotgun gleamed in his hands, barrel already swinging toward them.

His face twisted into a wild, filthy grin. Sweat and grime streaked across his cheeks, his eyes wide with madness.

“Well, ain’t this just perfect?” he sneered, voice a broken mockery of triumph. “Look at you. Broken. Bleeding. Two for the price of one.”

Charles froze.

Hands still slick with Zarkov’s blood, halfway through binding a wound he knew he couldn’t fix.

He was too slow. No chance to draw, to dodge, to run.

This was it.

But Zarkov wasn’t done yet.

The old soldier’s hand twitched. His breath hitched, wet, gurgling.

“Thanks... for trying,” Zarkov rasped, the ghost of a smile touching his bloodied lips. “I owe you one.”

Then, with a final surge of stubborn will, Zarkov moved.

He spat blood onto the floor. His hand fumbled at his side, clawing through the slick grime.

His fingers closed around his shotgun.

Still warm. Still loaded.

With a raw snarl of defiance, Zarkov hauled the weapon up, resting the barrel against his own chest, too weak to shoulder it properly, but strong enough to aim, bracing it with one trembling arm.

His bloodied mouth twisted into a feral, bloodstained grin.

“See you in hell... motherfucker.”

BOOM.

The hut shook with the force of the blast.

Hambley's head vaporized in a red mist, fragments of skull and brain spattering the walls.

For a moment, his body stood there, swaying, empty, before crumpling to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Silence crashed down.

Zarkov sagged back, the shotgun slipping from his fingers with a hollow clatter.

His chest rose once. Twice.

Barely.

Charles still at his side, cradled him instinctively.

Zarkov's eyes fluttered open one last time, still defiant, still proud.

He exhaled, a slow, rattling sigh. His voice was little more than a breath

"We're even?... Ha... So much for retirement..."

A faint, satisfied smile lingered on his face.

And then he was still.

Brigadier Sir Aleksandr Zarkov, Knight of the Imperium,
Died a soldier's death.

Gun in his hand.

Enemy at his feet.

A hero's ending.

The kind only the damned could ever truly earn.



CHAPTER 4 – BREATHING SPACE

The night was still. Too still.

For the first time since the attack began, the only sound was the faint hum of the barely functioning fusion generator. The creatures, whatever they were, had been driven off or killed. Hambley's body lay sprawled just outside the command hut, his head nothing but a pulped ruin. Nearby, Katriona's lifeless form lay crumpled in the dirt where she had fallen, the blood pooling beneath her already dark and sticky.

And then there was Zarkov.

Inside the hut, Charles knelt beside the old brigadier's corpse, his hands still slick with blood. Xander had died like a soldier, gun in hand, taking one last bastard with him. That wasn't much comfort, but it was something.

For ten long minutes, no one moved. Then, slowly, figures emerged from the huts, shell-shocked, exhausted, eyes wide with fear and disbelief.

Abe staggered forward, his hands shaking violently. He had cracked during the attack, lost his nerve, and now he muttered under his breath, staring at nothing.

Charles stood near the command hut, gripping his bow, gaze fixed on the motionless form of Zarkov inside.

Aris, ever pragmatic, was already working, kneeling over Katriona's fallen body, retrieving her shotgun and reloading it with a practiced hand.

Nearby, Stan shook his head, rubbing dirt from his bruised knuckles.

Sayelle wiped her face with the back of her sleeve, glancing around. "Hambley... he lost it, didn't he?" She wrapped her arms around herself, looking at Hambley's lifeless form. "He wasn't right," she muttered. "I don't think he had been for a long time. After the crash, he got worse. Paranoid. Jumping at shadows."

Aris, still catching his breath, muttered, "Bastard was a ticking time bomb. Could've seen it coming."

Charles nodded, jaw tight. "He turned on Xander. Didn't end well for him. For either of them." He glanced at the lifeless body outside the command hut, where Hambley's head was nothing but a gruesome stain on the dirt. Charles exhaled slowly, running a hand through his dishevelled hair. His voice was quieter now, more measured, as he looked down at the bloodied floor where Xander had fallen.

"He didn't deserve to go out like that," Charles murmured. "Not here. Not in this godforsaken place." He paused, eyes flicking to the shotgun still clutched in Xander's lifeless hands. "Zarkov was a soldier, a tactician, a man who could turn chaos into order with a barked command and a well-placed supply drop. He kept people alive. Hell, he kept *me* alive, more than once."

He swallowed hard, forcing the lump in his throat down. “And he died like a warrior. Fighting, even to the end.” His gaze lifted, meeting the others. “We owe him that much, to remember him, and to get through this mess in one piece.”

Aris had found some medical supplies in the med-hut “Alright, who’s hurt?” No one spoke. The wounds weren’t the kind that could be fixed with bandages.

At the comms tower, Corey and Stan had been working tirelessly. The kid looked wired, practically vibrating with nervous energy. Corey emerged from the comms hut, hands twitching from nerves or adrenaline, maybe both. “Uh... good news, bad news,” he announced. “Good news, I think I got something, Come and see.” The group followed him in to the Comms hut, as Corey’s fingers started twitching over the control panel. He flipped a switch. Sparks flew. Stan let out a string of curses as he hammered a fist against the console, and suddenly, a dim red light flickered to life.

Corey said excitedly “perimeter alarm’s working again. If anything, bigger than a hamster moves out there, we’ll know about it.”

Aris, standing and dusting himself off, raised an eyebrow. “And the bad news?”

Corey hesitated. “Still no real comms. I *think* I can get it back up,” he muttered. “It’ll take a few more hours, but I’m making progress.”

Aris clapped him on the shoulder. “Then you’d best not cock it up, lad.”

The perimeter alarm started flashing.

Everyone froze.

A blinking red dot on the monitor. Movement. Something, someone, was approaching.

Weapons were drawn. Shotguns reloaded. Breath held.

A lone figure stumbled into the floodlights, his steps uneven, his form ragged. He looked half-dead, clothes torn and filthy, eyes clouded with exhaustion.

Then Sayelle, peering into the dark, let out a gasp. “It’s Paddy,” she whispered, barely believing it herself. “He’s alive.”

*

Patrick Stirling awoke with a start, his body stiff, muscles aching as if he’d been unconscious for hours, maybe longer. A cold breeze swept over him, rustling the tall grass around him. He shivered, not from the chill, but from the gnawing unease settling in his gut.

Something was wrong.

His fingers curled against the coarse fabric of his jumpsuit—Stenmore Minerals. His belt was fastened. Standard-issue mining gear weighed lightly against his frame. His boots, sturdy but well-worn, were caked in dirt. He didn't remember putting them on.

Hell, he didn't even remember getting here.

Blinking against the pale moon light, he sat up and scanned the horizon. To the east, a communications tower jutted above the treeline—a stark, unnatural silhouette against the backdrop of rolling hills and tangled forest. It was the only landmark in sight.

A memory flickered, distant and vague. A base? Yes. A mining camp. That was right, wasn't it? But why was he out here?



A dull throb pulsed behind his eyes. He forced himself upright, testing his legs. Strong. Steady. His augmented left arm flexed with ease, but the rest of him felt drained, like he'd been wrung out and left to dry.

No point sitting around. He set his jaw and started walking.

*

And with every step, he fought to piece himself back together.

Start simple, he told himself. Start with what you know.

Born and raised on Sabruse, a frozen hell of methane seas and minimal population. Scottish father and Irish mother, Paddy Stirling got the best and the worst of both. He could drink like a Highlander, fight like a Belfast brawler, and curse in two languages before breakfast. Hard work wasn't a choice there. It was survival. Piloting battered submersibles. Working on computers cobbled together from scrap.

They lived in battered hab-units, eating rations imported through the Star Port and dreaming of worlds they'd never see.

"*No potatoes on Sabruse,*" he remembered muttering once, half in jest, "*more's the pity. There's no bloody soil to grow 'em in anyway.*"

It was the kind of joke he'd tell in that slow Irish drawl of his.

And when the work was done? Reading. Devouring old books; philosophy, history, poetry, anything to escape that godforsaken rock in his mind if not his body. He didn't quote the classics to sound clever. He quoted them because they meant something, because when everything else fell away, *words*, like war, were the only things that stayed true.

He forced his feet onward, step by step.

The military. Yes. That came next.

Not officer school — he had no stomach for the politics or brown-nosing. He enlisted. Infantry. Where the real work was. "*What need have I of riches, when I can still raise a glass*

and curse the bastards who think they own us?" he'd once quipped to his friends at Military Academy.

He remembered the battlefield — the stench of smoke and blood, the dull ache of carrying wounded comrades through artillery fire.

He remembered friends. A brotherhood forged and broken under fire.

A sharp pulse behind his temple made him stumble, but he shook it off.

The missions. The recon patrols.

The operation that went wrong — so badly wrong. His unit had been sacrificed for one politician's ambition. An explosion. Fire and metal. He saw his own arm severed, torn away like paper.

Waking up weeks later in a hospital bed, reborn with a cybernetic limb he hadn't asked for. Stronger. Harder. Colder.

Discharged. Forgotten.

But not for long.

General Stokes — the old bastard he had once saved — found him again. Pulled him back from the gutter.

Gave him purpose. A Recon mission to Orphee. A covert mission. Deemed a success but at a high price. That was enough. Time to quit.

He clenched his fists — both flesh and metal.

Then came the Supply Corps. He thought it would be quieter.

It wasn't. Another brutal war — the Siege of Undrelyn. He fought not for glory but to keep others alive. Moving supplies under fire, dragging wounded from craters, standing firm when younger men broke.

Finally, Retirement.

Freedom.

Or so he thought.

The Men in Black — cold-eyed bastards — hunting him through city streets like a fugitive. That politician, Senator Vexmoor, wanted him silenced. The bullet meant for him carved a hole in a wall instead. He fought. He ran. Fast and hard. First ship out, no questions asked.

He gritted his teeth.

The memories blurred again — a void swallowing detail.

Faces lost.

Times forgotten.

Until—

A flash of clarity.

A mining camp.

Yes. Here, on this planet. An outpost. He was waiting. Biding his time ...

Something had happened. Something bad.

Paddy shook his head, forcing himself back into the present.

"Ah, Stirling, boyo," he muttered aloud, voice rough and low, "you sure know how to pick 'em."

Ahead, through the mist and trees, he saw smoke curling into the sky.

He set his shoulders and picked up the pace.

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As Paddy reached the mining outpost, the aftermath of battle clung to the air—a mix of scorched metal, spent gunpowder, and the coppery stench of blood. Something terrible had happened here.

Bodies lay where they had fallen.

A man near the command hut, his head blown clean off, his shotgun still clutched in lifeless fingers. Another figure slumped near the centre of the compound—a woman, her chest wound dark with congealed blood.

His boots crunched against the dirt as he stepped forward, eyes flickering over the faces of the survivors emerging from the buildings. There were three men he didn't recognize—or at least, he thought he didn't recognize them. But something about them felt familiar.

The camp crew were staring at him as well as if they knew him. He could see it in their expressions. Their weapons lowered as one woman stepped forward "It's Paddy...", he heard her say.

Paddy thought to himself "Of course it's a bloody warzone. Wouldn't be a proper welcome otherwise."

And then he collapsed from exhaustion.

*

Sayelle rushed forward, catching him as he sagged to his knees. "You're alive... we thought you were gone."

His gaze met hers, recognition flickering behind his eyes like a dying flame. Sayelle. Came in on a ship the other day. More faces came into view, blurry, unfocused, but tugging at something buried deep in his mind.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Charles asked, studying him with wary curiosity.

Paddy's throat was dry, his words sluggish. "I... I was out there." His head tilted toward the darkness beyond the fence. "Looking for the boss... never found him."

Sayelle nodded, filling in the blanks. "You and Ryan went to search for him. Ryan came back, said you'd gone on alone. That was two days ago. Ryan was wounded. He didn't make it..."

Aris narrowed his eyes. "And you don't remember how you got back?"

Paddy shook his head slowly, his thoughts thick like molasses. "I remember... leaving." A pause. "Then nothing. Like waking up from a bad dream."

His eyes drifted toward the bodies lying in the dirt. Zarkov. Hambley. Katriona. He swallowed hard. His voice steadied slightly. “And now I see I’ve missed quite the party.”

Charles scoffed, shaking his head. “Something like that.”

Paddy turned back to Sayelle. “And the ship?”

A heavy silence followed.

“The ship’s gone, Paddy,” Sayelle said softly. “Came in off-course, veered into the lake. Crashed. Hambley and I made it here. Then these four.. three.. showed up a couple of days later.” She gestured vaguely to Charles, Stan, and Aris.

Paddy glanced at them, something flickering behind his eyes again. A memory. A conversation. A bar? A prison? A transport? It was just out of reach.

His brows furrowed, frustration setting in. “I know you.” He pointed to Aris, then Stan, his voice laced with uncertainty. “Somewhere... I know you both.”

Stan folded his arms, cocking his head. “Might’ve crossed paths.”

Paddy rubbed his temple, his head still pounding like a hangover he hadn’t earned. The flickering floodlights cast long, shifting shadows, and the cold air did little to clear the fog clouding his thoughts. He looked at Aris, then at Stan, his brow furrowing deeper.

“I know you two... Aye, I know I do...” He exhaled sharply, frustration creeping into his voice. “Prison. Yeah. It was a prison.” His eyes darted between them, searching their faces. “I was... passing through. No, wait, recruitment! That’s it! I was talking to inmates, Join the Army and see the Galaxy. And... trying to... trying to get leads. Wanted to get close to someone. Damn it, the name’s on the tip of my tongue... Vexmoor... Senator Alistair Vexmoor”

He clenched his fists, trying to force the memory into focus.

“You two were there... running some game, staying outta the gangs. Smart move. We talked. I don’t even remember what about.” His gaze met Aris’s, then Stan’s. He let out a rough chuckle, shaking his head. “Hell, I must’ve made an impression if I’m remembering *you* before I’m remembering how the feck I got here.”

Paddy exhaled sharply. Too much. Too fast. He shook his head, trying to push through the fog clouding his mind. “Whatever’s been happening here... I need time to catch up.”

Aris handed him a water bottle. “Take a minute, soldier. We’re all trying to catch up.”

Paddy took the bottle, his grip tightening around it. He wasn’t sure where he had been. He wasn’t sure how he had gotten here.

“How the hell did I end up here?” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. “Last thing I remember, I was boarding a ship... trying to get the hell out of Dodge. And now... this?” He gestured vaguely at the ruined camp, the dead bodies, the lingering smell of gunpowder and blood.

“Welcome to Proving Site 9.” Charles said.

Paddy took a long drink from the water bottle before his gaze drifted to the command hut. He walked in slowly, the flickering light casting deep shadows over the blood-streaked floor. And there, in the centre of it, lay a man he never expected to see again.

Paddy's breath hitched.

There, inside the command hut, sprawled in a widening pool of blood, a figure. His mind flashed with recognition. It was Aleksandr Zarkov.

The sight of the old brigadier, so still, so lifeless, sent a jolt through Paddy's mind. What the hell was Zarkov doing here? The last time they'd met had been at the Supply Corps, trading war stories over drinks.

And now he was dead. What in God's name had happened here? Where even was here?

Paddy exhaled sharply, a thousand memories hitting him at once. Zarkov was his training officer in the Supply Corp. He had driven this man around, watched his back at official functions, had sat with him and shared a drink, talking war and bureaucracy. He had been a tough old bastard, sharp as they came. Someone he dared to call a friend.

And now, he was gone.

Paddy crouched down, staring at the still body. He hadn't expected to see Zarkov here. Of all the places in the galaxy, what the *hell* had brought him to this backwater rock?

He sighed, shaking his head. "Dulce et decorum est, eh?" He gave a humourless chuckle. "You always were too stubborn to go quietly, old man." He paused, lowering his voice to a near whisper. "Rest easy, old friend. We'll finish what you started."

A moment of silence.

*

Paddy slowly took everything in. He was missing time—he *knew* that much. He didn't know how he got here. He had boarded a ship to get away. But his possessions, his weapons... they were gone. And why *this* place?

One thing was certain: something wasn't right.

He looked to the others. "Well," he muttered, stretching out his tired limbs. "Might as well see what fresh hell we're dealing with."

Charles smirked. "You're going to fit in just fine."

Charles turned to Anson, who was still standing by the buggies, hands clenching and unclenching into fists. "You wanted to drive off," he said. Not accusatory, just stating a fact.

She snapped her head toward him, eyes blazing. "I wasn't running," she shot back. "I was trying to lead them away. Give you lot a chance."

Charles held her gaze for a moment, then gave a small nod. "Brave."

Anson scoffed but said nothing.

Paddy looked around, frowning. "We need a plan. This place is still standing, for now, but that's not gonna last if we don't fortify it."

Sayelle motioned towards the containers "We've got mining explosives in the garage," she offered. "But... I don't think any of us really know how to use them."

Charles exhaled. "That's a problem for later."

For now, they needed to prepare. The night wasn't over, and they had no idea what else was lurking in the dark.

The storm wasn't over. It hadn't even begun.



CHAPTER 5 – THE SWARM BREAKS

The storm wasn't over. It hadn't even begun...

The red warning light flared again, casting a pulsating red glow across the Comms hut. The silence that had settled after the first attack shattered as skittering shapes darted toward the floodlights.

More of them.

Six at first—three creeping toward the Comms Hut, three scuttling around the Power Hut—faster, more coordinated this time. But this time, the survivors weren't caught off guard. They were ready.

Inside the Power Hut, Paddy, Charles, and Anson had barely caught their breath. In the Comms Hut, Stan, Aris, Corey, and Sayelle braced for another fight. Abe, shaken and broken, remained locked inside the Med Bay, unwilling to step outside.

And then, the creatures attacked.

"Pick It Up or Die! Hold the Line!"

Paddy saw the movement first. He snatched a shotgun from the table and thrust it into Anson's shaking hands.

"Take this," he ordered, his voice calm but firm. "You can either use it, or let those things rip you apart. Your choice. But if you don't, you'd best be faster than them."

Anson gulped, fingers trembling as she clutched the weapon like it might bite her.

Paddy spun toward the window, too fast, too casual. He pulled the trigger, but the shot went wide, blasting a chunk from the barricade outside.

Beside him, Charles lined up his own shot with deliberate precision. The boom of his shotgun shattered the night as a creature erupted into a spray of black ichor, its legs twitching violently before curling inward like a dead spider.

Anson yelped and squeezed the trigger, blindly. The shotgun bucked in her hands, sending her shot wide.

Across the compound, Aris popped the barrel of his shotgun out of the Comms Hut window, aimed, and missed.

Stan, knowing he needed a better angle, sprinted from the Comms Hut toward the tower, throwing himself behind cover. He raised his shotgun, fired, and hit. His target staggered, screeched, and fled into the darkness.

But the others didn't stop.

Two crashed against the Power Hut's door, claws scraping against the metal.

One lunged at Stan, just as he dodged, its talons slicing through empty air.

Another threw itself against the Comms Hut, clawing at the entrance.

Paddy pumped his shotgun and pulled the trigger - nothing. The weapon jammed.

"Curse this thing!" he growled, stepping back to unjam the weapon.

Charles, calm as ever, inhaled, then let out a sound like metal tearing, his shrikebox screeched, a horrible static burst that rattled teeth and made stomachs churn. Even the creatures hesitated, twitching violently at the unnatural noise.

Then, he fired again, hitting another creature, tearing through its carapace and leaving it twitching in a growing pool of its own fluids.

At the Comms Hut, Aris lined up another shot, exhaled sharply, and blew a creature apart with a well-placed blast.

Stan was in trouble—locked in close combat, grappling with one of the things. It raked across his ribs, pain lancing through his side. He staggered back a step, shoved his shotgun under its carapace and fired, the point-blank shot splitting it in two.

Anson, still panicking, fired wildly, hitting nothing.

From his position at the tower, Stan saw it first. More of them. Another six, plus one bigger than anything they'd seen before. Much, much bigger!

It was at least five times the size of the others, armoured like a tank, its barbed stingers curling underneath its massive frame. It lumbered forward, its thick carapace gleaming black in the low light.

Paddy worked frantically to unjam his shotgun, reloading with gritted teeth.



Charles fired again, winging one, sending it scuttling away.

Anson seeing the massive queen-like creature, fired at it in panic, squeezed the trigger, and, by sheer luck, hit it! It screeched in fury but kept coming.

Stan steadied himself, ignoring the pain in his side, and dropped another bug with a clean shot.

Then, the big one moved.

It clambered onto the Power Hut, smashing through the roof with its massive claws.

Inside, Anson screamed as a stinger slammed down - piercing her shoulder. Blood splattered across the floor as she staggered backward.

Paddy whirled, his shotgun ready once more, aimed for the creature's claw, and fired.

The shot struck, but the pellets bounced off.

"What the hell kind of armour is this thing packing?!" he shouted. "The small shot ain't cutting it! Concentrate your fire on the small ones. I'll handle the big beastie!"

Anson, shaking, turned toward the door and fired at a smaller bug breaking in - she missed.

Charles, ever composed, lined up another shot and obliterated a bug outside.

Paddy glanced at him, a half-smirk. "You know, you're not bad with that shotgun. I'm impressed. Shooting ducks on your estate paid off."

Charles laughed, reloading. "Ducks don't stab back."

Meanwhile, Aris fired at the big one - a solid hit, but its carapace absorbed most of the damage.

Stan shot again at a smaller one by the comms hut - a glancing blow.

Then, the big one struck again.

It stabbed downward, aiming to finish Anson off - but it missed.

It struck again with its second claw, but this one jabbed at Paddy.

Paddy raised his augmented arm, deflecting some of the blow, but the force still sent him reeling and the barb of the stinger still found flesh. A wave of ice-cold venom flooded his system, his muscles locking up for a brief second.

Then, with a snarl, Paddy shrugged it off, forcing himself through the pain.

"Bee sting, times a thousand," he muttered. "Had worse."

Two more small bugs scuttled through the wreckage—one lunged for Paddy, the other for Charles, but both missed.

Paddy snarled. "Enough!". He flexed his augmented arm, and as the mono-blade hissed and extended from the back of his augmented arm, Paddy squared his stance, his breath slow, measured. The massive creature loomed before him, its grotesque limbs twitching, its stinger curling like the executioner's axe.

A grim smirk tugged at the corner of Paddy's mouth as he rolled his shoulders.

"Steel was always a fine thing, but steel in the hand of a man with purpose? That's a bloody reckoning." Then, with deadly precision, he struck, the razor-thin edge carving through chitin, flesh, and sinew as if the beast were made of nothing at all.

As the massive beast reeled, wounded but still thrashing, a smaller bug darted in from the side, its razor-sharp mandibles snapping toward Paddy's exposed flank.

He caught the movement in his peripheral vision, instincts honed by decades of battle. With a twist of his augmented arm, the mono-blade whirred, intercepting the strike in a flash of gleaming steel. The creature's attack was thrown wide, mandibles clashing against empty air, its balance lost.

Charles' inhuman static shriek filled the air, distorting reality for just a fraction of a second. The bug hesitated, twitching in confusion—just long enough for Paddy to reset his stance, eyes locked on the towering monstrosity still looming over him.

"One at a time, lads," he muttered, spitting blood onto the dirt, the humming edge of death at his side. "You'll all get your turn."

Charles swung his shotgun like a club, slamming a bug away from him.

Anson fired again and missed.

Aris dropped another small one, its body crumpling.

Stan, near the tower, turned and fired one last shot - his target dropped, twitching. That was the Comm Tower clear, so Stan started to run towards the action.

The big one reared back, then stabbed again snapping wildly at Charles, but the shriekbox scrambled its aim, forcing it off-target.

The massive creature loomed above Paddy, its grotesque chitinous bulk still writhing despite the wounds carved into its armoured hide. A sickly black ichor oozed from the deep gashes left by shotgun blasts and the deathly blade, yet it wouldn't fall—not yet. It refused.

The night air crackled with tension as the thing reared back, its wicked barbed stinger dripping with venom, poised to strike once more. Its many legs scuttled, digging into the metal roof of the Power Hut, the structure groaning under the weight of its monstrous form.

Paddy exhaled slowly, eyes burning with focus. He shifted his stance, the servos in his augmented arm humming as the mono-blade extended fully, its impossibly sharp edge glinting in the dim floodlights.

The beast lunged.

Paddy stepped into the attack—not away from it, but toward the horror, closing the gap before it could react. With a grunt of effort, he thrust his left arm forward, driving the monofilament blade straight up into the creature's soft underbelly, where the armour was thinnest. Not that it mattered, the blade met no resistance and went through the armoured shell like a hot knife through butter.

With a shuddering screech, the colossal thing convulsed, its legs spasming wildly as the cutting edge slid deeper, slicing through muscle, organs, and spine in a single, merciless stroke.

Paddy snarled, twisting the blade upward, gutting the monster from belly to brain.

For a heartbeat, the camp fell silent, save for the wet, tearing sound as the beast collapsed onto itself, its twisted limbs curling inward as its massive frame split apart, spraying black ichor across the wreckage of the Power Hut.

Paddy ripped the blade free, ichor steaming on its impossibly sharp edge. He took a step back, breathing hard, watching as the nightmare twitched one last time—and finally, lay still.

With his right hand, he wiped blood from his lips, eyes narrowing at the husk before him.

"There lies the great beast," he murmured, voice heavy with exhaustion and triumph. "Struck down like Perseus smiting the Kraken."

He turned to the others, lifting his still-dripping blade in salute.

"And here stands the man who sent it to hell."

Two more of the creatures still skittered amongst the twisted remnants of the hut, their insectoid bodies shifting, mandibles clicking in agitation. Their mother was dead, but they weren't running.

"Persistent little bastards, aren't they?" Paddy growled, flicking the gore off his blade. "They don't seem to have gotten the memo."

Anson, clutching her bleeding wound, stumbled back, her face pale. "I'm out," she gasped, patting her shotgun as if willing more shells to appear.

One of the bugs lunged at paddy and caught him off guard, a glancing blow.

Paddy squared his stance, steel in his gaze. "Fine. We finish this." He jerked his chin at Charles. "Ye keep their heads down. I'll carve 'em up."

Charles didn't need telling twice. He raised his shotgun swung at another smaller bug, but missed. At least he was keeping it busy.

Aris, seeing the tide turning, abandoned his plan to fetch explosives and rushed to the Med Bay. He kicked open the door, only to find Abe drinking himself into a stupor.

"Ahh, get outta here, get off me," Abe protested drunkenly, but Aris grabbed him, dragging him out of the hut.

Stan sprinted across the compound, boots pounding against the dirt as he bolted for the supply hut. He yanked open the metal chest, hands moving on instinct, fumbling shells into his shotgun with the speed of a man who knew every second counted. Click. Click. Clack. Fully loaded. He spun on his heel and sprinted back into the fray.

Inside the shattered power hut, Paddy was already moving. The last creature to strike at him lunged, its claws flashing in the dim light, but Paddy was faster. The monoblade whirred in his augmented arm, a whisper of death, a sliver of steel sharper than thought.

He stepped forward and swung in a brutal, sweeping arc. The blade sliced clean through the creature's middle, its chitinous form splitting apart like brittle glass. The two halves hit the ground with a sickening squelch, twitched once, then lay still.

One left.

Charles raised his shotgun, eyes narrowing as he tracked the last beast. He fired—missed. The creature reared back, hissing, ready to strike.

Then BOOM.

Stan's shotgun roared.

The last bug exploded in a spray of dark ichor, flailing once before crumpling into the dirt.

A tense silence fell over the outpost. The power hut groaned, another section of metal crashed to the ground, sending up a plume of dust.

The skittering was gone, replaced by the soft hum of the floodlights and the rasping breath of the survivors.

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Paddy exhaled, rolling his aching shoulder.

Charles smirked, reloading his shotgun with a practiced flick of the wrist. "Well, looks like we needed Captain Paddy and his handy pike to save the day," he quipped, eyes glinting with a mix of relief and admiration. "That blade of yours cut through them like a hot knife through butter."

Paddy snorted, retracting the monoblade with a sharp hiss. "Captain, is it now? God save us all. Christ, Charles, I work for a living," he retorted, voice dry as old sand. "If I ever get that desperate, shoot me yerself."

"And for the record, this ain't a pike. Christ, Charles, a pike's a stick with a knife on the end," he scoffed, shaking his head. "This here's a monoblade—it's got a monofilament edge, a few nanometres thick—the sharpest known object in the universe. The only thing sharper is my Irish mother's tongue. But you're right, Charles—it does slice a loaf quite nicely too. Shame none of these bastards brought bread."

He cast a glance at the bisected creature at his feet and smirked. "Aye, well, seems the blade is mightier than the bug, eh, Charles?" His grin was sharp and dangerous, but it faded as he wiped a grimy hand across his face. "Shame they didn't read their history books before crawlin' outta their holes."

"Right O Captain Pikey.", said Charles.

Paddy chuckled, the words rolling out slow and easy with that Irish lilt. "Ah, if that's the way of it, I'll be needin' a proper first mate—how about 'Deadeye Darcy,' eh? Or maybe 'Lord Duckshoot' himself? A hell of a shot back there, I'll give ye that. 'Course, as the sayin' goes, pride goeth before a fall—so mind that big head of yours doesn't make for an easy target, eh?" He clapped Charles on the shoulder, eyes glinting with a mix of respect and mischief.

"Aye, aye Captain!" Charles chuckled, then let out a breathless sound that was half relief, half disbelief. The grin on his face faltered as he glanced around at the carnage—the shattered husk of the mother beast, the dark stains seeping into the dirt, the twisted carapaces littering the ground. The last echoes of gunfire hung in the air, a grim reminder that survival had been anything but assured.

Paddy's smirk faded too, eyes narrowing as the adrenaline began to ebb, replaced by a bone-deep ache and a cold weight in his gut. He glanced down at the mono blade, still gleaming and lethal in the floodlights' dim glow. The power hut sagged, half-collapsed, sparks spitting from a severed cable.

"Gods above," Charles breathed, running a hand through his hair. "That was... bloody hell."

Paddy grunted, "Aye, but don't start writing your memoirs just yet. If they hit us this hard once, they'll try it again."

The perimeter lights flickered, and all eyes snapped to them. For a breathless second, they waited. But no red warning light, no scratch of claws against metal, just the eerie stillness that settled in the wake of violence.

"We need to fortify," Stan muttered, voice taut with urgency. "If they come again..."

"Not if," Paddy cut in, gaze fixed on the shadows beyond the lights, the trees swaying in a slow, mocking rhythm. "When. They're testing our defences. They know we're here now."

Charles inhaled sharply, glancing back at the command hut, where Zarkov's body lay cold and still. He swallowed hard, shoulders tense beneath his jacket. "So what the hell do we do now?"

Paddy's eyes hardened, grip tightening on the hilt of the mono blade. "Simple, lad. We buy ourselves time, we get those comms working, and we pray to every saint we know that help gets here before those things do. And in the mean-time we prepare as best we can."

Silence settled again, broken only by the wind through the trees and the distant hum of damaged machinery. They all felt it, the weight of what they'd done and the grim realization that this was far from over.



CHAPTER 6 – THE EYE OF THE STORM!

The camp lay quiet, the air heavy with the lingering stench of burnt chitin and cordite. In the aftermath of the assault, every breath seemed a little harder, every shadow a little darker. The ground was littered with the twisted remains of the bugs—black ichor seeping into the dirt, glistening under the wan light from the floodlights. It was a grim silence, the kind that made even the wind sound like a threat.

Paddy wiped a smear of dark blood from his cheek, glancing at the others as they gathered around the power hut. His eyes were hard, but his voice was calm. "Right, lads and lassies, that was the warm-up. It's at least five hours till dawn and if we don't fancy becoming bug food, best we get ready for round two."

"Round three", corrected Charles. "You were late to the party, remember."

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Inside the cramped confines of the comms hut, Stan, Aris, and Corey worked with a single-minded focus, the air thick with the scent of burnt circuitry and sweat. Panels lay open, wires spilled like entrails, and the only light came from a flickering lantern hanging precariously from a hook. The radio crackled intermittently, a mocking reminder of how far they were from getting a distress signal out.

Aris muttered under his breath, hands moving quickly but carefully as he soldered a burnt-out circuit. Sweat beaded his brow, and he wiped it away with the back of his sleeve. Corey hovered nervously, eyes darting between the panels and Aris's hands, one foot tapping an anxious rhythm on the metal floor.

"Easy there, lad," Aris said, voice low but steady. "You'll wear a hole through the deck if you keep that up."

Corey flushed. "S-Sorry, Mr. Papadakis. It's just... what if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll try again," Stan cut in bluntly, feeding a fresh spool of wire through the conduit. "And if that fails, we'll try again. Keep your hands steady and your nerves in check, kid."

Corey swallowed hard but nodded, hands still trembling as he held a flashlight steady.

Aris squinted, peering at the mess of wires in front of him. "Left hand panel - check if the relay's fried. If it is, we've got spares in the crate. If not, we might have a fighting chance."

Corey scrambled to obey, fingers fumbling slightly. He flipped open the side panel, wincing as a fresh wave of sparks spat out like angry wasps. "Relay's intact, sir! I think... I think it might actually work."

Aris exhaled slowly. "Good lad. Keep it steady."

Stan moved to the main console, fingers brushing the controls with the familiarity of someone who'd done this a thousand times before. He reached for the switch but hesitated, glancing at Aris. "Ready?"

Aris took a deep breath, glancing between them. "As we'll ever be. Flick it."

With a grim nod, Stan threw the switch. For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then the console sparked to life with a furious hum. Lights flickered and steadied. The radio emitted a burst of static that swelled, levelled, and held. Corey's eyes went wide, a smile breaking through the grime on his face.

"We're getting something!" he exclaimed, voice almost a squeak.

But the smile faded as the static persisted—no voice, no distress signal, just a hollow hiss that clawed at the silence. Aris clenched his fists, jaw tight. "Damn it. We're close, but not there yet."

Corey bit his lip. "Maybe if we adjust the frequency—"

"No 'maybe,' lad. Just do it," Aris snapped, though not unkindly.

As Corey leaned in, hands now a little steadier, Aris shot a quick prayer to whichever saint watched over lost causes and electronic repairs. "Come on, you bastard. Don't make me look like a fool in front of the kid."

Another twist of the dial, a soft crackle—then silence. The light above the console blinked slowly, taunting.

Stan growled. "Better than nothing. At least the perimeter warning's still up. If anything bigger than a rat twitches, we'll know."

Aris nodded, but his eyes remained fixed on the console, the thin line of his mouth pressed tight. They were close, but close wouldn't call for help. Close wouldn't save their skins if the bugs came again.

From outside, a faint echo of voices reached them—Paddy's, low and steady, rallying the others to set fires and reinforce the barricades. Aris exhaled slowly, shaking off the dread curling in his gut.

And in the cramped, dim-lit hut, the three men bent back to work, the weight of the night pressing in around them.

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As the three men worked inside, Paddy, Charles, and the others combed through the outpost with purpose, searching every crate and container. In the far corner of a storage unit, Sayelle pulled back a tarp to reveal a metal crate marked with the faded Stenmore Minerals logo. The words "SEISMIC CHARGES - HANDLE WITH CARE" were stencilled in dull red, flaking at the edges. She pried the lid open cautiously revealing a collection of cylindrical devices packed in foam.. "We use these for mining, are they any use?"

The charges were ruggedly built—too rugged for mining alone, Paddy suspected. Each had a simple trigger mechanism and a detonation timer, both of which he examined with a wary eye. He picked one up, weighing it thoughtfully in his augmented left hand, turning it over to study the wiring.

"Could make some grenades outta these," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "Get a bit creative with the timers, rework the det caps... aye, could do it."

He twisted one of the canisters, exposing a tangle of wires and a timing module that looked disturbingly jury-rigged even for mining equipment. The faint chemical scent of the explosives drifted up, biting and acrid. Paddy narrowed his eyes, prodding a wire with the tip of his utility tool.

Snap.

A spark leaped between the contacts, startling him into jerking his hand back. The timer flickered—just for a heartbeat—then stilled again, the faint whine of charging capacitors fading into silence.

Paddy's expression darkened. "Ah, bloody hell," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "These things are temperamental as a colonel with a hangover."

He set the charge back into the crate with a touch more care than before, the idea of converting them into grenades swiftly losing its appeal. Last thing they needed was to blow themselves to bits before the bugs could even try.

Charles wandered over, shotgun slung across his shoulder, raising an eyebrow at the open crate. "Found anything useful, Captain Pike?"

Paddy snorted, running a hand through his hair. "Aye, useful if ye fancy turning this camp into a crater. These seismic charges are a damn sight too temperamental for my liking. We set one off wrong, and it'll take us and half the camp with it."

Charles leaned in, inspecting the explosives with a practiced, if slightly skeptical, eye. "Not feeling particularly suicidal today, then?"

"Not unless you want to try your hand at it," Paddy retorted dryly. "Me, I'd rather keep my remaining limbs attached."

He pulled the crate shut with a decisive clank, locking the clasps tight. Maybe if they had time—proper tools, a workshop, a training video, or someone who actually knew how to handle high-grade explosives without turning into a fine mist—maybe then it'd be worth the risk. But out here, in the dark, with who-knew-what waiting for them? Not a chance.

"Best stick to shotguns and blades," Paddy said, hefting his own with a grim set to his jaw. "At least those don't blow up in yer face if ye look at 'em wrong."

Charles chuckled, a weary sound, and slapped him on the shoulder. "Fair point, Captain Pike. Best we not add 'accidental detonation' to our growing list of problems."

"Aye," he muttered. "We've got enough to worry about."

He shouldered the shotgun, gave the crates one last glare, and moved to rejoin the others, the weight of the coming night settling heavy on his shoulders.

Paddy hesitated, glancing around to make sure no one was watching too closely.

He pried open the crate of seismic charges again, just enough to slide a hand inside. His fingers brushed over the smooth, cold surface of the cylinders, hesitating for the barest moment before curling around one of the smaller charges. He lifted it, careful and slow, cradling it like an unexploded mine.

"Insurance," he muttered under his breath, a faint grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "For when things go even more sideways."

The charge was about the size of a beer can, compact but heavy with potential. He traced a thumb over the activation switch, grimacing at the crude timer interface. The damn thing looked like it had been put together by a half-blind technician on too much caffeine. Still, better to have it than not.

With a furtive glance over his shoulder, Paddy slipped the charge into one of the larger pouches on his belt, securing it with a practiced efficiency. He cinched the strap tight, ensuring it wouldn't jostle free at an inconvenient moment.

Charles's voice floated over, dry and faintly amused. "Resorting to explosives now, Captain Pike? Didn't peg you for the type."

Paddy snorted, rising to his feet and brushing dust from his jumpsuit. "Just hedging my bets, lad. Never hurts to have a bit o' bang in reserve. Besides"—he patted the pouch with a smirk—"sometimes a fella's gotta make his own luck."

"Just make sure that luck doesn't blow us all to hell."

"No promises," Paddy shot back, striding past with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

His hand lingered near the pouch, instinctive and ready. Insurance, indeed—if they were going to get out of this mess alive, they'd need every trick, every weapon, and every last ounce of luck they could muster.

*

Paddy strode toward the ruins of the power hut, boots crunching over shattered plastiglass shards and twisted sheets of plasteel. The fusion generator still hummed faintly beneath the wreckage, its pulse a low, steady reminder that without it, they were as good as dead. The prefab walls, once smooth and uniform, were warped and crumpled inward, with jagged rents where claws had torn through the composite panels.

Charles, Abe, Anson, and Sayelle lingered nearby, eyes flicking between the wreckage and the darkness beyond the camp's perimeter. Their faces were a mix of exhaustion and barely-contained panic.

"Alright, listen up," Paddy barked, tone brooking no argument. "That generator's the only bloody thing keeping us from being neck-deep in bug guts come sunrise. If we lose it, we're done. So, I need every hand reinforcing what's left of this hut. Pile whatever you can find—crates, barrels. Make it tight, make it thick. Anything tries to chew its way through, I want it choking on debris."

Charles arched an eyebrow but gave a curt nod, turning to drag a broken plasteel panel into place. Abe, eyes still wide and glassy, hesitated a fraction too long until Anson gave him a shove.

"Move it, lad," Paddy snapped, already turning his back to them.

With the others scrambling to follow orders, Paddy moved to the carcass of the big bug sprawled near the power hut—a grotesque mountain of chitin and ichor, still steaming faintly

where its insides had been exposed. Its armour plates glinted darkly, thick enough to turn aside shotgun blasts and shrug off blades.

"Ah, you're an ugly bastard, aren't you?" Paddy muttered, dropping to a knee beside the corpse. He ran a hand along the smooth curve of the chitin, testing its weight and flexibility. If he could strip and reforge it, it might just serve as better protection than any jumpsuit or vacc suit could offer.

Extending his mono-blade from his arm, the blade sang to life with a whispering hum, a razor-thin edge glinting wickedly under the floodlights.

"Well then," he grunted, driving the blade into the thick shell with a swift, brutal stroke. The monofilament edge carved through the chitin like butter, sections of armour peeling away under precise cuts. "Let's see if we can't make some proper armour out of you, eh?"

Time blurred into a rhythm of hacking, prying, and stitching. Using strips of cloth and the salvaged wiring, Paddy fashioned a crude set of vambraces and a chest piece, overlapping the plates for maximum coverage. They were heavy and cumbersome, but anything that could turn aside claws and fangs was worth its weight in gold.

He slipped the chest piece over his vac suit, tightening straps until it fit snugly. The vambraces followed, shielding his forearms in thick segments of chitin. The whole ensemble looked ragtag and brutal, more gladiator than soldier—but it would hold.

Charles, pausing in his efforts to barricade the hut, gave a low whistle. "Well not exactly parade worthy, is it?"

Paddy snorted, giving the chest piece a final tug. "Aye, maybe not," he replied with a wry grin, "but then again, I'm not here to impress the bleedin' officers, am I? As they say—'better a ragged coat than a ragged back.' This'll do fine for the slaughter."

He gave the armour a testing rap with his knuckles, the chitin ringing dully. "Besides," he added, glancing at the darkness beyond the floodlights, "the bugs won't care if I'm dressed for dinner or a brawl. Long as it keeps me breathin', it'll do."

*

"Right," Aris muttered, "Take a break, lads, get some air. Let's see what the Sergeant's doin' out there."

Stan exhaled and shot a weary glance at Corey. "You heard the man," he grunted. "Might as well get a breath of fresh death while we can."

Corey, crouched beside the console with a spanner in one hand and a nervous twitch in his eye, shook his head quickly. "I'll... I'll stay in here, if it's all the same to you," he stammered. "Run a few more checks, y'know, keep an eye on the perimeter defence. If anything moves, I'll sound the alarm."

Aris glanced back, raising an eyebrow. "Suit yourself, kid," he said, voice half-muffled as he rubbed at his temple with the back of a gloved hand. "Just don't blow us to hell while you're at it, yeah?"

Corey gave a nervous chuckle, but his fingers never stopped moving, adjusting dials, eyes flicking to the perimeter monitor which was still silent. "No promises," he mumbled. "But I'll try not to. Uh, good luck out there."

Aris snorted, clapping him once on the shoulder, a gesture more reassurance than camaraderie. "Keep the lights on, kid. We'll need 'em."

With a weary nod, Aris pushed open the door to the comms hut, letting in a rush of cold night air that prickled against sweat-soaked skin. Stan followed, shotgun resting loose but ready in his hands, eyes scanning the darkness beyond the floodlights.

Stan and Aris emerged from the comms hut, looking worn but satisfied. Stan wiped a smear of grease off his cheek with the back of his sleeve, exhaling sharply.

"Managed to get the basic systems up," Stan reported, voice clipped and efficient. "Perimeter sensors are holding. Comms might need a bit more coaxing, but it's better than static. Corey's running some tests, we came out to see what you lot are up to."

They moved as a group to the stores, crowding around the open containers and metal lockers.

"Right then," Paddy grunted, pulling open the locker with a rough yank. Inside, a dozen or shotgun shells was all that remained.

Aris rubbed the back of his neck, peering into the stash with a raised eyebrow. "Not exactly the armoury of a capital ship, is it?"

"Aye, but it'll have to do," Paddy replied, tossing a handful of shells to Charles, who caught them with a nod. "Ration out what we've got. Six shells each, two in the pocket for luck. Any objections?"

Nobody spoke, though Anson's face paled slightly as she fumbled with the handful of ammunition Paddy pressed into her hands.

"Don't think about it too much," Paddy said, voice low but steady. "Just aim, breathe, and pull."

"Right, lads, listen up," Paddy barked, voice carrying just enough bite to snap everyone's attention. "We've got enough shells for six shots each, plus two in reserve. Make 'em count—no sprayin' and prayin'"

Anson, still pale and clutching a shotgun like it might bite her, glanced nervously at the battered walls. "And when they run out?"

Paddy's lips pulled into a grim smile. "Then it's down to fists and harsh language, lass."

Stan drew the revolver that was holstered at his side and spun the barrel with a flick of his wrist. The metal clicked and whirred. He snapped the cylinder back into place with a practiced motion.

"I've still got this. Four shots ain't much, but you never know when this might come in handy."

He glanced around, eyes settling on Sayelle, who was hovering by the supply crates, hands wringing nervously. Her eyes widened as he held the revolver out to her, butt-first.

"Here," Stan offered, almost gentle. "You might need it."

Sayelle hesitated, fingers twitching, but shook her head. "I—I've never been much good with guns," she mumbled, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'd probably shoot one of you by mistake."

Stan chuckled, the sound dry and humourless. "Fair enough. No point in shootin' us more than the bugs." He shrugged, tucking the revolver back into its holster with a sigh. "Dagger, then? Better than your bare hands if they get close."

Sayelle's gaze drifted to the dagger that had been Hambley's. She bit her lip, a shudder running through her, but reached out, fingers closing around the hilt.

"All right," she breathed, steeling herself. "I can do that."

Stan gave a nod of approval. "Atta girl. Stick 'em in the soft bits if they get too close. Don't think about it, just do it."

Sayelle's grip tightened, knuckles whitening, but she managed a shaky nod. "Right. Soft bits. Got it." She swallowed hard, but the dagger stayed steady in her hand. For now, it was enough.

Paddy hefted his shotgun, running his thumb along the barrel with a thoughtful frown. The others watched as he gave the weapon a considering look, then nodded to himself.

"Right, listen up," he said, voice carrying over the quiet murmurs. "We've got five shotguns between us. Now, we could modify one, saw it off clean. Close range, it'd blow a bug in half, easy." He glanced at the faces around him, measuring their reactions. "Downside is, anything past ten feet, ye'd be better off throwin' rocks. Less range, wider spread, but at close quarters, it'd make a right mess of those ugly bastards."

Charles adjusted his grip on his own shotgun, brows knitting together. "Isn't that a bit... excessive?" he ventured, though the hesitation in his voice suggested he was considering it.

Paddy snorted. "Excessive? Lad, ye just saw me slice a bug in half with a monoblade, and yer worried about a bit of extra spread?" His grin was wolfish. "Excessive's the whole point. Close up, a sawn-off's like a bloody cannon. Pull the trigger, and anything in front of ye gets turned into paste."

Aris rubbed the back of his neck, eyeing the shotgun warily. "What about the kick on one of those things? Ain't exactly a small boom."

"Aye, it'll rattle yer teeth, no question," Paddy admitted with a shrug. "But if ye're that close, you'll be too busy cleanin' guts off yer boots to mind a bruised shoulder."

Anson looked between them, biting her lip. "I've seen sawn-offs before," she muttered. "They're... loud."

Paddy chuckled. "Loud's what ye want, lass. Ye want those things runnin' scared, not crawlin' in through the windows."

But despite his best efforts, none of them seemed too eager. Charles shook his head, Stan just grunted noncommittally, and even Anson shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"Ah, suit yerselves," Paddy sighed, rolling his eyes. "Bloody hell, try to give folks a proper cannon and they ask for peashooters. Fine, keep yer long barrels. Just make sure ye hit somethin' when the time comes."

*

Paddy moved to the north wall of the supply hut, and extended the mono blade from his augmented left arm—a whisper-quiet hum accompanying every movement—he sliced through the prefab walls of the supply hut with effortless ease. Thin sheets of composite metal peeled back like tin foil, leaving neat, squared-off openings just wide enough to poke a shotgun barrel through.

"Loop holes," Paddy muttered. "Better'n waitin' for those bastards to come knockin'. And from here we can cover the Power hut."

He moved to the next spot, cutting another loop hole into the west wall this time, adjusting for line of sight and maximum coverage.

"That'll do," Paddy muttered, retracting the blade with a faint click. The edge vanished back into his arm, leaving only the faintest seam to mark where it had been

Charles, watching from a few feet away with an approving nod, couldn't resist a wry smile. "Well, if we survive this, I'll be sure to recommend your redecorating skills to the Admiralty. Very... utilitarian."

Paddy snorted, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead. "Aye, well, if they come knockin', you can give 'em a tour yourself."

*

They took the time to set fires at the boundaries, piling scrap wood, empty crates, and anything else that would burn into makeshift pyres. As the flames caught, crackling and spitting, an orange glow crept over the camp, casting twisted shadows that flickered and danced across the prefab huts and jagged wreckage.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

Charles Commented "Are we sure this is going to work? Those things didn't seem too bothered by the floodlights."

Paddy snorted, adjusting the vambraces he'd fashioned from the big bug's carapace. "Naw, they weren't," he admitted. "But this ain't about scarin' 'em off, lad. This is about lightin' 'em up nice and bright so we can blow their bloody heads off before they get close enough to start pincushionin' us."

Stan moved along the perimeter, torch in one hand, muttering under his breath. "Well, long as we ain't just roastin' marshmallows out here."

Aris emerged from one of the huts, arms full of folded cloth. "Found some Stenmore Minerals overalls—better than these paper-thin sleep suits," he announced, tossing one to each of them. The fabric was thick, padded in places—at least a step up from the cold nylon that offered little more protection than a bedsheet.

*

A yell broke the tense silence, sharp and panicked.

"Lights! Perimeter lights are flashing!" Corey's voice, high and raw, cut through the night. Every head snapped toward the comms hut. For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then they were running, boots thundering on metal and dirt.

Inside, Corey was hunched over the console, fingers jittering across the keys, eyes wide and fixed on the display. The perimeter map flickered with angry red dots—too many, far too many.

"Two big ones—sixteen smaller!" Corey's voice trembled, desperation threading through every syllable. "They're coming!"

The group crowded in, breath harsh and tight. Charles swore under his breath.

"Do we try the SOS signal now?" Sayelle asked, voice tight, eyes flicking nervously to the flashing lights.

"Unless there's a dropship waitin' in low orbit, don't expect the cavalry to come charging in," Paddy cut in, voice grim but steady. "Best we can hope for is to relay a message to the nearest starbase and pray they send a ship out—an' that'll be at least a week. But if we don't get a signal out and the bugs overrun the power or comms, then we're dead anyway."

For a moment, no one spoke. The only sound was the crackle of the fires outside and the pulsing alarm.

Charles ran a hand through his hair, jaw tight. "So... we try it now."

Paddy nodded once, curt and final. "Aye. Hit the damn switch."

Aris leaned over the console, hands slick with sweat, fingers moving with a frantic precision that belied the hammering of his heart. The comms hut was stifling, every breath thick and hot. Red warning lights bathed the room, casting jagged shadows that flickered with every anxious movement.

"Come on, come on," Aris muttered, wiping his brow with a sleeve, voice low and tight. "Don't you dare give out on me now, you tin-plated son of a—"

Corey was at his side, hands trembling but steady enough to pass tools and hold a flickering light steady. His eyes were wide, darting between the screen and the tangled mess of circuitry beneath it. "Mr. Papadakis," Corey stammered, "if you'd like me to, uh, wipe your brow—"

"Keep that light steady, lad," Aris snapped, a note of forced calm in his voice. "Or we'll all be a smear on the wall before sunrise."

Paddy leaned in the doorway, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the horizon outside. The distant flicker of the fires they'd set along the boundaries threw eerie, twisting shadows. He could feel the weight of the coming storm, the silence before it—like the pause before the first shell hit.

"How long, Aris?" Paddy growled.

"Here we go.. Oh Lord, don't forsake us now..." Aris flicked the on-line switch. The console hummed with a sullen, rising pitch. For a heartbeat, a green light blinked, hopeful and alive.

Then a sharp crack echoed—a fuse blew somewhere inside the console. The green light died with a pitiful flicker, replaced by a baleful red. Smoke curled, acrid and taunting. Aris flinched, jerking his hand back with a curse that would've made a priest blush.

Corey's face went white. "Is it... is it dead?"

Aris blew out a breath, running a shaky hand over his face. "Not dead," he growled, voice thick with frustration. "But it's gonna need more work. Hours, maybe. We don't have that kind of time."

Paddy's jaw tightened. "Bloody hell," he muttered, glancing at the blinking perimeter lights outside. The dots were closer now, a slow but inevitable crawl.

Charles, watching from the corner, let out a long breath through his nose. "So... we're back to sticks and shotguns, then."

Paddy snorted, a dark glint in his eyes. "Aye. And pray they don't fancy roasted Irishman for supper. Positions everybody. Lock and load and get ready..."

Stan pointed to the containers. "If we fall back to the garages, we might hold longer. But if they cut the power, we're dead anyway."

Paddy crossed his arms, eyes flicking between the others. "Aye, and if we lose the comms, we're blind and deaf. Best we defend what matters."

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, you know your positions, you know the routine." he said, voice low and steady. "Once more unto the breach dear friends... And good luck!"



CHAPTER 7 – HERE THEY COME AGAIN!

The night air hung heavy with anticipation. The perimeter lights blinked a slow, foreboding rhythm, red dots winking in and out like the pulse of a dying heart.

In the supply hut, the walls reinforced with scraps of metal and plastic sheeting, Paddy glanced at the two figures beside him. Charles, eyes narrowed, cradled a shotgun with the grim familiarity of a man who'd long abandoned any notion of clean hands. Anson, wide-eyed and pale, gripped her own weapon with the stiffness of a novice trying too hard not to flinch.

Paddy cleared his throat, the words heavy on his tongue. "Right, listen up," he began, voice low but steady. "Once more unto the breach, eh? We'll fight them on the beaches, we'll fight them in the—"

The words died in his throat as Anson's hands trembled, eyes flicking nervously to the door. Even Charles managed a tight-lipped smirk, one eyebrow quirking upward in skeptical amusement. Paddy huffed, rolling his eyes skyward. "Ah, bugger it. Just shoot straight and don't piss yourselves, right?"

In the comms hut, the atmosphere was no less strained. Stan peered through the slitted window, shotgun resting against his shoulder, finger light on the trigger. Aris leaned over Corey's shoulder at the console, eyes darting between the flickering lights and the young tech's pale face. Sayelle hovered awkwardly, glancing back toward the power hut with uncertainty writ large across her face.

"I—I should go to help at the Power hut," she stammered, wringing her hands. "Paddy said.."

"No!" Corey's voice cracked, hands white-knuckled on the controls. "Don't—don't leave me here alone, okay? I can't—"

Aris exchanged a look with Stan, a silent sigh passing between them. "Easy, kid," Aris muttered, patting Corey's shoulder with what was probably intended as a reassuring gesture but came off more like slapping a side of beef. "We ain't goin' nowhere."

Abe, meanwhile, had barricaded himself in the med hut, bottle clutched like a rosary, mumbling half-formed prayers to saints whose names blurred into slurred syllables.

Back in the supply hut, Paddy risked a glance through the loop hole he'd carved into the wall. His augmented arm flexed unconsciously, the monoblade sheathed for now.

"Steady now," he muttered, more to himself than the others. "Conserve your ammo. Let them come to us first. We can't afford to spray and pray, not with what we've got left."

Charles snorted, reloading with sharp, practiced motions. "And here I thought you liked a challenge, Sergeant."

The ground trembled, a faint but rising rumble that sent a prickle of unease crawling up the spine. And then, from the shadows beyond the floodlights, and emerging into the red glow of the boundary fires, the swarm emerged. Two hulking shapes flanked by a skittering tide of smaller bodies, mandibles clacking in a hellish rhythm, eyes glinting with mindless, predatory hunger.

"Here they come again..." Paddy murmured, breath misting in the cold air. His fingers tightened around the shotgun. "Saints preserve us."

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The bugs moved fast—too fast. Within moments, they had closed 25 meters, mandibles clashing, the earth itself seeming to shudder beneath their advance.

"Bastards move quicker than a debt collector," Paddy muttered. His voice was a low rasp, more to himself than the others.

In the supply hut, Charles drew the string of his bow back to his cheek, the muscles in his arm quivering with strain. He exhaled slow and steady, focusing on a single bug scuttling ahead of the others. The arrow whistled through the gloom, striking true. The creature staggered, ichor spurting from a puncture in its carapace, but it didn't stop. Its limbs scrabbled against the dirt, claws digging in, dragging its bulk forward with mindless determination.

"Nine arrows left," Charles murmured, pulling another arrow from the quiver at his side. His eyes never left the approaching swarm.

In the comms hut, Aris's opened the door and looked up at the roof "Up on the roof!" he suggested, gesturing wildly. "We need eyes! And a better angle Move!"

Corey's face blanched a sickly white beneath the flickering console lights. "Mr. Papadakis," he stammered, voice cracking. "I'm—I'm better off in here, really. Unarmed and all." His eyes darted to the flickering red dots on the perimeter display, hands trembling.

Stan snorted, shotgun cradled against his chest. "Roof, huh? No thanks. Think I'll stay where I've got a door to hide behind."

Aris huffed, rubbing at his temple, eyes flicking nervously to the roof. There was no ladder, the climb looked awkward for a man of his... stature. He squinted up at it, lip curling with a mix of doubt and disdain. "I, uh..." He cleared his throat, smoothing a hand over his coat. "Maybe not. I've never missed a meal, after all." He eyed the climb, cheeks red with something between shame and defiance. "Hmm, I'm not cut out for this."

*

The swarm pressed forward, a seething mass of chitin and claws, shadows twisting grotesquely in the flickering firelight, as they crossed the fifty-meter line, marked by the perimeter fires.

"Ah, there you are," Paddy muttered, lips curling into a grim smile as the fires revealed the full scope of what they faced. The closest ones were hideous, eyes glinting black, jaws

flexing eagerly. But it was the larger ones—towering above the rest, armoured in dull, obsidian plates—that drew his gaze.

"Light 'em up, lads!" Paddy barked, levelling his shotgun, eyes narrowed.

Charles inhaled, drawing back the bowstring once more. His gaze flickered over the horde, settling on the bug he'd already wounded. The arrow loosed with a sharp twang, slicing through the night. It struck true, burying itself deep between the creature's eyes. It gave a shrill, chittering scream and crumpled into the dirt, legs twitching in final spasms.

"One down," Charles muttered, a grim satisfaction in his voice as he nocked another arrow.
"Eight left."

In the comms hut, Stan braced himself, shotgun pressed to his shoulder. "Alright, you ugly bastard," he hissed through gritted teeth. He squeezed the trigger, the shotgun bucking in his hands with a deafening roar. The blast tore into one of the bugs, chitin shattering, greenish ichor spraying in a sickening arc. The thing screeched and veered off into the darkness, dragging a shattered leg behind it.

"Nice shot," Aris grunted, eyes flicking to the shifting shadows outside. He leveled his own shotgun, jaw clenched. His hands were steady, but the beads of sweat tracking down his brow betrayed him. He squeezed the trigger—BOOM!—the shot went wide, tearing into the dirt harmlessly.

"Bloody hell," he swore under his breath, pumping the shotgun with a hiss of frustration.

Back in the supply hut, Paddy steadied his breathing, focusing down the sights at the hulking beast leading the charge. Its carapace glinted dully in the light, thicker and darker than the rest. He exhaled slow, finger tightening—

BOOM! The shot rang out, but the beast darted left at the last moment, and the spray of pellets carved a useless line into the dirt.

"Dammit," Paddy growled, racking another shell into the chamber.

Beside him, Anson's eyes were wide and frantic. She gripped her shotgun awkwardly, knuckles white against the metal. Her voice was shrill with nerves as she barked, "My god, I thought you were in the army!"

Paddy shot her a glare, but before he could respond, Anson flinched, pulled the trigger—BOOM! The blast went wide, blowing chunks out of a supply crate, and her arms jerked back from the recoil.

She stared at the splintered crate, mouth hanging open. "Oh... oh, shit."

"Eyes forward, lass," Paddy snapped, reloading with quick, practiced motions. "They're not gonna die of fright!"

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The swarm surged forward, now just twenty-five meters out—close enough to see the sheen of their chitin and the way their mandibles clacked with feverish anticipation. The ground seemed to tremble beneath the weight of them, a relentless tide of claws and hunger.

"Steady, lads!" Paddy barked, voice carrying over the chaos. "Pick your shots! Make 'em count!"

From the shadow of the supply hut, Charles narrowed his eyes at a smaller bug leading the charge. He drew the bowstring back, muscles tensed, the arrowhead glinting wickedly in the firelight. He loosed the arrow with a sharp twang, and it cut through the air with lethal precision—THUNK!—piercing the creature's thorax. It staggered, ichor bubbling from the wound, but sheer momentum drove it onward.

"Persistent little bastard," Charles growled.

"You're a proper Robin Hood now, as well as a duck shooter," Paddy called out, voice rough but edged with genuine admiration. "I'm impressed. Not bad for a toff."

Stan braced his shotgun against his shoulder, sighting down the barrel. The firelight cast his face in hard shadows, eyes narrowed. He exhaled slow, squeezing the trigger—BOOM! The shot caught a bug in the side, blasting through a segment of its leg. It shrieked and veered off, skittering into the darkness, leaking thick, dark fluid in its wake.

"Run back to yer mammy!" Stan snarled, pumping the shotgun.

Aris, still half-crouched behind a crate, finally steadied his aim. He sucked in a breath, blinked away the sweat burning his eyes, and pulled the trigger—BOOM! The recoil kicked hard, but the blast was true, catching one of the advancing bugs dead centre. The thing screeched, limbs flailing, and twisted away, trailing a dark smear across the ground.

"Hah! That's more like it!" Aris whooped, voice raw with a mix of fear and adrenaline.
"Maybe I'll live to see another bloody sunrise after all!"

Paddy's eyes flicked to the advancing line, picking out a smaller bug darting between its lumbering kin. He shifted his stance, levelled the shotgun, and squeezed the trigger with a snarl—BOOM! The spread caught it clean, the blast punching through chitin and flesh in a spray of dark ichor. The bug crumpled mid-lunge, legs twitching as it hit the ground.

"One down," Paddy muttered, voice a low growl. "Who's next?"

Beside him, Anson's eyes were wide and wild, knuckles white around the shotgun's grip. Her breaths came sharp and shallow, eyes locked on the hulking brute leading the swarm—a monstrosity twice the size of the others, armoured like a walking tank.

"I'm gonna get that big one!" she shrieked, lifting the shotgun with a defiant glare.

"Ah, for—wait, you daft—!" Paddy started, but it was too late.

BOOM! The shotgun roared, the blast aimed squarely at the beast's armoured head. Pellets pinged harmlessly off its obsidian shell, sparks skittering like fireflies. The creature barely flinched, its eyes glinting black and unfeeling.

Anson's face went pale. "Oh... oh shite," she breathed, again.

"Aye, you got its attention now, lass," Paddy grunted, racking a new shell with a metallic clack. "Next time, try shootin' something that'll actually bleed!"

But there was no next time—the swarm was nearly upon them, the stink of them fouling the air, a mix of ammonia and rotting leaves. The big one reared up with a hellish screech, claws flexing.

Paddy glanced at Charles, eyes dark and flat. "Here we go," he muttered. "Time to see what we're made of."

*

The barricades barely slowed them down. The swarm surged over the mounds of debris and twisted metal, legs scrabbling with eerie precision. Firelight cast grotesque shadows across the camp, illuminating chitinous bodies and glistening fangs. The stink of them was suffocating—ammonia and rot.

Charles gritted his teeth, tossing his bow aside and yanking the shotgun from his shoulder with a smooth motion. "Not today, you ugly bastard!" he snarled. The blast roared, deafening, and the closest bug exploded into chunks of meat and carapace, ichor splattering the walls.

Stan, crouched at the corner of the comms hut, wasted no time. He sighted down the barrel, exhaled slow, and squeezed the trigger. BOOM! The shot caught another bug in the centre mass, tearing through it in a shower of dark blood. The thing's legs spasmed wildly before it crumpled into a heap.

"That's two!" Stan called out, pumping the shotgun with a savage grin. "Who's keepin' score?"

Aris took a step back, eyes flicking between the writhing swarm and the sights of his weapon. His hands trembled, but he sucked in a breath and fired. BOOM! The shot went wide, shredding a plastic barrel instead.

"Ah, shite!" Aris barked, shuffling back. "Sayelle, get out of the way, for God's sake!"

Paddy was already moving.

He surged forward, shotgun discarded, the mono-blade snapping out with a wicked hum. The polymer blade caught the firelight, its edge impossibly thin, a razor of a thing that could cut through steel like cloth.

"C'mon then!" Paddy roared, boots hammering the dirt. "Come see how the sharp end feels!"

He slid down the rubble, a blur of motion, eyes locked on the hulking brute that led the charge—the big one, armoured in obsidian plates, claws like scythes. He dropped low, spinning with the blade, angling to carve up through its underbelly in a lethal strike.

And then—CLANG!

The blade hit a rock, jarred his wrist with brutal force, and in that split-second of imbalance, Paddy's boot slipped on loose gravel. His balance went to hell.

"Ah, for the love of—" he spat.

Momentum carried him forward—straight into the path of his own weapon. He didn't even have time to turn the blade aside. The monofilament edge bit through the front of his vac suit, carving a crimson path across his ribs, sinking deep. Agony lanced through him, white-hot and paralyzing.

"Pride comes before a fall," he gasped, voice raw and hoarse, eyes wide with pain. "Son of a—"

His knees buckled. Strength bled out of him, He fell to his hands and knees..

"Ah, bloody typical luck," he rasped, voice strained with agony but still defiant. "Only thing able to slice through bug armour *and* a vac suit is my own bloody blade. Hoisted by my own petard, eh?"

His knees gave out, the world tilting sideways. The ground rushed up to meet him, cold and unyielding, and darkness crept at the edges of his vision. But the grin never left his face, teeth crimson-stained and eyes wild with pain and incredulous disbelief.

"Christ, Paddy," Charles muttered from the supply hut, eyes wide with horror. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Paddy's vision went dark at the edges, the pain so blinding it stole the breath from his lungs. He tried to move, to get a hand under him, but his limbs were ice. He could only choke out a broken laugh, lips flecked with red.

Anson's eyes went wide with horror. "That damn fool! He doesn't have a plan! All that talk about military training—fuck that!" Her hands trembled around the shotgun's grip, but she pulled the trigger anyway—BOOM! The spread peppered the big one's shell harmlessly, sparking off its armour.

"Damn it!" Anson hissed, voice cracking.

*

Charles narrowed his eyes, watching the largest of the beasts lumber forward. Its exoskeleton glistened in the firelight, claws snapping with murderous intent. But his gaze shifted, falling to Paddy's crumpled form sprawled in the dirt, the mono-blade still extended from his arm. Cursing under his breath, Charles slipped from the supply hut, keeping low and moving fast.

The big bug crashed forward, its massive claw slicing through the store hut's roof like paper, shards of metal raining down. Charles flattened himself behind a twisted sheet of plasteel, heart pounding. The poison-tipped stinger lashed out, aiming for Anson, but struck only air as she stumbled back, eyes wide with panic. The hut groaned under the assault, panels collapsing inward with a screech of tearing metal.

From the other side of the compound, an echoing crash split the air, followed by a high-pitched, desperate scream. The med bay—Abe's frantic voice barely carried over the chaos.

Charles gritted his teeth, hauling Paddy's limp form up and dragging him back towards cover. The Irishman was heavy, dead weight, blood soaking through the makeshift carapace armour. "Come on soldier," Charles muttered, voice tight with strain. "You don't get to check out yet."

Behind him, Stan levelled his shotgun at a smaller bug lunging forward. The blast was deafening, the creature recoiling, hissing, before skittering back into the shadows. Aris fired too, the shot ripping through another with a spray of ichor.

But then—cold, unmistakable—something pressed against the back of Aris's neck. Metal. A pistol.

"Lights out," a woman's voice drawled, low and mocking.

Aris froze, breath catching. "No way," he rasped.

"Way," Sayelle murmured, voice all honeyed malice.

"Sayelle?" Aris whispered, disbelief cutting through the chaos. He risked a glance over his shoulder, eyes wide. But the words barely left his lips before the shot rang out—sharp, deafening. The snub-nosed pistol kicked in her hand, and Aris's world exploded into white-hot agony. The bullet punched clean through his neck, a spray of crimson mist hanging in the air. He crumpled against the console, gasping, blood gushing between his fingers.

"Mr. Papadakis, what the hell is happening?" Corey shrieked, eyes wide, voice cracking with hysteria. "Sayelle?! That's Mr. Papadakis! He's going to get us out of this place!"

Sayelle's eyes narrowed, the pistol still smoking in her grip. "Oh, sweetie," she purred, "you really should have stayed in the bunker."

Back at the supply hut, Anson's gaze flickered to Paddy's slumped form, then back to the gaping holes in the hut walls where claws and mandibles were already tearing through. "I'm not taking any more of this shit!" she spat, voice quivering. "He's already passed out, and that thing's coming through the wall!" Her hands trembled as she fumbled with her shotgun, wide-eyed and frantic. The massive bug reared up, chitinous claws shredding the walls, snapping and lunging. Anson fired wildly, pellets sparking uselessly off the beast's armour.

"Dammit!" she cursed, voice ragged. "I'm running out of ammo!"

The walls buckled, the barricades groaned, and the darkness beyond swarmed with shadows and hunger.

*

Chaos reigned in the compound, the fires casting grotesque shadows through shattered walls and broken windows. The two bugs that had breached the supply hut were little more than slivers of darkness and chitinous malice, claws snapping as they closed in.

Charles's eyes narrowed as one lunged for him, mandibles clacking with a sound like dry bones. He twisted sharply, feeling the air stir as the claws missed by mere inches, slamming into the wall behind him in a shower of splinters. Anson wasn't as lucky; she barely threw herself aside, stumbling back, the creature's claws raking through the air where her chest had been a heartbeat before.

But the big one—the mother of all nightmares—was already smashing through what remained of the barricades. Its bulk filled the gap, claws rending steel and plasteel alike, eyes black and empty. Charles swore, breath coming fast and shallow, glancing at Paddy's unmoving form sprawled in a pool of blood and dirt.

“Sorry about this, Paddy,” he muttered, crouching low. His fingers worked quickly, unscrewing the mono-blade from Paddy’s augmented arm. His hands trembled as he worked the mono-blade free, the hilt slick with blood and dirt. The blade came loose with a soft click, impossibly light and cold in Charles’s grip.

And then Paddy stirred.

His eyes fluttered open, unfocused and glassy, but somehow still filled with that stubborn, unrelenting fire. A ragged breath tore from his chest, wet and rattling, and his hand twitched faintly, fingers curling as if to grasp something that wasn’t there.

Charles froze, breath catching.

Paddy’s lips moved, the words a blood-curdling moan, raw and rasping, but unmistakably his. “You are a brave man, Charles,” he choked out, voice little more than a whisper dragged through shards of glass. “I… am impressed.”

His eyes slipped shut again, the fire dimming, and his head lolled back against the ground. The faint, crimson-stained smile lingered, a ghost of defiance even as darkness pulled him under.

Charles exhaled shakily, fingers tightening on the blade’s hilt. “Damn fool,” he breathed, voice cracking. “Save your breath, you stubborn bastard. We’re not done yet.”

But the mono-blade was slick in his grip, and the barricades were splintering, and the swarm was pressing in.

The bug’s claws came down—Charles threw himself to the side, felt the rush of air as they crashed into the floorboards with a bone-jarring impact. The stinger lashed for Anson with a speed that belied its size. The sharp tip struck home, punching through her shoulder, and her eyes went wide, pupils blown with shock. She staggered, shotgun slipping from her grasp, lips parting in a soundless gasp as the venom coursed through her veins.

She swayed, breath hitching. “I—” she choked, knees buckling. The world spun, cold and dark. Anson crumpled without a sound, the poison stealing the strength from her limbs.

From across the compound, a sharp crack split the air—Stan’s revolver barked, echoing in the night. The recoil kicked up his arm, but his aim held true. The bullet punched into Sayelle’s shoulder, the force spinning her half-around. Blood sprayed across the wall, dark and slick. Sayelle gasped, eyes wide, hand flying to the wound.

Corey’s voice rose to a fever pitch, high and panicked, fingers clutching the console until his knuckles went white. “Sayelle, Stan, the things are over there! It was an accident, she wouldn’t—she couldn’t—stop it!” His eyes darted wildly between them, to the bugs clawing at the barricades, to the blood running down Aris’s neck.

Aris lay slumped, blood pooling beneath him, breath coming in shallow, rattling gasps. He didn’t stir.

Stan didn’t lower the revolver, smoke still curling from the barrel. His eyes were hard, grip unyielding. “Wasn’t no accident, kid,” he growled. “Keep back.”

Outside, the barricades creaked under the weight of claws and armoured bulk, the steel walls groaning in protest. The big one pulled back its stinger, ichor dripping from the barb, and hissed. The darkness swarmed, seething, hungry.

And on the dirt, blood trickling from a single deep cut, Paddy Stirling didn't move.

*

The world was chaos and shadows, claws and screeching metal. The supply hut groaned under the assault, panels crumbling inward as two of the smaller bugs forced their way inside, chitinous limbs scraping across the floor. Charles, eyes darting wildly, took a step back, sweat slicking his grip on Paddy's bloodied mono-blade.

Anson was down, slumped against a crate with her breath shallow and her arm blackening from the poison. Paddy lay sprawled nearby, the edges of his makeshift carapace armour slick with blood, unconscious but still breathing—barely.

Charles gritted his teeth, pivoting as one of the bugs lunged, pincers snapping. He twisted aside, boots skidding on debris, the creature's blow slicing empty air. The second one followed, but he ducked low, feeling the rush of air as a claw whistled past his head.

"Bloody hell!" he hissed, heart pounding in his ears.

He tightened his grip on the mono-blade, the polymer hilt cold and reassuring in his hands. Its edge gleamed darkly, still slick with Paddy's blood, and for a heartbeat, Charles hesitated. The thing was lethal, more so than any weapon he'd ever held—sharp enough to split atoms, for all he knew.

But there was no time for doubts. He lunged at the big bug, slashing in a desperate arc. The blade skimmed mere inches from the armoured shell, sparks flaring as it glanced off harmlessly.

"Damn it!" Charles spat, stumbling back, feet tangling in the wreckage. The big bug turned, multiple eyes glistening, and a claw the size of a grav-bike wheel swung down.

It hit. Pain exploded through Charles's side, a savage, bone-deep agony that stole his breath and left his vision white with stars. He staggered, gasping, crimson staining the tattered remains of his jacket. His fingers nearly went numb, grip loosening on the mono-blade, but he clenched his teeth and held on.

From somewhere across the camp came a shrill, agonized scream—the sound of a man being torn apart. Abe's voice, warping into something high and animalistic, then cutting off with brutal finality.

"God above," Charles rasped, sweat stinging his eyes.

*

Meanwhile, over at the comms hut, chaos reigned. The door buckled as three more of the small bugs slammed against it, their weight cracking the plastiglass window with every blow. Corey was practically hyperventilating, eyes wide and hands trembling over the console.

Aris lay crumpled on the floor, a bloody stain spreading beneath him, his breaths shallow.

Stan's revolver barked once, twice—the shots deafening in the cramped space. Sayelle staggered back, eyes wide with shock and betrayal, a crimson bloom spreading across her chest. Her fingers spasmed around the snub-nosed pistol, one last desperate shot snapping off, wild and high.

"Die!" she shrieked, voice raw with hatred.

Stan twisted aside, the bullet punching a hole through the wall behind him. He stared at her, eyes flinty and cold, jaw tight.

"Goodnight, Sayelle," he muttered.

The revolver roared, point-blank. Sayelle's head snapped back, the impact a spray of red and bone that painted the console and left her crumpling boneless to the floor. Corey screamed, hands flying to his mouth, eyes bug-wide in horror.

Stan breathed out slow, smoke curling from the shotgun's barrel. He didn't bother to glance at the body.

"Well, that's one less problem," he muttered, voice grim. "Now about these bugs."

But outside, the swarm kept coming, pincers clacking, eyes gleaming in the firelight. And in the ruins of the power hut, the big bug reared back, claw lifting for another blow.

*

The chaos showed no signs of stopping. The supply hut was a crumbling ruin. Charles, bloodied and breath ragged, backed up against the shredded wall, fingers clenched so tightly around Paddy's mono-blade that his knuckles were bone white. He began to wail, a nerve tingling ear piercing wail. His throat was raw, every breath scraping like sandpaper. But the augmentation embedded there did its job with cruel efficiency. The shrieker box, some Imperial Intelligence fieldwork special, warbled and keened, twisting his voice into a wail that grated like metal tearing, rising and falling in an unholy cadence. It was a weapon of fear as much as sound, designed to disorient, to split focus and scramble nerves.

Two of the small bugs scuttled forward, pincers flashing in the firelight. The first struck low, catching Charles across the thigh. Pain flared, hot and searing, nearly buckling his leg. He staggered, gritting his teeth so hard it felt like his jaw might shatter. Before he could recover, the second lunged, mandibles snapping. Razor-edged claws raked his side, tearing fabric and flesh alike.

He gasped, vision darkening at the edges. Blood was slick between his fingers, dripping down to the dirt below. But the adrenaline was a roaring river in his veins, and he shoved back the pain, muscles burning as he spun and bolted for the door!

The bugs lashed out as he fled, one claw skimming past his shoulder with a whisper of air. But the other—the second bug overextended, a limb skittering and tangling into the bulk of the big bug outside. For a heartbeat, the colossal creature lurched sideways, claws swinging wildly. The small bug flailed, hissing, caught in the thrashing limbs of its own ally.

Charles didn't waste the opening. He ran, legs pistonning, boots hammering over the blood-soaked ground. The shrieker box wailed, a banshee's scream in the night. His chest screamed with every breath, but he didn't dare stop, not with the shadows lunging at his heels.

Claws scraped across the back of his calf, splitting flesh, and he howled, half a stumble from going down. But somehow, by some mad stroke of luck, he kept his feet, half-limping, half-sprinting for the relative safety of the comms hut.

The door crashed open as he threw himself through, slamming back on its hinges. He hit the floor hard, vision swimming, and the mono-blade skittered from his fingers with a metallic clatter.

Inside the comms hut, things were scarcely better. Aris was down, bleeding from the throat, eyes glassy and half-lidded. Stan was braced near the console, revolver raised, expression grim and unflinching. Corey was white as a sheet, trembling hands clutching at the edge of the comms panel, eyes darting wildly between the door and Sayelle's crumpled corpse.

The door buckled once. Twice. Then it gave with a thunderous crack, shattering inward as three of the bugs burst through, mandibles snapping.

"Ah, hell!" Stan grunted, spinning with the revolver.

Two lunged for Corey. He yelped, flailing wildly, arms windmilling with all the coordination of a panicked toddler. His fist connected with nothing but air, the punch so feeble it might as well have been a strong breeze. Both bugs snapped at him and missed, claws slicing the console to ribbons. Sparks spat from torn wires, and Corey squeaked in terror, stumbling back with all the grace of a drunken deer.

The third bug lunged for Stan, mandibles gleaming. He pivoted smoothly, smacking the thing aside with the butt of his revolver. Its claws clacked together uselessly, slicing only empty air.

Stan smirked, thumbed back the hammer, and fired point-blank. The revolver cracked, the noise deafening in the enclosed space. The bug screamed, reeling back, ichor spurting from a shattered limb. It limped and skittered, squealing, dragging itself away into the shadows.

"That's right, piss off!" Stan barked after it, shaking the revolver for emphasis.

Corey was hyperventilating, eyes so wide the whites shone. "Mr. Papadakis, what—what—what do we do?! They're everywhere! Sayelle—Sayelle just—oh God, oh God—"

"Focus, damn you!" Stan snapped, turning with revolver still smoking. "Pull yourself together, Corey, or we're all dead!"

Outside, the big bug roared, claws rending metal with an ear-splitting screech. The supply hut groaned under the assault, crumpling with a sickening crunch as claws punched through the roof. The perimeter lights flickered and flashed red, a dozen shadows converging from all sides.

Charles pushed himself upright, vision still swimming, breath ragged, eyes flinty with defiance despite the blood dripping down his side.

"Well," he muttered through gritted teeth, eyes darting to Stan. "We've fought worse, right?"

Stan just snorted, cocking the revolver with a smirk. "If we have, I don't recall. But hell, I ain't dead yet."

The hut shuddered under the impact of another blow. Outside, the darkness roared, and claws scraped against plastiglass and metal. And somewhere beyond the firelight, more shadows moved.

*

Corey's scream was raw, high, and panicked as the bug's claw tore through his arm, leaving a slick trail of blood and shredded fabric. He stumbled back, clutching the wound, eyes wide and uncomprehending. The console behind him flickered with half-repaired circuits, casting jittering shadows across the chaos.

"Ah—God—oh God!" Corey gasped, knees buckling. His face was ghost-pale, breath coming in short, ragged bursts. The pain was a shock that froze him, locked every muscle tight. He fell hard against the console, vision swimming, limbs numb and useless. He tried to push himself up, but the strength fled his arms, leaving him slumped and trembling.

"Hold on, Corey!" Charles snarled, levelling his shotgun, but his hands were slick with blood, grip unsteady. His ears were still ringing from the shrieker box*. He squeezed the trigger of his shotgun, a deafening roar splitting the air. But the shot went wide, shredding a patch of plastic sheeting and plasti-glass, doing nothing to the skittering horror that lunged for Corey.

"Damn it!" Charles hissed, wrenching back to find a better angle.

Nearby, Stan fired, the revolver bucking in his hand with a sharp crack. The bullet caught one of the bugs mid-lunge, tearing through its carapace in a spray of dark ichor. It reeled back, hissing, wounded but still very much alive.

The revolver clicked empty, cylinder spinning uselessly. Stan snarled, flicking the weapon aside with a growl. "Out! I'm bloody out!". He knew there was no more ammunition for the revolver. And even as he said it, the reality was closing in—the ammo was running out, the walls were crumbling, and the screams were only getting louder.

*

The bugs hissed, claws clicking against the floor as they scuttled forward, eager for the kill. Corey, still dazed and bleeding, pressed himself back against the console, eyes wide and glassy. But by some miracle—or perhaps sheer, dumb luck—their strikes went wide, talons gouging into plasti-glass and metal instead of flesh.

Charles's shrieker box sputtered and fell silent, leaving an eerie quiet in its wake. The sudden absence of that grating distortion left his ears ringing, but it also gave him a precious moment to steady his aim. Breath measured, hands firm despite the pain radiating through his shoulder, he tracked the bugs' erratic movements, finger hovering just shy of the trigger.

"Wait..." he muttered to himself, voice low and strained. "Hold steady, damn you..."

In the chaos, Stan snarled and swung the shotgun like a club, the butt arcing down with brutal force. The blow was wild, missing the bug by inches and slamming into the prefab floor with

a dull, bone-jarring thud. The impact rattled through his arms, nearly making him drop the weapon.

"Ah, hell!" he spat, wrenching it back. "Damn things move like bloody greased lightning!"

Charles didn't answer, too focused on the sight before him. He exhaled slowly, pulse thrumming in his ears, waiting for that perfect moment when the chitinous horrors moved just a fraction too far—when he'd have a clean shot without risking Corey or Stan.

But the bugs were circling now, their black eyes gleaming with something almost like intelligence. Their claws scraped and clicked, a sound that set the hairs on the back of Charles's neck on end. The next few seconds would decide everything.

*

One of the two surviving bugs lunged again at Corey, claws slicing through the air with a hiss. But, by some twist of fate or sheer incompetence, it misjudged the strike entirely, talons slashing past his shoulder and raking empty air. Corey flinched, eyes wide and glassy with panic, but his survival instincts kept him rooted to the spot, too terrified to even breathe.

Across the room, Stan grunted, bringing his shotgun up just in time to parry the second bug's attack. The creature's limbs clattered against the metal barrel with a sharp *clang*, and Stan twisted hard, deflecting it aside.

"Not today, you ugly bastard!" he spat, voice a low snarl. But before he could retaliate, the thing was already scuttling back, claws clicking with lethal intent.

Charles's breath came slow and steady, eyes narrowed down the sights. He let it out, slow and controlled, the way he'd learned to shoot – at clay pigeons. His finger tightened on the trigger—just a whisper of pressure.

CRACK!

The shotgun barked, and the bug's torso exploded in a shower of limbs and black ichor, the force of the blast slamming it against the far wall in a splatter of gore. For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Then—

"Hell of a shot!" Stan barked, a wild grin splitting his face. "That's one less nightmare to worry about!"

But there was no time to celebrate. The last bug in the comms hut reared up with a skittering hiss, limbs slashing down at Stan. He spun aside, barely avoiding the strike, the talons gouging deep furrows into the wall.

Stan swore, swinging the shotgun around like a club once more. The butt of the weapon arced through the air—too slow, too wide—and the bug skittered back with a screech, its eyes black and glistening with malice.

"Hold still, you damn pincushion!" he snapped, breath ragged.

But the thing only hissed louder, circling low and deadly, ready to strike again. The battle wasn't over yet.

*

The bug lunged again, claws slashing, but Stan was ready this time. He sidestepped with a snarl, the talons slicing empty air, clattering against the wall with a metallic screech.

"Too slow, you ugly bastard!" Stan growled, teeth bared.

Charles, a few steps back, kept his breathing steady, eyes narrowed as he tracked the bug's movements. His finger rested lightly on the trigger, waiting for the perfect moment, the sights aligned with cold precision. Not yet. He needed a clear shot.

Meanwhile, Stan swung the butt of his shotgun with a grunt of effort, the move fluid and vicious. The weapon came down with a dull *crack*, connecting squarely with the bug's head. The carapace split with a sickening crunch, black ichor splattering across the floor in a grotesque arc. The creature spasmed, limbs flailing wildly before collapsing in a twitching heap.

Stan took a shaky breath, the adrenaline buzzing in his veins.

"That's how we swat bugs!" he barked, wiping a streak of black from his cheek with the back of his hand.

Charles didn't lower his aim, eyes still fixed on the twitching form. The smoke from his last shot hung thick in the air, acrid and sharp.

"Not bad," he muttered, tone clipped. "But let's not get cocky yet."

The bug lay still, cracked open and oozing, the threat finally neutralized.

The Comms Hut was clear

*

Amidst the eerie quiet that had fallen over the camp, the air buzzed with a faint, unsettling hum—the sound of mandibles at work. The big bug and its smaller kin skittered about the ruins of the power hut, their claws clicking against the debris-strewn floor. Anson and Paddy lay sprawled nearby, unmoving, but the creatures paid them no mind.

They weren't feeding.

Instead, the bugs were hunched over the shattered remnants of the generator and severed power cables, razor-sharp mandibles slicing through insulation and copper with methodical precision. One of the smaller creatures had half of its body buried in a mess of sparking wires, chitinous plates glinting in the intermittent bursts of light. The big one, its claws still slick with gore, pulled another length of cable free, gnawing through it with savage determination.

"They're not... eating them," Charles muttered, eyes narrowed as he watched through the slats of the supply hut. His voice was low, disbelieving. "Bloody hell. They're going for the power lines."

The implications settled heavy and grim. They weren't just mindless beasts—there was some purpose behind the attack. They were cutting off the lights, the defences, the camp's last threadbare hold on survival.

Further across the camp, a similar scene played out at the medical hut. The big bug loomed near the entrance, tearing through cables snaking along the outer wall, while a smaller one scrabbled at the door, mandibles chattering eagerly. Inside, a muffled thud and a stifled scream. Then silence.

In the comms hut, Stan knelt beside Aris's slumped form, hands slick with blood as he worked to stop the bleeding. The bullet wound in Aris's neck was a ragged, angry mess, but the pulse beneath his fingers was still strong.

"Come on, don't go dying on me now," Stan muttered, voice gruff but steady. He tore a strip from his sleeve, pressing it against the wound with as much care as haste would allow.
"You're too damn stubborn to go out like this."

Aris's eyelids fluttered, a low groan escaping his cracked lips. His eyes flickered open, hazy and unfocused.

"Ah... feels like a bad night at the pub," he rasped, attempting a smile that turned into a wince. "Did we win?"

Stan barked a laugh, the tension easing just a fraction. "Not yet, mate. But stick around—we'll need that silver tongue of yours before this is done."

Corey, still pale and shaking in the corner, glanced nervously at the door where the perimeter light continued to blink an ominous red. His eyes darted to Aris and back, wide with fear.

*

Pain was a living thing, coiled tight and biting deep into his bones. Paddy's eyes flickered open, blearily focusing on the darkness above. Blood oozed sluggishly from the gaping wound in his side, soaking the ground beneath him. He was cold. The kind of cold that seeped into a man's soul and made itself at home. His strength was gone, leeched away by that damn mono blade—the sharpest thing in the galaxy, and he had skewered himself with it. Bloody typical luck.

He was the soldier.

The veteran of countless battles.

He was supposed to lead them. Supposed to *save* them.

Instead, he'd let them down.

Let himself down.

Badly.

The thought gnawed at him harder than the pain.

The power hut was half-ruined, a twisted mess of metal and plastic sheeting. Cables hung down like entrails, sparking intermittently. One of the big mother bugs was gnawing through the wires, its mandibles clicking and crunching with methodical menace. Nearby, the limp form of Anson lay in a spreading pool of blood, glassy-eyed, but still breathing, just.

Through half-lidded eyes, Paddy saw a dark, bloody smear leading away from the hut, shreds of Charles's jacket, bright crimson drops painting the path. A scream echoed faintly, raw and desperate. That's the end of Abe too.

Paddy coughed wetly, tasting copper. His vision swam, edges greying. If he shut his eyes now, he wouldn't open them again. The cold would take him. But that wasn't how it was supposed to end. Not face down in the dirt on some forsaken rock, with his friends dying around him.

Through the haze, he saw a familiar face—Zarkov, leaning over him, spectacles glinting in ghostly light. His voice came deep and rough, half-scolding, half-amused.

"You know what must be done, Stirling."

Ahh, hallucinations. That's all I need now. Paddy tried to smirk but only managed a grimace. He could feel blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. Bleedin' daft thing to do, charging out there. Fate wasn't smiling on me today. Luck of the Irish, my arse.

But Zarkov's phantom just stared. Stern. Unyielding. "Do it, Sergeant."

Paddy's jaw clenched. His arm felt like lead, but the augmented servos whirred obediently, flexing at his command. Charles had taken the mono blade—smart thinking. But the arm still had power, and he still had an explosive charge. His metal fingers fumbled at his pouch, extracting the seismic explosive. Heavy. Cold. Enough to turn the bug and half the hut to mush if he got it right.

So, this is how it ends. Paddy spat blood, teeth-stained crimson. "Not the parade send-off I imagined, but beggars can't be choosers."

The big bug stopped chewing cables, its eyeless head swivelling towards him at the sound. Its mandibles clacked, and it started forward, each step a seismic tremor through the ground.

Paddy glared up at it, eyes fierce. "C'mere, ya ugly bastard! Overgrown lobster-lookin' shite! I've seen more frightenin' prawns in a fisherman's net!" His voice was hoarse, cracking, but the bug came on regardless, jaws spread wide, the poison stinger twitching eagerly.

It loomed above him, head lowering, mandibles reaching. Its breath was hot and stinking, like rotting meat and sulphur. Paddy grinned, baring bloody teeth.

With a final surge of inhuman strength, Paddy drove his augmented fist upwards, the charge clutched tight, straight into the beast's gullet. Its mandibles snapped shut on his shoulder, the stinger drove deep into his side, venom fire racing through his veins. Pain flared, a white-hot explosion, but Paddy's grin only widened.

"Gotcha! To the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee!"

His fist clenched. The seismic charge detonated. The mother bug's neck erupted first, ichor spraying in a black torrent. Then the torso, a great gash sending chitinous shells and gore and entrails in all directions, The blast ripped through the small critters nearby, reducing them to smears of pulped flesh and twitching legs.

Paddy's arm—what was left of it—was a ruin of twisted metal and shattered alloy, the pain like a thousand red-hot needles stabbing all at once. But he felt none of it. Not anymore.

He slumped back, vision dimming, the noise of battle fading to a dull roar. Blood filled his mouth, trickling past cracked lips. His breath came shallow and rattling, chest barely rising.

The world was cold. His arm was gone. His strength was gone. But his friends—his friends might just make it.

As the last of his life slipped away, Paddy Stirling smiled.

“See you soon, lads... keep the whiskey warm.”

His eyes drifted shut, and he was gone.

*

Stan knelt beside Charles, quickly wrapping a field dressing over the worst of his wounds. Charles winced, jaw clenched, but nodded his thanks. He was back on his feet—barely.

Then—BOOM!

The ground shuddered as an almighty explosion erupted from the ruined fusion reactor. A blast wave swept through the compound, kicking up dust and hurling debris into the air. A searing shockwave of heat ripped past them, forcing everyone to duck.

A floodlight tower, snapped from its housing, screamed through the air like a massive javelin, slamming into the ground with a deafening crunch. Sparks rained down as twisted metal crackled with dying energy. Two smaller bugs caught in the blast were obliterated, their chitinous bodies reduced to nothing but smouldering fragments.

Silence. Except for the ringing in everyone's ears.

For a moment, just a moment, it seemed like it was over.

Then, from the smoke and ruin, something moved.

A hulking shadow, its form partially obscured by the rising smoke, limped forward. A sickening scrape of chitin on stone. And then, it stepped into the flickering floodlights.

The big mother bug.

It should be dead.

Half of its carapace was missing, a grotesque hole torn through its side. Several of its legs had been sheared off, leaving it dragging itself forward, struggling against its own broken body. Yet, somehow, impossibly, it still lived.

Its massive claws snapped open and shut. A mangled, glistening wound oozed a thick, black ichor that steamed in the night air. It let out a low, rattling hiss, a sound more of defiance than pain.

The thing refused to die.

Smoke and fire reflected off its torn carapace, making it look even more monstrous in the flickering light. Its remaining legs scrabbled against the debris, trying to steady itself.

Then, it locked on to a new target—the Comms hut.

With an inhuman shriek, it lurched forward, its massive claws tearing deep trenches in the dirt as it picked up speed. Each step sent tremors through the ground, like the heartbeat of a dying beast still hell-bent on destruction.

"Ah, hell," Stan muttered, shotgun clutched tight.

Aris, barely standing from his wound, turned to see the behemoth bearing down on them.

Corey, eyes wide with terror, stumbled back from the console.

*

Aris fumbled with bandages, trying to help Corey. "You look bad, kid. Let me—uh—" He awkwardly held a roll of dressing, not even unwrapping it.

Stan yanked it from his hands. "Best if I do that." He worked quickly, patching Corey up with a practiced hand.

Corey let out a shaky breath. "I was terrified... Is it over? This nightmare?"

Charles, standing near the entrance, peered into the darkness beyond the flames. The monstrous silhouette of the mother bug loomed through the smoke.

"I fear," he said grimly, "we have the next round coming in."

Suddenly, from over the southern embankment, a shadow appeared.

A figure sprinted through the dust-choked air, a battered cloth wrapped around her face, only a flash of long, wild red hair visible.

She vaulted the wreckage and dove through the open doorway just as a bug shrieked behind her, claws snapping at empty air.

She yanked down her cloth mask, revealing rugged, good-humored features - a woman built for surviving bad lands and worse battles.

Slim, wiry, athletic. Her green eyes burned sharp and alive.

And her voice — when it came — was a low Southern drawl, roughened by years in the wild.

"Well now, what in all hell's name have I gone an' walked into?" she said, glancing around with a slow, assessing look.

Corey, clutching his bandaged arm, blinked like he'd seen a ghost.

"It's Cali—the wild woman!" he gasped. "She's a friend! Don't shoot her!"

Stan didn't hesitate. He grabbed the mono-blade from Charles and tossed it her way.

"Can you use a blade?" he called out.

Cali snatched it out of the air one-handed, turning it over, sizing up its deadly shimmer.

"Use a blade?" she snorted. She whipped out her own battered machete and flashed it.
"Honey, I was cuttin' through worse'n you before breakfast."

She looked at the monofilament edge and whistled low.

"But this lil' thing... this is somethin' else. Reckon it'll do just fine."

Stan grinned.

"Here you go, Ginger, give it a try."

Cali froze for half a second.

"Ginger."

The word hit her like a hammer to the ribs — a name she hadn't heard in years.

Her eyes found Stan's. Recognition flickered — worn down by grime and time, but not forgotten.

She tightened her grip on the blade.

"Later... Introductions later," she said, rolling her shoulders loose.

"Right now, we got us a mess o' critters needs killin'."

She shifted her stance, weight balanced, blade low and ready.

A fighter born for this kind of chaos.

*

The blast shook Anson from unconsciousness. Her eyes fluttered open.

Pain. Blinding, searing pain. It flooded her body, radiating from the deep wounds where the bug's stinger had torn into her. She felt cold. Weak. The taste of blood in her mouth.

The power hut was in ruins. Metal groaned as the damaged structure settled. Sparks crackled from shredded cables, throwing flickering light across the wreckage. And there, looming through the smoke, the massive mother bug.

Her breath hitched. It was still alive!

No time to think. No time to stay.

With shaking limbs, she rolled onto her side, wincing as the movement sent sharp agony lancing through her ribs. She pressed a bloodied hand against her stomach—her jacket was soaked through. Too much blood.

But she had to move.

Using the remnants of a fallen support beam, she pulled herself up onto unsteady feet. Her legs buckled beneath her. She caught herself before she fell, gripping onto a twisted railing, gasping for breath.

Her eyes darted to the exit -just a few meters away. If she could just make it...

Another metallic groan as the bug shifted its weight. It was wounded, reorientating itself...

Now or never.

Summoning every ounce of willpower left, Anson gritted her teeth and stumbled forward, one agonizing step at a time. Each step sent a fresh wave of pain through her body, but she refused to stop.

The air outside was thick with smoke and the stench of blood, but the open ground meant survival.

She didn't look back.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she staggered across the rubble-strewn ground, leaving a trail of blood behind her. Every step felt like fire ripping through her muscles, her wounds seeping warmth down her side.

The power hut was collapsing, metal screeching as weakened beams gave way. She didn't care. She just needed to get clear.

She spotted the nearest living quarters hut, one of the few structures still intact. A defensible position. If she could just get onto the roof, she'd be out of reach of those claws.

With the last of her strength, she threw herself at the side of the building, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the edge of the roof.

Too weak. Too slow.

Her grip slipped. Her legs buckled, and she collapsed to her knees, gasping.

No, dammit. MOVE.

She tried again, heaving herself up with raw determination. But her arms shook violently, her strength drained. The pain in her ribs stabbed like a knife.

She couldn't do it.

Cursing under her breath, she pressed her back against the wall, breathing hard.

*

The ground trembled as the two massive bugs lurched toward the comms hut, their clawed legs scraping against the dirt, their mandibles twitching in anticipation. One was still wounded from Paddy's explosive sacrifice, its carapace cracked, one of its legs missing, green ichor dripping in its wake—but it wouldn't die. The other had just finished tearing through the medical hut, its massive frame silhouetted in the flickering flood lights, hunting for its next prey.

Inside the comms hut, every breath was ragged, every muscle tensed.

Stan lifted his shotgun, squared his stance, and fired at the wounded beast. The blast went wide, slamming into the dirt beside the creature's chitinous legs.

"Damn it!" he growled, racking another shell.

Charles stood beside him, bow drawn, eyes narrowing as he lined up a shot for the bug's weakened underbelly. He loosed—but the arrow sailed past, clattering uselessly against the remains of the power hut.

The smaller bug scuttled closer.

Calista gripped the mono-blade, thumb flipping the activation switch. The blade hummed to life, its razor-thin edge shimmering. She pressed herself against the hut's interior wall,

staying low beneath the window. "Wait for it..." she muttered, her knuckles white around the handle.

Across the room, Aris let out a shaky breath. He clutched his shotgun, eyes darting between the advancing creatures. His lips moved in hurried prayer.

"Saint Jude, patron of lost causes, don't let this be one of 'em."

He squeezed the trigger—BANG!

The blast tore into the wounded beast's exposed side. It shrieked, its entire frame shuddering, but it refused to stop.

Closer. They were getting closer.

*

The comms hut groaned and shuddered as the first massive bug punched down with its towering pincers, metal screeching as the wall began to tear away like paper. With a final, gut-wrenching shriek, the comms hut tore open like a tin can under the relentless assault of the monstrous bugs. Metal sheets buckled, plastic panelling crumpled, and wires snapped, sending sparks cascading across the interior. The dim glow of the emergency lights flickered violently before plunging the room into uneven shadow.

The second giant bug gripped the steel supports of the comms tower, wrenching and twisting the frame, ripping it apart with unnatural strength. Sparks snapped and fizzed as wires tore free, the tower swaying ominously above them.

Across the compound, Anson struggled desperately to pull herself up onto the roof of the living quarters hut, her hands slipping, her body too weak and bloodied to haul herself up. She cursed under her breath, but her strength was fading.

Inside the comms hut, Stan gritted his teeth, took careful aim, and fired into the massive bug looming outside. The shot connected—dead on—but the pellets harmlessly bounced off its reinforced shell.

"Well, ain't that just bloody wonderful," he muttered, quickly chambering another round.

Beside him, Charles lined up another shot, his bowstring taut, aiming for the beast's exposed joints. He loosed the arrow, and this time it struck true, embedding deep into its hide! The creature twitched, its mandibles clicking in agitation—but STILL, it kept coming.

The smaller bug skittered through the broken doorway, its beady black eyes locking onto Charles.

Stan shouted, "Corey, get it!"

Corey froze, wide-eyed, backing up against the flickering control panel.

The bug lunged at Charles, its clawed limbs outstretched—

And then Cali stepped in.

"Oh no ya don't, ya ugly son of a—"

She slammed herself in its path, her mono blade flashing as she intercepted the attack, parrying its strike with an effortless swipe of the blade.

Then with a riposte of the blade she swung back at it, the blade sang through the air, slicing cleanly across the creature's side. The bug hissed and recoiled, green ichor dripping from the wound.

"Damn, this thing cuts finer than a gator's teeth," she muttered, twirling the blade with renewed appreciation.

Across the hut, Aris braced himself, levelling his shotgun at the towering monster outside.

He fired—BANG!

A direct hit. But the moment the shells struck, the bug's chitin shimmered, the hard surface deflecting the blast. Sparks flashed uselessly, leaving nothing but smoke curling into the night air.

The creatures were closing in, and nothing seemed to stop them.

The comms hut was seconds away from collapse.

*

The comms hut was seconds away from collapse, jagged metal and shattered panels spilling across the ground. The torn-open structure barely held together as the battered survivors regrouped. The wounded monstrous bug loomed over them, its ominous bulk blocking out the light, like a nightmare made real.

The beast turned its many-eyed gaze downward, as if surveying an ant colony. Then it lunged, smelling blood, straight for Charles!

Before he could react, Aris stepped in. "Not today, ya overgrown cockroach!" He dropped his shotgun and threw himself at the bug's massive claw, grappling with it, trying to wrench it away. The creature struck out blindly, its strike missing by inches as Aris held on for dear life.

Anson, panting and wounded, abandoned her hopeless climb. Instead, she sprinted to the corner of a nearby hut, braced herself against the wall, and levelled her shotgun. Her eyes locked onto the last big bug at the tower.

BOOM!

Stan fired first, aiming for the smaller bug still skittering in the hut. His shot hit true! The thing screeched, legs curling as it was blown to pieces in a spray of ichor.

Charles, still catching his breath, nocked another arrow, drawing back the bowstring. "You just don't know when to die, do you?" He exhaled, losing the arrow.

The shaft found its mark, piercing through a gap in the beast's armour. The giant bug spasmed, let out a deep, grating shriek, and collapsed to the floor of the hut, twitching as the last of its life drained away. "At last! One down. One left."

Across the compound, the second big bug continued its relentless attack, pincers rending into the steel supports of the comms tower. Metal screeched in protest, sparks showering down as

the tower buckled. The steel beams groaned, bending under its relentless assault. If that fell, if they didn't stop it soon, there'd be no way to get a distress call out.

Cali knew this, she had to distract the bug from the tower. She planted her boots firm in the dirt, rolling her shoulders as she twirled the monoblade in a slow, deliberate arc. The razor-thin edge gleamed in the dim lighting, sharp enough to whisper through steel, let alone bug hide. She tilted her head, lips curling into a half-grin, eyes locked on the towering beast still tearing into the comms tower.

"Well, ain't you just the ugliest damn thing I ever did see." She whistled low, shaking her head like she was *disappointed*. "Big ol' hunk'a shell, and not a lick o' sense to go with it. You wanna pick on some scrawny antenna and scrap metal? Or you gonna come take a swing at someone who knows how to fight back?"

She flicked the blade up, lazy-like, drawing a slow figure-eight in the air, daring it forward.

"C'mon, ya ugly sunofabitch! What's wrong? Too slow? Ain't got the guts to take on a real fight? Hell, I seen crawdads meaner'n you, and I cooked 'em for breakfast!"

The big bug twitched, its mandibles clicking as it froze in place. Then, like a great lumbering beast scenting fresh blood, it turned—slowly, deliberately—toward her.

Cali's grin widened. "That's right. C'mon now, darlin'... let's dance."

Cali readied herself. At least the comms tower was safe for now. But whether she was, that was another matter!

*

Aris bolted across the open ground, heading straight for what remained of the fusion reactor hut. The explosion from Paddy's final stand had gutted it, leaving the once-solid prefab buckled and scorched. The roof was half-collapsed, walls cracked open like a dropped egg, and inside, a mess of sparking conduits and broken equipment.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for, maybe some miracle that the generator wasn't totally fried, maybe some last-ditch salvageable power source, maybe just something, anything, that could turn the tide. If they lost the generator completely, their lights, perimeter defences, and comms were all screwed.

"Saints preserve us..." Aris muttered, wiping soot from his face as he staggered into the wreckage.

And then, a flicker of light from the power hut.

Aris turned at the last second and saw it, the backup batteries were still alive. A miracle. The system wasn't dead yet. They still had a chance to send a signal.

Aris whispered a quiet "Praise be."

But they still had a damn big bug to kill.

*

The big bug lumbered forward, its clawed feet crushing debris beneath its bulk, mandibles twitching as it focused on the torn-open comms hut. The tower behind it still wobbled dangerously, but it had stopped ripping at the steel beams. Now, it was hunting.

Anson moved swiftly, keeping low, pressing her wounded body against the side of a living quarters hut, trying to find a better firing angle. Her breath was ragged, but she grit her teeth, ignoring the pain. "Just gimme a clean shot..." she muttered to herself.

Inside the comms hut, Stan took a deep breath, raising his shotgun. He didn't fire yet, not yet. He adjusted his aim, steadyng his nerves, tracking the bug's movements.

Charles did the same. The bowstring pulled tight, his breathing even, waiting for the perfect moment. They'd only get one good shot before it was on top of them.

Cali, on the other hand, was already moving.

She stepped out, blade in hand, slow and steady, a hunter sizing up its quarry. The dim lighting in the hut behind her cast flickering shadows across the ground, the monoblade whining softly in her grip.

"Y'know," she called, "you ain't much to look at up close, neither."

The bug lunged, fast as hell for something that size.

She brought the monoblade up in a smooth arc, aiming straight for the soft joint beneath its clawed limb...

And just missed.

The razor-thin edge grazed the shell, so close she could hear the whisper of it cutting through air, but at the last moment, the bug twisted, skittering back, its reflexes unnervingly fast.

Cali cursed under her breath.

"Damn thing's got some moves!" she shot over her shoulder, spinning the blade in her grip.

The bug loomed over her now, mandibles snapping as if laughing at her failure.

From inside the hut, Stan kept his shotgun steady, muttering, "Hold still, you ugly bastard."

Charles kept his bowstring taut, lining up his shot.

They still had a chance. But Cali was standing in the open now.

And the bug knew it.

*

Across the compound, Aris stood in the wreckage of the fusion reactor.

There, amid the ruin, lay what was left of Paddy Stirling.

A charred mess. His makeshift bug armour and vacc suit were in tatters, scorched black and crumbling. His shotgun—twisted, melted—was fused to the dirt beside him. But the arm was still there. The augmented combat arm, once so strong and deadly, now lying half-buried in the wreckage like a discarded weapon. A grim monument.

Aris swallowed hard. His breath caught in his throat. Slowly, reverently, he stepped closer, crouching beside the fallen sergeant and murmuring a quiet prayer.

“Saint Jude... guide this warrior home.”

His hand trembled as he reached into the rubble, brushing ash and bloodstained cloth aside.

Then his fingers touched something solid.

Not bone. Not metal.

A single shotgun shell.

Untouched. Whole.

One last shot.

He stared at it for a moment, cradled in his palm like a relic, as if it carried the last echo of Paddy’s defiance. The last breath of resistance.

He closed his fist around it and exhaled slowly.

Maybe... maybe it would be enough.

Then, swallowing back the emotion tightening his throat, Aris shouted across the compound.

“He’s gone,” he said softly, and then louder, steadier: “It’s Paddy. Looks like he tried to blow the thing up. Sacrificed himself.”

There was a moment’s silence.

And it hit Cali like a thunderclap.

Paddy... dead.

Her head snapped toward the voice. For a heartbeat, the sounds of battle faded, and the memory surged - unstoppable, vivid, sharp.

The memories of Paddy returned.

His crooked grin.

The sound of his laugh echoing in the dark.

The glint of that monoblade, his blade, the blade she was now wielding!.

His voice, whispering that no matter how bad it got, she’d always have someone watching her back.

The weight of his absence crashed into her chest like a hammer.

Cali blinked, stunned, and saw the shadow too late.

The massive claw came arcing down toward her, moonlight flashing along the chitinous edge. She raised the monoblade, too slow to parry.

The impact was brutal.

The blow knocked the air from her lungs and sent her flying. She hit the ground hard, her ribs screaming as something cracked. She gasped, pain blinding, her fingers going numb around

the hilt of the blade. Her knees buckled beneath her as she collapsed to one side, the strength draining from her limbs like water through a sieve.

She lay still for a moment, dazed and broken - but her thoughts were on him.

Paddy.

She remembered his warmth, his stubbornness, that quiet fierceness behind the gruff exterior.

And now, like her ribs, something inside her cracked too.

"Damn you, Paddy," she whispered, the sting in her throat not just from smoke. "You stubborn, glorious bastard."

But her hand still held the blade.

His blade.

And she wasn't done yet.

She forced herself to stand, gripping the monoblade in both hands. Her muscles trembled, her breath ragged. She wouldn't fall. Not yet.

And then the bug's stinger lashed out next - toward Corey.

The kid didn't stand a chance.

The barbed tip speared into him, and Corey let out a scream that cut through the night, writhing as venom surged through his veins. He collapsed onto his knees, hands clawing at the wound, eyes wide with terror.

"Corey!" Aris turned, sprinting back toward the comms tower. "Hold on, kid!"

Anson raised her shotgun, her hands shaking, her vision blurred by pain and exhaustion. She fired—

Click.

Empty.

She stared at the useless weapon, eyes wild. "Dammit!"

Stan took his time, his barrel locked onto the wounded bug. He waited for the right moment, for the weak spot—

And then fired.

The shot struck deep, tearing a gaping wound into the creature's side, green ichor spraying across the dirt. The bug shuddered, its limbs faltering—

But it didn't fall.

Charles exhaled slowly, his bowstring taut, his sights locked. He didn't loose his arrow just yet.

Cali gritted her teeth against the pain, her vision swimming, but she tightened her grip on the monoblade.

She took one step forward, then another, lifting the blade with both hands. It was heavy in her hands, that last blow had sapped her strength. Her arms shook, her body screamed in protest, but she swung—

And missed.

The bug skittered back, its movements too fast, too erratic.

Cali cursed. She was running out of time.

*

The bug came for Cali again.

This time, she was ready.

She planted her feet, gritting her teeth against the weakness in her limbs, and raised the monoblade in a tight guard. The creature's massive claw lashed toward her, aiming to crush her where she stood—

She twisted, brought the blade up—

CLANG.

The edge of the monoblade met the chitin, and for the first time, she felt the beast recoil. Sparks flew, the creature's momentum broken.

It missed.

But Corey wasn't so lucky.

The stinger lashed out, snapping into his side like a whip.

"Agh—" He jerked, the barb punching deep into his shoulder, venom pumping into his veins.

Aris saw the fear in the kid's eyes, the way his skin turned pale, how he shook uncontrollably—

Yet, somehow, Corey didn't drop.

He swayed, barely holding himself upright, his breathing ragged.

"Pray for me, Mr. Papadakis," he gasped, clutching his side.

Aris' lips tightened. "Kid, I'm prayin' as hard as I can."

Anson let out a frustrated growl, her shotgun empty, so she swung it like a club.

She missed.

Stan ignored the chaos.

He was still aiming. Still waiting. Watching for the perfect moment.

Charles loosed his arrow.

THUNK.

A solid hit, striking deep into the bug's side, but still, it did not fall.

Cali gritted her teeth, her arms trembling from the last attack. The monoblade felt heavier in her hands, her vision swimming from the brutal hit she had taken earlier.

She swung again—a desperate, forceful arc—but the damn thing skittered back, just out of reach.

Air. Just air.

She staggered, frustration boiling over.

"What are you boys waitin' for?!" she snapped, shifting back into a defensive stance. "Me to drop so you can get a clean shot? I could use a little backup here!"

Her eyes flicked to Stan, still lining up his aim, and to Charles, who had just let another arrow fly.

Anson cursed under her breath, gripping her empty shotgun like a club, and Aris was still trying to get into position.

Cali huffed, tightening her grip on the monoblade.

"Y'all better hurry, 'cause I ain't plannin' on makin' this thing's kill list tonight!"

Aris scrambled onto higher ground, levelling his shotgun—

BOOM.

The shot went wide.

No luck.

The bug was still standing. Still fighting.

And they were running out of chances.

*

The big bug reared up, its massive pincers gleaming in the flickering firelight. It lunged down at Cali, who braced herself, monoblade raised in defiance.

She tried to parry, but the creature was too fast, too strong.

CRACK.

A sickening snap shot through her ribs as the force of the impact slammed her backward. The air rushed from her lungs, her vision swimming, stars bursting in the edges of her sight. She hit the ground, hard, her entire body wracked with pain.

She should have passed out.

Should have given in.

But Cali was a survivor.

She had survived worse.

She clawed at the ground, forcing herself up onto an elbow, her breath ragged. Not yet.

The beast turned, pincers snapping, going for Corey.

It struck—missed.

Cali barely registered Anson swinging at it with her shotgun, a wild, desperate clubbing strike that glanced off its armoured shell.

Then—

BOOM.

A thunderous explosion of gore.

The big bug shuddered, lurched forward—then its entire body ripped apart, a devastating blast tearing through its core.

Cali flinched, instinctively throwing up an arm as shards of chitin rained down around her.

Stan stood there, shotgun raised, smoke curling from the barrel.

His last shell. His last shot.

And it had torn the monstrous thing apart.

A beat of silence.

Then—

Cali exhaled, spitting dust, blinking up at the night sky.

"Well, damn," she muttered, wincing as she touched her ribs. "'Bout time, Stan. Thought I was gonna have to carve it up myself."

*

Cali slumped backwards, her head hitting the dirt, eyes half-lidded as the pain finally caught up with her. She felt her ribs protest, a dull, insistent ache spreading like fire through her chest, every breath a battle against the raw, bruised agony settling into her bones.

Her fingers tightened instinctively, feeling the cold grip of the weapon in her grasp.

The mono blade.

Paddy's mono blade?

That realization hit harder than any of the blows she had taken.

Her eyes flickered open, staring at the sleek, impossibly sharp edge, the faint hum of its monofilament edge whispering against the air. No mistaking it. That wasn't just any blade—it was his. The cables and connectors, the custom modifications, every little tweak Paddy had made to the weapon uniquely his own.

Her throat tightened.

Where was Paddy?

Memories surged, unbidden. They had been close. Closer than either had probably wanted to admit. Two exiles, hiding from the past on this forgotten rock, their paths crossing in ways neither could have predicted. Paddy had always joked that they were too stubborn to die.

And yet...

She gripped the blade tighter, her knuckles going white.

He wouldn't give this up. Not unless...

She couldn't finish the thought. Didn't want to.

The weight of it sat heavy in her hand.

She let her eyes drift closed, shutting out the spinning sky, shutting out the burning in her ribs, shutting out the realization that this blade might be all that was left of Paddy Stirling.



CHAPTER 8 – IN FROM THE WILDS

Stan knelt beside Cali, rummaging through what was left of the med kit. His hands were steady, but his expression was tight with exhaustion.

"Alright, let's see what we got here," he muttered, rolling up her torn sleeve and dabbing at the gash across her shoulder with an antiseptic-soaked cloth. "You're lucky," he muttered, pulling a strip of cloth from his belt pouch and pressing it against the wound. "Any deeper and you'd be leaking worse than a busted fuel line."

"Ahh, hell, I've had worse," she gritted through her teeth, but she let him work.

Stan snorted, dabbing at the wound with a little less gentleness. "That's what they all say before they bleed out."



As Stan continued wrapping her wounds, Cali pulled down her face mask for the first time, revealing the weathered yet striking features beneath. The years in the wilds had left their mark—faint lines around her sharp green eyes, the sun-kissed freckles across her high cheekbones—but they hadn't taken everything. There was still a youthfulness to her, a certain fire that hadn't burned out. Even caked in dirt and blood, she had a rugged beauty that couldn't be ignored.

She met Stan's gaze, studying him, something familiar tickling at the back of her mind.

"Well, I'll be damned," she drawled, her voice thick with Southern twang. "And here I was, thinkin' we got rid of all the bugs. Turns out one slipped through the cracks."

Stan froze mid-motion, brow furrowing at the comment. There was something familiar in her tone, but the face—weathered, freckled, streaked with dirt and battle-weariness—he couldn't quite place.

Cali chuckled, shaking her head. "Guess we don't need no introductions, Stan." She tilted her head, more of a reintroduction than anything. "You remember me."

Stan blinked, frowning slightly. "Err... no."

Before either could respond, Corey piped up, still shaken but curious as all hell.

"You all probably wanna know who she is," he said, gesturing toward Cali. "This here's Calista Fox, but most folks just call her Cali. She's been livin' out in the wilds for a good while now. The miners call her the 'woman in the woods', and I ain't ever seen anyone better at survivin' out there."

Cali snorted, stretching out her sore limbs. “Ain’t nothin’ to it. You stay quiet, you move careful, and you don’t go pokin’ your nose where it don’t belong. ‘Course, y’all didn’t exactly get the memo ‘bout that last part.”

Corey chuckled nervously. “Guess not.”

Cali turned back to Stan. “Oh, come on now,” Cali rolled her eyes, her accent dripping with amusement. “Four years on the *Wayfarer*—that battered old scout survey ship, pokin’ around the fringe worlds. Cramped quarters, bad rations, and just enough hull integrity to keep us from dyin’ in the void. That crash landing during the electrical storm, ring any bells? I was wounded, ribs busted all to hell, but still had to fix the computer so we could get an emergency signal out.” She nodded toward the ruined comms hut, her lips curling. “Hell, looks familiar, don’t it?”

Stan’s eyes widened slightly, and then realization dawned. He let out a breath of bemused disbelief, running a hand over his unshaven face.

“Shit,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Ginger?”

Cali’s grin widened. “Ain’t been called that in years.”

Stan huffed out a tired chuckle, then his expression darkened slightly. “Last time I saw you, I was bein’ led off in cuffs.”

Cali nodded, her expression unreadable. “Yep. You were. And I knew you were up to somethin’. Could see it plain as day. But,” she shrugged with her good shoulder, “I turned a blind eye.”

Stan snorted, tying off the bandage with a sharp tug. “Yeah, well, I paid for that one. Four years behind bars.”

Cali winced as Stan tightened the bandage around her ribs. “Damn, sugar, you ain’t gotta pull it that tight,” she muttered, shifting uncomfortably. “Anyhow, I can’t say I’m surprised. You always did have a way of pushin’ your luck.”

Stan snorted, not loosening his grip. “Quit squirming, Foxy. You’re lucky I remember a thing or two about patchin’ people up.” He sat back on his heels, shaking his head. “You never said nothin’. You could’ve turned me in.”

She gave him a knowing smirk, adjusting the sling over her shoulder. “Ain’t my business what a man does with his free time. You weren’t hurtin’ nobody I cared about.”

Cali’s eyes swept the group, lingering on the bloodied faces, the wounded, the wreckage.

Stan sat back, wiping the blood from his hands on his already-filthy trousers. He studied Cali for a moment, his expression unreadable. “So, Cali,” he said, voice edged with curiosity. “What brings you here? Ain’t exactly a vacation spot.”

Cali let out a rough chuckle, rolling her aching shoulder and tilting her head. “Now that’s a hell of a question, sugar,” she said, giving him a wry smirk. “Truth is, I been here a while.

Took off from the Core Worlds,” she said, voice low and rough. “Too much noise. Too many people. Cameras in your face, sponsors tryin’ to own your soul. Folks thought I was some

kinda damn celebrity. I wanted out. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere I didn't gotta smile for the crowd or sign another damn endorsement. Heard about Exocet—barely habitable, only a few outposts, no real law. Sounded like just the kinda place a girl like me could disappear.”

Stan nodded, arms crossed, listening.

“Didn’t come to work the mines,” she continued. “Brought my own gear, my own supplies. Lived out in the wilds, only came into the outposts to trade or get a drink. Folks around here started callin’ me *The Woman in the Woods* like I was some kinda ghost story.” She smirked, shaking her head. “Worked for me.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “And now you’re here. What changed?”

“Yeah.” She sighed, rubbing at her temple. “Took some survey jobs, lendin’ a hand now and again. Figured my scoutin’ creds might be useful to some poor bastard who couldn’t tell bedrock from bugs.”

Her tone darkened. “Then the bugs showed up.”

Stan’s expression barely shifted, but there was something new behind his eyes—recognition.

Cali nodded. “I went out, tryin’ to figure what stirred ‘em up. Something didn’t sit right. Then next thing I know... I’m runnin’. No memory why. Just this cold, empty *hole* where somethin’ important used to be. Whole damn hike back was a blur. Heart poundin’. Didn’t even know what I was runnin’ from.”

She looked around the wrecked comms room, her voice tightening. “Didn’t stop runnin’ till I got back here. And looks like I missed one hell of a fight.”

Stan let that sit for a moment, then let out a low whistle. “Well... shit.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah. Shit.”

Her eyes flicked back to the ruins of the power hut, her grip tightening on the mono blade still clutched in her hand. Paddy’s blade.

“Now,” she said, voice quieter but firm. “Somebody wanna tell me what the hell happened here?”

*

Stan knelt beside Anson, pressing a fresh bandage against her shoulder wound. “Hold still,” he muttered, his tone gruff but not unkind. Anson, pale and drenched in sweat, grimaced but said nothing.

Corey sat against the wall, shaking, cradling his own injuries. Stan moved over to him next, muttering, “Y’still breathin’, kid?” He pressed a roll of gauze into Corey’s hand. “Here, press down on that, keep it tight.”

Cali watched them work, her fingers still curled tightly around the hilt of Paddy’s mono blade, as if letting go would mean losing something else.

“Well,” she finally exhaled, her voice steady but edged with tension. “Looks like I walked into a hell of a story.”

Charles, standing with a stiff posture, his injuries obvious despite his best attempt to mask them, gave a tired nod. "Where do we even start?"

"From the beginning," Cali replied. "And don't leave nothin' out."

Aris ran a hand through his disheveled hair, wincing slightly as the motion pulled at his bandages. "We came in on a ship. A hauler. Not one of ours—we don't know who we were before we woke up here."

Cali's brow furrowed, but she let him continue.

"Ship crashed, hard. We don't know why. Next thing we knew, we were in this godforsaken place, wandering into Site Nine."

Stan grunted, tightening the bandage on Anson's arm. "And then the real fun started."

Charles leaned against the battered wall of the comms hut, his face shadowed under the flickering floodlights. "First wave hit just after we got here. We were still figuring things out when the bugs came. Big, mean, and fast."

"Katriona was the first," Charles said grimly, rubbing his temple. "One of the bugs got her right at the start. She never had a chance."

"Hambley lost it," Stan added. "Turned on Xander."

Aris nodded. "Xander went down, and Hambley was out of control. Charles took care of him."

Cali glanced at Charles, one brow raised.

Charles met her gaze, his voice level. "Wasn't me. Xander saved my life, put Hambley down and sent him straight to hell. That was his dying act."

"The second wave came not long after," Aris continued, glancing toward the ruins of the power station. "We fought 'em off. Barely."

Cali looked at the wreckage, her survival instincts already piecing together the tactical disaster they must have faced.

Charles, eyes shadowed, added, "Then there was the third wave."

Aris rubbed his throat, the memory still fresh. "That's when Sayelle turned."

Cali's head snapped up. "Sayelle? What?"

Stan finished securing Corey's bandage, dusting his hands off as he turned toward her. "She pulled a gun on Aris. Nearly killed him."

Aris touched the scar forming at the base of his neck. "Damn near succeeded. I got lucky."

Corey, still pale, whispered, "I thought it was over right then and there."

Stan's jaw tightened, his voice clipped. "She ain't a problem anymore."

Cali looked between them, her mind spinning as she pieced it all together. "Damn. And I thought I had a rough couple of days."

It was Aris who finally said what had been hanging in the air.

"And then... Paddy."

Cali's grip tightened on the blade in her hands.

Aris sighed, rubbing his temple. "That crazy bastard went after the big one. Didn't hesitate. Blew himself and that monster to hell."

Silence hung between them.

Cali exhaled slowly. Her jaw clenches, she swallowed hard. Her eyes dropped to the mono-blade in her hand. Her fingers running over the hilt of Paddy's mono blade, tracing its edges with a tenderness that spoke of something deeper than mere respect.

Something flickered across her face. A buried emotion cracking free.

She closed her eyes, and suddenly she was somewhere else.

The memories came flooding back to her: late nights around a fire, quiet laughter, his hand brushing hers. That stupid half-smile of his. The way he looked at her like she was something worth saving.

The unspoken thing that had always been there.

And now - gone.

She opened her eyes again, sharp with unshed tears.

"He weren't the kind to go down easy," she murmured, voice thick with emotion. Her thumb ran over the grip, as if expecting to feel the warmth of Paddy's hand still there.

"No," Charles agreed softly. "He wasn't."

A heavy silence hung between them.

Stan broke the silence by muttering "Abe was the last to go, Cornered in the medi-hut. One of those big bastards got him. Heard him scream—then nothing."

Cali swallowed hard, but the lump in her throat didn't budge. A single tear carved a path through the dirt on her cheek, the only crack in the wall she was desperately trying to hold up. She looked down at the blade one last time, then, with a slow, reverent motion, she tucked it into her belt.

A piece of Paddy, still with her.

She lifted her head, scanning the battered remains of the outpost, the exhausted, wounded group standing before her. Her face set like carved stone.

"We finish this," she said quietly. "Whatever it is, wherever it goes... we finish it. For him."

Silence fell over the group for a moment, the enormity of the losses settling in.

*

Cool night air drifted through the gaping doorway, mixing with the sharp scent of gunpowder, burnt circuits, and blood. It carried the stillness of aftermath, of cost.

Charles passed around a dented canteen without a word, his movements slow, deliberate. Each person took a sip, small, grateful. Aris, ever the opportunist, dug into a torn cargo pocket and fished out a pair of squashed energy bars.

“Bless you,” he said with a crooked grin. “The body of Christ.”

Stan let out a tired chuckle. “Tastes holier than it looks.”

Cali didn’t laugh. She was watching Aris now, closely. Another thread tugged loose in the fog of lost memory.

She saw a dimly lit chapel, smelled incense and candle wax. A younger Aris, standing at the pulpit, fire in his words but something hollow in his eyes. She’d sat in the back, listening, arms draped over the pew in front of her, boots propped up on the worn wood. She wasn’t one for sermons, but something about the way he spoke held her attention.

Now, looking at him across the firelit remains of the camp, she realized how much older he looked. Rougher. Like he’d been through his own private war. Maybe he had.

She let out a slow breath. “Ain’t the first time I seen you hand out communion wafers, preacher...” she said slowly, voice thick with that slow drawl. “I remember sittin’ in that old chapel, listenin’ to you spin words slicker than a snake in oil. Back then, I figured you had the fire of a true believer... but I knew. Somethin’ wasn’t right behind those eyes of yours.”

Aris stiffened slightly, but she pressed on, her tone not unkind, just firm.

“So I followed ya,” she admitted, shifting slightly. “Watched you slip out the back, all quiet-like. I tracked you, just like I would a wounded critter, sniffin’ out danger before it got too deep.” She met his gaze, sharp and steady. “And what did I find? You shufflin’ credits with Hawk’s men, whisperin’ deals in the dark, just as holy as a rattler waitin’ to strike.”

Aris swallowed, looking away for a moment. He exhaled through his nose. “I remember,” he muttered. Aris gave a half-smirk, rubbing the back of his neck. “I just needed somethin’ to keep me awake, keep me sharp. Long days, long nights—preachin’, helpin’ the flock, doin’ what I had to do. It wasn’t about dealin’, not at first.”

Cali snorted, shaking her head. “Yeah, well, I reckon it was your congregation that needed the uppers more, sittin’ through all them long-winded sermons.” She smirked, but there was no real humor in it.

Aris chuckled dryly but didn’t argue. He looked away, jaw tightening. “It wasn’t supposed to go that far.”

Cali’s expression sobered, the teasing edge gone. “That kinda thing never is, preacher. But you start treadin’ in that filth, don’t matter how clean your hands were when you went in—you come out stained.” She crossed her arms, leaning in slightly. “You had a good thing, Aris. A real purpose. A place. But you went crawlin’ in with the snakes, and look where that got you.”

Aris met her eyes, something unspoken passing between them before he gave a small nod. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right.”

Cali looked back at him, expression softer now, but not without weight. “I ain’t much for preachin’, but I’ll say this. You got another chance to stand on your own two feet, Aris. Make sure you ain’t just waitin’ for the next hole to fall into.”

She tapped Paddy’s blade once against her hip and pushed herself to stand. “We got enough ghosts walkin’ ‘round this place already.”

*

Cali leaned back against the battered wall of the comms hut, stretching her aching limbs, a tired but knowing smirk playing on her lips. “Well, ain’t this quite the reunion party? What a strange, fickle path fate weaves.” She glanced at Charles, the flickering light casting long shadows over his face. “I remember you too, Charles.”

Charles arched a brow, tilting his head. “Oh? Should I be worried?”

Cali chuckled, shaking her head. “Nah, not unless you went and forgot the best damn local guide you ever had. You were all dressed up like a proper diplomat, stickin’ out like a sore thumb, all polished boots and polite smiles, actin’ like you belonged there. Some newly colonized world, don’t even remember the name now—one of them shiny ‘potential Imperial territories’ your lot were assassin’. But you? You weren’t like the others. Didn’t have that stiff, stick-up-their-arse demeanor.”

Charles let out a small laugh. “Yes, I attended a lot of those kinds of events.”

Cali smirked. “And you had a fine ship, Ol’ Bessy, you called it.”

Charles chuckled, shaking his head. “It was my uncle’s ship back then. But she’s mine now. Or at least the mortgage payments are.” He exhaled, running a hand through his hair, his amusement flickering into something more uncertain. “At least I *think* she is. I don’t remember where it is now!”

Cali let out a short laugh, resting her hands on her hips. “Ain’t that just typical? Lose track of a whole damn *ship*—fancy-pants noble or not, that’s some next-level forgettin’.”

Aris rubbed his temple, his expression thoughtful. “We’ve all forgotten a lot,” he murmured. “Lord knows why, or what strange fate brings us here...”

Charles exhaled, rubbing his jaw. “A mystery for another day,” he said finally, shaking off the thought. “Right now, I’d rather focus on *staying alive* than solving cosmic riddles.”

Stan scoffed. “Yeah, well, considering our luck so far, I wouldn’t bet on either happening too soon.”

Cali nodded, then tapping a finger against her chin, said “Another thing I remember, Charles. Well, apart from the fact you paid me decently to make sure none of y’all got lost and eaten. As I recall, you had a habit of mixin’ a damn fine sundowner cocktail. That’s what I remember most.”

Charles smirked. “That does sound like me. Though, considering the state of things here, I may need to mix something a bit stronger.”

Cali laughed, shaking her head. "Yeah, you and your fancy highborn cocktails. What was it I used to call you?"

Before she could recall, Charles groaned and interjected, rubbing a hand over his face. "Oh no. Don't say it."

Cali's grin widened. "Lord Fancy Cocktail."

Charles let out a theatrical sigh, before muttering, "You mean 'Lord Fancy Cock'!"

A beat of silence—then the group burst into laughter, the first real laughter they'd had in what felt like forever. Even battered, bruised, and exhausted, for a brief moment, the tension lifted, and they let themselves enjoy the absurdity of it all.

*

The camp was eerily quiet now, save for the distant crackling of the still-burning fires and the occasional groan of metal shifting in the ruins. Aris, still buzzing on adrenaline—or maybe painkillers—paced anxiously near the comms hut. "Corey," he urged, his voice a little too eager. "We need to get the comms up again, now's our chance."

Corey, slumped against a crate, barely lifted his head. His face was pale, slick with sweat. "No," he croaked. "I can't. Not tonight. I'm spent." His fingers trembled where they clutched his side, where the bug's stinger had left its mark.

Aris opened his mouth to press further, but Charles shook his head. "Let him be. We'll try in the morning, if we're still breathing."

That thought settled like a lead weight in their chests. They were out of ammo. Out of time. If the bugs came again before dawn, they had nothing left to give.

"We need rest," Stan said grimly. "Inside the garages. At least we can bar the doors."

One by one, the battered survivors moved toward the shelter of the container garages, exhaustion dragging at their limbs. But Cali lingered.

She turned toward the ruined power hut, the few flickering floodlights illuminating the place where Paddy had made his final stand.

She knelt beside his remains, eyes heavy with sorrow, and laid her hand on his chest. The mono blade at her hip felt impossibly heavy.

"Sleep well, soldier," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

She stayed there a moment longer, breathing in the memory of him, feeling the ghosts of their past press against her mind. In the morning—if they lived to see it—she would bury him.

Then, steeling herself, she rose and walked back to the garages, shutting herself in with the others.

*

Corey sat curled up against the cold metal of the container wall, his arms wrapped around his knees. The flickering lantern light cast uneasy shadows. His breaths were shallow, eyes

darting between the survivors huddled inside. Everyone was battered, exhausted. Wounded in body, mind, or both.

But the others weren't *his* people. The whole mining crew - Hambley, Katriona, Sayelle, even Abe—all of them were dead. The only ones left were these newcomers. Strangers. Fighters. People who had survived where the rest had fallen. And yet, out of all of them, there was only one who felt remotely familiar.

He turned toward Cali, his voice small in the heavy silence. "I'm afraid, Miss Cali," he whispered. His fingers dug into his arms, his body trembling. "Are we going to die?"

Cali, sitting cross-legged on a crate, looked down at him, her face softened by the lantern's glow. The battle had left her weary, aching, but the sight of the kid, *just a kid*, scared out of his wits struck something deep in her.

She reached out, hesitated a moment, then ran her fingers gently through his hair. "Hush now, sugar," she murmured, her drawl soft and warm. "Ain't no use frettin' on what *might* happen. Just gotta keep goin', one step at a time."

She pulled him closer, resting his head against her lap, her hand brushing over his brow in slow, soothing strokes. His body, tense and shaking, finally started to relax.

Then, in that quiet, hushed space between the wreckage of the past and the uncertainty of the future, she began to sing.

Her voice was low and sweet, like a lullaby carried on the wind, the kind a mother might sing on the porch of a long-forgotten farmhouse, under the light of a warm summer moon.

*"Sleep now, child, the dark can't find you...
Stars above will always guide you...
Hush now child, close your eyes,
The stars are watchin' from the skies,*

She paused, then added
*"Ain't no monsters, ain't no fear,
Just the night, and I'm right here..."*

Her fingers traced slow, rhythmic patterns against his scalp, a grounding touch in a world turned upside down.

*"Rest your weary heart a while,
Dream of rivers, dream of miles,
Morning comes, the dark will fade,
I'll be here, no need to be afraid..."*

Cali's voice stayed soft, a slow, lilting melody drifting through the dimly lit container. Her fingers traced light circles over Corey's temple as she continued the lullaby, each verse wrapping around the boy like a warm embrace, shielding him from the horrors of the night.

*"Hush now, child, let the stars keep watch,
A silver moon's glow, just a lantern's touch,*

*Ain't no ghost gonna call your name,
Ain't no darkness gonna stake its claim."*

*"Rest now, darlin', feel the night breeze blow,
Through the valley, through the willows low,
Ain't no storm gonna break your dreams,
Ain't no shadow stronger than your team."*

Corey's breath evened out, his small frame growing still. Cali glanced down, the faintest of smiles touching her lips as she realized he had already drifted off.

She kept singing anyway, her voice carrying through the dark, a small, fragile comfort in a world that had been anything but kind. The rest of the group listened in silence.

*"Sun's gonna rise, paint the sky in gold,
New day's comin', strong and bold,
Ain't no fight that we can't stand,
I'll be here, just take my hand."*

Corey stirred, his breathing deepening, the tension in his limbs melting as her voice wove through the night like a slow river, steady and unbreaking. Cali could feel his small frame relax, the rhythm of his heartbeat slowing under her hand.

Cali's voice softened, a mournful yet steady warmth carrying through the night air, wrapping Corey in something close to comfort. She let the tune drift for a moment, then sang again, her voice full of quiet reverence for the ones they'd lost.

*"Brave hearts gone, but they walk beside,
Watchin' over, with steady eyes,
Ain't no fear when they stand near,
Guardian souls, strong and clear."*

Her fingers absently traced slow circles on Corey's arm, as much to soothe herself as him. She swallowed hard, feeling the weight of that truth settle deep. Paddy, Zarkov, the others—they were gone, but their fight wasn't over.

*"Feel the wind, hear their call,
They ain't leavin', they won't fall,
In the dark, their light will shine,
Guidin' us till the end of time."*

Corey gave the smallest sigh, his body slackening into true sleep at last. Cali let the last hum of the melody hang in the air, her gaze drifting to the faint glow outside—the flickering fires, the ruined camp, the silence left behind after the storm.

*"Sleep now, child, the dark can't find you...
Stars above will always guide you..."*

"Rest now, darlin'," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else. "They got us covered."

Cali let her own head rest back against the cold wall, gazing up at the metal ceiling, her voice fading into a quiet hum. Just for now, in this fleeting moment, they could pretend they were somewhere else - somewhere safe.

*

Aris tossed and turned in restless sleep, his mind plagued by shadows of the past. Memories clawed their way to the surface, perhaps memories that Cali had woken - sins he had buried, failures he had locked away. Deeds done in desperation, whispered bargains made in dark corners.

The dream shifted.

The darkness parted, and a radiant figure stood before him, cloaked in light. The voice was strong, unwavering, filled with divine judgment and mercy in equal measure.



"*Aris...*"



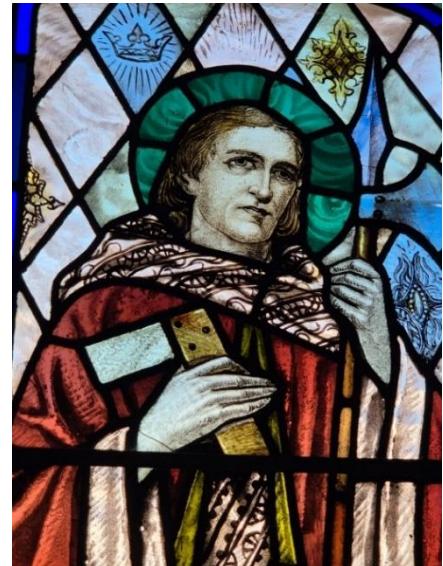
"*Aristotle Papadakis!*"

The voice of Blessed Saint Jude.

You have strayed, Aris. Yet in your moment of need, you called upon me."

"And with my lance, I pierced the hearts of those that sought to harm you. Stray no more. Return to thy fold."

Aris gasped as his eyes shot open, his breath ragged, heart pounding in his chest.



Tears streamed down his face, but not from fear, not from sorrow. Relief. Joy. A weight lifted from his soul.

He had done good. He had repented.

God, His Son, and His servant, St. Jude, had blessed him.

Never again would he disappoint the Lord.

♦—♦—*♦*

CHAPTER 9 – A NEW DAWN

Cali never truly slept, not in the way most folks did. Years of surviving alone in the wilds had conditioned her body to rest lightly, always aware, always listening. Even now, after a brutal fight and sheer exhaustion clawing at her limbs, her senses remained sharp. She stirred as the first slivers of red light bled across the horizon, the sun dragging itself into the sky like a weary traveller.

The night had been mercifully still, no skittering claws in the dark, no telltale flashes of the perimeter warning lights. But the world outside their battered shelter still felt wrong, heavy with the stink of blood, burnt metal, and death.

She exhaled slowly, looking down at Corey, still curled in her lap, his small body twitching with restless dreams. She'd sung him to sleep, holding onto the boy as much as he held onto her. Now, in the golden glow of dawn, he looked almost peaceful.

Cali shifted carefully, letting Corey sleep a moment longer, before her gaze swept the room.

Aris was next to stir. His breathing hitched, then quickened, his face twisted in something between wonder and terror. Sweat glistened on his brow. Then, with a sudden gasp, his eyes shot open, wild and glassy.

"Aristotle Papadakis!"

The name hung on his lips, whispered, reverent. He bolted upright, eyes wet, but not from sorrow—from something deeper. Relief. Joy.

"I saw him," he breathed. "I saw Saint Jude. He spoke to me."

Cali quirked an eyebrow. "That right?"

Aris barely seemed to hear her. He pressed a hand to his heart, eyes lifted toward the heavens. "I have been given purpose. I must set to and do the Lord's work." Without another word, he stood, moving with newfound determination toward the comms hut.

Corey stirred at the sudden movement. He blinked up at Cali, eyes heavy with exhaustion, still clouded with fear. "Miss Cali..." he mumbled, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Are we gonna die today?"

Cali ruffled his hair, offering the best damn smile she could manage after a night like that. "Not if I got anything to say 'bout it, sugar. Now up you get, time to earn our breakfast."

Across the camp, Charles had managed to rig up something resembling a coffee pot. It sputtered and hissed as steam curled into the morning air. He sniffed the brew with approval. "Always a good start to the morning," he mused, pouring a cup and offering it out.

Stan rummaged through the supplies, pulling out what little they had left. "Ain't much," he admitted, tossing out ration bars. "But it's food. Could be worse."

Cali caught the one thrown her way and ripped open the packet. "Hell, at this point, I'd settle for worse," she muttered, taking a bite.

The group gathered, weary but alive, watching as Aris and Corey made their way toward the comms hut, their work far from over. The sun rose higher, washing over the battered remains

of Proving Site Nine. A new day had come. Whether it was the beginning of salvation or just another fight to survive, they would soon find out.

*

The air inside the comms hut was thick with tension as Corey worked furiously, his hands moving over the console with renewed energy. His exhaustion was still there, dark circles under his young eyes, but something about the morning light gave him fresh determination.

“The fusion reactor’s a goner,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “But these batteries still got some juice.”

Aris wiped his brow, muttering a quiet prayer under his breath. “The Lord works in mysterious ways, Mr. Corey. Now let’s not waste His blessings.”

Corey nodded, tongue caught between his teeth as he twisted a wire into place. The static from the comms panel was less erratic now, levelling out into something steadier. “Yeah, we nearly lost it, but I just remembered—this goes here, that plugs in there... and... and...”

*

Cali moved through the wreckage of proving site Nine, eyes scanning for anything that could be salvaged and might be of use. She wasn’t about to be caught unprepared.

She ducked into the half-collapsed admin office. The windows had blown out from the shockwave, paper strewn across the floor like leaves in the wind. Filing cabinets, half-melted computer banks, and a cracked and overturned desk lined the room. Her eyes fell on something tacked to the wall.

A map. Old but detailed—a topographical survey of the surrounding region. Ink faded, corners curled, but the features were still legible. Elevations, valleys, faint track winding out from the site. She pulled it down carefully and rolled it tight. “Could come in handy,” she muttered, tucking it into her belt beside Paddy’s monoblade.

Out back, behind the comms hut, she crouched by the corpse of the large bug she had fought the night before. The carapace was thick, chitinous, tough as reinforced polyglass in places. It had held up against buckshot, teeth, and fire. Grimacing with the effort, she wedged her machete into a seam and pried free a plate. Then another. With cord salvaged from the stores and some ingenuity, she fashioned herself a crude breastplate and shoulder guard. It wasn’t pretty, hell, it looked like something out of a post-apocalyptic parade, but it was solid.

She stood, adjusted the straps, and ran a hand across the hardened shell. “Well I’ll be hog-tied and hollered at, ain’t what I’d wear to Sunday meetin’, but reckon it’ll stop a bug from makin’ gumbo outta me.”

She gave the chest piece a sharp knock with her knuckles. And then her hand tightened around the hilt of the mono blade at her belt. It wasn’t just a weapon now, it was a memory, a promise.

She exhaled slowly through her nose and nodded to herself. *This had to be done.*

“We ain’t leavin’ ‘em like this,” she said softly, mostly to herself. Then louder, to the others: “Stan, Charles, we need to see to the dead. Let’s lay ‘em to rest proper. Up on the perimeter,

by where young Ryan's buried. Can't let 'em rot where they fell, not after what they done for us."

Without waiting for an answer, she made her way back to the ruins of the power hut, stepping carefully over shattered metal and broken glass. What remained of Paddy lay where he'd fallen, or more accurately, where he'd detonated. The blankets she carried were more about dignity than containment—there wasn't much left to gather. Still, with grim reverence, she knelt beside what remained of him.

"Aw hell, Paddy... you always did know how to make an exit," she muttered, eyes misty, lips pressed tight. "Now let's get you home."

She bundled the remains as gently as she could, wrapping him in a pair of old thermal blankets. Blood, soot and ash stained her hands, but she didn't flinch. With a grunt and a strained sigh, she lifted him and carried him, step by steady step, to the perimeter.

Charles, wordless for once, moved with purpose toward the ruined command hut, where Zarkov had made his last stand. He crouched beside the fallen brigadier and removed the cracked spectacles from his face, placing them gently in a pouch. Then, with surprising tenderness, he hoisted the old marine into his arms.

Stan, jaw set but eyes rimmed red, had gone to Katriona. Her lifeless body was crumpled not far from the comms tower. He knelt for a moment beside her, pressing a hand to her shoulder before lifting her in his arms.

The three of them carried their fallen comrades toward the edge of the site, to the quiet ground near Ryan's resting place. There, beneath simple blankets and in the pale morning sky and the rising red sun, they laid them to rest

"Rest easy, soldier," Cali murmured. "You done more'n your share."

Then she turned, eyes glistening but her jaw firm. "Stan, Charles, let's get the rest."

Stan knelt at the crest of the perimeter rise, hands dirty as he piled the dry, rocky soil around the makeshift graves. The ground was stubborn, but he worked methodically, laying stone and earth with a care that belied his usual gruffness.

Charles gave a quiet nod, brushed the dust from his trousers, and turned away. He walked slowly to the spot near the command hut where Hambley had fallen, what was left of him. Charles paused a moment, lips pressed thin. Whatever madness had taken the man, he'd still once been one of theirs. He fetched what he could and carried the remains without a word, laying him a short distance from the others.

Meanwhile, Cali stepped through the cracked door of the med hut, the faint stench of blood and disinfectant clinging to the air. The room was dim, lit only by the orange haze of dawn filtering through shattered panels. There, slumped against the far wall, was Abe, what was left of him, anyway. The bug had done a number on him. Torn up real bad.

She crouched down beside the body, expression grim but steady. One hand instinctively reached to check for a pulse, even though she already knew.

Then her eyes caught the glint of something amber. A half-empty bottle of whisky, tucked beside him like a trusted friend. She reached out and lifted it gently, giving it a little swirl.

"Well now," she murmured, slipping it into her pouch. "Reckon you won't be needin' this no more."

Cali cradled Abe's body in her arms. He wasn't a big man, but he'd gone heavy in death, like the weight of all the fear and fighting had finally settled into his bones. She carried him slow, careful, as if every step still mattered.

The others were already gathered at the edge of the rise, where the makeshift graves now marked a somber line: Paddy, Xander, Katriona, Hambley—laid down one by one like fallen dominos of a forgotten cause. Charles stood with his head bowed. Stan leaned on a shovel, sweat streaking the dirt on his face. No words were needed.

Cali knelt and laid Abe down gently, smoothing the blanket over his chest. "You rest easy now," she murmured, her voice low, "your fight's done."

She stood, brushing dust from her hands, her gaze lingering on the row of the fallen. A moment of silence hung between them all, heavy with grief and memory.

Then, from the direction of the comms hut, Aris's voice rang out, urgent, calling.
"Everyone! Get over here!"

Cali turned, exchanging a look with the others. No rest for the living just yet.

*

Aris opened the door to the Comms Hut "Everyone! Get over here!"

As the ragged crew converged, Aris stood in the doorway, his hands still stained from circuit grease and dried blood. He looked more preacher than technician in that moment, tired, wired, and burning with a strange intensity.

"We're as ready as we're gonna be," he said, voice steady but hollow.

Cali slid to a halt beside him, eyebrows raised. "That mean we're saved, or damned?"

Aris didn't smile. "Depends on who's listenin'. We're in the Lord's hands now"

Aris reached for the final switch, took a deep breath, and flicked it.

A burst of static filled the cabin.

Aris leaned into the microphone, voice steady despite the tension clawing at his gut.

"Mayday, Mayday! This is Proving Site Nine. Exocet. Mayday, Mayday! Request immediate evacuation. We are under attack. Many casualties. Is anybody there?"

The transmission crackled into the void, swallowed by silence.

The group held their breath. The tension in the air was thick enough to choke on. The static hissed and crackled, teasing at a signal but offering nothing but white noise.

Aris muttered another prayer, his fingers tightening around the console as if sheer will alone could force the universe to answer.

Corey tapped a sequence into the controls, brow furrowed in concentration. "C'mon, c'mon... we got power, we got signal... someone's gotta be listening."

The static stretched on, long enough for doubt to creep in.

Then—

"Proving Site 9, we receive and acknowledge your message."

The voice was crisp, professional, carrying the unmistakable weight of authority. Aris let out a shaky breath. Corey whooped in triumph, slapping the console.

"This is Midnight Fall. We are in orbit. We will come and save you. Under no circumstances leave the camp. I repeat, do not leave the camp."

The words echoed in the small hut, sending a chill down everyone's spine.

Cali, standing near the door, narrowed her eyes. "Now, why'd they go an' say that?"

Aris pressed the transmitter. "Midnight Fall, please bring weapons. We are under attack."

There was a brief pause before the response came, steady and reassuring.

"Will do. Stay safe. We will descend as quickly as possible. ETA five hours. Midnight Fall out."

The comms crackled once, then fell silent.

*

A strange silence followed the transmission. Something wasn't right.

Charles narrowed his eyes, the wheels turning in his head. "That didn't sound right."

Aris blinked. "What do you mean?"

Charles turned toward the group, his voice quieter now, laced with the cold certainty of a man who had spent too long in the intelligence world. "I worked for Auntie, the agency. I know when someone's feeding me a line. The emphasis was wrong, certain words were too deliberate, like they were reading from a script. And the voice? Not a hint of panic. Not even surprise. If a stranded outpost suddenly called in a distress signal about alien creatures ripping people apart, you'd think we'd get more than a cool, measured response."

Cali folded her arms, frowning. "You sayin' they ain't who they say they are?"

Corey, still hunched over the console, nodded, his fingers twitching. "Yeah, I thought something was off too. There was a lag, not from distance, but hesitation. Like they weren't expecting a call but had a response ready anyway." He glanced back at Aris. "And there was no transponder signal."

Aris stiffened. "You're right. Every ship broadcasts its transponder ID, always. It's standard. Especially for military vessels."

Stan let out a low whistle. "So who the hell are they?"

Corey typed a few commands into the system, scanning what little telemetry the battered comms array could still pick up. "The signal came from orbit. Definitely a ship up there."

Charles exhaled sharply. "Midnight Fall is a military ship. If it's here, that means the Imperium has a vested interest in this rock."

Cali's gaze hardened. "So... either the cavalry's finally come, or we just sent up a distress beacon to the wrong kind of folk."

Silence fell.

Five hours.

Five hours until they found out exactly who, or what, was coming for them.

*

Charles was the first to break the silence.

"Well, I'm not sitting here twiddling my thumbs for five hours waiting for who knows what," he said, pushing himself up from his seat. "We've been fighting for our damn lives, but we still don't know what the hell is going on here. Time to start turning this place over for answers."

Without waiting for a response, he strode toward the water tanks. The others exchanged glances before moving off in different directions, each with their own ideas of what needed checking.

Charles inspected the water tanks carefully, checking for any sign of contamination. "Pretty sure it's clean," he muttered as he traced the pipes leading into the recycling system. Everything looked standard. If the water had been compromised, it wasn't obvious.

Meanwhile, Stan made his way to the ore storage. Inside, he found crates of processed samples, neatly catalogued in what was left of the records. But what caught his eye was something far more concerning, a sample of greenish, sticky liquid, stored separately from the rest. There were breakdown notes attached, detailing an analysis of the substance.

Stan scanned the scribbled reports, his brow furrowing. "What the hell is this...?" he muttered, reading further.

According to the notes, the liquid had hallucinogenic properties. High doses caused death. Low doses? Memory loss. His stomach twisted as he looked at the sample again, his mind making connections at a dizzying pace. It was eerily similar, almost identical, to the liquid found in the capsules.

He grabbed the report and rushed back to the others. "You're gonna wanna see this," he called out.

*

Cali lingered behind in the Comms hut as the others went their ways, there was still one more soul to see to, whether she deserved it or not. Sayelle.

Sayelle's body was slumped awkwardly near the equipment racks, half-curled like she'd fallen mid-step. Cali stared at her for a moment, lips tight. Why, girl? What pushed you to it? With a sigh, Cali moved to kneel beside her. She reached to lift Sayelle's arms, preparing to carry her to join the others. That's when she saw the dagger that Sayelle had been given earlier, it was still strapped to her belt. "Might come in handy," she mused, slipping it into her own. Aris had already claimed the pistol Sayelle had turned on him.

But Cali wasn't convinced that was all there was to find.

Her fingers brushed over something else, something smooth and cold.

She paused.

It was a cube. About four inches by six inches, made of what looked like crystal, yet humming with an inner glow. The sides flickered with orange symbols, shifting and reforming as if alive. The moment she touched it, something deep inside her stirred, a pulse of recognition. This was important.

She tried to make sense of the symbols, but they were alien to her.

Then—

A vision.

Not of this place.



A city in the clouds. Towers of gleaming silver stretching into the sky. A regal hallway, vast and ornate, lined with dignitaries in splendid attire. A presence - someone of great importance.



The vision faded, but the sense of *knowing* remained.



This cube was theirs. Given to them. Meant for them.

Mine.

Or— ours.

The others shared the same thoughts, memories, and recollections.

Cali's breath hitched as the glowing symbols shifted, pulsing as if in response to her very thoughts. And then, impossibly, they translated.

Words etched themselves into her mind.

"Intel incoming..."

Followed by a set of coordinates.

Cali's eyes widened. She knew this place. She had surveyed this land before. Four to five miles northeast. Atop a mountain range.

She looked up at the others, gripping the cube tightly. "I know where this is."

A heavy silence settled over the group as the realization sank in. The cube pulsed gently in Cali's grasp, the symbols still shifting, flickering with meaning just beyond comprehension. But the vision... that was clear as day. The city in the clouds. The regal hall. The presence of something, or someone, important.

And it wasn't just her.

She could see it in their faces - Charles, Aris, Stan, even Corey. The same flicker of recollection, the same deep-seated certainty.

This was not just a hallucination. This was real.

Then, with a smirk, Cali muttered, "Well, I'll be damned... That sure reminds me of my good ol' Uncle Jesse back in Hazard County, sittin' on his porch in that rickety ol' chair like he was holdin' court on a damn throne."

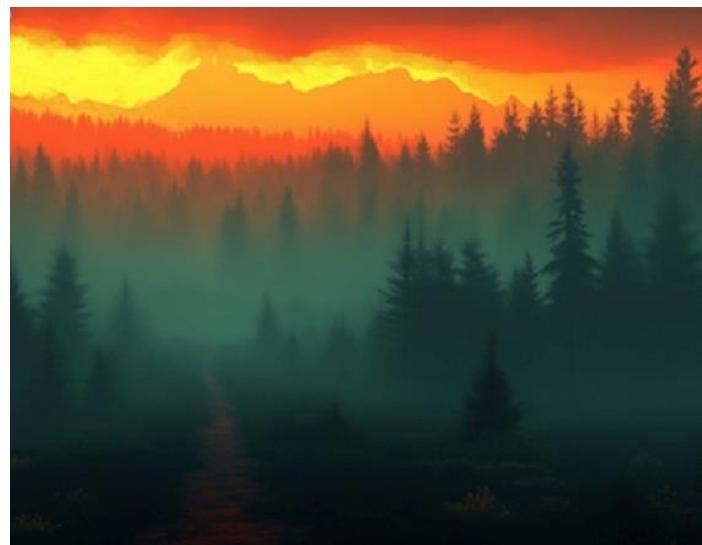
Cali turned, stepping out from the ruins of the comms hut, shielding her eyes and scanning the horizon. The first light of dawn crept over the landscape, spilling gold and crimson across the rugged mountain range to the northeast.

A path, one she had walked before, led vaguely in that direction. The terrain was treacherous, steep in places, but navigable.

And now that she knew where to look, she could just make them out. Natural stone pillars. Standing like sentinels atop the mountain, silhouetted by the rising sun.

Cali exhaled sharply, hands on her hips, the cube still clutched in one. She tilted her head toward the distant peaks.

"Well," she drawled, glancing over her shoulder at the others. "I reckon that's where we'll be headin' then..."



CHAPTER 10 – ONE FOR THE ROAD

Cali stood at the threshold of the comms hut, Sayelle's body wrapped in a tattered blanket and cradled in her arms. Her expression was firm, but not without sorrow. She looked to the others and said quietly, "We got one more job to do 'fore we head out. She may not deserve it... but it's only decent to lay her to rest."

No one argued.

With slow, measured steps, Cali led the silent procession back up to the mound. The morning light caught the fresh stones that marked the resting places of Paddy, Xander, Katriona, Abe, Hambley, and now Sayelle.

Cali knelt and laid Sayelle down beside the others, her face unreadable. "Ain't no judgement from me," she murmured. "Just the dirt, and the end of it."

She turned to Aris. "Would you say a few words, padre?"



Aris nodded solemnly. He stepped forward, the weight of responsibility clear in his face. He stood before the fallen and spoke with quiet conviction. "Whatever sins they bore, it's not for us to carry them now. May they find peace beyond this world." He raised his hand, made the sign of the cross over each in turn.

"Lord, we commend these souls to Your keeping. Whatever roads they walked, righteous or wayward, they faced their end with courage. And for that, may they find grace. Saint Jude, patron of lost causes... we sure qualify now. If you're listenin', watch over them. And if you've a moment left for us, light the path ahead."

He traced the sign of the cross in the air again, then bowed his head.

Charles stepped forward, brushing dust from his jacket with theatrical nonchalance to hide the flicker of emotion in his eyes. "Hey Aris," he said with a lopsided smile, "be a good fellow and if you're speaking to Jude, put in a good word for us all, old chap. I think we're going to need all the luck we can muster on our mountaineering jaunt. Onwards and upwards."

There were faint smiles - tired, grateful, human.

Then Cali stepped forward. She knelt by Paddy's grave again, holding the mono blade gently in one hand, resting it beside her thigh like an old keepsake.

"I don't reckon I've ever met a man quite like you, Paddy Stirling," she said softly. "You were rough as gravel and twice as stubborn, but you had a heart like forged steel. Guess it weren't just your arm that was augmented."

She laid her palm on the blanket that covered him. “You walked into the fire for us. Didn’t hesitate. You’re a damn hero, Paddy. And I’ll carry that blade like I carry your memory - close and sharp.”

She stood, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Rest easy, soldier. You earned it.”

She then reached for the bottle she’d taken from Abe’s side earlier. She pulled the cork with a soft pop, and for a moment, just looked down at Paddy’s resting place. Her voice cracked with feeling as she whispered, “One for the road, soldier.”

She tipped the bottle and let a generous splash of whisky seep into the soil over him.

Then she glanced to Xander, a small, sad smile tugging at her lips. “Guess your drinkin’ buddy could use a pour too.”

Another splash onto the earth, a final toast for old ghosts.

“Hey, easy with that stuff,” Aris said, half-grinning despite himself. “It’s all we got.”

Cali gave the bottle one last look, then gently recorked it. She held it up for a second, the amber liquid inside catching the morning light.

“Well then,” she murmured, voice low and steady, “we’ll save it for a proper toast, when we get off this damn rock.”

She tucked it carefully back into her pack, gave the graves a final nod, then turned toward the mountains.

*

The group stood in the lingering morning haze, the distant peaks shrouded in a pale, shifting mist as the dawn sun began to climb. Cali stood near the edge of the container huts, her arms crossed and face set with resolve. She held up the glowing cube, its surface pulsing gently with orange light.

“Well, folks,” she drawled, voice steady but low, “we got ourselves three choices.”

Everyone turned toward her.

“Option one – we sit tight and wait for that so-called rescue party. But let’s be real, they don’t want *us*, they want what we *got*. This cube. Wouldn’t surprise me none if they were in cahoots with Hambley and Sayelle, or maybe not. Wither way, if they knew where it pointed, I reckon they’d already be there. They sure as hell ain’t here to save our skins.”

She let that hang a moment, before continuing. She smirked faintly, the corner of her lip twitching with dry humour.

“Option two, we try to ambush the so-called rescue party. But let’s be honest, they’re probably Imperial Marines, tooled up to the teeth. Meanwhile, we’re limping on half a clip each and throwin’ curses like they’re grenades. That ain’t a fight, it’s a last stand, and I ain’t keen on goin’ out just to make a point.”

She paced a few steps. “Then there’s option three. We head for the mountains. We follow this cube, see what answers it holds. That fella in my vision - he looked like a wise old spirit, not

some death-dealin' horror. And truth is... if whoever made this wanted us dead, we'd already be ash by now."

A silence followed as the others weighed her words.

Stan scratched his chin. "I'd sooner take my chances in the mountains than wait here like bait on a hook."

Charles nodded slowly. "My thoughts exactly. Whoever that was on the comms... it wasn't standard protocol. And I trust my instincts."

Aris held the cross around his neck. "Saint Jude has guided me this far. If the light is shining up in those hills, then that's where I must follow."

Corey looked unsure, glancing back at the camp. "It's scary out there. But... I'm not stayin' here alone."

Anson, her face pale and drawn, just muttered, "Let's get the hell off this rock. The sooner the better."

Cali gave them all a nod. "Then it's settled. We pack light, we move fast, and we don't stop till we reach that mountain."

She looked down at the cube, its light flickering softly in her hand.

"Time to find out who, or what, is waitin' for us up there."

*

Cali gathered the group just outside the container garages, glancing toward the east where the sun crept a little higher. "One last thing 'fore we move," she said. "We don't know who exactly's aboard that ship, but if they're anything like Hambley and Sayelle, then I'd bet my last shell they ain't here to help."

She turned to Charles. "You got the handwriting of someone who's written one too many diplomatic apologies. I want you to write a note, real neat-like. Leave it in the office, say we've gone south, back to the crash site, takin' shelter there. Make it sound desperate but hopeful."

Charles raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "Something like 'We couldn't wait. The bugs kept coming. Heading to the wreck, might be safer inside the hull. Godspeed to whoever finds this.' That work?"

"Perfect," Cali said, and turned back to the others.

"Alright folks," Cali said, planting her hands on her hips, her eyes sweeping across the tired but willing faces of the group. "This ain't no Sunday hike, and it sure as hell ain't a tourist trail."

She tilted her head toward the hazy silhouette of the mountains in the distance. "That up there? That's my stompin' ground. The wilds. Lived out in 'em more'n I've lived under a roof. So y'all can relax on that front, this part, it's what I do."

Her tone sharpened just a touch, firm but not unkind. "We pack smart. We pack light. Food and water, enough for two days. Take what you can carry," Cali added, "but not so much you can't move fast. We may need to run, or climb, or God forbid, fight."

She gestured toward the ruins of the base. "Scavenge what you can; rations, medkits, anything that might still work. And if we're short on water, don't panic. I know where the streams run up in them hills, and I know what not to drink."

Her eyes narrowed just a little. "Trust me now, alright? Out there, the bugs ain't the only things with teeth."

Stan gave a soft whistle. "Well damn, wild woman's got a plan."

Cali didn't smile, but her eyes flashed with something close. "Damn right I do."

Aris was already rifling through the storage hut, pulling out protein packs and ration bars. Stan checked the remains of the med hut to get what was usable as a medi-kit, while Corey helped by bundling up blankets, rope and torches.

Cali slung her pack over one shoulder and glanced once more at the horizon. "We've got one shot at this. Let's make it count."

As the group set off, Cali lead them first to the South a good distance from camp, dragging her feet in the dust to leave clear, deliberate prints. She dropped a water bottle and cloth at intervals, muttering to herself. "Ain't no tracker worth his salt that won't follow a trail like this." Then she doubled back, carefully walking backward over her own prints, brushing over the more obvious scuffs.

"That'll buy us some time. Now, when we head north, we stay light, walk soft, and leave no trace."

And with that, the group turned toward the looming mountains, leaving the bloodied, battered camp and its ghosts behind.

*

The group pressed northward, the rising sun glinting through the canopy of twisted trees that marked the edge of the forested highlands. The terrain grew more rugged with every step - gullies yawned beneath moss-slicked ledges, narrow ravines forced them into single file, and the path itself was little more than a game trail, half-lost beneath a carpet of fallen leaves and damp earth. The air had a crisp bite to it, clean and sharp in the lungs after hours of dust and gunpowder.



Cali led them with quiet confidence, eyes scanning the terrain like she'd lived here her whole life. But even the most seasoned guides had their missteps.

Three hours in, the sun had climbed higher and the trees had begun to thin when she stopped suddenly, brow furrowed. She unslung her pack, dug out the map she'd taken from the outpost office, and crouched low.

"Damn it," she muttered, tracing a finger along the worn paper. "We've veered east. Couple miles off course, maybe more."

Stan peered over her shoulder, frowning. "How far does that set us back?"

Cali sighed. "Couple hours, easy."

Charles groaned. "Well, that explains why the mountain's been playing hide and seek with us."

She stood, brushing forest grit from her knees. "Alright. We'll take five, catch our breath. Then we cut back west and pick up the trail again. Ain't no good complainin', the forest don't care."

Everyone found a nearby rock or fallen log to slump against, sipping from their canteens and chewing silently on dry rations, the weight of the climb, and of what lay ahead, settling heavy over them.

*

They hadn't been walking five minutes since the break when a sharp rustle snapped through the underbrush.

Cali's head snapped toward the sound instantly. "Hold up," she hissed, arm outstretched to stop the others. "Somethin's movin'."

Aris and Charles were mid-step, caught completely off guard as a squat, skittering form burst from the thicket, chitin glistening, mandibles clicking hungrily.

“Bug!” Aris yelped, stumbling back. “Ahh! Shoot it!”

Cali spun, her machete already in hand. She swung with instinct, but the blade sliced nothing but air. The weight of her wounds made her slow, too slow. “Darn it!”

Before the thing could lunge, Charles raised his shotgun in a fluid, practiced motion. No time to aim - he fired from the hip.

BOOM.

The creature exploded mid-leap in a shower of green ichor and shattered shell. Aris ducked instinctively, arms raised in panic. But all that reached him were a few smears of gore and a broken leg clattering off his shoulder.

He opened one eye, trembling. “Is it dead?”

Charles coolly ejected the smoking shell. “Quite.”

Cali wiped a fleck of bug juice from her cheek. “Well now... ain’t that just the messiest pest control I ever did see.”

Charles glanced down at the steaming splatter on the forest floor, then over to Aris, still pale and wide-eyed, and gave a casual smirk as he broke open the shotgun.

“Well,” he said dryly, brushing a bit of ichor from his sleeve, “I suppose that answers the age-old question - yes, I can hit something when I don’t overthink it.”

He looked over at Cali with a raised eyebrow. “Though I admit, Fox, your dramatic warning swing did make for quite the distraction. Ten points for flair.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “Next time you’re leadin’ the bug charge, I’ll remember to bring popcorn.”

Aris just groaned. “Lord above... I nearly had a heart attack.”

*

The group pressed onward, weaving through the thick underbrush of the Exocetan wilderness. Every step was an effort now, fatigue creeping in after hours of cautious trekking. The trees grew denser and darker for a time, branches clawing at their clothes, whispering against them like old ghosts. Then, slowly, they began to thin, giving way to open stretches of rock-strewn ground and stunted brush as the elevation steadily rose.

Cali paused at the edge of a rocky outcrop, pulling the battered map from her pocket. She squinted up at the sun through the crisp, thinning air, then back at the terrain. “We’re on course,” she said, rolling the map tight again. “See that ridgeline? That’s our path. Ain’t no doubt. We’re gettin’ close.”

As they crested the next rise, the thick woods behind them gave way to the sweeping spine of the ridge. Wind whipped against them now, colder up here. The trees fell behind like an old curtain being drawn back. “Keep low,” Cali warned, motioning with her hand. “Don’t want

no silhouettes on the skyline. Might be eyes watchin', and we ain't in the mood to be target practice."

The group crouched and moved single-file, careful and silent.

Cali turned for one last glance back. In the far distance, now tiny and faint, the jagged antenna of the comms tower at Proving Site Nine jutted against the morning sky. The compound sat quiet, no movement. No sign of the so-called rescue party. Nothing.

"Five hours," she murmured. "If they were comin', they'd be there by now."

She gave the ridge ahead a firm nod. "Let's keep movin'. We ain't outta this yet."

As they crested the final shoulder of the ridge, the forest fell away completely, replaced by windswept rock and frost-bitten shrubs clinging to the stony soil. Cali moved cautiously to the edge, squinting into the afternoon sun, which despite the time of day never rose much above the horizon. She pulled her scarf down and breathed in the thin, chill air. The rest joined her one by one, eyes following her line of sight.

Beyond the ridgeline stretched a vast, flat plateau—an immense disc carved directly into the mountain. It was like the peak itself had been cleanly sliced off with some impossibly sharp tool, leaving a smooth surface three to four hundred meters across. The precision of it was unsettling, too perfect to be natural. Atop it, strange, ancient symbols were etched into the stone in broad, looping patterns, symbols that echoed those seen on the data cube.

There was no wildlife. No birds, no wind-song. Just stillness.

"Y'all feel that?" Cali asked quietly, voice barely more than a whisper. "Somethin' ain't right. Place's too quiet."

A narrow path wound up from the left side, rough and weathered, treacherous but walkable. To the right, the land dropped away sharply into a mist-choked gorge. Far below, barely visible through the shifting grey, lay Proving Site Nine. A strange sight, and chilling from this height. No sound carried from the outpost.

"We go left," Cali said, shouldering her pack and pulling out the coil of rope. "It's narrow and steep in places, so watch your footing. I ain't haulin' nobody back up if they fall."

They pressed on, every step deliberate. The wind had stilled. The only sound now was the scrape of boots on rock and the dull clink of gear.

After forty-five tense minutes picking their way along the winding path, the group came to a stop—before them lay the edge of the great disc.

*

As the group approached the edge of the massive, unnaturally flat plateau, they slowed to a cautious walk. The surface stretched three to four hundred meters across, its stone polished smooth, unnervingly perfect - like the entire mountain had been sliced with a blade and the scar left behind sealed with alien precision. Etched into the plateau itself were intricate symbols, carved six inches deep in looping, swirling patterns. They covered the surface in great arcs and circles, an unreadable geometry that made the eye ache to follow.

Cali crouched, brushing her fingers across the markings. “Same ones as on the cube,” she muttered. “But they ain’t any easier to read close up.”

Charles produced the data cube, its glowing orange facets flickering with the same script. He turned it in his hands, but the plateau’s etchings offered no new insight, no translation, no revelation. Just mystery.

Then, as the group neared the plateau’s edge, something caught their attention.

A perfect cube, about a meter across. Jet black, impossibly smooth, like a block of polished onyx. It reflected the red-orange sunlight in glimmers and glints like a dark mirror, casting long shadows across the carved floor.

“Would ya look at that...” Cali whispered.

They stepped closer. And as they did, the surface of the black cube stirred.



Tiny specks of light flickered into existence—pinpricks of energy, they flickered randomly across all faces of the cube, like fireworks going off behind a sheet of glass. The closer they got, the more frequent the flickers became—first occasional sparks, then swirls of motion, as if something beneath the surface were waking up.

“Whatever this thing is...” Aris murmured, “It knows we’re here.”

The group slowed to a halt, instinctively keeping a few steps back. Even Stan, ever bold, didn’t approach yet.

“Well,” Cali breathed, resting a hand lightly on her machete, “ain’t that a pretty thing...”

Charles frowned as he eyed the shimmering surface of the onyx cube. “Maybe it’s a sentry system,” he muttered, adjusting his grip on his shotgun. “We should spread out. Just in case...”

Cali, eyes fixed on the cube, tilted her head. “That thing invited us here,” she said with a half-grin. “I reckon I’m just gonna knock on the door.”

She stepped forward, raising her hand, but paused. Instead of touching it, she reached into her pouch and drew the smaller crystal cube. “Let’s see what happens if I use the key,” she said, placing it gently against the dark stone.

Immediately, the black cube responded. Lights pulsed from the point of contact, soft pinpricks like starlight dancing across its surface, flickering and flaring in patterns that seemed almost alive.

“Ain’t this REAL pretty...” Cali exclaimed.

Then came the rumble—low at first, like distant thunder, then growing, groaning as rock grated against rock. The entire plateau shifted. With a grinding roar, the disc-like summit began to rotate, the massive stone lid sliding smoothly aside, pivoting on the onyx cube like the mechanism of some ancient vault.

As the last of the tremors faded, a wave of cold air surged upward from the black abyss revealed beneath. The ground now opened like the mouth of the world itself.

They stepped forward, peering into the chasm. Carved into the walls of the shaft, a spiraling staircase descended into the unknown - thousands of narrow, carefully hewn steps.

Aris knelt and touched the stone. “Solid,” he said quietly, his voice reverent. “Whoever made this... they weren’t working with chisels.”

Corey tentatively and quietly spoke. “Mr Papadakis... would it be a good idea to, y’know... go back now? The radio said don’t leave. Why don’t we just go back?”

Aris placed a hand gently on the lad’s shoulder, his tone calm but resolute. “My son, be at peace. This - this is a sign. We stand before something far beyond our comprehension. If the Lord wills it, we are not here by chance.”

Corey’s eyes looked into the spiralling abyss. “What if there’s a creature down there?” he whispered. “What if this is their nest and we have to run back up?”

Aris stood tall, his hand still resting gently on the boy’s shoulder. His eyes didn’t waver from the ancient steps descending into the dark. “Then we meet it with courage,” he said quietly. “And with faith.”

Charles gave a quiet nod, rolling his shoulders as he checked the load on his shotgun. “We’ve come this far,” he said simply. “And I’ll be damned if I let a little thing like an ominous subterranean spiral staircase ruin our afternoon.”

Stan gave a dry chuckle, thumbing the strap on his pack tighter. “At this point, if it’s death or answers, I’d rather die knowin’ what the hell’s been goin’ on.”

Even Anson—still pale, her movement stiff with pain—set her jaw and stepped forward. “No point waitin’ for a better invitation.”

Cali looked around at them all, one hand on her hip, the other cradling the data cube that had brought them here. Her eyes gleamed with something between reckless excitement and weary acceptance.

“Well,” she drawled in that familiar southern mountain lilt, “they’ve opened the door for us. Be downright rude not to go in and say hi.”



CHAPTER 11 – INTO THE DEPTHS OF MEMORY

Aris stepped closer to the spiralling stairway, the breath of cold air from below brushing past him like a whisper from the deep. The stone looked ancient, but the edges were still sharply defined. No moss. No lichen. Just black stone and silence.

He glanced back at the others, then slowly extended one boot toward the top step. It held. Solid. No give beneath his weight.

Still, he didn't rush. He dropped to a cautious crouch, brushing his fingers along the nearest surface. It was impossibly smooth, like glass—but not slippery. No dust. No wear that matched the passing of time.

“This ain't natural,” he muttered under his breath.

He rose again, tested his weight on the next step. It held firm too. He tapped the rail-less edge with his boot, just to be sure. Then he turned back to the group and gave a small nod.

“Sturdy,” he said. “Strange, but sturdy. I'll go first—light the way. But keep your hands close to the wall and your wits even closer. Ain't no telling what waits below.”

He adjusted his shotgun across his back, took a slow breath, and began his descent, step by deliberate step, into the dark.

Cali was next, ever cautious, instinctively kept to the wall, her body angled to hug the carved rock.

One by one, the others followed.

Charles muttered, “This is either the start of something beautiful, or the longest death march in history.”

Stan smirked behind him. “Better than dying up top with a fake rescue and no whisky.”

Corey and Anson brought up the rear. The boy clutched his torch tightly, casting shaky light ahead.

The spiral descended endlessly.

Twenty steps. Fifty. A hundred. Still no bottom.

And as they went deeper, the temperature dropped. Not freezing, just enough to make the hairs on their arms rise, the air growing thinner, the silence more profound. The only sound was the scrape of boots on stone, and the low, steady hum, almost a vibration, that seemed to pulse from the very walls.

From the depths below, a pale, greenish glow pulsed faintly, almost imperceptible at first, but slowly building as they descended, like the heartbeat of some slumbering beast.

The only sounds were the soft scuff of boots on stone and the rasp of shallow breath. Each footfall echoed faintly down the shaft, bouncing off the smooth, spiraling walls. It was unnervingly quiet, no insects, no wind. Just the hush of ancient stone and the whisper of descent.

*

Then came the sound.

A faint *crack*. Not from below, but from above.

They froze.

A soft rumble followed, like a giant stirring in its sleep. It grew. a mechanical vibration, reverberating through the stone beneath their feet. The air shifted subtly, a pressure change that made ears pop.

Then the unmistakable roar of *thrusters* - low, guttural, and controlled.

Charles' head snapped up toward the opening far above. His eyes narrowed, his instincts immediately snapping into focus. "That's a drop ship," he said, his voice low and grim. "Big one. Coming in slow. Controlled descent."

He didn't blink.

"Not rescue. *Military*. Black ops."

The others stared at him.

"How do you know?" Aris asked.

Charles didn't take his eyes off the shaft above.

"Because I've *seen* them before. Heard them. That sound, *those* engines? That's not regular Navy. It's special operations. Off-the-books. Clean-up crew. These bastards don't come out unless something's too dangerous to explain... or too valuable to lose."

He looked to Cali, to Stan, to Aris and Corey. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"They're not here to help."

Above, the thrusters screamed louder as the dark shape of the drop ship passed overhead, the light from the open sky swallowed by its immense silhouette. Dust rained down around them.

Cali's jaw tightened. "Then we best hope we're too deep for 'em to follow."



And with that, they kept moving - downward, deeper into the dark.

A new sound cut through the dying roar of the thrusters - a sharp *clink* of metal on stone.

Stan twisted, looked up the spiraling shaft. His breath caught.

"Eyes up! We got company!"

High above, silhouetted by the narrowing disc of sky, figures emerged, a dozen or more, moving with terrifying precision. Dark shapes clad in matte black combat armour, visors aglow with dull red optics. Silent. Unhesitating.

They didn't shout. They didn't signal.

They charged, boots hammering the steps in unison, weapons raised.

"Go! GO!" Charles barked. "They're coming!"

The group bolted downward, boots skidding on the ancient stone. Corey stumbled, caught himself. Anson muttered a curse and pushed herself harder. Cali turned as she ran, grabbing a handful of pebbles and scattering them behind her, each one clicking across the steps, barely a distraction, but maybe enough.

Then—

FLASH.

A crackle of light sliced past.

A point of energy, hot and angry, streaked down the shaft, a screaming comet of plasma. It slammed into the stone wall a few meters behind them with a sound like the air being torn in half.

WHUUMPH!!

The impact sucked the air from their lungs, the shockwave washing over them in a wave of blistering heat. Rock evaporated. A perfect, molten hole had been blasted straight into the staircase wall, glowing at the edges, hissing with vaporised stone.

"Plasma!" Aris gasped. "That's *plasma weaponry!* Who the hell brings that to a bug hunt?!"

"They're not here for the bugs!" Charles shouted. "They're here for *us!*"

Cali didn't answer, she was too busy running, dragging Corey by the wrist. Stan hauled Anson forward, teeth gritted, boots slipping on ancient dust. The air grew thinner, the stairwell tighter.

Another shot.

Closer.

Another plasma blast shrieked through the air, this one dangerously close, a white-hot globe of death that slammed into the stone just behind them. The blast wave hurled dust and heat forward in a burst that nearly took Stan's footing.

"They're gaining!" Corey wheezed, legs burning.

"We ain't gonna make it unless we find a turn-off or cover!" Cali snarled.

More steps. More pounding boots behind them.

"Keep movin'!" Cali shouted. "Don't look back!"

They pushed on, lungs burning, legs aching, boots pounding against the narrow, spiraling steps. Then—

A faint green glow ahead. Just below them, stretching across the shaft like a curtain of light, was a fine mist, barely six inches deep, gently roiling and humming with energy. The stairway continued through it, undisturbed.

“Wait,” Charles said, slowing. “Some sort of energy field.”

“Only one way to find out,” Cali muttered.

Charles took a deep breath, held it, and stepped through.

Nothing.

No shock, no jolt, no pain.

He exhaled slowly. “Seems inert. Probably just decorative,” he said calmly, pressing on.

Cali followed, and as she passed through, she suddenly cried out: “AHH! IT BURNS!”

Corey screamed in panic, nearly tripping over himself.

Cali snorted, glancing back with a grin. “Heck no it don’t. But it might slow those goons down.”

Stan groaned. “Woman, one of these days, I swear...”

But they were through. And then—

The shaft opened below them, vast and deep.

For the first time, they could see the bottom - circular floor nearly 200 meters below, with something massive waiting in the shadows.

Then another blast tore through the green mist behind them, plasma energy slicing through the air, glowing and furious.

The last hundred meters flew past in a blur of adrenaline and urgency.

And then—

They hit the bottom.

The stone platform spread wide before them, ancient and smooth. And there, resting like a predator in the dark, was a sleek ship, unlike anything they’d seen before. Polished hull, dark plating with faintly glowing veins of light, 200 meters long, resting on three extended landing struts. No dust, no damage. Just waiting.

A low hum rose from the vessel. Lights flickered to life. With a hiss of pressure and the smooth whine of servos, a ramp began to lower from the underside of the ship.

Engines thrummed in the background, warming up.

A breeze stirred the dust as the ramp touched the stone with a soft *clunk*.

Charles slowed, adjusted his jacket, glanced over his shoulder at the burning green mist above, and gave a lopsided smile.

“Taxi for Charles,” he said.

And with that, they all rushed up the ramp into the ship.

A soft chime echoed through the ship's corridors.



Then a calm, measured voice, a woman's voice.

“This is the *Zarian*. All systems online. Ship ready for takeoff. Crew positions available: Pilot, Gunner, Navigator, Sensor Operator, Engineer.”

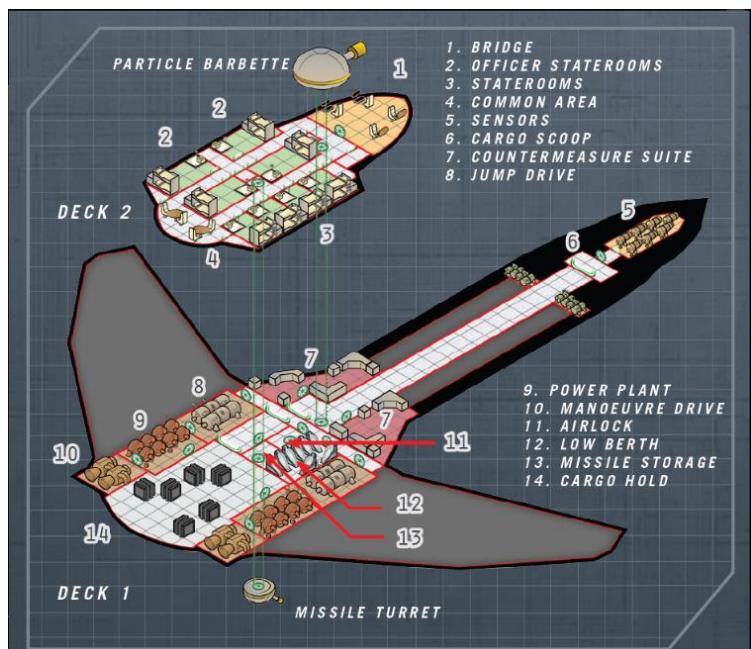
Before anyone could react, the ship shuddered, a sharp, sudden impact that reverberated through the metal floor. Dust rattled from the ceiling.

“*Zarian* is under attack from external sources. *Zarian* is under attack!”

Charles says “*Zarian*, fight back. Return fire.”.

Zarian calmly responded
“Gunner position available.”

“I know a little about ships guns”, said Anson. “I used to fire blasters when I was on the mining rig with belter miners,” Anson moved without hesitation. She spotted the turret position, sleek, curved, surrounded by glowing targeting systems, and threw herself into the seat. Her fingers danced over the controls.



The rest of the group surged forward, boots thundering up the narrow stairs toward the flight deck. They burst into the bridge...and froze for a half-second.

It was ornate, strangely so. Faded luxury and baroque style, brass and wood panelling lining the bulkheads, intricate carvings inset into the walls. It felt like stepping into a royal chamber that had crash-landed from another age.

Cali dropped into the pilot's chair, the seat practically moulding to her frame.

“Hot damn,” she breathed, running her fingers across the holographic controls. “This is high-tech stuff... Like riding a goddamn phoenix chariot...”

She looked over her shoulder. “Hey Stan, just like old times aboard the *Wayfarer*. ”

Stan smirked, settling into the sensor operator’s station. “Only with better seats,” he quipped.

Charles took the navigator’s chair, straightening his jacket as if preparing for a diplomatic audience, then calmly began studying the stellar charts. “Right then... Let’s see if I can remember how to do this without getting us lost.”

Aris leaned into the engineering console, eyes already scanning rows of alien data readouts. His fingers hovered over the keys. “Engineer Aris reporting for duty. Come on now, let’s see what’s workin’ and what’s held together with spit and faith...”

Another impact rocked the ship, harder this time.

Cali winced. “Sod it, girl, forget pre-flight. Let’s just get airborne.” Her hands swept over the console. “Hold on to somethin’!”

The *Zarian* roared to life. Grav drives thrummed, the ship vibrating with potential. Then—
They lifted.

The massive ship surged upward, rock walls flying past on either side as the disc-shaped monolith shaft swallowed them whole.

Cali shouted, “*Zarian!* Activate shields!”

A pause. Then the ship’s voice replied, serene but apologetic.

“Some systems damaged due to lack of maintenance. Current operational status as follows:”

- Ventral Missile Turret – Damaged and inoperable
- Holographic Hull – Only port wing and nose projectors functional
- Hull Integrity – 72, down from 88
- Military Countermeasures Suite – Damaged, reduced functionality
- Power Plant – Efficiency reduced to 75%
- Jump Drive – Mostly functional, navigational errors possible
- Manoeuvre Drive – Mostly functional; may fail temporarily

Aris muttered, “Oh, saints preserve us...”

Cali just grinned. “She’s held together with style and spite, just how I like it.”

They burst from the shaft, sunlight slamming into the bridge.

Below, the Imperial dropship rose slowly, maneuvering to engage.

“Anson!” Cali barked. “Hit that ship on our way out!”

Anson's fingers flew over the gunner console. Her eyes lit up as the targeting interface locked in.

"Weapon system online. Turret mount... damn, this ain't just a laser..."

The interface confirmed it:

TURRET MOUNTED PARTICLE BARBETTE
STATUS: ACTIVE. CHARGED. TARGET LOCKED.

Cali whistled low. "Someone brought a big stick to this party..."

"Firing," Anson said calmly.

The deck shuddered as the barbette discharged. A blinding lance of violet energy leapt from the turret, slicing through atmosphere like a god's fury.

The dropship didn't stand a chance.

The beam punched through the craft mid-chassis. A half-second later, the entire ship detonated in a blossom of white-hot plasma, raining scorched debris across the plateau like falling stars.

"Direct hit," Anson muttered, wide-eyed.

Cali let out a breathless laugh. "Holy hell! Girl, you're shit with a shotgun, but you're shit hot with a ship gun!!"

Anson grinned viciously. "Yeah, well... I'm more comfortable when the barrel's the size of a dumpster."

She spun the turret toward the fleeing troopers below, hands already dancing on the controls.

"Way to go, girl!" Aris whooped. "Now shoot the troops!"

But before Anson could move her targeting reticle, Charles' voice cut through the chaos, measured, firm. "No. There's no need. That's over the top. They're no threat to us now. It'll take them hours to get another drop ship down, if they even bother."

"But they tried to kill us! Shoot them!", said Aris.

"Very forgiving of you, priest!" retorted Charles sarcastically. "And this ship's damaged, every time we shoot or try something, there's a chance it may go wrong."

"Ok, when you put it that way", conceded Aris.

There was a beat of silence. Then Cali's voice, calm but with a weight of memory behind it.

"Leave 'em," she said. "I don't like 'em neither, but they were just followin' orders. Don't mean they agree with 'em. Hell, Paddy was black ops once."

Anson hesitated a moment longer, then slowly took her hands off the triggers.

Stan scanned the displays. "Nothing on sensors. We're clear, for now."

The *Zarian* surged forward, engines humming low and smooth, cutting a shadow across the broken wilderness.

Behind them, the monolith shrank into the distance.

Ahead, the skies of Exocet stretched wide.

And for the first time since they'd crashed here... they were flying free.

*

The *Zarian* swept across the planet's surface like a blade skimming just above the skin of a drum - silent, deliberate, and dangerously sharp.

Cali kept her eyes locked on the terrain, guiding the ship through craggy canyons, over ancient impact basins, and beneath jagged cliff overhangs whenever she could. They rode the shadows, keeping low and unpredictable. She was running a long arc, a sweeping horseshoe that would take them all the way to the planet's far side, the opposite face from where the *Midnight Fall* was likely stationed.

"Ain't no way I'm lettin' some Imperial black ops spook get a sensor lock on us," she muttered, adjusting trim. "We'll duck behind the planet's curve, then climb quiet."

In the co-pilot's chair, Charles monitored the navigation displays.

"If their ship's still in orbit, we're in the blind zone now. Line-of-sight's broken." He tapped a few keys. "We've bought ourselves a window."

Cali didn't look away from the canopy. With a smooth, practiced flick of her wrist, she began the ascent. The *Zarian* tilted upward, its nose cutting through the thinning atmosphere like a predator rising from the deep.

"Alright, everyone hold onto somethin'. We're goin' up."

The engines shifted tone, no longer the deep, earthy roar of terrain-hugging flight, but a high-pitched hum that vibrated through the hull. The sky outside shifted from steel-blue to the deep violet of near-space. Stars winked back into view, scattered like old friends returning after a long absence.

"Altitude, 90 klicks and climbing," Charles called out, watching the altimeter tick upward.

Stan hunched over the sensor console, eyes darting across the screen.

"Still nothing on scope. Either they're gone, or they haven't noticed we slipped the net."

"Let's pray it's both," Aris muttered from the engineering station. He wiped sweat from his brow. "We're flyin' on half a prayer and borrowed time. That reactor's holdin', but she's wheezin' like a nun at a liquor tasting."

Cali smirked. "We'll get her patched up when we're clear. For now, I just need her to climb."

Aris tapped at a series of glowing glyphs on the engineering panel, his brow furrowed. Panels pulsed with unfamiliar symbols overlaid with system diagnostics, some flickering, others pulsing red or amber. He muttered under his breath, tracing power flow indicators, checking structural integrity readouts. "This ship..." he said slowly, brow furrowing deeper, "it's not just old. It's sufferin' from neglect. A serious lack of maintenance."

Cali glanced over her shoulder from the pilot's chair. "Define 'serious', preacher."

Aris shook his head, lips tight. "She's holdin' together, but only just. Power distribution's patchy. Some systems are runnin' under manual override. Whole sections are barely above idle. It's like she was put into sleep mode and forgotten."

Charles, from the navigator's console, arched a brow. "So someone tucked her away. Parked her. But didn't quite keep up the servicing schedule?"

"More like... abandoned," Aris said quietly. "She's a relic. A damn miracle she woke up at all."

*

Charles leaned forward in his seat. He adjusted his collar absently.

"Zarian," he said, voice clear and calm, "Where were you constructed?"

The ship's voice responded without hesitation, smooth and refined, with the faintest echo of age.

"I was constructed on the planet Drinax approximately two centuries ago."

Cali asks, "Zarian... what was your purpose? What were you built for?"

The ship's voice responded almost instantly - calm, elegant, with just the faintest hint of pride.

"I am a Harrier-class raider. Pride of the fleet of the Kingdom of Drinax."

A silence fell across the bridge...

"Drinax..." Charles repeated, softly. His brow furrowed. "Yes. I remember now. I grew up on Drinax. Moved away when I was very young. Before... everything."

Cali turned to him, eyebrows raised. "Wait... you're from Drinax?"

Charles didn't answer right away. Something about the Zarian's voice stirred deeper truths loose in his mind, old certainties washed away by the tide of forgotten years.

He cleared his throat, half-dreading the answer. "Zarian... do you know who I am?"

There was a brief pause. Then the ship replied with perfect confidence.

"Yes, of course I know who you are. You are Charles Huebert-Cutter. Twenty-third Baron of the lineage of Drinax."

Silence slammed into the cockpit like a thunderclap.

Every head turned to stare at Charles.

Even Charles himself blinked, stunned. He opened his mouth, closed it again, then managed a hoarse:

"Well... that's new."

Cali leaned back in her chair, one hand still on the flight controls, the other gesturing loosely in his direction. "Well hot damn, Fancy Cocktail... turns out you *are* royalty."

Charles ran a hand down his face, still processing. "Honestly, I thought my mother was making that up. Some old noble blood to make our family name sound less bankrupt. But this..." He gestured to the glowing panels, the regal flight deck. "This is real."

The Zarian's voice chimed in again.

"Welcome aboard, Baron. It is an honour to serve you."

Charles looked around at his companions, half-dazed, half-delighted.

"Well," he said at last, a crooked smile forming on his lips, "looks like the inheritance finally came through."

*

Cali arched an eyebrow, cocked her head toward the ceiling, and asked with a smirk in her voice:

"Hey, Zarian... do you know who I am?"

There was a brief hum from the ship's systems as if it were thinking, or perhaps searching a very old memory bank.

"Yes," came the smooth reply. "Of course I know you. You are Calista Fox, and I know the rest of you too. Of course I would know that."

Cali blinked. Her smirk faltered for a heartbeat.

"I... what?"

"You were chosen. The King of Drinax sent you to find me."

Cali leaned back slowly in her seat, her fingers tapping the armrest as she processed that. "Well I'll be..." she muttered. "Chosen, huh? Reckon that explains the fancy cube."

Then, after a beat, she grinned and added with mock bravado:

"Hey, am I of noble lineage too?"

A pause.

"I don't believe so," the Zarian replied evenly.

Stan choked on a laugh. Charles tried very hard not to look too smug.

Cali snorted. "Figures. Not even a little bit noble? No long-lost duchess? Not even a countess of some forgotten outpost?"

"No, Miss Fox."

She shook her head, half amused, half exasperated. "Well hell. Guess I'll just have to settle for bein' useful."

She shot a wink at Charles. "But don't let it go to your head, Baron Fancy Cocktail."

Charles raised an eyebrow with theatrical grace. "Perish the thought, Miss Fox. I shall strive to remain *just* humble enough."

Aris leaned forward from his engineering console and flickering warning lights.
“Zarian,” he asked, voice curious but solemn, “who is the current king of Drinax?”

A pause. Then the voice of the ship responded, even and thoughtful.
“I only know the king as he once was. I do not know if there is a king now... but there must be.”

Aris’s mouth tightened, but before he could speak again, Charles cut in, his voice steady.
“Wait, what is this planet? Where exactly are we?”

The ship answered at once.

“This world is Exocet. I have been here for two centuries, awaiting retrieval.”

“We should leave,” Zarian added. “Quickly.”

Cali nodded, already guiding the ship on a wide banking arc.
“Yeah, reckon we outstayed our welcome anyhow.”

*

As Cali piloted the ship across planet and then into low orbit, The voice of Zarian continued.
Smooth. Ancient. Certain.

“King Tarn Velas gave you the mission to find me.”

And as the Zarian spoke those words... the memories came flooding back.

They remembered.

Not everything, not all at once. But enough.

You hadn’t been drifting.

You hadn’t been lost.

You came here, to Exocet, with purpose.

You see the halls of a ruined palace reborn in the clouds, the sun glinting off impossible towers. You remember standing before a man old before his time, robed in history and burden.

King Tarn Velas.

He offered no crown.

No riches.

Just a chance.

A chance to reclaim something thought lost forever.

Centuries ago, the Aslan Hierate burned Drinax to ash. The surface of the world is now a blasted wasteland, its people reduced to Vespeker scavengers who cling to survival in the dust and bones of a fallen empire. Only one remnant of glory remains, The Floating Palace, The Cloud City high above the scorched lands, where the last nobles of Drinax still dream of a kingdom restored.

Charles, you remember now. You were born in that palace.

You are a noble of Drinax.

The politics. The shadows. The secrets.

They raised you to be clever, to play the long game.

And this?

This was the game.

You recall the King's words now, spoken with quiet urgency in a room lined with relics:

"A Harrier-class raider. The Zarian. Lost during the Fall. Hidden here, on Exocet. A relic of the old fleet. Fast. Deadly. Priceless. Find it. And with it, we reclaim what was ours."

The data cube was part map, part key, and a test of loyalty. He warned you that Imperial spies, rival pirates, and worse would stop at nothing to get their hands on the Zarian. So you went quietly. Smuggled yourselves across the stars in low berth, hoping not to draw attention.

And now, as its signal merges with the Harrier's systems... it all comes back.

You were chosen to find the ship.

Now you've done the impossible.

You have the Zarian.

And Drinax just rose from its ashes.

Cali's fingers tighten around the cube, her voice low. "I was sent to find you."

And the ship replied, "Yes. And you have succeeded."

The crew look around the bridge, at each other.

Charles, the quiet truth of your lineage weighs heavier now.

Aris feels it too - divine purpose, reshaped by reality.

Stan blinks at the high-tech sensor arrays, half-grinning in disbelief.

Anson runs her hands over the gunnery controls like she was born to it.

Corey stares, wide-eyed, on the edge of legend.

And Cali... Cali just grins.

"Well, I'll be damned," she drawls. "Drinax just rose from its ashes."

The past has returned.

And with it... destiny.



CHAPTER 12 – PERFECT STRANGER

The stars above Exocet gleamed cold and indifferent as the Zarian slipped into low orbit, its hull still humming from the strain of reactivation. Below, the war-torn world fell away, its surface a memory of blood, bugs, and buried secrets.

From the forward view panels, the void stretched vast and black. And then the console lit up. “Incoming ship detected on radar. Incoming ship.” intoned the calm, mechanical voice of the *Zarian*.

A moment later, a transmission crackled to life.

“This is The Captain of the *Midnight Fall*. You will stand down immediately. Dock with this ship and prepare to be boarded - or destroyed. It is your decision. I will take whatever action is necessary to bring you down.”

Zarian displayed the incoming ship on the scanner. “Designation: Imperial Scout Ship. 100 tons. Military grade. Belongs to the Imperial Scout Service.”



The tension in the bridge spiked like a sudden current.

Cali leaned forward in the pilot’s chair, eyes locked on the glowing sensor display. The red dot, *Midnight Fall*, was closing in fast.

“Zarian,” she asked, voice sharp, Southern drawl curling at the edges, “can we outrun that scout?”

A heartbeat passed. Then the ship’s voice responded, calm, precise, tinged with old nobility: “Based on current data, my thrust capacity exceeds that of a standard Imperial Scout. However...” A flicker ran across the console. “I do not know what manoeuvre software their shipboard computer possesses. They may have upgrades... or combat-focused overrides.”

Cali frowned. “So maybe we can, maybe we can’t. Ain’t that just dandy.”

Stan, still hunched over the sensor station, looked up. He tapped the side of the display and said, with a glance to the others:

“You might find this interesting... when they hailed us, they didn’t call us the *Zarian*. They called us... *Perfect Stranger*.”

At that, Aris looked up sharply. “Hold on.” He turned to Charles. “The datapad we found, on that body near the compound.”

Charles blinked, then swore softly. “Yes. I remember. Zarkov decrypted part of the file. ‘Find the Stranger at all costs.’”

Cali leaned forward, eyes narrowing. Her voice cut through the tension like a drawl dipped in suspicion.

"Zarian... who or what in tarnation is the *Perfect Stranger*?"

Zarian's voice responded smoothly, calm and clinical.

"Perfect Stranger is the Imperial Scout Service's code designation for this vessel. I was hidden by order of the Kingdom of Drinax during the final days of the war. The Imperium has sought me ever since."

Cali blew out a breath, her eyebrows shooting up. "Well butter my biscuits... we ain't flyin' no mystery ghost ship - we're flyin' *the most wanted secret in the sector*. We're sittin' in the crown jewel of Drinax's lost fleet, and them Imperials just realized someone beat 'em to it."

*

Cali, eyes on the controls, jaw tight as warning lights blink:

"Alright, Charles. This bird's Drinaxi born, same as you, so it appears. Guess that gives you more right than any to pick your seat. If that gives you an edge, I won't argue, y'can take the stick."

She slaps the control panel lightly.

"Lemme tell ya, she's a real beaut to fly. Handles like a dream, even with half her systems covered in cobwebs. But she ain't nothin' like your pleasure boat, Ol' Bess; this bird's got claws. And that scout tailin' us? I've flown ones just like it. Quick, slippery, I know what it can do. This bird, if we fly her right, we can out-dance that Imperial bastard."

"So here's your choice, your Lordship. You wanna sit in the throne and call the shots as captain, I'll fly her for you. Or you can take the yoke and I'll follow your lead. But either way, make you mind up sharp, 'cause that scout's comin' in hot!"

The command deck of the *Zarian* crackled with quiet tension. The hum of the ancient ship's systems underscored the moment - a low, ever-present thrum that seemed to echo the heartbeat of something long-dormant now reawakened. Everyone had found a station, but one question still hung in the air: who was truly in command?

Charles stepped forward, adjusting his jacket as he settled into the central chair. He didn't hesitate. His voice, when it came, was firm and crisp. No trace of doubt.

"Zarian. I'll be taking the Captain's chair. Until we jump, I will refer to you as Bosun.

Miss Fox is our pilot.

Mr Kolinski is manning the Sensor Array.

Mr Papadakis is our Chief Engineer.

Master Corey, please assist Mr Papadakis.

Miss Anson, as our Gunner, please man the APB turret.

Crew. I know you are all more than capable. But now is the time to show us your mettle."

Charles then stood to attention, saluted, and added "God save the King."

There was a beat of silence, and then Cali, already running her fingers over the pilot controls, grinned, turned towards Charles and saluted “Yes siree.”

The others exchanged glances, nervous, grim, but resolute. They had fought together, bled together, and buried too many good souls. Whatever came next, they’d face it as a crew.

Ahead of them, the stars waited – behind them the enemy was closing.

*

Cali turned slightly in her pilot’s chair, glancing back toward Charles with a tight smirk and a glint of urgency in her eye.

“Captain, may I make a suggestion?”

“I got me a plan - cunning as a fox what just got hired as Professor of Advanced Cunnin’ over at the University o’ Outfoxin’. And not just any fox—*this* Miss Fox.”

She didn’t wait for a yes, just powered through like always.

“We need to stall ‘em. Every second we keep talkin’ is a second we ain’t shootin’, and one step closer to gettin’ clear o’ this planet. So let’s play this smart. First thing: ask ‘em to repeat their message. Buy us a little time...”

Charles cut her off, straightening in the captain’s chair with practiced precision.

“I’ve got this, Cali.”

He turned to Stan. “Mr. Kolinski, open a channel to the scout.”

Stan nodded and tapped a few keys. “Channel open, Captain.”

Charles’s voice rang out across the vacuum, crisp and authoritative.

“This is Charles Hubert-Cutter, captain of the *Zarian*. This is a royal vessel of the Kingdom of Drinax. If you attack us, you will be committing an act of war against a sovereign state.”

There was a tense pause before the clipped voice of the *Midnight Fall* returned.

“*This is not negotiable. Stand down immediately or face the consequences.*”

Charles’s tone didn’t waver. “What guarantees do we have if we surrender? What terms are you offering? What promises? You’re barking orders like we’re under your command, but we are not part of your chain of command, and you have no jurisdiction here.”

Silence.

Then a *click*—the line went dead.

Stan frowned, eyes scanning the flickering console. “Comms just went dark, Captain... and the scout’s weapons are coming online.”

Cali let out a low whistle through her teeth, fingers tightening around the flight yoke.

“Well... that coulda gone better.”

She cast a sidelong glance toward Charles, her voice half teasing, half regretful.

"No disrespect, Cap'n, but if you'd let me continue with my suggestion, I'da told that stiff-necked son of a blaster 'bout our superior armament, how we blew their fancy drop ship to kingdom come in one shot, and we ain't afraid to do it again."

She flipped a few switches, warming up evasive thrusters.

"Coulda told him to be a hero, save his crew, save his marines... not start a fight he sure as hell can't win, and a war he sure as hell don't want."

She shook her head, muttering as she keyed in manoeuvring protocols.

"I was real hopin' we'd get outta this without a fight."

She cracked a grin, the hillbilly twang sharpening.

"But oh well... So much for diplomacy. Guess we'll do this the hard way."

*

Stan leaned back from his console, eyes locked on the scanner readouts, fingers dancing across the interface.

"Weapons fully online. Looks like a pulse laser and missile launcher. That's a recon loadout, but still enough to hurt us if we're not careful." He grunted. "Guess they made their choice. Let's make ours count."

Aris, standing at the engineering station, muttered a prayer under his breath and snapped a few switches.

"Power routing stable. I'll keep the reactor humming best I can, but if they tag us in the wrong place, I can't promise miracles."

He paused, then added softly, "Saint Jude... guide our hands, and forgive what must be done."

Anson, already strapped into the gunner's seat, cracked her knuckles.

"About time. I was gettin' twitchy." She smirked, eyes gleaming. "Let's see how they like a taste of the Zarian's teeth. This ain't no rock drill, we're packing real heat now."

Corey, perched beside Aris at the engineering console, looked pale but determined.

"I can monitor the coolant flows and... and check diagnostics. I've got this." He hesitated. "I think."

Charles stood again from the command seat, placing a steady hand on the console in front of him. The bridge of the *Zarian* was tense, lit by shifting amber lights from the scanner displays and the hum of systems warming to full power. He straightened his jacket, cleared his throat, and spoke in his best officer's tone.

"Listen up. This is important. What we do next matters, not just for us, but for something greater. The King expects... expects loyalty, courage. This ship is more than a relic, it's a symbol. We carry the legacy of Drinax. So... let's give them something to remember."

There was a pause. It wasn't quite rousing. A bit stilted. Even Charles knew it didn't land with the full flourish he'd intended. He nodded stiffly and sat down.

*

The *Zarian* had emerged into low orbit, Cali keeping it low and tight, terrain masking them for as long as possible. By the time the Imperial Scout spotted them and made the climb, she'd angled the ship into a wide arc, keeping distance between them.

The *Zarian* had size and thrust on its side, even with its systems degraded.

Medium range. A solid tactical lead.

Then came the twist, the Scout ship banked sharply, diving behind orbital debris, and used it to sling itself into a superior firing position.

Stan shouted.

"They're repositioning, fast! They've got the angle, Captain, they just flipped initiative!"

Cali's drawl, unusually tight, held a note of frustration.

"Damn, that was a smart move. That pilot knew what he was doin'. Thought I had the upper hand. Guess he's got a few tricks of his own."

She yanked the controls, adjusting thrust vectors to keep them moving.

"Hold onto somethin'— here we go!"

*

Charles tapped a few commands into the armrest console, his tone clipped and analytical as he leaned forward.

"Alright. By my estimation, their ship's got less thrust and no real armour to speak of. One or two solid hits from the barbette should do the job. If we widen the gap and keep our angle, we can stay outside their optimal fire zone and wear them down. No need to panic, just keep to the plan."

He sat back with an air of confidence, as if that settled it... but the glance Cali shot him suggested it wasn't quite as airtight a plan as he thought.

From the pilot seat, Cali's fingers danced over the controls with effortless grit.

"Thrustin' hard. Let's put some distance 'tween us and that bastard. Evadin' too, but I'll try and line up a shot!"

The *Zarian* surged forward, its thrusters roaring through the hull like rolling thunder. The stars twisted in the viewport as the ship began to open the gap between them and the smaller scout vessel.

The enemy was quicker than expected.

From the scout's turret, a pulse laser blazed to life, striking the *Zarian* hard.

The ship rocked as the blast slammed into the hull. Metal screamed. Lights flickered.

BOOM!

Warning sirens howled.

“We’ve got hull damage!” came Aris’s grim voice from the engineering console. “Structural integrity compromised! That was a serious hit!”

Anson snarled, slamming the weapon controls forward. The particle barbette charged, its glow casting eerie shadows across the bridge, then discharged with a crackling shriek of energy.

The shot veered wide.

“Ah hell, I fluffed it,” Anson muttered, teeth gritted. “Shoulda lined it better.”

Aris, growling under his breath, scanned power distribution.

“I’m gonna try pushin’ the drive past spec. Let’s squeeze every drop outta this beast...”

He hit the override.

A mechanical whine rose... sputtered... and faded.

“No good. Drive’s balky. She ain’t playin’ nice.”

Corey, squinting at the engineering readout, frowned.

“I’m not much use here, Mr. Papadakis. This system’s way past my certs. I’m better with sensors. Stan, I’m movin’ over to you!”

He scooted to the other console beside Stan, who was already working furiously.

“Need a lock,” Stan muttered. “Gotta give Anson a clear shot.”

With Corey assisting and tweaking the array, the display blinked green.

“Lock acquired!” Stan barked. “Target’s lit up like a fireworks show. Anson, next volley should land square.”

A satisfying *ping* echoed from the console.

Then a new signal pulsed in.

Stan’s eyes narrowed.

“They’ve launched a missile. I’ve got a track. Marking it now. Coming in fast.”

A single gleaming dot arced toward them through the void.

Cali, eyes glued to the forward screen, growled low.

“That was a lucky shot they got in, but it ain’t gonna stay lucky. We’re stretchin’ our lead... this ain’t over yet.”

*

Charles gripped the armrests of the captain’s chair, eyes narrowing at the data scrolling across his screen. He muttered a new strategy to the crew, voice calm but lacking conviction.

“Alright... let’s alter our angle of approach. We’ll curve the vector, keep the high ground in space. Should force them to overextend to keep us in their firing arc.”

His suggestion hung in the air, tactically sound in theory, but already unravelling as the scout held its course without hesitation, not falling for the feint.

Cali, focused and steady in the pilot seat, flicked switches with one hand while gripping the yoke with the other. Sweat glistened at her temple.

“Easin’ off the gas a touch,” she muttered, “Gonna save juice for some fancy dodgin’. Thrust three Gs, couple ticks to dodge, and a bit to keep Anson’s aim steady.”

The *Zarian* surged forward but not as hard as before, preserving precious energy for evasive manoeuvres. The scout, still burning flat-out at full thrust, lost more ground, but not enough.

A flash lit the cockpit. Another shot from the scout’s pulse laser sizzled through space. Cali juked hard, the inertial dampeners groaning, but it still clipped the hull. A shallow burn scored the port side. Nothing critical. But a warning shot that this dance wasn’t over.

“Whoo-ee, that one tickled.” Cali muttered through clenched teeth.

Back at the sensor console, Corey and Stan worked side by side. The missile they’d seen launched moments ago now screamed through the void, closing fast.

“Okay, kid. Hhit that band-switch, now!” Stan barked.

Corey nodded, then stabbed the correct control with a shout. “There! ECM pulse fired!”

The missile’s guidance warbled and spun wide as Stan followed through with a burst of interference. The two watched on screen as the warhead fizzled and vanished into the void.

“Great job, kid,” Cali called back, eyes never leaving her controls. “Label that button for next time!”

Corey gave a weak grin, fingers already scribbling a tag on the console with a stylus.

Cali called over, “That was one. These scout turrets usually carry six if they’re full up.”

Anson, grim-faced but calm, sighted through the targeting overlay, her fingers dancing over the gunner interface. The *Zarian*’s particle barbette hummed deep in the hull as she fired.

A bright bolt of energy surged forward - and hit.

“Direct strike!” she crowed. “That’ll leave a mark.”

The scout ship jerked off-course briefly as the hit registered. Stan’s readout blinked. Manoeuvre drive partially compromised. Their controls had taken a hit.

“Looks like we rattled their cage,” Aris said from his chair at the engineering console. He was still trying once again to overload it for more power. “C’mon, c’mon, give me somethin’, girl...”

But the numbers flickered red. Not this time.

Then Stan’s voice came in again, tight with urgency.

“Another missile launch. That’s number two inbound.”

The cockpit fell quiet for a breath, the crew bracing.

The scout wasn’t giving up. But now the *Zarian* was biting back.

*

Charles leaned forward again, frowning at the tactics display as the icons danced across the screen.

“If they’re trying to box us in, then we pivot here,” he muttered, tracing a theoretical arc. But again, it didn’t play out. The scout’s pilot didn’t take the bait. The angle was off. The move failed to shift the tactical balance.

Cali grunted, barely glancing back.

“Appreciate the insight, Cap’n,” she said, dry as the desert, “but I got my own rhythm goin’ here.”

She threw the *Zarian* into a hard banking turn, stars wheeling past the cockpit in a dizzying spiral.

“Thrust three Gs. Holdin’ two for evasion, she’s likely to throw more missiles, and I’m settin’ one on the line for Anson to thread the needle.”

The scout’s pulse laser spat another burst of sizzling light, but this time the shot went wild, an utter fumble. The beam lanced far overhead, vanishing into the stars.

“Whew!” Anson chuckled. “That pilot blinked!”

But the real threat was already streaking toward them.

Missile two.

Corey and Stan locked eyes, then launched into action.

“Same play, kid!” Stan snapped.

“Aye-aye!” Corey flicked the now-labelled switch with a flourish. “ECM away!”

The sensor console flared; noise, static, pulses, and the missile wobbled violently, veering off and disintegrating into a harmless flash.

“Boom,” Corey said with a grin. “We should name that button.”

Cali swept the *Zarian* into a high-speed vector toward the scout, nose dipping just enough to open the perfect line.

“There’s your shot, Anson,” she drawled. “Don’t make me come back there and do it myself.”

Anson didn’t need telling twice. The particle barbette roared, the whole ship shuddering as it fired.

A brilliant spear of energy punched across the void and struck true. Another powerful hit.

“Solid impact,” Stan called. “Scorched their outer hull.”

Charles seized the moment and opened the comms.

“This is Captain Charles Hubert-Cutter of the Zarian. Desist your attack on this diplomatic ship or we will be forced to destroy you.”

Only static answered him.

“They’re not talking,” he muttered. “They’ve gone cold.”

At engineering, Aris was back at the drive console, gritting his teeth.

“Come on, come on... just a little more juice.”

But again, the Zarian’s manoeuvre drive refused to give more. She was holding, but not pushing any harder.

Meanwhile, the scout wasn’t done. A new set of signals flared on the scanner.

“Missile three away,” Stan reported grimly. “They’re not giving up.”

*

The tension on the bridge was as thick as vacuum grease. Every console flickered under the strain, and the Zarian herself groaned like a waking beast.

Charles looked once more at the tactical readouts, but the lines were blurring in his mind; predictive arcs, angles, and manoeuvres that refused to coalesce. He sat back in the captain’s chair, sighing heavily.

“I... perhaps I’ve done enough with the tactics for now.”

Cali didn’t even look over her shoulder as she quipped:

“Good call, Cap’n. Maybe rustle up some drinks instead. I like mine stiff!”

He gave a dry chuckle, tipping an imaginary glass. “Coming right up.”

She took the controls once more, steadyng her breathing.

“Thrust three Gs. Keepin’ two for evasion, and we’ll try another line-up shot for Annie here.”

The Zarian surged forward again, angling gracefully through the black. The scout ship fired, another crackling pulse from its dorsal turret. But the shot went wide again, carving a glowing trail through the vacuum.

“He’s gettin’ jittery,” Anson muttered, eyes locked on her targeting scope.

But missile number three was already streaking in.

“Missile incoming!” Stan barked. “Number three—fast and angry!”

Corey pounded the console, voice tight.

“I’ve got it, I’ve got—wait, no, it’s—dammit—it’s THROUGH the ECM!”

The missile screamed past their jamming net, sensors locked, hot on their trail.

Anson snapped to point defence mode, tracking the incoming warhead.

“C’mon, c’mon...” She fired. Too early. The shot flared wide.

“Missile still active!” Stan shouted.

Cali gritted her teeth.

“Hold on, sugar... Mama Fox is gonna dance us outta this one—”

She yanked hard on the yoke, diving the Zarian into a tight vertical arc - and everything went dead!

The hum of the thrusters cut out. The ship lurched, weightless. Alarms flashed.

“Oh, hellfire,” Cali hissed. “She stalled! M-Drive’s out! She’s outta juice!”

“Engine failure!” Aris barked, eyes wide as warning lights blazed across his console. His fingers flew over the controls in a frantic attempt to restart the M-Drive.

The ship shuddered, dead in space.

The missile screamed in, then tore past the Zarian’s nose, just a breath away from annihilation, vanishing into the blackness.

Cali blinked, then let out a ragged laugh. “Well, reckon stallin’ ain’t how I drew it up, but hey, if it dodges a missile, I’m callin’ it tactical genius.”

Aris let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding and made the sign of the cross. “Thank Saint Jude...” he muttered. “Patron of lost causes indeed.”

He worked feverishly at the engineering panel, fingers flying. But the drive refused to spark back to life.

“Still offline,” he growled. “It’s dead weight till I can get more outta her.”

Back at the sensors, the scout was trying again to shake their targeting lock. Code flashed across the screen, electronic warfare, signal spoofing.

But Corey and Stan were ready. The young tech’s hands flew confidently now, boosted by adrenaline.

“Not today, buddy,” Corey smirked. “We’ve still got you.”

Lock maintained.

Then the alarm sounded again.

“Another missile launch!” Stan called. “Missile four is inbound!”

Cali gripped the dead controls.

“This is gonna get bumpy, y’all. Let’s hope the old girl’s got one more trick up her sleeve...”

*

The *Zarian* hung motionless in the black, a silver silhouette against the stars.. No thrust. No manoeuvres. No attack vector. Just a wounded beast in the dark.

Charles leaned forward, squinting at the tactical readout again, trying to make sense of the scout's flight pattern.

"If they were going to flank... no, that doesn't track... unless they're... wait, no."
He sighed and shook his head. "Nothing useful to contribute, I'm afraid."

Cali didn't say a word. Her eyes were locked on the darkened controls. Her fingers danced across switches and toggles, coaxing the system back to life.

"C'mon, baby. I know I pushed ya hard. Give Mama a little spark..."

She flicked the startup routine. The screens blinked. For a moment, nothing...

Then the console flared to life with a chirping tone.

"Yes! She's awake! But ain't goin' nowhere just yet."

The drive was alive again, but there was no power to move this round. They were still sitting ducks.

The scout fired again, its pulse laser searing through the void. But luck was still with them. The beam missed wildly, vanishing into space.

Stan didn't even flinch.

"That guy needs to recalibrate his targeting array."

"Missile four, closing fast!" Corey snapped.

"Alright, kid, this one's yours..." Stan barked.

Corey tapped in the countermeasures, quick and clean.

"ECM engaged. Let's light it up."

The missile swerved, and detonated harmlessly a klick off their port side.

"Boom! Another one down!" Corey whooped.

Stan gave him a quick nod.

"You're earning your seat, kid."

Cali let out a sharp whistle.

"You two are a dream team back there. I'll knit y'all matching jackets if we live through this!"

The ship steadied again. No more rattling panels, no warning alarms. Anson took her shot, cool and steady. The *Zarian*'s particle barbette fired with a low, ominous hum.

"Target in sight. Firing."

The blast missed, but only just. It lit up the scout's flank, close enough to make them nervous.

Back at the engineering console, Aris rolled his sleeves up, pulled out his lucky coin, diverted a few relays from the auxiliary systems.

“C’mon now, girl. Give me more than just a spark...”

The console flickered. Power surged.

“We’ve got it!” he called. “Seven Gs, if we want it!”

Cali blinked at her display as the new numbers popped up.

“Well slap my knee and call me lucky! That reboot gave me some *real juice!*”

The scout tried again to break the Zarian’s sensor lock, but again, Stan and Corey held it fast.

Then the sensors flared again.

“Another missile launch!” Stan called. “Missile five incoming!”

Cali cracked her knuckles over the now-lively flight controls.

“Alright darlin’, now it’s our turn. Let’s move!”

*

The Zarian surged forward like a phoenix reborn, its thrusters blazing blue across the void. The sudden acceleration pressed everyone into their seats, the ship slicing through the darkness like it was born for war.

“Now this is flyin’, sugar!” Cali whooped, a gleam in her eye. “That reboot gave this old bird new wings!”

She slammed the throttle forward, pushing for max thrust.

The scout let loose another shot with its pulse laser, but it was rushed, off-angle, and wide of the mark. The beam zipped past them, harmless.

“Missed again!” Anson called, grinning. “Someone’s gettin’ twitchy.”

But another missile was streaking toward them, glowing hot in the dark.

“Missile incoming!” Stan barked.

Corey’s hands hovered, twitching slightly over the console.

“So much pressure...”

He hit the keys, pulse racing. The ECM fired up. The missile spun, veered, and detonated mid-space, harmless.

“Yes! Boom!” Corey cried out. “Wait...No boom! That’s the point!”

“You keep this up, I’m makin’ you a real engineer, kid!” Stan laughed.

With the scout slightly off-line, Cali tried to bank the Zarian for a tighter angle, hoping to give Anson a clear shot.

But the sudden adjustment was too sharp, too quick. The reticles skewed, targeting data flickered.

“Sorry, girl,” Cali muttered. “Thought I had that lined up better.”

Anson gritted her teeth, fired, —but the blast veered wide, missing by a breath.

“Dammit. Nearly had ‘em.”

Aris at the engineering console kept a close eye on the drive output. The boost was fading.

“Stabilising power. Back to standard thrust,” he reported, voice steady but tired.

Stan peered at his sensor readout and nodded grimly.

“Missile six incoming. That’s the last one, unless they’ve got reloads.”

The scout tried again, futilely, to shake the Zarian’s lock.

“Still got ‘em tagged,” Stan said. “They can’t hide.”

Cali’s hands hovered on the controls, the fire in her eyes matching the gleam of starlight on her console.

“Alright y’all, we’re still breathin’, still flyin’... now let’s end this dance with a bang.”

*

The bridge of the *Zarian* was alive with tension. Lights flashing, alarms chiming, the hum of systems at the edge of their limits.

Captain Charles sat stiffly in the command chair, eyes scanning the tactical display. But after a moment, he exhaled and leaned back.

“You’ve all got your roles. You know what to do. Carry on.”

“We’ll ease off just a tick,” Cali said, adjusting the settings. “Thrust at three, keepin’ two for wiggin’, one to line up that big ol’ gun. Let’s keep this dance goin’.”

But the scout wasn’t slouchin’. Its pulse laser flared, bright and sudden. Cali yanked hard on the stick, but the beam clipped the *Zarian*.

A jolt rocked the ship. Sparks flew from Stan’s console—screens flickering wildly.

“Damn!” Stan hissed, shielding his eyes.

“Sensors took a hit!” Corey shouted, as the sensor array started sparking.

Then another alarm.

“Missile incoming!” Stan barked.

Corey stared in horror at the fire flickering around his console.

“Look! The controls are on fire!”

“Hell boy, *you’re* on fire too!” Cali hollered with a grin. “Now keep them fingers tappin’!”

Corey hit the ECM—no good. The missile flew through like a guided demon.

“Anson, it’s all you!” Charles called.

Anson twisted her turret. The particle barbette hissed to life, but the shot went wide.

“Damn, missed it!”

Cali narrowed her eyes, nose wrinkling.

“Alright then. Hold on to your britches, I got this.”

She threw the *Zarian* into a brutal roll. The hull screamed under the strain. The missile streaked past, just missing the starboard fin.

“Phew!” Corey gasped. “That was—”

“—Too close,” Cali finished. “Don’t need a shave that close, sugar.”

Aris, brow furrowed, was already working on the fried sensors.

“Power rerouted, burned modules bypassed... and—there.” He slammed his palm to confirm.
“Sensors are back online!”

“Nice work, preacher,” Stan said with a nod.

He checked the feeds.

“But we’ve got a problem. They finally broke through. Scout’s got a full weapon lock on us.”

“Well, that ain’t neighborly,” Cali muttered.

Then came the final blow - another missile warning.

As the warning klaxon blared again and the red indicator flared on the sensor display, Stan’s eyes went wide.

“Seven? That’s seven! Those bastards brought extras. Ain’t standard issue. Someone’s breakin’ protocol.”

He turned toward Charles, a bitter grin forming beneath the sweat on his brow.

“Guess they didn’t come here just to talk, huh?”

Charles narrowed his eyes, leaning forward slightly in the command chair, voice level but taut with tension.

“Clearly they’ve got spares... and they’re reloading. This just got harder.” He tapped the armrest, gaze steady on the tactical readout. “No matter. We don’t need more firepower - we just need to fly smarter.”

He glanced around the bridge.

“Everyone - hold fast. Let’s show them how this crew handles pressure.”

*

On the flickering bridge of the *Zarian*, smoke curled from the recently-singed sensor console, but everyone was still in place. The ship vibrated with effort as Cali pushed it hard again.

Charles sat rigid in the captain’s chair, silent now, eyes scanning the tactical readouts with a clenched jaw. The bridge felt tense, humming with heat, fire suppression foam still hissing quietly from vents.

The *Midnight Fall*'s laser turret fired, now aided by its new sensor lock. It struck true. The ship jolted slightly as armour absorbed the worst of it, but several pulses blasted through, cutting into the hull and causing warning lights to blink red.

"We took a hit," Aris reported grimly. "More hull damage. We're holding together for now but we can't keep taking this beating."

The next klaxon sounded - another missile incoming.

Corey wiped sweat from his brow, eyes darting as he worked the ECM controls with Stan looming beside him.

"Okay! Okay! The fire's out at least!"

He punched the command, but the missile streaked through untouched.

"Damn thing's not listening!" Stan barked.

Anson spun her turret, tracking the streaking missile. She fired - miss.

Cali growled.

"Hold onto somethin'!"

She yanked the Zarian into an evasive roll, trying to shake the lock. But this time, it was too late. The missile slammed into the port side with a thunderous *WHUMP* that rattled the entire bridge.

"Direct hit!" Aris shouted over the din. "Fuel tanks breached! Minor leak"

Lights shifted from orange to red on Aris' console. A long line of pressure readings began to drop.

Charles leaned forward again, eyes fixed on the flickering fuel gauge.

"We've sprung a leak, but we're not bleeding out yet. Stay sharp, keep the pressure on. We just need to reach the edge. They'll blink before we do."

"Stan scowled at the sensor display.

"Scout's still got that lock. Tried to break it, but no dice."

Then another blip. Another missile.

"Missile number eight!" Stan snapped. "This is gettin' ridiculous."

"What, they bringin' the whole damn ammo locker?" Cali hissed. "Fine. Let's show 'em what we think of their generosity."

The Zarian groaned under the strain, but it was still flying. Barely.

*

The *Zarian* shuddered, her hull streaked with scorch marks, warning lights blazing like a festival gone wrong. On the bridge, the air was thick with smoke, stress, and static.

Charles sat in the captain's chair, back ramrod straight, fists clenched on the armrests. He watched the scout ship *Midnight Fall* with a grim set to his jaw, the flicker of red across his console reflected in his eyes. He said nothing now. The silence said enough.

Cali's fingers flew over the control surfaces, her face streaked with grime, one eye squinting against the sparks raining from a vent above.

"Alright baby," she hissed. "Don't you quit on me now."

She poured on the acceleration, the engines howling as she tried to maintain distance. Her instincts sharp despite the fatigue and damage. Always looking for an opportunity to line up the angle for Anson's shot.

The *Midnight Fall* struck first, pulse laser lancing across space, and again, it found its mark. The ship shuddered as another blast tore through the hull. Charles braced himself.

"Hull integrity dropping. Another breach in the fuel tanks!" Aris barked. "Estimate five tons per hour, we're leaking like a stuck pig!"

Corey stared at the warning displays, then at the missile alert now screaming across the board.

"Last time that thing hit... that was probably my fault," he admitted, voice small.

"Then don't miss this time, boy," Stan growled, eyes locked on the feed.

Corey slammed the ECM controls, perfect response, but Stan flinched, fingers missing the sequence. The missile pierced the electronic veil and came screaming through.

Charles' voice was calm but firm.

"Anson, hold fire on the missile. Aim for the scout. If we keep playing catch, we'll be torn apart. We fight back."

"Copy that," Anson muttered, swinging the particle barbette to bear.

The missile hit.

A deafening crunch. A violent lurch.

"Direct impact! Manoeuvre drive's damaged!" Aris yelled. "Control degradation on all pilot controls!"

Cali felt it immediately, her grip slipping as the ship pitched hard to port.

"She's gettin' slippery!" she hollered. "Feels like I'm flyin' on ice with one boot nailed down!"

But she held steady. Just enough.

And then Anson fired.

The particle barbette spat its fury. A blazing bolt of pure energy carved through space and slammed into the scout with enough force to make the stars blink.

"Direct hit!" Stan whooped. "Armor took a beating, down a layer!"

Cali wrestled with the controls, the stick jerking against her grip.

“Aris!” she barked, urgency crackling in her tone. “I’m flyin’ blind here. Get me my damn steering back!”

No reply. Just the sound of Aris muttering under his breath and slamming a fist down onto the console. A sharp *clang*, a wrench twist, then a low rumble vibrated through the deck.

“Try it now!” he called.

Cali gave the stick a cautious tug. The Zarian responded, smooth, steady, back in her hands.

“Oh hell yeah,” she grinned. “Mama’s got her wings back! Time to show ‘em how Foxes fly.”

The relief was palpable.

But then... another setback.

The sensor lock on the scout blinked out.

“Damn it!” Stan cursed. “They broke our lock!”

“We’ve lost targeting resolution,” Corey confirmed. “We’ll have to start over.”

“That’ll cost us,” Charles muttered, gripping the arms of his chair.

And then...

“Missile launch detected,” Stan said, cold and clear. “Number nine.”

The bridge was silent for a moment.

Cali leaned forward, eyes narrow, fingers dancing over the console like it was a fiddle in a backwater bar fight.

“They can try all they like,” she growled through a crooked grin, “but you don’t hunt this Fox... not unless you’re fixin’ to get bit.”

*

“Thrust to full, four Gs and nothin’ held back!” Cali barked, her voice half-snarl, half-laugh. “I’m puttin’ distance between me and that scout like it’s an unwelcome uncle breathin’ down my neck at a family reunion. Just enough left to side step if I gotta. Annie, sugar, I ain’t lining up squat this time, you’re flyin’ solo!”

Anson gave a tight nod, eyes cold and calm behind the firelight gleam of the weapons console. Her fingers danced across the controls with eerie precision. “Finally,” she muttered, “a steady platform and nothin’ to put me off.”

Charles sat in his chair like a man carved from stone, eyes locked on the view ahead, lips pressed in a tight line. Fuel leaking. Hull battered. Time slipping.

The scout ship didn’t flinch.

Its pulse laser spat fire across the void, a hair’s breadth from the Zarian’s flank, flashing past the bridge windows like lightning. The near-miss rattled the hull, but the Harrier held true.

Then the missile nine screamed through space, a fiery predator on a direct path.

Corey's voice cracked over the comms, "It's becoming impossible, Mr. Kolinski!"

Stan didn't reply, just growled low and hit the override. The missile flared, then vanished in a burst of white static, shattered by the ECMs.

The scout wasn't done. It still had its weapon lock.

But neither was Anson.

She exhaled once, slow and steady, then tapped the trigger.

The particle barbette roared. A lance of white-hot death surged through the black.

The scout ship caught it dead center.

For a moment, nothing.

Then—

BOOM!

The explosion bloomed like a second sun. A brilliant cascade of plasma and fractured hull plates, spiraling outward in molten shards. The scout disintegrated in silence, blooming into a firework of war in the cold dark. One of its wings spun away like a flaming shuriken. The cockpit ruptured, venting gas and wreckage as the ship twisted in upon itself and vanished into the black.

Cali released the flight controls, threw herself back in her seat, and whooped as she clapped her hands triumphantly overhead.

"Yeehaw! Good shootin', gurl! That's how we *do* it in the backwoods, sugar! I told y'all, they might think they're the hunters... but you don't hunt this Fox."

On the bridge of the Zarian, a moment of calm. No one moved.

Just the hum of surviving systems... and the whine of the fusion drive cooling down.

*

Smoke still drifted from a scorched panel behind Corey. Warning lights flickered like they were tired from the fight. For just a heartbeat, no one moved.

Anson leaned back in her gunnery seat, breathing hard, her hands still wrapped tight around the controls. The glow of the particle barbette's discharge still shimmered in her eyes. She turned toward Cali, a rare grin breaking across her usually grim face.

"Told you I ain't no good with a shotgun. But give me a ship-killer, and I'll paint the stars with their regrets."

She gave a sharp nod toward the console, the last sensor blip now a slowly expanding cloud of debris.

"We ain't dead. That's a win in my book."

Charles straightened in the captain's chair, brushing ash from his lapel like it offended him. "We warned them not to attack." His tone was even, but the tightness in his jaw told another story.

Cali glanced at the readouts, wincing. "I may have scratched the paintwork a little."

Corey, still blinking at the empty scanner feed, whispered, "We're alive."

"Praise be," Aris breathed, crossing himself with trembling fingers.

Stan leaned back in his seat, exhaling slowly as the last sparks of the scout's destruction flickered out on the display. His voice was calm, but laced with satisfaction.

"Well... looks like they picked the wrong crew to chase today."

Cali popped open her jacket and pulled out the bottle she'd taken from Abe's body back at the outpost, a rich amber-gold whisky. She thumbed out the cork with a quiet *pop* and took a long, slow swig.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and offered the bottle to Charles.

"We've earned this. Every damn drop."

Aris reached eagerly. "Yes YES! I've been waiting for this. St. Jude always said the Lord helps those who help themselves."

Charles took the bottle from Aris with both hands, cradling it with a kind of reverence. He turned it slowly in his fingers, reading the faded label, feeling the weight of memory pressed into the glass.

"Abe found this," he said quietly. His voice carried over the bridge, drawing every eye. "Said it should be used to toast our victory... and, if the time came, to toast it properly."

He straightened, exhaustion forgotten for a moment, and raised the bottle high.

"To victory," Charles said, voice strong and clear. "And to absent friends."

The crew raised their hands, bowed their heads, some whispering names under their breath.

Charles took a measured swig, the burn sharp, alive, *real*, then passed the bottle on.

Around the bridge, the bottle continued its slow, sacred journey.

And somewhere beyond the stars, the ghosts of Paddy and Zarkov toasted them back.

"Memories reclaimed. Stories remembered. As long as they were sung, they'd never truly be gone."

Outside the hull, the broken wreckage of the enemy scout ship tumbled silently into the dark.

Inside, they drank to life, to loss, and to the hard-won future waiting beyond the stars.

The bridge lights dimmed to a soft amber glow, and the Zarian's voice returned in its ever-calm, crystalline tone:

"Damage Report: Hull integrity at 35%. Structural integrity compromised. Critical impact on hull. Severe breaches in fuel containment. Ongoing leak—5 tons per hour."

Other systems remain impaired: Ventral missile turret inoperable. Hull holography at partial function. Countermeasure suite damaged. Drive output unstable.

Recommendation: Seek drydock repairs immediately.”

There was a pause. Then Aris looked up and said with a grin:

“Well, Zarian, you might be held together by hope, duct tape, and prayer... but you’re still flying.”



CHAPTER 13 – RETURN OF THE ZARIAN

The Perfect Stranger is no more. The Zarian sails once again.

Charles brought the crew back to attention, his voice calm but commanding.

“We’re not out of it yet. We still need to make jump.”

The bridge was still bathed in the soft glow of emergency lighting. Panels sparked here and there, and the acrid tang of burnt circuitry lingered in the air. But the tension had eased. The battle was behind them - for now.

Cali cracked her neck and flexed her hands over the pilot controls, “Well now,” she muttered, “reckon I’ll take a smooth cruise over a damn firefight any day.” She coaxed the ship forward, slipping the Zarian into a wide arc away from the wreckage of the scout. No more evasive manoeuvres, just the rhythmic thrum of her fingers dancing across the console.

The battered Harrier glided with surprising grace through orbit, peeling away from Exocet’s gravity well. The planet grew smaller behind them, just another bruised marble in the void.

Charles stood by his console, fingers dancing over the controls as the jump vectors locked into place. “Course plotted. Jump coordinates confirmed. Double checking....”

He turned to face the others “We’re going to Drinax.”

He allowed himself a moment, a breath, pride, purpose, maybe even hope. And then “The Zarian returns.”

“Power to jump drive,” Aris confirmed, flicking a bank of switches and muttering a quiet prayer. The faint vibration of the manoeuvre drive ebbed away as systems transferred. A deeper hum replaced it, the unmistakable song of the jump core spinning up.

“Coordinates set,” Charles said.

“Field stable,” Stan added from the sensor console.

“Standby to jump,” Cali drawled, her voice softer now, reverent. “We’re leavin’ ghosts behind.”

Aris pressed the final command. With a low tremor and a rising crescendo, space itself folded.

The stars stretched into streaks.

Then, with a silent shudder, the Zarian slipped into jump-space.

Behind them, Exocet faded into memory.

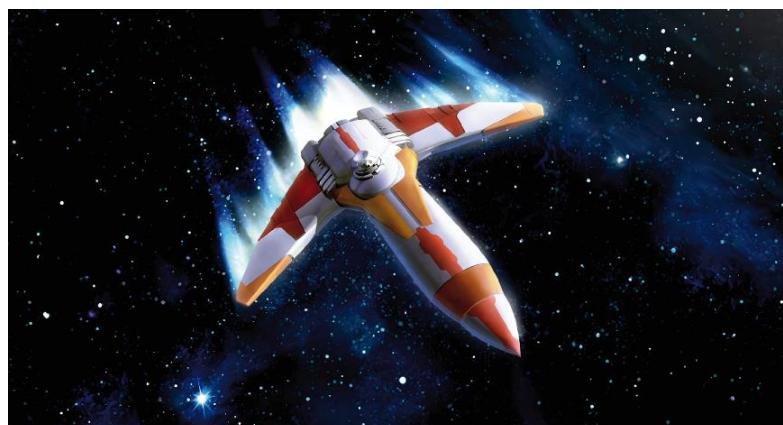
Ahead...

A broken kingdom.

A chance at something greater.

And a name reborn:

The Zarian.



*

The jump drive hummed steadily now, a low, soothing pulse that filled the bridge with its soft, ever-present rhythm. The stars were gone, replaced by the swirling folds of jump-space, a dreamlike distortion where distance and time blurred into irrelevance.

For the first time in days, maybe weeks, the crew of the *Zarian* could breathe.

They sat in the glow of the consoles, bruised, bloodied, and burnt, but alive. Around them, the ship bore its own scars. Scorched hull plates, leaking fuel tanks, groaning systems barely held together by Aris's will and a few strips of emergency sealant. But it had survived. *They* had survived.

Charles stood at the command console; hands clasped behind his back. "The King of Drinax made a promise," he said quietly. "Recover the ship, and he'd make us rich men and women. Said he'd give us employment, resources, a future."

Aris snorted. "If he's still alive."

Charles nodded. "Quite."

Cali leaned back in the pilot's chair, boots propped up. "He knew what he was doin', sendin' us the way he did. Low berth, no noise, no questions. Had to be spies in his own court. Maybe even someone on that damn scout was on the payroll."

"We were drugged," Stan said. "Not just frozen. Wiped clean. The amnesia, the lost memories, that wasn't just cryo sleep."

"And yet," Corey piped up from the sensor console, "somehow, we still found her."

They all looked around the bridge of the *Zarian*.

Pride of the Drinax fleet. Buried for two centuries. Now theirs.

They didn't know who had drugged them. Or why. That mystery lingered, like a spectre in the shadows of their half-recovered pasts.

But it could wait.

For now, they had a destination.

Home.

Back to the floating palace in the skies of Drinax. To patch their wounds, mend their ship, and claim what was promised.

The riches.

The power.

The future.

This was not the end.

This was just the beginning.



CHAPTER 14 – REFLECTIONS

The crew of the Zarian had done all they could.

Hull damage was patched, fuel reserves counted, and the jump plotted—an invisible line through the stars aimed straight at Drinax. They'd survived the outpost, the black-ops marines, the beasts, the betrayal, and a space battle that would've turned most crews into drifting wreckage. But now, with the hum of the jump drive pulsing softly through the ship's bones, they could finally rest.

There was no food on aboard. No rations. No luxuries. Just a sleek ghost of a warship running on hope and ancient systems.

Charles and Cali had taken wounds, deep ones, and though they'd both pushed through the pain with typical grit, the medics among them knew better. Low berth was the only way to preserve what strength they had left.

But even the uninjured made the same choice. It wasn't about comfort. It was about survival.

Stan's berth was set to wake first, programmed to revive him a few hours before the others. He had the skill, and more importantly, the steady hands and calm nerves to make sure things went smoothly.

The crew took their places. One by one they climbed into the pods. Each sealed with a hiss, a click, and a gentle glow.

There was an edge of unease. The last time they'd entered cold sleep, they'd woken to shattered memories, fractured identities, and chaos. Would it happen again?

But Zarian's voice, calm and unwavering, soothed their fears.

"All systems nominal. You are safe. Sleep well."

It was mechanical, sure, but oddly comforting. A steel lullaby from a ship that had become their home.

One by one, eyes closed. Breath slowed.

And as they drifted away into frozen silence, they each dreamed—

Of what was lost,

Of what had been found,

Of what still lay ahead.

*

Drawn by desperation and the promise of fortune, they had gathered at the royal court of King Tarn Velas of Drinax.

Each had their reasons; credits running low, reputations hanging by threads, hearts filled with wanderlust or vengeance. The King made them an offer too good to ignore; locate a lost ship, a relic of Drinax's golden age. A Harrier-class vessel, hidden on the remote world of Exocet for centuries. Find it, and it was theirs, along with wealth, purpose, and a place in something greater.

But there were dangers. Spies, rivals, saboteurs. The mission had to be secret. Quiet. So, they travelled like ghosts, frozen in low berth, ferried in a rust-stained small-hauler that would raise no suspicion.

Their last shared memory?

A cold tube closing. The hiss of gas. Darkness.

Then...

Pain. Fire. Screams. A crash.

And nothing was ever the same again.

Now, the mission was complete. The *Zarian* was theirs. The King's promise awaited.

But first, sleep. Real sleep. Dreamless - or not.

Inside their cryo-chambers, each dreamt alone.

Yet somehow... together.

*

Charles – Reflections in Cryosleep

As Charles drifted into cold sleep, the silence of stasis did little to silence his mind.

In the suspended stillness, thoughts unspooled like cigarette smoke in a forgotten bar, curling through memory and meaning.

He had always been good at wearing masks.

The silver tongue, the easy charm, the aristocratic posture that let him glide through embassies and backroom meetings like a practiced ghost. Journalism had been a lark, diplomacy a stepping stone, intelligence a game. But it had all felt so far removed from consequence - until now.

He had walked into the fire this time.

And somehow... led others out of it.

Drinax. The name sounded strange to him now.

Not just a ruined planet or the stuff of ancient spacer folklore - Drinax was *his*. He was Baron Charles Huebert-Cutter of the royal family, born in the Floating Palace, son of privilege and heir to a forgotten glory.

He remembered the ballroom. The scent of jasmine. His tutor's lectures.

Then... the exile. The journey. The shadows he walked through to forget it all.

He had spent a lifetime running from who he was.

Now, he was wearing the crown again - figuratively at least.

Captain of the *Zarian*, flagship of a fallen kingdom.

And maybe, just maybe... he was ready to stop running.

The past few days surged through his mind like a storm:

The crash.

Waking with no memories.

The bugs.

Twisted, chittering nightmares in the dark. That first kill with a bow. Then the shotgun. The endless swarm.

The betrayal.

Sayelle. Hambley. Trusted faces turned sour. He still saw Hambley's head explode in a mist of red, Zarkov's blood slick on his hands.

Zarkov. A soldier. A leader. A sacrifice.

Dying not for glory or orders - but for *him*. The old Brigadier's final shot, blasting Hambley from this world. Charles would carry that memory forever.

But more than the ghosts, it was the living who stayed with him.

Cali Fox. Fierce, clever, maddening. She had his back even when they were arguing.

Especially then.

Aris. Rough-edged, redemption-seeking, with a preacher's fire and a rogue's grin.

Stan. Steady. Practical. Smarter than he let on.

Anson. Silent steel. When the world burned, she stood firm.

Corey. The kid. Still innocent, somehow. Still hopeful.

They weren't soldiers. They weren't trained.

They were *better*. They were *his* crew.

The *Zarian*.

A royal vessel. Regal. Wounded. Defiant. Like all of them.

He had felt it the moment he took the captain's chair - not entitlement, but *duty*. The kind that digs into your bones.

That last battle...

His orders, their actions, that perfect final shot. He would remember that detonation, *the flash, the silence, the shaking of the deck*, until his dying day.

He had played diplomat. Spy. Courier.

Now, he was a commander.

There were low points.

Watching friends bleed. Wounds he couldn't mend.

Realising someone had stolen their memories, and left them broken on that cursed world.

And the highs.

Surviving!

Realising his skill with bow and shotgun.

Cali's ridiculous drawl.

Stan's dry wit.

The moment the *Zarian* lifted off, like a phoenix breaking free from ash.

And now, what did the future hold?

He didn't know.

But for the first time in years... he felt ready.

Drinax would rise.

And Charles Huebert-Cutter, Baron, Captain, Survivor, would be there to see it.

*

Stan – Reflections in Cryosleep

Stan Kolinski drifted off last. The low berth hissed gently around him as the freezing agent crept into his veins, and the light around the edges of his vision dimmed. His thoughts, always fast, always running, slowed to a heavy crawl... and turned inward.

How did his background bring him here?

He'd always been a survivor. Years as a thief, slipping through shadows and systems alike. He knew how to talk his way out of cuffs and into vaults. There were partners in crime, contacts spread across sectors... even a lover once. He didn't let himself dwell on her too long. That kind of memory was dangerous. Soft. Vulnerable.

Then came the scouts. An unexpected turn. Not because he went straight, he didn't, but because the job gave him structure. Purpose. That's where he met Cali. Back then, she was the firebrand pilot, full of sass and raw instinct. She flew like she had devils behind her and angels ahead. They made a good team. Until it all came crashing down.

The crime. The arrest. The term behind bars.

That's where he met Aris; Talkative. Preachy. Clever. They had nothing in common and somehow everything. Inmates. Dreamers. Survivors. They kept each other sane. Or maybe just distracted.

Now? They'd all woken on Exocet, drugged, memory-wiped, and dumped in a hellhole crawling with things that shouldn't exist. And Stan? He'd done what he always did.

Adapted.

The highlights?

The Sensor Lock: Working alongside Corey, jamming missiles and keeping the Zarian one step ahead of destruction. Without them, the ship would've been scrap.

Finding the Zarian: He still remembered that surreal moment, staring down at the sleek shape on the mountain floor, realising it was real. He'd found it.

The Crew: For all his instincts to run solo, Stan had grown to trust them. Charles, stubborn and sharp. Cali, fierce and familiar. Aris, flawed but faithful. Even Anson and Corey... they mattered now.

Low points?

Sayelle's betrayal. He hadn't seen it coming. And it hit harder than he'd expected.

The helplessness during the first attacks. No gear, no plan, just blood and bugs and fear.

Remembering the mistakes. The people he'd left behind. The crimes that caught up. The girl whose name he still wouldn't say.

And now, what does the future hold?

The stars. The *Zarian*. A royal damn ship, and Stan Kolinski was sitting on the bridge like he belonged there. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he still didn't know who he was without the cons and the lies.

But maybe, just maybe, this was a fresh run. A new hustle. Not for credits, not for the next quick escape.

For legacy.

For redemption.

And as cryosleep took him fully, Stan's last thought was this:

Let's see if a thief can become something more.

*

Aris – Reflections in Cryosleep

As the hiss of the low berth sealed around him and the cold hum of cryosleep set in, Aris let the tension ebb from his bones. For the first time in days, he wasn't running, wasn't reacting. In the suspended stillness of space and sedation, his thoughts turned inward - conflicted, searching, and strangely at peace.

How did his background bring him here?

Son of a preacher man. That was where it all began.

Aris remembered the worn wooden pews, the scent of incense, the way his father's voice thundered through the halls with holy conviction. He remembered Sundays filled with hymns and confessions. And he remembered how he fell.

He'd always been a talker, a charmer. It made him popular. It made him dangerous. There was rebellion in his blood, a craving for more than sermons and sacrifice. So he walked the crooked path. Drugs. Deals. A righteous man's son peddling sin. That old rogue, Hawk, dragged him deep. And Aris followed willingly.

University? A blur. He'd failed that too. Not because he lacked the brains, but because his nights were louder than his books. When the law caught up, prison became his penance. But even there, grace found him. A wry smile, a rough handshake - *Stan*. The two of them, so different and yet cut from the same cloth. They'd made a pact: when they got out, they'd start again.

So when the job to Exocet came along, backed by a king's promise? Aris took it. A clean slate, one last chance. Maybe even salvation.

Aris recalled his highlights of the past few days

The Vision. Saint Jude himself, patron of lost causes, had shown him a path. A true, clear sign. After years of murky morality and lies, the message had been simple: *Protect. Guide. Believe.*

Corey's trust. The boy had latched onto him like a lifeline. Not just blind faith, but belief in the man Aris wanted to be. That trust was more precious than credits or crowns.

The Engineering Console. Under fire, smoke in his eyes, metal groaning and systems failing, Aris had made it work. He wasn't just surviving. He was *saving* lives.

But of course the highs come with lows

Sayelle's betrayal. He hadn't seen it coming. One moment she was a scared girl in need of comfort, the next she was pointing a gun at him. Her death haunted him - not because she died, but because he might have saved her.

The feeling of powerlessness. When the bugs came, when Zarkov died, when Paddy fell... there were moments Aris could only watch. Pray. React too late.

The fear. Not of death, but of backsliding. Of falling into the man he used to be. One wrong step, and he'd be Hawk's lackey all over again.

And now, what does the future hold?

Hope. Real, uncut, solid hope.

The *Zarian* was more than a ship. It was a symbol. A holy relic. A second chance. Aris wasn't sure what kind of future they were flying toward, but it was theirs to shape.

He thought of Corey, of Stan. Of Charles, who carried a crown he hadn't asked for. Of Cali, fierce and defiant, like the Old Testament prophets with a shotgun.

They'd survived the fire together. And now?

They had a kingdom to answer to.

As his consciousness faded, Aris whispered into the void, lips barely moving:

"I'm not that man anymore. Saint Jude... if you're still watching ...I am your man...."

*

Corey – Reflections in Cryosleep

The cold seeped into Corey's limbs as the low berth hissed shut, wrapping him in its sterile embrace. His breath caught for a second. Was it fear? Or just memory? Corey closed his eyes and let the stillness take him. And in that quiet, a whisper of thought floated to the surface:

"I shouldn't be here. I should've died."

He remembered Proving Site 9.

He remembered the soft hum of the fusion battery, the smell of ozone and old circuits, the way Katriona would ruffle his hair when he got the diagnostics right. He was just the junior tech. Not a soldier. Not a hero. But the crew, *his family*, had trusted him. Hambley, Abe, Katriona. They were all he had.

Now? They were all dead.

Some torn apart by the bugs.

Some... traitors. Sayelle. Hambley. That hurt worst of all. He'd looked up to them.

He'd been so scared. He'd screamed, run, frozen. But somehow, *he'd lived*.

And now he was aboard a royal warship, flying with pirates and princes. He was Corey. Just Corey. And they hadn't left him behind.

Highlights of the past few days

Aris. Corey clung to him like a lifeline. He didn't preach like the old priests back home. He *listened*. Treated Corey like he mattered. Like someone worth saving.

The sensor array. When Stan had called him over, given him a job to do - *really do* - he'd felt like part of the crew. Every missile jammed; every lock broken... that was him. He had *skills*.

The moment the Zarian took flight. Standing on the bridge, surrounded by the others, watching the world fall away beneath them. He wasn't just surviving anymore. He was *moving forward*.

Low points.

Sayelle. He'd liked her. Trusted her. She'd given him a smile once when he fixed the water filter. And then she tried to kill them. Kill *Aris*.

The bug attacks. Screaming. Blood. Paddy's death. Abe's. Katriona. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw them falling again.

The moment the comms hut fell. That was the end of Proving Site 9. His home. Gone.

What does the future hold?

He didn't know.

But for once, that didn't scare him.

He had a place now. A console. A job. People who looked at him and didn't see a frightened kid. They saw *Corey*, crew of the Zarian.

Maybe he'd get better with the sensor systems. Maybe Aris would keep teaching him. Maybe Stan would teach him how to hotwire a door or two. Maybe Charles would show him how to speak like someone who belonged in a throne room.

And maybe... just maybe... they'd stick together.

Family doesn't always mean blood. Sometimes it means the ones who fought beside you when everything else was burning down.

As the cold took him, Corey didn't fight it. He smiled, just a little.

"See you soon, guys."

*

Anson – Reflections in Cryosleep

The low berth hissed shut, sealing Anson away from the world once more.

The last time she'd stepped into a cryo pod, she'd woken up to chaos. No memory. No bearings. Just a splitting headache and a stranger's gruff voice saying, "*She's alive. Barely.*"

Zarkov's voice.

She remembered his tired, weathered face. The old soldier with the iron backbone. He was gone now. Like so many others.

But she was still here.

She remembered the black - *not space*, not the comforting black of a mining rig orbiting a lonely asteroid. *The black inside*. That fog of forgotten years. When she'd opened her eyes, she hadn't known her name. Hadn't known *anything*.

The men around her, Charles, Aris, Stan, Xander, they looked at her like a mystery. She'd said little. Observed. Measured.

Let them make their noise. Let them figure it out.

Then Paddy had handed her a shotgun and barked an order: "Hold the line."

She'd tried. She'd really tried.

And she'd missed.

A lot.

But later, when the real fight began - *when it mattered* - she'd found herself at the weapons console of the Zarian. A particle barbette. Now *that* she understood. Angles. Trajectories. Timing. Like guiding a drill head into a spinning rock thirty klicks wide. *She could do that.*

And she had.

The scout ship? Gone. Turned to slag under her steady hands.

No one cheered louder than Cali. No one looked more surprised than herself.

Highlights of the past few days

Finding purpose. When she pulled the trigger and *hit*, the whole crew had cheered. Cali, especially. That mattered more than she let on.

The ship. The Zarian. She'd never seen tech like it. Not in the belts. It responded like it wanted to be fired. Like it had been waiting.

Being part of a crew. She hadn't said much. Still didn't. But when they looked at her now, there was trust in their eyes. That was new. That was... nice.

Low points

The bugs. The endless screeching, the claws, the chaos. The sound of flesh tearing. She'd buried more people than she'd ever spoken to in her life.

Missing. Shotgun shells spent into the dirt. Feeling *useless* when they needed her most.

Feeling like an outsider. Everyone else had history. Ties. Old friendships. She was just *there*. Watching.

What does the future hold?

She didn't know.

But she knew this: she was the Zarian's gunner now. That turret was hers. The crew relied on her. And when the next threat came, and it would, she'd be ready.

Maybe she'd never be the one to give the speech. Or raise the toast. But she'd pull the trigger when it counted. And maybe, just maybe, she'd start speaking a little more. She had things to say. Eventually.

The berth chilled her limbs. Her heartbeat slowed. Her mind quieted.

Her last thought before the cold took her was simple.

I belong here.

And that was enough.

*

Calista – Reflections in Cryosleep

She'd never liked low berths. They reminded her too much of corporate freight. Of passengers packed like cargo. Souls frozen in time, waiting for someone else to decide when they were useful again.

But this time, it was her call.

Born on Thebus, raised by mistrust and grit. Life taught her early not to rely on anyone; not governments, not corporations, sure as hell not the Imperium. Their rules were written in someone else's favour. She learned to live off instinct, learned the value of silence and sharp eyes.

She drifted for years. Flew when she could. Smuggled when she had to. Repaired busted-up ships and ran messages across the backwater stars. That's when she met Aris - back when he still had that fire-and-brimstone drawl and a spark of redemption in his eyes. She liked him. He saw through her. Didn't preach too hard. Let her be.

Then Charles - diplomatic, charming, a little too clean-shaven for her taste. But smart.

And Stan, wild-eyed and sly, already three cons ahead of himself. They'd served together in the Scout Service once. Stan always made the diagnostics beep like they were purring.

And Paddy. Hell, that one stuck. They had met in a dust-choked port on Garth, fists flying, backs to the wall, fighting off a gang who'd picked the wrong pair of drifters to corner, he grinned at her through a busted lip and said, "Hell of a first date." They drifted together a while after that—no destination, no promises, just quiet trust. Out there in the dark, that counted for a lot.

Then came Drinax.

It wasn't corporate. It wasn't Imperial. That was enough. King Tarn Velas offered something she hadn't heard in a long time - *trust*. A job with purpose. Something *hers*. She and Paddy Stirling were to go first, scout Exocet, pave the way for the noble Charles and the others. Two ghosts in the wind.

She didn't expect to fall for Paddy. But gods, she *did*.

Hard-headed. War-torn. Built like the side of a mountain and twice as stubborn. But he listened. Understood her silences. They were kindred; both battered, both hiding old scars. When she was with him, she felt... safe.

They were going to find that ship together. Carve something new. Be *free*.

Then it all went wrong.

She woke at Proving Site Nine, too late. No memory. No idea. No Paddy.

She found the group - Aris, Charles, Stan, the kid Corey - not knowing who or where she was, she joined their fight against the bugs. And then Stan gave her the mono-blade. *His* blade.

That's when the memories hit. Like a freight hauler slamming into her chest.

She remembered Paddy.

The way he laughed. The way he looked at her like she was fire and light and sky.

The way he *died*, buying them all time with nothing but guts and a seismic charge.

And as she remembered, another slam to her chest as the mother bug hit.

But she didn't fall. She *fought*. Wounded, but never broken.

She helped them survive. She found the data cube. She led them through the mountains. Helped them to survive. She was *good* at this.

She led them to the Zarian.

And gods above... *that ship*.

A Harrier. Not just some scout bucket. A proper bird. Sleek. Responsive. TL-15 curves and humming controls. She took the pilot's seat and *knew*. It was like dancing with an old flame, everything familiar, but full of new fire.

She outflew Imperial black ops, dodged plasma and missiles, and brought that ship home in one piece.

Well. Mostly.

The lows points.

Losing Paddy. Nothing compared. Not Sayelle's betrayal, not the bugs.

That moment she stood in the ruins and realised she was *too late*.

Watching the others almost die, again and again.

And the highs

Finding the cube. Seeing the vision. Realising it was always her destiny to find the Zarian.

Taking the helm of the Zarian. That ship sang to her.

Seeing Anson blow that scout out of the sky. That was *poetry*.

Earning the trust of the crew. Becoming *more than a scout*. Becoming part of a family.

The future?

Cali wasn't sure what waited on Drinax. Politics, no doubt. Royal games. Maybe even war.

She wasn't nobility. She wasn't polished. But she had instinct, fire, and the soul of a pilot.

And deep down, she *liked* the idea of sticking it to the powers that be. Of using their own forgotten warship to make something new. Something better.

She grinned, her last thought before sleep taking hold:

This ol' fox ain't done yet. Not by a long shot.

And then her breath slowed, her heartbeat softened, and Calista Fox slipped into cryosleep.

Dreaming of stars. And speed. And the wild ride ahead.

*

Paddy & Zarkov – Memory Eternal

The afterlife, as it turned out, was a bar.

Not a divine hall of judgement. Not some luminous cathedral floating in cosmic mist. Just a bar.

Not that either Sergeant Patrick Stirling or Brigadier Sir Aleksandr Zarkov were particularly surprised by that.

It was a quiet, unassuming place. Weathered wood and old brass fittings. A large window looking out over endless clouds, no clocks, no exits. The air held the faint scent of leather, gun oil, and slow-aged whisky. The kind of place found only at the edges of spacetime, where stories came to rest like dust on the bottle.

Paddy sat at the bar, arm whole again, chest no longer aching, the scars of battle gone, at least, the ones you could see. In his hand, a glass of rich, honey-coloured whisky caught the glow from the low-hanging lights. He hadn't touched it yet. Just watched the way the amber swirled and caught the light like memories too stubborn to settle.

Boots sounded across the floor. And over walked a ghost.

Aleksandr Zarkov, cane in hand, spectacles perched, beard neatly trimmed, still looked like a man who'd never truly retired. His bearing was too straight, his gaze too sharp. He paused,

looked Paddy up and down, and gave the smallest nod of recognition. Then he sat in the next chair, as if they'd only just finished a mission and wandered in for a drink.

"I suppose I should've known the afterlife had a bar," Zarkov said, voice like gravel wrapped in military silk. "Makes about as much sense as anything else in this universe."

Paddy glanced sideways and gave a tired smirk. "If this ain't heaven, it ain't hell neither. So I'll call it a win." He finally lifted the glass, took a sip. "I'll admit... wasn't expectin' company."

"I heard about your stunt," Zarkov said, adjusting his cane. "That mining charge. Couldn't just die quietly, could you?"

Paddy chuckled, though the sound didn't quite reach his eyes. "Nah. If I was goin', I figured I'd make it count. Took a good few of those bastards with me." He set the glass down with a soft clink. "Truth is, I was hopin' someone might remember. Guess that worked."

"They remember," Zarkov said quietly. "All of them. You should've seen the funeral."

They both sat with that a moment.

Then Zarkov gave a dry smile. "Though I'm not sure we deserved such good company in the end."

"Maybe not," Paddy said. "But they were the best of 'em."

Zarkov's gaze flicked up to the bar's mirror, not to his own reflection, but to the flickering images playing behind it. Like a one-way screen, it showed the *Zarian*, rising from the mountains of Exocet like a phoenix from ancient ash. It showed the crew - Charles, Stan, Aris, Corey, Anson, Cali - fighting, flying, surviving.

He grunted. "I'll be damned. They actually did it."

"They did," Paddy murmured, watching the same scenes. "Even when the odds were stacked like a house of cards in a hurricane. They kept goin'. Stan and that lad Corey jammin' missiles like pros. Anson on the big guns... who'd have thought she'd go from belter to deadeye?"

"And Aris." Zarkov's tone softened. "Still preaching. Still fighting.

Paddy raised his glass, nodding towards the shifting, ghostly vision of the *Zarian* gliding silently through the starry void.

"Charles... he stepped up, didn't he?" Paddy mused quietly, eyes reflecting distant memories. "Not just another smooth talker. A leader."

Zarkov gave a thoughtful grunt, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly in quiet agreement.

Paddy took a slow sip, considering carefully before continuing.

"He hasn't the first bloody clue about tactics, mind you. Leadership on a battlefield? Way beyond him. But gods, the man could speak. Charisma dripping from every word. Made the others believe, made them feel safe."

He smiled faintly. "And he tried, Zarkov. With all he had, he really tried."

Paddy finished his drink and placed the empty glass down gently.

“Sometimes... well, sometimes that’s all that matters.”

Zarkov nodded slowly. “Da, my friend. Sometimes, that is enough.”

Quietly, almost unnoticed, Paddy’s glass refilled itself, just enough, just right. He looked down at it, amused and appreciative in equal measure, then lifted it again, eyes brightening.

“And Cali...” Paddy began softly, his voice thickening with warmth, “she’s somethin’ else entirely. Fire and steel, wrapped in that quiet grace o’ hers.”

His voice caught, and he paused, swallowing hard before lifting the glass again.

“I should’ve said more, Zarkov. Should’ve told her what she meant. Me an’ her—we were kindred, the same broken pieces stitched together differently, maybe. But I knew she’d survive. Had to. I saw her standin’ there, mono-blade in hand, my blade, mind you, lookin’ ready to walk straight through hellfire for every soul in that place.”

Zarkov nodded slowly, voice deep and certain. “She did, Paddy. More than once.”

Paddy’s smile turned wistful, tinged with quiet relief.

“Glad she ended up with the blade. Means she remembered.”

“She did,” Zarkov affirmed softly, the weight of understanding passing between them. “She did.”

There was a silence then. Heavy. Honest.

“They buried us together, y’know,” Paddy said finally, voice low and measured. “Up on the ridge, beside the others. Dirt an’ dust for blankets.”

Zarkov’s eyes softened. “Not the worst place to rest, my friend.”

Paddy gave a half-smile. “True enough. But that whole damn planet can rot. Bugs, lies, betrayal...”

Zarkov’s jaw tightened at the mention. “Hambley,” he growled softly, bitterness in his voice. “Charles tried to save me. Dragged me back inside after Hambley threw me out to die. But that traitor burst in to finish the job. So, I used the last strength I had to grab my shotgun...”

“Ended it right there,” Paddy finished for him gently, respect clear in his eyes. “Charles told me. Held you till the end, your blood on his hands. Literally.”

Zarkov exhaled slowly, a sense of quiet peace returning. “At least the traitors got what they deserved.”

Paddy smiled faintly, tapping his glass gently against Zarkov’s. “Aye. And the kids, our kids, lived.”

Zarkov turned his gaze toward the shimmering image of the ship. “They found her, Paddy. The *Zarian*. Harrier-class - fast, deadly. Took that scout apart like it was nothing.”

“And Cali,” Paddy added, pride colouring his voice, “flew her like an angel with a mean streak. I’ve flown in a lot o’ ships, but that bird was somethin’ special.”

Zarkov chuckled softly. "I was supposed to oversee its retrieval. They brought me in for logistics. Ground ops. You and Cali - advance scouts. They never gave us the full picture."

"They never do," Paddy murmured.

Zarkov nodded toward the shifting screen, now showing the crew entering low berth.

"They're on their way home. Back to Drinax. To claim what was promised."

"They'll do good," Paddy said, softly. "They'll make something out of it."

"And they honoured us," Zarkov added quietly. "Every word at that funeral. Every silence."

"That's more than most get," Paddy agreed. "Maybe... that's enough."

They sat in silence again. The screen dimmed, fading to soft gold. The bar felt warmer now, as if the memories themselves gave it heat.

"They'll remember," Paddy whispered.

Zarkov raised his glass again, determination in his voice. "They'd better. I didn't die to be forgotten."

Paddy chuckled, gently tapping their glasses together again. "To memory."

"To ghosts," Zarkov said softly.

They clinked glasses. And as they drank, the silence stretched on. Not heavy, not bitter—just a peace between old soldiers. Two friends. Two stubborn souls. Watching over the ones who still had stories to tell.

Because memories... memories are precious. They're fragile things, easily lost, easily stolen.

They both knew what it was to wake without them, to feel like strangers in their own skin. But they'd fought for those memories. Reclaimed them.

And now?

Now, they didn't want them lost again.

As long as they were remembered, in stories, in hearts, in whispers shared over old bottles in forgotten bars, they would live on.

From somewhere distant, like an echo in time, Cali's voice carried softly across eternity -

"Sleep now, child, the dark can't find you..."

"Stars above will always guide you..."

They sat in silence, the words settling over them like stardust.

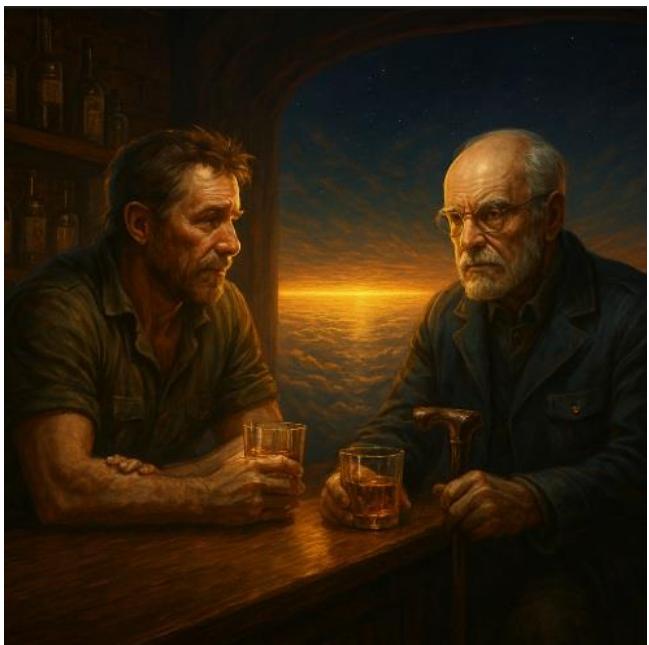
Memories reclaimed. Stories remembered.

And as long as someone sang the song... they'd never truly be gone.

And so, Paddy and Zarkov leaned back in their chairs, raised their glasses once more, and smiled into eternity.



(Not quite the end...)



The afterlife, as it turned out, was a bar.

Not that either Sergeant Patrick Stirling or Brigadier Sir Aleksandr Zarkov were particularly surprised by that...

In a timeless bar at the edge of eternity, Paddy and Xander, one-time brothers in arms, now ghosts of war, share a final drink, reflecting on sacrifice, camaraderie, and the enduring power of memory.

Memories. Never forget. Guard them close, because once you lose them you know how precious they are.



CHAPTER 15 – BRINGING IT HOME

The Zarian sliced through jump space like a ghost on a mission, her damaged systems humming and flickering with barely-leashed energy. The stars warped and bent around her as the Harrier-class vessel made its way home, leaping across the void on a silent promise made long ago.

Blue. Clarke. Then Drinax.

Three jumps, three chances for something to go wrong. But luck, or providence, held steady.

Each stop was swift, calculated. No hails. No contact. No docking requests. The Zarian drifted through the upper atmosphere of gas giants, skimming hydrogen with a silent dignity as the ship refuelled. Crew were revived only as needed, long enough to monitor systems, plot the next jump, and eat one more can of rehydrated slop or a ration bar salvaged from Proving Site 9. No one complained. Water was recycled from the Zarian's life support systems, clean and cold. More than once, someone caught themselves whispering thanks to the long-dead engineers who built the ship.



There was no music, no conversation, just the soft chime of sensors and the creaking of metal expanding and contracting in the vacuum of space. Every meal was rationed. Every breath measured. But morale never dipped. Not really. They were going home.

And finally, Drinax.

A broken world hanging against the stars, its scarred surface still scorched from the war that nearly ended its people. But above it floated the jewel - The Cloud City. White towers, golden domes, light glinting off high-altitude rings of atmospheric condensation. The last real vestige of the once-proud Kingdom of Drinax.

Cali's fingers flew across the Zarian's control panel, her face calm but focused as she guided the ship towards the planet.

Stan opened a comm channel and Charles spoke.

"This is Harrier-class vessel Zarian, returning from expedition. Crew status: alive. Ship status: functional. Mostly."

There was silence. A moment of disbelief on the other end.

Then, a reply. Tight. Choked with emotion.

"Zarian, you are cleared for immediate priority docking. Please proceed to Bay 1. Honour guard will be present. Welcome... home."

Cali guided the Zarian in to the docking bay in the Cloud City. Despite the battle scars on her hull, the Harrier responded with grace and pride, settling into the docking clamps with a quiet hiss of atmospheric equalization.

As the ramp extended, Charles stepped forward, straightening his worn jacket, brushing dust from his sleeves. He paused for just a second—then smiled.



Docked beside them was the *Lady of the Stars*, Ol' Betsy herself, his old ship.

Cali noticed it too. “Ain’t that poetic,” she muttered, limping slightly as she followed Charles down the ramp. “The old girl waited.”

An honour guard stood at the base of the docking ramp. Drinaxian soldiers in polished black and gold, ceremonial spears at their sides, faces unreadable behind their visors. But their salute was precise, and their voices unified:

“Honour to the Zarian. Honour to her crew.”

They were escorted through gleaming white corridors trimmed in brass and darkwood. Lights glowed in soft halos above each doorway. Everything was impossibly clean, elegant in a way only old wealth and forgotten power could afford.

Their quarters were like something from a dream. Silk sheets. Hot running water. Real food.

Doctors tended to Charles and Cali’s wounds. For the first time in what felt like forever, neither of them bled through their bandages.

Stan tested the entertainment system in the room, letting out a low whistle at the tech.
“Swanky.”

Aris lit a candle in the corner, murmuring a prayer of thanks to Saint Jude.

Anson took one look at the real food and said, simply, “Well, it ain’t asteroid stew, but I’ll allow it.”

Corey tried on a clean shirt, the fabric too soft, too luxurious, like something from a different life. Maybe it was.

For a few hours, they rested. Ate. Showered. Laughed, even. For the first time in weeks, they felt human again.

Tomorrow, they would meet the King.

Tomorrow, the story would change again.

But for now... they were safe. Home.

*

The morning came with golden light filtering through silk-veiled windows, casting soft patterns across polished marble floors. The crew of the Zarian, now rested, fed, and dressed in simple but elegant finery, assembled in the antechamber of the Royal Audience Hall.

The air hummed with anticipation as they were led through the wide arched doors by a pair of ceremonial guards.

What met them was awe-inspiring.

The Great Hall of Drinax was exactly as it had appeared in the memory-vision triggered by the data cube, yet somehow more real, more radiant. Gleaming white pillars stretched



skyward, climbing into a vaulted ceiling that shimmered with crystalline panels, allowing filtered sunlight to cascade down like celestial rain. The air was cool, perfumed faintly with something sweet and floral. Murals lined the upper walls, depicting scenes of Drinaxian glory; fleets of ships, grand coronations, triumphs over ancient foes.

And everywhere, nobility. Men and women dressed in rich fabrics and embroidered robes, eyes wide with curiosity and calculation. Some whispered behind gloved hands. Others watched in silence as the newcomers were ushered forward.

At the far end of the hall, atop a raised dais framed by twin banners of black and gold, sat the King.

King Tarn Varis.

He looked exactly as he had in the vision, and yet more solid, more commanding. An older man, yes, his hair was white, his beard neatly groomed, and a slender golden crown rested upon his brow. But there was steel in his posture, clarity in his gaze. He wore a robes of white and crimson red, inlaid with silver threads, and a broach marked with the Drinaxian star.



As the crew approached, Cali leaned toward Charles, her voice a low, amused drawl:

“Y’all, I swear, he still looks just like my Uncle Jesse. Just needs a jug of moonshine and a deck of cards.”

The others managed faint smirks. The tension eased, just a little.

The King rose. Not simply out of tradition, but to welcome them with purpose.

He extended both arms, then gestured them forward with regal warmth.

“Come. Step forward, crew of the *Zarian*.”

They did, stopping just before the steps of the dais.

“You have done what many doubted was possible,” the King continued, his voice resonant and confident. “You have returned with the *Zarian*, the last ship of the old empire. A vessel thought lost. Forgotten by all but our oldest records.”

His piercing eyes swept across them; Charles, Cali, Aris, Stan, Anson, Corey.

“And not only that... but you returned from a world few escape. You endured fire, betrayal, death... and yet you prevailed. You proved yourselves worthy of Drinaxian legacy.”

There was a hush in the hall. Even the nobles had stopped whispering.

Then, the King smiled.

A warm, genuine smile that broke through his stately demeanour. It was the smile of a man who had waited decades to see something long hoped for.

“Welcome home.”

The grand audience concluded with ceremony and respectful applause. But as the last notes of the royal fanfare echoed from the towering ceiling, King Tarn Varis rose again, his expression shifting from public formality to something more personal.

“Come. We must talk.”

*

The King turned and swept from the hall with surprising grace for a man of his years. Without hesitation, the crew of the *Zarian* followed, led by a discreet pair of attendants through a side arch and into a quieter wing of the palace. They passed through softly lit corridors, past etched crystal panels and ancient banners faded with time, until they reached a private audience chamber, modest compared to the throne room, but no less regal in tone.

Here, there was no need for pretence.

The King waited by a table already set with refreshments, old star charts, and the soft hum of active holo-maps. He motioned them to sit. There were no guards now, only trust.

They took their seats. Charles, straight-backed in noble posture. Cali, casual but alert, her ribs still aching faintly beneath the borrowed coat. Stan leaned forward, ever watchful. Aris, reverent but quietly calculating. Anson, reserved. Corey, wide-eyed, taking it all in.

Then, the King began.

There was no ceremony now, only the weight of history and a plan centuries in the making.

He spoke with purpose, his eyes bright with conviction, and the fire of a dream long deferred

"You have done what I dared only hope," he said, voice steady with solemn pride. "The *Zarian* is not just a ship. She is a relic of our past, and now, a promise for our future."

He gestured, and a small golden casket was placed before them.

"I made you a deal, and I honour it now. You will take the *Zarian* as your ship. And more. I grant you a **Seal of Marque and Reprisal**. With this, you are authorised to prey upon merchant and military shipping within the borders of the old Empire... provided they do not carry the proper documentation."

The king opened the casket, and therein was A thin golden band, etched with the twin suns of Drinax and the ancient sigil of the Royal Fleet. Small in size. Titanic in meaning.

He allowed the words to settle

His hand swept over the holographic map that flickered into view above the centre of the table. Glowing constellations shifted and reformed into the familiar shape of the Trojan Reach.

"Here - the Trojan Reach," the King said, gesturing wide. "On one side, the great red expanse of the Third Imperium. On the other, the golden glow of the Aslan Hierate. Between them, dozens of scattered stars. Independent systems. Forgotten worlds. And through them all, arteries of trade and power."

He leaned in.

"Every ship in space is your legal prey," he said, and his voice dropped into something more dangerous, more deliberate. "But I don't want cutthroats and murderers. I want heroes... and thieves."

"Once, every world along that trade route paid taxes to use our space and our starports. Then, because my ancestors were greedy, ruin fell upon us all."

There was no self-pity in his voice, only a grim recognition of past failures, and an iron will to rebuild.

He straightened, his voice rising.

"This is what we're going to do. You take the *Zarian* and you cut a swathe of fire across the stars. Attack shipping, raid starports, hit depots. Make allies, shape politics, unravel mysteries. Take what you can. Don't kill anyone you don't have to. We want to bleed the merchants until they go crying to the Imperium, not start a war."

The crew exchanged glances. It was bold. Audacious. Dangerous.

And brilliant.

"Part two is all those worlds out there. We make them our allies. Sell goods there, defend them from raiders, recruit minds, and bring them back under the banner of Drinax. When the time comes, we offer the Imperium a deal – the raids stop if they recognise the Kingdom of Drinax once again."

He didn't wait for approval. His fist struck the table, loud and final.

"This we do now!"

The room rang with the echo of it.

Then, he continued, his tone more measured, but no less firm.

"Now, the terms. We keep this a secret from the Imperium for as long as possible, and that means you keep that seal of marque hidden until we sign a peace. The ship's being loaned to you. You are responsible for repairs and maintenance, but she's yours til the end."

He raised a finger.

"A percent of any money you make comes to me. Spend as much as you can spare on the colony worlds and curry favour with them. We'll need them on our side if this isn't going blow up in our faces."

He leaned back at last, folding his hands before him. His gaze swept across them all - not as a monarch judging petitioners, but as a man weighing potential.

And then he smiled again.

"If this works... then you'll be made dukes of my court. And Drinax will rise from the ashes!"

The King leaned back in his throne, piercing gaze sweeping across the gathered crew.

He gave a nod, inviting their response.

*

Cali was the first to stand.

She pushed herself up from her chair with a small wince, her side still healing beneath the clean uniform they'd been provided. Her pilot's jacket was folded over one arm now, her boots finally polished, but there was no hiding the wild spark in her eyes or the edge of fire in her voice.

She gave a little mock-curtsy, half-grin playing at her lips.

"Well now, Your Majesty... reckon I didn't expect to end up a duchess. My Uncle Jesse would've fallen right off the hover-plow if he'd heard me say that."

There was a chuckle in the chamber, but her tone softened, sincere.

"I'm honoured, truly. If you're entrusting us with the Zarian... then I'll see she flies like she's meant to, and not just for profit."

She paused, flicking a glance at the rest of the crew.

"But truth be told, she took a beating gettin' here. We're patched up with spit, tape, and half a hope. If you could advance us something, just enough for emergency repairs, or parts to get us shipshape again, it'd help us start strong. Wouldn't take much."

The King didn't hesitate. He sat forward, hands folded atop the arm of his throne.

"No," he said, not unkindly, but with firm finality.

"The deal I offer is what I have stated. No more, no less. You have the Zarian, and free rein to make your fortune however you see fit. That is your prize. And your test."

Cali gave a small, respectful dip of her head, then raised her voice, thick with that soft drawl: "Your Highness... I surely didn't expect to be standin' in a throne room today. And you done honoured me with a chance I never thought I'd get."

"I'll fly that ship not just 'cause you gave me the right to, but to honour a friend who gave up his life makin' sure we had the chance. Paddy Stirling was the best of us, and I'll make damn sure his memory don't drift away like smoke."

Her hand rested on the mono blade that hung at her side. Then she looked up at the King and squared her shoulders.

"You give the word, Your Highness, and I'll fly that Zarian like a comet tearin' through the stars. You just light the fuse."

She snapped into a surprisingly sharp salute, years of service in the scout corps surfacing beneath the homespun tone.

"Yes, Your Highness. I'm ready."

*

Stan Kolinski leaned against the edge of the ornate table, arms crossed, a glint of his old streetwise grin on his face.

"Well... sounds like the kind of job I've been training for my whole life, just didn't know it till now."

He gave a mock salute, then added more seriously,
"You'll get results, Majesty. Just don't ask how I get 'em."

*

Aris stepped forward, eyes shining with purpose.

"King Tarn... I once preached false sermons for credits and lived by lies. Now I've seen truth in fire, and been given a cause worth believin' in."

He bowed low.

"Saint Jude willing, I'll see it through."

*

Corey fidgeted, then raised a hand awkwardly.

"Uh... I'm not a pirate or anything, but... I can help. I'm good with wires. And systems. I'll, uh... I'll do my best."

*

Anson, ever quiet, nodded once.

"Put me behind a ship's gun. I'll shoot it."

*

Charles Hubert-Cutter stepped forward with calm precision, the soft rustle of his formal robes echoing faintly across the polished floor. He wore the attire of a noble son of Drinax; dark

velvet trimmed with silver, the sigil of his house pinned proudly to his chest. His hair was combed, his bearing impeccable, and though exhaustion still lingered in the lines of his face, his eyes were sharp with purpose.

He bowed low, one arm folded across his heart.

“Your Majesty,” he began, his voice steady and clear, “I accept this honour, and the duty it entails, with gratitude and resolve. The Zarian flies again, and under my command, she shall serve not as a relic of what once was, but as a banner of what may yet be.”

He straightened, standing tall before the King.

“I will wield her strength in the service of Drinax, with justice where possible, with steel where necessary. You shall not find me wanting.”

And then, with a courtier’s flourish and the conviction of a captain who had earned his title: “Long live the King. Long live Drinax.”

*

The King rose from his chair, the smile on his face was warm and genuine, one not often worn by rulers burdened with centuries of fading glory.

One by one, he approached the crew of the Zarian.

He clasped Cali’s calloused hand in both of his, meeting her wild eyes with regal appreciation. “A fire in your spirit,” he said with a knowing smile. “The Reach needs that.” She grinned back, rough-hewn and proud, for once lost for words, she simply nodded in thanks.

To Stan, he offered a firm handshake and a quiet, knowing nod, as if he recognized the conman beneath the professionalism, and respected the man he had become.

Aris accepted the gesture reverently, bowing his head with a whispered prayer on his lips, as though Saint Jude himself might be watching.

Corey shook the King’s hand nervously, clearly unsure if he should bow or salute or both, but the King chuckled and simply gave the boy an encouraging smile.

Anson gave the briefest nod, her grip firm, no words needed. The King understood.

And finally, the monarch turned to Charles Hubert-Cutter, nobleman, diplomat, now Captain of the most advanced ship to ever serve the Kingdom of Drinax.

The King grasped his hand, firm and sure, then reached up and placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

“You were always meant to wear command well, my lord.”

Charles bowed once more. “Your Majesty.”

*

The audience chamber slowly faded from view, its high white pillars and golden banners giving way to the curved towers of the Cloud City, gleaming against the brilliant blues of the upper atmosphere.

Then farther still, to the ruined lands of the planet below, still scarred, still healing, watched now by hopeful eyes.

Then farther again, rising above it all, beyond orbit, past stars and satellites, until only the deep black of the Trojan Reach remained, dotted with countless pinpricks of light.

A sleeping giant had stirred.

And somewhere out there, among the stars, the Zarian would rise.

THE END (again!)... for now?



COMING SOON... (Maybe...?)



They were never meant to be heroes.

Six outcasts.

*One super-advanced ship.
Wanted by the Imperium -
But intent on wrecking as
much havoc on it as
possible.*

Zarians 6

Drinax shall rise again.

