

## The α3 Report

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The α3 Report	1
1	5
FLICKER [1.01]	5
CONVERSATION [1.1]	7
2	9
>CTRL-C [2.01]	9
NOTHING SPECIAL [2.02]	13
SLAMMED SHUT [2.03]	15
SMALL MERCIES [2.04]	17
KNEW NOTHING [2.05]	20
DISCUSSION [2.1]	26
3	29
ATTITUDE [3.01]	29
STENCH [3.02]	31
NICE ENOUGH [3.03]	32
CRATERED [3.04]	35
COMPLICATION [3.1]	37
4	41
TELCORPS [4.01]	41
NOT SUBTLE [4.02]	43
SHIT DETAIL [4.03]	45
ARMY LOGIC [4.04]	47
PLACEHOLDER NAME [4.1]	52
5	54
DAMN THE REST [5.01]	54
YOUR PROBLEM NOW [5.02]	55
SAFETY OFF [5.03]	57
EVALUATION [5.1]	59
6	62
CHASE DROP [6.01]	62
PLACEHOLDER NAME [6.02]	64
PLACEHOLDER 2 [6.03]	68
PLACEHOLDER 3 [6.04]	72
PLACEHOLDER 4 [6.05]	77
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [6.1]	79
7	80
83% CONFIDENCE [7.01]	80
FRAGILITY [7.02]	81
PLACEHOLDER Name [7.03]	83
SECURITY [7.04]	86
ENFORCED IGNORANCE [7.05]	86
PICTURE [7.05]	89
PLACEHOLDER NAME [7.06]	91
OBSERVATION [7.1]	93
8	94
UNSUBTLE SUBTLETY [8.01]	94
OCCUPIED BIRTHPLACE [8.02]	96
SEMBLANCE OF ORDER [8.03]	98
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [8.1]	100
9	103
OUR TARGET [9.01]	103
PLACEHOLDER NAME [9.02]	104

WEREN'T MINE [9.03]	111	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [9.04]	115	
HER [9.05]	119	
SOMETHING MORE [9.06]	123	
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [9.1]	125	
10	128	
WHY? [10.01]	128	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.02]	130	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.3]	134	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.04]	137	
SECURITY POSTURE [10.05]	143	
OFF LIGHTLY [10.06]	145	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.07]	148	
RECOMMENDATION [10.1]	152	
11	155	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.01]	155	
ACTING OFFICIALLY [11.02]	158	
OFFICIAL NOW [11.03]	163	
REAL SCRAPS [11.04]	166	
CHOOSE QUICKLY [11.05]	172	
GOOD CHOICE [11.06]	176	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.07]	180	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.1]	185	
12	187	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.01]	187	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.02]	190	
TWO-TONED [12.03]	192	
PLACEHODLER NAME [12.04]	197	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.05]	201	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.06]	207	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.07]	211	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.09]	225	
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE 12.1	232	
13	234	
POINT AGAIN [13.01]	234	
BARE FOOTPRINTS [13.02]	238	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [13.03]	250	
DEPARTURE WINDOW [13.04]	253	
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [13.1]	255	
14	259	
READY ENOUGH [14.01]	259	
ALL GOOD [14.02]	261	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.03]	266	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.04]	270	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.05]	277	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.06]	282	
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [14.01]	285	
15	287	
PROXY ACCESS [15.01]	287	
DATA DUMP [15.02]	290	
BRIEFING [15.03]	293	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [15.04]	297	
PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE 15.1	299	
16	301	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.011]	301	
PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.012]	304	

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.013] 307  
 LANDING ZONE [16.014] 314  
 PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.021] 318  
 PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.022] 327  
 MESSY ENGAGEMENT [16.031] 338  
 SITUATIONAL AWARENESS [16.032] 348  
 FEAR REDISCOVERED [16.033] 352  
 MOVE FAST [16.034] 357  
 BROKEN BY REVELATION [16.035] 367  
 ALL IN [16.036] 380  
 CONTACT RANGE [16.037] 381  
 LAST BREATH [16.041] 389  
 CHOICE [16.051] 397  
 TERMINATION [16.1] 402  
 RECOMMENDATIONS 404

## FLICKER [1.01]

She moved like the animation in a child's flipbook. Jerky, uneven, disjointed. Flicker. Step. Flicker. Step. Flicker. A meter away. Flicker. Standing over me. Flicker. Crouching next to me.

I was hallucinating. I must have been. It was the painkillers or the pain or the blood loss. There was already a shortage of leggy blondes in my life, much less ones barefoot and in jeans and a red t-shirt that could have been from any time in the last few centuries.

Women like that didn't appear in warzones. All the ones I'd seen who weren't wearing uniforms were dead. The lucky ones were actually dead, even if it was slow and painful. The unlucky ones were just as dead on the inside, the same as the men and children who came with them. Refugees and survivors, all of them, but how much survived or whether they really lived was a question they would struggle to answer until the day they died.

She leaned over me and I saw the rose design done in stark black lines against the vibrant, bloody red of the shirt that hugged her chest. I don't know why that stuck with me when I can't even describe her face.

There was no dust or blood on her bare feet or the bottom of her jeans. Another detail that was so incongruous that my mind refused to accept it.

Hallucinating. Painkillers or pain or blood loss. Hallucinating.

Then she pressed her palm into the center of my chest. Where fire had been consuming me, eating away at what remained of my life, ice now threatened to overwhelm me. The old poet would have approved.

She stood and threw out her arm, palm out, like she was signaling something to stop. Signaling, or maybe demanding. Either way, it did. The shouting and shooting and explosions that had been the chorus announcing my death fell silent.

Then the screaming began. By the time it ended a CASEVAC bird had arrived.

The docs said I should have died. I would never use my right eye again. The arm and leg on that side had been no more than shredded, flayed strips of flesh barely clinging to the bone. My side was better, but not by much; the mess that had been made of it only just held in place by the shattered remnants of my armor.

They wanted to know how I survived. The brass wanted to know the same thing. Every other man and woman with me hadn't.

I didn't have an answer because I wasn't sure I had.

It was two weeks by ship to the nearest major hospital. They didn't do implants, prosthetics, or physical therapy at the frontline or shipboard facilities. That was all just keeping you alive, making sure you'd hold together long enough to fix you properly somewhere down the line or doing just enough to be able to throw you back in on the sharp end.

The dreams started on that trip, and I saw her again every night. Sometimes the dreams left me screaming as I woke. Sometimes they had no effect at all.

They weren't really dreams, though. It was a dream, The Dream, night after night after night. I lay there, dying, as she approached, until she touched me and I woke.

## CONVERSATION [1.1]

*Well?*

*Alpha Three is alive, barely. His unit walked into an ambush. He was the only survivor.*

*What about the others?*

...

*Tell me.*

*Alpha One's ship lost containment. The drives blew; casualties were total. Alpha Two committed suicide after three weeks of rapid mental decline. Alphas Four and Five were both lost during the Bradbury campaign.*

*Why was I not informed before?*

*We thought that—*

*Nevermind. I don't want to hear it. What about her? Was she involved in any of this?*

*She's an unknown factor. We can't account for her actions and we don't have enough information to know.*

*So guess.*

*I think she intervened with Alpha Three. It wasn't just his squad that died. Everybody there either died or disappeared. Our sources the Rebels say that no one returned from that patrol, but the bodycount only adds up to half a standard squad. The official report is that a next-gen Induced Terror Field was deployed and neither side had proper countermeasures. They either killed each other, turned on themselves, or ran.*



*An ITF? Or something that looked like one? That could be her. It's... very much her style. Similar to some of the incidents at our facilities. But why now? I know some of our people said something strange was going on even after we last dealt with her. Even so, this is a more direct form of interference than we've seen before. She hasn't bothered with the Alphas since we were just bringing the project online.*

*I—*

*Don't answer. I already know you don't know anymore than I do. The question wasn't for you. We're going to operate on the assumption it was her. Bring the Betas online. Accelerate the Gamma line. If we're lucky she'll be fixating on Alpha Three and won't notice. We might finally be able to bring this back under control.*

*Should I prepare a report for the Board?*

*They don't need to know yet.*

2

>CTRL-C [2.01]

After all the surgeries and a basic round of physical therapy I was given a month of leave to finish adjusting to the prosthetics. I could have used more time but the war was going badly and Earth needed every pair of hands she could get, even if one of them was metal.

I spent the first week getting drunk, alternately hitting on every blonde I saw and avoiding them like the plague, before staggering back to my housing unit, alone, after all the bars closed. It didn't help with The Dream. I woke screaming less, but just normal more.

That scared me. The thought that I was somehow getting used to dreams of dying over and over again, and what had kept me alive, was genuinely disturbing. At least screaming was a normal response.

Halfway through the second week I met a petite brunette, damn near the opposite of the woman I dreamed about. Ilya was a metalhead, a cog-girl with more than a few augs of her own. She didn't mind my skeletal arm and leg, or the burnished alloy, ceramics, and industrial diamond of my eye. Not even the scarring down my side hiding titanium and carbon-fiber ribs put her off.

I spent the rest of the month with her, doing the usual things shore leave couples did. We slept together, she showed me the town, we went swimming at the beaches, out drinking, had sex again, and the days blurred together in a stream of repeated actions, mindlessly looping like a buggy program.

I didn't ask what she did that let her take so much time off. I didn't want to know. She could have been on vacation, working a part time job or one with flexible hours, a college student between semesters, or even on leave herself. It didn't matter. We both know that no matter what promises we made in the heat of the moment or whispered in the dark when our time together was over we would never see each other again. That was just how it went.

Until then we kept each other happy and pleased and that was enough. On top of that, sleeping next to a warm body helped with The Dream. I wasn't as if it stopped. Despite my hopes, it waited every time I closed my eyes for more than a few moments. But my reactions to it were less visceral. I stopped waking with a throat raw from screaming. Most mornings I woke normally with The Dream fading into a haze of forgetfulness.

Ilya did ask how I was wounded once as the month was drawing to a close. I told her the truth, or a least part of it: That my squad had been ambushed and driven into a minefield and how I'd been the one make that unfortunate discovery by stepping on an anti-personnel mine. It had catapulted itself upwards faster than I could see. Only a combination of luck—it must have had a faulty charge, so it didn't trigger with enough force to kill—and my armor had kept me alive.

I didn't mention the woman in red. Hallucination, dream, or who knows what else, I hadn't mentioned her to the doctors or my CO, so I wasn't going to mention her to Ilya. Luck and armor held together well as a story, better than something that might have only existed inside my head.

In any case, my time with Ilya was happy enough, aside from that one awkward conversation and my nagging worries. I think she had reservations of her own but it never came up. It was probably better that way. We both chose to ignore the issues the other danced around, embracing a deceptive, willful ignorance.

There was enough to be worried about as it was. The massive Cabell Military Medical Complex was visible from any point in the city that had grown up around it, an ever-present reminder of the war. Even if it hadn't been, the news was filled with reports of setbacks and losses.

What had started as rioting in Cydonia had led to a group calling themselves Knights in open revolt across Mars, fighting a guerrilla campaign on Earth herself and bombings in the Titian and Io habitats. Military casualties had been in the tens of thousands before the rebellion had been put down.

There was no official count of the civilian dead. It was possible there never would be beyond estimates made by historians. Various media and propaganda claims had put it within an order of magnitude on both sides of a million, which meant nobody had a damn clue. Three years on since The Knights's Rebellion and they were still finding mass graves, not all of them filled by the Knights, and digging bodies out of the rubble left by bombs and orbital strikes.

Not things had ended there. The Knights's leadership, who'd named themselves The Round Table in stunningly creative move and impressive fit of pretension, had long since fled the Sol System by the time loyalist forces stormed the deep bunker complexes beneath Cydonia.

So from The Knight's's Rebellion we got the Round Table War, the first true challenge to Earth's hegemonic position since the establishment of extra-solar colonies. A dozen systems outright at war with Earth, a handful more on the fence, and a death toll steadily climbing towards a billion.

It was more than enough to worry about.

NOTHING SPECIAL [2.02]

When my month was almost up I got orders to return to the front. They were straightforward. There was a transport leaving for the Heinlein system, so I would be able to return to my old company, or at least battalion—division if I was unlucky—instead of being reassigned to an entirely new unit.

My goodbyes were nothing special or drawn out. I kissed Ilya one last time, more for a last memory to go with the nights we spent together than any thought of a future between us—we were effectively anonymous, each of us one of thousands, and nothing more than chance had brought us together. The chances that we'd even see each other again was near to zero. That was simply the way of it.

We'd kissed in her hotel room before the sun was even up. When we were done I picked up my kitbag filled with what few clothes and possessions I still had, slung it over my shoulder and left. I might have looked back, or not. It doesn't—didn't—really matter either way.

The sidewalks outside were full of people. This close to the beaches they always were. Even farther into the city there would be people walking, lit by the grey pre-dawn light and neon signs of the nightclubs and bars catering to the soldiers and spacers and marines and who-knows-who-else that had money to burn and no need or desire to sleep.

I stepped into the crowd and become one of them, just another uniform with a nondescript face and regulation hair above it, the same as half the people around me.

I put my head down and stared at the sidewalk as I walked, jostled blindly along by the crowd. I could've taken a taxi, but I had time to spare—not much, but enough—before my shuttle lifted off from the military spaceport by the hospital and no other way to kill it. And I liked walking. Paradoxically, it gave me a chance to be alone and think, even as men and women bumped against me and I kept half an eye out for pickpockets.

Not that being alone with my thoughts was perfectly pleasant. For the most part I wasn't thinking ahead—the two week trip I was facing would give me more than enough time for that—but backwards, reflecting over the last three weeks. Not even that was safe, and I ended up drifting further back, thinking about my wounds and the ambush and the question of how I'd survived.

I looked up when I got to the gate, breaking free of my thoughts. There was a line ahead of me, everyone waiting their turn to show their IDs and be scanned through, all under the eyes of a dozen armed MPs, three different automated turrets, a microgrenade launcher, two cameras that I could see and almost certainly several more that I couldn't. It was fairly light security for a major installation, but I knew the closer we got to the landing pads the tighter and heavier it would become.

I saw a flash of gold and red in the corner of my eye. It stood out against the drab colors of camouflage uniforms and the shabby tan-grey of the low concrete buildings around the spaceport. I turned to look and she was there, standing a head taller than anyone else and staring at me across the street, looking through and past the stream of people flowing between us. She met my eyes, then the crowd ebbed and swirled around her and she was gone.

I shivered and tried to convince myself that I'd imagined it. By the time my shuttle was in orbit I almost believed it.

SLAMMED SHUT [2.03]

The shuttle landed heavily enough to tell me the pilot was either a novice who'd barely earned his wings or a veteran of landings under fire. Whichever it was there was a decent chance he'd get chewed out by the officer in charge of the hanger bay if he'd left any significant new dents in the deck, for form's sake if nothing else. Knowing pilots, he'd never hear the end of it from his squadronmates or ground crew if he did.

There weren't many boots on shuttles coming up from a hospital in the middle of a war, but a couple had ridden up on my flight. They still had the eager looks and almost completely shaven hair that shouted that they were fresh from whatever school they'd gone to after basic training. The three of them crowded together up by the access hatch.

The older hands, myself included, were a mixed bunch, mostly Marine infantrymen heading back to the front, but there a few tankers and gun bunnies in the mix, plus a small handful of Navy boys. We were still sitting, waiting patiently for the airlock indicators to switch to green as the vacsuited crews out in the hanger ensured the boarding tube had a good seal.

A couple of minutes after landing the glaring red light changed color. The access hatch slid open aside at an electronic command from the unseen pilot and the boots spilled out into the tube, while the rest of us followed more sedately, bags slung over our shoulders.

The tube was made of a clear, semi-rigid plastic that accorded out from the hanger bulkhead, guided by a rail mounted in the deck. Looking out and back I could see the cavernous space of the hanger and with the dual metal doors of its airlock open, showing the void of space beyond and the running lights of another shuttle on approach. The two halves of the inner door had slid into armored recesses in the deck and overhead, twenty meters above me. The outer door moved further out before being drawn upwards as a single massive plate to rest on the hull of the warship.

Normally opening and closing those doorways was a fifteen minute evolution with a list of safety checks that ran to a couple megs of data, assuming none of the machinery required had crapped out after the last run or burned out partway through. I'd once seen them closed at emergency speed to button up a ship and leave no vulnerabilities for a good gunnery program to exploit. The inner doors had snapped shut with a terrifying force, moving together faster than an unaugmented eye could register, and it was a safe bet the outer one had closed just as fast.

This time, they stayed open until every shuttle was accounted for. Sometime between the last landing and the hyper transition they slid ponderously closed and the hanger was pressurized to so the maintenance crews could work on their charges without suits.



I was still staring out through the tube wall when the man behind me ran into me.  
“Hurry up, dammit.”

“Sorry.”

“Fucking dirtsider.” The chief pushed my shoulder again, not gently, and I started to move. The tube passed through yet another airlock, a sign of the Navy’s universal love of redundancy, before opening onto a passageway of bare metal, alleviated only by the pipes and wires running in organized bunches along the bulkhead and overhead, their purpose indicated by color or neatly stenciled markings.

SMALL MERCIES [2.04]

If the shuttled I’d taken up to the *Athens* was filled with a mix bag, my berthing was even worse. The space I lived in for two weeks was cramped and crowded, just like the marine berthings on every ship I’d even been on. The racks were stacked three high, with barely enough space for my gear or me, and the head was shared by fifty different men with predictable results in terms of cleanliness. A rotating detail cleaned it and the berthing daily, but things still got pretty grungy.

*Athens* was a warship, not a troop transport, but she still had the standard marine detachment plus the equipment and supplies required to support them for a month in the field, with some space left over.

That space included my berthing. There were about two platoons worth of re-placements or specialists onboard *Athens*, headed for the battlefields of the Heinlein system. There were no officers in that number, so a lieutenant from *Athens*'s MARDET was formally in charge of us. Other than making sure we were all accounted for and giving the standard safety brief—don't mess with the crew, stay in marine country, and here's what to do incase shit happens—that everyone but the boots could have recited in their sleep he left us to our own devices. Or, more accurately, to our senior noncom, a sergeant major who'd been fighting to put down insurgencies and petty wars between colonies before I was even born. Rumor had it he'd been on Cydonia for

He organized us, insofar as we were organized, but didn't make any outrageous demands on our time besides the occasional working party to help with something. I spent most of my free time reading books I'd downloaded over leave, watching vids on my own, or listening to music. I made it to the gym, the favorite pastime of marines underway, at least once a day, but I'd never been able to summon the sort of enthusiasm for moving around large pieces of metal that most marines did, and tended to view anything other than running or basic exercises as a necessary evil.

I only really enjoyed myself three times during the whole trip. Once, the Sergeant Major, who was on his way to a Command Sergeant Major billet in the middle of the worst of the war, assuming the regiment he was assigned to still existed by that point, decided we were all sitting around with out thumbs up our asses doing nothing and needed some motivation. He had the sparring mats dragged out onto the gym floor and an impromptu, anything-goes-so-long-as-you-don't-kill-each-other competition began.

Most of the other marines aboard and more than a few crewmen showed up to watch. Even our Lieutenant made an appearance for the final match.

I didn't win, but I did fairly well, and managed to avoid any sick bay time, which was more than could be said for the winner or the woman he had to beat for the title. They both spent four days under the less-than-pleased eye of the doc.

The other two times were when the Captain let us practice urban combat drills in a half empty cargo hold. The CO of the MARDET had us playing the OpFor, with his XO in command. Those were two long, tiring days, but I appreciated the refresher for what it was, and it allowed me to do what I was good at.

Still, for the most part I kept to myself and had an uneventful trip back to the Heinlein system. The only things I had trouble with were not thinking about the campaign, which had deteriorated since I'd last been on the ground, and sleeping.

For one I did my best to appear confident and unafraid. To some extent it was even the truth. Or a truth. War was war, and either I would continue to survive or get unlucky. Being unafraid was the same courageous lie the other veterans were telling themselves and each other, and I took what solace in it I could. It was better than thinking about the men I'd seen blown apart or disintegrate in explosions or burned to a crisp or shot or crushed and what my chances of ending up like them were.

The other thing I couldn't do well was sleep. Every night I was awake well before I needed to be after another short round of restless, sweaty sleep. The only good thing about it was that I only jerked upright once, my first night aboard. Having slammed my head violently into the rack over mine, my body managed not to repeat that mistake, so I didn't end the two weeks with a split forehead.

Small mercies, but by then I took what I could get.

KNEW NOTHING [2.05]

I left my food at the table and sprinted out of the mess. All around me Marines did the same, moving to the wailing GQ alarm. The main lights flickered and died, battle lights coming on in their place as power systems were diverted to life support and weapons.

The alarm cut out, replaced by the calm voice of a chief in the CIC reeling off instructions. By that point I was in the berthing, struggling to haul my emergency vacsuit on. Behind me the last man in sealed the airtight hatch.

There was a petty officer in the compartment, a damage controlman. It was his assigned post—if needed he would press-gang us into helping repair battle damage. Until then he had nothing to do, like the rest of us. Some of the marines began to ask him for news. They thought being tied into the damage control net meant he knew more than we did.

I didn't bother. If he knew more he would've said something. After a minute of sitting I dug out my reader. It was a better way to pass the time.

Beneath me I felt the rumble of the engines change more than I heard it. The vibrations shifted pitch subtly as the gravity field slewed. The ship was turning. But so long as the slew in the gravity field didn't turn into a shear there was nothing to worry about. I knew that much.

The engine shifted pitch again, dropping into infrasonics that shook my whole body. We were moving faster. Running or preparing to fight. I had no way of knowing which. Neither did anybody else.

We sat there in the berthing with nothing to do for the next ten minutes. The engines had stopped shifting and held steady. Other than that we knew nothing. Were we under attack? Attacking? Whose ships were out there? How many? Everyone had their own answer to each question, none more accurate than the last.

The whole ship shook. Then again. A handful of unsecured items fell to the deck, clattering off the hard metal.

The DCman spoke up. "That's the main batteries. Outgoing, not incoming." He said it like the experience was nothing new. For him it probably wasn't. Most of the fleet had seen action of some sort since the start of The Knights's Rebellion, and they'd kept busy even before that.

The compartment fell silent at his announcement. When the conversations resumed they felt forced, strained. Those who'd had shipboard postings before were more at ease than anyone else, but still looked like they'd rather be part of the MARDET. At least *Athens's* marines had regular stations at general quarters instead of sitting around waiting for news.

I did my best to ignore the periodic shudders in the smooth movement of the ship. I buried myself in my book instead. Then I couldn't ignore it anymore. The ship shook again, more heavily, and the whole hull echoed with the impact.

The DCman listened to chatter on his radio. Then, "We just lost a secondary battery and a launch cell cluster. Regular teams are handling it; we're not needed yet."

The main gun fired more frequently after that. We were hit twice more, each time too far forward for the DCA to bother calling us in to help. When asked our DCman claimed that it was not an unusual amount of damage for a running fight.

I agreed with him. I'd never been in a naval battle before, but I'd been part of the first assault on Heinlein. We'd dropped past rebel ships in orbit, each one gutted by the force required to kill it. I had tried not to think about the shots that had missed and struck the planet below. Then the SAM batteries, AA and triple-A that the wild weasels hadn't gotten opened up and there hadn't been any time left to think.

I would've preferred that mindless fear as the dropships made planetfall to the sitting and waiting. Someone near the forward hatch had pulled off her helmet and was sick across the deck, splattering those around her. A couple of towels were passed up without comment. I wondered how many others were close to following her example. I was.

A minute later she was dead along with everyone else sitting on the port side of the compartment. Where they had been there was only a ragged hole torn by a deep penetrating shipboard missile, one of the ones with a multi-stage plasma warhead. Flash-frozen blood and viscera floated with the sudden loss of gravity before being ripped outwards into vacuum by the pressure change. There weren't really any bodies in the debris cloud, just chunks of flesh seared and blown apart by the plasma wash or torn to shreds by glowing shrapnel.

Two of us had survived on the starboard side, spared by the lethal fragments. I was holding on to the twisted edge of a rack with my augmetic arm. My instinctive reach saved my life. My companion was also clinging to a tenuous handhold. I watched, unable to do anything, as his fingers, lacking the strength of my biomechanical replacement, gave way one by one to the raw force of explosive decompression.

Unlike the others he had time to scream. His cries echoed in my helmet until I managed to mute my radio.

Eventually there was no more air to be sucked out of the breached compartments and the howling storm stopped, fading into the silence of vacuum. It felt like minutes but was probably only seconds before I was able to pull myself forward against the rack.

The feedback sensors in my arm transmitted just enough for me to feel the effort of holding myself in place. My shoulder, where metal and carbon and silicon met flesh, had been reinforced during the augmentation process, but was still painful. If my arm barely transmitted pain than my shoulder more than made up for it.

I clung to the rack, then after a moment's thought I swung until I was horizontal, arresting my movement with a foot. Then I slid into the rack I'd been holding onto. It felt like sliding into a coffin. The sheet of metal above me was twisted and warped. The number of shrapnel holes through it and the pieces embedded into the bulkhead the rack was welded to were a testament to just how close to death I'd come.

Once in the rack I was able to brace myself in place with my feet, leaving my hands free to work the controls of the vacsuit's computer. A quick check showed that the transmitter for my radio was out, though the receiver still worked. More worryingly, a series of flashing alerts appeared on my visor. The suit's oxygen supply had been breached. There was at least one leak in the system, possibly more that the suit couldn't pinpoint.

The patch kit on my belt had been ripped away when the compartment depressurized. The emergency supply locker had been mounted on the port bulkhead. Without them there was no way to repair the suit. I had eight minutes before I died and the rack became my coffin for real.

A hand grabbed my arm and dragged me from the rack. I struggled, flailing, but hit nothing. I was spun around and slammed into the rack hard enough to make me lose my breath and go still.

I looked up and met her eyes. She was standing there, barefoot on the shattered deck, wearing the same jeans and shirt I'd seen her in before. She should have been dead, killed by the vacuum, drifting out into space with no gravity, but she wasn't.

For a fraction of a second she was backlit through the torn bulkhead as a fusion warhead detonated in burst of plasma and radiation in the starfield behind her. She wasn't a hallucination. A hallucination couldn't have saved my life once. But I didn't know what she was. No human could survive unprotected in space, but she did. She stood there in complete defiance of physics and biology and threw me towards the end of the compartment.



I impacted shoulder first. It was my reinforced shoulder that hit, which was probably deliberate. I managed to grab the handhold set into the bulkhead by the hatch before my momentum carried me away from and turned towards her.

She stood in the same place, unmoved by the force required to throw me without gravity. Newton's Third had no more apparent effect on her than any other fundamental law of the universe did. Then she was in front of me without having crossed the intervening distance.

Her eyes weren't focused on me. She looked beyond me and beside me simultaneously. The warped hatch next to me shouldn't have been able to move in its twisted frame. That didn't stop it from wrenching open.

I threw myself into the hatch but was blown back by the air streaming from it. Then I was through, propelled by an unknown force, and the hatch slammed shut behind me as improbably as it had opened. The telltale above it flashed red.

I collapsed to the deck and lay there gasping.

#### DISCUSSION [2.1]

*Well?*

*The Reliant was lost with all hands. Defiance escaped and is currently between systems modifying her drives to change signatures. Both ships were using Rebel IFFs. Absolution is still in-system with merchant registration under a neutral flag.*

*I thought the neutrals no longer operated in Heinlein?*

*Normal shipping is suspended. But Absolution is chartered as a private warship and has been contracted to run escort for humanitarian convoys and refugee evacuations. The neutrals would rather hire independents than risk their few warships, especially as those warships are the only things keeping them neutral. This is Absolutions's third run as an escort. And the holding company that owns her is, of course, distant enough from us that we can deny any part in her operations.*

*Explain how we lost a frigate on a harassment run.*

*It appears that Reliant and Defiance both underestimated Athens's captain. She had an undistinguished pirate hunting career running down in-system boats and light frigates a quarter of her tonnage pre-war, and mostly skirmishes since. Athens was part of the screening DESRON at Bradbury, but that was her only fleet action and there's no record of any distinguishing actions in either direction there.*

*So Reliant and Defiance came screaming in like a pair of hotshot Rebels abandoning guerre de course for a chance at real blood. Athens turned out to be better than they thought and swatted Reliant early at the cost of a few heavy hits and fought hard enough to force Defiance to withdraw earlier than planned. Apparently there's now talk of giving Captain Burke a promotion and a DESRON of her own.*

*How many aboard Reliant?*

*Her complement was nine hundred and twelve. She's listed as overdue on the false itinerary she filed and assumed lost due to unknown causes. Death benefits have already been paid to next of kin. Defiance reports eighty-seven killed and roughly twice that injured. She'll also need drydock time. The official cause of damage is pirate action.*

*So far you've detailed an operation that has been expensive financially, with an additionally high cost in men and materiel. Do you have any success to report?*

*Yes, sir. Defiance and Absolution both report system-wide reading increases consistent with her presence immediately after Athens suffered a severe hit. We believe she intervened on Alpha Three's behalf again. Additionally, there are no indicators TELCORPS units within the system suspect anything, have been alerted to her presence, or Alpha Three's potential status.*

*The attack was timed to occur simultaneously with the Beta activations, which went according to plan with no unexpected deviations.*

*Good. But we can't afford such expensive diversions for every Beta milestone. Find a way to keep her attention on Alpha Three at lower costs.*

*He's entering the hottest warzone for fifty light years. She'll have plenty of reasons to be occupied with him, sir.*

*Still.*

*Yes, sir. I'll see to it.*

## ATTITUDE [3.01]

The only secure airspace over Heinlein-2, or Rico, was a two hundred klick perimeter around what remained of the costal city Zim, which served as our HQ. We held about a K-klick around Zim, but only the inner perimeter was free of Innies forces. Outside that there were still entrenched or underground pockets of Innies, some with mobile SAM units or MANPADS.

If there had been a couple of dropships worth of grunts to send to the main AO *Athens* would've dropped us directly to a FOB. After all, grunts, even in full battle rattle, were cheap, and dropships and their pilots weren't worth much more. But there was just me and one of the boots, who'd survived by virtue of panicking and running to the wrong berthing, so they put us on a full shuttle, strapped into jump seats next to the cargo, which was important enough to earn an hard-burn descent through the middle of the safe corridor.

There were enough factory fresh APCs and IFVs to fit out a mounted infantry company, plus a handful of tanks and pallets of spare parts for the vehicles. Then there was the ammo. It might have been the most valuable part of the load.

It was all exotic munitions, stuff that couldn't be produced in theater, mostly plasma: Plasma mines, bombs, warheads, containment rounds for specialist AP work; you name it, it was there. And then the nukes, ranging from demolition charges to strategic weapons. ROEs didn't permit orbital bombardment without direct authorization from Earth, but nuking a city was just fine and only had to go up to System Command for approval.

High-density power sources for heavy DEWs and a container full of antimatter ordnance rounded out the manifest. If the rest of the cargo made a safe descent likely, that had guaranteed one, escort included. No one wanted an unplanned A-MAT reaction, and even something as primitive as an explosive round could breach containment. Any heavy AA system certainly would.

Just being near it concerned me. The boot sure as hell didn't like it either. I was doing my best to ignore him. From what I could see he was pale underneath his tan and doing his best to hide a case of the shakes.

The lander was bouncing through the upper atmosphere when he spoke. "How can you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Just sit there. Aren't you nervous?"

"What about? We're not gonna take fire."

"Everything. Anything. That you have no control, no say in what happens."

"How'd you get through boot and SOI with that attitude? If you worry about everything you can't control in war you'll eat your gun before the month's out." If he lived that long. Boots died fast on Rico. And he didn't want to know what I was worrying about, or why I'd barely spoken since *Athens* was attacked.

"That's no help."

"Worry about nothing and you'll end up dead and in the mud. Worry about everything and you'll snap and do it yourself."

"So, what, find the balance?"

"Something like that. What are they teaching at SOI if they didn't tell you that?"

“They’ve cut down the courses for non-specialists.”

“Of course.” I closed my eyes and slept for the rest of the ride.

STENCH [3.02]

The boot ended up being assigned to 3/5, same as me. Probably to save on transpo costs, and one unit was much the same as any other, all starving for fresh blood. I drew weapons and gear from the stores in Zim to replace what I’d lost onboard *Athens*, then we hopped onto a skimmer westbound to the perimeter.

Two hundred clicks passed fast. Even the checkpoints every ten clicks went smooth and easy. It wasn’t their job to be concerned with people heading towards the forward areas unless an alert had been passed.

The skimmer was hovering five meters about the roadway, buzzing past the long convoys of ground transports and armored vehicles at 100kph, fast enough to make the mounted plasma repeater in my grip rattle despite the stabilizer fields. The only time we moved slower was between two checkpoints where there’d been fighting. An Innie saboteur team had slipped through the perimeter and mined the road before setting up an ambush.

From the looks of it they hadn't gotten away. There were bodies and parts of bodies scattered along the treeline where it'd been cleared back a hundred meters from the roadway. They hadn't died alone. The most intact wreck on the road was a burning tank hulk. Its armored underside had absorbed most of the blast from the mine that killed it. The trucks it had been escorting hadn't been so lucky. I saw chunks of debris smoldering deep into the trees, well past where dismounts were using flamethrowers to ensure no one was hiding in the underbrush.

The driver made to land the skimmer and offer assistance. A battered looking lieutenant with the paint scorched from her armor waved us off before returning to directing her men. We accelerated away, clearing the cloud of smoke and sticky stench of seared meat.

The boot hadn't sealed his helmet. He blew chunks over the side. So did one of the other three marines we were riding with, though the condition of his armor showed he was no boot.

NICE ENOUGH [3.03]



The perimeter was twenty meters of concrete revetment studded with weapon emplacements, cameras and sensors of all sorts, with the forest cleared a regulation hundred meters to either side. The better part of division of engineers had put it up over a month while three quarters of the infantry and armor on the continent had held a tenuous line of makeshift fortifications a klick out from the work site. 3/5 had been constantly on the move, screening that line, serving as picket, and checking where the foliage was too dense for visual, infrared, or thermal scans to penetrate effectively. More than once a squad had failed to return from patrol and an entire company would move out in force to look for them. On the good days we found the bodies.

Now the length of the wall was patrolled by drones and watched by automated security systems backed by QRFs stationed at intervals. It was still a huge investment in time and resources and money and manpower, but it was reasonably secure and did leave less territory to hold the hard way. Apparently the whole thing had been built in the first place because Earth had wanted some form of demonstrable success in Heinlein to make setbacks elsewhere less visible, nevermind that we'd been sending back three digit body-counts daily since the campaign began.

The massive camp inside the wall had been turned from tents and dugouts and foxholes to concrete pillboxes, guard towers, underground bunkers and a reinforced barracks complex. The road cut straight down the middle, through the gate in the earthen berms and in the sights of an even dozen heavy weapons.

Following instructions on signs outside the wire, the driver dropped the skimmer from five meters to one so it didn't trip the AA defenses, which were set to target skimmers and gunships, leaving anything bigger or flying higher to the DEW batteries on the wall to deal with.

We settled to a stop in the motor pool. I safed my repeater and locked the mount in place before stepping down. I nodded thanks to the boot when he handed me my rifle and slung it over my shoulder where it bounced against armor plating. The moment we were beyond the perimeter I'd have it in my hands with a round in the chamber and my finger on the safety, but it didn't look like that was necessary inside the wall.

A quick check reassured me that my sidearm and two knives were in their proper places, then I grabbed my pack from the skimmer.

The sergeant running the motor pool waved us over to his desk, a half-smoked cigarette hanging from his lips. The closer we got to him the stronger the smell of tobacco got and the thicker the haze of smoke. "Where y'all headed?"

Two of the marines with us were assigned to local QRFs and were told to sit around until there was a ride free for them. They left when he pointed them to the chow hall. The third was a tech specialist in light armor assigned to wall monitoring duty. He was told to report to a captain in the main bunker.

When my turn came I indicated the boot as well. "We're headed out to the 3/5."

"They're pushing into Blackstone. Started two days back. Word is they're neck deep in the shit." He met my replacement eye through my faceplate. "Looks like you're familiar enough with that. Transfer?"

"Coming off a couple of months of mandatory R&R."

“Huh. Where’d they put you back together?”

“Cabell.”

“Nice place.”

“Nice enough.”

“And that one?”

“Boot.”

“Ah.” He smiled. It wasn’t pretty. “You ready to get dumped straight into the shit, kid?”

The boot didn’t have an answer.

CRATERED [3.04]

The ten-meter high slab of hardened ceramics and titanium plates swung open, revealing a tunnel through the perimeter wall dimly lit by recessed light strips. My HUD flashed a bright red warning and overlaid a field of the same crimson on the tunnel floor, indicating a minefield, moments before it began to highlight autonomous weapon emplacements in the shadowed walls.

I found myself hoping the smart mines and weapons would recognize the IFF codes we were transmitting. Otherwise the tunnel would turn into the carefully designed killzone it was.

I held tightly too the repeater mounted in front of me as the small convoy began to rumble through the short tunnel to the open gate on the far side. Instead of being in a skimmer this time I was riding an armored transport capable of holding half a squad. The only way for both me and the boot to find room was for one of us to take the turret and the other to squeeze in between the transport's crew and the supplies it was carrying out to the units fighting in Blackstone. The boot was smaller than I was, so I got turret.

We'd been lucky to catch an outgoing convoy so soon after we arrived at the perimeter. The only time vehicles moved alone beyond the safety of the wall's guns were if they were scouting or in emergencies. Routine patrols consisted of a pair of light APCs and an IFV for support. And there was no way a flight through such risky airspace, when the ground between the perimeter and the front was seeded with Innie guerrilla teams carrying anti-air weapons, would be risked for a pair of grunts. Instead we'd squeezed in and made do.

The asphalt of the road leading out was pocked and covered with impact marks, scorches and rough patch jobs wherever the damage had been too severe. The cleared strips to either side were worse. They'd started as plain dirt after any remaining plants had been burned away, but in the time since I'd last traveled the road to Blackstone they had turned into a pitted wasteland of craters and pools of stagnant water. The trees beyond the cleared ground had either been shattered or denuded by the relentless, if intermittent, Innie shelling.

"How long since the last time they shelled this close?" I asked over the transport's net.

“Coupla weeks. Laser clusters were added to splash mortar rounds before they hit and they haven’t had any plasma light enough for hit-and-runs in months. The FOB a hundred clicks out’s been gettin hit pretty bad since then and there’ve been plenty of bombings on the road.”

Armed with that reassuring knowledge, I settled in for the three hundred-ish clicks to Blackstone.

#### COMPLICATION [3.1]

*Well?*

*We may have a problem, sir.*

*What is it?*

*Alpha Three’s been assigned to his old parent unit—Third Battalion, Fifth Marines.*

*They’re currently part of the push to drive the Rebels out of Blackstone, where they still hold everything on the south bank and parts of the northern city.*

*He’s infantry. We knew he would probably be assigned to an active combat zone. It’s an acceptable risk. Particularly if she is forced to intervene to keep him alive.*

*Normally I’d agree with you, sir, but there are complicating elements.*

*Elaborate.*

*Blackstone's a joint op. Army elements normally used to garrison Zim and the inner perimeter have been tasked with seizing the city while the majority of the Marine units have been moved back up to front lines. 3/5 are the only Marines in the besieging forces at this moment. More importantly, there are TELCORPS units native to the Army forces, and a team has been seconded to the 3/5.*

*How much of a threat are they?*

*It depends on who the Operative leading the team is.*

*Do we know?*

*No. We were able to acquire a list of all the TELCORPS operatives in theater, and several of them are sensitive enough to pick up Alpha Three despite his latency. Unfortunately, between TELCORPS's typically paranoid level of OPSEC and the confusion in the Blackstone AO, we've been unable to narrow the list down and determine which Operative is with the 3/5. Nor do we have any assets within the battalion—we're relying on reports for what intel we do have.*

*Relocate any local assets you can get your hands on, but tell them to maintain their distance from the Operative. I don't want any possibility of TELCORPS being alerted to our activities. Or to our interest in Alpha Three.*

*Already done, sir.*

*ELINT? SIGINT?*

*Neither. Both sides are employing broad-spectrum jamming. The only transmissions getting out are high power bursts with condensed reports and casualty counts to Heinlein SYSCOM. We're pulling aerial and orbital imagery, but that only gives us a rough idea of the situation on the ground.*

*Do what you can. If you ID the Operative as a major threat, you're authorized to take whatever measures you deem necessary to deal with him.*

*Yes, sir. I'll begin preparing contingency plans.*

*Good. Now, what's the status of the Betas?*

TELCORPS [4.01]

The battalion CP was in the basement of a school on the northern fringes of Blackstone. It was fairly obvious what the building was being used for. There were a half dozen antennas hastily mounted on the roof, a sandbagged and monowired perimeter, and the better part of a platoon obviously on guard. The rest would be inside, close to windows they could shoot out of.

For all that, it didn't look very permanent, or like it had been set up there long, which matched my impression of the Colonel. He wasn't a man to stay far from where his men were fighting, even if the realities of command meant he was more effective in a secure location back from the front.

The convoy was waved through the wire. It pulled to a halt and soldiers spilled out. Some joined the guards. The rest began to unload the supplies we'd carried. I dropped down from the turret and walked through the school's double doors, the boot behind me.

The inside of the school showed the other reason why the building was fortified. It was a CCP and a field hospital all in in one, with everything that entailed. There was screaming and moaning; medics and a few doctors ignoring blood and offal and vomit that stained the floors and their patients as they tried to keep men and women alive.



Almost a third of the marines I could see weren't moving. Most of those would never move again. A pair of men were quietly moving bodies, clearing up floor space and cots. They were expecting more casualties and preparing accordingly. There might have been an assault gone wrong, a Rebel counterattack, or the fighting was so heavy the flow of wounded was constant. I didn't know which it was and none of the options were appealing.

One of the sentries came over and led us through the mess to a set of stairs leading downwards. As he did I was glad for the second time in as many days that I kept my helmet sealed while planetside. It might not block the sounds of screams or desperate prayers but it blocked the smells of the dead and dying.

If there was any spillover from the CCP it had gone upwards, rather than down. The school's basement held no wounded soldiers. Just men and women whose stances spoke of the exhaustion hidden beneath their helmets. They were officers, staff, and other specialists gathered around a display showing the city.

The sentry who'd guided us went back upstairs as the Colonel approached. "Corporal. Good to see you back. I didn't think you'd be here in time for the fun."

"The docs work fast these days, sir."

"So I see. Charlie's been hit pretty hard. They're short experienced NCOs. You'll be with them."

"Sir."

"And you, Private?" The Colonel turned to the boot. "Any combat experience?"

"No, sir."

"How fast can you run?"

“Sir?”

“There’s so much jamming and counter-jamming going on that anything longer range than squad comms gets lost. The techies are doing their best, but until they figure something out I need message runners. Can you handle that?”

The boot’s helmet bobbed. Looked like he’d swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Dump your rucks here. Somebody’ll make sure your gear comes with us if we move and you won’t need that shit out there. Just assault packs and battle rattle. Private, you get to wait here until I need you. Get familiar with that map.” He waved to the display. “Corporal, there’s some wounded coming in from Charlie. You can hitch a ride back when the ACP gets here.

“No need for that, Colonel.” A woman stepped away from the map display. Her armor was the matte black of inactive chamouflage except for the dull grey insignia on her spaulder. TELCORPS. “I was planning on taking my team into that sector anyways. He can come with us.”

I suppressed the urge to swallow.

NOT SUBTLE [4.02]

Earth was not subtle when she named her colonies. Asimov. Bradbury. Banks. Clarke. Gibson. Haldeman. Herbert. Lucas. Reynolds. Roddenberry. Simmons. Others. They were those who saw the universe as it might be, not as it was. When we moved past Gagarian Station and Armstrong Landing, when we ran out of the heroes of the early space age, we turned to them for inspiration instead.

Heinlein is another example. Rico took its name from the main character of one of his books. Every other major city and landmark on the planet follows that trend. I knew the names. There wasn't a marine alive who hadn't read of Johnny Rico, Sergeant Zim, and all the rest. *Starship Troopers* was a classic, practically an infantryman's Bible, and had been for centuries.

It wasn't the future he saw. It wasn't the war he saw. But it was a future, a war. I thought Blackstone would have seemed familiar to the man who named it, however indirectly.

I was safer thinking those things as our Drake IFV crept through streets between bombed-out, bullet-scarred buildings. TELCORPS operatives had a reputation for being twitchy about the men around them, and had the authority to act on what they picked up if they so desired.

Enough had happened to me that I didn't want the operative sitting next to me in the back of the Drake rooting around in my head. I chose to muse on history instead. It also made ignoring the carnage we passed easier. I'd contemplated enough walls painted the rusty color of old blood in the past two years.

When I looked away from the viewport, the Operative was staring at me. She cocked her head to one side, the armored equivalent of a raised eyebrow. I shrugged and leaned back on the bench.

The others in the Drake watched our silent exchange. Their gazes were easier to meet. They were only hidden behind the standard tinted, non-reflective polly-diamond alloy facemasks of infantry helmets. The Operative's helmet was a death's head in black, immortal grin and all. Overly theatrical, but TELCORPS had a reputation. They apparently found it useful and indulged in occasional dramatics to support it.

Not that the Operative would sacrifice practicality for cheap scares. The skull helmet was made of the same chamouflage as the rest of her armor and could blend into anything. It was too expensive for grunts like me to get, but standard for SpecOps and other elites.

The Drake stopped. Servoes whined and metal creaked above us. Then the cannon in the turret opened up. It was a short burst, maybe a dozen smart HE rounds. There was no return fire and the Drake began to move again.

The roads got rougher. We started to rattle around in the metal box on tracks we were riding. It took conscious effort not to continually bump shoulders with the Operative next to me. On the few occasions I did, she turned to look at me. I got the impression she was smiling at her discomfort behind the sculpted grin of her helmet. I wasn't sure which expression was more unnerving, but I'd rather not have been subjected to either.

SHIT DETAIL [4.03]

Charlie Company's HQ was a more hasty affair than battalion. Even calling it an HQ was a bit much. It would've been more accurate to say that it was where Captain Ikari had stopped between firefights. The only thing that distinguished it from any other ruined building in Blackstone was that it had three mostly intact walls—one more than was normal near the river bisecting the city—and the extra antennas on the command variant Drake sitting outside.

I knew the Captain by reputation. Her platoon commanders and first sergeant were a mystery. They were all gathered in the room, drinking cups of field ration instant coffee and looking at a map. A few were smoking.

None of them looked happy to see us. Or, more accurately, they weren't happy to see the Operative. I don't think they noticed me.

"Operative." The Captain was the first to greet her.

"Captain Ikari." The Operative took off her helmet, matching everyone else in the room.

"I thought you were with Battalion, Ma'am. May I ask what you're doing here?"

"I wanted to see the front. See if there was anything I could do."

Ikari snorted and pushed a strand of red hair back from her face. "You've come at a good time then." She waved at the map behind her. "We're about to start things up again."

"Corporal, are you with her?" Ikari switched her attention to me.

“No, Ma’am. I’m fresh from the docs and the Colonel said you needed NCOs.”

“I do. Adam, you’re short the most squad leaders. Take him.” She walked back to the map. The Operative followed her. I hesitated until the lieutenant who’d nodded when I was assigned to him waved me over.

“Now, as I was saying, the Army boys want to roll their armor up to the river and take the bridge in our sector. But they left their big girl panties back on the transport ships and are saying there’re too many enemy positions between here and there to just assault through. So we got the shit detail and we’re clear a path to the bank then escorting the armor column in.

“Adam, you’ve got these buildings,” she indicated a cluster outlined in red on the map to him and then handed out assignments to the rest of the platoon leaders. “The Army has a last been gracious enough to put a battery on call for us. If a position’s too hard for your platoon to take, call in arty and schwack the fuckers. Don’t be stupid about picking fights. You have an hour and a half to feed your people, brief them, resupply, and rearm. We’ll step off at 0845.”

[follows with meeting squad segment. So rough I’m skipping typing it up for now.]

#### ARMY LOGIC [4.04]

“So, if the Army’s too scared to bring in Dragons, why the fuck are we rolling up in Drakes?” Sadik asked.

“Army logic.” Heimirson replied. She brass-checked her rifle as she spoke. “No one said it had to resemble actual logic.” It was an old joke.

The Drake slammed to a stop. The ramped dropped and the IFV began to shake as the 30mm up top opened up.

I was the first out the back. It was a short sprint to the front of the target building; protected by the bulk of the Drake and covered by the hail of smart munitions it was spitting at anything with a thermal signature and no IFF. They punched through walls or arced upwards to drop in through weak or missing ceilings.

When the squad was in position we stacked up. We led with grenades, opening the door just enough to throw them in and finish anything the Drakes missed. A muffled blast shook the wall. Then Kay kicked in the door and we filed into the room, weapons up.

Blood dripped from the walls and painted the rubble on the floor. It stuck to my boots with a slight squelch for every step I took. The grenades shredded what the Drake hadn't torn to pieces. The largest remaining chunk of flesh was the size of my fist.

Shouts of, “Clear,” rang out from my squad, then, “Fuckin Christ. You think the frags might've been overkill, Dirix?”

“Fuck you, Malker.” We started to move to the next room. “You know the maxim: ‘There is no overkill, only—’”

“Can it, both of you.” I cut him off.

The next room, if it could be called that with two walls open to the street, was similar. The Drakes hadn't been firing HE, just regular 30mm, more than enough to leave sticky smears where the Innies had been hiding. Two had been dug into the rubble, but they hadn't brought thermal covers and the Drakes saw them anyway.

The whole building was like that. We cleared it carefully, called it in, and moved on. Stray rounds were bouncing off the Drake as we moved forwards, but its sensor suite tracked them on the way in and replied in kind. The number of shooters dropped quickly.

The second building still had two stories left. So did most of the others. We'd started with the most ruined of the buildings assigned to us. The rest of third platoon was around us, clearing their assigned buildings. There wasn't much fighting, just isolated bursts of firing, quickly silenced.

Half the street blew up.

Two Drakes were gone instantly. My visor blacked out with a nanosecond delay. A heat wave washed over me, hot enough to feel through armor, fast enough to throw me to the ground. The gun on our IFV started to roar as the icons for Dirix, Sadik, and Kasper vanished from my HUD, and my visor started to depolarize.

It blacked out again. I was thrown against a wall by a concussive wave. Hot shrapnel pinged off my armor. A few pieces got through, missed anything important; hurt like fuck. I was lucky. Heimirson wasn't. Her icon disappeared.

My visor depolarized again. There were Innies everywhere, rising from where thermal covers had been thrown aside. Our Drake was a burning, shattered hulk.

Malker was on the ground next to me. I hauled him up and we dove for a new hole in the wall beside us, throwing ourselves through to escape the gunfire outside.

Seymour was already inside. She pulled her knife from the chest of a dead Innie, wiped it on the body, and sheathed it. Kay scrambled through the hole while she was picking up her discarded rifle.



Somebody'd lost it, was screaming his head off on the platoon net. I switched to the squad channel in time to catch a remark from Malker.

"Fucking fuck. What the fuck was that?"

"Shut up. Door." I pointed to the doorway. We started to move through. Bullets shattered the concrete by Kay's feet.

"Motherfucker!" He jumped back into the relative safety of our room. "Stairs, right side. MG on the landing, sandbagged. Two meters up."

"Seymour."

"On it." She flipped a switch on her rifle, plugged a fiber-optic cable from her gauntlet into a port on her underbarrel SM launcher. "Link's good. HE, WP secondary."

"Cover on three." We poured fire through the doorway, towards the stairs. Seymour sprinted through, dropped behind the best cover she could find. Her coilgun snapped as it fired.

The explosion rattled the house. Half the stairs were gone, the machine gunner with them. Chunks of white phosphorus were scattered around the rooms, burning hot enough to embed themselves in the walls and floor. Anything flammable went up. The room filled with smoke.

My helmet was working well enough to activate the air filters on its own before I'd gotten more than a breath or two of smoke. It couldn't do anything about the visibility, but that wasn't a surprise.

“Seymore, Kay, hold here. Malker, with me.” I moved towards what remained of the stairs, Malker following. We ascended carefully, close to the wall where the supports for the steps were still mostly intact, avoiding the still-burning WP. It was more than hot enough to melt our boots if we stepped on it.

The only Innie upstairs had been coming to help the machine gunner when Seymour blew him up. She was on the floor, her knife beside her where she’d tried to dig searing bits of WP from her skin. Her helmet must’ve kept us from hearing the screaming before she passed out, but I could still hear flesh cooking and see smoke rising from holes in her armor.

Malker kicked the fallen knife away and put two bullets through her visor without checking if she was alive. If she was it was a mercy. If she wasn’t at least we were sure of it.

We searched the rest of the floor quickly. The only surprise was a man huddled in a back corner. His hair might’ve been gray—he had wrinkles to match if it was—but he was too dirty to tell.

He said something to me. I didn’t know the language.

“You know Xin Mandarin?”

Malker shook his head. “Just Standard English, Japanese, and some Prezheniy Russkiy [should be “Old Russian,” if Google Translate hasn’t dropped the ball on me].”

We left him. There was still a firefight to deal with outside. I checked the platoon net. Some order had reasserted itself, but we were still split up, little groups forced to take shelter in the nearest buildings while the Innies cut anything in the street to shreds. If they'd had any heavy stuff besides the plasma mines and a few HMGs, we'd have been dead already.

I went to the front of the house to look out over the street. Every few seconds a burst of tracer fire swept down it from the blocking position ahead. No one had managed to get through the killzone and take it out. Without air or arty it was going to be a hard fight to break out.

Then I was thrown into a wall hard enough to feel it through my armor and She was standing over me. The world went white. Then black.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [4.1]

*Well?*

*We've lost contact with every asset in Blackstone. SYSCOM's still trying to figure out what happened. I'd say it worked.*

*Anything on our sensors?*

*Besides the usual for an event like this? Yes. A spike, identical to the one that occurred when we attacked the Athens, but longer in duration.*

*So we can draw her out.*

*It would appear so.*

*Good. Check if Alpha Three's found amongst the survivors. The Operative as well—I don't want TELCORPS anywhere near him.*

*Yes, Sir.*

## DAMN THE REST [5.01]

For the second time in three months [check timeframe] I woke up to the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling—but one that was quickly identifiable as the overhead in a Navy medbay by looking around the room. Or, more accurately, the curtained partition between me and the rest of the room—the only direction that wasn't blocked by neutral colored fabric was at the foot of my bed, and that just showed an open corridor and a wall painted in sterile white. The deck was a dark gray to provide a reference in case of gravity loss.

It was essentially the same view I'd had the last time I woke up in a medbay. It was definitely not Blackstone, and if the constantly changing vibrations I could feel through the bed were any indication, the she was actively maneuvering.

Eventually a corpsman came by on rounds.

“Good, you're awake.”

“What—”

“What happened? The Innies nuked Blackstone, and your lucky ass got pulled out of the rubble, unconscious, but apparently fine. Not even cooked in the slightest. Brain activity's normal, no obvious injuries besides the normal scrapes and bruises, not even elevated radiation levels, according to your armor's diagnostics panel.” He stepped closer. “Which makes you a fucking enigma, but that's the brass's problem, not mine. You're awake now, so I get to keep you under observation for a couple of hours, then you can piss off and find an open berthing somewhere in Marine Country.

“And since you’re going to ask anyways, CSAR only pulled one other survivor out of Blackstone. That lived, anyway. The rest are dead or dying of acute radiation poisoning and are,” he checked his watch, “no, were, being treated—and buried—on the ground in Rico. They’re living ones are probably on their way up in transport now.

“You’re here because the brass wants to grill you and the other survivor. Till they get around to that, you might want to bring up an orbital view on your terminal. EARTHCOM authorized a major retaliatory strike on Heinlein. Word is any position with more than a company of Innies present is getting nuked to glass, and damn the rest.”

YOUR PROBLEM NOW [5.02]

EARTHCOM could’ve ordered the fleet to use just about any weapon to carry out the strikes. Warfare often revolves around the high ground, and orbit is the highest ground there is. From their geosynchronous positions the various warships assigned to Heinlein SYSCOM had the luxury of choice. KKV’s, ship-to-ship plasma cannons, capital-grade DEWs, they had it all, if not on one ship than another.

But EARTHCOM decided to send a message, of the, “Eye for an eye,” sort. Old-fashioned nukes wouldn’t just kill the Insurrectionists; the fallout would leave massive portions of the main continent uninhabitable as radioactive winds blew outwards from glowing craters. If the Innies were willing to use nukes to deny Blackstone to us, then we would do the same for the whole planet, and leave the survivors to slow deaths while our troops were reassigned elsewhere. Two birds, one radioactive stone.

The mushroom clouds were still rising when I was escorted into a conference room. The senior woman was a rear admiral, Heinlein SYSCOM's head of intelligence. The other two were a Marine major and a Navy captain, both also spooks. The corpsman hadn't been lying when he said command was interested in how I survived.

I told them I didn't know. That my unit had been ambushed, we were in the middle of a heavy firefight, there was a white flash, then I woke up in the medbay. I didn't tell them about the Woman In Red, that I'd seen her right before the nuke went off. I thought *She'd* kept me alive, but I wasn't sure. I was sure a bunch of intel officers wouldn't believe me if I mentioned her.

They ran me through my story three times trying to pick it apart and were about to get started on the fourth when the hatch opened and the Operative stepped into the room. She wasn't wearing her death's head helmet and most of the camouflage paint had been scored from her armor, leaving it the dull color of burnt titanium-reinforced composites, but it was unquestionably her.

"Operative." The admiral spoke first. "You'll have an opportunity to explain your experiences when—"

"Respectfully, Admiral, I've already submitted my report. You'll find that it matches the Corporal's, who you will be releasing into my custody, effective immediately. This is now a TELCORPS matter."

"I—" She took a deep breath. "Very well, Operative Oscar One Five Four. Per standing TELCORPS Operative authority, he's your problem now. If you're going to kill him, the Navy would appreciate it if you cleaned up afterward or used an airlock."

“Your cooperation is appreciated, Admiral.” The Operative turned back to the door. “With me, Corporal.”

SAFETY OFF [5.03]

I followed The Operative through the passageways of the ship, heading away from the conference room and into a small stateroom in Marine country that she’d taken over. There wasn’t anything personalizing the room apart from her helmet, more skull-like than ever with the paint flayed from it, and her weapons, immaculately cleaned and stored there instead of an armory in defiance of regulation—regulation that probably didn’t apply to her to begin with.

There was only one chair, fixed behind the desk, but she declined to use it, instead standing across from me, with only the thin, bare metal separating us. Her right hand stayed close to the pistol holstered on her thigh, and her eyes twitched away from my face occasionally, like she was watching for a threat.

A whisper of a familiar presence on the back of my neck, gone as soon as I noticed it, suggested what she was watching for. I suppressed the urge to swallow, but couldn’t stop the shiver that went with it. She noticed. Then the moment passed.

“You and I should both be dead. I know how I survived, but I’m curious how you did.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she stopped me with an upraised hand.



“A little bit of digging revealed that this is not the first time you have been the only survivor of your unit. You are either lucky beyond reason; a latent gift, which is almost the same; or lying. I will find out which.” She leant forward, bracing her free hand against the desk.

“So, how did you survive?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you really think you can lie to my face? I can tell. The only thing keeping you alive right now is that you might be useful. Change my mind, and I will rip everything you know from you and watch you die as I do it.”

“I don’t know. There was a strange feeling, then a white light, then I was here.”

“Lucky your eyes still work, if you saw the blast. But this feeling—have you felt it before? When the rest of your squad died? Or on the *Athens*?”

“No.”

“You’re lying. Last chance.”

“Something similar. Not identical.”

Half-truths kept me alive, so long as she didn’t press. She didn’t.

“So.” She leant back. It looked like she would have crossed her arms if she hadn’t been keeping one hand by her weapon. “You’re a latent gift. I thought as much when you arrived in Blackstone. And powerful. But you haven’t awoken, or TELCORPS would’ve noticed. You might be protecting yourself unconsciously. But there’s something. You’re being watched—you felt it. I felt it. And I’m—” She frowned.

“You’re dismissed.”

“Ma’am?”

“I’m done with you for now. TELCORPS is done with you. You’ll be reassigned to fill a hole in someone’s roster; there are plenty of them right now. You’ll be redeployed, like the rest of this fleet, as soon as EARTHCOM tells us where we’re going. Some other shithole to get shot at, undoubtedly.”

Her hand moved faster than I could see. She left her pistol on the desk, barrel facing me.

“But I will be watching you.”

The safety was off.

#### EVALUATION [5.1]

*Well?*

*“We’ve confirmed that Alpha Three survived the strike, and we’ve acquired the records from Heinlein SYSCOM’s debrief of him. He claimed that he had no idea how he survived. Unfortunately, that’s not all. The Operative seconded to 3/5 survived and ended the debriefing by placing Alpha Three in TELCORPS custody.”*

*Any indication of how he survived?*

*She, Sir. And no, though we can make an educated guess. The debriefing records identify her as O-154. Our penetration of TELCORPS is too limited to give us access to any of her evaluations, but she's listed as a class two asset, and that classification frequently includes limited high-threat precognition.*

*Class two. That equates with what? The estimated low end potential of the Alphas?*

*Roughly, Sir. We were never able to run the full spectrum of tests we—*

*I'm aware of the history of Alpha line. Still, she could be a significant threat. Has she done anything with Alpha Three since she took him into custody?*

*It appears she only did so to remove him from the debriefing. The records we have show no change in his status, so it's likely that he was returned to the Marines before SYSCOM could log the changes. They may have spoken in that interval, but we have no confirmation of that.*

*Very well. Hold half of the active Betas for more testing and prepare the other half for deployment, but ensure that the remaining units come online properly. Then work up a set of possible operations against Alpha Three and O-154. I want a full range of options on my desk for evaluation within forty-eight hours.*

*Yes, Sir.*

## CHASE DROP [6.01]

The Chase drop was entirely different from my last landing on Heinlein, and painfully similar to my first. The rattling box I was strapped into with twenty other Marines was a quarter the size of an armored cargo lander and could take less than that in fire.

And it was taking fire. Heinlein as a system had been lightly held in space but fortified on the ground. Rico was a major fortress world for the Rebels. Gibson was worse, and a full Rebel fleet had been parked in the system. They held the troop transports back from the fighting, but we still dropped under fire.

SAMs and AAA and a dozen other methods for knocking expensive pieces of machinery out of the sky tried to kill my dropship. We were accompanied by interceptors, multirole attack craft, and probably even gunships when we got close enough to the ground. SEAD did what it could, and major AA and AO emplacements had been flattened from orbit before we cleared the hangars of the troopships, but a combat drop was a combat drop, and no sensors picked up every weapon down to the MANPADs and small arms the Rebels had.

The Marines around me, all trying to deal with the drop, or desperately trying not to contemplate it, were new faces. I'd been assigned a company made up entirely of replacements and scattered survivors, mostly limited to a few experience NCOs. The war was fast bleeding Earth and her loyal colonies, and that meant more new faces than not every deployment or campaign.

The standby light flicked from red to green as the dropship shook again. One minute warnings echoed through the compartment, shouted by sergeants and corporals. Then an impact slammed us into our seats as harnesses released automatically. We were down.

Disembarkation ramps dropped, one in the rear and two on the sides. I sprinted out at the head of my team, rifle raised, and split left, taking a knee in the high grass of the LZ. Other Marines moved past while we pulled security, heading for the treeline, directed by orders shouted over radio.

The ground trembled with the impact of new dropships. Heat washed across my back from the engines of the dropship that carried me down as they flared. It lifted, making space for more battered transports to follow. I gathered my team with a gesture and ran towards the trees.

There was no fighting at the LZ, but the battle continued overhead. Bits of shrapnel rained down from explosions. A burning fighter drove itself into the ground nearby, too fast for me to see the markings identifying it as a Rebel or part of our escort.

My team rejoined our squad at the trees. The sergeant waved me over, gave a few short instructions on where to dig in, and we began the task of forming a perimeter that could be held so the engineers could turn the clearing into a proper small spacefield.

An entire division had been allocated to the assault on Sparrow Spacefield after the bombers were finished with it. I didn't envy them. Since we were pushing into the cities on foot after encircling them, they saw the hardest fighting of the initial landing.

Tanks rumbled by, heading for revetments being thrown up for them, while combat engineers hurried ahead, under guard, to clear lines of fire for them, blowing down dozens of trees at a time.

The Rebels had chosen not to contest our landing on the ground. But they waited for us just a few clicks away, in Sparrow. Gibson SYSCOM gave civilians three days to clear the city, searching and scanning them as they went. Then we went in.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [6.02]

The slight shake of the hand around my ankle woke me up in my ranger grave. If the hand had been anywhere else I would have tried to kill whoever it belonged to, but it was Cook, one of the members of my team, waking me up for my watch.

We'd finished digging foxholes and fighting positions inside the treeline before I'd racked out. When they had time the engineers would reinforce them and build a berm, but they'd been too focused on putting up sensors and air defense emplacements to be worried about the ground defenses much, so that had been left to the infantry and armor units assigned to hold the perimeter.

Cook withdrew her hand the moment she was sure I was awake and moved onto Chen. We were on fifty percent watch in case the Rebels tried a spoiling attack against our staging grounds before we moved into Sparrow. I jammed my helmet on and grabbed my rifle. The clock in the corner of my HUD read 0200. A notification popped up, warning me that local sunrise was at 0522. Until then I'd be keeping watch in the dark.

When Chen joined me I climbed into the foxhole where Shaara was and sent her back to Cook to sleep for the rest of the night. She took Chen's proffered rifle and ammo while he took over her SAW, peering down the sights into the forest around us before relaxing.

"Looks clear."

"Yeah." I settled in for the watch beside him, making sure there was ammo for the SAW in reach.

The next hours were spent pulling up the thermal and night vision overlays on my HUD to confirm that the movements I saw beyond the foxholes were just local wildlife that hadn't been scared off by the continuous stream of dropships into the LZ, and men and machines out of it. Occasionally I asked one of the Dragon tanks to look at something with their better imaging suites, but for the most part it was boring and routine.

I didn't see the DEW beam that cored a Dragon further down the line, but I heard the crack of superheating air in its wake just a fraction of a second before the tank blew up. There was shouting behind me as the off watch Marines woke up, but I was too busy watching as the forest in front of me lit up with muzzle flashes. My helmet began to highlight the shapes of the attackers against the darkness as they depowered their camouflage to save energy.



A rocket cut through the night and impacted on the small berm of leftover dirt in front of the foxhole to my right, throwing dirt across me as it destroyed the AGL that had been mounted there, killing its crew and silencing it before it could start to tear holes in the attackers. Other rockets flashed out, hitting weapon emplacements or aimed at the Dragons in their revetments. They shrugged off most of the hits and fired back into the night, their muzzle flashes strong enough to cause my helmet filters to black out if I looked directly at them.

Chen was feeding the belt into his SAW without difficulty so I shouldered my rifle and looked down the sights towards the nearest group of Rebels. They bounded from tree to tree; advancing through the fields of fire we'd laid out earlier as best they could. The whole time their heavy weapons teams were doing their best to kill the Dragons.

I pulled the trigger and watched my bullet spark off the armor of the man I was shooting at. They were well equipped and well armed. I pulled the trigger again, this time aiming for his helmet. He staggered, and a burst of HMG fire blew his torso into fist-sized chunks.

Somebody shouted and another Dragon died, replaced by the sun-bright glare of a plasma warhead. Not the simple rockets I'd already seen, but proper, specialist AT missiles; pop-ups with vertical terminal attack profiles. The sort we used. The best thing an infantryman had to kill tanks.

The remaining tanks launched chaff clusters that glinted in the light of burning trees while rebel IFVs rolled forwards, cannons roaring, their complement of infantry advancing behind the shelter they offered. I tried to crouch lower in the foxhole even as I began to shoot at the newcomers. Chen was reloading the SAW behind me.

A mild crump announced the mortar round that blew his head off, blood and shrapnel pinging off my armor.

“Mortars!” The warning was unnecessary, but I sent it out over the squad net while dropping my rifle and grabbing the SAW anyways. I wiped blood and dirt from the rounds in the feet tray, slammed the cover down, and racked the bolt.

Chen’s headless body slumped against the front of the foxhole, leaving a damp patch that glowed warm in my thermals. I started firing.

A round from one of the Dragons punched through an IFV and continued out the far side, sucking a plume of offal after it. The IFV stopped. A HEAT round hit it. The blast threw everyone in half a dozen meters to the ground. Most didn’t get back up. I shot at those who did.

A voice on my radio warned me a second before someone slid into the foxhole. Shaara dropped more ammo beside me and started loading a grenade into the launcher beneath her rifle. She didn’t bother setting up a smart link. The shot, aimed by eye, hit in front of a fallen tree being used for cover. The Rebels behind it ducked, hugging close to the ground. I put a burst over their heads, keeping them that way.

“Mech stride approaching from the southeast.” The calm voice overrode nets down to the squad level to pass the alert.

“Shit.” We were anchoring the southern section of the perimeter. “Got any AT? Or plasma?”

Shaara shook her head. “I’m only carrying HE and incendiary.”

I saw the quartet of walkers through thermals first; glowing blobs of white and grey against a forest picked out in shades of black. Then I felt them, metronomic impacts rumbling through the earth as they advanced, more distinct than the subtle vibrations of the Dragons's massive engines or the earthshaking blasts of their main guns.

The mortar fire got lighter for a moment, but the mechs took up the slack. One swept the area with bursts from a minigun, keeping our AT teams pinned. Two broke off from the stride, moving away at an angle until one took a plasma round in the knee, locking it up. The concentrated fire of the three remaining Dragons tore it apart.

The fourth mech had a guided micromunitions launcher. I saw a warning as infrared targeting lasers swept the area and did my best to curl up at the bottom of the fox-hole with Shaara. Then it fired.

PLACEHOLDER 2 [6.03]

The hail of thumb-sized projectiles swept through the forest across a one hundred sixty degree arc. Some were contact detonation. Others were airburst, directing shrapnel straight down into the fighting positions beneath them.

A warning spiked in my mind, and I rolled so that I was on top of Shaara, with my augmetic limbs on top for extra shielding.

The combination of armor plating and reinforced prosthetics took the brunt of the blast. I was still alive. So was Shaara. So were the Rebels we'd been fighting and the mech stride that had silenced the defenses.

I stood up. My rifle was wrecked. The SAW was a twisted, shattered mess. The pistol strapped to my leg seemed intact. I unholstered it without thinking. Shaara had fallen on top of her rifle and held it, dirty but functional.

The frozen moment caused by the sheer destruction ended with a burst of gunfire passing overhead. I shot back.

“Shit!”

“Here!”

The damaged slide jammed after the first round. Shaara passed me hers as she stood up.

Our lieutenant’s voice cracked over the radio through a damaged transmitter. He ordered us to fall back while the tanks provided covering fire. They were still engaging the walkers from the safety of their revetments, but they began to pull back from the battered positions.

Shaara had to help pull me out of the foxhole. The knee of my right leg had taken damage and wouldn’t support my weight properly. We sprinted to the nearest Dragon. It’s armored bulk provided cover as it slowly rolled backwards, the whole chassis shaking every time it fired or a shot from one of the mechs impacted. It’s active defenses were up in addition to the chaff clouds it continually refreshed, and a point defense laser destroyed a missile just beginning its downward plunge.

Behind it was, briefly, probably the safest place I could have been. Dragons caught off guard or under heavy assault were vulnerable, but with all systems up they took considerably more effort to kill.

Shaara and I were joined by more survivors as we fell back from the overrun perimeter. Mortar shells were still falling, leaving craters in the grass and scars on the fresh concrete of the first landing pad. Most of the engineers had fled, abandoning their construction equipment, while others were sheltering behind it, firing back into the darkness.

When the tanks stopped retreating, I ran for an unused digger as best I could, Shaara supporting me on my right side.

Safely behind the massive treads of the construction vehicle, I leant out and began firing at the poorly defined figures at the edge of the clearing. I aimed at any patches of heat warm enough and large enough to be a Rebel. Some were moving, others weren't. Shaara did the same, as did most of the other Marines who'd made it back to the center of the LZ.

Bullets threw sparks off the machine I was sheltering behind. I ducked back, fumbling for a fresh pistol magazine. The low caliber bullets wouldn't do much to an armored man, but it beat being unarmed.

"Get down! Danger close splashdown in five!"

I was flat on the ground before I had time to think, and then the whole world became light. The ground rippled underneath me, throwing me up and battering me on the way down. The shockwave of compressed air that followed the tremors toppled any unsecured equipment left unshaken by the impact. Above me the digger wavered worryingly before settling back into place.

I looked out again. The orbital strike was hellishly effective. What trees remained to the immediate south were blazing, many of them toppled over. The walkers that had harried the tanks were the main target of the strike. They were little more than slagheaps, lumps of molten metal partially scattered by ammunition cook-offs, effectively entombing their pilots.

Elsewhere, IFVs burned hot enough to twist and char their armor plating, surrounded by the half-cremated remains of the men they'd been supporting. Deeper into the broken woodlands, I barely made out more men and IFVs. They were turning away, abandoning the assault as a lost cause and running back to Swallow.

The mortars were no longer firing. More shells fell—heavier ones, from artillery, by the sound—but they only deployed a smokescreen behind the retreating Rebels, preventing us from firing on them and hindering pursuit.

We wouldn't have pursued anyways. The remaining Dragons and fresh troops dropped into the landing zone by the company led an advance to the edge of the crater where the defenses had been.

I limped and stumbled with them, accompanied by Shaara. I took a deep breath when we stopped at the crater.

Beside me, Shaara laughed.

“Can you imagine how much the engineers are going to bitch when they see what we've done with their nice new landing field?”

PLACEHOLDER 3 [6.04]

There wasn't anyone who knew how to fix augmetics at the CCP or the hastily established aid station, and the damage was minor enough that I didn't get sent up to a ship. I spend about an hour fiddling with the knee of my right leg before drawing a fresh weapon from the pile that had been collected after the battle and grabbing my sleep system from the collection of gear that had been left at the northern side of the LZ. It had survived mostly intact, though a stray bullet had ripped through the pad. I was too tired to care, and fell asleep as soon as I was in the bag.

The new battalion had taken over security, so my morning began with a head count. The single company assigned to keep watch to the north had the fewest casualties, all of them limited to the platoon they'd sent to the southern side during the assault. Otherwise, we'd been hammered. I'd seen Chen die, and Cook had been killed as well, leaving me with just Shaara in my fireteam. That casualty rate held for most of the battalion. With just under fifty percent KIA or MIA, probably incinerated by the orbital strike, we barely counted as combat effective, and only after a lot of consolidation was done.

I was a squad leader again. Of the Marines above me in the platoon, only the lieutenant and platoon sergeant had survived. The LT was needed elsewhere, so the platoon sergeant found himself in charge of the two understrength squads that remained.

An engineer found me afterwards. HE had a free moment and offered to look at the damaged knee of my augmentic leg. He got it working reasonably well after twenty minutes of fiddling.

As understrength as we were, there were no more reinforcements because of the fighting at the spaceport, so the surviving units from the defense were pushed out into the forest on foot to search for Rebels.

As we passed through the lines I saw a familiar figure. The Operative's battered armor had been repainted, but the way the blank eyepieces of her helmet watched me told me it was her.

The who patrolling force was comprised of about a company. Our mission was roughly what the Rebel's was last night—find the enemy, call for reinforcements, and kill him. Orbital and aerial recon had failed, so we were doing it the old fashioned way. We landed uncontested because the Rebels didn't have the air power or defenses to stop us. They'd counterattacked to try and destroy the beachheads before we consolidated on the ground. As the ten-klick ring around the city tightened into a full siege, they were certain to try and fight us every step of the way.

We spread out by platoons to push forward. Other elements of the encircling force were doing the same, screening the buildup behind us. Then we split down to squads to cover more ground. Half a klick from the LZ we stopped seeing blown-down trees. There were still patches of smoldering earth we avoided, but the fire from the orbital strike was mostly dead, without spreading further.

A mixture of mud and ash coated my boot, and bits of ash still blew in the smoky wind. The forest was still and quiet, save for the creaking of branches in the wind, the whisper of a stream in the distance, and the muted sounds of our own passage.

An hour into the patrol the only sign of the Rebels I'd seen was a hole in the underbrush where a vehicle had rammed it's way through and a downed gunship. The gunship had carved a furrow in the forest as it crashed, coming to rest jammed against two massive trees.



Half the squad was checking it and the bodies nearby for intelligence. I was with the other half, pulling security. I'd called it in and been told to destroy the gunship when we were done and continue the patrol. Command wasn't sending a specialist to rip data from the computers because they couldn't spare any and doubted it had anything they didn't know.

The camouflaged raiders killed three of the sentries before anyone noticed. I saw one collapse, blood flowing through the gap between gorget and helmet just below the ear as the knife that killed him was removed.

I shouted a warning at the same time Cortez did, bringing my rifle up. My first shots hit directly where I thought the attacker was. camouflage rippled around the impacts and the bullets left two streaks of primer where they scraped off angled plates.

I dropped in time to avoid return fire. Now that I knew to look for them, the tell-tale distortions were visible as the attacker moved closer towards me.

The fireteam inspecting the gunship had scrambled inside it. From the cover it offered they sprayed bursts of fire wherever they thought attackers might be. I stayed down, below their line of fire.

I saw the grenade arc out of the forest. It fell short of the gunship, but it still silenced the suppressing fire. Rippling patches of air rushed forward; camouflage struggling to keep up with their movement. I tried shooting at them, but the ripples were hard to track, and my helmet couldn't isolate them. I missed.

Bullets kicked up dirt around me. I sprinted for the shelter of the nearest tree. My luck and armor held as I threw myself behind a tree.

Shots were still being exchanged between the indistinct, moving forms of the attackers and the rest of my squad in the gunship. My attempt to call for reinforcements was met by static—they had a jammer, and we would've been dead before the sounds of gunfire attracted anyone. If it attracted anyone.

The attackers knew exactly what they were doing. They split into two teams, one suppressing the fireteam in the gunship while the other closed for the kill. Classic infantry tactics, but revealing. They didn't have any combined arms support. If they did they would've just dropped arty or mortars or bombs on the gunship, rather than attacking by fire and maneuver.

They didn't need any support. Their chamo made them hard targets to hit and their armor made them hard targets to kill. Their skill, precision, and tech made us easy targets to kill.

The team suppressing the rest of my squad split again. One pair continued to lay down fire. The other turned to engage me, reacting to my fire.

Bark and splinters flew from my tree, gouged away by bullets. Several deflected off my armor, leaving sore patches that would become bruises beneath.

My weapon jammed. The pair of blurs sprinted; reached me before I could clear it. One slammed the butt of his rifle into the side of my helmet. I dropped to the deck.

He leveled his rifle at my faceplate. His partner did the same. I could hear the continuing sounds of the firefight in the background, but my attention was entirely taken by the muzzle of the weapon in front of me. I felt nothing, unlike the last time I faced death. There was no intervention coming. She either could not or would not interfere again.

## PLACEHOLDER 4 [6.05]

The chest of the man standing over me vaporized. A moment later his partner died the same way.

I scrambled away from the bodies, grabbing my rifle as I moved until my back was firmly pressed against a tree. I cleared the jam unconsciously, my hands on autopilot, while six more shots rang out, audible above the firefight because of their percussive regularity. Every time the shooter fired another blur fell, their camouflage becoming inactive as they died.

The Operative walked out of the woods, her own chamo shimmering before it settled to the inert black of her normal armor. The green band around the magazine of the rifle in her left hand indicated micro-containment rounds that burst into a ball of plasma on impact.

“Someone really wants you dead, corporal.” She offered me a hand up.

“Me?”

“You really think the Rebels would ambush you like this? They don’t have the resources to spend a team of operators on killing a bunch of grunts.” She nudged a body with her boot. “Look. No insignia.”

She was right. Any part of the armor that might normally display unit markings was blank.

The three remaining members of my squad approached. They were all lightly wounded, and Shaara was limping badly enough that the others had to help her. The thigh armor on one of her legs was missing, replaced with a stained bandage.

The Operative displayed the same precise marksmanship that saved me earlier as she shot them. I jumped at her, only to be slammed into the ground and held there by an unseen force.

She didn't turn as she spoke. "As far as the Marines are concerned, you and your entire squad are dead."

"Why?"

"You represent a question. Why are you worth sending an entire team of operators to kill in a way that looks natural? A team that included a pair of powerful telepaths? I dealt with them—They were occupied with muting, unsuccessfully, the call for help that brought me here. Because as much as someone wants you dead, someone else is expending a great deal of effort to keep you alive, even if they were prevented from doing so directly this time."

I saw a flash of red clothes and blond hair at the edge of my vision. The Operative didn't notice.

PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [6.1]

*Well?*

*Alpha Three is still alive. We lost a pair of Betas and the assault team they were with.*

*How?*

*I suspect 0-154 was involved, but there is evidence both ways. The ambush site was sterilized before we could get agents there.*

*And the Rebels?*

*Still complacent. They were happy enough to launch a spoiling attack after their air defense failed and the loss of Sparrow Spaceport; they didn't ask why we specified where the attack should be or what it was covering for.*

83% CONFIDENCE [7.01]

The Operative faked my death by blowing up the gunship and reporting me dead, all while she held me to the ground without apparent effort. Then, invoking TELCORPS authority with her armor's integrated computer suite, she overwrote every ID chip in my gear with a classified stamp, painting me as part of her team until she could official transfer me to the twilight world she worked in with a new identity of mixed truths and half lies. She unlaced my dogtags from my boot and threw them in the fire behind her before assuring me that even reported dead the slight of hand she'd used meant I still had access to my bank account, that I would still be paid, and on top of that my life insurance policy would be paid out to the named beneficiary.

Apparently faking someone's death and handing them a new identity under the same name approached TELCORPS SOP. No one pressed for more details when my designation came up as redacted at the LZ and three hours later I was in the local TELCORPS database with my updated status, real and faked, forwarded to Earth along with the daily list of casualties.

We left the LZ I'd fought to protect. None of the scattered survivors of my unit recognized me. With my helmet on and chips blanked the undecorated armor I'd been issued after Blackstone looked no different from any of the hundreds of soldiers milling about. Not even the absence of personalization stood out; there were plenty of replacements and veterans fresh from hospitals still in regulation uniforms to make it unremarkable.

The Operative had the bodies from the fight by the downed gunship collected. They were checked over for any sort of identification, then their prints, irises, and DNA were all plugged into the database in the hopes she'd get a hit off them. The local database didn't make any matches, so we spent a quiet week doing nothing—I worked out, while the Operative went over other reports from in-system—on the SYSCOM command ship while the main databases on earth crunched over our information.

That ended when one of the bodies turned up a match in a classified archive Earthside with eighty-three percent confidence. NAVINT suspected the dead man of being a member of Rebel special forces, with former ties to several Earth-based PMC's and security contractors. We took the next ship back to earth.

#### FRAGILITY [7.02]

Earth's orbital industry is the eight largest of any inhabited planet. It was the legacy of mankind's terrestrial origins and the effort required to bootstrap ourselves into orbit, then to the moon, then Mars, eventually the greater solar system, and finally beyond that.

A consequence of the busyness of Earth's orbit was the heavy traffic between the various habitats, stations, shipyards, and the planet itself. That meant the Operative and I were able to find a civilian flight from the militarized section of the L3 station to Dulles Spaceport, despite the heavy security. We were headed to the DMV Sprawl, which was still the beating heart of the military-industrial complex and the Lower North American Zone, more than a century after the county it had been the capitol of was formally absorbed into the Greater Earth Government of the United Nations. The Operative hoped to find some trace of our target amongst the thousands of defense contractors headquartered throughout the Sprawl. TELCORPS was based in the DMV as well, making the task of hunting for one man amongst half a billion easier.

I was just there because she told me to be there. Refusal would have resulted in a telepathic compulsion or a nine-millimeter cranial hemorrhage.

We were both wearing civvies on the flight down. A pair of soldiers headed Earthside on leave, even when one had augmented limbs and the other always managed to have empty space around her that no one willingly violated, attracted less attention than a pair of obvious combat veterans taking civilian transportation in full uniform.

Military transport had been vetoed by the Operative in the name of maintaining a low profile. We weren't officially assigned to Earth for the same reason. Except to TELCORPS, the pair of us were on detached duty but still formally assigned to Gibson SYSCOM.



It'd was a long time since I'd taken a civilian flight anywhere. When I was recovering I stayed planetside. The shuttle was closer to its in-atmo counterparts than any military transport I've ridden. The seats were more padded, the restraints simpler. The bulkheads were painted bland, comfortable tones instead of being bare metal. The hull was only tough enough to survive re-entry without ablating or encounters with stray debris. An old point defense autocannon could shred it, never mind the light DEWs most ships mounted for that role. I found the sense of fragility uncomfortable.

There was a jerk when we hit Earth's atmosphere, then the cabin began to heat up as climate control systems struggled to deal with the heat of re-entry. I looked at the Operative. The dead-eyed glare of her death's head helmet met my gaze, her armor incongruous against the red cushion on her seat. The black paint on her helmet cracked and peeled, coming away in strips like flayed flesh to reveal burnt composites beneath. The artificial grey layer crumbled to ash, taking the painted skin with it, until only aged bone remained. TELCORPS's emblem was charred into her skull's yellowed forehead in stark, perfect lines.

I turned away from the nightmare visage and looked into the angry eyes of the woman in red. She did not speak. I understood. With my understanding, she vanished.

The Operative spoke, almost to herself. "Something doesn't want us here."

PLACEHOLDER Name [7.03]

Dulles Spaceport was a sprawling field of blast-scarred concrete landing pads, runways, and hardened buildings, all enclosed by a ten-meter ceramic blast wall. Beyond the was a forest which doubled as one of the few major parks in the DMV sprawl and a way to keep the flightpaths for approach and landing clear of tall buildings.

The ground at the spaceport always seemed to be shaking in time with the howling engines of shuttlecraft, punctuated by the infrasonic roar of takeoff and the echoing impact of landing. It felt like a continuous artillery barrage rolling through the earth from a distance, and sounded like one too.

Customs checks had been conducted in orbit, where it was easier to turn people away, so leaving the spaceport was a simple matter of finding a waiting airtaxi to shuttle us to the Rosslyn-Crystal City Megacomplex. Neither of us had any luggage. The Operative probably had resources on Earth and could afford to travel light, with her weapons and armor being transported as cargo on a military flight. I didn't have any possessions to worry about. I was wearing the only set of civvies I owned, which I'd scrounged together in my time aboard SYSCOM's flagship. My bag contained a pair of uniforms with no nametape or unit patches and a few other essentials representing everything I owned. Everything else had been destroyed or lost. I would have to buy more clothes—more everything—once we ended up in one place for more than a couple of hours.

The Taxi ride was fast once we cleared the spaceport's restricted zone. The Operative and I spent the trip in silence. She was absorbed in a file on her tablet, while I read a book of my own, picked up in the departure lounge while we waited for the shuttled earthside.

The steel and glass of the megacomplex ran down a long slope to a river spanned by several bridges. From the air I could see the structure way it narrowed and curved around a low, geometrically shaped building surrounded by roads and an abstract sculpture of three rising curves before expanding outward from the riverbank to fill a level space beyond them. It wasn't the planned regularity of the arcology I'd lived in before joining up, looking instead like it was built around the low building instead of consuming or destroying it.

We stopped at an exterior taxipad jut out halfway up the complex's south-western face, not far from where it began to rise from the edge of the hill it cut into. From the taxipad the Operative led the way downwards until she reached an apartment in one of the first subterranean levels.

She opened the door by pressing on the palm-pad in the wall next to it and then keying in a code. The cramped space was subdivided into several rooms, all of them lit with the harsh florescent glow of cheap lighting that highlighted the dust on the equally cheap, spartan furniture and bare counters.

"That one's yours." She indicated a closed door. "Drop your gear, then head upstairs to the mall sector and buy yourself something professional looking to wear—and more civvies, too. We might be a while.

"Get receipts so you can be reimbursed. I'll have your print added to the lock before you get back."

It was the most normal thing I'd ever heard her say. I dumped my bag in the indicated bedroom and went shopping.

## SECURITY [7.04]

I ended up with a set of bland looking work clothes, equally uninspiring civvies, and some PT gear. In the three hours it took me to get them the Operative had managed to stock the fridge, unpack her bags, get her hair trimmed, and set up the terminal that she spent the rest of the night glued to. She was on it when I racked out, and on it again when I woke up; the on signs she'd moved a freshly scrubbed dish drying beside the sink and the different clothes she was wearing.

I found two different holdout weapons in the process of making breakfast and getting ready for the day. I didn't know if the apartment belonged to the Operative or was a TELCORPS safehouse, but whoever stocked it has strong feelings about security.

## ENFORCED IGNORANCE [7.05]

The uncomfortable domesticity of the safehouse gave way to silent professionalism as the Operative lead the way to TELCORPS headquarters. She walked in front of me through the hallways and throughways of the Megaplex, further downwards to the centuries old transit tunnels. I still felt her behind me as a looming threat over my shoulder; one of two. What her plans were and how I factored into them were a mystery to me, weeks after the violence of my conscription. That knife at my back was matched by another presence, watchful for now, that had guarded me before, with no clue about its—Her—intentions.

The subway trains in the metro were the only part of the system that looked new. The platforms were clean but worn by centuries of use and the vaulted concrete overhead showed every year of their age and kilo of earth and structure they supported. Under the light of LED panels set into the ceiling, newer additions by the wiring running up to them, a crowd of people pushed around us, more packed into a small space than even the Navy usually managed. The press of the morning rush was filled with the inevitable chatterers whose voices bounced and echoed off the concrete, and the stubbornly silent who sought solitude in headphones or glared at the world as they waited for the effects of coffee to hit them.

The Operative blended in, just another businesswoman heading to the office, fit and attractive without being noticeably so. When I looked at her I felt the slightest hint of a headache and the urge to blink and look away.

I stood out more than she did. Or I should've. There were other service members in the crowd, some in uniform, others in suits. Most of them had no scarring or augmentations, while the skeletal metal of a cheap military replacement arm showed at the end of my sleeve. The DMV Sprawl was for intelligence, logistics, procurement, and other functionary tasks that kept the services running. The only other combat veterans around were too disabled to go back to the front lines. But the eyes of the crowd slid over me, noting the arm without registering it, accepting my presence without questioning it. It was more double-edged help from the Operative. No one really knew I was there.

We changed trains once and there was a short above ground section where the train ran through a tunnel of metal and glass cutting through the base of the complex where it was built over the tracks. It dived belowground again and were at our stop. The station looked just like any other and the same mix of people got on and off. The Operative cut through the crowd and I followed, climbing the stairs to find myself just outside the geometric building I'd spotted from the air earlier.

We didn't join the lines of workers streaming inside. There was a shuttle waiting near the subway exit we took instead. Everyone onboard ignored each other; all of them either so carefully nondescript in a way that made my headache worse or just normal in a practiced way. They were all operatives or other workers heading up the short hill to TELCORPS' headquarters, the same as us. Outside, people seemed to avoid the shuttle, refusing to acknowledge it, not with the enforced ignorance that hid me on the metro but because if they didn't see it they wouldn't have to deal with it. With us, since I was on the shuttle too.

PICTURE [7.05]

The interior of TCHQ was grey and drab; the doors watched by guards, the halls by security cameras. That was just what I could see. There were hidden defenses I couldn't see but were there all the same. The sudden absence of my headache suggested as much, as did the insets in the walls that were big enough to hold turrets or drones. Motion and thermal sensors could've been hidden anywhere and probably were. Big Brother watched even himself in the heart of the most shadowy and threatening agency with a name and a public face—even if that face was shrouded in legend and veiled by a death's head helmet with impenetrable lenses for eyes.

The Operative continued to lead with unerring accuracy. She submitted to the required security protocols while shepherding me through them before carrying on. She led me through a labyrinth of unmarked corridors to an office with her number stenciled where another building would've had a name or a title.

There were two rooms. One had a collection of smaller desks with workstations on them and a small armory's worth of tactical gear and weapons mounted on a wall. Items were missing, presumably those belonging to the members of her team that didn't make it off Heinlein. A large safe near the door, opposite a burn bag, was marked as containing ammunition and explosives. TELCORPS seemed to believe in letting teams gear up and move with a minimum of fuss. They were still a government agency, so the location and file name of the ammunition log and the form number for munitions requests were listed above the safe's palm-pad.

The second room was smaller, though the desk inside and its workstation were larger than those in the first room. The main room was neat and impersonal, while the Operative's office had several piles of marked-up hardcopy printouts pushed onto a single side table. Other than that it was spotless. Besides the piles of old work it lacked any humanizing touch. None of the holographic displays on the walls were active, but I doubted they would be showing unit pictures like might be found in an officer or non-com's office.

Then I noticed the picture. It was small, deliberately positioned so it was hard to see from the door, and physical; a print on old-fashioned glossy photo paper, in a plain frame, with fold lines around a corner that had been singed at home point. I didn't step closer to look—the Operative was distracted by a message on her terminal as she sat down, and I didn't want to draw her attention—but from what I could make out the worn photo showed her, in civvies, with a younger woman who looked similar. A sister or cousin, maybe. And a sign that there was more to the Operative than the cold killer I'd seen. Probably the only sign of it I'd ever see.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [7.06]

I was not trained for investigations and the Operative knew it. Sge saw some future use for an infantryman, or if nothing else a possible answer to a question when she recruited me. She did not see an investigator. So for the next week I did make-work and paperwork, sitting in the larger office while she did her own digging from behind the screen of a terminal.



I killed time as best I could. There was a firing range available, and a gym. I used both heavily. My marksmanship was solid and unlikely to improve much. Still, practice never hurt and the familiar cadence of rifle fire helped pass the time.

There were frequently others on the range, some of them operatives, others not. We didn't talk much. That seemed to be an unspoken rule of TCHQ: no one discussed their business or shared war stories. The secrecy and compartmentalization that defined the agency in the field leaked backwards into their own structure. The building was filled with quiet, driven people who only spoke when they needed to exchange information. It was decidedly unfriendly to newcomers and veterans alike.

There was more talking in the gym, but it never went deeper than the surface. Friendly chatter, nothing more. The occasional bullshitting about past missions, sorties that talked about the what and how while they omitted the who and why. I didn't partake. The stories I had were ones I didn't want to tell or ones I wouldn't. Instead I worked out in silence. Mostly I focused on the routines that strengthened and stabilized the muscles that supported the weight and anchor points for my augmentic arm. I hadn't been allowed to leave physical therapy until they were sufficiently strong for me to use the arm in combat but I continued the routines regardless.

The days settled into a pattern where I woke up, went into TCHQ with the Operative and did what little work I had, PTed, and found other ways to spend time, before returning to the safe house to eat, read for a while, and then go to bed. It was the most bored I'd been since getting out of the hospital.

The whole time the Operative was working on something, digging deeper wherever her investigation led her. Every day she was up before I was and every night she was still working when I racked out. As far as I could tell she slept infrequently and briefly. The only thing remotely human about her schedule was the mug of coffee that she always had in-hand or nearby.

I didn't think her pursuit of information would stay confined to the office for long. Even with help from the analysts and crackers TELCORPS kept onhand to assist operations there was only so much that could be done from behind the screen of a terminal. She proved me right at the end of the week with a single directive: We were going to Mars.

OBSERVATION [7.1]

*Well?*

*They're on Earth. TCHQ, probably. We lost them after they left Dulles, heading of the Rosslyn-Crystal City megaplex. It's a logical conclusion.*

*Do they have anything to work with?*

*No, sir. The Betas were clean. No IDs; not in any system.*

*Were they rigged with deadman's incendiaries? If they're ID'ed as clones on a genetic scan we'll have a problem. What about the mercenary team?*

*The team were experienced. Still in some of the databases, but professional enough to scrub identities and identifiers before hitting the dirt, and hired through a cut-out—Metheron...*

*The Beta's weren't rigged, sir.*

*Then we do have a problem. There aren't many companies with the capability to produce viable clones. Move the Gamma line to an unlisted site and make sure everything front-facing is clean. If personnel need to suffer accidents, make it happen. Then cut out the Metheron.*

*This can be cleaned up if we move quickly. No loose ends, no more mistakes. Understood?*

*Understood, sir. It won't happen again.*

*Good. See to it then.*

*Yes, sir.*

We flew military this time. Civilian flights into Cydonia were sharply restricted. There were none at all into the Bellamy Federal District. But money could, and did, still flow into the city torn apart by the beginnings of rebellion. We followed it. The ruins visible from the air were the perfect place to disappear into, hiding amongst the civilians trying to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Armed police patrolled everywhere in strength, visible from the air, while columns of MPs and infantry made their presence felt, still hunting for rebels burned in the rubble of their uprising.

The perimeter of the BFD was heavily manned by infantry. The shuttle we rode in on flew low enough to see the anti-air emplacements that tracked us on approach. The better part of a full division was assigned to the occupation. For the most part they kept the peace since the was population too battered to do anything that would require them to leave the BFD in strength.

I was glad I'd been sent to the front line. Bad as the sharp end was, it was better than sitting still, hoping no one blew up a convoy I was in. Rubble, after all, made good hiding places for IEDs.

We landed unannounced as extra passengers on a flight bringing soldiers back from mid-deployment leave, a luxury unique to the secondary fronts and occupations in the home system. A pair of soldiers had been bumped off our flight with leave extensions to make space for us. It wasn't generosity on The Operative's part. She wanted to remain anonymous. She'd sent no official notification to BFD garrison and used her authority to make quiet arrangements for our arrival.

We were dressed in unmarked fatigues. They managed to raise eyebrows and still any attempts at conversation. The others in the shuttle knew better than to ask any of the obvious questions. They'd probably seen it before—TELCORPS wasn't the only intelligence agency with teams in Cydonioa.

The Operative had even foregone her death's-head helmet when packing her armor. Abandoning the blatant indicator of her affiliation for a generic infantryman's helmet was a piece of characteristically unsubtle subtlety. She went from being a terrifying presence capable of tearing minds apart to get what she wanted to another faceless soldier in a region filled with them, bringing me alongside her.

I just wished we'd worn our armor on the flight. I felt naked going over precariously held territory with just fatigues and a sidearm.

#### OCCUPIED BIRTHPLACE [8.02]

Cydonia was worse from the ground. The BFD had received priority for reconstruction, so the empty corpses of buildings gutted by bombs or shattered by artillery were torn down day by day. The skeletons of new buildings rose to take their place. Temporary shelters huddled amongst the bones of their forefathers and successors.

The burial details kept busy. New bodies were unearthed as they decomposed in the cold air and red dust; legacies terraforming could not free Mars from. A steady stream of smoke drifted upwards from the army crematoriums. Some corpses were intact enough to be identified and next of kin to be notified. Most weren't. They went into the flames nameless. Their families, if they had any left, would never know their fates for certain.

The Operative had another safehouse for us to stay in outside the BFD. That meant civilian clothes, an unmarked transport through the perimeter, and concealable sidearms for weapons. We stored the heavier equipment in a building set aside for the intelligence services to use. There was a small room that doubled as an armory and an office for both of us. The Operative had the crypto-key for it and sent the biometric lock as well.

We changed quickly, cramped together in the small room. Modesty wasn't an issue for either of us. For all that the Operative was an attractive woman by most standards, I ignored her as I changed. She killed too easily over too little for me to be interested. Not when she'd threatened me before.

Now that we were on the ground there was no need for the unmarked uniforms. We had ID—not in our names—that let us move in and out of the BFD unmolested so we left the fatigues with the rest of the gear. The battered, rugged civvies we had on and the worn looking business dress in our bags matched the frayed look of the survivors who were refugees in their own half-ruined city. We looked like we belonged in the BFD and outside it.

The small pistol holstered at the back of my pants was hidden by the jacket I wore in the cold air. A pocket knife was the only other protection I had. That, and whatever talents the Operative had—ways of killing with her brain.

I felt the guns on us as we passed through a BFD perimeter checkpoint into the street beyond. And I felt it when we were out of sight, no longer under their protection.

Alone in Cydonia, occupied birthplace of a rebellion. Somewhere in the city around us waited the answers the Operative sought.

## SEMBLANCE OF ORDER [8.03]

The streets near the BFD were mostly cleared of rubble. As some semblance of order spread outwards from the military-controlled district it had been necessary to send the infantry first, their APCs weaving through the ruins and foot patrols going where the armored transports could not. Within that narrow cordon of safety the engineers had followed. Intel liaised with what remains of the local police force to determine a strategy. The strategy was passed on to the General's staff, and from them to the engineers. The rubble began to disappear. Quick-drying, fast-hardening materials were poured into pot-holes and craters. The resulting patchwork of roads became the arteries of martial law—the routes followed by the police and the military as they tried to stabilize the city where war had broken out, and been fought room to room and street to street.

Even with the reconstruction there wasn't much of Cydonia left. There were skeletal buildings in various states of collapse. Beyond them were the broken silhouettes of three arcologies looming over the horizon. The Operative drove down the battered roads, guiding us unerringly into the ruins. It was not long before we left the repaired roads for the smaller byways of the city. There, instead of convoys and patrols we passed police checkpoints and slumped heaps of rubble. The Occupation of Cydonia was evident.

The energetic rebuilding of the BDF had not spread to the parts of the city where the TELCORPS safe house we'd be working out of was. I didn't know if that was intentional; if the safe house came after the war and was placed to keep an eye on areas where the Knights of Cydonia were still highly regarded and remembered fondly despite the destruction they'd brought to their home city, or if it pre-dated the fighting and was intact due to luck.

The safe house was part of a building that had been hit by artillery. The top third was a twisted wreck, all exposed girders and rebar. Below that there was a hole where a shell passed through without detonating. Detritus was piled on the ground around the entrance. Chandeliers were cut into it, allowing the remaining residents to enter and exit their home through macabre drifts of shattered concrete, broken glass, and unmarked graves.

Whoever had cut the channel through the wreckage also opened up a path to the underground car park. The Operative drove in, stopping at the space marked 343. The rest of the parking lot was a patchwork of empty spaces and full ones. There were no aircars—if there were any in the building to begin with their hanger would've been in the ruined upper floors—and many of the cars didn't look like they'd been used recently. Still, the open path to the entrance and the few cars covered in dirt and dust from the street meant people were coming and going.

The elevators were out. All of the cars were stopped on the lowest floor—sent down after the building was damaged—or missing. The empty shafts were filled with a weak, broken sunlight that filtered through jagged openings in the upper floors and spilled from their open doors into the shadowy garage. They led to nowhere, a reminder of the brutal amputation of the building's upper third.



The Operative bypassed the banks of inoperative elevators, barely giving them a glance, and made for the stairs instead, one hand steadying the bag slung over his shoulder. I followed with my own bag.

Chunks of concrete lay on the sides of the stairwell where they'd been pushed aside after falling. Looking up, I saw a ragged tarp covering the open top of the stair, keeping the red dust carried on cold winds out.

The safe house was a room on the third floor. It was as spartanly furnished and impersonal as the one on Earth and even less subtle. There were first aid kits and several pistols in plain view. By the time I'd dumped my gear in one of the rooms I spotted at least two more places where weapons and ammo could be stored. It now seemed like that the safe house was set up after the rebellion. There was too much casual firepower lying around to have pre-dated it.

PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [8.1]

*Well?*

*We don't know where they are. They might have left Earth.*

*Why? Was there anything they could find to get them to leave TCHQ?*

*It's possible that O-154 could have traced the assault team to Methereon. If that's the case they're headed for Cydonia.*

*Cydonia? That's a problem. She might get involved if they get too close. Still, there's nothing we can do about that except try to keep her distracted and hope they don't find... Well.*

*Have your assets found Metheron yet?*

*They moved against him two days ago. He got out and went to ground. They're still running down where he might have hidden.*

*Make sure you finish the job. And do your best to locate Alpha Three and O-154.*

*We'll do our best, Sir.*

*Get it done, one way or another. Corporate's been checking into our expenses and asset usage. They're starting to get worried about both. I can't stonewall forever—I need results.*

*Yes, Sir.*

## OUR TARGET [9.01]

The image on the screen was a thirty-something man of indeterminable ethnicity; vaguely southern european but homogenized enough that his ancestry could have contained just about anyone. There were a lot of faces like that on Mars and nothing else made him stand out. From what the Operative was saying, that was a definite advantage for him.

“This is Arthit Metheron. Forty-seven, so older than he looks, but that’s no surprise—he can certainly afford the cosmetic treatments. He’s the biggest corporate fixer in Cydonia and easily within the top ten planetwide. Locally he sets up about three-quarters of all the shady business dealings—corporate espionage, theft, kidnapping, extortion, sabotage, and assassination—that use for-hire third parties. That comes out to about a sixth of all such work on Mars. It’s a pretty small market and Cydonia’s a decent share of it.

“The local cops keep tabs on him. They haven’t been able to pin him with anything since he’s got a nice, respectable job as a lawyer that he keeps completely separate from his off-book dealings.” She paused for a second. “He runs a slick operation, and on top of that he’s been shielded by a couple of intelligence agencies, including TEL-CORPS, twice, since it’s useful to have a man like that owe you favors, and he’s handled some sensitive, deniable operations for them as well.

“Now he’s our target. Everything I could dig up from the group that attacked you on Gibson points to him being the intermediary that hired them. Off-planet work’s unusual for him, but he’s done it a couple of times for recurring clients, so it’s not out of the range of possibility. And he’s disappeared off everyone’s sensor screens. The police don’t know where he is; neither does military intelligence or the regional TELCORPS office.

“Men like Metheron do too much business, even now, to just disappear without a reason. He had no warning that you and I were coming and he’s been way down the to-do list of local law enforcement since the Knights started blowing things up. That means someone’s out for him for whatever reason, and we have to get to him first. Is that clear?”

I nodded. There wasn’t any real reason for her to be briefing me since at best I was just an extra gun-hand to keep her company and at worst I was bait. It was probably just habit on her part, left over from when she worked with a full team. Still, for a change I knew what we were doing and why. It beat sitting around waiting for something to happen like I had on Earth.

“Good. his main office was bombed in the fighting three years ago. He’s been doing most of his work out of rented space in the Melpomene Arcology’s business sector, so we’ll be going there first.”

PLACEHOLDER NAME [9.02]

Of the three Cydonian arcologies, Melpomene was the smallest and least damaged by war. The outer walls of the great pyramidal structure were battered and holed in places, but it hadn't broken like its sisters. The other two arcologies had been reduced to empty shells. The Knights's headquarters had been a reinforced bunker beneath Thalia Arcology—supposedly a remnant of the terraforming era, when such shelters were needed. Either way a direct assault on the bunker would have been too costly. So the military gave residents six hours to evacuate. Then they bombed it. They used bunker-busters, ground-penetrating fusion-plasma warheads, and for good measure followed up with an A-MAT strike. In the wake of the annihilation reaction the shattered, hollow shell of Thalia collapsed in on itself. Calliope, her supports broken by the shock of the blasts, fell in soon after. Only Melpomene, smaller and further away, escaped.

Access to the arcology by car was easy enough. One of the first roads cleared was the route that ran past the two dead arcologies to the living one, at the edge of the reborn Martian sea. Security at the entrance was tight. Our car was checked for explosives, while the guards went over our documents. The cover identities we had were solid enough to pass their brief scan, but they weren't authorized for the weapons we were carrying. The Operative took care of that. I felt a subtle pressure in the air, like my ears were about to pop without having noticed a change in elevation, and we were through; the guard's half-spoken question about weapons left unfinished.

The vehicle transit corridors within the arcology could not go everywhere. They took up too much space. In response, most of the structure was designed to be walkable, which, combined with the internal public transit system, meant there were few places a car was needed for inside it. The business district was off one of the transit corridors, but access was restricted to trucks and utility vehicles. We left our car in a garage by a mag-lev station and boarded the train instead.

The arcology was different from the Rosslyn-Crystal City megacomplex. That had evolved naturally and was joined together later. Even where old buildings were torn down for new, unifying construction the same general layout was followed, guided by the maze of unplanned streets that still snaked through its surface level. The Arcology was built to be self-contained, designed to hold settlers while the great terraforming machines worked, and to protect them from the harsh unpredictability of the changing environment. It was utilitarian corridors broken by stretches of internal gardens and food production zones. The long hallways, and even the tracks for the mag-lev, were split into sections by heavy airlocks. It felt more like the interior of a vast ship than part of a city. It was an isolated micro-city of its own where many Cydonians had retreated to during the rebellion.

Metheron's office was a small set of rooms on a sub-level of the business sector that abutted an agrizone. They were built right up against the wall dividing the sectors, overlooking a section with pseudo-diamond windows. Metheron hadn't needed much space, but he did have a view—something of a luxury in the arcology.

The interior of his office did not match the pleasant, unobtrusive exterior. Mostly because it bore more resemblance to a war zone than an office. I stepped across scattered shell casings as I entered. I reached, by reflex, for the pistol that wasn't holstered on my thigh as I took in the room behind the Operative. I fumbled for a moment before remembering that my weapon was holstered at the back of my waistband, where the jacket I wore hid it. It was still in my hand less than a second after I stepped inside.

I didn't need it. The fight finished well before the Operative and I got there. Bullet-holes pockmarked the wood panelling of several walls and casings littered the floor, particularly near the door. The attackers had gone in shooting. It hadn't gone well for them. There were several pools of dried blood on the floor, indicative of solid hits, and more drag-marks where the wounded had been dragged to cover.

"Someone got to him before he hid." The Operative finished looking around the foyer and moved into the next set of rooms. Like me, she kept her weapon in hand. "Well executed—professionals, but not special forces tier."

"The shell casings?"

"Yes. They had suppressors—probably active dampeners, too, since no-one reported anything—and dealt with the bodies. The casings were an oversight, or they didn't care."

"He had security." There was no other way for a firefight this heavy to break out. A telepath of the Operative's power might have been able to hold off so many alone. Anyone else needed help. The office wasn't laid out for defense but any building could be turned into a nightmare to storm. I'd been on both sides of that before. And Metheron's security had done it right. "Experienced, and skilled."

The Operative nodded. “Not the sort he normally kept around.” The lights in the next room were out. She turned her pistol’s flashlight on and swept it across the floor. “Still no bodies.” The beam focused on a charred pile of wreckage. “Incendiaries in the desk. Hard copies’ll be gone. Locals, too.”

I crossed the office to a door at the back. Bullets had damaged it, pounding holes through the heavy synthwood. The knob was wrecked, so I grasped the ragged edge of one of the holes and swung it open gently, pistol ready. The beam of my under-barrel flashlight showed a small kitchenette with doors on either side and a short hallway leading to another door.

And a body, slumped on the floor by the back door. His weapon had been kicked away and a burst of fire had blown the back of his head apart where he fell. “There’s a body back here. Looks like they killed him while he was down.”

The Operative left the main office. “Holding the door?”

“Probably. Too tall to be Metheron.” The lawyer had gone about the back door while his security man kept fighting.

“No reports of a firefight on the arcology’s security network.” The Operative scrolled down a screen on the tablet she’d pulled out. “The attackers didn’t pursue once their target got away.” She nudged the body with her boot. “And they only cleaned up after their own. Basic OPSEC, not a vanishing act. The blood in the front room is old enough that getting a good sample’ll be hard. I should be able to pill up this guy’s data, though. You check the outside.”



She grabbed the corpse's outstretched hand and forced it flat on the tablet to scan his palmprint. Why she was doing that I opened the back door. It led onto an access corridor behind the building, narrower than the pedestrian corridor out front and framed by the pseudo-diamond panel looking onto the agrizone. It was empty now, but a number of other doors opened onto it, and there were two cross-corridors not far away. Both had a decent number of people moving through them, coming to see the view. The Operative was right—there were no signs of the fighting outside the office.

She was still running as search on the dead man's biometrics when I stepped back inside. An ID, two spare magazines, and a few other random items were laid out beside him—she'd been through his pockets. "Anything?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I'm running the search quietly—I don't want the security bots on the grid to notice that I'm in their systems. He looks more professional than a hired gun, the ID is probably accurate and his biometrics match it. If it's fake it's good."

I looked into the two remaining rooms. One was a small sitting room, with a fold-out bed and a small entertainment screen. The other was an equally small bathroom, complete with a shower. It seemed that Methereon worked late often enough to justify them.

Neither room had been disturbed by the fighting. The sitting room had been thoroughly searched, with no effort to restore it to its original condition, but there were no bullet holes or shell casings, or any other signs that either side fought through it.

The Operative looked up when I stepped out of the bathroom. "Anything?"

"Bathroom and bedroom. No signs of fighting. The bedroom was searched—it's a wreck right now."

“Was there anything in there?”

“No way for me to tell. Want to check?”

She did. She left her tablet, still running its search through back doors in the security grid, to do her own search of the two rooms. She didn’t turn up anything and shook her head again as she stepped back into the hallway. “The attackers were thorough. If Metheron had anything there or in the office that didn’t go up with the desk, it’s gone.”

The tablet flashed an alert. She picked it up and looked through the results, then snorted. “Nothing new. Professional hired security, exactly who his ID says he is. Metheron didn’t fuck around when paying for protection—looks like it paid off for him.” She sighed and brushed a few loose strands of hair back from her face. “There’s nothing left for us here. At least we know we have competition.”

She called arcology security as we left the office. By the time they arrived we were outside the megastructure, looking for one of Metheron’s most frequent contacts.

WEREN’ T MINE [9.03]

Wú Fenn wasn’t at his home or what remained of his workplace. He was arrested by Cydonian police four days before we arrived, in a raid which rounded up a small Knights cell. The police were forced to turn their detainees over by military police from the BFD, who were holding them in their oversized stockade.

The Operative wasn’t pleased. She wasn’t displeased either—she said that it was a workable situation.

Getting back into the BFD was simple. The car was authorized for it. Once there we changed back into our unmarked uniforms—for the intimidation effect, according to the Operative. Then she pulled rank on the MPs and had them bring Fenn into an interrogation room while I watched the camera feed.

She kept him waiting. The room was bare concrete. A plain table sat in the middle with a normal chair on one side for the interrogator and Fenn, locked into a restraint chair, on the other. The LED indicators on his cuffs were bright red, even in the harsh glare of the single overhead light.

The room was cold and Fenn was uncomfortable in the thin clothes he'd been issued. An indicator on the camera feed said it was sixteen degrees in the room. He waited, shivering and looking back and forth between the door and the camera.

Precisely ten minutes after the guards left Fenn in his restraints the Operative walked in. She'd added a TELCORPS patch to her uniform; he swallowed when he saw it.

She got to the point. "Where is Arthit Metheron?"

"What?" Fenn jerked in surprise.

"Where is Metheron?"

"How should I know?"

"He's disappeared. Gone to ground. You've worked with him for years." Her tone never changed as she leaned forward to look Fenn in the eyes. "Where is he?"

"I don't know." He pushed himself as far back in the chair—as far away from the Operative—as he could and struggled to meet her gaze. "What do you want with him? He's worked with TELCORPS before."

“That doesn’t matter.” She sat back in her chair. “You’re not lying. Smart. Tell me what you do know.”

Fenn didn’t say anything. After half a minute the Operative leaned forwards again. “You don’t gain anything from protecting him.”

“I don’t loose anything either.”

“You know what I can do.” She made it a statement and a threat, not a question.

Fenn shrugged. “You can kill me. If you’re good enough you’ll get what you’re looking for while you scramble my brain.”

“I could. I could also ensure you don’t get tossed in a cell for the rest of your life, or shot out of hand for being with the Knights.”

The silence stretched on. This time she was content to let it. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Fenn slumped, fidgeting with one hand where it was strapped to the arm of the chair. The Operative sat impassively, waiting for him to crack. It was easier for her. She could tell what was going through his head. He knew it, too.

The time stamp in the corner of the feed I watched showed twenty-seven minutes of silence passed before Fenn decided he did have something to loose.

“I haven’t worked with Arthit since the Rebellion started. Just before, when the bombings were starting, he and I provided information for an assassination job. Lots of corporate money behind it. They bought guns, ammo, intel—just about everything—from us.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it was the last big job either of us did. Since the Rebellion there hasn’t been anything big enough to draw the attention of TELCORPS. And because the job was for KDI. We’d never worked for them before, either together or solo. But they knew Arthit’s reputation; came to him with a description. Someone they wanted found and dealt with.”

“Who?”

“I never got a name. KDI warned us any name she was using would be false. They didn’t say why they wanted her dealt with, either. Hell, they didn’t even say who they were—approached us anonymously.”

“Then how did you know it was KDI?”

“We found out later. They went to a number of fixers and information brokers on Mars looking for this woman. Knew she was here somehow, but not exactly where. Arthit found her first, hiding in some run-down apartment block at the edge of the industrial sector. KDI was happy with him. They paid out in full, tossed in a bonus, and asked him to help them kit out an assault team. That’s when he brought me onboard. He could get guns if he had to, but they were always my specialty.

“Anyways, we get the gear, and they ask for one more thing: Help smuggling a crate to the surface. KDI must’ve had the resources to get it down on their own. I think they didn’t because they were trying to leave as little a trail as possible.

“Well, we didn’t know who they were until we got the crate and turned it over to their team. They started to assemble it before we left the handoff. It was a big, ugly piece of tech with no way to tell what it was or who made it. Except whoever packed it up didn’t get the memo. The manual and assembly instructions were right at the top of the crate, with KDI’s logo stamped across half the cover.”

“Careless of them.” The Operative’s voice was completely neutral.

“Yeah. I’ve heard stories about what they’re capable of and some of the rumors about what their black divisions get up to are pretty unpleasant. Anyway, the manuals also had big red stamps across them. ‘PROTOTYPE-NOT FOR FIELD USE,’ that sort of thing. Out of all proportion to killing a twenty-something blonde living on her own in a bad part of town. The rest of the gear they asked for was the same—there are police tac teams here in Cydonia, even now, with less equipment than they bought off us.”

I frowned at the mention of the blonde. It didn’t seem likely, but—

My thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of being watched. Onscreen, in a room a hundred yards away, the Operative’s head twitched and she looked to one side. Her eyes left Fenn for the first time. She was looking in my direction.

I turned around. There was no one there. The feeling of being watched didn’t go away. And for a moment I felt fear and anger and hate could taste them and smell them and they weren’t mine but they were.

I didn't need to see to know. She was here. She was watching. And I think I knew why. And now the Operative had felt it too. Not as strongly but she could tell something wasn't right.

She let Fenn ramble obliviously to a halt. If she paid him less attention than before he didn't notice. He ended his story by giving her the location of the building where the KDI team had attacked their target.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [9.04]

I think the Operative suspected what we'd find in the rundown apartment. There was certainly enough for her to put it together. But she didn't mention it at all on the drive over. The one brief conversation we had was about an entirely different topic than the assassination we were now looking into.

"What do you know about KDI?" For the first time since she'd conscripted me—for the first time since I'd met her—the Operative sounded distracted as she drove towards Cydonia's industrial sector. We were back in civvies and heading down a regularly patrolled route. In theory we were about as safe as it was possible to get. But Cydonia was still a city intermittently at war with itself. I could hear bursts of gunfire in the distance. Overhead, a gunship changed headings, vectoring towards the new firefight. Distraction was still dangerous. Cydonia was still dangerous.

“Not much. They’re a major defense contractor, right? Originally based out of asteroids in the Kupier belt? Converted mines?”

She nodded. “Essentially accurate. Before they moved to just using the acronym they were Kupier Defense Industries. They’ve been audited by TELCORPS before; they’re authorized for telepathic research so we keep an eye on them. It wasn’t my department, so I don’t know the details, but from what I heard the audit was triggered by the deaths of several telepaths on the same research team.” Explosions punctuated her words. Northwest of us the gunship was firing its payload.

That was it. The rest of the drive was silent. We both watched the road and the city around us. There was more than enough to occupy us. The Knights might have fought until the destruction of their final redoubt beneath Thalia, but that wasn’t where they started. They started in the industrial center—the shipyards and manufactories. There is a limit on what can be built inside a planetary gravity well, but even so the industrial base required to create the heavy trans-atmospheric ship Cydonia specialized in was immense, and the mass automation of factories and assembly lines hadn’t eliminated the need for vast workforces in the yards. Whether the shipyards grew as Cydonia did or Cydonia grew as the shipyards did was an open question.

The housing districts at the edge of the industrial center were sprawling prefabricated blocks, four or five stories high, crude and ramshackle looking compared to the towers of the central parts of the city or the sleek sides of the remaining arcologies.



Cheap and faceless; without feeling. That's what the housing looked like. That's how the workers had been treated. So they rose up. Strikes and labor disputes first. A few ended well. Others were put down harshly—not that it stopped them from recurring in the decades leading up the Knight's Rebellion. And it wasn't just in Cydonia. It happened across Mars as well and in the orbital shipyards that built and drove our exploration of the stars. Cydonia just had it worse, or maybe felt it more. So the rebellion began, born out of the bland structures we passed through—the bland structures whose remains we passed through.

The evidence of war was more dramatic elsewhere in the city. Thalia Arcology, broken and lifeless. Towers that were bombed, shelled, and fought through before and after, that now tilted, slumped, or crumbled. The destruction we drove through was less dramatic. And far more thorough.

Entire blocks were turned into mounds of rubble. Other buildings stood despite massive damage, testament to the strength of the prefab designs. Some showed signs, even now, of desperate stands and street-to-street fighting.

The few people who remained in this sector watched from behind shattered windows and out of shadows. The police kept order with a heavy hand, backed by the military. Fear ruled this section of Cydonia. Fear and the death that followed it.

The infantry fought for a solid month through the industrial sector and its outskirts before they reached the city proper. They were liberal with airstrikes and arty and the light mech squadrons. The Knights, in turn, fought hard in the district, so that it seemed to be nothing short of an endless array of ambushes and killzones, littered with mines and IEDs. Spray paint still marked undetonated ordinance and IEDs on the road. IT was no wonder that the remaining inhabitants were afraid. There were men in the 3/5/ who'd fought in the Cydonian campaign. They didn't, as a rule, speak of it. I'd seen enough to guess why.

The prefab where the KDI team hit their target was part of a whole block that was still intact, relatively undisturbed by the war. Looking at the maps it was too far from the Knight's defenses or the military's main line of advance to have been fought over.

It was a stroke of luck that didn't feel quite right. The closer we got the more my unease increased. It wasn't luck that the fighting avoided the block. Something was wrong. Wrong on a palpable level.

The Operative was tense. She felt it too.

We reached the block. It was abandoned—utterly deserted. No residents. No squatters or refugees taking advantage of the undamaged structures. That alone was a warning sign.

Whoever KDI killed, it made an impact. The sense of wrongness persisted, grew stronger. The same taste of fear and anger and hate. We knew before we entered the apartment what we'd find. I'd known since watching the interrogation. The Operative suspected. And there was no way she couldn't have known by the time we reached the building.

HER [9.05]

The block was coated in windblown dirt, rust red and undisturbed. The tire tracks of our car were the only signs of human presence. Other than the dirt the building was near-pristine. Slightly weathered, but there was no battle damage. Or graffiti, or art. Even before the war that was a rarity—the Cydonian workers tended to decorate, to try and make the prefab structures more pleasant. Bullet-damaged murals were visible on some walls when we drove through.

From the outside apartment number 42 looked no different from the rest of the building. The door was intact—KDI's team went for a quiet entry. The palm-lock and keypad combination had been overridden. The only sign of it was an open access port on the side. There were plenty of military and law enforcement groups with the hardware to automate the door-hack. It wasn't much use during full-scale urban warfare but the COIN and occupying forces tended to be fond of it, and I'd used it once in training.

The short front hallway showed no signs of a fight. Fenn claimed KDI went in a couple of hours before dawn to catch their target off guard. I didn't know if that was possible given what I'd seen her do. Still, even if she knew they were coming she didn't fight them at the door. A mistake—entrances are choke points; choke points become killzones. And from what happened—what I thought happened—when I lost my arm, none of the KDI team should've made it through the front hall alive.

There were no piles of ash and flayed flesh topped with charred bones. Just a plain, cheap carpet, dusty from disuse, and those same emotions in the air. Strong enough I could smell them, feel them—

I put a hand to my forehead, as if it could stop the growing headache. Each step I took made it worse. The Operative didn't see me—she was ahead of me, she couldn't see me. For a moment I thought she didn't feel it either. Then her shoulders tensed. Her pistol never wavered in front of her, even as the fabric of her jacket bunched, showing where her muscles tightened.

Neither of us spoke.

The living room was dark. A quick sweep with our flashlights didn't reveal anything. While the Operative began a more thorough search I reached for the light switch. It still worked. The overhead LEDs turned on. The warm light revealed the first signs of conflict.

There were bullet holes in the walls, reminiscent of Methereon's office. In six hours I'd been in two different rooms where fighting took place. Here it was easier to track what happened.

A counter separated the kitchen at the end from the rest of the room. Despite the attackers's best efforts it was still partially intact. The cheap siding of the counter had been eroded away by the weight of fire. The heavier plating behind it was pitted and scored. In places slugs were still embedded in the pseudo-diamond sheet. A series of scorch marks showed where a plasma weapon was used without much success. The additional armoring spoke to an uncommon degree of paranoia, but it worked. So it was sound preparation, not paranoia.

My headache grew so bad I started seeing spots. They danced over the walls and the counter, merging with and growing from bullet holes in a psychedelic waltz. I closed my eyes; watched the spots dance on the inside of my eyelids. I opened them to the sound of gunfire.

She was there, her blonde hair in disarray as she fired a rifle behind the cover of the counter. She knew what she was doing. Each shot was aimed. She ducked behind the counter as her magazine clicked empty. Return fire passed through me and chewed into the counter. Chips of plastic went flying. The rounds ricocheted off the armor plate and tore holes in the walls and floor,

Something was wrong. She should've been incinerating them, liquifying them, driving them mad and making them turn their weapons on each other. She could fight with a rifle, she showed she knew how, but why was she?

I looked down to check the pistol in my hand; to get ready to help.

The gunfire stopped.

The Operative walked around the counter. Her boots crunched through the debris from the fight. Her pistol was back in its holster. There was no danger. The fight was over. Had been over for years. I holstered my pistol and followed her, trying to ignore the spots and the headache. Trying to look normal. Trying not to attract her attention. She guessed too much already.

She crouched down to look at something. My eyes followed hers.

She was pinned down. Her rifle wasn't enough against their armor. They advanced through her fire; bullets sparking off composite plating. One side of her face was flash-burned from a near miss with a plasma weapon; half the hair on that side scorched away.

She couldn't do anything. Couldn't fight, they were prepared for that. Couldn't destroy them—it wasn't working. They weren't telepaths, she couldn't sense it in any of them.—The prototype. The one from the main labs. The one that blocked her. They had one, it was working. They would kill her.

A footstep. Heavy boots. One of them got around her while she was pinned. No face. Just an expressionless helmet.

A rifle. Barrel pointed at her.

They won. He won. Again.

Couldn't keep the others safe. Couldn't finish what she started.

A shot.

I looked at the body. The skull was blown apart, the pieces spread across the floor. Skin and brain and blood rotted away, leaving stains. Some strands of hair still attached. The rest of the body was in similar condition.

She still wore jeans and a red shirt. No shoes. It was her. There was no one else it could be.

SOMETHING MORE [9.06]

The Operative reached out to what remained of The Woman In Red's ruined face. The apartment's climate controls were set to cold, helping preserve the body. It had desiccated more than it rotted, a form of mummification common enough on Mars, though more common in the pre-terraforming days.

"This is... Problematic. And confusing." The Operative's words were for herself. Then she looked at me. "Can you feel it?"

I rubbed at my arm. The join between carbon-fiber replacement and flesh was beginning to ache, like it hadn't since I'd finished physical therapy. The socket around my eye began to itch, too. "I think so. Echoes, feelings. Maybe last thoughts. You?"

"The same." A thin trickle of blood seeped from her nose. She wiped it away absently. "Probably worse. However powerful you are, you're a latent. The presence here..." she shook her head. "She was a powerful telepath. Sometimes feelings can stick around after death, but this—I've never felt anything this strong, or this long-lasting.

"And I *know* this presence. So do you." Her pistol was in her hand again. It wasn't pointed my way, but that could change. "Care to explain?"

"I don't know anything about it. Only that I've felt it before. That it's saved my life—The *Athens*, Blackstone; earlier."

She looked me in the eyes while I answered. The wall of force that was her mind hit me as I finished and threw me to the ground. My headache earlier was nothing compared to it. My mind tore itself apart. Pain. Memories of pain. A man screaming as he disintegrated before me. The shattered, bleeding stump of my arm. The ragged hole through the *Athens*'s hull. The white flash that should have melted my eyes, should have burnt me to death.

And her thoughts. Impossible to understand. Backed by a will, a drive, that would not stop. Deeper and deeper, burrowing into my mind, seeking, demanding—

Rage. Over me and through me, *but not mine!*

Force.

Warmth. Protection. Something else; something more?

PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [9.1]

*Well?*

*The team on Mars registered something on their sensors. Two overlapping spikes of telepathic activity, with enough strength to burn out the passive detectors.*

*Did they get a signature before their equipment failed?*

*Yes, for both spikes. The first, weaker one, matched what we've seen from O-154. The second signature was noise and cut off before we could get a hard match. Analysis give about a seventy percent match with Her signature. But...*

*What is it?*



*We did a pattern analysis on the signature after we filtered her signature from it. Some was just noise—interference from O-154 and the burst from the sensors as they burned out. But there was another signature buried in it. So weak that by the time we'd lowered the detection threshold we had to determine and account for false-positives by hand. It—it looks like Alpha Three's signature, Sir.*

*And even more of the noise disappeared after we convolved it back in—there was a thirty four percent overlap between the noise and a partial convolution of the two signatures.*

*Is he active?*

*We have no way of knowing for certain, Sir. I let one of the staff telepaths look at the raw data and he thought it was more likely that she was working through him, taking advantage of his latency.*

*Neither option is pleasant. Did you get a location?*

*We did, and assets have been dispatched to it. Our response time was slow; I don't expect them to find O-154 or Alpha Three by the time they get there.*

*Where was it? Wait, don't answer that. There's only one place on Mars where something like that would happen. Am I right?*

*You are, Sir.*

*Damn.*

WHY? [10.01]

Blood trickled into my mouth from my nose. Piss soaked my pants. I could smell it through my nosebleed. My tongue was thick and raspy in my dry mouth, which tasted of bile. A look confirmed that my head was in a bubble of vomit. More blood flowed from my nose and mixed into it.

I pushed myself up, out of the mess, with trembling arms. Standing up from my hands and knees took all the willpower I had. I spat, leading against the counter, a futile attempt to clean the taste from my mouth. My spit came out thick and heavy, laced with blood and bile. It did nothing to help.

I felt less alive than after my closest brushes with death. The pain then was a reminder I still lived.

I stared down at The Woman In Red's corpse, blinking to bring it into focus. She'd done—I don't know. I felt her anger at the end. Not the lingering traces of it on the air; not her death cry. It was fresh, personal. Present. Present like she was. Watching over me. The same presence when I lost my arm. The same that saved me on the *Athens*, or when Blackstone was nuked. The same that didn't want me on Earth or Mars. I knew it was her, from the start, from the second time I saw her and knew she wasn't a hallucination. She wasn't subtle. But why? Why was she interested in me? And how? I was staring at her body, standing where she died, and she'd still managed to help me.

I began to see why the Operative was so interested in me.

Her interest hadn't gone well for her. She lay at the base of the wall in a heap, where she'd been thrown. She stirred as I watched. Still alive. However unpleasant, that beat having to explain her death to TELCORPS higher.

She looked how I felt—unsteady and half dead. Even from ten feet away I could see that her eyes were having difficulty focusing. I staggered over to her, letting the walls take most of my weight.

She spoke first. "I guess that was a mistake." Her voice was hoarse. "You look worse than I feel."

I nodded. "You alright?"

"Head's killing me. Haven't felt backlash like that since training." She was surprisingly relaxed for someone who'd torn into my mind the last time we spoke. So was I. I didn't have the energy for anger.

"Come on, we can sort this out later. Let's get out of here—we're not getting anything more from the body." She held up an ID that matched what The Woman In Red looked like. "Probably won't even get much from this."

Getting to the car was an ordeal. We stumbled out of the apartment, supporting each other like a pair of petty officers on shore leave. The stairs alone were almost too much for us. We got down them one step at a time, wincing the whole way.

My nosebleed had stopped. A look in the car's mirror showed a mask of crusted blood and vomit on one side of my face. I was a mess.

"Here." The Operative took a swig from a water bottle she'd dug out of the back, then tossed it to me.

“Thanks.” A quick rinse helped wash the taste out of my mouth. I spat the water out and took another sip. That one I swallowed. Then I wet the ruined bottom of my shirt and used it to wipe away the gunk on my face. It helped some. It also made me feel more human.

There was a first-aid kit in the glove compartment of the car. I pulled it out, leaving the loaded pistol and spare magazines there alone, and went through it until I found the painkillers.

The Operative was sitting on the ground, leaning against one of the wheels, her head tilted towards the sky. She opened her eyes as I approached. “Heh. You still look as bad as I feel.”

“I’m sure.” I passed her the water and the painkillers. “You good to drive?”

“Probably not. Still having trouble focusing.” She handed me the key-chip. Cydonia’s roads were too damaged and dangerous to let the car drive itself.

“Back to the safehouse?”

“Yeah. I don’t think we’ll get anything more done today. And you need a shower—and fresh trousers.”

I didn’t bother replying. I did offer her a hand. She took it and I hauled her upright.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.02]

We reached the safe house without any difficulty. The streets had calmed down—I didn't hear any fighting while I drove and the only soldiers I saw were on routine patrols supporting the police or EOD teams working to clear IEDs.

The Operative let me have the first shower. She made coffee while I was cleaning up. I had a mug and a quick snack while she showered after me. For half an hour we were able to pretend nothing had changed; that we were still within the comfortable bounds of the uneasy truce established between us since she conscripted me into TELCORPS.

Her hair was still damp when she sat down across from me, coffee mug in hand. We both sat there in silence, neither willing to start the conversation that had to happen. She gave in first.

"KDI's tied up in all of this." There was nothing for me to comment on in a statement that obvious. "Whoever she was, she's connected to you somehow, and KDI wanted her dead—If we believe Fenn's story, and I do." She took a long, slow sip from of coffee. I watched from behind the protection of my own mug, held contemplatively in front of my face, close enough that I could feel the steam. "They're also one of the few companies licensed to research both telepathy and cloning. That alone put them on the short list of people behind the attempt to kill you.

"The two fields are supposed to be kept separate—TELCORPS never has, and never will, authorized studies aimed at creating artificial telepaths. We're dangerous enough in small, naturally occurring numbers across the whole human population." She frowned into her mug. "The ability to create more telepaths—it's too powerful; it's why TELCORPS restricts research so heavily."

She closed her eyes and sighed, slumping down in her chair, before taking another sip of coffee and continuing. “But none of that’s enough to do anything to them. Enough to alert higher and start looking into things on my own authority, maybe, but nothing else. We need concrete proof before we go further. We need Metheron. We need what he knows.”

The silence between us resumed. The easy part of the conversation was out of the way. That only made getting to the next part harder. We avoided each other’s eyes as studiously as the events we danced around discussing.

“What did you feel there?” My voice surprised me as it broke the silence.

“Anger. Lots of it, right before I got thrown across the room.” If I was surprised to hear myself speak, then the Operative was just as surprised by her own candor.

“I felt it too—I couldn’t not. But that’s not what I meant. What did you feel there, in that room?”

“Anger, again. Fear, hate, and—I think—resignation at the end.” She spoke more slowly, considering her response. “No discrete thoughts that I could make out.”

There seemed to be no point in keeping secrets, except for the last ones, the ones I only guessed at. Not when the Operative had put most of the details together already.

“She killed half a platoon of rebels when I lost my arm. Without weapons. Without being there. *After* being killed—two years after. How the fuck did a bunch of corporate grunts kill her? Even if they were ex-SF, like the mercenaries, that’s hard to believe.”

“You think she faked it—no.” The Operative shook her head, abandoning the idea as soon as she voiced it. “She’s dead, I don’t doubt it. But you’re right. She should’ve been able to kill them easily. Then what?” She scowled into her mug, then answered her own question. “The KDI prototype. It interfered somehow.” She met my eyes for the first time since trying to pull answers from my mind. “Good catch.”

I shrugged. The surreal image of a barefoot woman in jeans and a red shirt, casually walking through the destruction she caused, was seared into me. Every time my eye ached or the join between flesh and prosthetic on my arm got sore I saw it again. That didn’t match how she’d died. I’d come to the same conclusion as the Operative, helped by The Woman In Red’s dying thoughts.

“As theories go I’ve heard worse. Certainly KDI, and every other contractor and research lab licensed to do telepathic work, are looking into hard counters for us. If they’ve managed that, without oversight audits by TELCORPS noticing...” She trailed off, staring into her now-empty coffee mug. “Well. That’s not something I can deal with now.”

Silence lingered between us again. There were two more things to discuss. Two more things that had to be discussed, no matter how much we would have preferred not to.

“You weren’t lying when you said you had no idea why she was interested in you.” The Operative leaned forward for the first time since she sat down. “I got that much from you before she intervened.” I didn’t say anything. I watched, and waited for her to speak again. “So we don’t know why she was interested in you, why KDI wanted her dead, and whether their interested in you because she was or for some other reason.



“Dammit, this is becoming one of those investigations. Always more questions, even when we find an answer.”

“And we don’t know how a dead woman is keeping me alive.”

“The Operative’s look could have prompted another appearance by the Woman In Red. “No. We don’t. And that should not be possible.

“Telepathic echoes are a known phenomenon. I’ve encountered one before. But they’re only impressions, left behind by a powerful telepath. There’s never been an echo able to do anything worse than giving telepaths in the area a headache. Manifesting light-years away? Impossible.”

PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.3]

There wasn’t much to say, or do, after that. Neither of us was ready to rack out. A cup of coffee wasn’t enough to keep me from falling asleep if I wanted it. It was enough to ensure long minutes spent staring at an unfamiliar ceiling while waiting for the events of my first day on Mars to overwhelm the caffeine in my system. So I read instead. The Operative worked on a report and cleaned her already-spotless pistol. At some point I threw my blood-, urine-, and vomit-stained clothes into the laundry.

I went to bed when I ran out of busywork. The dreams were back. Back like they hadn’t been since the *Athens*. I lost my arms again. I lost my eye again. I saw men turned into bloody chunks, into viscous liquid that ran down from their bones, into ash; screaming all the while. The hull of the *Athens* tore open in the blinding light over Blackstone that became the harsh sterility of an operating theater.

She was always there. A desiccated death's-head grin and a shattered skull overlapping, merging with, becoming her face. The Woman In Red. Dead. Not dead. Not alive. Keeping me alive, for reasons of her own.

I woke tangled in my sheets. My headache from the day before was back; worse. The aftereffects of two different telepaths fighting over—fighting in—my head became apparent. And I was lucky. Either of them could've fragged my brain faster than a cyber-ops unit in an enemy network, with about the same general effect.

I self-medicated the traditional way: coffee and painkillers, followed by a long shower. In that way it was no different from a shore-leave hangover.

Dawn still hadn't broken by the time I was out and dressed, but the Operative was up before me. For all that I'd never seen her sleep, she didn't have the telltale signs of a stim abuser. Or a stim user. She was awake and active, the same as always. Usually with a half-empty mug of coffee by her elbow.

When I looked more functional she gave me a quick run down of the day's plan. It amounted to the same thing as the day before: Find Methereon by going through his contacts until one of them knew something useful. Something other than the body of a woman killed years ago in a job he helped set up. That was useful information in more ways than one, it wasn't useful in a way that would help us find Metheron.

I wasn't optimistic. The Operative looked less than happy. In most of the Sol System finding one man was an easy task for a TELCORPS Operative. The clearances that came with her position opened up law-enforcement, military, intelligence, and local security databases and active monitoring to her. In Cydonia those systems were hamstrung by the scale of the destruction. The legion of drones, microdrones, and satellites watching the city was close in terms of raw surveillance but they weren't plugged into every moment of everyone's life the way grid-enabled security was. And with most of the grid traffic in the city using drones as emergency relays, the people who didn't want to be found—rebels, black-marketeers, other war profiteers—knew to stay off the grid, something made much easier by the collapse in coverage and the periodic massive disruptions of the replacement system.

Interrogating people, even with the ability to tell if they were lying or rip what they were hiding straight from their minds, was much less effective. That didn't stop us from heading off to do it again.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.04]

The first place we stopped was a bar in the basement level of another half-ruined skyscraper. The glass tubing of the neon lettering over the door was shattered. Cracks spiderwebbed across the display screen beside it. 'Still Open' was spray painted over the dead black of the screen and a set of jury-rigged lights lit the battered stairs leading down to the equally battered door.

‘Still Open’ didn’t mean open now. The Operative pounded on the door and stepped back, waiting. A minute later she did it again. Then again. After the fourth time it swung open. The woman on the other side glared at us with reddened eyes. Her dark skin had the grey pallor of someone who hadn’t slept. Judging by how she stood she was also holding a gun out of sight behind her body.

“The fuck you want? We’re closed.”

“That’s not what the sign said.” I heard her small smile in the Operative’s voice.

“Real fucking clever. You’re a regular goddamn comedian. We’re still closed. You want booze, go somewhere else. Better yet, fuck off and don’t come back.” She made to close the door.

The Operative blocked her by stepping forward into the doorway. The woman reacted by bringing her pistol up. I unholstered mine in turn. The Operative’s hands didn’t move at all.

“Look, I don’t know who the fuck you are or what you want, but if you and your boyfriend here don’t leave right fucking now I will shoot you both. You’ll be dead before he can get his gun up—if he can. The cops won’t even hassle me over it. There’s a lot of looters getting shot these days.”

“You don’t want to do that.” I’d never heard anyone speak as calmly as the Operative with a gun in their face.

“Like hell I don’t. Piss off. Now.”

“Arthit Metheron.” She sounded bored.

“What?”

“You heard me. Used to be a regular here. Did some business out of your back room. Disappeared recently. Sound familiar?”

“Yeah, I heard you. Sounds like another reason for you to fuck off. Only people looking for him these days cause trouble for me and want him dead.” She thumbed the hammer back.

The Operative moved. One second the woman’s pistol was in her face. The next it hit the deck, the hammer dropping on an empty chamber—she’d forgotten to load it properly.

The woman was on her knees, her arm twisted up behind her in the Operative’s grip. She leaned in, pushing her weight on the other woman’s arm, stopping just short of dislocating her shoulder.

“Get the door. And the weapon.”

I did as she ordered, bending down to pick up the pistol and then closing the door. That done, I holstered my own weapon long enough to to elect the magazine and double check the chamber on her pistol before safing it and putting it on the counter by the door. Then my pistol was back out and pointing at the woman.

“Don’t.” The Operative shook her head at me. I shrugged and followed the unspoken order, holstering the weapon year again.

She looked down at the woman—the bartender, I assumed. “I’m going to let you go. Then we’re going to have a talk about Metheron.”

“Go fuck yourself, bitch. Better yet, get your boy-toy to do it, assuming he can get it up for you.”

The Operative smiled at the insult. She also twisted harder on the bartender's arm. The bartender's face went white. "Or we can do this the hard way. Choice is yours."

The bartender didn't say anything for half a minute. Beads of sweat broke on her forehead and trickled down her face. "Alright, alright! I'll talk, you fucking psychopathic cunt; Jesus Christ!"

The Operative hauled her to her feet and let go. "If it makes you feel better, we're not looking for Metheron to kill him. We just want information he has."

"Yeah, right. Why the hell should I believe you? I've got no clue what the fuck you are, but robo-hand over there looks like he's got a stick up his ass that says 'MARINES—STANDARD ISSUE.' Bet it's a size large, too. He looks like he's used to stretching out for it. All nice and loose down there."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. She didn't know when to shut up, and the endless stream of insults and profanity that resulted was the best I'd heard in years.

The Operative grabbed her by the front of her shirt and pulled until the shorter woman was face-to-face with her. "Enough." She dropped her and shoved.

The bartender stumbled back into a table. She caught herself and glared at the Operative. "You're not very good at this whole 'easy way' thing, are you? You'd make a much better bad cop."

The Operative sighed. Loudly. "Just tell me what you know about Metheron, Ms. Abdullah, and we'll leave. It's that simple."

The bartender's eyes widened. "The fuck? How do you know that?"

"Abani Ali; age thirty-four. Born Farai Abdullah, who served a total of three years in prison for various minor offense, and is still wanted for murder, though I imagine the police aren't look too hard right now. You were what, twenty-seven, when you managed to scrape together enough cash for a decent fake identity? You've done pretty well for yourself since then. If you're running this dive now you've gone up in the world since the last report."

"Yeah, well, there wasn't anyone else left and I still needed some sort of work so I took—wait. What did you mean, 'report'? You people are watching me? Who the fuck are you?" Abdullah found an unfinished bottle on the table behind her. She took a desperate pull from the whiskey without bothering to check the contents.

The Operative stepped forward until she towered over Abdullah. "Who we are doesn't matter. What matters is what that information can do to you, and what I want in exchange for my silence.

"And, Ms. Abdullah, we watch everyone—if we want to. You were just unlucky enough to turn up in connection to someone we do care about."

Abdullah took another pull from the bottle. "What do you want to know?" The whiskey gave a rough edge to her soft, broken-sounding voice.

The Operative held all the cards and played them perfectly. I was impressed. "Where Metheron is. If you don't know that, then the last time you saw him and what he was doing."

A pull of whiskey. “Haven’t seen him in a month.” Abdullah split her gaze between the bottle and the floor. “He used to be a regular. Here at least three nights a week. Had an arrangement with the old owners, did some of his work out of the back room. I let him keep it up—he helped with my ID.” She closed her eyes for a couple of breaths before continuing. “All the shady shit he was into—some if it tied to the Knights. He skipped doing most of his work except the day job. Maybe they wanted him to keep his head low? I don’t know. He stopped coming here, said it was too dangerous. And—” she broke off for a drink, slumping against the table. “If you know to come here, you know where he works these days. Or is it worked, now? Whatever you want with him, he’s not where he’s supposed to be.”

“No. He’s not. Which rebel cell is he working with?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t ask. He didn’t say.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Your the one asking me about someone I haven’t seen in a month. Why would I know where he is?” A bit of her fire was back. Not much, but some. For a second she glared at the Operative, before dropping her gaze back to her scuffed boots. “There’s something like a dozen groups of leftover Knights in the city. They don’t even know who everything working for them is. Why should I?”

“Fine.” The Operative stepped back. “If I find out you’ve lied, or left something out...” She didn’t finish the threat. She didn’t have to. Abdullah could guess the rest. Had guessed the rest, going by the look on her face.

She turned to me. “We’re done here.”



“Ma’am.” The formality seemed appropriate. Abdullah already guessed what I was and it fit the image the Operative was projecting.

I let her lead the way out. Before I went through the door I turned back and addressed Abdullah for the first time. “Next time, chamber a round. It works better that way.” I kept my face straight.

“Fuck you.” She was too shaken for there to be any fire in the response.

SECURITY POSTURE [10.05]

“What did you think of that?”

“She might be lying.” I climbed into the passenger seat of the car. “She might be telling the truth. Not really sure which—it depends on how well compartmentalized the remaining Knights are and how close she was to Metheron.”

“And if I told you to pick one?”

“Why do you want my opinion? All I do is shoot things. I’m not trained for this.”

“No. You’re not.” The Operative started the car and backed out of the deserted parking lot. “But a second opinion is always helpful, and latents like you tend to be good at reading people.”

I shrugged. “Then I’d say she’s lying. Even after you held her feet to the fire she was shifty—wouldn’t look you in the eye except when denying that she knew where he was. And her initial reaction doesn’t fit that, it was too strong. Even with her attitude.”

“You might not be trained for this, but you aren’t bad at it.” The Operative looked over at me, then focused on the road again. “Might be worth keeping you around if I get some decent answers about what’s going on.”

A beat up car turned onto the road in front of us. It was the third non-military or police vehicle I’d seen all day. The part of Cydonia the bar was in didn’t have much traffic these days, despite the mostly-cleared roads.

We hit a temporary checkpoint five minutes later. It looked like it had been up for a couple of hours—the police were searching the handful of pedestrians trying to get through with a bored, lazy efficiency. The sentries looked up as we approached, then returned to their conversations, still relaxed.

The should have known better. However routine, manning checkpoints in an occupied city was dangerous. Especially in a city with as many flare-ups as Cydonia. If they were Marines I was responsible for I would have chewed them out for their lax security posture.

The Operative slowed down when we got closer. The other car didn’t.

“Shit!” She turned, tried to get a building between us and the checkpoint. The police started shooting. The unmistakeable tempo of panic-fire echoed down the street. A LMG opened up with a sustained burst.

OFF LIGHTLY [10.06]

The blast threw us into a pile of rubble. The Operative aimed for it as cover. She didn’t quite get us behind it in time.

“Move!” She grabbed my jacket and started hauling me from the car. Half her face was a ruined mess from the shattered driver’s window. Blood ran into her eye. It was still intact—her power, or an instinctive flinch.

I fumbled at the seatbelt and managed to undo it. I half-fell out of the wrecked car, pulled along by the Operative. My head was reeling.

My pistol was in hand and everything snapped back into focus. This, I was trained for; could deal with.

Gunfire still rattled down the street. Either the checkpoint survived the VBIED or more people were joining in. From the size of the smoke cloud I thought the second.

I crouched behind the wreck. The Operative was beside me.

“Reinforcements. Theirs or ours?”

“Didn’t see.” She swiped at the blood running into her eye.

“Shit.” I pointed at her face. “Get that cleaned up. I’ll check.”

I crawled to the end of the rubble pile. The street beyond was a mess. The bomb left a crater four meters across. It was short of the checkpoint by about the same.

That didn't mean it was a failure. The car was completely gone, turned into a wave of fire and shrapnel. The facades of the building on either side crumbled down into the street, torn away by the force of the blast. Screams came from one—civilians.

The smoke cloud obscured the checkpoint. I didn't need to see it to know what it looked like: Smoking wreckage and a carpet of blood and broken bodies. I'd seen it before.

More shots. They came from beyond the smoke. The tempo was different. Controlled fire; heavy. Lots of different weapons, by the sound. Something hissed. Another explosion shook the street. A plasma cannon—the QRF. Maybe just a nearby patrol.

A hand touched my ankle. The Operative crawled up beside me, coagulant foam already hardening on her face.

“Rebels are hitting the QRF. We need to get clear—we're not equipped for this fight.”

“Alley, ten meters behind us. I'll cover. Go!”

At her command I got up and sprinted back past the wreckage to the alley she indicated. For a few brief seconds the only sounds I heard were the slap of my boots on the ground and my breathing. Then I was in the cover offered by the alley. I crouched down at the corner of the nearest building and lead out, ready to cover the Operative's run.

“Go!” She began her sprint at my shout. Halfway to me she threw herself sideways and hit the ground. A bright line of tracers ripped through the space she'd occupied a heartbeat before.

Tracers work both ways. I fired at the machine gunner down the street, a steady hammer of suppressing fire. The Operative didn't need to be told to get up. She was moving again as soon as she hit the ground. She ran even faster, a blur instead of a human shape and only slowed before she passed my line of fire.

Then she was in the alley as my magazine ran dry. Pistols aren't good for long against machine guns. I turned and started running with her, reloading as I went. Behind us bullets tore holes in the pavement and blew chunks out of the corner I used for cover.

The Operative turned her head long enough to shout at me. "We need to get off the street."

"Here!" I moved to the nearest service door and tried the handle. It was locked. I slammed it with my boot. It held and I didn't feel any give. I tried again. No change.

The Operative grabbed my shoulder. "I got it. Cover me."

I stepped back, watching the alley for movement at either end. The Operative grunted behind me, then swore. The door shattered around the lock like she hit it with a battering ram.

"Let's move." She stepped inside, leading with her pistol and checking the room beyond the door. "Clear."

I followed and swung the door shut. A second after I did plasma hissed outside and something screamed overhead. A wave of hot air blew the door open. I stumbled back in the scorching wind, my left arm in front of my face to shield it from the molten bits of pavement and wall that splattered outwards. One chunk landed on the sleeve of my jacket and burned through. “Fuck!” I staggered, nearly fell. “Gunship—Blue-on-Blue! Do you have comms with them?”

“No.” The Operative grabbed my arm and dug the cooling chunk off from where it was fusing with melted skin, down to the bone, with a knife. I collapsed against her. “Too risky. We need to stay covert; unofficial.” She sheathed the knife and produced the same can of foam she’d used on her face from a pocket. She sprayed it on the burn. I swore again. It stung for a second before my whole arm turned numb and cool. “That’ll need proper care.”

“Yeah. Your face, too. When we have time.” I got off lightly. A bit of flash-burn and one serious injury from a close-proximity plasma strike was nothing. Meagre as it was, the door and the building protected us from burning alive. “At least the can’t follow us that way.” Enough heat radiated out from the impact point to keep the alley impassable for at least a quarter hour. That was part of the reason the pilot did it—they couldn’t get in after us, but we were trapped inside.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [10.07]

The Operative and I moved deeper into the building. The room we first entered connected to a lading bay with closed, now-warped doors. From there we entered the access ways and service corridors. We didn't see anyone for the first few minutes. Then we started passing offices and rows of workstations. The people of Cydonia were used to reacting to violence; the occupants of the rooms were on the ground under their desks or behind what cover they could find. At the sight of our weapons they moved away. I heard one man whimper as we passed.

"We stand out."

The Operative agreed, but didn't holster her pistol. "We're too obviously wounded to blend in."

"Can you keep a sweep team from finding us?"

"Yes, but it won't do any good if they lock the whole place down. By now they'll have overhead showing that we haven't come out."

"Think they'll put that much effort into finding us?"

"Would your old unit?"

"Yeah. Damn. That MG was probably setting up to cover their advance—our guys. We're in civvies, we're armed, we shot at troops—doesn't matter if they shot first. Responding to an incident like this, ROEs'll be loose. It's how they've been running things here. No wonder we can't keep the rebels down. Every time we shoot first..." I trailed off. The Operative knew how COIN worked as well as I did. Better, even.

She snorted a laugh. “We get out of this and I’m running it up the flagpole. Things clearly aren’t working now. TCHQ might be able to lean on the general. He can ignore doctrine and complaints from below, but outside pressure could change that.” She sounded as optimistic as I felt.

The hallways eventually brought us to the building’s front lobby. I leaned out from a corner and looked in. A cloud of micro-drones buzzed through the room. Behind them a squad of soldiers cautiously entered through the remains of the front door, their boots crunching on fragments of broken glass.

“Dammit.” I waved the Operative back and hoped the drones hadn’t spotted us. We retreated past the next corner. “The sweep team’s leading with drones. Might’ve spotted me.” I looked at her. “Can you deal with them?”

“I could. It would blow our cover, though.” She thought for a moment. “We’re splitting up. Hide, but surrender if you get caught—don’t fight them again. I can get us out of custody without announcing to the whole world that TELCORPS is actively operating in Cydonia.

“If you avoid the search, head back to the safehouse. Otherwise, don’t say anything to them. Clear?”

“Clear.” That much I could do.

“Good. Get moving.”



I didn't run down the hallway—it would've echoed off the tiles and made it obvious to the searchers that someone was trying to get away. I walked and took a series of random turns, always heading away from the lobby. Once I put a few corners between myself and the soldiers I started running and looked for a stairwell. The micro-drones were moving through the building ahead of the infantry, saving search time, but it would still take time for them to be thorough. I could stay ahead of them if I moved fast enough.

I found the stairs near the back of the building, next to a locked-down bank of elevators. I took them.

There were a half-dozen civilians sheltering under the bottom flight. I ignored them in favor of pounding up the stairs. Even if they told the soldiers about me I didn't have other options. This stairwell didn't go down. And while there were probably utility rooms in the basement with plenty of places to hide they had an equivalent lack of ways out. Up or down didn't matter. As long as the soldiers controlled the ground floor and the back way was impassible I was trapped.

I settled on hiding in an abandoned office on the fifth floor. I waited there in relative comfort for one of the drones to find me. An infrared sensor could pick up my body heat through the heavy door or the thin walls. It was a matter of time, so I didn't see any point in putting effort into hiding.

The only reprieve was if the squad moved on. I doubted it would happen. One squad, it's IFV, and a swarm of micro-drones weren't enough to make a major difference in a fight the size of the one the QRF was caught in. On the other hand, the Operative and I looked like suspects, had fired on the army, and were holed up in a building they controlled, all while higher was screaming at them to get the people responsible. A green LT could figure out the math on that, and none of the occupation force was green anymore.

The door bust into a cloud of splinters. I hit the deck on reflex. Before I got up a stunner blast hit me and I blacked out.

#### RECOMMENDATION [10.1]

*Well?*

*Our team found signs of a disturbance in Her apartment. Then She liquified—that's a direct quote from the report—two of them. The rest got out. The only further casualty was a Beta who tried blocking Her. He lasted long enough for the team to pull back. He's comatose right now. The team medic says he's got massive cerebral hemorrhaging and expects him to die soon. Even they could take him to a hospital he wouldn't survive.*

*Is the team still operational?*

*Yes, sir. Three losses hurts them but doesn't cripple them.*

*Good. Order them to terminate the dying Beta and incinerate the body, then stand by for further tasking.*

*Yes, sir.*

*Now, have we been able to turn up anything on O-154?*

*No, sir. Other than the team we have no local assets in Cydonia. Nobody does—it's too much of a mess and too low priority. And we can't get anything out of the remaining Knights cells. They're too busy trying to stay ahead of the army to do any special jobs for us.*

*Can we get anything from the army?*

*We have a roster of all incoming personnel in the last week from one of our sources. I don't expect to get anything from it. O-154 will have falsified her transit information if it's listed at all.*

*Damn. Is there any good news?*

*We know which Knights cell is hiding Metheron. We don't know where, though. They're being stubborn.*

*Give them what they want. We need him found and taken care of if there's going to be any hope of cleaning this up.*

*Yes, sir. But...*

*What is it?*

*You need to go to the Board, sir. They're already questioning our budget expenditures and leaning on you for details. And we're losing control of events. If you go to them now*  
—

*No. I appreciate your advice—and your honesty—but I can't go to the Board now. They'll use it as an excuse to axe too many successful projects and they'll take steps that will damage our credibility with both Earth and the Rebels. As long as there's a chance I can keep this contained I will.*

*Understood, sir. I'll start taking with the Knights cell immediately.*

*Good. And thank you. [Insert Assistant's name here?]*

11

PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.01]

I woke up on the cold concrete floor of a holding cell. The cold wasn't helped by the thin prison jumpsuit I'd been changed into while I was out. Goosebumps ran down my arms. I shivered. Then I sat up, using the wall next to me for support. The man sitting by me grabbed me under one arm and helped.

"Stunner?"

"Yeah. I think." I'd been shot by them before in training. The pounding headache and nausea were the same.

He chuckled. "You look like it. What'd you do to earn it?"

"Shot at some soldiers."

"Really?" He looked me up and down. "You look like a soldier yourself. Well, except for the boiler suit."

I shrugged. I was too disorient to lie and wasn't going to tell the truth.

The cell was packed. With twenty people in it I was surprised there was enough space for my unconscious body on the floor. There probably hadn't been. Once I was upright and sitting against the wall with my knees curled up for warmth the rest of the cell's occupants pushed a little closer.

The sheer number of people around me didn't make it any warmer. The temperature controls were set low. Freezing air flowed into the room from a small, reinforced vent high up on one of the walls. It wasn't quite cold enough to stop me from smelling sweat, adrenalin, propellant, and blood. I wasn't the only person in the room who'd been in a fight recently.

I couldn't feel the burn on my arm. I poked at it, only for the man to stop my hand.

"Don't. All they did was put fresh foam on it. The burn hasn't been treated properly, and you'll regret disturbing it."

"Oh?"

"I was doctor. Now I'm a suspect picked up in a sweep of potential sympathizers. Go figure."

"Well, thanks."

He snorted. "Just unlucky you used that arm. Next time, block with the metal one and you'll only need to see a mechanic."

"Yeah." A reflex I hadn't retrained—a mistake.

There were two or three groups sitting and talking in the cell. A couple other smaller conversations. The rest of us sat quietly. After a short eternity of the cold seeping into my legs I checked my watch. Unsuccessfully. It was gone, stripped from me with the rest of my belongings. Classic tactics and SOP.

The ebb and flow over conversation around me and the growing pain in my arm as the painkillers faded marked the passage of time. I had nothing to say to my cellmates besides the brief conversation with the doctor, so there were no distractions from the pain and the cold. I tried listening to the prisoners around em with no success. Their conversations were circumspect or inane, always mindful of the cameras and listening devices seeded through the room.

I sad and shivered and waited. I trusted the Operative—if I wanted to get out I had no choice. I didn't say anything. Even my admission to the doctor was dangerous, I realized. It could be used against me. Could justify letting me rot in a cell or face court martial, or summary trial, or a tribunal. I wasn't military anymore. I was employed by TEL-CORPS but my official record listed a cover job that didn't exist and I never paid any attention to. If the Operative couldn't get me released I was dead or the next thing to it. Years in one prison or another at best. Possibly and endless series of detention camps, not even afforded the right of being a prisoner, much less a prisoner of war.

The fear in the room was overwhelming. The longer we sat there the less conversations there were. Many of the others were thinking similar things. I saw it in their eyes, in how they held themselves. Even the defiant ones, the known rebels who faced a tribunal and the firing squad after, grew quiet.

The door opened. Armored guards stormed in, stun rods held threateningly. More guards filled the hallway. They held rifles. The guards in the room cleared a path, beating away anyone too slow to move with sharp electric shocks that left them twitching. Their target got the same treatment. They slapped restraints around her wrists and ankles, linked them together, forced her upright, and half-dragged her from the room. It took the length of a few shocked breaths; maybe twenty seconds. It was efficient, it was violent, it was fast, and then they were gone, the door slamming shut behind them.

“Fuck.” Someone voiced the way we all felt.

It was perfectly timed to increase the fear. The whole cell was tense. One of the men the guards shocked pissed himself in his spasms. The doctor went over to check on him. The smell drifted through the room. No one said anything about it.

The guards took four more people that way. The intervals felt different each time. If there was any sort of timing it was based on never letting us relax. The moment the atmosphere started to calm they were back in a burst of violence. No one slept. No one tried sleeping.

The fifth time the guards came in I was the target.

ACTING OFFICIALLY [11.02]



Hands under each arm kept me upright. My feet slid along the ground without finding purchase on the smooth floor. The two guards holding me noticed I wasn't dazed from the stun anymore and slowed long enough for me to get my feet under me. Then they let go and fell back to a position right behind me. The inactive stun rod in the small of my back was a clear message: Keep moving.

The rest of my escort peeled off as we left the cell block, heading for their break room until they were needed again. The only one who stayed was the sergeant in charge of the detail, who lead the way through the hallways of the detention facility to a different cell block. I shuffled along after him, hampered by the restraints around my ankles and driven forward by the MPs behind me.

Security at the new cell block was tighter. A lieutenant verified my biometrics and the transfer paperwork at the door and oversaw the handoff to a new escort. The entrance proved to be a pair of heavy security doors with an interlock.

The first door swung shut behind me, leaving me alone with two guards, a security robot, and a pair of recesses in the wall where automated weapons of some sort were hidden. After a delay of ten seconds or so the second door opened to the sounds of heavy bolts being withdrawn.

Another sergeant waited on the far side to oversee the rest of the transfer. I followed her through a short maze of hallways lined with cells. One was mine.

They left me in the tiny room with no ceremony after undoing the restraints. The door slammed closed. Heavy bolts shot into place with an audible noise, followed by a soft buzz as the electromagnetic seal engaged.

The solitary cell was also bare concrete. A narrow bed covered by a thin blanket ran the length of one wall. Across from the bed was a sink and a toilet. All the furnishings were made of solid plastics that were solidly anchored in place and couldn't be broken to make weapons. The whole room was cramped half again as wide as my armspan.

With nothing to do besides worry and no way to measure, much less pass, time I ended up doing the one thing a Marine—former Marine, now, given that I was officially dead as far as the Corps was concerned—can always do. I climbed on the bed, pulled the thin sheets and blanked over me to fight the cold, and slept.

My dreams were a strange nightmarish mix betoken by tossing and turning, trying to stay warm in the cold air. The Woman In Red featured prominently. So did another room, a cell not too different from the one I was in. The walls were painted a sterile white, the air warmer, the blankets heavier. The floor was covered in white tiles reminiscent of a hospital. One corner had a drain set into it, beneath a standing shower.

It felt familiar in the twisted way dreams do.

It felt like home.

I was sitting on the bed doing nothing—thinking nothing—when she grabbed my shoulders from behind and shook them. I jolted forward and slid to the floor, turning around as I did.

She didn't say anything, didn't communicate in any way. Her face was blank, showing none of the anger or fear I'd felt the last time i saw here. She reached down and shook me again, then pointed to the door. It opened, revealing black silhouettes that walked in without any of the violence of the MPs. One reached towards me. She tried to step in-between us, but his arm reached right through here. In that instant I saw something painful and broken and sorrowful in her eyes.

I woke not knowing where I was. Goosebumps rippled down my arms. I'd thrown the blanket off while sleeping.

A buzzer sounded and the cell door opened. The whole transport process was repeated. The MPs cautiously cuffed me, escorted me down the hallways, and brought me to an interrogation room. There were no clocks that I could see anywhere along the way. I didn't know how long I'd slept, how long I'd waited in the holding cell, how long I'd been unconscious before that—how long I'd been a prisoner. It was an effective method of keeping me off balance. My stomach told me I hand't eaten in too long, my dry throat the same about drinking, and the throbbing in my arm said the topical anesthetic in the foam covering wore off at some point.

The interrogation started with more waiting. They left a water bottle sitting on the table in front of me, at the edge of my movement range with the restraints. I didn't drink. Inhibition reducing drugs were technically forbidden in interrogations. They still saw limited used, though, so I chose not to trust the offered water. In theory I only had to wait until the Operative got things straightened out. If she failed I was well and truly fucked and what I did in the first of many interrogations to come didn't matter.

Eventually the door opened. A captain—intel by his branch insignia—entered the room and sat across from me. He looked down at the tablet in front of him for a moment and then began to ask questions. He started with the basics—Who was I? What was I doing in Cydonia? He already knew the answers to several of the questions. I didn't respond.

He didn't get frustrated by my refusal to answer. Instead, in the same calm voice he began to ask questions that were more pointed. What was I doing near the attack? Why was I armed? Why did I shoot at the soldiers?—I resisted the urge to point out that they shot first—Who was the woman I was with? What did I know about the Knights? What cell was I part of? I doubt he expected answers. Anyone involved with the Knights wouldn't respond to basic questions, anyone picked up by mistake would be babbling or demanding a lawyer they wouldn't get. Asking was a *pro forma* exercise.

I still didn't respond. At the very least he was a good actor; he betrayed no emotions at my refusal to talk. Maintaining my silence was easy. It conflicted with training that urged me to give my name and serial number, over and over again, in reply to each of his questions, but that was simple to ignore. It would do me no good. I might even hurt me. The name and number of a Marine who died half a month previously in the Gibson theater meant nothing anymore.

I meant nothing anymore, except as a question for the Operative to answer. If I was lucky I'd survive that process. I wasn't optimistic. I was alive. That could change easily enough at her hands, at the hands of the group hunting me, by the order of the captain across the table from me.

My thoughts drifted through the interrogation until his tablet buzzed an alert, drawing the attention of both of us. He read the message, stood up without saying a word, collected the tablet and straightened his uniform, then left the room. I got the impression he would've slammed the door shut if it wasn't automated.

The next person to come through the door, not long after, was the Operative. The left side of her face was still a maze of cuts, but they'd been seen to, the blood washed off, and she was in fatigues again. The still naked nametapes or rank insignia, except for the new patch on her shoulder. A black death's head, mirroring the helmet she wore when armored. The symbol of TELCORPS's Third Division, and a sign that she had more power than anyone in the BFD short of the general. And he'd need a very good reason to overrule one of her decision if he wanted to keep his job.

The uniform she placed on the table had the same patch. We were now acting officially.

OFFICIAL NOW [11.03]

I started to ask the Operative a question during the process of collecting my belongings and leaving the detention facility. She shook her head, cutting me off before I got past the first word. I settled for looking at my watch instead. It was just past midnight. I'd been detained for fifteen hours. Despite having been awake for so little of it, it still felt longer.

The next hour was spent getting my arm looked at, eating, and—invariably—drinking a great deal of coffee. The Operative suggested using stronger stimulants if I wanted, since I wasn't likely to get any sleep that night. I declined. I never liked stims and tried to only use them on the battlefield where it was necessary. She didn't seem surprised and kept drinking her coffee.

The mess was busy despite the late hour. They weren't serving as much variety as they did during regular mealtimes or even during off hours during the day, but there was still a fair bit of simpler food to choose from. The occupation of Cydonia didn't stop when the sun went down and the cold Martian night rolled in, so soldiers and contractors trickled in through the night as they came back from missions, came off or got up for oddly-timed and overlong shifts. It seemed like a safe enough place to ask my question.

“So we're official now?”

She grimaced. “Yes. The moron interrogating me didn't believe who I was until I convinced him to query TCHQ. He took his time doing that and the whole process got the attention of the general. You were spared a meeting with him—he wasn't pleased that we were operating here without notifying him. So between that and the rest of it the whole damn BFD knows we're here by now.” She paused long enough to take a bite from the wrap on her plate. “Our records were wiped from the detention facility and everyone involved ordered to keep quiet, so our cover will hold a while longer. Long enough, I hope, to find Metheron and get off this planet.”

“What’s next, then?”

“We finish eating, and then I order a squad to kick in Abdullah’s door and bring her in. I don’t have time for subtlety anymore and she has information I need.” She applied to herself to finishing her wrap. I followed her lead and didn’t speak again until my plate was clean.

“What do you think Abdullah knows?”

“I’m not sure—she didn’t think audibly about Metheron’s location or anything that convenient during our conversation. She’s definitely closer to him than she claimed.”

“Think Fenn knows anything about her?”

She looked up at me. “Not a bad idea. Let’s find out.”

We returned to the detention facility. She had Fenn brought to one of the interrogation rooms. This time I was with her, standing at her shoulder while she sat across from him, doing my best to keep my expression neutral. While I didn’t care about Fenn one way or the other. I could feel the lingering echoes of The Woman In Red’s hatred for a man who’d had a hand in her death. Fenn raised an eyebrow at my presence but didn’t comment on it otherwise when we entered.

“What do you want now?” A day and a half more in captivity hadn’t done him any favors. HE looked tired and his skin was sallow.

“What do you know about Farai Abdullah?”

“Never heard of her?—Them?” He leaned back and crossed his arms.

“She goes by Abeni Ali theses days.”

Fenn was more interested by that. “The waitress at Arthit’s favorite watering hole? What do you want with her?”

“So you do know her.”

“Yes, I know her. I just don’t see what she has to do with anything. Aside from getting her name changed she kept out of his work. They both thought it was better that way.”

The Operative leaned in. “ ‘They both thought it was better?’ Why were they both making that decision?”

Fenn sighed. “Fuck. I’m tired if I’m slipping like that. And you’re entirely too goddamn sharp.

“They were involved. On-again-off-again for a while. Last I heard they were back together and had been for half a year.” He shrugged. “I can’t tell you more than that.”

The Operative looked satisfied. “That’s more than enough.” She stood. “I’ll make sure your file notes you’ve been cooperative.” Her face was carefully blank. While that annotation might make Fenn’s sentence easier it wouldn’t do him any favors with his former compatriots. It was a merciless mercy. After seeing the results of the car bomb, I approved.

REAL SCRAPS [11.04]



The BFD Ops Center was dimly lit to make viewing the holographic projections and flat-screen displays on the walls and at the workstations easier. A susurrant of quiet chatter filled the room as technicians, comms specialists, and intel teams talked into headsets, relaying information and orders to a variety of drone controllers, units in the field, and other commands. The room felt purposeful and unhurried. Even the radio chatter from ops that played over speakers as a drone relayed footage to the primary screen was relaxed despite the sounds of a firefight in the background. The night's operations, it seemed, were routine and under control.

A quick question pointed the Operative to the colonel in charge of the ops center. He was a short, stocky man in rumpled fatigues holding a cup of coffee the same color as his skin and standing in front of the room's main display, watching a raid in progress. He introduced himself to the Operative when she walked over to him, cutting through the room, and offered his hand to shake. She took it as I crossed the room to take my new customary place behind her shoulder. He gave me a brief nod of acknowledgement then looked back at her.

"What do you need, Operative?"

"A team for a snatch job. I'd prefer military, but I'll take a police unit if they're all you have available for tasking."

"Are you expecting resistance?"

"No. I want to go in heavy to make an impression."

“I think I can help you with that. Who’s the target?”

The Operative moved to one of the workstations and said something to the technician manning it. He replied and typed something quickly. A new window showing Abdullah opened on the main display.

“Abeni Ali. Runs a Knights friendly bar in the city.” A location marker appeared on a small inset map.

The colonel looked over at her and raised an eyebrow but didn’t question it. “We have a team in that area already. Easy enough to add to their tasking for the patrol. Will the bar be open this late?”

“Her hours weren’t posted. Still, there’s no curfew in that district. Expect a couple of customers, probably drunk by the time you get there.”

Grainy white washed out a quarter of the display behind the colonel. The chatter over the speakers immediately increased, carrying the sounds of a renewed firefight. Muzzle flashes lit up across the front of the building onscreen. Two of the tags marking friendlies turned bright red—wounded. A third went black. The colonel swore. The figure on the screen dragged their wounded behind cover. They left the dead woman where she was. There was time enough to retrieve her after the fight finished.

The sudden burst of action didn't disturb the action of the Ops Center. The casualties didn't phase them for more than a moment either. A major attack like the car bombing we'd seen that morning would have produced a controlled, if frantic response. A couple of injured and one dead, on the other hand, was still routine. The calm was a reminder that the war hadn't left Cydonia alone after the Knights's leaders fled. Occupying the city and dealing with insurgent Knights wasn't as bloody as the pacification efforts—the polite, official term for invasions, sieges, and other major engagements—I'd done in the colonies over the past two years. Clearly that didn't mean it was bloodless.

We waited in the Ops Center, watching raids and firefights. Twice the colonel authorized precision drone strikes to end an engagement, including the fight that broke out while the Operative was speaking with him. That time he used a conventional warhead. The explosion dropped the building on top of any rebels still inside. The second time he authorized a strike there were too many civilians present for that level of indiscriminate force. He had the unit on the ground designate all the hostiles they could see by hand, then drop a cluster bomb with targeted micro munitions. The audio from the engagement broke off with a series of sharp pops as the seekers detonated, destroying everything within a meter of them.

After an hour of watching operations continue as normal by the Operative's side I found myself swaying on my feet trying to stay awake. To avoid collapsing and making myself look stupid I made my way to the coffee pot in the corner of the room. A trio of soldiers stood around it, chatting quietly while they refilled their mugs. I grabbed a disposable cup and waited for them to finish. One broke off chatting with his friends to address me.

“What’s TELCORPS doing in Cydonia? You’re the only intel agency I haven’t see here before.”

“I can’t say.” I edged past him to the pot. “Excuse me.” I filled my cup, then after a thought, grabbed a seance one and filled it, too. Not knowing how the Operative took her coffee, I left it black, like mine, but picked up a sugar packet and a thing of instant creamer.

“Fair enough.” The man was unphased. He’d probably heard similar answers before. “Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, how’d you get the arm?”

I quashed the mental image of The Woman In Red surrounded by death the question brought up with the speed of practice. He wasn’t the first to ask casually, though often as not other soldiers ignored the augmentic. “Heinlein.”

He accepted that my one-word answer was all he would get and turned back to his friends. I crossed back to the Operative’s side and wordlessly handed over one of my cups. After she took it I proffered the creamer. She declined with a quick shake of her head, still focused on the screen.

The clocks read 0220 local when the snatch team reached Abdullah’s bar. By then they had a collection of captured Knights in the backs of their APCs, with more bodybags on the floor so the enemy combatants could be identified before being disposed of in the constantly-smoking crematoriums.

The Operative queued up a live helmet cam feed from one of the squads to go along with the colonel's overhead imagery. The APC stopped and dropped its ramp. The squad spilled out immediately, showing how familiar and practiced they were at rapid raids. Inside thirty seconds the squad moved down the stairs and stacked up on the door while the feed shook and bounced with every step the man took, a nauseating effect on the stationary screen. Behind them, visible on the overhead view, the other squad established a perimeter backed by the APCs in the same amount of time.

They didn't bother with breaching tools. The point woman cracked the door open, tossed a flashbang, waited for it to go off, and kicked the door in.

The cam we watched through belonged to the second man through the door. A couple of rounds caught him in the chest as somebody sprayed the doorway with automatic fire. He grunted and stumbled as her armor took the low caliber rounds. Then he steadied and snapped his rifle up, returning fire while she moved to the side, clearing the door for the rest of the squad.

More rifles joined in. The man, firing blindly behind an overturned table, disappeared in a hail of splinters and blood. The rest of the bar was too shocked to resist when a fire team broke off and bagged his body. The other soldiers kept their weapons leveled at the rest of the room. The corporal leading the squad moved around the bar, slammed a stun rod into Abdullah before she could react, paused long enough to cuff her, and then hauled her twitching body across the room.

One of the soldiers spoiled the atmosphere with a quip about closing time on his way out through the door. Other than that the whole raid was smooth, professional, and fast. Three minutes and one body after they dismounted they were boarding the APCs again with a prisoner and a fresh corpse in a black bag.

“No resistance?”” The colonel’s voice was dry.

“Nothing your men couldn’t handle, colonel. I’m sure they’ve gotten worse in actual bar fights on leave.”

To my surprise, he laughed. “So you been to the bars around Hereford, then?”

“Once or twice.” A crooked smile crossed her face. “Go into a few real scraps there with my sister, years ago.”

CHOOSE QUICKLY [11.05]

We watched Abdullah and the rest of the prisoners get unload from a distance. If she noticed us, we were another couple of soldiers standing together outside the range of the floodlights at the entrance to the detention facility.

The prisoners were all conscious by now. They either shuffled out of the APCs at gunpoint or were manhandled out by tired soldiers who wanted to be finished for the night so they could go rack out. The platoon’s lieutenant exchanged data with one of the MPS, officially turning over his captives. When he finished the APCs departed, heading for the BFD morgue with the rest of their cargo.

The MPs herded the detainees inside for processing. Most would go to a holding cell for now. A few, like Abdullah, were already known and went elsewhere; individual cells or interrogations. The Operative and I passed the processing time by heading to an observation room where she pulled up Abdullah's files—both of them, one for each identity—and reread them. I read over her shoulder. There wasn't much there that hadn't already been covered, either by Fenn or during our first conversation with her. Given how much the Operative knew about her to begin with I suspected she could recite the high points of the file without looking.

Two MPs wrestled Abdullah into the interrogation room on our monitors. She struggled and swore the whole time, even when they got her into the chair. One of the MPs ran out of patience and hit her with a stun rod again. She slumped long enough the the MPs to suffer her to the chain and restrain her hands to the table. Her swearing was more vicious when she reviewed half a minute later. The MPs ignored her. To them she was just another uncooperative prisoner, as story to tell in the mess later, maybe.

"If you have your reader on you, I suggest getting it out." The Operative looked away from the monitors. "Or get a couple hours shut-eye. I'm going to let her sit for a while."

I was in the weird zone between being tired and not being tired at all, a result of the strange day I'd had and the coffee I'd piled onto of it. I opted to read, glancing up at the Operative and the monitor periodically.

She only half payed attention to Abdullah. The rest of the time she went over various files. Mostly it looked like dossiers on the active Knights cells in Cydonia and their senior members. Several times I saw equipment manifests and lists of addresses—stockpiles seized and suspected locations of more.

At exactly oh-five-thirty the Operative asked me to take over for her. I did, paying more attention to Abdullah on the screen in front of me than I had for several hours. She wasn't swearing energetically anymore. She switched between looking furious and terrified at irregular intervals without resorting to her ranting. She eventually settled on a hard, determined look before fear undermined it and she began to fidget again. The Operative's decision to let her imagination run wild seemed to be working.

Twenty minutes later the Operative returned, carrying coffee and sandwiches for both of us. "Anything?"

"She's psyching herself out, same as before."

"Good. Here." She passed the food over. I finished quickly.

An hour later the Operative told me to make another food run. When I got back she stood up and straightened her uniform. She somehow managed to make it look like she hadn't been caught up in a firefight, tossed in a cell, released, and up all night after that. She also redid her hair, going from a loose, comfortable looking ponytail to a hasher uniform bun that emphasized the angles and raw wounds on her face.

And she looked terrifying while doing it. She caught my reaction and smiled. The way I was feeling, it looked more like the eternal, sardonic joy of a skull than anything else. "Good. If you're feeling that through your unconscious defenses she definitely will."



Knowing her powers caused the effect weakened it. That didn't make it comfortable but by the time we walked through the door into the interrogation room I had my reaction controlled.

Abdullah took one look at the Operative's face and paled so suddenly she looked sick—or about to die of blood loss. “You—” she managed.

“Yes. Me.”

She took a bracing breath while the Operative sat down. Once again, I stood behind her, coffee and food still absently in hand. “And boy-toy. Is he your barista now?” the scanner was still there, underneath the fear. “What the fuck do you want with me? I've done nothing.”

“One of your patrons shot at soldiers. For someone who's done nothing, that's not a good sign.”

“What, and I responsible for the actions of every drunken asshole in my bar now? If that was the case every bartender in the universe would be in jail right now.”

“No, you're not. But it certainly doesn't look good for you.” The Operative's voice hardened. “And I warned you what would happen if you lied to me. Do you know what this means?” She tapped the TELCORPS emblem on her shoulder. Abdullah's eyes flicked over, registering it for the first time. They widened and she went pale again—paler than before, which didn't seem possible. Her breathing became faster as she started to panic.

“You do. Good.” The Operative smiled, twisting the wounds down the side of her face. “So you know—or think you know—what I can do. I’ll keep this simple: You tell me what I want to know. Without lying or holding back this time. I will know if you do, and I will rip what I want from your mind. Provided you survive the process, what remains will be barely enough for you to function. You’ll either be wheelchair bound or comatose for the rest of your short life.” She let her voice soften. “If, on the other hand, you’re cooperative, Fari Abdullah disappears for good, another casualty of the fighting in the city, while Abeni Ali gets a quiet life somewhere nice on Earth, far away from Cydonia and the Knights, and answers any questions asked of her.” She crossed her arms and met Abdullah’s glare with a level look. “Choose quickly. I won’t wait forever.”

GOOD CHOICE [11.06]

Abdullah didn’t take long to make up her mind. She broke. Watching her face, I saw the exact moment she decided her life was worth more than her secrets. The Operative’s offer was more tempting than a painful mindrip that would either leave her dead or wishing she was.

The Operative saw it too. The aura of overwhelming fear she projected lessened to the point where I barely felt it. Abdullah unconsciously relaxed—slightly. The Operative’s subtle reinforcement of her choice was enough to make her vocalize it.

“I’ll talk.” Her voice sounded like it had when we left the bar. She’d been broken in different ways twice in as many days by the Operative.

“Good choice.” The Operative sounded friendly—reasonable—as she acknowledged her victory. She twisted in her seat to me, only far enough that she could keep track of Abdullah out of the corner of her eye, and took the coffee. She placed it on the table in front of Abdullah, within her reach. “Here.”

“What, so now he’s my barista as well as yours?” Her humor was bitter.

“Enjoy it while it lasts.” I passed the Operative the sandwich I’d grabbed with the coffee. She unwrapped it and placed it beside the drink. “Unless you’d prefer water?”

“Only if it’s Russian.”

“Sorry, no vodka.” We waited quietly for her to eat. The Operative didn’t show any sign of impatience. Not that it took Abdullah long to finish. She tore into the sandwich, crumbs dribbling down onto the table where she hunched over the food.

The Operative didn’t speak until Abdullah washed the last of the sandwich down with the coffee. “So, do you know where Metheron is? I already know the two of you were lovers.”

“How’d you find that out?” Abdullah waited for an answer that didn’t come.

“Right. TELCORPS. You know everything. Obviously. I don’t even know why I’m surprised.” She took a breath, steadying herself. “Yeah, Arthit and I were fucking pretty regularly. Still haven’t seen him in months.” She hesitated.

“But?”

“But I know who’s hiding him. Not where he is, they wouldn’t tell me that. I also know how to arrange an emergency meet with them.”

“Who is it?”

“No. Not until I see proof of our deal.”

“Fine.” The Operative sighed. She placed her tablet on the table and switched it to projection mode so a hologram floated above it. She navigated to Abdullah’s file—the one under her birth name, not Ali—with a few commands. Another series of commands and a signature changed the file so it read that Abdullah’s death during the Battle of Cydonia was confirmed. “There. That update will automatically push out to all the relevant databases, including the police’s active registry. Your past is dead. The arrangements for your relocation will take more time. Satisfied?”

“I have to be, don’t I?”

“The Knight cell called Lancelot—I know, I know; their leader’s a fucking romantic when he’s not executing suspected informers—anyways, they’re the ones sheltering Arthit. He was worried some of his past business could catch up to him while things were unsettled and set something up with in exchange for giving them help with weapons smuggling and a some other stuff through his connections. When he was attacked at his office in the Arcology he fled to them.”

“The Lancelot Cell...” More commands on the tablet, this time with the projector turned off. “Operates in central Cydonia? The ones behind the Snowblind Bombing, led by Jaques Clarke?” She frowned. “Has one hell of an unpleasant record?”

“Yeah. Him. He’s personally executed five people that I heard of. Real pleasant guy.”

“And you can set up a meeting with him?”

“Arthit gave me a contact code for emergencies. One-use only. Should be enough to get you through the door. He’ll set it up somewhere out of the way and send a few grunts. If half of what they say about spooks like you is true, that’s enough.”

“It will be.” The Operative stood. “I need to make the arrangements for getting you to Earth. In the meantime you’ll be moved to a cell, with a chance to shower first. What do you need to get in touch with Lancelot?”

“My tablet. The contact info’s hardware and software locked to it for verification.”

The Operative nodded. “Understood.” We left.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.07]

We took another car from the BFD’s small stock of unmarked civilian vehicles. From it’s condition it was battlefield salvage commandeered by an intel unit for use in the city. Scorch marks ran halfway down the right side where it had been too close to an explosion, making it look like many of the other cars on Cydonia’s streets.

The safe house didn’t feel like home after only two days. I’d been bounced around by the war too much for any place to feel like home, even where I grew up. On the other hand, I did relax for the first time in an day when I walked in.

The Operative moved straight for her workstation to contact TCHQ. She’d taken care of the Marian side of things for Abdullah’s relocation before we left the BFD, even seeing another patrol out to seize most of her possessions as evidence. The goal was to make it look like she’d been disappeared into the detention system with not chance of coming out the other side.

I went to the kit bag holding my armor and the cases with the heavier weapons stored in the safehouse. We wouldn't be able to carry it to the meeting, but I wanted to check that everything in the arsenal was in working order. There was a good chance we'd find ourselves in a heavy fight with the Lancelot Cell after we got their location. I wanted to be prepared.

Running a function test on the Camouflage of my new armor took longer than I liked. I wasn't practiced at it. I'd had some time to familiarize myself with the tech during our brief stay on Earth and it was designed to be user-proof, but it was still a complex, specialized system kept out of general issue by cost and the difficulty of maintenance.

When that was finished I moved on to the weapons. I started by cleaning my pistol. Despite a few scratches in the finish it survived the day before intact. I took it apart, wiped it down, removing the dirt and debris it picked up in the firefight the day before, and lubricated the action. Then I set it aside and opened the first of the weapon cases, removing an assault rifle.

I followed the same process. Then I set it aside to work on the next one. It was the same, a version of the Marine's standard issue weapon cut down for more maneuverability in close quarters, as TELCORPS operatives weren't likely to need the ability to engage at as much as three quarters of a click. And when they did they could just bring a dedicated sniper team to handle it.

After the assault rifles were a pair of SMGs, then a shotgun and an assortment of sidearms ranging from a few suppressed low-caliber versions for quiet work to a heavy plasma pistol I wasn't qualified to use, let alone maintain. Whether the safe house always had that much firepower or was up-gunned because of the rebellion, no expense had been spared on the armory. The selection of grenades and other explosives was similarly extensive, and abundant enough to make the stingiest of combat engineers liberal with it. The deadliest weapon was in a case twenty centimeters deep with key lock, a keycard lock, and a code lock. The warning label on the top made it clear why the case was so heavily secured: It was the symbol for antimatter. The contents of the case could put a significant hole in the city if used.

The Operative came up behind me as I worked. She'd finish her call to Earth and started checking her personal weapons. One of them was a pistol I'd already gone over. Another she produced from a concealed holster and started to go over herself. Finally, she drew a knife from its sheath and tested the edge. Finding it satisfactory sharp, she sheathed it and added it to her collection of gear.

"Sidearms and knives only for the meet. Rifles or SMGs—your preference—and light armor in the trunk of the vehicle if things go bad."

I nodded without looking up from my work. She left the room. I selected a pair of carbines from their cases and collected several hundred rounds of ammunition for each. Then in the spirit of overkill, I took the plasma pistol from the rack as well and grabbed a handful of spare batteries for it. My pistol went into a thigh holster with several spare magazines and my knife. After a moment's thought I picked up another set of magazines and pouches to hold them. If I was going to get into a fight with only a sidearm I wanted plenty of rounds to put down range. And there was no point in subtlety; that was for the Operative to handle. I was going to play the part of extra muscle, and that meant I could get away with being more heavily armed than her.

With the weapons selected I looked through the armor cases again. There were two full sets of the heavy infantry armor that I'd been testing, mine and hers, that we'd brought to Cydonia. In addition to that there were several different lighter options that came with the safehouse; an armored jumpsuit for infiltration work, a few low profile armor vests, and two sets of clamshell torso armor. I took the clamshells. They were rated for most small arms fire, more protective than the low-profile vests, which they could be put over if needed, and easy to put on quickly—important if things went south.

I spent the next quarter hour taking the weapons and armor down to the car in black duffle bags. There was no one in the halls of the building the safe house was in. I heard, vaguely and through several walls, the sounds of others carrying on with their lives as best they could in Cydonia, but I didn't see any of them.

The Operative was waiting for me when I got back from my second trip to the car. "Everything good to go?"



“Yeah. Weapons, ammo, and armor. Even tossed in a few grenades.”

“Good. We shouldn’t need them if this works. Nice to have them, though. Ideally we’ll be able to talk our way in and out without things heating up. Worst case scenario is finding where Clarke is and shooting our way. Most likely is getting in quietly and shooting our way out. I’d rather not but these things rarely go to plan. Do you have a squawker?”

“No.” Squawkers were emergency beacons, good for calling for help.

“Get one. There should be a few concealable options in the armory. And get a knife you can hide, too. They may make us disarm. Something small and ceramic—nothing that’ll show up on a security scan.”

I did as she instructed. There was a tiny squawker beacon set into a web belt that ran an antenna through the belt itself and was nearly invisible unless the it was actively transmitting. I swapped it for my belt. Then I dug through the small collection of knives until I found one that fit her specifications. It was a thing piece of ceramic with a blade five centimeters long and a handle the same size. The edges were thin strips of a material I didn’t recognize, sharp enough to leave a score in the metal plate I tested them against. It lacked the comforting heft of the combat knives and pocket knives I was used to, but it wasn’t a knife designed for fighting. It was a knife designed to be taken where it shouldn’t be and used to kill someone.

After a few moments spent fiddling with the sheath I managed to strap it to my calf inside my boot. The top of the handle didn’t protrude from the boot at all, making it hard to get at, and the blade was slim enough that it fit inside, where the heavy construction of the boot hid it, without being too uncomfortable.

there was another knife like it in the same drawer, reflecting the paranoia and focus on preparation that was endemic to TELCORPS in my experience. The Operative picked it up in her final pass through the armory to grab a squawker of her own and slid it into her boot.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [11.1]

*Well?*

*Word from Cydonia—a report of a TELCORPS operative in the BFD. No name or number, but it's almost certainly O-154.*

*She's been operating sub-rosa since she arrived. What drove her into the open?*

*I don't know, sir. We have several sources and they all agree that she turned up without warning. She seems to have pissed off General Ekewaka to no end; he wasn't happy to find the one agency he can't rein in messing around in his backyard.*

*I doubt she was happy herself. The man's an ass and a pain to deal with.*

*I'll take your word for it, sir. I haven't had the pleasure.*

*Trust me, it was anything but.*

*Do your sources know anything about what O-154 was doing?*

*Only rumors. Looks like she had someone freed from detention, might've thrown her weight around and ordered someone else detained—no direct confirmation of her involvement in anything, and given the way everything she touches is immediately classified or redacted, there won't be. We can confirm that she was present in the BFD detention facility at least once and spent some time in the ops center.*

*What about Alpha Three?*

*Nothing. If he's there it wasn't reported. But—"*

*He'd fade into the background, one soldier among many, yes. I understand.*

*We'll continue under the assumption that they're still hunting Metheron. If there's any way to ramp up our search for him, do it. I want him dealt with before O-154 can find him.*

*Understood, sir.*

*Now, do you have the itinerary for the next board meeting?*

*Here, sir.*

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.01]

Abdullah looked better when the MPs brought her into the interrogation room this time. The bright colored jumpsuit did her no favors, but she'd been given a chance to clean up and grab some sleep, and for all its failings in the realm of fashion the jumpsuit hadn't been dragged through the aftermath of a gunfight and didn't smell like it.

She didn't look like she appreciated the improvements much. In fact, she didn't look like she was feeling much of anything. Her defiance was gone. So was the broken acceptance when she'd agreed to the Operative's terms. The glassy look in her eyes as she surveyed the room gave away what replaced it: Shock. The events of the past day and the ramifications of her decision caught up to her while the Operative and I were making preparations.

After a few seconds of staring down at the tablet in front of her, she refocused from the middle distance. She blinked and shook her head once. The Operative didn't speak while Abdullah gathered her thoughts. She waited until the other woman looked up again.

"Most of your belongings have been collected. They'll be returned to you on Earth after the analysis has gone through them." She smiled, barely. I recognized it. I wasn't sure Abdullah did. "I did make sure a set of clothes was saved, so you'll have something besides that when you get to Earth."

"When do I leave?"

“On the next prisoner transport. You’ll be pulled out during processing on Earth. Can’t just put you on a special transport from here; it’s too visible.”

“And what about Arthit? Will you offer him the same deal? Will you...”

“What happens to him depends on what he knows and how he chooses to act. He’s outside the scope of your deal.”

Abdullah took several heavy breaths. One sounded like a sob, strangled before it could come out properly. “I—I understand.” She reached for the tablet. “Where do you want to meet Clarke’s people?”

“Not your bar. Tell them you think it’s being watched. Otherwise, let them choose. And say you need to meet them quickly.”

A few quick button presses on her tablet woke it up and logged her in. Abdullah steadied as she did so, brought herself further under control. She was committed now, in deeper with every swipe and command, and that calmed her nerves somehow. I noticed her hand stop shaking from shock as she brought up the encrypted messenger.

It was hidden behind an application with a forgettable name and an ignorable interface, one of hundreds of thousands of pointless time-killing games. The sort of app that wouldn’t warrant a second glance in a cursory search through the tablet’s contents. The actual messenger section of the app was buried several menus deep and required a separate password to reach.

Abdullah typed a message. Her finger hovered over the send button. Then she shook her head and turned the tablet around so the Operative could read it. “Text only. Easier to encrypt and hide. Is that acceptable?”

The Operative read it. “Yes.” She pressed send.

We waited for a reply. The Operative leaned back in her chair and kept an eye on the whole room. Abdullah's gaze alternated between the tablet and her lap. The room only had two chairs, so I moved from standing behind the Operative's shoulder to leaning against the wall by the door with my arms crossed. Mostly I watched Abdullah. Once, I checked my watch.

The wait wasn't that long. After about seven minutes of uncomfortable silence the tablet buzzed once. Abdullah reached for it, paused, continued at the Operative's nod. She opened the app again and navigated to the hidden functions. Wordlessly, she turned it so the Operative could see the reply.

I stepped forward from the wall and leaned over her shoulder to read it for myself. The response was simple: an address and a time, two hours from now.

"Good." The Operative stood up and collected the tablet when I finished reading. "Two final questions. One: What's your login?" Abdullah told her. "Two: Is there a recognition protocol for the meet? A codeword?"

"Yes. The question is 'Lighting', the response is 'Stars.'"

We left the room.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.02]

A brigadier ran the day shift in the ops center. Either his predecessor had warned him about us, or the presence of a TELCORPS operative in the BFD was becoming common knowledge, because he didn't react when the Operative cut through the room to speak with him, other than a subtle sigh before she reached him. I understood the sigh. Even the most accommodating regular unit didn't like special groups butting in, and he was the one who had to scramble to find resources to do what she asked—if he could find them. There was never enough to go around to begin with and the occupation of Cydonia, resource intensive and expensive as it was, was a second priority to the active theaters and the system commands running engagements.

“Operative.” His greeting was perfectly neutral. “What do you need?”

“Overhead surveillance of this location,” she gave the address, “starting immediately. And a team in civvies to grab anyone suspicious, or trying to set up an overwatch position.”

The general turned to one of his assistants. “Captain?”

“We can task a drone to that airspace for the next hour or so. After that there's too much else going on. You'll have to rely on the microdrone shroud and satellite imagery—there might be some coverage gaps, and—” she plugged the address into a workstation and looked at the results, “I thought so. That's in the older part of the warehouse district. Everything there is over-engineered, colonies style. Too heavy for sensors to penetrate. If it's on the streets we can find it, but anything already set up indoors is effectively invisible.”

The general looked back at the Operative. “That good enough for you?”

“It'll do.”

“What about the ground team? Can you make do with overhead support instead?”

“No. I need it to be quiet, and I’d prefer live capture. Your people will get custody of anyone they take. I doubt they’ll have the information I need.”

“That’s a pretty steep ask, Operative, even if you’re giving us the prisoners. I take it cordoning off the area and sweeping it after you’re done is out of the question?” He didn’t give her a chance to answer. “I can find a unit, but I need to know what you’re after. I don’t have limitless resources, and I need to justify this operation you’re throwing together.”

“My objective is classified, General.” She held up a hand to cut off his protest. “However, if this goes as planned, you should have the location of the Lancelot Cell’s command element.”

He smiled. “That I can work with, Operative. You’ll have your team.”

“One more thing. I don’t expect this meet to go bad, but I do expect things to move quickly afterwards. If they have what I need, I’ll be moving directly to Lancelot’s location. We’ll be going in first, and if things go south we’ll start squawking on the standard frequencies. You should have a QRF and a blocking force on standby to roll up what’s left.”

“That’s doable. I’ll need to go to the General with a standby order that large, but if it can give us Lancelot he’ll okay it.” He waved another one of his aides over. “Twenty minutes to prep and brief your ground team, another thirty to get them in position. You want direct comms or to run through here?”

“Direct. You’re welcome to listen in, but I have control of the op.”

“Done. Major, make it happen. Captain, get that drone over the AO.”



The second aide approached us to begin the hurried planning process.

TWO-TONED [12.03]

Half an hour before the meeting the Operative and I were sitting in our car a half mile from the warehouse. We were parked out of sight underneath the half-collapsed roof of another warehouse, well off the most likely lines of approach to the meeting site. The Operative, seated in the passenger seat, idly rubbed a hand against the injuries on her face and looked down at the tablet on her lap.

It was her own, a civilian model that TELCORPS had tinkered with extensively. Its screen was split into three uneven sections. The largest showed the overhead imager of the district provided by a drone, with clusters of moving figures highlighted against the background. Two of those clusters were tagged as friendlies—they were the plainclothes team that went in ahead of us, and they were closing in on a third pair of figures who were in a position overlooking the the entrance to the meeting warehouse.

The second window showed a similar view, rendered more patchily from satellite imagery and the omnipresent micro drones that looked down on the city. That feed had less information since the two platforms providing it lacked the the full sensor suite and penetrating capability of the stealthed drone overhead.

The third window was simpler. It was linked to Abdullah's tablet incase it received new messages, and only showed her home screen.

I looked up from the tablet and scanned the street in front of the warehouse. No activity. I looked back as the Operative spoke into her radio.

“Alpha Team, that’s far enough. Don’t snatch them until I give the signal.” She received an affirmative reply. “Good. Stay on them. Bravo Team, check the nearby buildings.”

The trio of figures that was Bravo Team moved slowly out of the warehouse again. Alpha stayed where they were, ready to deal with the insurgent’s observers.

Nothing happened for several minutes. Then the Operative’s radio crackled with transmission over another one of its channels. “Oscar One Five Four, this is Drone Ops. We’ve extended your window as long as we can. Your drone is RTBing for rearming and retasking. Switching to secondary observation now.”

“Understood.” The main image on her tablet began to move as the camera lens swung across the city on the drone’s new course. A moment later the image was gone entirely and the satellite feed with its overlays took up the majority of the screen.

“Why didn’t we take either roof the drones from the safehouse?” I’d noticed them sitting in a corner of the armory along with a nanocamera swarm launcher.

“Too risky. They don’t behave like the rest of the shroud microdrones, and don’t have the altitude to avoid detection. The swarm’s even worse—nobody uses them but us and the best-equipped rebel units. The cloud would stand out too much and spook the Knights.” Bravo Team winked off the display. They were underneath something neither the shroud nor the satellite could penetrate. She activated her radio again. “Bravo Team, be advised, we no longer have you on overhead. Proceed with caution.”

The radioed back and we descended into tense silence again, broken only when Beta Team confirmed that the buildings were empty. Other than that, nothing. The Operative was letting the Knights arrive first. To keep everything looking like it was Abdullah coming we couldn't be early and waiting in the warehouse for them to arrive, where it would be obvious that neither of us were the woman they were looking for.

The two men we were supposed to meet arrived with ten minutes to go, giving them enough time to scope out the empty warehouse. The observation team had already been through and reported it clear, but caution had kept the insurgent Knights units alive longer and better than anything else, so the new arrivals made their own check. With three minutes to go one stepped outside and waved an all-clear to the observers.

I turned on my earpiece and started the car. The motor hummed quietly as the fuel cell came alive. Then we were moving. The Operative stowed her tablet in the glove compartment and leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed. She frowned in concentration, and I shivered. I felt, barely, what she was doing. Anyone watching would only see a frantic, angry—worried—woman behind the wheel of the car. The reality she imposed on all the other minds in her range pressed against mine like a headache but did not take hold.

I swallowed and concentrated on navigating the rubble scattered along the street, driving faster than was safe—my contribution to the illusion.

It got us past the observation post. Alpha Team's signals specialist confirmed they'd sent a message. I heard the Operative's order to deal with them quietly over my earbud and in person. Alpha acknowledged as I pulled the car to a stop outside the warehouse door. I put it in park and checked one last time that the trunk was unlocked. Then I got out, leaving the motor running.

Alpha whispered in my ear. The OP was dealt with.

The Operative stepped out of the car. Her eyes were open, but the pressure hadn't lessened. She smiled, quickly. This was what she specialized in, and she was good at it.

She walked through the door. I followed.

The two men inside wore hats pulled low and loose coats hid the weapons they carried. They didn't see anything wrong as we approached. One called out to us.

"Lightning."

"Stars."

The Operative's voice was two-toned. I heard her say the passphrase. And I heard Abdullah say it at the same time, from the same mouth.

We kept walking forwards. Their eyes were on the Operative. They didn't ignore me. Their gaze passed over me when they looked away from her. The pressure made my teeth ache.

Then one was dead with two holes in his chest and the other was on the ground, restrained by the Operative. The gunshots echoed through the warehouse. I drew my pistol and kept it trained on the downed man as I approached. He remained dead. I kicked his weapon away anyways.

The Operative's man was on the ground with an arm wrenched up behind his back alongside the knee she used to keep him pinned down. He started swearing at us until she drove his face into the floor and held it there to silence him. Certain that his partner was dead, I switched to covering him. The Operative took the opportunity to secure his other arm, drawing it up into a position that matched the first. From there she produced a set of restraints and cuffed the man around his wrists and then elbows, effectively locking them into place. She repeated the process with his ankles and then flipped him over onto his back.

Behind me I heard Alpha Team enter the warehouse with their captive while Bravo Team covered them and filed in after, watching the doors.

The Operative's interrogation was straightforward. She only bothered with her prisoner, confident that she didn't need to ask the observation team her questions. The man yielded quickly to her questioning and gave us the location of Lancelot Cell's main hideout. Either he was more interested in his life than his cause or she was forcing him to talk with her power. Since he was still fighting after the conventional defeat of the Knights on Mars, I suspected the latter, and the renewed pressure in my head concurred.

When she had what she wanted the Operative turned him over to Alpha Team and we left. When we got back to the car she radioed the location—the reinforced, multilevel basement of a building on the far side of the city, near the ruined arcologies—back to the BFD Ops Center, and I plugged it into the car's navigation panel. The BFD confirmed that they had the location, and that a QRF was on alert, with more troops on standby if needed. The shroud had a lock on the car and would track us there. Everything was ready.

PLACEHODLER NAME [12.04]

“Find somewhere to park nearby. We’ll approach on foot.”

I followed the Operative’s directions. Official parking wasn’t common in Cydonia. Many of the underground parking structures were too damaged to safely use and the above-ground ones were half-ruined. Instead, parking had become a matter of finding somewhere off the road near where you want to be and where your car could fit. I found a gap in the rubble three blocks from the target building and parked there.

“You sure? It’s a long way to cover if we have to leave in a hurry.”

“If things go that badly we’ll call the army.” We walked to the back of the car and popped the trunk. Our radios joined the rest of the gear there. Even well hidden they were too obvious.

Before she put her radio away the Operative made one final series of transmissions. “BFD Ops, this is Oscar-One Five Four. Standby for squawker test.” At her nod we both activated our squawker beacons. A moment later the reply came back over the radio.

“Oscar-One Five Four, we confirm two beacons at your location. Test is good.”

“Understood, Ops. Ceasing transmission.” We both killed our beacons. “Oscar-One Five Four going radio silent.”

“Copy that. Good hunting, over.” BFD Ops signed off. We were on our own. The radios went into the trunk along with the weapons and armor that were too conspicuous.

I felt vulnerable, almost naked, as we walked away from the car. Surprising a pair of insurgents at a meeting where we had backup was one thing. Walking into their lair, protected by the dubious force of the Operative's powers and only carrying a pistol and a pair of knives, was another. It wasn't what I trained for. As a Marine I wanted to storm the place in full armor, leading with grenades, or flatten it with superior firepower—air, arty, orbital; whatever worked—and use infantry to check through the resulting mess. The Operative's powers and her command over them justified nearly every rumor I'd heard about TELCORPS and the aura of dread that shadowed the agency. That didn't mean knowing they were the only thing keeping me alive was comforting.

The Operative began to project again as we got closer. Just another pair of insurgents, die-hard Knights who hadn't made it off-planet and so fighting a war that was already over. Nothing more. I felt the pressure building behind my eyes again; accepted it. If being a Knight kept me alive, then I would be a Knight for however long we could keep the illusion up. Compared to what I was used to as a Marine, low-profile armor, a handgun, and the pair of knives, one of them hidden, felt like nothing. Less than nothing, given the chance that we'd be allowed to keep the obvious knives and pistols was low.

Short as it was, it was the first time we'd traveled any real distance by foot in Cydonia. Broken tops of towering buildings loomed overhead like jagged teeth. The shattered Thalia Arcology lay ahead of us, further down the street, a broken mountain torn apart by the angry god of orbital bombardment. To its side, partially obscured by ruins, was the blasted, collapsed shape of her sister, Calliope. Hidden beyond that was the towering, intact edifice of Melpomene. Together, the battered and broken muses of Cydonia dominated the northern skyline.

Pebbles of concrete crunched underfoot. Even on a cleared roadway every step threw up clouds of gritty dust and ash, mixed with Mar's fine red dirt.

Every step brought us closer to the target building. The Operative employed her full power. We were familiar; friends, comrades, to be admitted and accepted. Trusted. The immense pressure of her false reality nearly drove me to my knees. I could feel it, could believe it. I was a Knight, ready to fight and kill and die for the city, for Lancelot Cell, for freedom from the oppressive government on Earth; for Mars's rightful place, ascendant, a leader of the colonies, the first planet Mankind expanded to, worthy of respect, of preeminence—

I stumbled on an uneven section of pavement and fell, catching myself on outflung hands. It stung through the gloves I wore. The Operative stopped, waited for me to find my feet again.

I saw a flicker of red out of the corner of my eye as I stood. I didn't look at it.

Another pressure inside my skull. Equal. Not opposite. Different. Walls of white metal, soft floors. Familiar. Unfamiliar. Not the Martian dust. My—Hers?—Mine? memories—Hers?—Elsewhere. Safe, and not safe.

Stinging palms brought me back to myself. The red was gone. The ghost's presence remained, enough to balance the Operatives, to boost whatever native defenses she knew I had. I knew who I was again, knew what I was doing.

We were at the building.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.05]



The basement apartment had its own entrance. The stairs down from street level were largely clear of rubble. Several crumbling chunks of concrete and broken rebar were piled against the wall at the top. Otherwise there was only the pervasive grit, dust, and pebble-sized chunks of other buildings.

The door at the bottom made no effort to hide that it was a slab of reinforced steel. Scarring down the front suggested it had been tried, unsuccessfully, before, by someone intent on breaking it open. They'd only used brute force—none of the scarring was from explosives or cutting tools, and the frame hadn't been attacked, despite potentially being the weakest point if whoever bought the door didn't realize they needed to reinforce it as well.

Amateurs, then. Probably looters, before the city was locked down under martial law after the fighting was over.

The Operative ignored the buzzed beside the door. The LED in the panel was off, so it was on manual power anyway. She hammered on the metal with her fist, producing dull thumps that echoed in the stairwell. The armored window, set at eye-level in the center of the door, opened in response, the slat covering it thunking to one side. A pair of eyes looked out through the polly-diamond panel.

"Grey." A challenge, muffled by the thickness of the intervening door.

"Griffon." The Operative had the day's response, courtesy of the man she'd interrogated.

The panel slammed shut. A bolt scraped against the far side of the door, then another, and another. It opened wide enough to admit one at a time. The room beyond was darker than the street and hard to see into.

“In. Quickly.”

We obeyed. The door closed behind us while our eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. There were three others in the room. Details were hard to make out in the gloom. Light seeped through the crack underneath an inside door on the far side of the room, enough to make the weapons in our greeter’s hands obvious.

“You know the drill. Weapons.” One of the shadowed figures stepped closer and stretched a waiting hand towards me. Another approached the Operative. The third watched us, pistol in hand, ready in case we tried anything. The Operative had guessed right about this layer of security.

Slowly, aware of the third guard’s gaze, I reached beneath my coat to the pistol holstered inside my waistband at the center of my back. I worked the clip loose and removed the holster, then handed it, with the pistol still inside, to the waiting woman. Then, at the same non-threatening pace, I slid a folding knife from my front pocket and turned it over.

Our weapons were placed in a box in the room, where they were easily retrievable on exiting, but not instantly visible to anyone coming in—an attempt to remain innocuous despite the door and obvious guards.

“We need to see Clarke.”

“What for?”

The mental pressure increased. “We have valuable information, for him only.”

The guards took us at the Operative’s word. The pressure receded to its previous level. Once our weapons were secure we were allowed to move further into the basement.

The door on the far side of the room opened onto another, larger and well lit room. I blinked when I passed through it, my eyes watering slightly at the second sharp change in brightness in as many minutes.

Eight men and women were sitting around in the next room. All were armed and had the pallid complexion of spacers or others who spent too much time indoors. More guards, probably permanent if they didn't get outside much. Some were talking, two were playing a video game together—or against each other, judging by the swearing—one was reading, and another pair had taken over a table and were in the midsts of cleaning their weapons.

They all looked up when we came in, then resumed their tasks and conversations, ignoring us or giving a quick, friendly greeting. The Operative's power worked on them. I tried not to relax visibly at their quiet acceptance of us.

The woman from the entrance who'd taken my weapons accompanied us into the makeshift ready-room. With a curt, "Wait here," to us, she continued across the room and knocked on the door. After a second of waiting she was directed to enter. She went through the doorway too quickly for me to see what was beyond it.

I looked over to the Operative, who gave a one-shouldered shrug and drifted towards one of the walls to wait. With nothing better to do, I followed, aware that every delay increased the the chance of her illusion failing somehow, even if the pressure in my head hadn't abated any. The Woman In Red's counter-pressure remained as well. The two forces were locked in a stalemate in the back of my brain, giving me enough room to think without their influence.

The Operative didn't give off the impression of wanting to talk to fill the time as she landed against the wall. I joined her in silence while I tried to watch the guards in the room without seeming to. It didn't take long for me to realize there was no way to do so unobtrusively, so I gave up and focused on the game being played on the far wall instead. I could see most of the guards while watched and it was less suspicious than scanning the room or staring at nothing. It also had the fringe benefit of being entertaining.

Eventually the guard reemerged from the door with another group of Knights. Unlike the guards, the new group had the look of men and women who spent their time outdoors. They were dressed in an assortment of hard-wearing civilian clothes with uniformly battered boots. They could have been a collection of day laborers, helping clean up ruined sections of the city or workers from the shipyards. The second was potentially true, view where the Knights originally drew much of their support and numbers from.

None of them were armed. The collection of bags and packs they carried probably contained weapons, explosives, or both, but being visibly armed, or looking like they had concealed weapons, would only increase the chances that they got picked up by a patrol. And they would want to avoid that, because they were clearly a group setting out on a mission. They'd probably just been briefed on their target and resupplied, if they weren't going to use equipment cached elsewhere.

Except that today they were emerging from a known Knights hideout. Depending on how aggressive the brigadier running the show back at BFD Ops was feeling, they'd either be picked up within the hour or left free so his people could track them to other Knights hideouts after rolling this one up.

The guards in the ready room stopped what they were doing to see the other group off with jokes and calls of, “Good hunting.” The Operative joined in. After a moment I followed suite. Not doing so would’ve stood out. From the way the Operative acted, that could damage her illusion.

I clapped the apparent leader of the team on the shoulder. “Get some of the bastards for me.”

“I will.” His grim smile was familiar. I’d seen it on the faces of fellow Marines heading out on a mission any number of times. Some for them hadn’t returned. After Blackstone, none of them were alive anymore. No one had been smiling before Gibson. We all knew going in that the landing was going to be a meat grinder. We were right.

The insurgent team left. The guard who came out with them approached us with the one other who hadn’t gone out—a tough-looking woman whose face I recognized from the hurried briefing on Lancelot Cell as one of Clarke’s chief lieutenants and the main suspect behind the Snowblind bombings.

“You’re here to see Clarke?”

The Operative stepped forward from the wall. “Yes. Critical intelligence for him, and him alone.”

“Hmph. I’ll be the judge of that. Come with me.” She led us through the door. A stairway cut down through the building’s original foundations in the center of the floor, heading down into a bunker. A ten-centimeter thick hatch capable of sealing the entire entrance rested open against one of the walls, held in place by heavy cables. There were two large red buttons labeled Cable Release, one on the wall beside the hatch and the other set into the side of the staircase, halfway down.

I stopped myself from frowning. The hatch had naval-style dogs around the edges and a large wheel to operate them. The rubber lining mean it was airtight, or at least supposed to be. And it was heavy enough that more than one person would be needed to open it from the inside. If the insurgents closed it while we were below it would be a serious obstacle.

And none of that made any sense. At their height in Cydonia the Knights had access to the tools and expertise to excavate their own bunker; that wasn't what bothered me. This was a terrible entrance, too easily blocked by dropping the building on top of it if it was discovered. Added to the airtight seal—which meant a ventilation system—that meant an extensive complex, and multiple entrances. The more I saw of the hideout, the more getting out after the Operative obtained the information she wanted became difficult.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.06]

Clarke's lieutenant led us down the stairs and through another airtight hatch at the bottom—which meant that the stairs served as an airlock for the bunker. There were several vents in the walls that added to confirmed that. The Lieutenant passed through the weapons scanner outside the bottom door by waving a passcard of some sort at it. The Operative and I walked through it while it was active. I tried not to grit my teeth. The light flashed green. It didn't detect the knives in our boots.

Yet another guard was posted inside the hatch. Unlike the others in the basement he wore armor over his clothes and held an assault rifle in plain view. This far into the complex he had no need to pretend to be anything other than what he was. And his presence betrayed something else about Lancelot Cell: They were large, and they were well equipped, much more so than we thought. The pre-mission briefing on the cell made it clear that the BFD command believed they were falling apart and struggling to find supplies and support. It also made it clear that Clarke demanded ideological purity and suicidal commitment of his followers, and intel had never successfully placed an informant in the cell because of that.

The lack of direct intelligence meant the analysts were dangerously wrong about the cell. Discounting the team that left there were twelve guards that I'd seen. With three eight hour shifts of the same size there was a minimum of a full platoon's worth of Knights in the bunker, whether or not they were that rigidly organized. And that platoon was dedicated to guard duty alone—the cell had the number to spare that many guards from active operations. So they had more members capable of carrying out attacks, the resources to equip them well—the guard's armor was high quality, and his rifle was a model popular with Rebel forces expecting close combat, not a battlefield acquisition or part of a mishmash shipment into Cydonia by arms dealers—and to feed them. Forty guards if they had a full leadership structure for the platoon, plus the leader of the cell itself—maybe fifty people. That many people took lots of supplies to feed, even if they'd been stocking up in the bunker since the early part of the war.

Someone was giving Lancelot Cell outside support, lots of it, and intel missed it.

We followed the Lieutenant down the main hallway of the bunker. The doors we passed were closed but stencils gave away their purposes: PLNNG, BRKS 1, ARMORY—that door was reinforced beyond the already-study construction of the bunker—and more. Bundles of wiring and cables were bracket to the low ceiling alongside pipes and ducts, all color-coded or labeled. The interior of the bunker resembled the passageways of a warship.

The hallways were mostly empty. One man passed us in a hurry, staring down at the tablet in his hands. Like the rest of the Knights we'd seen he wore no uniform or identifier, but his air remain unmistakably military-like. He looked like the harried staff officers that populated the BFD, coming and going from the Ops Center. The whole of Lancelot Cell headquarters felt more like a military unit conducting a carefully planned unconventional campaign than the last remnants of an insurgent force driven underground after an overwhelming conventional defeat. Only the relative lack of activity in the hallways gave away how stretched-thin they were.

The Lieutenant's name was stenciled above the door she led us to. The hallway she turned down to get to it was lined with other stenciled names. CLARKE stood out at the far end, over a door identical to the one guarding the armory.

He office was small, with enough pace for a desk with a terminal and an uneven stack of papers and maps, and the chairs on either side of it. A set of the same clamshell armor and helmet the guard at the stairs wore rested against the wall in a back corner, next to a closed door.

"Now," she looked at us, "what is it you have for Clarke?" She sat down inner chair, leaving us standing on the far side of the desk from her.



The Operative didn't bother replying. She reached across the desk before the woman had time to react and grabbed her head in both hands. Clarke's Lieutenant stiffened, her jaw going slack and her pupils dilating. A tickle of blood ran from her nose.

The Operative released her and she slumped forward. None of her muscles were able to hold her up properly. The included guts. I smelled that she's shit herself.

She was still alive, though. The involuntary, automatic process of breathing continued.

"Help me with her." The Operative rounded the desk and opened the door beyond. Together we wrestled the woman's limp from into the cramped bedroom. A smaller door off to one side led to a tiny bathroom—a privilege of rank. We left her there. Once she was in the shower the Operative drew the knife from her boot and slid it into the base of the woman's skull; a quick, clean kill.

We paused in the office. I made a quick search of the desk drawers and found a loaded pistol with a spare magazine. There was a round in the chamber. I offered it to the Operative, but she shook her head. I slipped it into an easily accessible pocket of my jacket, wishing I had a proper holster for it, and grabbed the extra ammo as well.

"Clarke's in his office." The Operative had gotten from the other woman, then, "I'll deal with him. Watch the door once we're inside; if I have to do a deep trawl he'll make more noise than she did and I won't be able to keep the illusion up at the same time."

"Understood."

“Good. Don’t run to his door, we need to look normal as long as we can.” She paused. “And if you can feel what I’m doing, expect it to get worse. I’ll be making sure he opens the door for us.”

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.07]

The Operative led the way into the hallway. I followed several steps behind her, one hand hovering close to the pocket my pistol was in. We approached Clarke’s quarters at a steady pace despite the lack of other observers in the hallway.

Her face was pale when we reached the door. The effect of forcing so many people to believe we were friends, and whatever she’d done to Clarke’s Lieutenant, was showing. She knocked on the door with a steady hand. I stood to one side; not quite pressed against the wall as if I was stacking up to breach the door, but ready to enter violently if I had to.

The Operative didn’t bother. She stood squarely in front of the door and waited for Clarke to acknowledge the knock. Her eyebrows drew down and her expression hardened. The mental pressure spiked. Forewarned, I managed to ignore it.

“Enter.”

The Operative opened the door without any sign of haste and stepped into the room. I followed and closed it behind me. Clark didn’t look up from the terminal he was engrossed in when we entered. “A moment.” He held up a hand to us and resumed typing.

He never got that moment. When the door shut completely the Operative burst forward. She grabbed his head in both hands across the desk, just like she had his lieutenant’s. I half-turned, keeping Clarke and the door in sight, and drew the pistol.

The pressure from the Operative vanished. The Woman In Red's surged for a heartbeat. It threatened to overwhelm me, then vanished. Half-familiar images faded, half-formed, from my sight.

Clarke screamed. It was a ragged, involuntary sound; primal terror unwillingly unleashed from his throat. The Operative ignored it. She maintained her hold on either side of his head. He didn't go limp like his Lieutenant had. He went rigid. Every muscle locked up. Tendons stood out on his neck, the vein on his forehead popped. He looked like he was fighting the Operative. If so, he was losing.

Footsteps sounded through the door, dulled by the intervening metal. With her illusion dropped, there was no way that Clarke's scream would be ignored. Not while we were in the same hallway where his deputies had quarters. Even if they spend most of their time dispersed for security reasons, the chances of the hall being deserted except for Clarke and his Lieutenant were low. And my luck hadn't been good, despite surviving Blackstone. The hurried fall of boots on metal floors outside the door made that clear enough.

"How long?" I found the lock on the door and engaged it. It would hold until they brought breaching charges, thermal lances, or overrode the electronics.

"Not sure. Not long." The Operative's voice was strained, gritted out between her teeth.

I grabbed Clarke's tablet off the desk, then returned to watching the door. No point in losing any intelligence, especially since intel was so off about the cell. It fit in an oversized jacket pocket.

“Squawker?” I didn’t see a point. The beacons were powerful, but not ground-penetrating powerful.

“Don’t—” A labored breath, “bother. Get his gun. And armor.” She focused on Clarke again. He shuddered. Effort made her shake.

I went through his desk. There was a loaded pistol in his top one as well. I wasn’t surprised. For an insurgency endemic paranoia and basic security precautions were nearly the same thing. I placed it on the desk and continued looking. I didn’t turn up any more weapons. I did find hard-copies of important documents. SOP for a raid like this included his terminal, but that wasn’t feasible for two of us in a hostile bunker. Shooting our way out was going to be difficult as it was.

He had clamshell armor in his bedroom. I stuck my head back into the office. “You want armor?”

“No. Take it. And be quiet.”

The low profile armor we both wore was decent protection; the clamshell was even better and fit overtop. I slipped off my jacket and pulled the armor on, then spent a minute messing with the straps so it fit right.

Then I found another gift courtesy of Clarke’s paranoia. A weapon case and box of loaded magazines were tucked under the bed. The case contained an assault rifle and three grenades. The ammo was mixed, most for the rifle, some for his pistol. The Lieutenant’s pistol took the same magazines. I checked. The standardized armaments was a nice touch, and another indicator of a well-managed supply chain.

I took the assault rifle for myself and stuffed my pockets with magazines. I left some of the pistol ammo for the Operative and carried the box out to the office.

“Getting out got easier.”

“Good. I’m almost done.” The Operative looked exhausted in a way I’d never seen. Her speech was slightly slurred. Fatigue was getting to her.

Clarke went limp. She released his head and let it slam into his desk. Then she unsheathed her knife and executed him in the same dispassionate way she had his lieutenant.

“You’re on point.” It made sense. She swayed on her feet as she spoke, though she steadied herself as she collected the pistol and ammunition I’d left on it.

I passed her one of the grenades. “On your count.” She nodded.

I chambered a round and thumbed the rifle’s safety off. Then I dropped it to hang from its sling and picked up one of the remaining grenades. I pocketed the other.

“Any idea how many are out there?”

“Enough.”

We took our places beside the door. She counted down. On three she hit the lock and pulled it open partway. I threw my grenade. A moment later she threw hers and slammed her shoulder into the door after it, forcing it closed.

I raised my rifle. She drew her pistol. There were two muffled explosions beyond the doorway. Shrapnel pinged off the door. She opened it and I stepped through.

Blood and body parts coated the hallway. Shrapnel scored the walls. I stepped over the wreckage of human bodies and cutting tools—they’d been preparing to breach the door—and advanced down the hallway. One mostly-intact body twitched and groaned. His left arm was mangled, that side of his torso flayed to shreds. Three bloodied ribs and the organs beneath were visible.

I put a pair of bullets in him and kept moving. The Operative's boots squelched through blood and crunched bone fragments underfoot behind me.

An insurgent leaned out from behind a corner at the end of the hallway and fired at us. I dropped, one knee resting in the remains of a woman's chest cavity, and returned fire. The Operative sprinted for the nearest door and forced it open. She began to fire. Under her covering fire I ran for a doorway of my own.

We moved down the hallway in bounds, doorway to doorway. None of the Knights leaned out long enough to get a proper fix on us. None of our return fire hit either. They ducked back into cover before we could hit.

The hallway was a nearly-perfect killing ground. They should have been able to stop us there. That they didn't was a testament to their lack of training. Despite their equipment, the Knights were part of an insurgency that preferred to use ambushes and bombs. Every direct confrontation between them and the military ended in defeat for them.

One of the insurgents threw a grenade. The Operative lashed out with a burst of power that made my ears pop and knocked it back towards them. It exploded short of the intersection. A man screamed and fell back behind the shelter of the corner, pulled clear by other hands.

"Can't do that often." her voice rasped from a raw throat, broken by heavy breathing.

"Got it." Grenades remained a threat, then. The next time I covered the Operative as she moved forward my rifle clicked empty.

"We need to get out of here!"

“Cover me, I’ll rush them.” I slammed a fresh magazine in and hit the bolt catch.  
“Call it!”

“Go!” At the Operative’s command I threw myself out of the doorway I was sheltering in. I sprinted for the T-junction at the end of the hall. Her pistol hammered behind me, a steady, percussive beat of fire keeping my path clear. She had fifteen rounds a magazine. I made it before she ran dry.

I swung around the left-hand corner into two Knights. I put a burst into the first one before she could react and slammed full-tilt into the second. We both reeled back from the impact. I recovered faster and shot him. I didn’t bother aiming. I didn’t have to. I was close enough that the unaimed burst tore through his gut. A second, aimed, burst blew his head apart and scattered chunks of bone and brain across the floor.

It took maybe two seconds after I rounded the corner. The Operative was hard on my heels. She went right. The one Knight in that direction died without a chance to shoot me in the back.

Alarms wailed through the bunker. The blood on the floor looked black in the red battle-lighting. But no one was shooting at us. The Operative paused long enough to collect a rifle from from then she killed. I stripped the two corpses inform of me of ammo with a fast, practiced efficiency The Operative did the same. My pockets bulged with spare magazines. So did hers. She checked the ammunition remaining in her rifle. I passed her a pair of grenades from one of my bodies and collected another two for myself.

“Which way?” We needed to keep moving. I doubted the brief respite would last.

“They have a second entrance. Have to find it. Blocking forces will deal with the basement entrance. If they see movement they’ll move in.” She started running down the corridor away from the stairs we used to get in. “We’ll trigger one of the squawkers there; use them to signal the location to the QRF, box the Knights in.”

A Knight shouted behind us. Bullets tore past my head—a close miss. I spun and returned fire. He dove for the floor. Another came up behind him, firing. They were both properly armored.

“Behind us! Shit!” I kept shooting while running backwards. One burst hit the second insurgent. The impact on his armor staggered him long enough for the Operative to throw a grenade at them.

I turned and sprinted, following her. The hallway made a 90 degree turn ahead—a defensive position. We were lucky. It was unmanned. No crossfire tore us apart at the corner.

The grenade detonate behind us.

“Where’re the guards?” The corner should have been held. I didn’t like blind luck.

“Must’ve moved up to deal with us.”

The series of corners created a sort of s-bend in the corridor. We advanced carefully through it, expecting resistance at every turn. Boots pounded on metal behind us. The rest of the garrison was catching up.



The hallway opened into a straight section with an airlock at the far end. The other entrance. Rifles fired from that end of the hall. The slugs hit my armor dead in center mass. Good shots. I collapsed from the force of the impact. The entrance guards knew to stay at their posts. That made the hallway a killbox.

The Operative grabbed the back of my armor, dragged me behind the corner. “You good?”

I coughed. “Bruised ribs.” The feeling was familiar. It was the usual result of taking a direct hit in armor.

“How far?”

“Ten meters. Completely open.”

“Shit. Grenades?”

“Unless you can do something?”

“Nothing major. I can get the grenades where they need to go.”

“On three?” We both readied grenades. She counted down.

“Now!” We pulled the pins and threw. Neither grenade moved through the air properly. They reached the apex of their arc and continued forward on a level trajectory that tricked the eye. When I thought they were going to start dropping they kept moving forward in defiance of physics.

One of the guards managed to shout a warning. It didn’t do him any good. The two grenades flew through the open door and detonated one after the other. A strangled scream began with the first explosion and choked off with the second, ceasing in an abrupt hail of fragments.

I stormed down the corridor in the grenades's wake. The Operative followed. There was only silence ahead of us. No gunfire greeted our approach. Footseps and shouting followed behind us. Our pursuers heard the grenades go off and sped up.

Then we were through the door and into an abattoir. The enclosed space of the bunkers airlock—without stairs, this time—made the grenades terrifying effective. The guards were torn apart. What the hail of fragments had not shred the explosive force had liquified. Blood coated the small room and dripped from the walls. Viscera and offal and gory chunks littered the floor and stained our boots. The Operative placed the grenades precisely where they would do the most damage, and it showed.

“Damn.” The Operative looked at a shattered control panel. “The door controls are ruined.” She moved to the side of the inside door. “You’ll have to close it by hand.” Her rifle swung into position as Knights began to cautiously emerge around the corner behind us. A pair of bursts sent them back into cover, dragging a wounded man with them. “Move!”

I grabbed the edge of the door. It ground on its hinges, resisting my attempt to sing it closed. Shrapnel in the mechanism. I grunted; slammed my shoulder into it. The heavy slab of metal screeched closer to shut. Bullets ricocheted off it. Others hissed past me. The Operative continued to fire. She kept the insurgents too busy to aim properly. Undisciplined fire rattled down the hall, met by her precise replies.

One last heave and the door was shut. The Operative moved out of the way a moment before it slammed closed. I stepped back, breathing hard, one hand on my bruised ribs. “That won’t hold long.” I saw no way to jam it shut. “Manual controls are on their side.”

She reloaded. “Through the far door, and keep going after we shut it.” She moved on.

I looked past her. The exit we’d fought our war way to opened into a wide tunnel—wide enough to bring a truckload of supplies down before hand-carrying them into the bunker. Low-power LEDs bracketed to the ceiling washed the tunnel in a flat white light that made the drill-marks on the walls hard to see. The tunnel receded into the distance, coming to a hard stop against a massive steel door that filled the whole tunnel and could only be the main entrance.

“I has to tie into the old subway network.” The Operative swept the walls with the flashlight mounted on the side of her rifle’s barrel. “It’s the only way they could get drilling equipment down here unnoticed.” I heard a frown in her voice. “And they would’ve still needed official help, or at least bribed their way to silence...”

The artificial cavern jumped as I stepped out into. The convulsion knocked me onto my ass. Thin fractures opened in the ceiling, accompanied by a rain of dust and pebbles. “Fuck!”

“They dropped the building on the Knights. Bastards.” The Operative was still on her feet, one hand braced against the tunnel wall. “Couldn’t be bothered to see if we got out.” First exhaustion, then tired anger drive by the same. The Operative was showing greater emotional range than I thought she possessed. There was never any grief over Blackstone; no relief about returning to Earth from the front. Only the same detached, efficient professionalism. “Fucking Ekewaka.” She caught herself, cut off the rant.

“Wasn’t ground-penetrating.” We’d be dead if those were bunker-busters.” Ordnance wasn’t my specialty, but I’d managed to pick up a working knowledge after witnessing my share of indirect fire calls, mostly on the receiving end, from both sides. “Air-burst, maybe? Would’ve knocked don the whole block. Less collateral if it was impact-fused.”

“Sloppy and lazy is sloppy and lazy, either way.”

The tunnel began to shake with smaller, muted explosions overhead. “Arty, now. That is sloppy.” I looked up. “We’re deep. The roof should hold.”

“We have to keep moving. Without a lock the Knights’ll be out that door soon.” The Operative began to walk down the tunnel, her rifle ready despite the obvious emptiness.

“I’d kill for a mine or two right now.” I followed her. Every dozen steps I swung around to check the bunker door behind us.

It took two more minutes for the Knights to being pursuing us. Bullets sparked off the rock walls of the tunnel and clipped at our heels. We ran again. The tunnel was perfectly straight and well lit. Speed, and armor, were all that kept us alive. My ribs began to ache.

The rebels were decent shots, but even good shots struggle to hit their targets in combat conditions, and the shaking of the barrage overhead threw their aim off. Those who stopped to aim came closest. The insurgents who chased us fired, not wildly, but without extensive training or practice. Their snapshots missed too, so they continued to run, trying to back us up against the end of the tunnel. For them it wasn’t a race. We were close to cornered already.

After the first thirty seconds I stopped trying to shoot back. I threw my last grenade and sprinted. There had to be some way through the massive door at the far end. otherwise we were dead.

There was. The steel door had a small door set into it so people could come and go without opening the full passage up. And it was never intended to be attacked from this side. Whatever hidden systems secured it on the other side, on our side the Operative was already working the wheel to release the dogs holding it in place.

I stopped, hard, slamming an arm into the huge door to stop myself. Then, as fast as I could, I knelt, braced my rifle, aimed, and fired.

I missed. It didn't matter. The man I aimed at dropped prone to return fire. So did his companions. The delay gave us time. I kept shooting, trying to disrupt their aim. Even so, we were stationary and their misses were uncomfortably close.

The wheel thunked into place. The Operative grunted and shoved the door open. "Through. Move!"

I flipped the selector to automatic with my thumb and held the trigger down. My rifle emptied in seconds. Recoil forced it up and off target. But the unaimed spray of bullets forced the Knights to keep their heads down long enough for me to scramble through the door. The Operative started sorting back through the opening the moment I was clear. I released the empty magazine and reloaded on reflex.

We were in a service tunnel, a large one. It could fit excavators and heavy equipment with ease. The lighting was worse. Instead of running on a generator or a small reactor from the bunker complex the intact lights were powered by Cydonia's war-damaged, unstable grid. Pipes and wiring ran along the bare concrete walls. Warnings and signs were stenciled on the walls. The door to the bunker's tunnel was labeled AUX EQUIP STORAGE and gave a number to contact before opening. It looked totally innocuous, even if it was newer construction. The tunnels had been used as bomb-shelters by civilians during the invasion, and none of it looked new anymore.

Another, more important sign read SURFACE ACCESS. An arrow painted beneath it, painted with a bio-luminescent of some sort, glowed dimly and pointed the way out.

"That way." I pointed to the sign. "We can get out."

"You can get out."

"What?" I knelt next to the Operative, partially covered by the door, and added my rifle to hers.

"I can keep them bottled up here for a while. There no cover and no other way out for them. And I can stop a rush, maybe two."

"You're exhausted. I can see it."

"I'll last long enough. Get to the surface, hit your squawker, the get the reinforcements to me. Move fast." She never stopped firing.

"Switch weapons. My rifle doesn't have a light." She stopped, ducked out of the sling on her rifle, and held it out. The ground shook again. More arty. I took the weapon, passed her mine. I left half my ammo in a stack next to her, too.

“Thanks. Go!”

I went.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [12.09]

Gunfire echoed down the tunnel. The Operative’s tempo slowed. She was conserving ammo, only taking shots she was sure of.

I ran away from it, my path lit by the flickering, irregular lights and the sharper circle of illumination provided by my rifle’s flashlight which bobbed up and down with every step. My boots rang on the floor. My pulse pounded in my ears. My armor dug into my shoulders, bouncing up and down. Beneath it my bruised ribs complained with every breath I drew in.

The signs on the wall said it was 750 meters to the surface access point. That was a short run in full armor and a shorter one in the mismatched collection of lighter gear I was wearing.

I was going to fast for caution. Any Knights in the tunnel would hear me coming. I didn’t think there were, though. They would have already been moving to the sound of the firefight behind me if they were nearby. If they were further out and had any sense they were already gone.

So I ran. I ran to keep the Operative alive, and I didn’t know why. She was holding the line to give me time, yes. But she’d also killed Marines who were my responsibility, effectively ended what little life I’d had outside the military, and threatened me, more than once. In spite of everything that had transpired since the last threat, I still believed she was willing to carry it out if she saw the need. It left me in an uncomfortable position.

I slowed beneath a dim, half-broken light panel. One hand pressed to my aching ribs, I walked forward, managing the rifle as best I could with my other hand. I owed the Operative and if I was too slow to save her—well, it happened, in war. The cost of doing business. Every battle had its butcher's bill.

I saw something out of the corner of my eye and turned towards it. The flashlight beam fell on The Woman In Red. She stood there at the edge of the dull light, half hidden in the shadow even under the flashlight's harder glare. Her face was impassive. She stood there, still incongruously dressed in jeans and a red t-shirt, still barefoot, still dressed as she died, and waited. I felt her presence. There was no pressure, no judgement. As long as I lived whatever choice I made was acceptable to her. Strange, to have a ghost waiting on me for a decision that didn't effect her. Strange to have a ghost at all. Strange that she could alter the world, could kill, could protect me. Strange that she wanted to. Who was I to her? What was I? Why did she care? And how could she be? Even in a world where TELCORPS existed she made no sense. A powerful enough telepath to leave a ghost after she died? Unheard of outside of bad horror movies. Unbelievable. Yet manifestly true.

A whole host of questions brought on by her presence and none of them mattered. The firefight continued behind me, the tunnel amplifying and distorting the familiar sound of gunfire. The questions I couldn't answer outweighed the by the one I could. And what did I owe the Operative? Nothing, really.



But was that really true? She'd saved my life, and more than once. At first to satisfy her own curiosity, later because we were working together. Did that outweigh the men and women she'd callously killed to keep my survival and her interference a secret and what I owed them in turn?

Did it matter, though? For all she'd done to me, without her I had nothing. To the Marines, to the world, I was dead. The new life I had was a fiction in TELCORPS files. They owned the proof of my existence, and the truth of it. If they inquired after the death of one of their own vaunted Operatives, one who was a well-respected and senior member of the agency, as I'd managed to learn in my time at TCHQ, who knew if I'd be able to hide what I knew from them? Maybe The Woman In Red would help. I looked at her again. Still impassive, still waiting. Maybe not. She wanted me alive but it was hard to know anything about her for sure. That she was dead; that she had helped me before. But only that she might do it again, if it served her unknown goal.

So it wasn't a choice at all, because the Operative stood between me and TELCORPS. Between me and the world. With me against whoever was trying to kill me, who had killed The Woman In Red.

No choice, just orders. Just like everything else in my life.

I started to run again. Faster, if possible, to make up time. I went past The Woman In Red. Her face didn't change as I approached. She did not judge my decision—my obedience. She accepted, and faded as I went past.

The tunnel needed in a massive cargo lift and a set of stairs. I took the stairs. The power was unstable and there were any number of others reasons the lift might not work. Stairs always worked. The door at the bottom opened and then it was up and up and up, my breath growing more ragged with each flight, until the stairs ended.

I opened a door and saw natural light and fire on the horizon. The artillery barrage was over, replaced with periodic, specific strikes. The damage was done. The city burned around the Knights's headquarters.

I fumbled for the squawker beacon, slapped the single button to activate it. And waited. Not for long. The QRF was airborne. It took thirty seconds for a dropship to roar overhead and sweep around, checking the empty street before landing.

The squad inside disembarked, weapons ready, and spread out to secure a perimeter. Two kept their weapons on me. Understandably. I was the source of the beacon. I was also out of uniform, armed, and splashed in blood from the knees down. I smelled like gunfire and death.

I let my weapon hang from its sling and kept my hands visible as they approached.

Their faces were impossible to read behind impassive helmet visors. A second dropship came down in the open space and one of them broke off to direct the squad it carried. The other, who had a lieutenant's insignia in scuffed paint on his armor, came up to me.

"You're with Oscar 154?" He depolarized his visor, and I recognized him from the briefing.

“She’s below in a service tunnel. We need to get back to her—she’s holding off a whole bunker’s worth of Knights. And you dropped a building on the other entrance.” A third dropship landed, carrying the platoon’s last squad.

“A bunker? Shit. We’ll need the whole company and engineers for this.”

“You don’t have time for that, Lieutenant.” It felt strange to tell an officer off so bluntly, but I had the independent standing for it as part of TELCORPS, however unwillingly. “She needs reinforcements ASAP. Leave a squad to secure the LZ and follow me.”

“But—”

“We’re not storming the bunker, we’re holding a choke point. We can wait until we have the numbers to assault it properly. Now move!” He moved.

Progress back down the stairs was slower, more methodical than my run up. At least if we were too slow it wasn’t my fault. The squads moved in a bounds by fire teams. There was always a set of weapons pointing down the rectangular opening the stairs wrapped around, and there was always a set pointing upwards, covering our rear. That I understood. Infantry did not like stairwells. That the occupation gave them experience with them did not make the soldiers happier; conversely it made them, more competent and more wary. I lived through one major stairwell firefight with the Marines and that was enough. We were fighting through a city, then. The members of the QRF spent their deployment occupying one. Not a pleasant prospect.

They were no happier when we reached the tunnel. It was too open, too lacking in any sort of cover. A linear environment with no cover was a terrible place to have an engagement of any size. So we moved up, steadily, bound by bound. Gunfire sounded in the distance. The Operative was alive.

What I'd covered in three minutes of running took almost ten at a careful advance. Knowing the Operative continued to fight ahead sped the soldiers up but not enough to make them abandon their caution.

She looked terrible when we reached her. The earlier injuries to the side of her face were augmented by a set of nicks and scrapes down both sides. It was the sort of scuff damage from spalling and fragments and near misses that were common in heavy firefights without a helmet. And she favored one leg. There was a pair of bloodless bullet holes on one thigh where her low profile armor stopped the rounds, leaving deep, spreading bruises beneath.

"Friendlies coming up." I announced our presence when the fire team on point was fifty meters from her. She didn't acknowledge. Instead she leant out of cover and snapped a burst through the open door.

The Lieutenant waved his squads forward. A fire team joined the Operative at the door and the squad's gunner opened up with his LMG. The fire from the Knights on the other side slowed.

The rest of the two squads moved up and down the tunnel to set security and blocking positions. The Operative stood up, collected her rifle, and limped towards me. A rifleman took her place.

"Lieutenant."

"Ma'am."

"How long until the rest of your company arrives?"

“A second platoon should be here shortly. They were already in the air. The third platoon and weapons platoon need to embark from the BFD when the dropships return. Thirty mikes if they move quickly.”

“Good. Can you hold until they arrive? The Knights appear to be... Unwilling to rush this position after what I did the first time they tried.”

“I can, Ma’am. You’re returning to the surface?”

“Yes. I’ll ensure your CO is briefed on the layout of the bunker.”

“Understood.” He waved his RTO up. “Macar. Grab a fire team and escort the Operative to the surface. Then start placing relays along the tunnel. I want to be able to talk to command inside ten minutes.”

“Yessir. Ketut, get your team. We’re headed back topside.”

#### PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE 12.1

*Well?*

*We have locations for both Metheron and Alpha Three*

*Both of them? In real time?*

*Not in real time, Sir, but close to it. Just the transmission delay. Alpha Three and Oscar-154 lead a raid on a Knights cell; not one of the ones we have ties to, fortunately. And that may explain why we’ve had so much trouble locating Metheron if it was Lancelot Cell who were hiding him.*

*But you've found him now?*

*Yes, Sir. The last transmission from the Beta team on Mars was that they had a probable location and were preparing to move on it.*

*The transmission lag is, what, five hours from Mars—I assume they used c-comms?—so he should be dealt with by now. Once we receive confirmation, order them to deal with Oscar-154. Tell them to make it look like a revenge attack by the Knights. She's certainly given them able cause if she did take out Jaques Clarke.*

*Yes, Sir.*

## POINT AGAIN [13.01]

We rode one of the dropships the second platoon arrived in back to the BFD. It was empty except for the two of us. I slumped into my seat and relaxed. The fight was over for the moment.

The Operative briefed the company captain over a vide-link in flight. He was not a happy man. Two of his platoons were on the ground in an uncertain situation and might be called on to storm a fortified enemy position once he arrived in strength. He was already en route with his command staff on the first dropship to arrive at the BFD and start the process of picking up the rest of his company. He wanted to be on the ground and in control.

I doubt what the Operative told him made him any happier. What we knew about the bunker made for a short, unpleasant list from an operational perspective. As only a junior NCO I would've wanted more information than a partial layout and the knowledge that the enemy was well equipped, dug in, and present in anything from platoon to company strength. If General Ekewaka decided he wanted to storm the complex and try to preserve the intelligence gains from it, the captain was in for a bloody fight, even after the damage the Operative and I did. Given how Ekewaka'd handled the other entrance, he seemed more likely to drop a proper bunker-buster and look through the wreckage after the flames died down.

The company CO only had to worry about holding a choke point and potentially storming the bunker, which was bad enough. Ekewaka had to choose between dead soldiers with intact intelligence or more damage to the city he was occupying and a move that would make his COIN experts and public affairs team scream.

The Operative was worried about something else entirely. She passed her information on to the captain and a staffer at the BFD Ops Center hurriedly, which was easy enough given how little of it there was. She also arranged for someone to meet us at the landing pad to collect Clarke's tablet and the few hard-copy documents I'd grabbed, and for yet another unmarked vehicle to be waiting for us.

The previous one had been destroyed, along with the all the equipment in it, by either the first bomb or the artillery after. I didn't envy the Operative the paperwork for that—while I'd done limited administrative duties for her on Earth this time she was directly responsible for the gear in the safehouse and had to face the supply officer who clean up after her. I suspected TELCORPS went through a great deal of equipment, and had a supply unit that alternated between being angry, frustrated, resigned, and complaining about how even large black budgets didn't allow for unlimited requisitions. The Marine quartermasters certainly went through most of those phases, and their default tone seemed to be irritated and frustrated.

We didn't get in the car right away. We swung by the armory first. They didn't have the personalized camouflaged armor like we'd left at the safehouse, but they did have regular armor and plenty of weapons. The maintenance bots found spare armor sets in both our sizes and rapid-paint the TELCORPS emblem onto the spaulders. The Operative, it seemed, was entirely done with subtlety.



And she was in a hurry. In the five or so minutes it took for the bots to prep the spare armor we grabbed rifles and ducked into an underground range to adjust them from mechanical zeroes to personalized, set for short engagement ranges. Two magazines apiece were enough for us to sight them in comfortably, then we went back upstairs and spent another five minutes armoring up and grabbing ammo and gear. The whole process took just over ten minutes and the Operative was impatient the whole time. Whatever she'd learned from Clarke had her on edge.

We didn't discuss it until we were in the car, heading out through the BFD Perimeter.

"You have Metheron's location." That much was obvious. It explained the need for immediate action, though not her impatient haste.

"Yes. But we weren't the only ones looking for him. Another Knights group was sniffing around, trying to get information out of Clarke's people."

And so we geared up for a fight. That made sense, at least. "Tied to the previous attack on him?"

She shrugged. "Occam's Razor."

We cleared the perimeter. She hit the accelerator. A few clipped command activated the car's navigation system and plotted a route to an address in the industrial district, roughly two miles from where The Woman In Red was killed. A good place to hide. The whole area was too devastated to make keeping track of residents feasible and there were a minimum of three minor engagements with Knights Insurgents in the district a week, ensuring a state of continuing chaos.

While we were still in the better part of the city the Operative let the car drive itself and briefed me on what she knew—or what she thought I needed to know. It wasn't much: Metheron was hidden in an apartment with a quartet of guards, they'd likely be on alert after the raid on the headquarters, and it was possible whoever else was looking for him might have his location and get their first. Clarke hadn't been happy with how much information leaked out and was looking for ways to plug the leaks and a new safe house for Metheron when we got to him. So we were going in heavy, expecting a fight.

"No backup?" She could have requested some, and gotten, despite the number of troops deployed for the raid. Cydonian police were available, if nothing else.

"No backup. This needs to be kept of everyone's radar. They," if she knew she didn't specify who 'They' were, "had enough access to find you in a war zone. I'm not risking the nets being compromised."

There wasn't anything to say to that. I moved on instead. "What are we looking at?"

"Out of the way apartment, four guards plus Metheron. There's no way they missed what's happening. Those barrages were like kicking over an anthill. Every Knight in the city'll have gone to ground until this blows over. For a safehouse—"

"They'll be on alert. And if they heard from Clark that people were looking for them it'll be worse."

"Right. They're on the third floor. Breach and clear; you're on point."

BARE FOOTPRINTS [13.02]

The third floor was the highest of the apartment building. The fourth had been amputated by an explosion, leaving a shattered mess. Parts of the third floor were exposed, other parts were intact.

I moved up the stairs slowly, weapon up. The Operative followed a few steps behind. Neither of us made much noise on the cheap and dusty carpeting that covered the stairs. Little puffs of dust accompanied each footfall and colored our boots a grey-red.

The lights in the third floor hallway were out. Shafts of sunlight broke the darkness through ragged holes in the roof. Dust motes raised by our passage danced in the pale light.

There were no guards in the hall. The Operative came behind me and tapped my shoulder, then pointed to one of the doors. The lock light glowed red—the only other source of illumination. The rest of the lock panels in the hall were dead. An oversight on the insurgents's part.

I pointed to it, held up a hand and moved my fingers like I was typing in the air—the hand signal for hacking. The Operative shook her head. She couldn't, or wouldn't. A violent entry, then.

We approached the door along the wall, out of sight of the peephole. The building was constructed so cheaply it was an actual hole in the plastic panel, not an inset camera above the number 3F in luminescent paint on the center of the door.

The Operative kept watch while I unzipped the pack on her back and removed the breaching charge. I passed it to her and we switched places. I faced down the hall, rifle at the ready, while she attached the charge to the door. The while procedure was carefully soundless. All it took was gentle pressure on the adhesive pad and the charge was stuck to the door, ready to shatter the plastic.

She stepped back from the door and around me until we were both stacked up, ready to breach. Her hand thumped my shoulder. She was ready. I gestured for her to begin.

She activated the charge a silent three-count later. It was a two-stage device, designed primarily for law-enforcement or other situations where the goal wasn't to kill whoever was on the far side of the door. The first stage was a shaped charge that destroyed the door without turning it into an eviscerating hail of plastic splinters. The second was a flashbang.

Our helmets darkened their visors and dampened sound. Then the tinting vanished, sound returned, and I swung through the open doorway.

The first man I saw reached for a pistol on his belt. I took a heartbeat to look at his face. It wasn't Metheron. I shot him and moved right, clearing the doorway for the Operative. She went left. Her rifle barked. Half the guards were dead. I moved into the next room.

A guard rose from the kitchen table, pistol in hand. I shot her. Blood sprayed across the sandwich she'd abandoned. She collapsed to the floor beside the chair that she knocked over in her haste to get up.

"Clear."

From the other room: “Clear.”

I killed two. The Operative killed two. Only Metheron left. We met in the apartment’s living room. I stepped past the corpse sprawled across the center of the floor. There were two doors in the far wall—the bedrooms. The first was empty. The Operative’s armor took two bullets for her when she entered the other.

Metheron didn’t get the chance to shoot her again. She lunged forward, slamming into him and driving him into the far wall. She grabbed his wrist and pinned it to the wall, forcing his pistol away from both of them while she crushed him between her armored bulk and the wall. The flimsy sheet of metal buckled under their combined weight, but it held. Her other arm pressed across his throat, choking him.

I pried the pistol from his hand. I kept it long enough to eject the magazine and empty the chamber, then tossed it aside.

The Operative shifted her grip on Metheron and dragged him to the kitchen. She threw him in a chair and held him there, one-handed, while she produced a set of restraints from her webbing. I held him down and she secured his arms and legs to the chair, then stepped back. “Arthit Metheron. You know who we are?”

Metheron’s Eyes darted from the bloodied food still on the kitchen table to the emblem on her shoulder. He swallowed. “TELCORPS.”

I moved to a position where I could watch them and the apartment entrance.

“Good. You put together a mercenary team a month ago for a battlefield assassination in Gibson. Who hired you?”

“I don’t discuss my clients—”

“You don’t have a choice. Clarke’s dead. You’re out of protectors.”

Metheron kept calm in the face of the Operative's blunt declaration. "Then why should I talk to you? You can always take what you need." He looked levelly into the tinted faceplate of her helmet, at the level of her eyes. "Or perhaps you can't? Otherwise I would be screaming on the floor already. So," he smiled. "I am a businessman. Your organization has worked with me before. We can come to an agreement."

"Not this time. Tell me what you know, and I might let you go. You're in no position to argue."

"I disagree. The fact that you haven't already taken what you wanted—"

"Metheron." The Operative stood over him and leaned down until a handful of centimeters separated her visor and his face. "What I do or choose not to do is not your concern. Your past dealings with TELCORPS are irrelevant. Your protector is dead. Even your girlfriend sold you out. You've been caught associating with insurgents and rebels. You're tied to an attempted battlefield assassination, also involving rebels; the successful murder of Marines; and at least one murder here in Cydonia. Any court would send you to the firing squad. It is within my authority to summarily execute you right now, on the evidence I already have, or simply because you shot me. You want a deal? Talk. Satisfy me and you'll live. I might even let you see Abdullah, sorry, Ms. Ali, again."

I cued my radio so Metheron wouldn't hear the question I had for the Operative. "Shouldn't we be moving him somewhere secure?"

"Soon. I'd rather break him here." She cut the transmission and returned to Metheron. "Well?"

Metheron shrugged as best he could in the restraints. "Some corporate. They never say who they work for and they never give their real names."

“And you never know, or look into it, I’m sure. Cut the bullshit, Metheron, I’m getting tired of it. Protecting your clients gets you nothing here.”

“Fine. I knew him—I’ve done other jobs for him in the past. All three times, including the first, before the Knights Rebellion started, the approach came through the same people. Knights, but not Clarke’s cell. I couldn’t trust them to hide me, not when they almost certainly arranged the attack on my offices, so I went to Clarke.

“Nonetheless, I trusted them, or trusted them as much as one does in my business. When they made the introduction I listened. The job their corporate friend had for me was relatively simple: They wanted supplies smuggled into the city. It was not very different from other such jobs.” The Operative was apparently content to let him keep tacking and retail what we’d already heard from Fenn. I rubbed at my arm. After the rush to reach the apartment staying felt like a bad idea and the join between my augmented arm and flesh ached from the long day.

“The next two jobs were the same. A soft approach through the same group, then a meeting with the intermediary. Payment upon completion, through encrypted channels and escrow accounts. And the jobs were just as straightforward: Smuggle equipment into Cydonia, smuggle supplies onto a space station, and putting together a team of freelance mercenaries and corporate commandoes for an out-system wetwork job.

“Fenn helped me with the first one. Not the other two. The fighting had started by then, and he chose to go independent and supply arms and munitions to the Knights full time.”

“What space station did you smuggle supplies onto?”

“Pluto Research And Launch Two.”

I knew that name. The station was in the news when I joined up. Mostly because PRL 2 was bombed into a broken, airless shell. It was the fourth-deadliest bombing carried out by the Knights off of Mars, after the Hohman Transfer Staging Depot, Hong Kong, Canaveral Joint Launch Complex, and 433 Eros Command.

“Pearl Two isn’t exactly nearby. How were you involved?”

“The ordinance was loaded onto a flight out of Mars orbital and detonated when they matched orbits for docking. The orbital ports were secure, so the government skimped on inspections relative to anything else going to or from Mars. My part was ensuring it got to orbit from the depot where the Knights built it. I wasn’t aware of the contents of the container at the time, only the destination. After Pearl Two was bombed it was simple enough to determine what happened.”

“So you were contracted to support a corporate assassination run through the Knights; a major terrorist attack by them, this time backed by a major corporation, presumably the same one; and coordinated elements of a second assassination, in addition to all your other activated, both related to the Knights Rebellion and independent of it.” The Operative paced in front of Metheron’s chair, back and forth. From her tone the summary was more for her own benefit than anything else.

“Yes.” MEtheron had completely given up on denial and switched to cooperation. His self-preservation instincts overrode his earlier position.

I wanted to move him somewhere secure. The interrogation didn’t have to be carried out in the field now that we had him. If security was a concern then we could hold him off the grid at our sage house instead of detaining him in the BFD. I radioed as much to the Operative, again. She cut me off and continued pacing.



Then she stopped directly in front of Metheron and braced herself on the table. One of her gauntlets rested in the scattered viscera, unnoticed by her. “Three extremely dissimilar contracts. Did anything connect them besides the means of contact?”

Red flashed at the edge of my vision, near the destroyed door. The Woman In Red stood there with her back turned to us, facing down the hall. She looked over her shoulder at my eyes, before jerking her head at the hallway in the same direction she’d been looking a moment before.

The interrogation continued. Neither Metheron or the Operative noticed anything different.

“One thing connected the first two jobs. There was an indicator of it for the third, but I knew better than to ask. Keeping suspicions to myself has kept me alive this long.”

“What was it?”

“The first assassination, the woman in the industrial sector here—Fenn told you about it? I assume you’ve already interrogated him in the process of finding me?”

“Yes.”

I looked away from the door. They were discussing her death. I wanted to hear more details; what was outside could wait.

“I oversaw the equipment transfer. In addition to the weaponry for the kill team, they had a secured container, about a hundred centimeters by one-fifty, with an integral power supply. It looked like a custom job. One of the mercenaries referred to it as, ‘The device,’ and another said something about making the job easier, despite, ‘Being an pain in the ass to haul around.’ I assisted them in moving it and got a good look at the container. That power supply—I hadn’t seen it before, but they began to show up on battlefield equipment I moved later. It was a Kupier Defense Industries proprietary design. They use a custom connector to force buyers to stick with their products. It’s unmistakable.

“And KDI has the largest corporate presence on Pearl Two.”

“The Knights always had covert backing. Their level of funding and target selection for a number of bombings in system made that clear. Several colony-based businesses eliminated their rivals before their colonies joined the rebels. But KDI was a major victim after Pearl Two. You’re suggesting otherwise?”

“I have been in practice, both in law and my other endeavors, for nearly twenty years, Operative. I have seen false flag operations before. And it seems more plausible that KDI attempted to cover up their involvement by painting themselves a victim after using Knights operation to smokescreen and support their own, than prototype KDI technology showing up in a minor assassination at the start of the conflict, six months before anything with a similar design appeared on the battlefield *or* the black market.”

Blond hair and green eyes filled my vision. The Woman In Red was right in my face. I startled back. She glared at me, then listen an arm and pointed to the door again. This time I paid attention. Leaving the interrogation behind, I walked to the door, rifle ready.

In time for a grenade to sail in. She batted it further back into the apartment with a wave of force, and faded out. I knew, somehow, that I could expect no more help from her. Dealing with the grenades, after shielding me from the Operative earlier, was the extent of what she would—could?—do. The grenade detonated beyond the kitchen, in the living room.

And my knees hit the floor. My hands went to my head without conscious action. Raw force pressed down on my mind. It didn't try to make me do anything, or change how I thought. It was only pressure. Pressure enough to drive me to my knees, pressure enough to make me drop my rifle. Pressure enough to make me helpless.

The first man through the door put two rounds in my chest. My armor took them, the force of the impact driving me backwards, sprawling. A third bullet cracked the faceplate of my helmet. My head crashed into the the padded back of my helmet.

I lay still. He moved past without checking that I was dead. Another figure passed by, ignoring me, then two more. Belated weapons fire rang from the kitchen. I heard and unarmored day hit the floor, a wet thump. Metheron.

The second pair through the door wore the same armor as those who tried to kill me in the forest outside Chase. One shouted, stumbled back. I could move again. The Operative's work. The second two were the telepaths.

My rifle was close, but not close enough. I couldn't reach it worth attacking attention. I went for the pistol strapped to my thigh. My hands shook with aftershock. The Operative had driven the mental force off with one of her own. The delicate balance of forces in my head made steadiness difficult, or impossible.

One of the telepaths saw me; swung his rifle so the muzzle was in my face. I fired first. The round didn't penetrate his armor. It did throw his aim off. A trio of bullets embedded themselves in the floor beside my head. I fired again, down wavering sights, and hit the center of his chestpiece. Rode the recoil back down, paused and resighted, fired once more. This time the bullet hit the side of his neck, above the gorget and below the edge of his helmet. He dropped, hands going to the wound to try and hold in spilling blood.

His companion shot me. The rounds skipped off the rim above my visor. My head slammed back into the floor, dazing me. Another, more careful, shot hit the visor itself. The cracks spread. Another burst would shatter it and kill me. I shot blindly my pistol aimed in his general direction. Bullets sparked off his armor or hit the wall around him, enough to drive him back.

My pistol clicked empty. The slide locked back on an open chamber. I scrambled for a magazine with my off-hand.

A burst of power threw me into the wall. The same force held me there, spread-eagled. My pistol was in my hand, it pointed at the flood and I couldn't change that. I tried to move my arm—either arm—and succeed only in twitching it. I had control over my movement, but the unseen force had me pinned.

A flash of red. I was wrong. She wasn't quite out of the fight.

The man holding me also kept the Operative at bay while she dealt with the two commandoes in her room. Exhaustion crippled the raw power she could bring to bear, and the telepath made use of that against her. But without the support of his partner, it cost him. He stood with a hand raised towards me, unable to do more.

And The Woman In Red had enough left to take advantage of that. I heard of scream of rage from her. He heard it too. The force holding me in place slipped, weakened, vanished. I collapsed against the wall, sat there long enough to reload and stood back up. I wavered on my feet and braced myself against the wall. Brought my pistol up to stare down the sights.

There was no need. I found how wrong I'd been about The Woman In Red's ability to help when I failed.

The man screamed, an expression of raw terror. Screams like I'd heard once before. She looked like she had then, too. Walking forward, flickering in and out so each step covered too much distance. Bare footprints charred into the floor where she walked. She passed through the pool of blood by the wounded telepath. It steamed and boiled to a rust-brown crust without staining her feet.

His screams grew more desperate. Behind her, the man with a hand pressed to his bleeding neck moaned in pain. Smoke began to rise from the standing telepath's armor. I smelled cooking flesh. The armor collapsed; clattered empty to the floor in a pile, interconnected by the undersuit it was fastened too. An undersuit that leaked blood.

She turned, flickered towards me, face impassive. Met my eyes through my cracked faceplate. Nodded. Smiled, a tiny quirk of her lips. And was gone.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [13.03]

The Operative emerged from the kitchen, her helmet off. Her eyes were blood-shot, red. Blood tricked from her nose and dripped from her chin, unnoticed or ignored. New marks scored her armor where bullets had scraped away the paint. A single flattened round was embedded in the chestpiece, right over her heart. It was a perfect center-mass shot.

I let the wall take my weight as I walked, still unsteady and unbalanced, to the dead telepath. The wounded one was more important. I didn't care. I wanted to see what she had done. How she'd killed.

The blood on the floor added another layer of stains to the soles of my boots, joining the dried blood from the bunker, and new stains to my kneepad when I went to one knee beside the the pile of armor. It wasn't completely empty. Disconnected, de-articulated bones resisted as I turned the helmet. The visor was darkened so I couldn't see the face beyond it. I fumbled under the jaw of the helmet for the catch, gauntleted fingers slick with the blood that had leeches into the undersuit. I found the button and pressed it. The helmet unsealed from the undersuit. I pulled it off.

A grinning, carbonized skull greeted me. Streaks of burned bone and flesh mixed with flakes of brown blood, boiled dry, and fresher blood that stuck to my fingers, leaving imprints in the partially congealed mess. With the suit unsealed the reek of cooked flesh and offal was stronger than ever. I didn't look inside the rest of the armor. The skull was more than enough evidence of how my ghostly protector acted when provoked—though her motivations for protecting me remained a mystery.

The Operative had gone to the wounded telepath while I examined the skull. She found the aid kit in his webbing and started using to deal with the bulled wound in his neck. That he wasn't already dead meant I'd made an unlikely shot and missed anything instantly lethal in the throat or spinal column. From the amount of blood I'd at least nicked an artery without severing it. It wasn't enough to kill him immediately, though the blood-loss was bad. He was close to bleeding out when the Operative began first aid.

The blood stopped flowing before she finished. She swore and felt, as I had, for the helmet release with her own blood-slick fingers and pulled it free. Blood leaked from the telepath's eyes, from his ears, from his nose, all in thin streams that ran down and painted his face a red mask. He looked like he'd been hit with a sonic grenade, or caught by the blast wave from a powerful explosion.

"Dammit." The Operative dropped his helmet and stood. She brushed her fingers against the thigh-plates of her arm in a futile attempt to clean them. They stayed bloody and left streaks of blood across the side of her thigh. Her face looked tired; grey and drawn with a headache around her bloodshot eyes. Her speech slurred again. The mental battle took the last of her energy, and she looked like she was about to collapse.

"Telepathic suicide." She nudged the corpse with her boot. "Information denial—and dedication, or imprinted orders. Either possibility is disturbing." She knelt down again and scooped some blood into a small vial produced from somewhere in her webbing. "Get a sample of him, too. I want to check them against the Telepaths from Gibson."

I gathered the sample from the slurry coating the scorched skull. I didn't know if it was viable. I didn't know if there was enough left behind in the mess to be properly viable no matter where I took it from, and I didn't want to check the rest of the body. There was no way to get blood from it that wasn't mixed with carbon.

I stood when I finished. "Metheron?" I wanted confirmation.

"Dead."

We both went into the kitchen. Metheron's corpse lay on the floor bound to his knocked over chair, opposite from the guard I'd killed earlier and her chair. His head and torso were a mess of gore and shattered bones. The bodies of the first two attackers lay where they fell among the spent casing that littered the floor. Their ruined faces stared out from shattered visors.

I collected samples from them while the Operative retrieved her helmet from where she'd dropped it and put it back on. With her face hidden by an expressionless visor it became impossible to see how close to the edge of functionality she was.

We left the bodies behind. A second vehicle, battered and inconspicuous, sat beside ours outside the building. The Operative took the time to note down its serial number. I checked over our car for explosive traps. When I didn't find any we moved on.

I drove. When we left the industrial district for safer streets I set the auto-nav and slumped back in my seat. I was tired, hungry, and my throat was dry. I activated the hydration system in my armor and dark from the table the helmet deployed. The one piece of gear I hadn't acquired in the BFD armory was energy bars, and I regretted it.



The Operative didn't relax like I did. She sat in her seat with her rifle in hand while she scanned the streets and the roofline until we pulled into the garage beneath the safe house building.

There was cold coffee in the pot. The Operative reheated it without comment and sat down at her terminal, still in her borrowed armor. Her only concessions to being out of the field were taking off her helmet and spending a few seconds to clean the blood off her gauntlets in the sink.

I cleaned my weapons; de-armored; took a long, hot shower; and went to sleep. I did leave the pistol, loaded, beside the bed.

#### DEPARTURE WINDOW [13.04]

The Operative woke me four hours later.

"Grab your gear. We're rolling in thirty. There's a flight for Pluto waning on us and the departure window closes soon." She dropped an empty kitbag on my floor. "Bag anything from the BFD for return or we'll catch hell from the SupO. Re-equip from what's here."

I stumbled out of bed, grabbed I'd pulled civvies on before I collapsed on top of the blankets. My guess that I wouldn't get more than a long nap was right. I pulled on my boots and poured a mug from the fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen. Then I hauled the empty kitbag down the hall and started filling it up with the borrowed equipment. Packing was straightforward; my personal gear was still all packed in a duffle in my room, so I only had to grab a new set of weapons and toss them and boxes ammunition into one of the empty black duffles in the room, followed by my TELCORPS camouflage armor and swing it over my shoulder. I winced as the heavy weight of settled on its strapped and the edge of an armor place dug into my side. The Operative's armor and several more weapons were already gone from the room.

She was waiting by the door when I finished, weighted down by all three of my bags.

"Pluto?"

"We're flying out on a cargo flight, then taking s shuttle up to Pearl Two. I want a look at the aftermath of the bombing. I need something to confirm Metheron's account with."

We left the apartment. The Operative locked it behind her. She took an extra second to fiddle with the lock panel and activated an additional defense system for the safe house. Then we went down to the garage and drove away.

Dropping off the equipment at the BFD consumed less time than I expected. The Operative told the quartermaster in the armory to forward any complaints to TELCORPS and signed the gear back in without the usual series of checks. Then we took a handful of minutes to change once more into our unmarked fatigues. A shuttle took us to a military cargo-hauler in a high parking orbit and we settled in for the long trip on in-system sub-c drives.

PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [13.1]

*Explain this to me: We had a target, a known location for that target, and the resources to deal with him effectively. And now we have two more dead Betas, two dead mercenaries, and have completely lost track of Oscar-One Five Four and Alpha Three. The only thing stopping this from being an unmitigated disaster is that Metheron has been silenced—and even so it seems likely that the information he knew has not been contained. So, tell me, Ariana: What happened?*

*Yes, Sir... Are you familiar with the term 'meeting engagement,' Sir?*

*Refresh my memory.*

*Yes, Sir. A meeting engagement is when elements of two forces unexpectedly encounter each other and combat ensues. According to the reports I've received, something analogous occurred in Cydonia. Our team leader sent a recon element to keep Metheron under observation while he prepared for a raid. The recon element reported an unmarked vehicle of the same type as those sometimes used by forces from the BFD outside the apartment building where Metheron was hiding. He assumed that the building's occupants had been discovered, either by the One Five Four or another government group, and ordered the recon group to investigate further. After giving that order he directed the remaining team members to immediately depart from their base of operations and provide reinforcements if needed.*

*Then how did the reinforcements miss One Five Four and Alpha Three?*

*They were staging some twenty minutes by car from the target building, and could not afford to draw attention to themselves while the occupying forces and Cydonian Police were on high alert, particularly with the continuous overhead observation from the shroud making them easily trackable. Moving in full gear was risky enough to begin with. As for Oscar-One Five Four escaping, that was pure bad luck—an accident of timing made possible by the transit time between the staging area and the target building. She dealt with the recon team and left the area within those twenty minutes, well before any sort of net could be established to catch her.*

*Any other sign of her?*

*No, Sir. A possible sighting in the BFD later, but no confirmation of that , and no information on what she was doing there or where she was headed.*

*Right. Recall the rest of the Martian team; I don't think we have any further use for them there. Assign them to security duties for now, but be ready to reassign them elsewhere if we get actionable intelligence. And inform their commander that he is to report directly to me upon arrival.*

*I've already taken the liberty of doing so, Sir.*

*I should have know you'd anticipated me. Thank you, Ariana. Now, is there anything else you want to add?*

*Yes, unfortunately. One of the Betas with the recon team was—incinerated, or semi-liquidified, or something along those lines, the report is unclear—in his armr. The team leader assumed it was One Five Four's work, which makes sense, since he hasn't been briefed on everything, and powerful TELCORPS agents have been known to do similar things—*

*But it isn't in keeping with how One Five Four prefers to operate. Her, on the other hand... Well, she has certainly done so before, and if Alpha Three was at risk she may have intervened again. Do you have any other evidence?*

*No, Sir. The team had already turned off their monitoring equipment and prepped it for transport. This is strictly my interpretation of the limited available data. One Five Four has never been tied to all-out telepathic attacks of that nature. From the records we have there's no doubt she's powerful enough to do so, but she prefers to influence people and events indirectly, with more finesse, and the few operations we know for certain she was involved in didn't produce casualties of that sort.*

*I agree. And I want the active Gammas ready as soon as possible. Focus on that over activating more for now. She's becoming more and more involved, so we might need them.*

*Yes, Sir. I'll see to it right away. I saw what she did to some of the other labs, and I'd rather the Gammas were around to deal with her, too.*

READY ENOUGH [14.01]

Pluto Research And Launch 2 was primarily a lab facility for research kept out of the public eye, made possible by the remoteness and the eccentric orbit of Pluto, even in comparison to other Kuiper belt objects. KDI owned 63% of the station and had used it primarily for zero gravity research labs and living quarters to support the labs. The remaining 37% of the station was held by a variety of smaller defense contractors, several of the KDI subsidiaries, and at least one academic lab. The material I pulled up on the station over the course of our flight there also hinted at the presence of a military black projects lab, though not TELCORPS clearance was sufficient to confirm that without more invasive—and obvious—prying. Prying of the sort that would show up outside TELCORPS channels, which the Operative was trying to avoid.

Our flight stopped at PRL 1, a similar facility that PRL 2 had been designed to compete with, in contrast to the other academic and ice-mining facilities based on and around the dwarf planet. From there we took a shuttle down to a surface installation, Dis Pater Station, a town of sorts inhabited by workers and researchers from workers and researches from a number of different groups. It also hosted a steady salvage and repair-crews for PRL 2. Some of the salvage crews were corporate, focused on the retrieval of data, intact machinery, and viable prototypes. Some were independent scroungers risking all the dangers of a spacewalk for valuables in the now-abandoned living quarters and anything else they could find in the labs after the official salvage teams finished.

We hitched a ride with an independent group successful enough to have their own ship. It was a battered old Glowbug-class transport, barely kept functioning by an over-worked mechanic of the jury-rig-or-make-do school.

The view of PRL 2 from the cockpit window on our approach was revealing. There was a ragged hole in the exterior of the torus where the bomb tore through the outer hull of the station.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” The captain joined us in the cockpit for the approach. “Look there—see how the damage is asymmetrical? Before they spun her down the station’s rotational velocity was enough to throw off a whole lot of plating broken loose by the bombing but not severed from the station immediately.” He shook his head. “Stroke of luck, really. They detonated early. Another two clicks and it’d’ve managed to cut through the whole ring. Entire sectors was gutted internally by the other bombs, the ones they got on board, and that would’ve been a killing blow on top. The whole station flying apart; lots of it heading out into space, the rest of it hitting Pluto or forming a debris cloud. Maybe not Kessler Cascade levels, but it sure as hell would’ve made Pluto orbit an unfriendly place. Damn glad it didn’t go down that way.”

“Were you here for it?” The Operative looked from the view to the captain.

“No. Saw them do it right at Hohman Transfer. This was just a failed attempt to repeat their success there. Must’ve had a bone to pick with KDI. Guess they figured a major defense contractor’s as good a target as any. And there’s been rumors of KDI getting hit now and again, starting before things heated up on Cydonia, so it wasn’t the first time.”

That was news. For the Operative too, apparently. “Where’d you hear that?”



“Loose talk from one of their salvage units on shore leave. A senior guy shut them down pretty quick. Didn’t get any details, just that it was going on for a couple of years beforehand. Don’t know how they covered it up, if it’s true.”

“I remember reading something about a series of lab accidents. They even got fined for safety violations. Smoothly done, if what you overheard wasn’t someone spouting off about nothing.”

“Could be. Got no way of knowing.” He shrugged again. Outside the viewport the ragged edge of the hole in the station grew closer. “You two ready?”

“Ready enough, captain, thank you.”

“That’s a lot of hardware. And I note most of it ain’t salvage gear.”

“Your crew isn’t exactly unarmed, either.”

He raised his hands, palms out. “Fair enough. I won’t pry—you’ve paid too well for that. May as well get down to cargo bay, we’ll be in position in a couple of minutes. Remember, three hours. We won’t be sticking around to pick you up if you’re late; we’ve got appointments of our own to keep, and our air supplies won’t last forever.

ALL GOOD [14.02]

The transport’s crew were checking the seals on each other’s suits by the cargo airlock. With the exception of the pilot the members of the crew who weren’t going EVA stood around with them, talking and helping with suits and equipment. Three of the four members of the salvage party carried vacuum-rated small arms in addition to plasma cutters, cables, bags, and the various other tools they needed for their job.

The Operative and I stood to one side performing our own checks. The armor we wore could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was, but the camouflage coatings had been reset to a different default. Instead of clean, well-kept armor with official insignia the plates looked scruffy and battered with poorly done paint jobs and other signs of heavy use. While a close inspection might reveal the underlying quality of the armor there was no way to distinguish it from any other set of well-used equipment. With it on we looked like a pair of freelance mercenaries operating at the fringe of a war zone. My augmented eye and arm, and the fresh scarring down the side of the Operative's face, enhanced that impression.

I slid my helmet on and engaged the seals. They clicked into place. A telltale readout sprung up on my HUD. Environmental seals were green. Temperature controls were green. Air recycling and recirculation were green. Active camouflage was green, and tagged INACTIVE/STDBY. Maneuvering pack thrusters were green. Tethering systems were green. Flashlights, light amplification, and IR illuminators were green. Sensor suites—a major improvement over the Marine standard ones I trained on—were green. Primary Transponder was green. Emergency Transponder was green. Multi-spectrum communication package and point to point laser comms were green. All the armor systems were green. The telltales minimized to a series of icons on the side of the display, leaving it clear except for a 3D navigation overlay.

That overlay, at least, was the same as the one I'd learned to use during the three weeks of zero-G and boarding operations training at SOI. And it was intuitively designed so that after several years without and EVA or refresher training I could still use and understand the system. That wouldn't make me much more comfortable during the ZG work, but it did make catastrophic mistakes less likely.

The Operative slipped her helmet on, hiding her scars. It was the only part of either of our armor sets to have an active camouflage element instead of a passive base-layer reset. The death's-head mask of a TELCORPS operative was not so easily hidden, and required active measures, powered by an independent battery when disconnected from main armor systems, to disguise. After a second of reading her own telltales she waved me over.

"Manual check." I turned my back to her, giving her access to the secondary readout there. After going over the information she thumped my shoulder—all good—and turned to let me check her readout. I scanned down the indicator lights on the back of her shoulder and a second set on her maneuvering pack. All green, again. I closed the panel flap so the armor gave off no unintentional lights, and slapped her shoulder in return.

With armor taken care of the last set of checks was weapons. We both carried standard issue weapons, now coated in heavy lubricants designed for vacuum. The prop work had been done already, leaving only a final functions check and then loading them. The Marines preferred energy weapons in vacuum. Doctrine held that the added firepower, lack of recoil, and lower chance of mechanical failure made up for heat dispersion issues, which they compensated for by adding more cooling systems to the vacuum-rated versions of the plasma weapons and DEWs. For us however, even a low-end vacuum DEW—a cheap laser rifle—was too suspicious. Some larger corporations and high-end PMCs could afford to outfit small groups with those weapons. The average breed of mercenaries and freelance salvagers made do with kinetic weapons—either electromagnetically driven or the more common chemically propelled weapons. Self-oxidizing propellant in the rounds—plain old bullets, the same as they’d been for centuries.

The crew finished their own preparations not long after we did. The members staying behind hung back while their crewmates stood near the airlock door. The ship’s intercom crackled to life.

“Two minutes. Looks good out there, Captain.”

The captain acknowledged the pilot’s message in return and waved his group into the airlock. The Operative and I followed, joined them in the cramped space. We stood, pressed together. A warning light flashed and a klaxon blared. The automatic locks in the interior airlock thunked into place. The deckplates rumbled as the engines flared and we jostled into each other with the momentum shift. The airlock began to depressurize. Air hissed as it was sucked out of the room. Then it was gone. The only sound I heard was my own breathing, loud inside my helmet.

“Boots on.” At the captain’s radioed command we activated the magnetic locks all of our boots had. Because gravity was still active, I felt no immediate change.

The captain turned from the outer door to the Operative. “Your three hours start now.” She nodded. I started a mission clock in the upper corner of my HUD. “Good.” He hit the large button beside the door. It opened and we were staring out into a vast starfield.

PRL 2 was below us. The transport’s pilot had brought us to a relative stop over the hole in the outer ring. It was a common ingress point. Several other ships held positions around the edge, visible only as running lights and silhouetted outlines. A handful of other lights were visible within the damaged station. Some were stationary, single lights marking hazards or pairs showing entry points. Six others moved, gliding around the danger lights to and from the paired entrance markers.

The captain walked to the outer edge of the hatch and stepped forward, pushing off as he did. He drifted slowly away from the ship, turned on his suit lights, and flared his thrusters so he was headed downwards. The rest of his crew followed, one by one until they made a loose line descending towards the rent in space station.

The Operative stepped to the edge of the ship, then out and away. I followed.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.03]

I reoriented so I was moving headfirst away from the transport, diving towards the growing hole in PRL 2. My HUD painted a projected path for me, a glowing line the showed where I was headed and guided me towards where I wanted to be. The sensor suite marked the position of the Operative ahead of me and her trajectory in a different color, less bright than my own own. It also had the range to mark the transport's crew, half a klick beyond us, and several of the closer scavengers on the hull of PRL 2, a full klick away according to rangefinding LIDAR.

The distance vanished rapidly. It fit what I was taught by the Marines: At the velocities of spaceflight, large distances were small. The numbers from the rangefinder ticked downwards meter by meter.

As we approached the ragged hole grew until it eclipsed the rest of our view. It was a hundred meters deep, a full third of thickness of the torus, and twice that in average width. I didn't need to be an engineer to see that the captain was right about how close it came to be being a far worse disaster as the black cavern engulfed us.

We rotated again so we were approaching the bottom feet-first. Our thrusters packs fired in an automated sequence that killed acceleration until we touched down with a gentle impact I absorbed by flexing my knees. My boots engaged, holding me fast to the lower deck.

There were orientation issues. With the exception of a shaft running through the center of the torus, PRL 2 had been spun for gravity. We stood on the ceiling of a breached compartment, looking about at wreckage illuminated by the flashlights on our helmets.

Five minutes had elapsed.

A mail received icon flashed on my HUD. I opened the package from the Operative, and a layout of the station uploaded into my armor's navigation systems. Four points were marked on the map: Two different labs in the KDI sector, a quarter of the way around the ring from the crater in the direction that was up-spin when the station still spun; the next marker was the zero-gravity labs in the spindle, which were only accessible through a connecting shaft in the KDI section. The fourth marker showed our position at the very bottom of the bomb crater.

So we were going up-spin. And we'd come so deep into the crater because the labs we were looking for were part of the inner ring of compartments.

I sent a confirmation to the Operative, and we began to look for a way out of the compartment. Deep as we were, several years worth of salvagers and scavengers had preceded us. The blast-damaged hatch to the next compartment up-spin was forced open, cut away in places where the explosion impact-fused pieces of metal together. The Operative led the way, picking a path across the debris scarred overhead one ponderous step at a time. Her helmet lights illuminated the path we followed, small circles of light shining on ragged edges and jagged bits of shrapnel embedded in the metal we walked on. And once, on a vacuum-desiccated arm pinned to the wall by a long splinter of metal.

We pulled ourselves up the stretch of bulkhead below the hatch, originally the space between it and the ceiling, and slid sideways through the cut into the next compartment. Ahead of me the Operative jumped and twisted with a thruster burst so she stood upside-down to me. She moved along the ceiling to the far side of the compartment.

The Marine trick of, 'Your objective is down,' for ZG environments didn't work inside a station that was designed around a given orientation. I preformed my own version of the Operative's maneuver, though I was less graceful about it. I nearly hit my head on a desk attached to the deck partway through the rotation and didn't manage my momentum right. I found myself with my boots locked to the deck, leaning forward into them as far as I could, pushed forward by residual velocity. I took another step and caught myself. The new orientation, matched to the station's, made instinctive sense in the same way that standing on the overhead was unnerving. Now the ceiling above me was smooth, broken only by deactivated light panels, instead of a maze of shadowy fixtures.

I swept my light around the room. It was an office of some sort, with more desks welded to the deckplates like the one I'd almost hit my head on. The desk all had holes where their built-in workstations and terminals were cut out by scavengers. The chairs for the desks hadn't been attached to the deck, and were piled in a down-spin corner where they'd drifted as the station's spin slowed and the gravity weakened to nothing.



My light reflected off a luminescent exit sign pointing towards the far door. Its internal power was dead, but the reflective layer made it stand out, bright red letters in the darkness, surrounded by a white painted bulkhead in the circle of my light and blackness around that. Without power the whole station was unbroken darkness hiding wreckage and mummified corpses, hidden forever unless humans brought them out again. Some of those corpses might never be discovered where they floated in the darkness. KDI had scavenged much of their equipment and data from the station, and other scavengers made a living picking it apart, but the projected cost of refurbishing the gutted interior and rebuilding the damaged sections, and sustaining the workforce required to do so, was immense. If they decided it wasn't worth the cost, compared to using robots to assemble a new station out of modules that were easily shipped to the dwarf planet, then PRL 2 would remain an orbiting tomb above Pluto, and some of its secrets would go unrevealed for yours, if they ever came out.

I crossed the room, winding my way through the damaged desks to the hatch the Operative was by. She cranked it open with the manual controls. I kicked off and drifted through in an elongated bound. My feet hit the deck in a corridor and locked into place. The Operative came through behind me. My map said it was one of the larger ring passageways that ran around the whole torus of the station. It curved away, horizonless, upspin from us. When I looked behind us, my light picked out a tangle of wreckage. There were darker holes, voids that ran through the mass to open onto the crater beyond. The white paint on the bulkheads beside the wreckages was scored and scorched away, showing the bare metal beneath.

With no obstacles to avoid, the Operative and I were able to move up the passageway away from the wreckage with more bounds, pushing off the bulkheads or deck if we got too close. We glided past doors and hatches that were forced open or cut away, further evidence of scavenging. The Operative held her pistol, using its underbarrel flashlight in addition to the ones mounted on her helmet.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.04]

The sensors on our armor saw the damage before we did. We were a hundred and fifty meters from where we'd entered the ring passageway when LIDAR picked it out and highlighted the edges on our HUDs in the darkness ahead. Twenty meters beyond us the passageway was blocked again. It was the first evidence of the simultaneous internal bombings we encountered.

The bulkheads, deck, and overhead nearer to the damage was burnt black beneath a white-grey layer of dust from chemical fire suppressants. Some still floated, drifting randomly in the vacuum. The beams of our lights were visible in the thin cloud.

Scraps of metal lay in a pile on the overhead, while others had been driven deep into the metal, penetrating into the deck beyond. The pile above us defied the logic of the station's orientation and my instincts, which lined up with it. Intellectually I knew that it was there because the explosion drove it and the rest got caught on the embedded pieces that held the whole in place in the absence of gravity, but instinct defied intellect, and the pile looked unsettling—wrong.

There was no deck beneath the pile. It was gone, torn away by an explosion several compartments closer to the outside of the station. Once again we were close to the bottom—or top—of the damage. Through the hole I saw a maze of destroyed compartments that collapsed on themselves. The integrity of the station was relatively intact—not enough structural support was destroyed by the explosives—but the same could not be said for the areas around the internal bombs. They had collapsed, broken beams and sheets of metal falling inward while bulkheads under the new weight they bore or warped in the heat of the blast.

Someone had cut away the wreckage directly beyond the hole, allowing access to that compartment. They had not gone much beyond that. Deeper in it was more unstable and cutting, or any sort of salvage, became more risky. Even the compartment through the hole required bracing, and several of the cut beams were welded together to hold more wreckage in place.

My light fell on mangled body parts in the twisted, broken pile. I didn't look closer. The damage was evident enough from their surroundings and the gaping wounds in the mummified flesh, damage of a sort I'd only narrowly escaped aboard the *Athens*. If there were whole bodies there beside what I could see, it would only be more of the same.

The Operative unlocked her boots and pushed off. She cleared the five meter gap with ease and landed on the far side without using her thrusters at all. I managed the same.

My map flashed and updated itself with the damage. The Operative had added it to her version of the map and pushed the change out on the tactical network we shared.

We continued along the passageway, passing through a hatch between frames. The Operative halted on the far side of the hatch.

“Switch to IR lamps.”

I turned off my helmet lights and activated the second set mounted next to them. The helmet’s low-light amplifier came on automatically, painting a monochrome image of the Operative and the passageway on my HUD, lit by the beams of infrared light my helmet was projecting. Another pair of beams from the Operative’s helmet scanned across the deck and bulkheads in front of us.

The hatch behind us marked the boundary between KDI’s regular area and the high-security labs. According to the map, we weren’t close to the labs the Operative wanted to investigate or the access-way to the spindle, but we were closer.

We’d discussed switching to IR ahead of time in planning. While KDI had stepped down their recovery efforts they still had people on-station, and visible lights were a giveaway of our presence. IR wasn’t much better, we needed some sort of light, and forcing it out of the visible spectrum was better than nothing. The LIDAR and radar systems could have generated a map of where we were, but they would’ve hid the important details, so the operative went with IR.

We floated forward again. We took shorter, more cautious bounds, closer to large steps. The Operative kept her pistol in hand, though the light was off. I had my pistol out, too. I wanted my rifle, but I didn’t trust my ZG skills enough to try moving without at least one hand free to catch myself.

The Operative took two bounds. Then she swung to the left with her pistol up. Her regular lights snapped on, illuminating an empty section of deck. My HUD merged the circle of bright light and color seamlessly into the overlay from the light-amplifying systems. I flicked on my own lights and moved sideways, covering the spot from a different angle.

There was nothing there. There continued to be nothing there. After several seconds the Operative switched off her lights and moved on. I turned off my lights, reverting to the monochrome overlay lit by my IR lamps.

But I watched the area for a moment longer. In that moment I saw red. The Woman In Red stood there. She faced away from me, looking down the passageway. Looking past the Operative.

She ignored me. I think. When she didn't move for several seconds I started forward again. Ignoring the bright red of shirt, the gold of her hair, and the worn blue of her jeans, even as they screamed for attention against the greys and blacks on my HUD. She walked alongside me, always just in the corner of my eye, keeping pace with effortless steps, easy and regular like there was still gravity to hold her down. Moving like there was still air for dead lungs to breath. When I turned my head to look at her she was gone, but there was an itch in the base of my skull that told me she hadn't left, and when I looked forward she was there on my other side. I heard the soft padding of her bare feet on the deck. It was impossible. And it was *Her*. The impossible became less than unusual.

The passageway was blocked ahead. More bomb damage. The Operative stopped in front of it and turned back towards me. The beams of IR light from her helmet paused to my right, where The Woman In Red walked, then continued until they rested on me.

This time the bomb was stronger. Or placed closer to the inner ring. The passageway was cut by fallen rubble and twisted wreckage. Again, I saw bits of bodies mixed in and didn't look closer.

We went around. But going around wasn't easy. The destruction cut clean through the corridor and none of the nearby compartments escaped intact. Our maps showed that the nearest ones on either side continued past the bomb damage. Investigating them showed that they were also blocked.

After finding that obstacle, we stopped. I kept watch, switching my pistol out for my rifle, while the Operative searched the map for an alternate route that went far enough around the bombed area to be clear of the damage. When she found one she updated my map as well.

The route required backtracking fifty meters or so and cutting through the dark maze of an abandoned lab. The Woman In Red kept pace with us the whole time, flickering in and out of the corner of my view. Twice I caught her investigating some piece of lab equipment, looking it over and examining the labels. Labels I couldn't even read with IR amplification, and she was well out of the thin cones of light we emitted, standing in the utter darkness that surrounded us.

The Operative seemed to sense her. Not full; enough to leave her on edge. Her lights darted around the room we moved through, constantly searching. As if she felt a presence but could find no trace of it. The Woman In Red managed to never be where the Operative was looking. The one time she wasn't, one of the times she was looking at an instrument, the Operative's lights hesitated on her then moved past. The Operative couldn't see her, though she thought something was present.

She was busy looking around when she walked into the body.

“Fuck!”

She jumped back from the floating corpse and pushed it away. It flew into the wall while the Operative used her thrusters to kill her momentum and bring herself down to the deck, where her boots locked again. The Woman In Red’s presence on a deserted, bombed-out space station did have her more jumpy than she seemed.

The corpse bounced off the wall and drifted gently away from it. The lab we were in skirted the very edge of the blast zone, so a corpse wasn’t that surprising, though it was the first relatively-intact one we’d encountered on PRL 2.

A third of his chest cavity was gone, and the rest of his front was peppered with wounds that were visible through shreds of his clothing. Viscera floated in his wake, trailing out from him. His face was a tattered mask. Dried strips of vacuum-frozen skin pulled back from the edges of cuts, showing shrapnel embedded the skull beneath and holes where more went through. Fragments of shattered teeth and jawbone were visible through the remains of one cheek. His eyes were gone.

The desiccation and mummification of vacuum exposure—as far as we were from the damaged exterior, too many compartments and frames were breached by the explosion for more than a few isolated compartments to retain pressure—and the flat colors my HUD painted the room in gave the corpse a surreal quality. It looked unlike any body I'd seen. I'd watched men and women bleed out from gunshots, torn apart by explosions, liquified and incinerated from within by The Woman In Red—who stood, patiently, beside us—and I'd seen them die in the light of IR lamps and through light amplification overlays before. None of those deaths look as alien as the effects of space on a man who was dead long before his compartment depressurized.

The Operative continued through the room. She took a path that kept her out of the way of the corpse. I followed, pushing off from the deck towards the hatch in the far wall. The Woman In Red continued her strange, distance-eating walk just within sight of me. I saw her pass through the corpse without noticing or effecting its slow passage towards the far bulkhead.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.05]



The first of the target labs no longer existed. The explosion that destroyed it was the fifth-largest of the seventeen internal bombings. It radiated out from a transport moving through the cargo shaft running through the core of the torus. It was a minor miracle that the station was intact at all. The explosion devastated everything within almost a hundred meters in a rough sphere and left a gaping void in the station. The added stresses on the surviving load-bearing components and the bracings for the outer hull were immense until damage control teams finished the dangerous work of repairing the emergency thrusters and gradually spinning the station down, removing the centrifugal force that imitated gravity.

We didn't get within thirty meters of the lab. The whole area was blocked off. Where there wasn't impassible wreckage salvage crews had welded hatches shut to keep scavengers out, even as they informed their superiors and wrote off the contents of the unreachable areas.

The passageway we followed was another victim of the bomb. A plate was welded over the hatch through the nearest intact frame to the damage. Sensors showed that the plate was several degrees warmer than ambient temperatures as the head of the weld defused through the metal and the bulkheads. That meant the obstacle was fairly new, but we didn't try to force it. The slow process of heat dispersion in vacuum didn't make much of a difference. The door was only a few degrees warmer, and that meant it was still cold enough for double-digit Kelvin temperatures.

Like the official KDI salvage crews, we wrote off the first lab. The spindle access was closer than the second lab. We went there next. I watched seconds tick by on the mission clock and worried about making it back to the ship in time. The Operative gave no sign of worrying about it herself. Either she was confident of finding another ride off PRL 2, or she really wasn't worried about the time limit. Or she was faking it.

Reaching the accessway to the spindle required navigating through more pitch black compartments, backtracking, and using the map to find a way around damage that wasn't marked. The whole time the only sounds I heard as we drifted through the station were my own breathing and terse orders from the Operative over radio. And the steady, soft impacts of bare feet that should not be on metal; a sound that could not be, from a dead woman who was not there. But there she was, silent, waiting. Doing nothing. Observing, perhaps. Dead but not dead, interested in me for a cause only she knew. Following, staying present like never before, for reasons I could not know.

Finding her body was a mistake. Knowing was worse than wondering. Knowing led to new questions with unknowable answers.

When PRL 2 was active the spindle didn't rotate with it. At set intervals the hatch on the bearing-ring lined up with hatches on the spindle and connected to it. It then locked into place long enough for personnel to pass through the accessway from the KDI sector. When the station was spun down the spindle connection was locked in permanently. Instead of being the only part of the station in zero-gravity it became another section of a whole construct without gravity.

The emergency lighting in the access tunnel was still active, unlike the rest of the station we'd been through. I turned off the light-amplification overlay and saw shades of dim red. The flat light washed out the white-painted walls of the tunnel, obscuring any variations and casting no shadows. The tunnel itself was a twenty meter long shaft that ascended from the inner ring of the torus. The orientation of PRL 2, under gravity, made it a vertical climb to enter the spindle. Ladders lined either side of the shaft, one marked for ascent, the other for descent. Two people climbing at the same time would pass within centimeters to spare between each other.

Without gravity ascending the shaft meant jumping. The Operative opened the airlock to the base of the shaft, grabbed a ladder run, and unlocked her boots. From there she pushed off while pulling down on the rung for extra momentum, and flew up out of sight from the hatch. I did the same, using the rungs and handholds to control my ascent and slow myself so I didn't run into her boots.

The hatch in the spindle opened into an airlock. A docking clamp monitor was mounted inside the hatch, a manual backup for the automated systems. It was live. Another display, also live, showed the rotational velocity of the spindle and the backup controls for the thrusters that maintained the spindle's position within PRL2. A large green light was on beside the 0.0 m/s readout. The whole spindle, it seemed, had power.

We pulled ourselves through the hatch, one after the other, and floated into the airlock. The outer hatch swung closed behind us with the press of a button and locked shut in its flat mount in the curved hull.

The Operative stopped herself with a hand on the inner hatch. “Something’s not right here. The Spindle plans doesn’t have an auxiliary plant listed in the schematics. Weapons ready.” She holstered her pistol in favor of her rifle, checking that there was a round in the chamber. “Cover the hatch. I’ll open it.”

I pushed myself to the flood of the airlock and anchored my boots to the deck so I was kneeling with my rifle pointed at the hatch. With my boots locked in place it was the most stable firing position possible in ZG, limiting how much the recoil could push me around. Otherwise Newton’s Third Law made firefights in ZG tricky.

The Operative hit the controls for the inner hatch and pushed herself out of my line of fire. The hatch didn’t open immediately. Instead, there was a hiss of air pumps. The airlock was pressurizing. Which meant there was still atmosphere inside the rest of the spindle.

The pumps cut with a click. The hatch swung open.

Nothing. Another passageway. Painted white. Well lit. Crated supplies held in place by cargo netting along one side. I switched to a thermal overlay. Warmer by far than the rest of the station—20 centigrade: human livable—but no residual heat or other odd signatures. No one there, and nothing emitting heating that wasn’t supposed to be. The passageway was empty.

“Clear. No sign of anything.”

“Understood.” The Operative floated through the hatch then anchored herself to the floor. She continued that way, each step made cumbersome by the magnets, with her rifle up. I followed a safe interval back.

The hatch swung shut and locked closed behind us. It was an automated safety protocol.

My armor registered constant temperature and pressure as we worked our way through the compartments. The air composition was viable. Environmental systems, like power, were functioning. And functioning without regular maintenance.

I looked beside me. The Woman In Red was there, walking along, keeping pace. Expressionless. Against the white walls, under full lighting, she looked like she belonged. She didn't. Wouldn't. Couldn't belong anywhere. Dead. At home surrounded by white bulkheads. Familiar bulkheads. Half-familiar? I knew them, did not know them. Memories? Hers? Mine? Someone else's? A headache raged behind my eyes, itched at the back of my skull and the base of my spine. Not right.—Headache. That was real, that belonged. Focused on the pain. Brought me back to—Reality?

I tripped over my boots, trying to move faster than the magnets allowed. A beginner's mistake. Inertia sent me forwards, the boots held me back. I caught myself. Blinked. She was gone. On maybe on my other side. I didn't check. Didn't want to check.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [14.06]

The top third of the spindle was a single compartment. The Zero-Gravity Teseting Lav, according to the schematics. What exactly was being tested there was never specified in any of the documents I'd read. It had a stable, independent power supply that wasn't in those documents, despite nothing suggesting it needed it. And it had additinoal security, on top of the difficulty required to access the spindle itself.

Security, in this case, took the form of an independent pressure vessel within the outer hull, connected to the spindle by a pair of internal airlocks with checkpoints outside them. One led to the lab itself. The other was labeled Obs/Control on the map. We went to the control room first.

The checkpoint for the control room took the form on an internal security booth that required a biometrics to pass, or being allowed entry by the guard program and the security officer within the booth. This didn't present the problem it should have. Both airlock hatches were open—a major security breach and a violation of safety protocols, which also facilitated rapid evacuation. The occupants of the control room were too panicked to seal it behind them in their rush to get off-station after the bombing. They must've used a manual override on the automated system, because the airlock interlocks should have prevented that.

Observation and control was literal about the observation portion of the name. One whole wall was a clear pan looking out onto the white walls of the lab. The Operative floated to the window, stopped herself against it with a single hand.

“That's not a lab.”

I joined her. “What?”

“Look at it.”

I did. The room was a single, open sphere with white, impact-padded walls, studded with lights all around so there were no shadows. A single padded chair, reminiscent of an acceleration couch, complete with a harness, was bolted to the floor. It was the only furniture in the sphere.

“That’s a class-zero telepathic containment facility. Meant for restraining powerful, unstable or unwilling telepaths. The whole topside of the sphere is studded with explosive bolts. In a containment failure they blow the bolts and the outer hull, venting the whole compartment to space—hence the airlocks.” She pushed off from the window towards one of the control consoles. “And you need a telepath of your own on duty at all times to block potential interference by the subject. Telepaths KDI shouldn’t have, because TELCORPS regulates all telepathic research and personnel. KDI only has one authorized research facility right now, part of their main lab complex elsewhere in the Kupiers, and it’s audited by TELCORPS twice a year. Just having an undeclared facility is enough to indict the head of R&D, hit the company with massive fines, shut down their legitimate lab, and trigger a security review of every government contract they have.” She strapped herself into the chair in front of the console and powered it up. “Watch the door. I need see if there are any files left. They bugged out in a hurry—the airlocks are evidence enough of that—so they might not have scrubbed their systems properly.”

I floated over to the security station and used it to close both airlock hatches. “We have an hour and thirty before our ride’s gone.”

“I’ll be done in less than thirty. We’ll be faster on the way back, we already know the way.”

“Understood.” I flipped through the available camera feeds. They showed nothing. The spindle remained deserted, except for us. Then I realized something. “But why is this still here, if KDI ordered the bombing? Couldn’t they have made sure the spindle was destroyed, too?”

The Operative took a minute to reply. I looked over. She was hunched over the terminal, pounding on keys. A hardline connector ran from her armor to the terminal's input port.

"Couldn't get a bomb past their own security, probably. A facility like this, SOP is everything gets inspected. It was—Ah, shit." She broke off for another minute. I checked the cameras again and waited.

"At a guess, it was supposed to be destroyed when the station tore itself apart. Tearing the access shaft and its bearing mounts away would split the spindle in half and leave it to the salvage crews to cut up for scrap. But with the failure to hit the station properly they couldn't blow the spindle up afterwards without generating suspicion. And the people working here didn't know this was coming. Too many casualties, and their infosec routines weren't all run by the—goddammit. Active ICE. Where'd that come from... Well, it looks like a left-hand, right-hand deal. Coldblooded, too."

Ten minutes later she disconnected and unstrapped. "Let's go. We need to get off this station and back to Earth. I need TCHQ's decryption techs for this."

I unlocked the airlock again. The Woman In Red was there when I turned around. She was smiling.

PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE [14.01]

*Well?*

*The Mars team leader is here for debriefing, Sir.*

*Good. I'll speak with him in a moment. Before that, though, any other updates?*



*No, Sir. They've gone completely off-grid. If One Five Four chooses not to advertise her presence and Alpha Three's by extension, then we won't be able to find her.*

*I agree. I still want her found.*

*We'll do what we can.*

*Prepare several different action plans if she resurfaces. I want her out of play, and Alpha Three with her.*

*Are you sure, Sir? We might catch her if she returns to Earth; however, removing her will be difficult, and impossible to hide.*

*I suppose you're right. Damn. This is becoming a problem. And if we remove Alpha Three, She'll stop being distracted by him—we need him under threat at least. Fine, make plans from removing One Five Four if she reappears anywhere where it's plausible to do so. In the meantime, let's see about laying down some false trails for her to sniff out. And get the head of Activities in here, I want a salvage team to accidentally detonate some unexploded ordinance on PRL 2. The Spindle Facility is becoming a liability, we need to clean up properly this time.*

*Yes, Sir. He's not going to like it, though. You've been running his people hard.*

*His people botched the job in the first place, they can damn well fix their mess now. If Metheron turned over anything about PRL 2 she'll be there eventually.*

*Yes, Sir.*

15

PROXY ACCESS [15.01]

Earth again. Same trip through Dulles to the megacomplex safehouse, then on to TCHQ after grabbing hot coffee from a store along the way. The Operative waited on a metro platform with barely contained impatience. The whole network was running slow because of an electrical fire in the old section, and she was sitting on a pile of partially-decrypted data that had her visibly worked up for only the second time I'd seen, waiting on the next train.

When it arrived the train was standing room only, crowded with everyone from previous stops who'd been waiting out the delay. The crowd crushed me against one of the handhold poles. The Operative somehow managed to carve out a small void of empty space around herself. It wasn't immediately obvious and she was still surrounded by people, but a second glance showed that she had about five centimeters of space around her in every direction, while everyone else in the car was pushed into physical contact with at least one other person. I didn't feel the mental pressure I associated with telepathic activity. It was a minor, unconscious use of her power, limited to the area directly around or, or it was the look on her face.

A third of the train car emptied at our stop. Only one other person made the solitary walk up the hill to TCHQ with us. He made no attempt at conversation. Neither did we. That was the TELCORPS way, as I learned it during my the week I'd spent on Earth.

The Operative made her way to her office. She went straight to her desk and closed the door. I sat at the terminal I'd used before and checked to see if my login worked. It did. A message window opened on the screen—the Operative wanted me to dig up summaries of KDI's telepathic research and its authorization paperwork.

Being reduced to an office worker again was uncomfortable. The only times in my brief, unwilling career with TELCORPS that was within my skillset were the kinetic moments of our time on Mars and the extended spacewalk through PRL 2. The rest of Mars consisted of sitting around, waiting, and following orders. My time as a Marine made me familiar enough with those. TCHQ was much the same, but the orders were less simple, the tasks more bureaucratic, and those I never trained for,. While the Marines gave me basic familiarity with government paperwork, at the end of the day I was a grunt in wartime, and my job consisted of preparing for the next time I had to kick a door down, not administrative work. That was what officers, staff NCOs, and POGs were for.

I settled in and began trying to figure out how to search through TELCORPS's network. I had the document request form up in a separate window, ready if any of what I found was classified beyond my proxy access level through the Operative.

Fifteen minutes after I began three people entered the room and headed for the Operative's office. The door remained closed behind them.

By the time they emerged I'd pulled the summaries of the previous two audits and filed requests for the full files, plus previous audits. The original research proposals remained elusive. The Operative saw her visitors to the door, then came over to my desk.

"Any luck with the documents?"

"Two summaries waiting in your inbox. I've requested more."

"Stick to internal channels, don't pull anything from other agencies. If KDI is the source of our problems, they've been entirely too well informed about our movements. Whoever's intelligence network they've got access to is effective at penetrating our agencies and the military—it's likely the Rebels, they've had good intel from the start.

"And familiarize yourself with the summaries, you'll be helping me go through the data dump once the crypto group finishes."

She returned to her office. I started reading.

#### DATA DUMP [15.02]

KDI was authorized for four telepathic research labs. At the time of the last audit, only their primary facility on mined-out asteroid in the Kupier Belt remained, despite nearly being shut down twelve years ago over a catastrophic experimental failure that cost the lives of three of their staff telepaths and seventeen others. The destruction was so thorough that the investigative team, according to their summaries, was unable to determine the exact cause of the accident, or even what the labs were being used for. The lead investigator, an Operative, had advocated for shutting the facility down for safety violations and because he suspected it wasn't being used for its intended purpose.

He wasn't successful. Despite the broad powers given to Operatives in the pursuit of objectives, he was constrained in the scope of his investigation, limited by forces outside TELCORPS with enough political leverage to lean on the agency and protect KDI. His report, and his request for a review of the decision not to investigate further and to shut down the labs, were masterpieces of bureaucratic ass-covering and politely-worded frustration that made his position on the matter unequivocally clear.

The audits after that were more revealing. The rumor the salvage ship's captain told us was right: KDI was the victim of a number of terrorist attacks, usually resulting in moderate numbers of fatalities and severe damage to or the total destruction of the facilities attacked. And on three of those occasions the attacked facilities included telepathic research labs. Each of the labs was investigated by TELCORPS in the aftermath, but only by support personnel. As tensions heated up on Mars and in the colonies, there were less members of the Enforcement and Operations divisions and their remaining manpower was focused elsewhere. The destroyed labs appeared in all cases to be collateral damage to what was suspected to be corporate sabotage masquerading as terrorism, and the investigations in them were cursory.

Going back further, they'd had another incident a decade before the large one, resulting in the death of another staff telepath and another cursory investigation of their program. An addendum to one of the reports noted that the head of their telepathic studies group committed suicide not long after, without leaving a note, video, audio recording, or any other form of explanation.

The incidents were all separated enough that TELCORPS's overworked analysts didn't think to look at the trends. For comparison's sake I pulled the audit files of other defense contractors and academic groups permitted to study telepaths. Almost every program had suffered a loss at some point. Enough to make the KDI investigations cursory where they shouldn't have been.

No mention of the PRL 2 Spindle appeared in the paperwork. It was entirely unlisted, off TELCORPS's radar, and unauthorized. It made sense that it had never been found; KDI hadn't used any of the rest of PRL 2 for anything close to the research fields that triggered audits, and PRL 2 finished construction after the last major audit twelve years ago. I suggested to the Operative that they might have been planning to get the facility authorized for future research. I didn't believe it, but it was a possible, benign explanation for its presence. She considered it, then pointed out that doing so would have required explaining an illegal, already existent facility, because no modification work had been done on the purpose built spindle.

She was still waiting for the crypto group to finish. The files she recovered from the Spindle's control station were partially corrupted by the improperly run scrub programs and were encrypted to start with, making the task doubly hard. Two or three times a day for the most of a week she received small batches of decoded and reconstructed documents, some fragmentary, and retreated to her office to read them. She always looked grim when she emerged.

After four days she ordered me to prepare a briefing on the audits and the remainder of the information we had about KDI. While I did that, she went to work on her own briefing, covering what she'd learned from the decrypts, PRL 2, and her investigations on Mars.

At 1400 the next day we presented our evidence to the troika of operatives that headed the Enforcement division, two deputy directors of the agency, and the Director of TELCORPS. The presence of that much brass made one thing clear: The Operative had something major. The panel listing to the report was the most powerful group of individuals I'd encountered, and one of the most powerful assemblages in the Sol system. Only the Joint Chiefs and the War Cabinet outranked them, and only a two-thirds majority resolution from the Cabinet could overrule them if they were operating within their remit.

#### BRIEFING [15.03]

The Operative began by telling my story: That I was a powerful latent telepath who'd shown no signs of active telepathy and had three times—the ambush that cost me my arm and eye, the *Athens*, and the destruction of Blackstone—survived catastrophic events due to the intervention of another, extremely powerful, telepath, who had also gone to lengths to protect and assist me in less catastrophic but no less dangerous situations. That led to her describing her own interest in me starting after I survived Blackstone and cemented by the assassination attempt she interrupted outside Chase, which she'd been drawn to by a telepathic prodding she suspected was another form of intervention. Then she covered the investigation into the assassins and the resulting events in Cydonia.

She kept her briefing short, focusing on the major events instead of the small details, and went through the confusion of Cydonia quickly, though she did slow for enough time to take a jab at General Ekewaka's actions. Apparently her meeting with him while I was sitting in a cell hadn't left her with a positive impression, and that was before he tried to drop a city block on us with artillery.

The panel listened in silence, taking notes for later. The only times she got a reaction out of them—still silent, but I was in a position to watch their faces while I waited for my part—was when she mentioned that some of the attackers in Gibson were telepaths, and again when she detailed finding The Woman In Red's body.

When the Operative finished describing PRL 2 and what we found there she turned the floor over to me, and I gave my presentation on KDI's telepathic program over the last two decades. I was also met by silence and quiet note-taking. The Operative warned me that there would be pointed questions after we'd both said our pieces, or I would have found it unnerving. More unnerving. When I was finished the Operative took over, relaying what she'd found in the decrypted documents.



In short, KDI was running an off-the-books telepathic research program, under the name Project EXEMPLAR, smokescreened behind their official research. They had, for at least thirty years, been attempting to create artificial telepaths who were outside the control of TELCORPS. And they'd succeeded, to an extent. The documents contained references to a successful prototype, after several failed, non-viable attempts. Project EXEMPLAR iterated on its first success, producing at least two further generations. The Alphas, based largely on the prototype's genetic, were considered failures because they had powerful latent gifts which never activated in testing, and the Betas, less powerful, with a more diverse genetic background, who performed successfully in tests. The Operative believed that the telepaths who attacked us on Chase, and later at Metheron's safehouse, were KDI Betas, due to their close genetic matches and because they did not appear related to any registered telepaths.

Mentions of the prototype disappeared from project summaries twelve years ago, coinciding with the major research accident on record, while the most recent files from before the PRL 2 bombing hinted that a third iteration was underway. And, various illegal research activities aside, KDI appeared to be collaborating with the rebels on more than tactical objectives: Beta units were slated to provide the backbone of a force to counter TELCORPS and provide training for newly-manifested telepaths inside rebel territories, in exchange for Rebel support of KDI research and a chance to set up under less restrictive regulations and lower taxes in the Rebel colonies. While she had no proof, the Operative speculated that KDI was bankrolling parts of the Rebellion in support of their objectives, as several other companies had been caught doing.

That produced a response. The panel waited for her to finish, but their scrutiny felt more intense as she continued, and they talked quietly amongst themselves while paying attention to her. When the Operative did finish, the Director of TELCORPS opened the questioning, and did so bluntly.

“How certain of this are you, One Five Four?”

“Very, Ma’am. While the files that provided the information could be an attempt to implicate KDI by a rival, it strikes me as unlikely. Sever of the files were partially corrupted, requiring significant reconstruction, and many of the intact ones were retrieved from cloned memory sectors where they were deleted but not overwritten, consistent with an incomplete or improperly run purge.

“The partially corrupted files appear to have been overwritten in the purge, hence their fragmentary nature, filled with junk data. Those were the files with the most sensitive information about Project EXEMPLAR, and the ones hinting at KDI’s involvement with the rebels, matching a purge beginning with priority documents. There appears to have been information compartmentalization in the project, so my conclusions relating to KDI’s greater interaction with the Rebels is speculative, but fits the pattern of information and actions I know about. Even so, the unsanctioned containment and research facility aboard PRL 2 is sufficient to trigger sanctions and a further investigation under current regulations.”

The Director frowned down at her. “This is true. However, you are claiming that a major defense contractor—and producer of a number of civilian products through their subsidiaries and spin-offs, I should add—is performing illegal research to a degree far beyond merely breaking regulations, and is implicated in treason and the attempted murder of TELCORPS personnel. Those are serious allegations, if true, and will have political ramifications beyond this Agency, as well as economic consequences. Moving against a company as large as KDI will impact the market.” She held up a hand when the Operative began to speak. “No, Operative, you’ve made your case. I will begin a full internal review of KDI based on your claims, but I cannot begin anything further based on your conclusions alone.

“I want your full analysis and copies of all your data, including helmet-cam recordings, in my inbox by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow morning for review by our chief counsel and an analyst team. Classify them; I’ll write the distribution list myself. And you and your assistant will make yourselves available for any inquiries into this. Understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Good. You’re dismissed. The rest of you, stay. We need to discuss our options.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [15.04]

Everyone at TCHQ knew something big was happening. The building remained as quiet as ever, and there weren’t any conversations about the possibility of a major action. None of the people the Director had reviewing the Operative’s evidence and KDI’s history said anything, but everyone knew they were working overtime. The agency prepared itself in small ways, with a quiet, certain acknowledgement of all the little clues.

The gym was full all the time. The shooting range as well. No one knew who would be selected for what came next, so everyone put rounds downrange to stay in top form. The Operative accompanied me down there twice.

The pool and the indoor assault course were similarly full. I never looked into the sealed rooms where the agency's telepaths practiced their skills, but I saw more than enough people enter, or emerge sweaty and breathing hard, to guess that they were doing the same. And I always found a sparring partner to hit the mats with.

It was different from the marines. TELCORPS specialized in covert, small unit actions. They had training and exercise complexes removed from TCHQ where their limited number of troops and agents kept their skills sharp when not on assignment, while at TCHQ everyone was limited to keeping up personal skills, not teamwork or unit cohesion. The marines, on the other hand, were at war when I joined up, and were at war my whole time in the Corps. Most prep time for an operation consisted of learning objectives, assault plans, and getting the necessary units in position to launch the op. That included a great deal of sitting around on transport ships, where training opportunities were low, and tension and boredom high.

Once, five months before I lost my arm, the 3/5 was rotated back from the front for three weeks of R&R, followed by field exercises training for the assault on Rico. Even that had been distinct from how TELCORPS prepared, though the atmosphere was similar. Those training exercises were massive, complex affairs that ranged in size from single squads practicing room clearing to full-battalion assaults.

Four days after we briefed the Troika and the Director the words was passed: TELCORPS would move against KDI. The Operative was summoned to a meeting of the same group and a classified directive went out to a short distribution list that included me. Most of the other recipients were tasked with executing a raid on KDI's corporate headquarters, located in the DMV Sprawl not far from Dulles Spaceport. The Operative, myself, and an action platoon from the Operations Division were assaulting KDI's remaining telepathic research facility in their original lab complex, deep in the Kupier Belt they'd taken their name from.

#### PLACEHOLDER INTERLUDE 15.1

*Well?*

*Sir, there's a Navy warship en-route to this complex. They cleared the asteroid belt six hours ago and are on a heading that makes a direct intercept without our orbit. There's nothing else on their vector.*

*TELCORPS.*

*Yes, Sir. The Independence-class cruiser Liberator and her attached marine section were retasked from joining the Reynolds campaign earlier this week. We didn't make note of it then, but it's definitely her. I checked and she's running under classified orders and a total comms blackout. The only reason we know it's her is we were able to backtrack her vector to when she left the L3 anchorage. We don't know if she's carrying TELCORPS personnel aboard.*

*It seems likely to me. How many other groups could arrange a change so quickly and quietly?*

*Special Warfare Command, maybe? I agree, though. This is TELCORPS.*

*If we're agreed, then—We need to prepare a report for the board. We've failed at containing this, so they need to know what's coming. I'm sure they'll enjoy the chance to disavow me publicly.*

*I can think of a few of them who would, yes. Is there anything else you need from me, Sir?*

*Clear all active Gamma units for combat and get the head of station security in here.*

*Other than that, There are a few calls I have to make to see what I can salvage. I trust you'll be able to arrange those?*

*It may take a day or so to get everything in place.*

*That's acceptable. We still have some time before TELCORPS gets to us. Thank you.*

16

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.011]

I stood against the bulkhead in the ready-room the Operative co-opted for her briefing. Normally meant for briefing the small complement of pilots aboard, the room now contained the officers and senior noncoms of the marine company embarked with us, along with the commander of the TELCORPS action platoon and his team leaders. *Liberator's* Captain and XO watched, slightly apart from the other groups. There were only a few seats to spare.

The patch of bulkhead I occupied was next to the Operative. She stood beside the screen at the front of the room. I think she had me there to make it clear that I was her assistant. I certainly had no part in the briefing.

The Operative began by getting to the point. "For those of you not aware of our objective," which meant everyone in the room not associated with TELCORPS, "We are raiding a deep space laboratory facility operated by Kupier Defense Industries in their primary research station. The lab is carrying out telepathic research beyond what they are authorized for. While this would not normally require a major armed response, KDI has been further implicated in a number of armed actions against TELCORPS personnel and is suspected of maintaining ties with Rebel elements.

"In short, we expect resistance, and we know that they have combat telepatsh. Because of this, Major," She addressed the company CO, "each of your platoons will be accompanied by a TELCORPS team.

“This is an enforcement operation carried out under TELCORPS authority. That means try to take prisoners if they surrender or are wounded. We do not expect them to surrender. Other than that, ROEs are fire when fired upon. As we expect our landing to be contested, in practice this means the whole facility is declared hostile. Do what you have to do, but try not to destroy anything that might be evidence.

“The target itself is a complex built on and into an asteroid in the Kupiers. We don’t have plans for it beyond what the previous audit have reported back—which means we know where the labs we’re looking for are relative to our entry point, but don’t know the layout of the rest of the complex. Captain, we do know they have anti-ship defenses, though not the grade or number. Major, after this meeting is concluded I want to meet with you and your staff to plan the assault.

“Other than that, all I have to say is that they will know we are coming, and may have already picked us up on long-range sensors. There’s nothing else near them right now, so our vector has only one possible destination. Despite that, as of now, this ship is under total EMCON—full communications blackout.

“Dismissed.”



The men and women in the ready-room got to their feet quietly, without discussion. Most filed out through the hatch near me, and began talking immediately once they were through it. Some looked happy to finally know what they were doing. Others looked grim, anticipating a bloody fight through the confined spaces of the station. I did my best to keep my face blank but I was with the second group. A company of marines, reinforced by a platoon's worth of TELCORPS agents, even if they were all combat veterans with experience in spaceborn assaults, was a small force for the task we were doing. A ship on-station above the target would mitigate that somewhat, except calling for fire represented a nuclear option—possibly in the literal sense. *Liberator's* guns, or missiles, would do an enormous amount of damage, so much that they were useless on a tactical scale. We could level large portions of the station or not call for fire at all.

The XO left the compartment to implement the comms blackout. The CO stayed behind, along with the marine major—technically a captain, but tradition far older than spaceflight insisted that there was only one captain aboard a ship, so he received an unofficial promotion while shipboard—his XO, a lieutenant; the company first sergeant; and the senior TELCORPS agents.

“How much information do we have on the target, Ma'am?” The major looked less than pleased by the revelation of what sort of fight he and his men were in for.

“Some imagery and the general location of the labs.” The Operative typed in a command and the main screen sprung to life. “KDI Likes their privacy. The contractor they used to construct the base suffered a server failure in which the plans were lost, and any other possible records had similar fates over the last fifty years.”

The major walked to the image that appeared onscreen. “Hangers here. Probably the best point of entry. Anywhere else and we have to make a breach, then fight in vacuum. I assume they’ll be defended. Top?” He looked at his first sergeant.

“Probably, Sir.” She pointed at a feature on the image. “That hexagon there, near the hangers. That’s the mouth of a launch tube. And that dome beside it—a radar array. There’ll be a SAM battery nearby.”

“I can hit anything that’s radiating before the dropships go in.” The Captain joined the discussion. “Provided I’m not distracted by the bigger guns, anyway. And if they hold off on target acquisition or use data from passives at launch I won’t be able to do anything. Operative, can you pass your imagery to my operations officer and intel section? We might be able to pick out more defenses and see if we can neutralize them before you launch.”

“I’ll see to it. Other than that, Captain, I want you holding at least ten k-klicks from the station once the dropships are away. You’ll be close enough for fire support if we need it, and far enough to be able to react to any unexpected surprises.”

“That’s doable. Do you need me for anything else here?”

“No, thank you.”

“Understood.” The Captain left the room.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.012]

I spend most of the remainder of our flight time sitting in on planning sessions. The Operative, the major, most of his support staff, and the senior TELCORPS agent went over the limited intel on the KDI station and came up with a series of plans, debated their merits, refined them, and eventually settled on the one they briefed the captain and the rest of the marines on.

I didn't contribute often. I was there as the Operative's shadow, like in the first briefing, and I wasn't a boarding operation specialist like the marines in *Liberator's* detachment. I knew the full details of the the plan we settled on, though, which she wanted. There was no specific role for me either other, other than to accompany the Operative, who was attaching herself and a squad-sized TELCORPS element to tone of the marine platoon—the one that was landing first.

Technically, as the senior member of TELCORPS aboard and the only operative involved, the Operative commanded the operation. Practically, while she was trained for leading engagements ranging in size from a single company to a battalion, her experience was with small units, and there was already someone else—the major—whose job it was to lead the company of marines. They developed what was effectively a joint command structure, where final responsibility lay with the Operative and she had the authority to override the major if she felt the need to, and he in turn coordinated and led the actual assault. He was landing with a different platoon, and his XO was staying shipboard to help control the operation from there, along with the company intelligence officer.

It was a messy compromise, but one the ensured everyone involved knew who was taking orders from who, and who they reported to.

Three hours from our ETA the Captain called the Operative to the bridge. I followed through the passageways from the armory where, like the marines we were ensuring that our equipment was ready for the assault. I was almost done and happy to catch a quick nap when the IMC came on and requested the Operative report to the bridge.

The bridge was buried deep in the hull of the ship where extra layers of armor protected it. That made it a long trip from the armory, situated near the hangar and the hull of the ship. When we arrived the captain was staring at a plot, frowning.

“They have a ship.” He pointed to an icon on the main display. “She’s transmitting a merchant code and IDs as a bulk cargo transport. But we got a good look at her signature when she maneuvered to put herself between us and the station, and we were able to resolve her with long-range imaging as well. She’s definitely a light warship. I don’t know why they didn’t hold off until we were in engagement range. She might have been able to do something with surprise on her side. As it is we outgun her and know she’s there. Worst case is she’s been up-gunned, and even then that hull can’t fit heavy enough to kill us.”

“A-MAT shipkillers or nukes?”

“Might get through if they make a saturation attack against our point defenses, same as any other engagement. Otherwise, she can’t mount heavy plasma—no way to radiate the heat effectively with that design—and has a limited missile magazine. Her class has a spinal railgun with a slow refire rate because of the power requirements.”

“Your analysis, then?” The Operative looked at the specs for the ship on another display.

“Not directly a threat. If her Captain’s good at their job they’ll be dancing around us, trying to pull us into the effective engagement envelope of the station anti-ship missiles. That might get hairy, but it shouldn’t come to that.”

The Operative hesitated for a moment, thinking Then she came to her decision. “May your hails from outside her engagement range, then, instead of the station’s. How far up does that move the timetable?”

“We hit our effective engagement range against her in ninety minutes. Eight minutes after that and we don’t have sufficient time to react to her guns. Assuming we keep constant velocity—which we won’t—another three for the maneuvering envelope of the ASMs.

“I’ll begin hailing them and the base around five minutes before I’m in range.”

“Understood. I’ll inform the major. Do you want the marines in their berthings when you go to general quarters or in the dropships as originally planned?”

“Dropships, I think. You’ll be more vulnerable to a surface hit in the hanger, but you’ll be able to deploy faster.”

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.013]

Eighty minutes later I was strapped into a seat in the back of a dropship in full battle rattle—armor and all the equipment and ammo I could possibly need for the assault, and then some. Most of the gear was in the pack that rested at my feet, while the rest was in the pouches attached to my armor. Because I still had TELCORPS chamouflage armor the pouches were coated in a slightly slick-feeling polymer that allowed to change color with the armor, at the cost of being harder to grasp and open. Right now the armor was set to a black and gray camo pattern with a monochrome TELCORPS insignia on one shoulder. I looked like all the other TELCORPS agents in the assaulting force except for the Operative.

She was sitting beside me in the same full armor, pack at her feet like me and the rest of the marines with us. Normally we wouldn't have bothered carrying the extra gear, but there were enough unknowns about the inside of the station and the major made it clear he wanted his people carrying assault packs with extra equipment to deal with the unknowns. What made the Operative stand out wasn't her pack or most of her armor, which matched mine. For the first time since I met her in Blackstone she visibly wore the death's-head helmet of a TELCORPS operative. It shouldn't have had an effect; skulls weren't scary after halloween stopped mattering to me, but it did, because of what it declared her to be. I was used to it, used to her—and I wasn't. She'd fought beside me and threatened to kill me, more than once for each, in little more than two months. She didn't seem likely to kill me anymore, if only because I was useful to her. There was no way for me to be certain, though. The calm way she'd once threatened with a loaded pistol lurked near the surface of my memory as I felt the rumble of the dropships's engines and the deeper, heavier out-of-sync vibration of the cruiser's engines firing in uneven patterns.

Those patterns felt like we were maneuvering. And maneuvering meant we were preparing to engage. Courtesy of the Operative I had the codes to plug into the command channel. As inertial bleedthrough, the tiniest bit behind the movement of the ship, attacked my inner ears and sense of balance, I added the channel to the filters on my helmet, so it came through when there weren't higher-priority transmissions on the lower level tactical channels I was also using.

The captain came up on the command channel A flag on my HUD indicated it was being relayed from a general bridge-to-bridge hailing frequency.

"Merchant Vessel *Defiance*, this is the warship *Liberator*. You are ordered to change course immediately and power down your engines. Be advised that if you fail to do so you will be treated as interfering in an official TELCORPS operation and we will fire on you. You have five minutes to comply." There was a pause as he switched to a traffic control frequency to speak with the station, even though they would have heard their previous hail. "KDI Primary Station, this is the warship *Liberator*. We are inbound with a TELCORPS investigative team. Attempting to hinder our approach will be treated as non-compliance with your research charter and will be met with force. *Liberator* out." He switch again, this time to the command channel. "That's it, Operative. What happens next is up to them."

We sat in silence, unable to do anything about the looming space battle. The trickle of information on the command channel was only just better than the total lack of knowledge I experience during my first space battle aboard *Athens*. Much of it was contextless and there was no visual overlay showing contact tracks on a sensor board. I listened to the Navy talk and watched the time pass on my HUD's clock.

Four minutes from the first message the Captain came back on the radio. “*Defiance*, this is *Liberator*. You now have one minute to comply. This is your final warning.” Thirty seconds later he was back on the command channel. “They’re accelerating to engagement range. Firing main battery.”

*Liberator* shook and our dropship shook with it. It was the same motion I’d experienced on *Athens*, and marked the second time I was aboard a ship for a naval engagement. This time I had more information than last time—the chatter on the command channel was limited compared to the ship’s departmental circuits, but it was better than a single terse damage-controlman relaying bits and pieces of what he knew to a berthing full of marines on *Athens*. The biggest difference, though, was where I was in the ship. Despite how it turned out, I was safer on *Athens*. The berthing there was fairly deep in the hull. The hanger where the dropships idled with their full load of marines was, by necessity, right inside the outer hull of the ship. And while the dropship had atmosphere, the hanger didn’t. Most outer compartments were depressurized so there was less medium to transmit shocks deeper into the ship and no oxygen to fuel any fires. Anything powerful enough to punch through the armored hanger doors was probably powerful enough to damage or destroy the dropships, leaving us with only the thin airtight shell of our armor as protection against vacuum.



Seven minutes after the battle began the captain had a new message for the Operative: We've entered the guided range of KDI Primary's missiles. They're painting us with targeting radar and LIDAR. We're responding, but it looks like they intend to resist." He was back on a handful of seconds later. "They've fired. Our analysis was correct—those are capital-grade ASMs in their launch silos. Commencing SEAD with secondary batteries."

The feel of the battle underway didn't change as the Captain retasked his lighter weapons. They'd already been firing, adding to the heavy vibrations of weapons fire that shook the ship. Some of the petty officers and chiefs I'd met claimed to be able to ID what was firing by how it effected the feel of a ship—that plasma batteries, missile launches, and railguns all had different, signature patterns. There was enough variety in the movement of the ship, filtered as it was through the dropship's engines and the interference of different weapon systems firing at different times, that I believed them, even though I lacked the experience to know what was what. I could barely tell the feeling of outgoing fire from the impact of hits by the other ship, if there were any. I hadn't heard damage reports of any sort, but that could mean we hadn't take hits at all or that the armor had protected the ship.

There were two gravity slews in the next half-hour. Each was the result of a rapid vector change by *Liberator*; sudden maneuvering for positional advantage or to avoid incoming fire. Four minutes after the second slew, word was passed over the command channel: "*Defiance* destroyed. Proceeding to KDI Primary Station."

I relaxed in my seat. So did many of the marines around me. The part of the day that felt the most dangerous—the part we had the least control over—was finished. There was still whatever remained of the station's anti-ship defenses and the assault run to worry about before we were comfortably on the ground, but those were dangers that we understood and accepted. They were dangers that came with being a marine. And for the moment I felt like a marine again, not whatever I'd become while working with the Operative. This, at least, was something I'd trained for and understood.

Fifteen more minutes passed, accompanied by sporadic murmuring and the light rumbling of the secondary weapons. Those, at least, I could distinguish from the tremors caused by the main gun. This time after the weapons fired new information was added to the marine's tactical net. It was surface imagery of KDI Primary Station, showing where the ASM launch tubes had been destroyed, along with several light anti-ship guns, SAM launchers, and point defenses. The craters glowed as they tried to radiate heat into vacuum as well as the rock the weapons had been mounted on. More possible locations were marked for later strikes, and the plan was that sensor systems that lit up and began searching for targets while the dropships were in flight would either be hit by the small number of escort fighters or *Liberator* if she had a clear line of fire past us.

Every defense system destroyed increased our chances of making it to the LZ alive. If more KDI people died to ensure that, I wasn't bothered. For that we were acting as law enforcement, everyone on the station was assumed to be hostile until they proved otherwise. If KDI was any smaller, with less clout, and there was less need for the case against them to be airtight, then TELCORPS—the Operative—could have ordered the whole station destroyed without bothering to raid it for evidence. Collateral damage, the lives of those who weren't directly involved, had been part of TELCORPS's way of sending messages before. The threat of massive retaliation was clear, and was a good incentive for employees to report violations that their employers wanted concealed. They often used more surgical strikes; I suspected they preferred them, and I thought the Operative definitely did. But when they needed to make an example to keep the rest of the telepathic research community in line, TELCORPS wouldn't, and hadn't, hesitate.

There were already going to be plenty of KDI dead before the day was over. A few more who happened to be by defense stations when they were destroyed wouldn't be noticed by anyone: Not by KDI, not by the navy, not by TELCORPS, not by the marines. By family, perhaps, if the government or KDI ever told them how their loved ones died. That was unlikely, and that the families might be able to do something about it was even more unlikely. The population of Sol alone far exceeded the numbers that had strained Earth's ecosystem in the past. Individuals rarely mattered, and the cost of lives was cheap.

I looked over at the Operative one last time as the dropships lifted off. She stared down at a tablet, checking over the limited layout we had of the station one final time. When I sat back in my seat and saw the marine across from me, he was gone. A familiar blond face was there instead. She looked grim, but I felt the pleasure her expression hid. She was pleased by what was about to happen. Beside me the Operative's head snapped up. Only to see nothing as The Woman In Red vanished.

Gravity slewed and shifted and vanished. We were out of the hanger. The pilot's voice came over the intercom. "Ten minutes."

LANDING ZONE [16.014]

Ten minutes flight time to our landing zone. Ten minutes under the blanket of jamming and ECM provide by *Liberator* with her guns on overwatch and escort craft ready to turn any remaining defensive emplacements into glowing shrapnel and mangled metal. Ten minutes of easy ways to die and no way to know if I would. Some of the marines made jokes to try and break the tension. It was Flood, one of the TELCORPS agents with years of experience, who summed it up as we got closer. "Good luck. Don't die. Especially not you, Crake. You haven't paid out for last night's game yet."

The other agent shrugged. One of the marines laughed. And the pilot came over the intercom again. "Two minutes."

The dropship shook and danced. We were taking fire. The pilot's voice for the one minute warning was strained. I stood up, the maglocks in my boots holding me to the deck, and steadied myself with a hand overhead. I slung my assault pack over my shoulders and gripped my rifle tightly in my free hand. The rest of the dropship did the same. Armor and helmets looked inhuman in the flat red battle lighting; shapes deformed by packs and the bulk of equipment strapped to them.

The dropship shook, shoved backwards as missiles blasted off the stubby mounting wings on the dropship's flanks. I rattled in my boots, locked in place but still effected by the movement, and only my grip on the handhold and the presence of the tightly packed marines around me held me upright.

Gravity slewed a final time as the dropship passed through the hole the missiles blasted into the hanger and swung around so the nose faced the exit. The light by the rear ramp went green in sync with an indicator on my HUD. The ramp dropped and we stormed out, weapons ready. I took my place in the perimeter, staring down my sight and covering my sector. Behind me the dropship roared out through the gap and the next slipped into place after it. It spun to disgorge the squad of marines it carried. I felt the force of the thruster-wash and murmuring jets though the heat that made them glow red-hot didn't transmit through the vacuum in the breached hanger.

It took two minutes for the full platoon to unload from the dropships. The whole time I waited for KDI security to counterattack. They certainly weren't shy about shooting at *Liberator* or the dropships on approach. We were at our most vulnerable while we waited for our whole force to land. Tactics and common sense demanded hitting us while we were exposed. Of course, standard tactics tended to come second to reality if the people you're fighting also know what they're doing, and KDI's forces had proved that they knew their business before. So had the Rebels they'd worked with. And reality said that there were limited entrances to the hangar which the dropships could pound on their way in if KDISec tried to strike through them. So while I was waiting for a counterattack I didn't expect one. They hadn't tried to hold the hanger at all, so they planned on fighting us in the corridors of the station itself, where we lacked fire support and numbers only meant so much. It was no different from an army retreating into and fortifying a city when faced with superior numbers, and the job of digging them out was the same, too.

After the first platoon and attached TELCORPS elements—us—were down and fully secured the hangar, the next dropship brought a group of specialists, assaultmen under the leadership of a combat engineer, with heavy breaching gear for the internal airlocks, and self-sealing temporary airlocks to replace the ones they were about to blow open. Half of them began setting the breaching charges on the outer airlock doors and the other half began erecting the ballistic fabric temporary airlocks, ready to place them after the charges went off. The hope was that the enemy valued their own atmosphere to bring heavy weapons to bear against the fragile temp-locks. They generally didn't. If the 'locks went SOP was to breach every airtight hatch and rely on armor seals—if we didn't have atmosphere to fight in then we had more than enough cutting tools and explosives to make sure they didn't either.

For KDISec that meant sacrificing a significant part of their station if they hit the 'locks. They'd conceded that they wouldn't when they didn't resist the landings in the hanger itself, which also risked the integrity of the airlocks when faced with the heavy munitions carried by the dropships for LZ clearance. However much they intended to fight us, KDISec was still sane. They still valued their atmosphere like any reasonable group of spacers and most of the unreasonable ones too.

Respect for atmospheric integrity wasn't written anywhere in the laws of war or the field manuals that governed military doctrine. It was, in a way, more powerful for that, because it was a tradition and the accompanying paranoia of atmosphere loss that went back to the earliest manned spaceflight. For all the atrocities visited on the Rebels, and all the atrocities they'd committed, when the intent was to raid or capture and not to destroy, the taboo against venting held almost uniformly. And it seemed KDI's leadership held to it too.

When the odd period of liminal quiet between the dropships taking fire on approach and the airlocks being breached ended it was going to end violently. There was no way there wasn't a emplaced and prepared enemy on the fare side of the inner airlock doors. Only the outer doors had to be breached with finesse. The inner ones could be destroyed more violently without concern for the fragile temp-locks.

The engineer singled that his team was ready. The Operative moved us into position. It was beginning.

She came up over the general hailing frequency with one last warning. "KDI Primary Station, this is your final chance to comply. You have thirty seconds to signal your intent to stand down." When she finished a timer appeared on my HUD, counting down from thirty alongside a mission clock that began to tick upwards.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.021]



The timer hit zero. The engineer hit the button. The breaching charges erupted in a sequenced flash of light. The outer airlock door crashed to the deck in pieces. The first fireteam of marines swept into the confined space of the airlock to confirm there were no hostiles. They waved the engineer's team forward. This time they carried a single large charge. They placed it against the inner hatch, then they flash-welded a set of low barricades to the deck just inside the outer doors to give themselves cover. The engineer, his team, and the first fireteam had the unpleasant task of holding the breached airlock while the rest of us filtered through the temp-lock behind them.

The process took less than a minute. When the two-stage breaching charge blew, it turned the airlock door into scrap metal. Scrap metal that flew down the corridor behind it as high-velocity shards of heated metal propelled by the second stage of the charge. The only reason it didn't leave a pink mist of pulverized and shredded flesh behind was that KDISec was smart enough not to position anyone within ten meters of the door. That and their own barricades set at the first intersection also protected them from the grenades that followed the breaching charge.

The Operative and I were the first ones through the temp-lock. We rushed to the cover offered by the damaged bulkhead around the shattered inner door. KDISec was shooting low, at least while we were the temp-lock. Rounds sparked off the barricades and the deck.

The fireteam's machinegunner leaned out and rattled off a series of long bursts back down the corridor. The incoming fire slowed briefly and his team leader used her under-barrel gauss launcher to send a grenade towards the barricades. She'd messed with the fusing, since it normally shouldn't have armed that close to her. When it went off I leaned out to add my weapon to the fight. We weren't trying to hit anything so much as keep them suppressed. We managed that long enough for a pair of the assaultmen to get set up with a rocket launcher.

The backblast filled the whole airlock with smoke. The rocket was a lighter model, designed for boarding use, or the backblast in the confined space would have been dangerous. The warhead was also lighter than an all-up missile, enough to blow away the barricade without threatening us despite how close we were, and the assaultmen still fired it at absurdly close range, close enough I felt the air heat up.

It worked. More marines kept cycling through the temp-lock, one four-person fireteam at a time, into the smoke of the airlock chamber. While they did I was sprinting down the corridor to the slagged barricade. It was too wrecked to be effective cover, so the Operative and I pressed ourselves against the bulkheads again. The barricade had been erected in front of a sharp right turn in the corridor. Moving past it would expose us to enfilading fire from the next defensive position. One of the earlier auditing TEL-CORPS units noticed the textbook defensive layout of the corridors leading into the asteroid's interior and placed it in their report—as a commendation because telepathic research facilities were supposed to have strong defenses, both against research incidents and outside attack. The plan accounted for the layout, mostly with more rockets.

Another fireteam joined us. The Operative snaked a fiber-optic around the corner and broadcast the visual on the local tactical network. More marines moved up to us until there was a full squad plus a pair of TELCORPS agents stacked up in the corridor, where they watched the feed from the Operative and waited for instructions. I ignored the broken bodies at my feet, sure from a single glance that the defenders of the first barricade were dead, and so did they.

Calling the second position a barricade was something of a misnomer. It was thirty meters back from the corner, a rare luxury of space in a station that was only available because the corridors were dug into the rock of the asteroid instead of being wholly constructed. The approach was completely clear. There was nothing that could be used for cover. No way to escape the barrage of automatic fire from the barricade. As a defensive design it was straightforward, old, reliable, and hard to defeat.

But the design didn't account for telepaths. It predated TELCORPS. It predated the Operative.

She pulled a blind grenade from her armor and rolled it around the corner. The outer layer of the large canister threw up a cloud of chaff, while the inner cylinder emitted a dark, heavy smoke. The combination defeated most sensors. The Operative motioned to Frederics, one of the assaultmen.

"You're up. They can't see anything, and I'm making sure they don't blindfire at you." Her voice was rough with stress and adrenalin. She sat down, back against the wall, a few meter from the corner. I assumed she was giving Fredrics and his team time to get setup. Not that they needed much.

Under the cover of the blind grenade they moved around the corner to the center of the corridor. While they did, I stepped around the corner and went to one knee, my rifle aimed through the obscuring smoke. Other marines joined me, ready to cover Frederics. Frederics couldn't see what he was aiming at any more than I could, but it didn't matter for him. All he had to do was shoot straight and send his rocket through the corridor to the barricade. Then follow it up with another for good measure. At that point the rest of were ready to take over.

What actually happened was a burst of fire hitting him in the chest. He reeled from the impact of deflecting rounds. He didn't reel long, though, because some of the bullets penetrated his armor. A second burst knocked his partner to the ground, bleeding. More fire raked the hallway above her.

"Enemy telepaths." The Operative waved to the other TELCORPS agents.

"Flood, I'll maze them."

"Understood." He began to direct his own people, addressing them all by callsign.

"Brick, Fallguy, get Mikhailov out of there. Sleepy, the launcher. Keep your signatures suppressed."

The three TELCORPS agents crawled out from the corner to the two marines. Normally, I felt a sort of buzzing in my teeth near them, a weaker version of the headaches the Operative or The Woman In Red caused when using their powers. This time I felt nothing. From the orders Flood gave, I guessed the KDI telepaths at the barricade couldn't sense them either.

Brick and Fallguy reached Mikhailov and began to drag her back behind the corner. Her armor scraped and squealed on the metal deckplates, and she left a trail of blood, barely distinguishable from the charred pieces of bodies the first rocket left behind.

Once they were back in cover the two TELCORPS agents hit the emergency release on her armor and pulled the chestpiece away to begin first aid while a corpsman rushed to her side. He dropped to his knees beside her, already unslinging his medical pack, and started giving direction to the two agents.

Sleepy made it to Fredrics—and to the launcher. She stayed prone on her stomach while her hands ran over it with trained familiarity, checking that it was still in working order. Satisfied, she pulled a reload from Fredrics's pack and placed it beside him in easy reach. Then she rose to one knee and slung the launcher over her shoulder. She aimed into the center of the smoke, spared a moment to check that no one was behind her, and fired.

The bright streak of the rocket's engine diffused the smoke and chaff. It glowed orange for a split second before it twisted and closed in on the open space left in the rocket's wake. Then the cloud blew apart, dispersed by the force of the explosion when the rocket hit the barricade.

No gunfire replied. Whatever the Operative was doing kept Sleepy safe. She was already reloading the launcher. Before the echoes of the explosion faded away she was ready again. This time, instead of firing blindly, she knew exactly what she was aiming for. Her second rocket used a pulsed-plasma warhead. When it hit the barricade the magnetic containment bottle in the nose of the rocket shattered in a wash of white-hot plasma.

Deckplates softened. My visor went completely opaque, and I still blinked after-images from my eyes. In the time it took my vision to clear armor and flesh incinerated, bone burnt and blackened and disintegrated to ash and carbonized fragments. Alerts lit up on my HUD and my armor sealed its environmental systems again. Metallic vapor from the barricade hung heavy in the air, hot and poisonous. A station system registered the danger. Fire alarms wailed before being overridden by the breathing hazard alert. The ventilation systems churned on and tried to suck the poisonous fumes out of the atmosphere. More automated systems kicked in and the corridor was coated and the wreckage and the charred bodies in dusty chemical fire-suppressant. The heavy white dust settled to the deck instead of being sucked in to the vents.

One fog was gone, replaced by another. This one confused my armor's sensors like the blind grenade, but it didn't obscure my vision as much. I saw rough outlines through the haze, the shattered hole, its edges glowing and dripping slightly, in the armored bulkhead of the barricade, and bits of corridor beyond as I ducked out from the cover of the corner and knelt beside it again. I watched the barricade through my sights, looked for movement of any sort. A full squad of marines moved past me towards it, through the fog of fire-suppressants. Their indistinct, blurred forms were perfect targets in the killbox of a corridor. There was no other way to get by. The passageway burrowed from the hangar down into the rock. It was one of the old mining shafts, from before the asteroid was repurposed into a station, and going around it was impossible. There was nowhere to go. Solid rock surrounded the bore and we had no way to cut through it short of heavy fire from *Liberator* that would crack the whole sector of the station wide open. Through the corridor and past the barricade it was.

Once the first squad secured the barricade I moved up to them, through the kill zone, with the Operative and the next squad. Several of the TELCORPS agents came with us. As we got closer I felt the softened deckplates give slightly beneath my boots and my HUD flashed another warning, this time for dangerous external temperatures.

The haze of vaporized metal and fire suppressants and the air around them maintained much of the heat of the plasma wash. The walls were beginning to stop glowing as the rock absorbed the heat, expanding and cracking as it did, casing the softened metal over them to deform in turn. What had been a perfectly straight corridor from the corner to the barricade was twisted and irregular. None of the deformation was enough to provide cover. It did distort the corridor in ways that tricked and confused my eyes. The deck underfoot was treacherous, for all that my boots left light impressions in it. Where it had been as level as modern technology could make it now it rose and fell subtly; without a pattern and hard to see.

I made it past the barricade without tripping on the deck, my own feet, or the slag pile at the foot of the breach. There were no bodies worth speaking of to trip over. Lumps of metal and scorched ceramics fused with the deck in places, and there were a few bits of blackened bone. More ash was probably caught in the haze, the particulate too fine to single out from everything else in the air, all of it being sucked away by the overworked bents in the warped ducts hanging from the ceiling.

Plasma weapons were always bad. I'd never seen one used in the confined environments of a ship or station before, and the way it amplified their destructive potential was almost disturbing. The destruction was thorough enough that there was no way to tell how many KDI security guards were stationed at the barricade, or which of them were the telepaths. The plasma reduced them to anonymity in death.

If I'd ever wonder why plasma munitions were so popular with the marine detachments who spent their time boarding pirates and Rebels, I no longer did.

Beyond the barricade was another stretch of corridor, undefended, and the large cargo that led from the wide tunnel into the station proper. We were through the first obstacles of a boarding operation, the defenses KDISec never realistically expected to hold against a determined and properly equipped force. They'd lost maybe ten men and a telepath. We'd suffered one marine killed and another wounded. Whatever was beyond the hatch, the costs for both sides were going to rise. The fighting was going to get worse. And the deaths at the barricade weren't the only terrible way to die I was going to see in the mess of hallways and offices and labs that filled the old mining tunnels and cut into fresh rock. That much I knew for certain as I watched the engineer come forward with more heavy breaching charges.

PLACEHOLDER NAME [16.022]



The hatch blew inwards, followed by grenades, followed by marines right after the second set of explosions. The first marine through almost made it to the nearest corner before fire cut through the open space and killed him. The second died three steps from the hatch in the same barrage of fire. It was unaimed, since there was too much smoke for any of the defenders to see and there were blind grenades and flashbangs in the mix tossed through the hatch. Blindfire was more than enough. They had men in cover at the far side of the room and through the next hatch, raking the length of the room with a HMG that sent sparks flying when it hit the deck, and more fire hitting around the hatch we breached. Some rounds went through the opening. Marines swore and pressed themselves against the wall where the hatch coming gave them some cover. Those closest to the hatch leaned out to return fire, their bullets kicking up sparks and spalling of their own.

Before an explosion spread the hatch across a third of it the room was a combination of atrium, lobby, and departure lounge. Seats lined one side of it, near the wall, for people waiting for the next flight off-station. They became visible as the smoke from the blind grenades began to thin. Further the pairing of a reception desk and a display of KDI products, backlit by screens that shared details about them, dominated the room. It was designed to look as much as possible like the entrance to a regular groundside room.

The bullets flying back and forth across the lobby, shattering screens and knocking chips out of the reception desk where one of the machinegun teams sheltered, ruined the impression.

Lieutenant Kelley, the commander of the marine platoon the Operative and I were attached to, got one of his GPMGs set up at the hatch. The marine lay prone on the deck, the barrel of his weapon sticking out beyond the hatch, while the rest of his fireteam stayed behind cover. He began firing long bursts, mostly at the desk, a few aimed at the far hatch. The fireteam started sprinting out past him, one at a time, while the rest of us added our weapons to the suppressing fire.

They made it to cover a quarter of the way up the room, knocking over tables and ducking behind them. It wasn't good cover—a bullet could tear through the table easily enough—but it got them out of sight and into the room. The team leader fired a rifle grenade at the desk. It flew short, a telltale sign of a snapshot instead of one aimed by the smart link with the laser-targeter mounted on her helmet. The managed to destroy the machine gun though it left the crew behind the reception desk unscathed, protected by its bulk and their armor.

That was enough. With the machine gun silenced marines began to move into the room, seeking cover of their own and adding to the weight of fire. Another fireteam went up the side of the lobby until they reached a position where they could see past the reception desk and took out the two pinned machinegunners with a handful of well aimed bursts that chewed through the weak points of their armor.

When the defenders saw the lobby was lost, they sealed the door to slow us down. This time, though, it wasn't an armored hatch and the walls around it weren't anchored by solid rock. KDI had taken the massive central bore and turned it into a complex of rooms separated by thin walls and a few heavier bulkheads with airtight hatches that carved it into large compartments.

And that meant the door wasn't the only way out of the room. Or even the smart one. The whole platoon was in the lobby and the lead elements of the next platoon coming up. The door and the security detail behind it were the last real chokepoint before entering the warden of rooms and labs beyond, where the company could spread out and bring its numbers to bear as different platoons made fought way to different objectives.

We went around the chokepoint. We didn't need engineers to do it, either. Every squad had someone who knew the basics of explosives handling, including cutting through walls. All it took was a line of a thin gel compound laid in an oval on the wall, or any other shape for that matter. Then placing the detonator in the gel and triggering it. It flared white-hot and a section of metal crashed down to the floor, melted clean through. Nobody bothered with the official name for the compound, except on requisition forms. "Instant Door" was easier to remember and more descriptive.

The Operative and I were on point. When the instant door finished cutting I was the first first through and went left. She went right. The room we entered was empty, and a solid eight meters to one side of the main doors. The KDISec troops on the far side of the door didn't hear us.

A single gunshot came from the lobby, followed by a warning from Flood. "KDI telepaths are attempting to dominate us. TELCORPS agents, do what you can." The 'or what you have to' went unspoken. The shot made that clear enough. Flood wasn't able to block the outside influence on an unlucky marine. He confirmed it a moment later over the TELCORPS net. "Watch yourselves. Somebody here has real power. Not your level Operative," an admission that she was in the top ten percent of TELCORPS for raw power and easily outmatched Flood, "but more powerful than the one at the barricade."

More marines swept into the room, fireteam by fireteam, while she replied. “Understood. First priority is shielding. We don’t have enough men to take self-inflicted casualties and we can’t afford a panic, either. Try to avoid executions. Then work on finding their telepaths and taking them out. I want intact corpses, if possible. We’ll be taking samples.” The leaders of the other three TELCORPS teams acknowledged her.

Corporal Padukone, one of the squad leaders in the platoon I was attached to, directed his squad to the next door. The Operative and I took our places as they stacked up in the small room by a desk someone knocked over in their haste to get into the room. The Operative opened a private channel to me. “You should be good. Your unconscious shielding’s strong.” She shook her head. “And these stronger telepaths—the Gamma line?” I didn’t have an answer for her. I don’t think she wanted one.

“One of the squad riflemen, Nur, slowly turned the handle on the door and opened it far enough to slip a fiber-optic cable through the crack. He held up a hand and relayed the feed to the rest of us. Two KDISec troopers. Padukone made the call. No grenades. On his signal Nur jerked the door the rest of the way open. The next two marines went through, firing.

The KDISec troops were well armored. Almost as well armored as the marines. The firefight in the next room was vicious and longer than it should have been. Each side could hit their targets. Killing them was harder. I was fifth into the room, in time to see the second KDISec trooper die when a marine rammed a knife through the narrow slit of undersuit visible between helmet and gorget. He collapsed, bleeding freely onto the deck. Padukone picked himself up off the floor. Fresh scars scratched into the paint of his chest plate showed how he was knocked down, and he reflexively ran a gauntleted hand over them as he stood to make sure the plate was intact. I'd been shot in chest before, more than once. His ribs were going to be killing him the next day if he made it out and the bruises already forming beneath the armor were going to be spectacular.

Much of the next twenty minutes were similar, variations on the theme of breach and clear. Boarding actions were the epitome of close quarters battle, and CQB was composed of bursts of concentrated violence in the same way it had been since people first brained each other with rocks. The armor we wore made the fighting more survivable for us and the same applied to KDISec. Individual room devolved from storms of bullets at close range to fists, knives, and rifle-butts when bullets failed to penetrate armor and momentum drove the two sides together. The only real advantage we had was penetrator ammunition, which stood a better chance of piercing armor than the mix of hollow points and FMJ rounds that KDISec was firing. The numbers of both sides didn't matter on a room-to-room level.

Wherever possible we avoided corridors. KDISec learned and spread their defenders into the maze of interconnected offices and conference rooms and open spaces. Fighting room-to-room was risky and every room had a chance to turn into a brutal near-brawl or protracted firefight depending on its size, but the corridors were worse. KDISec controlled them completely, using automated defenses where they didn't have troops, and the chance of being ambushed or flanked and caught without cover was higher.

Four different times my headache surged from the low pressure behind my eyes that indicated telepaths nearby to nearly blinding, a sharper pain that stabbed into my head. By now I knew that meant someone was using powerful telepathy close to me or trying to effect my mind. The second time was strong enough to drive me to my knees with a grunt. I wasn't the only one. Half the squad around me collapsed and the rest reeled. The Operative, and Sleepy and Burn, the other two agents attached to the squad, were upright. Sleepy braced herself on a chair, her grip on its back tight enough to make the plastic deform and squeal.

I blinked watering eyes and the sharp pain receded to something more manageable. I shoved myself upright and looked at the Operative.

"Where?" My voice sounded strained and hollow in the confines of my helmet.

"I'm not sure. Close. They're smart enough not to target us," she gestured to the other telepaths, "directly, so we can't track them down."

"Try—" Another stab of pain. I staggered into the wall, caught myself with an outflung hand. "Try through me?" I didn't know if she could. It didn't matter, it was the only thing I could think of.

She rested a hand on my shoulder. My head erupted into fire. I collapsed again, seeing nothing, a blinding white that was a deep red of searing pain. My skull was too tight for my brain. I hyperventilated. Blood dripped down across my lips and into my open mouth, trickling out of my nose. The taste of salt and copper brought me back. I blinked, moaned. Scrabbled blindly for the catch on my helmet, pulled it off, spit. Wiped my mouth on the back of my gauntlet, cool metal against hot flesh.

Telepathic backlash continued to be unpleasant. I forced myself to my hands and knees, jammed my helmet back on, waited for the click of seals engaging and the green indicator on the HUD confirming the same. By then I was seeing properly again.

A hand under my arm—Sleepy’s—helped me to my feet. The stock of my rifle thumped in my chest plate where it dangled on its sling.

“You good?”

“Fuck.” I still tasted blood, felt some half-swallowed at the back of my throat.

“Not really.” No point in denying it. I felt worse than I sounded, and I didn’t sound good.

“I’ll manage. Did it work.”

“It did.” The Operative sounded like her helmet was hiding a smile. “They got a shield up, so I couldn’t fry them, but I scrambled their brains a bit.”

The rest of the squad started to recover. Sleepy and Burn took positions watching the hole we’d cut through the wall to get into the open office. The Operative went to the door. I covered her.

“Three in there, including the telepath—she’s not up to much right now. We’re doing this softly, I want them alive for now.”

“The others?” Padukone words were slurred and punch-drunk.

“Expendable.” The bandwidth compression and encryption on our radios flattened voices and made emotions harder to distinguish. It didn’t matter. The Operative’s voice was free of inflection to begin with for her blunt declaration.

“Understood.”

At Padukone’s signal we stormed the room. One armored figure was already on the deck. The other two died swiftly. The Operative was first through the door, and she put a burst into one of the KDISec trooper’s faceplate before she was more than a step into the room. The second was fast enough to get a shot off. He was close enough that he couldn’t miss. Her armor took the round. She didn’t even slow down, or bother with shooting. My headache pulsed again with the wave of power she sent towards the other man. He fell and sprawled limply beside the casings from the rounds he’d fired.

I followed the Operative into the room along with one of the fireteams. They spread out around the conference table and secured the far entrance. One slipped a fiber-optic around the door to check for enemies on the far side. The other nine marines—we’d lost one in the earlier fighting—stayed in the larger space outside. For the moment we held the two rooms instead of preparing to fight through the next one.

The Operative knelt beside the figure who’d been on the deck when we came in and yanked her helmet off. Crusting blood coated her mouth and chin where it spilled from her nose. Her eyes twitched randomly and sightlessly. Burst blood vessels crept across their discolored whites to the near-invisible irises and the expanded pupils that fill them.

“She’s young.”



I looked closely. The Operative was right. The damage from the telepathic strike, the gore over her face and the blown pupils aged her. I'd have placed her in her twenties after my first look. I revised that downward. She was probably younger than the greenest private in the whole company we'd landed with. I noticed something else, too. "Her armor—there's no old damage or patches hidden by new paint." It was freshly issued. It wasn't used for training, either. Training accidents left armor battered before it reached the battlefield. "The others on Mars and Gibson were more used. Same design, though."

"They were older, too." The Operative took a blood sample for the semiconscious woman and stood up. She put two rounds through the telepath's head, then switched from squad comms to the TELCORPS net. "We have confirmed Gamma-line telepaths in the field."

Flood was the first to respond. "Copy that. We're seeing them here too. And there's more, we grabbed serials from some of the weapons out here and ran them through *Liberator's* intel database. The batch numbers match a shipment hijacked by Rebel raiders eight months ago."

"How'd it get back into KDI's hands then? They can procure armaments themselves for their security without needing to go to the black market."

It was another one of the senior agents, the one leading the detail with Third Platoon who came up with the answer. "The security team might have brought their own weapons—if KDI borrowed them."

“As good a theory as any. Flood, get a field sample from the crops that weapon came from. We’ll send it back to headquarters with the serial numbers, see if it’s in our databases. Might be the official confirmation we need that KDI’s been working with the Rebels on more than jobs where they need deniable muscle.” The Operative switched to the company net. “Status?”

“First Platoon’s pushing towards the junction tunnel. We’re encountering moderate resistance.”

“ETA?”

“Unknown, not long. We’ll have this whole sector cut off soon.”

“Third Platoon?”

“Moving through the lobby now. We’ll push up the main corridor and support your advance on the labs.”

“Copy that, Third. Watch your flanks, we’ve got most of these rooms cleared, but they might get around us in this maze.”

“Solid copy, Operative. Third out.”

MESSY ENGAGEMENT [16.031]

The marine Captain came up on the company net. “Second Platoon, Third Platoon’s encountered heavy resistance in the main corridor, about a hundred and fifty meters behind you. Can you assist?”

We'd pushed forward through the offices at a faster pace after the encounter with the Gamma telepath. Caution kept us moving slowly, though we hadn't encountered too many KDISec troopers since. Third Platoon running into a counteracted group of them fit the new pattern that was developing. Instead of fighting for every room in a series of violent defenses that lead them of numbers faster than it bled us, they were pulling back and fortifying in strength. We'd stopped encountering them in twos and threes, piecemeal groups that joined together in a continuous firefight broken by incongruous pauses as we maneuvered around each other in the maze of rooms. Instead, it was pitched, set-piece engagements of squad size or greater, with KDISec emplaced at chokepoints we couldn't fully avoid and had trouble maneuvering around. Enough so that Lieutenant Kelley had the whole platoon moving close together so we could concentrate force as needed.

And then Third Platoon ran into a similar static defense.

Kelley beat the Operative to replying. "We copy. SITREP?"

"They're pinned down by a large group in using barricades in the corridor. They took casualties when the HMGs opened up, and telepaths got the platoon sergeant to stand in the open instead of running for cover. He didn't make it."

"Understood. The enemy position?"

"Barricades with heavy weapons facing both directions, and flankers pushed out in the corridors and rooms to either side. Third Platoon's spread out in the corridor and rooms, but doesn't have the numbers to take the position."

"Where do you want us?"

"Hit their flank and punch through to the main position. Once the pressure's off Third they'll make a move of their own."

“Copy. Moving to support.” Kelley switch to the platoon net and relayed the information to the squad leaders and everyone else who didn’t have access to the company-wide communications. The rough map made by the networked sensors of the platoon’s armor updated with a marker where he wanted the platoon to gather, a set of conference rooms about ten meters in from the corridor. First squad, including Kelley, had already shot their way through a pair of telepaths holding the room fifteen minutes earlier. But our advance through the office complex, despite the slow, grinding pace, pushed us ahead of the contested area of the corridor, which had heavy fighting throughout.

We moved recklessly fast through the rooms we’d already cleared, despite knowing the enemy could have gotten in behind us. Kelley was already betting that the conference rooms we headed for hadn’t been taken over by the perimeter security of the KDISec force in the corridor. It was a decently safe bet, but a bet nonetheless.

He bet right. The leftmost wall, separating the conference suite from the next set of offices in the direction our maps labeled as ‘station west’ for convenience—using a six direction system, which added up and down to the four cardinal directions, was standard for major stations with unified gravity, though not for designs that used centrifugal force to imitate—was still intact. When we reached the suite Kelley pulled all of his squad leaders and the senior TELCORPS agents, including the Operative, with me tagging along, into the a quick conference around a projection of the map produced by his tablet.

Inside two minutes he laid out a rough plan for relieving Third Platoon and highlighted the routes each squad would take. Then the squad leaders in turn explained what they were doing to their squads, which took about two minutes as well. For a plan designed on the fly the dissemination took a while, but the complex layout of the area and the way he wanted to assault the position required effective communication and coordination, and it was faster than other briefings I'd sat through.

One thing he insisted on was TELCORPS agents on point for each squad. It was a practical decision, since we knew KDISec had telepaths with them.

The three overstrength squads moved into position. Instant doors were prepped on the walls, including the back wall of the conference room where Kelley held his impromptu briefing. There were doors we could use. Kelley preferred going through the walls for maximum surprise and safety. The only problem was the corridor itself: as an old mining bore it had thick walls of rock instead of the thin metal walls used to patron the later caverns drilled alongside it into offices.

Roughly five minutes after we arrived at the staging point, and less than fifteen after we started heading back to help, we began. Sleepy was on point for our squad. The Operative was second, then me, then Burn. Like them, my camouflauge was active. Standing still beside the wall where about to breach we blended into the beige-painted metal. In the aftermath of the breach, we were supposedly hard to hit, though camouflauge had a tendency to lag instead of operating in perfect real time. Flawed or not, anything that made being spotted more difficult made me more survivable.

“Go!”

The instant door gel flashed and a chunk of the wall fell to the deck. Sleepy stormed through, going left. The Operative went right. I followed, covering my own sector. I heard shooting, didn't see who was firing, and assumed it was being dealt with.

The room we breached was empty. Then the Operative swung around and kicked a grenade back into the door it was rolled through. A handful of heartbeats later it exploded.

She followed it and I followed her. We pushed forward with the rest of the squad behind us. The grenade tore apart the man closest to the door. The rest were disoriented by the blast, shaken by the fragments their armor shrugged off. I'd experienced a close-proximity grenade detonation twice and survived by sheer luck. It was like being caught in a sudden, torrential rainstorm just long enough to be stunned by the force of it and relieved that more of the shrapnel slipped through gaps in my armor plating.

We moved like ghosts, barely visible, made easier by their own mistimed grenade and the Operative's enhanced reflexes. We slipped through the room as blurred forms, killing as we went, tracked only by our muzzled flashes. It was mechanical work, aim and shoot, aim and shoot, aim and shoot, repeat until there was no one left to kill.

That was the easy part. It didn't go so easily for everyone else. Several rooms over third squad ran into most of a squad. Two marines were cut apart by a sustained burst of machine gun fire from a quick-thinking shooter when they went through the door. First squad had casualties as well.

Despite that, we'd eliminated the perimeter security element of the KDISec force pinning Third Platoon. But the main force knew we were coming, and we couldn't cut through the walls to get to them. There were two more doorways, essentially short tunnels through the thick rock sides of the main bore shaft near where KDISec was set up. They knew we had to come from the doors and they knew that with Third Platoon pinned in the corridor we couldn't get behind them without exposing ourselves to Third's fire as well as theirs.

Muffled gunfire sounded from the other side of the rock. Third was stepping it up, trying to keep KDISec suppressed for our assault. I doubted it would work. If they were strongly emplaced in that direction, they'd be hunkering down and return fire with a few MGs while the rest of them dealt with us.

Kelley reorganized the platoon by splitting third squad's fire teams between the other two squads for the next stage of the attack. Then he called Flood and the Operative over to him. "Can you do anything?"

Flood shook his head. "They've got telepaths over there, playing defense for now, and we need to keep them at bay once the fighting starts. We can't mess with their heads so long as they're being actively shielded."

"I can, but the effort required would be—" the Operative paused, looking for the word, "significant, while the effect would be minimal. It's a stalemate. Whichever group drops their defenses first to attack opens themselves up to retaliation, and there's no guarantee that a first strike will completely overwhelm them.

"Damn. Alright, do what you can." Kelley swore again then got on comms with Third, trying to set up something for when we went through the access tunnels.

Sleepy volunteered to run point again. She and Burn waited behind the marine who placed the charge on the door. More marines filled the tunnels behind them. This time the Operative, and me, by default, were handing bag. As the most powerful telepath we had, not risking herself made sense, and she could shut down or block most of the enemy telepaths, leaving the rest of the agents to use their lesser talents in small ways that gave themselves an edge in combat.

If Kelley wasn't happy about what he was about to do—and I don't think he was, since we were basically assaulting a prepared position through a chokepoint—it didn't show in his voice when he gave the final orders. And his helmet visor, like all of ours, was opaque from the outside, and hid the emotions on his face from the world. There were enough experienced marines in the platoon, most of them specialists in boarding ops, who realized how bad the situation was without their CO adding to their anxiety by showing doubt. Kelley's verbal poker face was a good thing.

Third Platoon kicked things off with a couple of rockets and a barrage of automatic fire. They used plasma rockets, and the heat-wash was enough to make the door closest to their position glow around the edge.

“Wait!—”

An explosion to turned the door into shards of hot metal. They flew down the tunnel and impaled anyone in their paths. One tore through Sleepy and cut her in half. It sliced through her armor and flesh with casual disregard for both. Burn disappeared in a cloud of gore. The marine setting the breaching charge vanished, swallowed into an explosion as his munitions cooked off.



Bullets raked the passage. Another marine died before she could get out. Five seconds turned the situation into the deadliest engagement since we boarded in one tunnel alone, and the situation was repeated in the upper passage.

KDISec rigged the doors and blew them before we could. They turned our tactic of using the doors as weapons back on us, so effectively we didn't have wounded to deal with because everyone caught by the blast was dead. Third Platoon was hammering them and they'd managed to turn their position so the most likely avenues of attack were defended anyway.

It was impressive. It was the sort of tactical skill I expected from veteran Rebel units, not corporate security. That and the composition of the mercenary teams KDI used earlier was a solid unofficial confirmation that why were using Rebel manpower and had the pull with Rebel leadership to get away with it. Officially we wouldn't know until the dead were checked against intelligence databases, but I was convinced.

I threw myself to the deck while the implications ran through my head, thought separated from instinctive action. I was a quarter-second slower than the Operative, who'd started to call a warning over comms a moment before the twin explosions ripped seven men and women apart. Her warning ended with the sound of air being forced from her lungs as she crashed to the deck.

Rounds poured down the passageway in intermittent bursts for another thirty seconds. Tracers flashed, connecting a dotted line between the shattered doors and far wall that passed over our heads. By the time they stopped we were out of the line of fire, but the bullets were ricocheting off the walls and deck, bounding out of the tunnel at random angles that made standing up risky and approach impossible.

The Operative crawled to the wall next to the opening; a dark hole in the wall after the lights were shot out. Third Platoon was still lighting up the KDISec position in the main corridor from the sound of it. There was plenty of return fire, too, and their initial attack with heavy weapons hadn't been enough to stop the trap sprung on us, so they probably weren't doing much good.

"Explosives." The Operative's request was met by silence. "And a bag." It clicked. I handed her an incendiary grenade to mix into her improvised satchel charge. Bricks of explosives were handed up. The idea caught on by the other passage, and first squad started collecting explosives as well. We had plenty to spare, since we'd loaded up heavy, heavy enough that we'd only put a mild dent in our supply with all the room-to-room fighting.

She wired the explosives together and connected the detonator. My incendiary grenade was in the mix somewhere, with the pin pulled and the handle taped down. The bag she stuffed them into was large and awkward for throwing, but she didn't need to throw it far. To her it wasn't all that different from batting a grenade away with a flex of her power. To the rest of us it was a trick that could keep us alive.

She lobbed the bag up the tunnel, confident it would get where it needed to go. Flood did the same at the upper passage. Kelley watched it happen and had enough sense to get on comms with Third Platoon again and tell them to step it up after things went boom.

It worked. KDI's telepaths, the betas or gammas with the regular troops, weren't watching for such a simple trick, or were somehow overwhelmed by the force the Operative put behind it. The explosion rattled dust free from the rock wall and sent a wave of compressed hot air rolling through the tunnels. It washed over me, then I was up and sprinting through the tunnel at her heels into the short, sudden silence that followed the improvised satchel charge going off. Into the chaos that resulted.

Chunks of burning white phosphorus were everywhere, burning through armor, flesh and barricades indiscriminately, white embers of heat surrounded by heavy smoke. The other explosives detonated together, and at close range the concussive force of the explosion pulped men and women in their armor and twisted barricades. The kill-radius of the charge was a bloody mess of destroyed bodies. The confined space channeled the two blast fronts into each other, and where the waves from Flood's charge hit the Operative's the force left a liquefying mess on the ground instead of corpses.

Bullets still slapped against the walls and deck as we came through the short tunnels. KDISec entrenched their position so heavily that a number of their troops were alive and fighting from where they'd sheltered from the blast waves, protected by barricades on either side.

Further down the passageway, Third Platoon stopped firing when we emerged and moved up in rapid increments, bounding forward to be there for the kill. There were forces on both sides of the remnant KDISec position. It wasn't ideal, with the risk of missed shots hitting friendlies, but it allowed us to bring our numbers to bear against them.

The survivors evidently didn't include telepaths. While they were taking fire from us two of them turned their weapons on each other. A third pulled the pin on one of his grenades and dropped it. With a little help from one of the eighteen TELCORPS members in the corridor he created a neat resolution to a sharp, messy engagement. All we left behind was a ruined stretch of corridor that needed a hazmat team and pressure washers to clean when we were done.

#### SITUATIONAL AWARENESS [16.032]

Between the earlier losses and the fight against the KDISec position, Second Platoon lost a quarter of their strength. Third was slightly worse off, with more wounded and less dead. Both platoons were over strength to being with, reinforced by TELCORPS agents and a small handful of other specialists, so the losses weren't as bad as they could have been. For a small force, operating without possibility of reinforcement in a hostile environment, without the benefit of fire support, they were sever. Even by the standards of boarding ops, which always ran casualty heavy and bloody, we weren't doing well. And while KDI was expect to resist, given how far over the line they were and how deeply in bed with the Rebels they seemed to be, they were fighting harder than expected.

The corridor firefight most them a platoon of security troopers. Together with the large number spread through the offices and the losses defending the entrance from the hanger, they'd committed large numbers to untenable positions. More were hitting First Platoon's blocking position between our sector and the rest of the station. From First's reports they hadn't made any headway and casualties were stacking up on both sides. Enough casualties to make it clear that KDI had more security than they should have and they acted with a degree of tactical skill that resembled trained military units, not corporate security paramilitaries.

The operation wasn't going well. The well-trained Rebels were fighting hard. The Operative and the captain came to the same conclusion as I did in the lull after the corridor fight. I heard them discussing it on a channel between the two of them, *Liberator's* captain, and the company XO. With my nebulous position associated with the Operative, I was part of that channel as well. I didn't feel the need to give any input—it was clear that we all had the same opinion of the situation. In the frantic close fighting the difference in situational awareness between the joint commanders of the operation and a former marine's view on the ground was small enough that the only things the captain knew I didn't were the details of unit positioning, and he didn't know much more than me about that.

The decision they came to was straightforward: The Operative would take Kelley and Second Platoon and head for the labs. The telepathic research section of the station was near the surface station, close to where we were, and the route to it was one of the few things we knew for sure about the station's layout. Third Platoon would spit off from us and assist First in cordoning off the different tunnels that provided access to the rest of the station. Most of those were former boreshafts that now provided space to transport large cargo or were converted for passenger trams for the station transit system, and a few provided foot access to nearby sectors. First was getting spread thin trying to hold the chokepoints and KDI was probing several different approaches and had the captain worried about an impending counterattack.

Speed was essential. The Operative was banking on being able to smash through to the labs and grab the data she needed, then do enough damage to make them unusable. If the coordination worked properly several other KDI offices throughout the Sol System were being hit at the same time. Those were focused on shutting down operations, seizing evidence, and arresting senior members of the company. Our job was different: forcibly end the company's telepathic research program and seize as much intact data as possible for the trials to follow—and probably for TELCORPS's in-house research labs, too.

It put the thousands of workers present on the station at risk because of the choices of the company's leadership. There was avoiding that. But it was why we hadn't destroyed the station with naval gunfire and why we tried to limit where we fought. Theoretically, acting as law enforcement instead of a military force could increase our casualties. Practically, the marines and TELCORPS agents weren't going out of their way to alter their tactics, other than boarding the station to begin with. KDI wounded were treated—after marine wounded—and eventually sent back to the hanger, In that way they were treated no differently than any other enemy combatants on the battlefield. Or how the regs and the law demanded they be treated, anyway. In the field there were sometimes divergences from the regs.

Eight minutes after the firefight ended, and four minutes after the deckplates softened by the plasma rockets firmed up again, both platoons moved out for their objectives. This time Third split off through the offices, blowing a shortcut through the interior walls to the points where the captain wanted them to reinforce First.

Second Platoon moved by squads up the corridor. The lack of cover and long sight-lines along the relatively straight path of the tunnel more made it faster than going through the offices. It also managed to make it both more and less risky, because we could see and be seen at range, and engaged in the open. On the other hand, it wouldn't be the short, nasty room-to-room engagements of the offices.

It ended up not mattering. We encountered no more resistance on our way to the labs. Third Platoon wasn't engaged until they were near the sector entrances, either. It seemed that the remaining KDISec troopers in the sector were at the fortified corridor position or were dispersed and avoiding us. I didn't like the possibilities raised by the second option, but so long as we were moving fast there was no good way to account for them. The fireteam on point, assisted by one of the TELCORPS agents, kept an eye out for signs of ambushes, the same as they always did in enemy territory, and that was all we had time to do.

#### FEAR REDISCOVERED [16.033]

An airlock with heavy doors, reinforced for security, separated the lab complex from the office sector. The internal tram stopped by it as well, running from a platform through a tunnel that cut through the offices. The far end of the tunnel was one of the areas First Platoon secured. They'd known about the transit system in advance and brought demolition charges specifically for cutting the tracks and isolating the office and lab sectors.

We didn't have ordinance heavy enough to breach the airlock. The plasma rockets that dealt with the lighter barricades weren't armor piercing and as violent as they were melting through half a meter of titanium composite and ceramic armor was outside their capability. The door to the airlock was tougher than the rock around it. Even the shaped breaching charges used on the hanger airlock would struggle with it.



And the TELCORPS audit team that noticed how over engineered it was had actually approved of it as a security measure. The single cargo airlock was the only entrance into a self-contained sector, complete with life-support and an isolated, air-gapped intranet, buried two hundred meters beneath the surface of the asteroid. It compared favorably to the deep-space, vacuum-secured chemical and biological warfare facilities Earth consistently denied having, and which the auditor used as a point of reference for the security measures.

The plan wasn't to attempt a breach of an area with defenses that had earned the approval and admiration of a TELCORPS security expert. Instead we were making a soft breach. Flood, who was one of the three agents with cyberwar training, took out a tablet and plugged it into the airlock control system. He used it to initiate a full set of TELCORPS proprietary infiltration and subversion programs, a bundled cyberwarfare package he called the 'entrance suite.' According to his briefing it was tailored to apply a vast library of exploits against known and suspected vulnerabilities. He'd also said that while the station net and the research sector intranet were hardened against attacks, the control system was likely to be a relatively insecure off-the-shelf system. In this case off-the-shelf meant KDI's in-house airlock tech, and TELCORPS had cracked the security on that when it went commercial.

He was right. The attack bundle took less than thirty seconds to break airlock security and open the door.

“We’re in. No further access to the intranet, they’ve black-boxed the airlock control and reject non-standard inputs.” He shook his head and actually laughed. “They would have been more secure with a purely mechanical system. Remind me to send support division a note recommending they check the systems securing our facilities.”

The massive door swung open and he stepped back. “Remember, they know we’re coming, even if they can’t stop us from getting through the door. Stay sharp.” He waved the platoon forward. Kelley and the Operative both second what he said while just over thirty marines and TELCORPS agents crowded into the airlock space.

The Operative seemed worried about being vulnerable in the confined space. “Seal armor against environmental hazards. They might flood the chamber with something nasty.”

“Negative, Operative. I’m forcing the second door open without cycling. We’ll have to wait a bit; I can’t override the mechanical interlock between the doors. Shouldn’t be too long, I’m overvolting the motors.”

Flood was as good as his word. The motors that drove the door open erupted into clouds of black smoke that leaked from between their mounting in the wall and the door’s hinges. The door, driven by the self-destruction of the motors, slammed open far faster than it was designed to move, cracking the wall it hit and sending vibrations rumbling through it from the multi-ton impact. It didn’t crush anyone, though. The defenses were set up well outside the door’s arc.

Flood earned us a second’s grace with his trick, cut inside their OODA loop long enough to give us the first move.

The first move, naturally, was mixed handful of grenades. Some were flashbangs, some were blind grenades, some were plain old fragmentation grenades. Since I didn't throw a grenade I pressed against the side of the airlock with third squad, hopefully out of the line of fire. First and second squad were opposite me, hugging the far side of the airlock.

The TELCORPS agents were in the center, right in front of the open door. After throwing grenades, they shoot or knelt in a loose group, weapons ready, confident that the KDISec troops were too confused to hit them with their emplaced weapons.

They were right. Maybe they encouraged it with their powers. Maybe not. Either way, they were right, and no weapons fire met them.

The grenades detonated in a staccato of noise and light and deadly fragments, shrouded in the fog of smoke and chaff that filled the hallway. My visor blacked out, auto-polarizing in response to the flashbangs. It cleared near-instantly from fully opaque to transparent. In that time the TELCORPS agents, led by the Operative, left their places in the center of the airlock and advanced on the KDISec position. I saw the last one of them move forward into the fog, weapon raised and firing at a target hidden from sight and sensors. But they were TELCORPS, and they didn't need to see to find their enemies. Even the weakest of them, telepathically linked to the rest, knew the location of all the minds around them, and all the humans those minds belonged to, because the strongest of the group knew. The Operative became a human sensor network, the center of a C2 web that spread through the impenetrable smoke and hunted its targets with perfect accuracy.

I could almost feel it, just a hint of what the full telepaths felt, a sense of where to go and what to do, to weak to act on. A ghost of an extra-human sense. The Woman In Red stood beside me, her hand resting on my shoulder, unseen by the marines, feeling the same way. And her vicious satisfaction at each death, each light in the distance that went out in a burst of gunfire, leaked back to me.

The gunfire continued for a minute, then two. At the very end, there was a long, rattling burst, as single HMG going cyclic for twenty seconds or more. Tracers streaked through the airlock, bounding off the deck in the center ricocheting high to embed in the ceiling, or deflecting again and falling, their killing energy spent.

For the first time since a pair of telepaths held me helpless and killed a squad I'd only just met—my squad, regardless—in the forests outside Chase, I remembered how marines generally felt about TELCORPS. How their operatives would wear ridiculous, theatrical helmets and not be mocked for it. Feelings I'd ignored in my forced alliance with the Operative. I remembered that the woman who controlled the battlefield in front of me in a fog of terror and death had threatened to kill me more than once. And she might still do it. That fear. That fear that nothing, not even your thoughts, was safe. That fear, as much as any skill or weapon or power, was the force behind TELCORPS the reason why such a small agency could do what it did. And that fear was the reason TELCORPS claimed a monopoly on telepaths. Bad as TELCORPS could be, the idea of unconstrained telepaths suddenly seemed far, far worse.

The entrance to the labs was clear. The fog was blowing away. We moved up, out of the airlock.

MOVE FAST [16.034]

The labs seemed different, felt wrong. The drab offices were gone, replaced by walls of sterile white metal. Directions were painted on the walls with colored arrows. It looked like a hospital without waiting rooms, but missing something. The cheerless military hospital where I'd gotten my new arm, filled with broken men and women, there to be pieced back together and sent back to the front, felt more comforting than the cold halls of the lab sector.

The fog of smoke and chaff dispersed after the first ten meters. I saw the bodies it hid. None of them wore TELCORPS insignia. Most had bullet holes through their visors or their necks. Few had casing or empty magazines on the ground beside them. They died with no chance to fight back.

The TELCORPS agents waited at the far side of the cleared defenses. They were using segments of barricade and the machine gun nest for cover, turned so that they faced down the hallway they were meant to protect. They split again, each agent joining up with the squad they worked with before. The Operative joined me as the squad went past her. The marines with me looked at them with a new appreciation for what they could do, the same appreciation I'd recently found.

Kelley directed his platoon forward. Third squad, his most intact, led. First took the middle, and he went with them. Second, including the Operative and me, was last in line as forty men and women began searching through the research sector for the dedicated telepathic labs.

We searched each room we passed. They weren't like the offices of the previous sector, where areas flowed together, separated by thin walls and open doorways. Every room was its own discreet space, used for some specific purpose and separated from the rest by heavy walls. They were even excavated from the rock separately. It felt more like a ship, with the corridor as the usual way of getting between spaces instead of interconnecting.

And the rooms we searched were empty. The terminals were shut off, the workers gone, and there were no KDISec troopers. As though they'd thrown everything they had into the defense of the airlock.

The single corridor continued for fifty meters beyond the remains of the defensive position. It was another sign of the isolation of the telepathic labs—the single entrance for easier access control, the reinforced airlock that only admitted people in groups, and the shaft deep into a different section of the asteroid, penetrating the meters of rock that separated the labs from the rest of the station. It was another element that the audit team had approved of—telepaths able to influence minds outside their direct vicinity were rare and powerful, and distance was a good defense against them. The Operative was one of TELCORPS best operatives, and she had difficulty working at a distance.

There was no resistance at the first intersection in the corridor, even though it was a good location to try and hit us. A fireteam from third squad, accompanied by Three Pair, moved into it, checking each direction before the full platoon entered.

The walls and deck erupted. The mines set into the hallway leading to the intersection and the deck in the center of it killed them all. Half the next fireteam back was caught in the blast as well, including the squad leader. Two of them died. The squad's automatic rifleman, Orjales, was lucky enough to escape with only her weapon and arm above the elbow mangled by the blast. There was no arm left below her elbow. Automatic seals clamped down in the battered shoulder of her armor, beneath the spaulder, and cut off the flow of arterial blood through the stump of her lower arm.

I wasn't tied into third squad's tactical net. All I heard were the screams muffled by her helmet instead of the ones the helmet transceiver picked up and relayed over the net until someone cut her pickups. From what I heard, the screaming didn't last long before shock and drugs kicked in anyway. The corpsman rushed up to look at her. There wasn't much he could do for a severed limb that the armor's systems didn't handle automatically. They were limited, but the sensors running through the underside could at least detect catastrophic injuries. The painkillers—mild ones, because of her lowered blood pressure—were administered by her squamates before the corpsman got to her.

Kelley and the Operative didn't pay much attention to her. They couldn't afford to. They had to worry about mines and other internal defenses that weren't an issue before. There wasn't a good way to deal with them, and that was the problem. In the end they agreed to put Snapshot on point for the whole platoon. Her powers gave her enhanced reflexes, somehow, and she might not be able to detect traps any better than the rest of us, but she had the best chance of getting safely out of the way of one if it went off. The Operative had the same ability, but couldn't risk being on point at the same time she was running the operation.

They also reported the incident back to the captain, informing him of the casualties and the possibility of other traps. We got increasingly grim news from him in return. First and Third Platoons were facing a full counterattack from KDISec in other sectors. Third reported light armor advancing in the transit tunnels in support of the infantry. So far they'd been able to take out the vehicles they encountered, but it was costing them, and First was taking increasingly heavy casualties as well.

The captain was watching his command get chewed up by an untenable situation, edging up towards the most severe loss predictions from planning, and he sounded like it. "Move fast, Operative. We can't do this much longer. You have maybe an hour before I have to fall back to the hangar and extract."

Orjales's wound made the bad situation worse. She couldn't fight; couldn't keep up with us. And sending her back to the CCP in the hangar meant losing more marines to do it. Kelley was already shorthanded. In the end he didn't see much of a choice. He made his decision quickly, at least, and managed not to sound worried when he ordered the remaining member of her fireteam to get her back to the hangar. It wasn't enough to keep her safe and he was slowed by having to support her when she moved. But to Kelley it represented the best possible compromise and cost him the least firepower moving forwards.



Then Snapshot reported worse news from ahead of us. It wasn't a concrete sort of news. She said that something felt wrong ahead of us. The fireteam trailing behind her didn't notice it. Flood did when he joined her. Two telepaths reporting that something felt strange wasn't the sort of thing that could be ignored. The marines weren't happy about it. I wondered why it took them so long to notice. The Woman In Red wasn't at my shoulder anymore and even without her I shared the telepath's uneasiness. I had with her next to me at the entrance to the labs.

The Operative agreed with Flood and Snapshot and the other agents who felt it as well once they were deeper into the labs. By the time Brick, the least sensitive of the them, felt it, the rest were starting to worry about what caused it. They were debating it on their own channel when the KDI telepaths hit us.

It started with a regular attack, rounds pouring down the hallway from doorways and corners we hadn't reached yet, only everyone reacted a little slower than normal. Kelley took a bullet to the neck trying to get through the nearest door, moving like he was half-awake. Snapshot's reflexes kept her fat enough that rounds meant to hit her center-mass hit the armor plates on her side as she threw herself out of the way, only for a burst of machine gun fire to reduce her to bloody chunks and shredded armor.

The man who killed her wore the same armor as the other gammas. He stood in the middle of the hallway, apparently unconcerned about being shot, and raked it with a HMG usually found mounted on vehicles. Others fired around him from cover to keep our heads down and force us into cover of our own. They carried weapons that took more or luckier hits to get through armor and managed to exactly that more often than they should have. The gamma with the machine gun was the one doing the most damage, and what return fire we managed inevitably missed despite how exposed he was.

Flood evidently agreed with me. While I was scrambling to get through a door, somehow ahead of and faster than the marines around me, he advanced down the hallway, firing as he went. Bullets missed him, too, and he kept going forward at a steady rate, his steps smooth enough to keep his aim steady. When his rifle was empty he dropped it to hang from its sling and drew his pistol, still firing on the gammas, still moving forward. He was three meters from the other man when he overcame whatever ability protected him, untouched by the gamma's fire. His pistol barked twice and the gamma was on the deck, dying.

His own protection, luck, whatever spared him up until then, ran out too. His head jerked back as a bullet slammed into the faceplate of his helmet, came back down, and jerked again. His pistol dropped from his hands. It hit the deck with visor fragments and drips of blood, just ahead of the senior TELCORPS agent's body.

The firefight became a stalemate. Several dead and wounded marines lay on the deck, out of reach, matched only by a single dead KDI telepath. The wounded didn't last long. In the open they were easy targets. The telepaths took advantage of that—fatally. Otherwise, they weren't able to do much. The surviving marines and TELCORPS agents, leaned out of the cover they'd found and put out enough fire to stop anything else from happening. Neither side was able to do much.

I added my rifle to the fight and shot at KDI telepaths without effect. When I was able to shoot one, I did. On the few occasions I hit, I saw their armor take the rounds. The same happened when they shot at me. I felt the heavy impact of rounds on my chest plate, the underlay of the armor unable to fully distribute the force, and leaving bruises beneath. Other rounds sparked off doorframes, walls, and the deck. The hallway became a no-man's-land killing ground neither side could use, but their extraordinarily good aim no longer seemed quite as dangerous, the work of a TELCORPS agent, I assumed.

The air grew thicker, heavier. Not the enforced slowness that affected the scramble for cover and left us exposed, feeling like we were swimming. This was different. This was dangerous. I felt it. I don't know if the marines did. The thickness, the hanging threat in the air, shifted back and forth. I only thought of one explanation: A telepathic fight of some sort, the two teams of telepaths struggling for dominance. They were looking for another way to break the stalemate.

Blood tricked down over my mouth, crusted over my lips. I forced my mouth closed and kept it that way. There wasn't a good place to spit in a helmet in the middle of a firefight. Most of the options involved getting shot with my helmet off or getting half-congealed blood in the respirator systems or over the internals. Swallowing it as it dripped wasn't a much more pleasant alternative. So I did nothing.

But the shifting, continuous, immense pressure of the mental battle, a battle that was more active than the intermittent gunfire of the stalemate, achieved nothing. It was a stalemate of its own, from what little I sensed. I had no idea how to properly interpret it, no idea if I sensed enough to interpret it at all. All the back and forth shifting, the strange twists that made my head pound and my eyes water when a new feint was tried by one side or another, nothing changed. Nothing except that I felt better about leaving the marines there. I shot at things but my shots went wide. Too many things—senses, feelings, something?—were interfering. Couldn't shoot straight could barely think straight more blood from my nose licked at it tasted copper no choice too much. The marines picked up the slack. Picked it up where I collapsed, slumped against the doorway sheltering me, pulled me in out of the line of fire when the bleedthrough was too much.

Helmet jerked off, hands on either side of my face. Not *her* hands, wouldn't couldn't? be here now don't know how I knew it did know it. Her hands. The Operative's. Didn't see her take cover in this room there she was anyway. Blew a wall maybe? thought they were thicker. Didn't matter. Cold hands—not hands gauntlets mesh and thermal shielding and armor plates—on either side of my face. Met her eyes, didn't see them through the helmet visor, didn't need too, could meet them anyway. Saw them weighing—asset, threat, risk, friend? (no, ally maybe, that never) Saw them decide.

And another mind wrapped around mind. Another consciousness flowed around me. Separated, contained, shielded from me, shielding me as well. Completely subsuming, overwhelming, guarding, buffering what little talent I had, so the corrupting pressures of the fighting telepaths was reduced. I felt the effort it cost her to shield me. It wasn't much. Not compared to what she dumped into holding off the gammas. I felt the betas too. And the other TELCORPS agents. They were presences, no where near as strong. Not non-entities in the fight. Both groups contributed. Not as much as the Operative or the gammas who opposed her. Together they were nearly too strong for her, but directing eight minds—eight gammas still alive that she, we, I, felt—in concert for an effect was harder and they didn't work together as effectively as she blocked them.

The mind protecting me was cold and professional and focused. There was more, out of reach and locked away, beyond the surface level that bled through from the shielding. She saw some of me, too. The bleedthrough, limited as it was, was full duplex. I don't know what she saw or if she processed it there, focused as she was on more immediate things.

With clarity restored the sensation around me felt similar to when The Woman In Red shielded me on Mars. But that was subtle, in it's way. Less bleedthrough. I sensed none of her mind then or any other time, that she did not want me to sense. Only the overwhelming emotions that accompanied her most violent incarnations when flesh bubbled and burned and ran and her enemies died screaming.

The Operative felt that thought when the comparison flashed through my head. She had a distinct response to the mental images that accompanied it; the only time I felt one. Her reaction slipped through the hazy liminal bounds of the shield between our minds, barely a conscious response, half a thought while she wrestled with the other telepaths. It was a woman dying in a manner I recognized the same way The Woman In Red killed, in an unfamiliar place. With the fragment of memory came a sensation of exhaustion, of abilities being pushed to their limits. Whatever The Woman In Red was, a ghost for lack of a better term, a residual telepathic imprint, an unknown phenomenon, however the Operative chose to phrase it, she killed casually with a method that took the full power of the Operative. The Operative, who was one of the strongest telepaths on record, and was successfully resisting the combined efforts of eight powerful enemy telepaths.

The speed of thought is fast. I had a shield put up around my mind and a revelation about relative power in under ten seconds. Then it was back to the fight. There was no time. Even engagements that were long and drawn out were always in the moment, always without enough time.

The Operative nodded at me and moved off. I grabbed my helmet from where she'd dropped it beside me and pulled it back on. The seals clicked. My rested across my chest where the sling held it in place. The ammo counter on my HUD showed half a mag left. I ejected it, looked at the indicator on the magazine. They agreed. I slapped it back into place.

BROKEN BY REVELATION [16.035]

We regrouped by the expedient method of blowing holes through the walls until the remainder of the platoon were in a newly connected series of rooms instead of being spread out in small pockets off the hallway. The walls were thick enough to put a serious dent in our explosives supply, and there was no way to hide what we did from the KDI telepaths. The demolitions charges made too much noise for that. They started trying to push up the hallway more aggressively.

“We need to get to the labs.” The Operative took command after Kelley’s death. The platoon sergeant was directing our defense while she tried to figure out what to do next.

“Keep going through the palls?” One of the assaultmen held up another breaching charge.

“To slow. Can you drop the tunnel?”

“Not with this much fire. The hallway’s a deathtrap.”

I pulled up the map on my HUD. Unlike the sketchy details of the approach the whole telepathic research sector was well documented. Plans were submitted as part of the approval process for the facility and updated before each audit. If KDI hadn’t changed from the plans too much we had another option. “You have enough to crack a meter of rock?”

“Probably. It’ll take more time to set up. Why—the deck?”

“Plans show an identical hallway below us. Best way to get out.”

The Operative gave her approval. The demolition work started. I moved to the hole in the wall. The KDI telepaths hadn’t tried coming through the breaches. I didn’t think it would last.

It didn't. Five minutes of waiting were filled by three frantic minutes of fighting, providing cover fire through the breach as the rooms were given up one by one. Marines rushed back through the breach then turned around to help me cover the rest. Bullets knocked chips out of the rock around us. They didn't score more kills. Several other marines took direct hits on their armor and more had minor wounds of some sort in the gaps their armor plates didn't cover.

The demolition charges finally went off behind me. It took a great deal of our remaining explosives, but that was why we'd packed heavy to begin with. It kept ammo and equipment from becoming an issue in a prolonged, heavy engagement.

It also took a great deal of skill and care to place the charges properly so the concussion from the blast didn't pulverize the room. Ideally the shaped charges would only have been detonated when everyone was in cover, in a different room if possible. Since this wasn't an ideal situation everyone not actively involved in the fight got as far away as possible and hoped their armor was enough.

It was. Barely. The force of the blast was focused downward, through the deck-plates into the layer of rock between us and the next level. The shockwave still threw me forward into the section of wall I used for cover. That it only bruised a bit through armor instead of crushing me against the wall or giving me a concussion meant the job was done right.

I returned to my firing position, trying to find targets through the fresh cloud of dust. The particulate was heavy enough that my armor's senses had difficulty penetrating it to acquire targets I couldn't see.



Behind me Fallguy and Crake were the first through the hole. They were partners, used to working together. Since blowing through a floor was a fairly common bit of lateral—or vertical—thinking in built up environments the Operative wanted the first people dropping down able to deal with difficulties.

They didn't find anything. Marines and TELCORPS agents began to jump down under the direction of the platoon sergeant. I tossed a grenade into the next room to slow down the telepaths's response. The incoming fire lessened when the demo charges blew, but it didn't stop and slowing the KDI telepaths as much as possible was essential to staying alive. While most of the platoon was busy escaping through the hole in the floor the assaultmen were rigging the room with proximity smart mines to slow pursuit.

Another hectic few minutes and somebody slapped me on the shoulder hard enough to feel it through my spaulders. That was my cue. I turned from where I was shooting and sprinted for the hole. When I reached it I jumped straight down, holding onto my rifle with one hand.

There wasn't any time for finesse. I took the fall the way they trained us—feet, legs, ass, and then back upright—and moved out of the way quickly to make room for the next person.

The room I dropped into was small, probably a researcher's office. There were a few small pieces of furniture Fallguy and Crake pushed to the side to make a safe space to fall into, and two entrances, both of which were already rigged with mines. My HUD flagged them as command detonated this time though the right signal could flip them to proximity mode if we decided to keep moving.

The Operative was directing traffic. She pointed me to one of the doors, past a worktable with lab equipment. I ran past her into another hallway. A fireteam watched one direction while a squad moved the opposite direction from them. A quick check of my map showed that there were only supply rooms in the direction being watched. The squad was moving towards the stairs—towards where more enemy reinforcements might come from.

Ordinarily that was a bad idea. But we were here on a raid, looking for something. So long as the original objective wasn't scrapped, and didn't seem likely that the Operative would scrub the mission, losses or no, we were still heading for the labs. That meant leaving the storage sub-level we'd dropped into ASAP, before we were trapped again. Crake and Fallguy were already at the base of the stairs after moving recklessly fast and racing up to them to secure the entrance at the top.

There was a cargo elevator halfway down the hallway. A pair of marines covered it with a LMG. That didn't seem sufficient to me. I ran to their position and went to one knee beside them. I let my rifle drop to hang from its sling while I shrugged off my pack and started to dig through it. The mines in my pack hadn't been used yet, and it seemed like a good time.

Under the cover of the machine gun I slapped a pair of mines outside the elevator doors. Then I slipped the fingers of my augmented hand into the door and hauled. The metal deformed around my armored grip. The gap in the door widened as I pulled them apart. My arm screamed at the join between flesh and metal. There was only so much strain it could take. I was approaching that limit. I didn't stop, though. When the door was open wide enough I slipped into the gap and braced my back against it to hold it open.

With the door held open I placed my third explosive in the base of the shaft. It was a satchel charge wired together with a mine so the proximity sensor would set them both off, a useful field hack I'd learned in on urban battle or another. The charge was powerful enough the wreck the elevator if it was sent down first, or kill a man in armor and partially collapse the shaft if the car was bypassed and our pursers climbed or roped down.

That finished, I gave the doors one last shove, pushing with my legs and back, and slipped out of the gap before their electronics forced them closed. The marine with the machine gun and his assistant stayed where they were and kept covering the elevator while I started running again. My breath echoed in my ears and helmet as I sprinted. The jolt of every pounding impact of my feet on the deck travel up my ankles and knees in time with my pack bouncing on my back. I was one of the last ones to reach the stars after my delay trapping the elevator. Only the security elements, the Operative, and the dead were behind me.

I paused to catch my breath at the top of the stairwell. More boots clattered on the metal after me. Ahead of me marines and TELCORPS agents swept up another hallway, checking each door, alert for enemies.

They found none. The whole hall was abandoned. Where the halls and labs elsewhere in the sector were meticulously clean, near sterile when they weren't actually sterile spaces, the new hall wasn't. It wasn't overtly dirty, but I saw dust floating in the air that hadn't been kicked up by bullets and explosions. The white tiles along the lower third of the walls were dull and slightly grubby. The deck plates, painted white like the tiles, had black marks from shoes and small scuffs in the paint, imperfections that hadn't been scrubbed away or repainted.

The Operative moved past me while I looked over the hallway. She went to the first door and tried it. It slid open, unlocked. My helmet picked out details and highlighted edges in the dark space before she reached in and turned on the lights, resolving the wireframe visual building up on my HUD into solid space. It was an examination room, dusty with disuse and otherwise no different from thousands of hospitals and clinics across space. It even had a vague resemblance to one from some of my oldest, haziest childhood memories. The only thing unusual about it was instead of having a name or number by the door, there was a symbol, “ $\alpha$ .” Nothing else, no way to know what the room was without checking or already knowing. Just an alpha.

The Operative brushed a hand over the alpha. “Not radioactive particles, obviously. So—the first iteration, the telepaths after the prototype, before the Beta’s and Gamma’s we’ve fought. The unsuccessful ones.” She switched her radio to the platoon net. “TELCROPS agents, search these rooms. Everyone else, defensive positions at the stairs and the far end. Crake, if you find any working terminals, get in, pull what you can.” Crake was the one remaining computer expert after Flood’s death.

The security detail was coming up the stairs when she spoke, leaving more mines behind them. Their packs were empty of ordinance by the time they got to the top. More marines rushed to them there. The rest headed to the far end of the hallway, raiding rooms they passed for furniture for makeshift fighting positions.

The TELCORPS agents all took a room for themselves to search. Crake moved from room to room, looking for an active terminal she could crack her way into. The Operative started checking rooms of her own.

The first was a small dormitory, five beds made up with military precision beneath dust covers thrown over them when the section was mothballed. A large one-way window filled the wall. It was an unnecessary touch. Continuous observation could have been carried out in far less obvious ways. Which meant it was there to let the occupants of the dormitory know they were being watched. There were no personal possession anywhere in the room. The small lockers at the foot of each bed held old clothing, all identical, all marked with the alpha.

Desk terminals lined the far wall. A small, empty bookcase was next to each desk. Other than that there was only the toilet and shower at the far end of the room. There was no curtain or stall for the shower. No privacy at all. Everything strictly regulated, always watched. Communication—not forbidden; frowned on. Everything impersonal. Another lab, not living quarters watched at nearly all times, recorded when not watched.

There was nothing of use besides the implications. The Operative pressed the power switch on one of the desks. It didn't turn on. She moved on, I followed.

The next room was observation. No documents left lying around. Equipment all shut down. The Operative looked at one in particular, tried booting it up. No result, again.

The next room was different. More test equipment. Padded floors and walls. Weights lying around where they'd tried to make us lift them without touching So different from the gym at school, back before the Corps.

A spike of pain drove behind my eyes. Lift weights with a team, getting ready for the next game. The one we'd lost, knocking us out of regional semifinals. Trying to lift without lifting, not knowing what that meant, hearing it over and over and over again, watched by figures in blank masks, faces always hidden. Deciding to join the Marines after the war started, holding a gun for the first time. Too-small hands methodically stripping a weapon, cleaning it under the eyes of another faceless figure.

My knees hit the padded deck, sank in. One hand thrown out to catch myself of reflex. The other on my faceplate, as though it could stop what was happening. I closed my eyes to block the pain. It got worse. Blood running down my face from another nose-bleed.

Two lives. One unremarkable. Happy in its way. Nothing special. Another athletic kid signing up to be fed into the meat grinder of the new war without understanding it. The other faceless figures and endless tasks. Blank walls. Nothing friendly. Nothing happy. Nothing humanizing.

I couldn't—both were me—I was—I wasn't—fingers scrabbled at the catch of my helmet, pulled it off—bile, throwing up, a puddle on the old padding—not the first time—hurt—pain—then—now—different—the same—me?—Me.—what?—Marine—TELCORPS—no—yes—Both?—maybe—student—son—Lie—*failure*—waste of funding; overheard conversation—*next iteration*—subject—Alpha—Three—*Alpha Three*—truth?—Truth. Understanding. And more pain. Cold hand on my face. Not gloved. Looked up. Sad eyes, dead eyes. *Her*. A nod, agreement.

Then she was gone and the Operative was there, looking down at me where I'd collapsed.

I coughed, spat. My throat burned. Looked down the barrel of the Operative's rifle. "I—I am—"

"Yes. I thought so."

"How? Why?"

"I don't know. Falsified records, obviously. Done well enough that they looked authentic when I checked them. And false memories. Why? You were a failure. All the Alphas, all of your brothers, were. The project documents, remember? Powerful latent telepaths who never manifested. So they tried to change that with more external methods, subjected you to more stress."

I coughed again. "And what's more stressful than war?" I didn't sound like me. My voice was hoarse from vomiting. Broken by revelation.

Her rifle was still pointed at me. The muzzle didn't waver at all. If she diced I needed to die, I would die. There was nothing I could do to stop her, nothing I could say to convince her. The decision was out of my hands and in the hands of a woman who kept her cards close to her chest.

Instead of saying something, instead of trying to convince her not to kill me, I stayed silent. Stayed there, halfway between kneeling and being on my hands and knees, balanced on the padded floor over a puddle of my own vomit. I watched her weapon. I watched her. Didn't even wipe the blood and bile from my face. Just waited, impassively. I didn't have any impulse to run, to try to get away, didn't feel any urges to do anything. In the end, I never really had. Survival or death; fear, failure, lust, pleasure, satisfaction, happiness—all distant ideas, concepts, not feelings or drives.

We stayed that way for at least a minute in total silence. The Woman In Red stood at the Operative's shoulder, watching. Waiting, as I was. If the Operative sensed her presence, the way she sometimes did, she gave no indication of it. I don't think it would have mattered either way. She had no influence over the Operative's choice.

The Operative sighed and lowered her rifle. "If you were a threat I'd already be dead. Get up. We have a job to do."

I dragged a hand across my face, a futile attempt to clean it. Then I grabbed my helmet and pulled it back over my head. Again. I felt I was going to get shot in the face with it off if I kept discarding the damn thing. It clicked on, the seals engaged, and the HUD booted back up.

In time for the radio to squeal into my ear before the helmet's systems cut it off. "Jamming attempt." The squeal settled into white noise.



“Same here.” The Operative had one hand to the side of her helmet like her ear was hurting her. Which it probably was. “Local comms are intact.”

I checked. She was right, the jamming was weak enough that the short-range secondary transceivers for squad level comms burned through it with enough range to reach the whole platoon. Reports and comm checks filled the channel until the platoon sergeant managed to restore discipline.

By then the Operative and I were standing in a small circle with him and the platoon’s RTO in another side room. Several antenna sprouted from the armored pack on the RTO’s back, which she unslung and dropped to the deck. She knelt beside it and began working the controls. “The jammer’s elsewhere in the station—the signal’s too weak for it to be nearby.” It was about what we expected her to say.

The sergeant nodded. “Can you do anything?”

“I can boost our signal strength, try to burn through all the crap in the air. They’ll see it, though. No way they aren’t looking for transmitters. It’ll draw them right to us.”

“Do they have comms, then?”

“Depends on what frequencies they’re using. If their frequency range is outside the jammed spectrum, then yes. I’m more worried that they’re jamming everything and using hardline build into the station.”

“Damn.” The platoon sergeant looked at the Operative. “Your call, Operative.”

Shots echoed from the stairway. The telepaths were closing in on us.

“Do it. I want status updates from the rest of the company and *Liberator* as soon as you have them.”

“Aye, Ma’am.” The RTO began changing the settings on her radio pack.

“Staff Sergeant, make sure nothing comes at us from the far end of the hall. I’ll do what I can about the telepaths.” Orders given, the Operative left the room.

She checked the status of the other TELCORPS agents and told them to keep looking for information while heading for the stairs. Before we got there an explosion shook the deck and threw me from my feet. Smoke and dust erupted from the stairwell.

And the Operative laughed as she reached down and hauled me upright. “I felt that. The blast got two of them.” It was the most emotion I’d heard in her voice since the artillery barrage in Cydonia provoked a reaction out of her. It wasn’t in any way a pleasant sound. The laughter had a mean edge of satisfaction to it, different from her usual cool professionalism. I heard the same edge in a cheer from one of the marines covering the entrance to the stairwell, and I felt it, too. A dangerous enemy was dead, and our situation was better than had been thirty seconds before.

The KDI Telepaths held off on trying again. They stayed where they were content, for the moment, to wait us out.

ALL IN [16.036]

The RTO’s voice crackled through my helmet speakers. A note on my HUD indicated she’d restricted the transmission to the Operative, other TELCORPS personnel including me, and the platoon sergeant. That alone was a bad sign about the news she had for us.

“I got through the First and Third. They don’t have comms with *Liberator* either and are having difficulty staying in contact with each other.”

“SITREP?”

“Bad, Ma’am. The Captain’s dead, both platoons have taken heavy casualties, KDIsec is mounting another push against them, and they’re leading with light armor through the tram tunnels. Lieutenant Kim doesn’t think he can hold for long.”

“So they think they can kill us all and pretend we never existed. Stupidly short-sighted, but hardly news, except that they’re in a good position to pull it off.”

“It’s worse than that.” Somewhere in the course of giving her report the RTO’s voice shifted from professional to outright worried. “They’ve lost contact with *Liberator* because she moved off-station to deal with incoming contacts. The last report they got from her indicated a Rebel light task force dropping in at the edge of the system.”

“Shit.” I didn’t recognize the next voice. My HUD indicated it was Three Pair, another of the TELCORPS agents. “That’s four frigates and a destroyer if it’s a standard formation. More destroyers and maybe a raid carrier—that’s lighter than a fleet carrier—if they’ve reinforced it. Best guess is *Liberator* can take three of those. Four, if the captain’s as good as I think he is.”

“So they’ve gone all in with the Rebels.” The platoon sergeant sounded more exhausted than anything else. “Greedy fuckers. And they’ll get away with it, too, at this rate. Nearest ship’s far enough out that they’ll be able to evacuate the station before friendlies get here.” The exhaustion fit him. I’d seen his record, and heard about some of the engagements he’d fought in. In at least three of them there’d been no expectation of survival. This was familiar territory for him. For me, too, in a way. “With your permission, Ma’am, I want to take people off the stairs and push them past the far entrance. I’ll bet good money that the KDIsec troopers we haven’t seen since we entered this sector are nearby. We can try to find them and disrupt their plans.”

“Do it. Crake, detail two agents to join them. The rest of you, with me at the stairs. We need to keep the telepaths shut down. Forward any data you have to me. Evidence doesn’t really matter at this point, but we’ll still send an info package out if we can. The team in the hangar should be able to set up a burst transmission to the nearest forces using the traffic control transmitters—if we can get it through the jamming. Campo,” that was the RTO, “You’re on that. Try to maintain contact with the other platoons as best you can as well.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. We all knew the situation. With the decision made, everyone went about their assigned tasks. There was nothing else to do except wait.

CONTACT RANGE [16.037]

Within ten minutes the two fire teams and the two agents scouting forward of our position dropped out of contact. Any question of whether it was jamming or enemy action was settled by muffled gunfire echoing back through the tunnels and corridors of the research sector to us. The Operative cradled her head in one hand near the end of the fighting. “They’re gone.” Then she shook her head and returned her hand to the foregrip of her rifle, and went back to watching the stairs from the makeshift defensive position we shared.

The depleted remains of the platoon used the ten minutes we had well. We dragged anything that we could move out into the hallway, making makeshift barricades and fighting positions. The rest of our explosives were used to right the far approach. Then was no need for more in the stairwell, since it was heavily mined the first time around. The ones on the lower level went off in the first attempt on them stairs, but the upper ones were still in place. No one risked trying to descend the damaged stairs to replace the lower ones.

Then we were under attack. Machine gun fire mixed with the sound of explosives as KDISec troops hit the far hallway. Screams and shouts quickly joined the sound of battle. Their armor was lighter than ours and didn't hold up to heavy weapons very well. It wasn't much use against the explosives either. The barricade survived their first, incautious assault, and after a few futile minutes the KDISec troops withdrew, dragging their wounded with them. The dead, shredded by bullets and shrapnel, were left where they lay. The frantic, overwhelming sound of a nearby firefight was replaced by the sounds of marines checking and reloading their weapons and treating their wounded. One of the machine gun teams swapped their overheated barrel for a new one and put the old one aside to cool.

Nothing happened at the stairs. I didn't think the telepaths were dead, and neither did any of our telepaths. So we were left wondering what they were waiting for while the second rush was repulsed. Like the first, it was over quickly. One of the marines caught an unlucky bullet that deflected off the gorget of his armor and up through the gap beneath his helmet. His radio was on when he died. I heard a wet choke before it cut off. And there was still nothing from the stairs.

Then the Operative collapsed. Armor clattered to the deck as the rest of the TEL-CORPS agents followed her down. For once I didn't have a headache. Instead I felt light-headed—tipsy but not yet drunk. Whatever effected them didn't interfere with me beyond that. The marines around us reacted with swearing and fear, apparently unaffected as well.

I reached down, got a grip on the Operative's arm, and started hauling her upright as she began pushing herself up.

“What—”

“Not sure.” Her speech was groggy, almost slurred. Nothing like normal “Status?”

The other agents reported in, one by one, all of them sounding as bad as she did.

“What the hell was that?” With a few seconds to regain control of herself the Operative was sharper, more normal.

“Felt like shielding. I can't feel any of you, or the KDI telepaths downstairs.”

Crake struggled to make coherent words. She sounded punch-drunk. The few remaining agents—only her, Fallguy, and Brick were left—agreed with her, eventually.

“Can't be.” The Operative shook her head. “Their gammas aren't powerful enough to shut me down.”

“Its not the Gammas.” Brick staggered towards the stairs, towards us. “Check the data we pulled from their system. They were working on a telepathic inhibitor. A jammer for our powers. The report I found said it wasn't—”

He didn't get a chance to finish. The explosives in the stairwell detonated simultaneously. The blast threw him down the hall. He was too off-balance from the effects of the jammer to react properly and slammed hard into the deck. One look made it clear that he was dead. He hit head first, and lay with it pointing too far to one side. His neck was broken.

He was the only casualty from the blast. The rest of us were rattled by it, but the worst was minor disorientation. I stared down the sights of my rifle, focusing on the red dot and centering it on the cloud of smoke. There was no way the telepaths were stupid enough to get themselves killed by the explosion. They had to know about the inhibitor and be prepared for it. It turned them into nothing more than regular soldiers, same as the TELCORPS agents became. And in a fight like that, in the end numbers would tell. Their presence forced us to split up and defend two approaches. That was all they needed to do to overwhelm us.

There machine guns started up behind me again. I didn't look. I kept my breathing steady and kept staring at the red dot and the thinning smoke it rested on. Two round objects flew out of the smoke as I watched.

"Grenade!"

The flashbang went off in a blaze of light and a blast of sound. The blind grenade threw up a haze of chaff and more smoke. My visor blacked out, fast enough that only the start of the flash leaked through. The sensor display whited-out from the chaff. I didn't head the explosion and hiss of fragments from a third grenade that followed the first two. I did feel some of the shrapnel pinging off my helmet while I hit the deck.

I pulled the trigger on instinct before my helmet cleared again. My weapon was still pointing in the right direction. Other rifles fired around me as the marines and TEL-CORPS agents did the same, laying down several seconds worth of blindfire. The sound of our return fire merged with the fire coming from the stairs.

When my visor cleared I saw the KDI telepaths storming through the open door, trusting their armor to protect them. It did. It was heavier than the armor of the KDIsec troopers, which couldn't have withstood the fire they took. One fell from a burst that shattered his faceplate, blood and brains and bone shards leaked from the jagged hole as he fell. Others staggered or stumbled when their armor absorbed the force of direct hits. One of the marines was on the deck, too, his legs shredded by the grenade.

They weathered the storm of gunfire and kept closing. Accurate fire killed more marines. They took more casualties, too. I drilled one in the chest. The first few rounds deflected off the armor plate. The fifth cracked it, and the sixth punched through. I was shooting on automatic, burning through ammo. So was everyone else. So many weapons firing all at once in the enclosed space turned from the individual reports of shots into a continuous roar that echoed and bounced.

More grenades were thrown and added to the chaos. No one controlled the fire-fight. No control was possible. It was a vicious close quarters engagement, a brawl that sustained itself and followed its own rules, brutal and straightforward. Armor and cover played their part with skill and numbers and training. Men and women and clones died.



In less than a minute I shot my way through two magazines. There wasn't time to reload a third time. I stepped forward and swung the stock of my empty rifle into an armored figure. It smashed into him. He continued without stopping and slammed into me. The impact drove me to the deck.

His rifle was also empty and hung forgotten from his sling. We grappled. HE got a hand on his sidearm. I did everything I could to stop him from drawing it. Out of ideas and without time for anything fancier, I jerked my helmeted head forward into his.

My head dropped back and bounced off the deck. I blinked, then shoved against the man on top of me as hard as I could. I recovered faster from the mutually stunning impact of the headbut than he did. Mostly free of him, I pulled my knife from the sheath strapped to my chest plate and drove it under his helmet, up through his jaw. He fell, a dead weight on my legs. I let go of the knife and pulled my pistol. I lay on my back, partially propped up by my pack, half pinned by a dead man who bled on my armor, and searched for more targets.

They weren't hard to find. Nearly everyone was fighting hand to hand, advanced killing technology abandoned as weaponed emptied and the rush of the assault continued. With the advances in armor, it wasn't unusual for attacks at close range to devolve. Combatants on both sides fired at point-blank and contact range. Knives and pistols and fists and a helmet were being used to deadly effect.

I shot the nearest telepath. He turned towards me and a long burst from the Operative killed him. She grabbed my shoulder and hauled me back upright by brute force.

She saw her chance and took it, dragging me along behind her. Marines at both ends of the hall were killing and dying; being overrun. Bodies littered the deck, a mix of ours and theirs. I couldn't tell who was winning. I knew who would win eventually.

We ran past them, the Operative in front. Charging through the fighting to the stairs. By then the telepaths assault had broken into a series of small, personal fights. Telepaths and marines alike were too busy dealing with the enemy directly in front of them to do anything else. One telepath noticed us running by and brought his weapon up. I shot him. The rounds bounced off his armor. It slowed him down and then we were past. I fired blindly behind me and emptied my magazine at where I thought he was.

We pounded down the stairs. My rifle hammered against me on its sling. I reloaded my pistol, holstered it, and did the same with my rifle, all without stopping my headlong sprint at the Operative's heels. No bullets chased us down the lower hall.

The Operative turned towards the elevator doors. I passed her. "Trapped! We have to use the hole."

"Got it."

We kept moving, running back the way we originally came. We'd escaped being bottled up twice now using the same hallway. The Operative stopped when we reached the room with the hole we dropped in from the first time. The mines we left behind were gone, replaced by scorch marks and shrapnel embedded in the walls. She went to one knee beneath the hole and made a foothold with her hands. The ceiling was too far overhead to reach without an assisted jump.

I stepped into her cupped hands and pushed up, jumping at the same time she threw me upward. It was enough. Barely. I caught the rim of the hole and hung there with the edge digging into my armpits for a moment, then hauled myself up and through the hole.

I sprawled beside the hole on my stomach for a breath, then turned around so my arms and head hung out over the edge. Without a proper foothold I spread my legs to distribute my weight and hoped to was enough to stop me from sliding forward. The Operative jumped. She caught my wrists and I dragged her upwards, my shoulders screaming from the strain as they took her full weight. She helped by pulling herself up, and then got a leg over the edge and used it to level herself through.

#### LAST BREATH [16.041]

The Operative and I lay beside the ragged hole in the floor and caught our breath. Gunfire echoed through the tunnels, attenuated by the path it took to reach us. There was less of it with every deep breath we took. The position we'd just abandoned was overrun. Our radios only picked the empty hiss and crackle of jamming. We were out of range for squad comms to burn through. There was no way to tell if there were any other survivors. It didn't seem likely.

We'd fought our way clear of one ambush only to find ourselves trapped in another position by mission requirements. The Operative couldn't have let the old labs we found shelter in go uninvestigated and in the time it took to search them things had gone to hell again.

And now we were back where we started, more or less, after a frantic escape from an overwhelming force attacking on both sides.

We were properly fucked. I knew it. The Operative knew it, probably better than I did. After all, I was a marine infantryman; a grunt and a good one. Neither the recent revelations about my past or the effects of the telepathic inhibitor changed that. She, on the other hand, was a powerful telepath, a TELCORPS Operative, stripped of the power that defined her. She was reduced to my level—a combatant, a skilled one, and nothing more.

She didn't let that stop her, though. After a handful of seconds forced herself to her feet and reached down to help me up one more time. The two of us seemed to be doing a lot of that, something very different from how we'd started with a stilted conversation in the back of a Drake.

"Let's move. We don't have much time."

I took the offered hand and let her help me. She was right. If any of the KDI telepaths survived then even without their powers they'd figure out soon enough that we'd gotten past them. And if they all died we still had to worry about KDIsec sweeping the sector looking for stragglers.

I checked over my gear. She did the same with hers. The results weren't good. Between the two of us we had seven rifle magazines and five pistol mags, plus one blind grenade and two frags. My assault pack was empty. She had one explosive charge left.

It was nowhere near enough. She said it first. "We're not getting out of this."

I shook my head—in agreement, not denial. "No. And even if we could get back to the hangar—"

*“Liberator”*’s off station and the rest of the marines are dead or will be soon.” We worked as we spoke, dividing our remaining supplies. The only things we had enough of were water and ration bars. The soft bricks of food tasted terrible and had the consistency of half-dried mud, but they were packed full of calories and sugars and protein and just about anything else we needed. They were designed to be a perfect all-in-one meal, good for a mid-firefight snack or pause on patrol. They succeeded at everything except being something anyone would ever want to eat—which was, itself, a standing tradition for field rations. As long as there were armies there was bad food to complain about.

We ate a bar apiece while we shared out the equipment. We finished not long before the firefight in the distance faded. By then the Operative and I were creeping through hallways, watching carefully for signs of anyone else because anyone left in the sector was hostile. The chance of running into marines or TELCORPS agents was minuscule to the point of irrelevance. We were alone.

And we didn’t have an objective anymore. We sought to put distance between ourselves and the enemy; to survive a little longer for whatever that was worth. That didn’t last long. We were wandering past testing facilities and research labs, all with different designations. Some were labeled  $\beta$ , some  $\gamma$ , and some EXEMPLAR PROTOTYPE.

The Operative opened one of the prototype doors and we stepped inside, out of the hallway and out of sight for a moment. It was a small office with only a pair of desks and a bookshelf crammed full of old printouts. She walked over to the bookcase and pulled a few files out at random. “None of these are newer than twelve years ago.” She flipped through the first one. “This one’s seventeen years old.” She paused and skimmed a page. “Damn, no wonder they kept this on paper.”

“Why?”

“It’s an incident report. The prototype attempted a breakout. She killed three before one of the staff telepaths was able to shield her and security could subdue her.”

“Shouldn’t the telepath have reported that? Aren’t all research positions TEL-CORPS approved with reporting requirements?”

“It was reported—as an accident. It triggered one of the research audits I had you look into. They got the telepath to lie for them. If he was still alive he’d earn a bullet for his part in this.”

I frowned. Something about the dates... Then I realized what it was. “You said the files end twelve years ago. Doesn’t that match the second audit? The one after the major disaster that the project director suicided over?”

“Let me check the dates.” She pulled a white binder from the recent end of the shelf. The printed dates on the cover sheet matched to the month. I watched over her shoulder while she flipped to the last pages. They contained summarized research notes and power testing records, except for the final page. That was a copy of a memo that hadn’t made it into the files cached on PRL 2:

FROM: Director, Project EXEMPLAR

TO: Director, Telepathic Studies; Director, Research and Development; Director, Security; Staff, Project EXEMPLAR; EXEMPLAR Distribution List

In light of recent events, the prototype division of Project EXEMPLAR is now shut down. Staff members assigned to the prototype will be individually notified of reassignment. All files regarding the known capabilities of the prototype are to be sent to security; see the attached list for approved distribution. Finally, Any new information regarding the prototype, to include possible whereabouts, speculative capabilities, and potential influence on genetically related EXEMPLAR iterations is to be referred directly to the head of Project EXEMPLAR and the previously mentioned security distribution list.

The Operative swore again, quietly and to herself, after she finished reading. “This would have been nice to have twenty minutes ago. “ Twenty minutes ago she could have included it in the data broadcast from the edge of the jamming. Now only she and I knew about it. She stuffed the binder into her pack anyway.

“Did you notice the date?” I recognized it, but wasn’t sure she had.

“What about it.” Evidently not.

“It’s the day after the project director committed suicide. His successor must’ve written the memo.”

“Isn’t his successor—”

“Now head of R and D? Yes.” The background research she’d had me do on KDI came in handy. “He made Director Of Telepathic Studies and then R&D.”

“And this while time he was hunting for the prototype—Wait. The assassination in Cydonia. Your ghost.”

I nodded. I'd reached the same conclusion. The details were starting to come together. I had no idea how they'd gotten me from a test subject to the marines, though I could guess how I ended up with fake memories. They had enough telepaths on hand for that and it was a known ability. I even remembered a face to go with it, though not a name, if I ever knew it. The bits and pieces we'd—she'd, really—uncovered were enough to form a sketchy outline of my past.

And from that I knew I was an experiment. And Alpha, one step beyond the prototype, who was The Woman In Red. Who watched over me despite being dead, and for all I knew while she was alive.

I wonder if the Operative caught the last implication of the memo. She was more than smart enough to. If she did. she didn't bring it up. Whether she did or not, there was no way to prove it, or find out how true it was. And we were still keyed up, nervous, a pair of dead soldiers deep behind enemy lines. That we had to ability to think about the contents of the memo at all was a surprise.

All I knew was everything I knew was a lie. What I had details about I could confirm was different, but objective facts alone, stripped of context, didn't help me construct the truth. What came after joining the marines was true. The last two years of my life, bloody battles and frantic moments and the long, strange dullness between, those were true. Before that? I had no way of knowing, and no way of finding out from the ones who did. I might've been a clone, a constructed test-tube baby, or something—someone—else.



There wasn't any more time for introspection. The Operative and I had more pressing things to worry about. The Operative focused on The Woman In Red: "I think she's tied to the decline in KDI's telepathic studies program. It started with her escape, and then the rest of the facilities kept being damaged or destroyed, one at a time, over the years."

I shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not. But it explains why they wanted her dead after all these years. If she was still involved, handing them while they hinted her..." The Operative trailed off. "It might have been personal. A long game played against the ones who made her." She sighed. "Which makes you and me pieces in the game, too. Not that that matters anymore, either."

"So what do we do now?"

"We're dead."

"We agreed on that already."

It was her turn to shrug. "Yes. It all comes back to that." She was tired. I heard it in her voice. I knew she could hear it in mine, because I did. "All we can do is control how we die."

"How, then?"

"The Navy will destroy this rock. Not until after we're dead, not until *Liberator's* dead and the Rebels get away. Nearest fleet elements are too far off to stop them."

"So they lose the facility. So what. We're dead, and KDI's lost facilities before. They can keep their research going, or start it up again with new people."

“Can they?”

“Of course they can. Their scientists and telepaths are gone. They probably left before we got here.” The Operative wanted to die with meaning. Somehow I wasn’t surprised. Of all the soldiers and marines and navy spacers I’d met, all the people I’d fought alongside, the ones with drive, the ones who managed to accomplish something, they were all idealists, or idealists masquerading as cynics, who dragged others with them. They tended to get a lot of people killed even when they did manage to change things. Mostly, they changed their unit’s bodycount. She was more successful than most and a full company of marines was still dead. So was a cruiser and a full TELCORPS detachment.

“If it’s a long game, though, I think we’re the checkmate.”

“Bullshit. We can’t do jack to stop this.”

“We can’t, no.”

I realized what she meant, then. “The inhibitor?”

“The inhibitor.”

“Can you find it?”

“Yes.” Iron certainty beneath exhaustion. “I’ll take point.” And have me at her back. A surprisingly comfortable place for both of us. I took a last breath and felt my augmentic arm clench into a fist. Then followed her.

CHOICE [16.051]

We were nearly invisible in the middle of the intersection. Chamoflage armor plates faded and distorted to match the sterile whites of the hallways. The only thing that didn’t match was the dull matte black of our weapons.

I was kneeling at a corner watching the way we came, alert for any sign of movement behind us. The Operative stood out in the open at the center of the four corridors. It was a suicidal, stupid thing to do, camouflage or no, in the middle of enemy territory. That didn't matter to her. She stood there, trying to decide which path to take. Without a full map of the labs, finding the inhibitor came down to guesswork. The Operative claimed she could tell if we were getting closer or not, that her powers—or lack of them—gave her a rough idea of what direction the interference in her abilities was coming from. It was all we had.

She made up her mind and we moved off. We went slowly, weapons swinging to check every door we passed. I spend half my time twisting around and checking behind me while she faced forward. In the half-hour or so since we started searching for the inhibitor we hadn't encountered any KDIsec forces. Neither of us expected that to last. They were competent opponents, and that meant they were combing through the sector, shutting off access points and moving forward incrementally, leaving nowhere for us to hide. Stone on the move was the only way to avoid them, and staying on the move would eventually bring us into contact with the force guarding the inhibitor. Intentionally or not, KDIsec was herding us towards a final engagement. So long as we stayed ahead of them we had an advantage—they didn't, and couldn't, know that where they were herding us was exactly where we wanted to be.

It was a quiet, patient game we played, and all the more deadly for it. A thorough sweep of the sector necessarily moved slowly. At the same time, our movement was forced to an equally slow pace. The risks of rushing ahead into the enemy's guns was too high if we wanted to succeed at our final objective.

The only sounds I heard were quiet: The soft tread of boots on metal deckplates. My breathing, steady and even, amplified by the enclosed space of my helmet. The distant hiss of the ventilation systems cycling on. For all it looked like a ship, KDI Primary Station lacked the omnipresent sound of engines; the dull subsonic roar that was felt as much as heard. It was an inescapable part of shipboard life, and its absence made the whole station feel wrong. I hadn't noticed before, when I was surrounded by marines and TELCORPS agents and gunfire. Before I was alert to every sound, my ears straining for any hint of discovery.

The Operative broke the quiet with a bullet. I swung around from watching the rear in time to see the KDIsec trooper she shot drop. It wasn't a kill shot and her squad responded by laying down covering fire while two of them grabbed her by the arms and dragged her into cover.

The Operative and I both took hits, our chamouflage rippling and distorting when the rounds struck. Each shot felt like a heavy punch, a painful broad impact where armor distributed the force it couldn't stop like it did the bullets themselves.

We leaned into our rifles and advanced regardless. The Operative dropped her weapon long enough to throw one of our last grenades. Before it exploded her rifle was back up and she was pulling the trigger with every step forward.

My rifle ran dry. I switched to my pistol. We rounded a corner to find half the squad shooting at us dead or wounded and the rest falling back. The boots and greaves of our armor shifted color to match the gore pooling on the white metal of the deck, only to be coated in those colors for real when we splashed through the puddled blood and stepped over fragments of bone and brain and shattered pieces of armor.

The Operative and I reloaded in sequence, coordinated by terse commands, all without stopping. Empty magazines clattered to the deck and brought us that much closer to running out of ammunition. There was no time to stop and scrounge from the dead. The station's hardwired internal comms system was still active and unaffected by the jamming. The sounds of combat gave away our position to anyone close enough to hear. The contact report heading out over the internal nets from the survivors of the squad we ran into alerted the rest. Slowing down or stopping were not options. Being caught in a protracted firefight was not an option. The only thing to do was advance, to push through the forces around the inhibitor.

Shouts and the sounds of running from behind us, audible over the screams and drugged moans of the wounded. The Operative passed the last blind grenade to me. I waited until I saw our pursuers and threw it. Without cover they dove for the deck. I followed the explosion with several bursts into the resulting smoke to keep their heads down.

The Operative led the way in what became a running fight. She faced forwards and dealt with the KDIsec force between us and the inhibitor. I helped her where I could. It wasn't often. For the most part I was occupied by the troops racing after us. They drove us forward without exposing themselves much, giving me lots to worry about and little to shoot at. They didn't have to expose themselves because they were confident that we were caught between them and the inhibitor guards.

We were. But they underestimated how relentless the Operative was; how lethally effective she could be, even when stripped of her deadliest powers. She killed, and where she didn't kill she drove back, forcing a way through for us. It wasn't perfect, and neither were we. We both were wounded, minor hits that pierced armor without enough remaining power to do serious damage. We ran low on ammunition. I gave my last rifle mag to the Operative and switched to my pistol. She needed it more. At some point she used our final grenade. I didn't notice when.

We turned a final corner into a hallway with a single closed door at the far end. A pair of guards crouched behind barricades in front of the door. One opened fire with a MG. I shot at him with my pistol, pulling the trigger again and again until the hammer dropped on an empty chamber, the final round of the final magazine expended.

The Operative grunted and collapsed. Her finger locked down on the trigger, and her rifle sprayed the last of its ammunition out. Then it, too, was empty.

She was dead. One look told me that. I dropped down beside her corpse and pulled the pistol from her holster, checked it. There was a round in the chamber. The safety was off.

The machine gunner was dead. I'd gotten him, or a stray round from the Operative had. There was only one guard left. He stuck his head over the barricade to see if we were alive or not. I put four rounds in his faceplate. The last one shattered it and killed him.

I tore open the Operative's assault pack and grabbed the one remaining explosive. I heard shouts behind me. There wasn't much time.

The door was locked. I checked the guards. The last one I'd killed was an officer. He had an access pass on him. That got me in.

The inhibitor didn't look like much. A plain box with a few power cables running into it, three strangely shaped antennas, and a control panel. I left the Operative's pistol on top of it and used both hands to right the charge and make sure it was properly connected to the detonator.

A shout from the door.

I have a choice. It's not much of a choice, really. In a sense I've already made it. That doesn't matter. I make it again.

I press the button as bullets reach me.

TERMINATION [16.1]

*Well?*

*That's all there is, Sir. Alpha Three doesn't know any more.*

*What are the chances of a post-trawl neural reconstruction?*

*Zero. But we don't need him anymore, Sir. The surviving Betas and Gammas should be more than sufficient.*

*Very well. Prepare a disposal team. Get rid of Alpha Three and clean up anything related to him and Oscar One Five Four before the Navy gets here.*

*Full external sanitization and limited internal. I'm sure you know who's essential and who isn't.*

*Yes—*

*So. I suppose you're looking for him. There's no point any—*

I'm here. It's over. Go to sleep.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

IT IS THE RECOMMENDATION OF THIS INVESTIGATORY COMMITTEE THAT PROJECT EXEMPLAR BE RESTARTED. DESPITE THE LOSS OF ALL FACILITIES, EQUIPMENT, AND PERSONNEL INCLUDING ALL ACTIVE ALPHA, BETA, AND GAMMA SUBJECTS, SUFFICIENT RESEARCH REMAINS INTACT TO SUPPORT RESTARTING THE PROJECT.

THIS COMMITTEE HAS NO RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT THE PROTOTYPE SUBJECT. SHE REMAINS AN UNKNOWN FACTOR AND A SIGNIFICANT RISK. ALL FUTURE FACILITIES SHOULD BE PROVIDED WITH INCREASED SECURITY AND TELEPATHIC DAMPENING OR INHIBITING EQUIPMENT IN ORDER TO DECREASE THE RISK OF DETECTION AND SUBSEQUENT INTERVENTION BY THE PROTOTYPE SUBJECT. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT SUCH MEASURES MAY NOT PROVE SUFFICIENT, BUT HAVE NO VIABLE ALTERNATIVES AT THIS TIME.

UPON A DECISION BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF PROJECT EXEMPLAR A COPY OF THIS REPORT WILL BE PLACED IN THE SECURE ARCHIVE ALONG WITH ALL PROJECT FILES NOT DEEMED IMMEDIATELY RELEVANT AND SEALED UNDER DIRECTORIAL LEVEL ENCRYPTION. ALL OTHER COPIES ARE TO BE IMMEDIATELY DESTROYED.

**END REPORT**