

DAYBREAK ★ Dispatches

an anthology by jayemouse

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THE BUG EATERS

I.

Heavy metal footsteps obliterated rocks and rubble as they tore a path through the desert wasteland. They belonged to a large bipedal mech, well over five meters tall, running at a brutal, destructive pace. Beneath a thick coat of grime were countless scratches and dents, showing that it had come out on top in no small number of serious firefights. Aside from the cosmetic ruin, it was still in peak working condition, and its hydraulic limbs surged with raw, mechanical power.

A trio of scavengers were almost crushed into a fine paste. The machine paid no attention to their presence, neither adjusting its path away from them nor aiming its weapons towards them. They were simply insignificant to a machine like this. Its journey kicked up a blinding wall of sand, forcing their eyes and mouths shut as they stumbled to an abrupt halt.

“What a fucking cunt,” Jazael wheezed. He was coughing and spluttering, his deeply lined face shriveling up like a sun-dried prune. “I swallowed so much fucking dust!”

“Whose mech was that?” asked Faina, her voice muffled behind fabric. She had been a lot faster than the other two in pulling her mask up and over her mouth and nose.

“DNA or KA, most likely,” Tulio said, running a hand through his dark hair in a futile attempt to brush away some of the grit. “They’ve both been pretty active in this area lately. Just small skirmishes so far, but I’m betting on something much bigger soon. Things are going to get nasty.”

Although she could tell from their voices that they were fine, Faina instinctively glanced over at her companions to confirm. Tulio was putting on his usual stoic act. His hawkish eyes were fixated on the silver-gray titan as it disappeared over the horizon. Jazael, by

contrast, seemed quite agitated. He wasn't coughing anymore, but his rage was still bubbling to the surface. Faina knew that it was healthiest to just sit back and let him express it.

"Who gives a flying fuck whose mech it was? They're all the same brand of bastard," he grouched. "They ride around like maniacs in these ridiculous killing machines without a second of thought to the destruction they cause. They've got no interest in the lives of ordinary people, let alone scavs. We might as well be insects!"

"Is that so?" Tulio feigned curiosity as he waited for Jazael to launch into the latest variation of an inevitable rant that he had already put his team through so very many times before.

"If any of these factions had good motivations at all then they wouldn't just be wasting bullets on each other," Jazael growled, kicking a lumpy stone across the sand, "they'd be making sure we had stable houses, clean water, and some decent fucking food. They're totally lost, man, it's all a game to them now. A vapid power struggle that's never going to end! And they've been at this for how long? A fucking century?"

"Who do we even have? DNA, VMA, PLM? It's nonsense! Fascists, mercenaries, and bureaucrat creeps. Fifty years ago we had a different lot of acronyms and it was no better. RNA, HRT, MRI, they all came and went. These clowns don't grow or improve, they just pillage and ruin until they run out of bullets and someone else takes their place to do the same damn thing."

"I'm pretty sure half of those were never real factions," replied Tulio, raising an eyebrow.

"Point is, it doesn't even matter!" Jazael waved a gloved hand dismissively. "Nobody can remember the name of every pack of armed goons who staked a claim here. It's a waste of mental energy trying to keep track of their miserable little war because it's never going to change in a way that matters for people like us. I'm not going to care about it and if you were being smart then you wouldn't either! The only thing that should matter to us is staying alive and getting to Lamplight.

Once we make enough to buy our way out of this hellhole of a country, I swear I'm never going to listen to another word about the war ever again."

"I think the differences matter," Tulio said. "The DNA's kept the capital standing, at least, and it's good to know whether we're at risk of rubbing up against a disciplined army or a guerilla one."

"Well, we're not fighting a fucking mech either way, are we? Whenever we see one, there are only two outcomes: it either kills us or it chooses not to. That's getting lucky or it's greasing its joints with whatever's left of you, and the bastard hiding in his air-conditioned cockpit doesn't give a fuck either way."

"Okay, old man, that's enough," Faina cut in, sighing a laugh. "I know they're all rotten, I was just curious. You really don't have to get so riled up about it all of the time. You're getting out of breath."

"Alright, alright, I was done already. I'm done! They just piss me off, you know? The bastard almost flattened us! That, and I think I'm just sick of walking in this awful heat. It never used to get quite this hot back in the day, and there weren't so many mechs either, there's two things that have changed and both for the worse."

"Well, we still have a lot of distance to cover," said Tulio. "The best way to speed things up is to complain less and walk faster. Don't waste energy on idle rants. Sure, it sucks out here, now practice what you preach and focus on the job."

"Yeah, yeah. Mind on the money," grumbled Jazael.

"We've been doing well recently," Faina offered, trying to lighten the mood. "I think we really came into our own."

"We're effective," Tulio said. "My last group, not bad guys, but they would want to turn back home as soon as they scrounged up enough scrap metal to buy a bottle or two of vodka. Sometimes I'd be the only one who wasn't hungover when we went out again. This has been great, even if I have to listen to the mad ravings of an old fossil."

"The mad ravings of an old friend, you mean," Jazael said, clutching his chest as he feigned offense.

“Of course.”

“I think the most important part of a good team is that they have shared goals. I’m a wise and sagely influence, I know, but what matters even more is that we all want the same thing, to get the hell out of here.”

“Wise and sagely, huh?” Faina said.

Jazael only nodded, a crooked smile on his face. He adjusted his cap to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. The faded ink on his hands, stretched out and bled over decades, looked almost like black bruises on his weathered skin.

“What do the tattoos on your hand say? I don’t remember if I ever asked about them before,” Faina mused.

“Oh, these?” Jazael took a second to look at them. “89 and 92, they’re the years my parents were born. They’re supposed to be, well, ‘stylized’, but they just look kind of fucked up now.”

“The 20th Century? That’s such a long time ago. I can’t even begin to imagine what life here was like back then.”

“Fewer ruins, I’m sure, but they too lived their entire lives in wartime. There were a lot of desert towns that held out all the way until that, ah, that weird lab explosion. We felt it, you know? The vibrations in the ground. It was a scary day to be a kid.”

“I find it really strange that nobody seems to know much about what they were actually doing there, even in Lamplight.”

“There was no real investigation. Most people just wanted to get the hell away from whatever happened, stay ahead of the fallout, and it was far from being anybody’s only concern. Even today, as the buildings fall apart, that whole area is just as dangerous.”

“Time buries everything, I suppose.”

Lamplight was a small town in the shadow of a very large mountain range. It was founded just over two hundred years ago as a mining village, but spent the last hundred as a home for mercenaries, criminals, scavengers, and the occasional refugee caravan. It was lawless, seedy, and one of the only settlements in Daybreak to have

generally remained outside of the control of any of the major factions without getting completely flattened. There was nowhere else quite like it in the world.

For a few hours, they trudged over a great expanse of dull, colorless hills. They were all wearing thick military surplus boots but were still keenly aware of the damage being done to them by the miles of stoney sand. It always drained them of their energy and enthusiasm surprisingly fast. Faina imagined herself trudging through an ocean of television static, a ghost image on gray canvas. Rest couldn't come soon enough.

The weathered cliffs in the distance were probably breathtaking tourist attractions at some point in the distant past, but in this era of war, it was only possible to see them as oppressive. Their rocky outcroppings were jagged, rippling chaotically in the monochrome sky like thousands of improvised knives. It was almost as though they were placed there as a warning. Keep out of the desert, said the mountains, or you'll get what's coming to you. Some of the rocks on the hills had similarly violent shapes.

This area was called Smoke Desert because of the numerous coal seams that lay just beneath the ground. These seams were so close to the surface that the constant fighting would often ignite them, resulting in thick clouds of smoke. The wind on this day had been kind to the trio, and they had lengthened their walk somewhat by avoiding known fire hotspots, but that didn't make them safe. The air here was never good enough that it wasn't slowly killing anyone who breathed it in.

"Finally! I was starting to think we'd just be walking forever. It's like the desert gets bigger every time," groaned Jazael as iron roofs and dull yellow lights started to come into view.

"Let's get to Crumb's right away. I need to get this weight off my back or else I'm going to collapse," said Faina, adjusting the strap of the haul bag on her back.

All three of them were looking forward to selling their loot and getting some rest. They weren't expecting huge profits or long downtime, but they were getting very welcome respite nonetheless. Lamplight was their oasis in this desert. Whatever small luxuries it could provide to them always felt amazing after a walk of any length through the desolation that surrounded it.

II.

The town's decaying shopfronts and sagging row houses offered Faina soft and stubborn comfort. There was still something beautiful about them even now, unmaintained for decades. It was proof, she thought, of Lamplight's unmatched ability to persevere through whatever the world threw it at.

Copper Street was bustling with activity. It always was, despite the town's small size. All sorts of people gathered here for the commerce, street food, and back-alley bars. Faina watched the townsfolk shuffle about in dirty clothes, taking swigs from their hip flasks and bickering about nothing. There were a few merc groups and shady types hanging around too, but they usually kept to themselves. They would be from all corners of the country, perhaps even the continent, and all scrounging for better lives.

Most people here carried a weapon of some sort, and a lot of them were still visibly dressed up in full combat gear, but Lamplight was still almost always free of violence. Even though plenty of its visitors wouldn't hesitate to rob and kill one another out in the wastes, people knew better than to make trouble here. No one wanted to ruin a place like this for themselves, losing access to some of Daybreak's only neutral ground and risking the combined fury of the entire town. Sure, there was the occasional drunken brawl, but anything more serious than that had to be settled elsewhere.

They entered an old brick building with a big wooden sign that read 'Crumb's Dealership'. It was rendered in absurdly ornate lettering for the complete lack of decoration surrounding it. A little brass bell rang as they opened the door, alerting the store owner.

Behind a rusted iron desk, Crumb glanced up at them from a week-old newspaper. He sat framed by stacks of kitschy junk, worn machinery, and busted metal cabinets. It all appeared distinctly unimpressive, but Faina knew that was intentional. He kept his more valuable stock locked up safely in the back to make sure newcomers

didn't get any funny ideas. Crumb was actually one of the most successful businessmen in town.

"Hey there Crumb, how are you doing?" Jazael spoke in a tone that was, for him at least, friendly and full of warmth. The two of them had known each other for years.

"Back already? You guys get anything good for me this time?" said Crumb from behind the desk.

He was a portly man with a wide grin that never seemed to leave his face. There were bits of meat, probably synthmeat, stuck between his yellowing teeth. His hair was tied back into an unflattering ponytail, and he wore an old denim jacket emblazoned with numerous logos of mostly defunct corporate brands. His eyes looked tired, especially above the exaggerated smile.

"Well, you'll just have to take a look for yourself. The shifting sands happened to bless us a little today by revealing a couple of new structures outside the village in G9. What was the place called again?" Jazael paused for a moment. "Kurhum? Kurham? Ah, whatever; no one's lived there for a long time. Anyway, we picked up all sorts of shit while we were out there. Something's gotta hit the mark, right?"

"Hmm, okay then," Crumb responded in a raspy tone that made him hard to hear over the building's choking AC unit.

The scavengers dumped their rucksacks onto the desk and unzipped them so that he could take a look at their contents. Inside were various metal pipes and broken mechanical devices. Scrap like this was their bread and butter, the commodity that could always be counted on to bring in a decent amount even when they didn't fully know what they were offloading.

Tulio's bag also held a bundle wrapped in stained cloth. He unwrapped it to reveal a collection of small porcelain dolls. They weren't in great condition, chipped and cracked with faded paint, but they knew that Crumb had a soft spot for odd bits of memorabilia.

The trader spent about five minutes picking things up, looking them over, and putting them down. An expert in his field, he paid

attention to every detail of what he was buying. He was perhaps Lamplight's most experienced scrap buyer, and also one of the more trustworthy ones. It wasn't as though he didn't rip people off from time to time, everyone here did, but he almost never ripped off his regulars.

"Okay," he said, sighing a little. "Well, I'll be frank. There's nothing great here, but I'll always make you the best offer I can. What do you want your payment in? Daybreak National Credit? Ascendency Drehm? PLM's new labor vouchers? Coastal Dollars? Washington Dollars? Crypto? Take your pick! I overhear a lot of people talking about MinuteToken these days, so that might be a good bet."

"Vitarian Credits," said Tulio, quickly and sternly, before the others had time to even *consider* a different currency.

"You know the total is going to end up being a bit less if it's in VC, right? Transaction fees and exchange rates, you know, they screw us over."

"Yeah, but it doesn't hyperinflate overnight whenever a regional commander gets murked. We're trying to save up a little, not just play the lottery. It's worth it for the stability."

"Fair enough. I'll take it your team doesn't object? I can split the payment between the VC and one of the others if you want me to."

"VC is fine," replied Jazael, and Faina nodded along with him.

"Alright then. I'll give you 60 VC for the metal and 20 VC for the dolls. No, 21 VC for the dolls, just to make it easier for the three of you if you need to divide it up. I really am a very generous guy, after all."

"Thanks," said Jazael, rolling his eyes a little as he passed over a large metallic token.

Crumb chuckled a little. He then pushed the wallet chip into a slot on his computer and hit a few numbers on his keyboard, loading it up with the credits. A look of hesitation suddenly appeared on his face as he remembered something, and his eyes moved slowly to the heavy sheath strapped to Jazael's belt.

“You know, Jaz,” he murmured, leaning forward. “I’m still offering two hundred VC for that knife, here and now, if you need the money.”

“Ha, I wouldn’t give it up for anything. This knife’s been by my side for so long that it’s pretty much the only possession I’d actually start to feel uncomfortable without.”

“Well, it’s your choice, but I’m only looking after you. Some people kill over as little as clean water out there, and you’ve made no secret of the fact you’re carrying a piece of real valuable hardware. An energy weapon would be a great prize for any scavenger, you know that.”

“It’d cut through them like warm butter, too! I’d like to see anyone try and take it from me. It’s just not happening,” Jazael grinned.

“Alright,” Crumb shrugged, handing back the token. “There is another way you could all make some pretty decent money. If you get there fast enough, maybe there’ll be enough of the good stuff for two or three of those energy knives.”

“Yeah? Tell us more,” Tulio enquired with a certain enthusiasm buried in his voice so subtly that Faina was certain nobody else could have really noticed it.

“There was a battle today, while you guys were out of town. The place to look is B3, along Route 42. The Daybreak National Army went after a squad of those religious cultists from the Korvarian Ascendency. It was all over in an instant, but mechs got involved on both sides, and word is that at least one of them actually dropped during the fighting. It’s supposed to be still out there right now.”

Tulio straightened up, his eyes sharpening.

“The noise,” Crumb continued, “left the group who heard it all shaken up. They came in here telling me they thought the mechs were coming for us, and that Lamplight was finally going to be wiped off the map! I’m not sure who else they told, but word will probably spread quickly that there’s money to be made. Mechs have all kinds of valuable parts and rare metals inside them. Hell, what I’m thinking is,

maybe they even left the power core. The factions scattered so fast that they wouldn't have had time to extract it."

"Thanks for the heads up, we'll go check it out right away. We don't want to miss the opportunity to snag a mech core; people are always saying that even just one of those monsters could power the whole town and then some."

"Wait," said Faina sharply, "I really doubt they'd leave something that valuable behind. Let's not let ourselves get too excited about this. A recent battlefield is going to be incredibly dangerous."

The people of Lamplight were highly susceptible to rumors and misinformation. An innocent suggestion or mistake easily spiralled into a grand delusion once it passed through a few campfires and dive joints. Small skirmishes turned into epic scale warfare and potential paychecks turned into wealth beyond measure. Faina was conscious of how it was up to her to temper her teammate's expectations.

"A mech core has never actually been sold in Lamplight before, right Crumb?" Faina asked, already fairly certain of the answer.

"Hmm, well, not to my knowledge. Honestly, I've never even seen a mech core in person, but there's a first time for everything. It's good to have some healthy optimism, no?" Crumb let out a raspy laugh. "There was a battle, there will be loot, and there will be money. Don't stress over the details, sure, but it's definitely worth checking out. I promise!"

"I think we're too tired right now to go out again. We've already been on one long expedition today and I don't think we have another one in us. Even you, Tulio, look like you're about to crash and burn. You think you're good at hiding it, but no amount of willpower will vanish the bags under your eyes. We've got to get some rest now or we won't be at our sharpest if we run into trouble."

This wasn't the first time she'd had to talk her friends down from acting brashly. They rarely did the introspection required for them to take proper care of themselves, and so the burden usually fell on her. She sometimes found it frustrating, babysitting was certainly not her

desired calling, but she cared about them a lot. The absolute most frustrating part was just that Tulio knew all of this and still put up resistance anyway. Faina figured he didn't like the loss of control.

"I'm tired, sure, but I can push through it. Remember what we're saving up for. Remember our goal. A thousand other people want that same thing, and we've got to beat them to the prize. Do you think they'll stop and give us time to take breaks? It's not how this works. We have to keep going when there's a job this good, Faina."

Crumb watched them as they talked, but reached with one hand towards his newspaper. He still had a grin on his face, but his eyes weren't part of it. He clearly wanted to get back to reading whatever article he had been in the middle of when the scavengers had entered his shop, and there was always a limit to how much he'd try and push them towards any particular course of action. It wasn't his place to offer advice, as he had never been a scavenger and he didn't have much personal experience with the dangers of the open desert.

The AC filled the brief gap in conversation with an ominous rattling.

"Faina's right, as usual. My knees are screaming at me! We definitely need to take a break before doing anything else. I'd probably drop dead if you marched me out there right now," Jazael laughed, alone.

"Fine," replied Tulio. "Outvoted. We'll take a break so that the two of you can have your beauty sleep. We're not staying out of action for long though. We set out first thing in the morning, agreed?"

"First light," said Faina, knowing that was all Tulio would ever concede.

They gathered up their now-empty bags and pocketed their newly earned credits. Jazael said his goodbyes to Crumb, and then the three turned to leave. Crumb switched on a crackling radio and went back to reading his newspaper.

“Thanks for the business! See you all again soon, and good luck!” he said, as the bluesy chords of century-old rock music followed them out the door.

The three went straight from Crumb’s Dealership to The Lazyday Hostel, where they were known by the staff. The owner made sure they always got a special rate and a private locker, so they never stayed anywhere else. That was not to say that it would have been in any way expensive had they not secured the discount. The hostel was a run-down place even for Lamplight, a sheet metal shanty built into the bombed out husk of an old convenience store, but all they needed were four walls and three mattresses.

Jazael was the first to get to sleep, knocking out almost immediately. Tulio followed, seemingly unfazed by Jazael’s loud and abrasive snoring. Faina found it a lot harder to keep her eyes closed. She lay awake on her mattress for some time, watching over her sleeping comrades, before finally getting any rest.

She knew Jazael was right whenever he raved about Daybreak’s situation. Leaving was the only sensible choice. Buy fake identity papers, secure transit, and put distance between themselves and the war. It made sense as the course of action most likely to give them all a chance at a good life. But still, as she thought about it, a knot tightened in her chest.

There would be nothing satisfying about leaving while others are still struggling just to survive. She wanted a future, but she wanted Daybreak to have one too, and she wasn’t sure what that would take. There was always the possibility of joining one of the factions, but she agreed that they all did more harm than good. Helping herself and those closest to her seemed like all she could really do. There was no guilt in it, but it left her feeling hollow.

Faina turned onto her other side and pulled her thin wool blanket up to her chin.

III.

Four hours later Faina got up, choked down a cold breakfast straight out of a can, and then got herself ready for the day. She stretched her aching muscles, tied her chestnut hair into a loose ponytail, and then splashed some water on her face in an attempt to offset some of her fatigue. It was only a conditioned response, but it helped her a little.

Although it was always Jazael who made the most noise about it, Faina could tell that all three of them were still sleep deprived. A few more hours of rest would have felt like a godsend, but four would have to do. They were back to work.

The trio stuffed their bags with water, protein bars, and basic medical supplies. They then each picked up a rifle and strapped a few ammo pouches to their belts. Nobody was expecting a firefight and nobody wanted one, but being prepared for an emergency was always worth the extra weight.

The rifles were built in Daybreak about 40 years ago, in the factories of the Linkt Industrial Zone. They were relics of relics, outdated before they even went into production. The ruling class of the region, the PLM, were Marxist-Leninists clinging desperately to the imagined glory of foreign nations that had long since ceased to exist. The rifles, SVD-130s, were essentially just off-brand Soviet SVT-40s. Aside from the name, the weapons had hardly been altered from the original 1940s design.

It was still dark as they left Lamplight, with the sun rising only as the buildings and burn barrel glows of the town began to recede into distant specks. They had wrapped up their preparations in good time, and Faina was glad that this journey would be a bit shorter than the previous one. The group marched together at a brisk pace.

Although they were going in a different direction to yesterday, direction hardly made much of a difference in this area of Smoke Desert. The same towering cliffs could be seen in the distance, the same sun blasted their tanned skin, and their boots were still being

worn down with each step. Despite this, and despite her tiredness, Faina was in relatively good spirits. A mech core was absurd, but a quick and tidy profit was still likely.

She found herself admiring the morning sky. A vibrant pink lit up the desert hills and cut through some of the usual gray before pushing up against the starry blanket of the night. In the other direction, the cliffs in the distance had turned a mellow blue, sedating the violence of their jagged appearance. It seemed to shine with beauty.

The approach to their destination was clearly marked out by scorch marks and spent shell casings. They cautiously climbed a dune overlooking what they surmised would be the main battleground. Along a dusty road were a couple of crushed pickups, a tank, a blackened APC that looked like it had been dipped into the deepest pits of hell, and the collapsed wreckage of a once-mighty mech. Smoke had drifted in from the desert, giving the scene an even more devastated feeling.

"Well, fuck. I'm glad that thing is definitely not getting up," said Faina, shocked to see it despite having been forewarned. Mechs were already pretty rare and dead mechs were even rarer.

It seemed to be a variation of NOMAD TWO, perhaps the most common mechanoid frame. One of its two legs had been ripped clean off, and it had clearly collapsed sideways before it was able to lower itself onto a pair of steel plate chain tracks fitted to its front. It was riddled with bullet holes around a large dent in its hull that suggested an even mightier mech must have walked right over it at some point. The sight was somehow pathetic. Its potential for intimidation had been completely drained away by the implication of an even more powerful predator.

"*Shit*, we left it too late," muttered Tulio, clearly irritated but still trying to keep his voice low. "You see that, by the mech? A pair of guys are going through it right now! If we'd slept less, or maybe just walked faster, we'd be the ones down there. They're going to take all the good stuff! They could have the core in their bag right now."

“Don’t get too stressed. If there are only a few of them, there will be a lot of valuable parts that they can’t carry, just like there’ll be a lot of stuff that we can’t carry. They’re just going to fill up their bags and move on. We’ll go in after they leave,” Faina said calmly.

“No, screw that! It was you two who wanted to sleep! I wanted to get back out here and make some money. I’m not going to miss out on a big haul just because of one poor decision that I was forced into.”

“Hey, don’t pin the blame on us. You were tired too, and being tired can kill out here. Anyway, what would your alternative be? There isn’t anything we can really do about this. We have to wait.”

Tulio’s stoicism had been shattered, but only briefly. He took a few long and deep breaths to return himself to level-headedness before continuing the conversation. Faina knew that it wasn’t just for the team’s sake but also for Tulio’s own self-image that he worked to remain calm. It was common in Daybreak, sometimes even religiously motivated, for people to feel shame about intense emotional responses.

The two scavengers in the distance were still completely unaware that they were being watched. They were shouting happily about one of their finds, clearly not too worried about drawing attention. It seemed unlikely to Faina that they had come from Lamplight as veteran scavs. They were probably inexperienced and had just stumbled upon the wreckage by chance.

“Okay, I’m sorry for losing my cool, but I do have a plan. It should be simple. We’re going to sneak down there and get behind that APC. Then, we’re going to jump out and point our guns at them. They’re going to hand over whatever it is they’ve picked up and make themselves scarce. We get the first pick, we go back to Crumb, and we get rich.”

“Seriously? Your plan is to rob them? That’s not how we work. They haven’t done anything to hurt us, so there’s nothing moral about it, and you know how risky it is to turn your gun on anyone, right? They’re almost definitely going to be armed. Jazael, tell him.”

“Eh, well, I’m not going to pretend like I’m above this kind of thing,” Jazael said sadly. “I don’t like holding people up, but I’ve done it before and had it done to me too. No one actually wants to steal from others, but everyone needs money, and it’s hard out here. There’s no way to get rich that doesn’t involve stepping on someone else’s toes. It’s just how things work.”

“I still don’t like this idea at all.”

“We’ll be quick about it and nobody will get hurt. If there’s actually a mech core down there, well, I can tell you now that you’ll forget you ever had any doubts about doing this.”

“Faina, you’re outvoted this time,” Tulio said with an air of authority. “Now, both of you, get your rifles ready. We should make sure that it really just is those two before we jump them. Scan the landscape for possible threats as we move.”

Faina let out a quiet sigh of resignation. Her team was her entire life and they had to move as a unit. If they were going to do something, even if she didn’t like it, she had to be part of it. She would watch their backs and do whatever needed to be done.

It wasn’t as though she didn’t understand their mindsets either. They had some kind of choice, sure, but it wasn’t much of one in the face of their miserable surroundings. Most people will do extreme things when put into extreme situations.

They held their guns steady and mentally prepared themselves for danger. When the two scavengers by the mech had their backs turned, Tulio gave the signal to move. They scrambled over the ridge of the dune and slid skillfully behind one of the vans. From there, they dashed behind the ruined APC. Faina’s heart was beating fast as she clutched her SVD-130 close to her chest.

Before they had time to compose themselves, they heard sand shifting behind them. Swirling around, the three came face to face with a kid who looked to be in his early teens. He was short and dressed in dull yellow rags that were quite a bit too big for him. They were similar to the ones on the scavengers they had been planning to jump, which

made it obvious that the boy was part of the same group. There was a machine pistol in his left hand.

“Ah, fuck,” Jazael muttered, as the kid aimed the weapon towards him.

The boy’s cheap dust mask was down, exposing his youthful, frightened face. He had caught them off-guard, but with a move that had clearly not been premeditated. Now, the boy had no idea what to do with them. He didn’t say a word to them, he didn’t call out to his friends, he just kept the gun aimed at Jazael. His pupils flitted between the rifles that the three were carrying.

“Hey, kid, put the gun down,” Faina spoke gently, removing her hands from her weapon and letting it dangle on its shoulder strap as she faced her empty palms towards the boy. “We don’t want anyone to get hurt. We’re out here just trying to make a living the same as you, and your people got here first, so we’ll just back off now and promise not to cause any trouble.”

The boy didn’t reply. He didn’t even blink. His eyes were as vast and as harsh as the desert itself as he examined the trio. Faina got the impression that the boy had, despite his age, seen far too many horrors to be trusting of strangers. His machine pistol lowered for half a second, but only half a second, and then he raised the gun right back up to where it had been before. It was clear he wasn’t just going to back away, but they had to try to defuse the situation.

“We’ll throw our weapons on the ground, okay? Is that okay?” continued Faina, nodding to her gun and searching for some sign of approval.

No such sign of approval came. The boy’s dead stare carried on, stretching a few seconds of silence into a terrifying eternity. Faina looked back at him with sorrow, hoping desperately for a way out. Then, in an instant that came so fast and sudden it seemed sharp enough to cut into her very soul, the boy tore open the overstretched silence with a panicked shout.

“Help! Over here!” he squeaked to his comrades.

The trio flinched, and that was all the boy needed to send him over the edge. He pulled the trigger and sent a burst of 9mm rounds straight into Jazael's chest. The veteran scavenger's back hit the APC behind him with a thud. He left a dark red smear on the metal as he collapsed into a slumped position on the dirt and entered a state of shock.

Tulio reacted with almost superhuman speed, raising his rifle and firing a single shot through the boy's skull. The bullet exploded out the back of his head in a flurry of bone and viscera, but Tulio had already turned away from the gruesome sight. He gestured at one of the trucks and then made a quick dash for it with Faina close behind.

From a crouching position behind the vehicle, Faina easily worked out where the other two scavengers were without even looking. They had gone quiet after hearing the gunshots and were now trying to sneak up on the APC, but this battlefield was not an easy place to remain stealthy in. Faina's keen ears had picked out their footfall disturbing bits of scrap half-buried in the sand. She nodded to Tulio and they used their fingers to count down from three for a surprise attack.

The two of them jumped up, fired their rifles a few times over the bed of the pickup, and then ducked back down again. A shrill cry of pain echoed through the air, confirming that at least one of their shots must have hit their mark. Still, they could not be certain of having actually downed anybody.

Counter-fire struck the other side of the truck with loud and rapid crashes. Faina couldn't register exactly how many shots were fired, but she could tell they were still coming from two separate guns. She could also tell that their enemies were firing erratically, their shots weren't being aimed carefully, and this gave her a small burst of confidence. They were panicking.

"One more time, let's get them!" growled Tulio.

"Go right," replied Faina.

They counted down again. Three, two, one. Faina leaned left out of cover and Tulio leaned right. They fired a series of shots at their

panicked foes, dropping them into the road. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

“Fuck!” shouted Faina. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Jazael and the boy were on one side of the APC, and the two scavengers they had just downed were on the other. One of the scavengers was clearly dead. A bullet had gone through his eye, and he had more holes in his arm and chest. The other scavenger was not far off from joining his friend. He had been shot in the neck and was making a nightmarish gurgling sound as blood gushed forth from the wound. Faina felt certain that it was one of her bullets lodged in his throat, and thinking about it made her feel sick.

She had killed before, but only in the kind of self-defence that was do-or-die from the outset. This time, it was her group who had planned on drawing first, even if they had been caught out in the process. Dizzy with emotion, she understood that it exposed a capacity for ugliness inside of them that must have always been there. They had been ruthless.

Tulio ushered her away as he walked over to the dying man and finished him off with his knife. It was the only option for easing the fellow scavenger’s suffering. Although Tulio’s face remained stern, his hands were shaking slightly as he drew his bloodstained blade away.

Faina went to check on Jazael. She was hoping that he had somehow survived his injuries, or that she’d at least be able to say goodbye to him, but these hopes were in vain. Their teammate was dead.

IV.

Jazael's dead eyes gazed lifelessly at the boy's ruptured skull. The old man's eyes were wide open, and his inner eyebrows were frozen upwards with a mixture of shock and sadness. His last moments had been spent drowning in horror, the gravity of the tragic situation pulling his consciousness into the dark as he bled out.

"I can't believe it," Tulio said, walking up to Faina as she collapsed into the asphalt next to Jazael.

"I can. We picked a fight where we shouldn't have. We got all these people killed including our friend," she replied with tears streaming down her face.

"It's, yeah, it's awful. I'm sorry it turned out this way. You know, I always thought of the old man as invincible. You get that, right? He always seemed too stubborn to die. It never even crossed my mind that some stupid kid could be the end of him," he exhaled.

Sadness and anger tinged his eyes and voice, but it seemed muted. Jazael had been Tulio's friend for a long time, and they had gone on a lot of scavenging runs together, but Tulio was no stranger to bereavement. He had lost friends and family before this and was already used to pushing through the grief and just getting on with life. As for the other three lives that had been lost, Tulio would do his best to ignore them entirely.

He left Faina and went over to the downed mech. There, he started rooting through a rucksack that was dropped there by the other group of scavengers, spilling its contents onto the ground before angrily tossing the bag aside when he didn't find what he was looking for. He then climbed onto the mech and stuck his hand into a messily punctured hatch on the side. Faina moved to where she could watch him, but stayed close to Jazael.

"Damn," Tulio shouted over to her, "the power core is already gone, of course! Those guys who shot at us didn't have it and it's not in the power hatch either. I should have known! It's like you said,

nobody's going to leave behind something that valuable. Whichever mech pilot messed up this one must have stopped to grab its core.

Aside from the mech, this wasn't even a big fight. Crumb was just exaggerating like always. This isn't going to be worth losing a companion. I mean, nothing could be, but I had at least hoped for us to have a sliver of good luck today. This is bullshit."

He climbed off the mech and went about collecting fallen weapons with frantic haste, throwing himself fully into the job. In addition to the fresh bodies from their own firefight, he discovered a few dead DNA and KA soldiers. Some of them were a mess of red holes and spilled guts, as though they had been torn to shreds by a mech's HMGs. Tulio took their radios, their knives, and their patches. He also got a watch off of one of them. It was an old model with obvious signs of wear and tear, but its luxury Cygnet branding was recognizable even at a distance.

"Hey, come on! Aren't you going to help?" he called over to Faina.

She was still sitting silently alongside Jazael and the boy. While Tulio had been scavenging the ruined battlefield, she had removed the boy's cloak and placed it over his mangled face. Some of his blood was on her clothes.

"I don't want to do this anymore," replied Faina, but the wind drowned out her words.

"What was that?"

"I said I don't want to do this anymore!" she yelled it this time.

Tulio stopped scavenging for a moment. He put down his bag and walked over to her. He looked confused.

"Don't want to do what anymore, Faina?" he asked in the softest voice he was capable of, which was still too stern to be considered calming in a moment like this.

"I don't want to keep scavenging! I don't want to loot corpses, mechs, or anything else! I don't want to be here! I don't want to compete with people who are struggling just as much as us! I don't

want to spend my life hauling rucksacks through the desert and watching my friends die! I'm so fucking sick of it all. It's all for nothing. It all hurts so much and it's always for nothing."

"Well," Tulio drew in his breath and thought carefully about what to say to her. "We should talk about this when we get back to Lamplight. It's hard to lose someone you care about, I cared about him too, and I know this kind of life takes its toll, but for now you should just make sure we bag up as much of this stuff as possible. I promise we'll get some real downtime as soon as we're home."

"It's not just 'someone I care about', it's Jazael! He was my friend for so long— your friend for so long! He's always been with me in this, he even taught me most of what I know about surviving this lifestyle, and now he's gone." she said angrily as she stood up and began to lift Jazael's body.

"Come on, you know he meant a lot to me, but I can't deal with this right now. It's not the time or place. We have to gather the scrap and get out of here. Put the body down."

"You're always so callous."

"I..." Tulio looked genuinely hurt as he struggled to find the right words to say. "I don't mean to be, I just have to be."

"And what does that even mean, Tulio?"

"Jazael would want us to make money," he said, with a flicker of hesitation. "It's the way of the world, right? We're going to need a lot of money if we're ever going to leave Daybreak. You hate this way of life? You want to get out? You've got to go through hell, first."

"And where would we even go? If we got out? You know we never made a realistic plan. It was always a pipe dream," Faina said as she started to lift Jazael again.

"Vitaria, maybe? We'll talk about it in Lamplight and work out the specifics then. Please just leave the body alone already," Tulio's brows twitched. He was getting increasingly agitated as he spoke.

"I want to bury him," Faina responded bluntly.

“That’s... I mean, there’s no time for that. We can’t bury people out here. Even the DNA didn’t bury their dead. It’s not safe for us to be around this wreck any longer than we have to be. More scavengers could show up at any moment and assume from the bodies that we’re hostile. We only have time for the haul.”

“I don’t care about the haul!” Faina said through sobs. “I just don’t want to leave our friend out here. He deserves a proper send-off by the people who cared about him. Is a bag of guns and scrap metal worth more than that to you?”

“Then I’ll fucking keep all the credits for myself, how about that?” he shouted with a voice that boomed across the desert. “You think I like doing this shit? You think I’m happy that he’s dead? You’re being hysterical! Not thinking straight! Of course I’m not happy about any of this, but we need the money, Faina! We don’t have a choice about it. This isn’t just what we do, it’s the only thing we can do.”

“Then what are we living for?” replied Faina, quietly, feeling utterly broken.

No more arguments were exchanged. That was their limit. Faina was too upset to argue with Tulio, and he was too upset to argue with her. Anything else would cause an escalation that neither of them wanted.

He called out her name a few times as she dragged Jazael through the sand and away from the battlefield, but it didn’t seem like he could think of anything else to say. As Faina got further away, he went back to searching for objects of value to add to his rucksack. Eventually, Faina crossed over a hill and the two could no longer see each other.

After walking for a while through the desert, Faina stopped at the base of the mountains and laid Jazael down. She was a fair distance away from the skirmish now, and Tulio probably was too if he had been genuine when emphasizing the time pressure they were under. Hopefully he was okay, she thought as she sat down for a few minutes of rest.

While resting there, she examined Jazael's energy knife. It had a very simple but menacing design. The handle was gray with curved finger grooves that were studded to provide extra grip, the blade was black with a sharp, pale blue edge, and the guard too was black. Beneath the guard was a hidden trigger that Faina knew would ignite the edge of the blade with plasma energy. This energy would allow it to cut into more or less anything that wasn't also charged with that same energy, and that was what made the knife so incredibly valuable. She put it back into its sheath, which she then took from Jazael and attached to her own belt.

Once she had gathered enough energy and willpower, she buried him in a shallow and sandy grave. She then gathered up stones and piled them up on his place of rest one by one. Jazael had never been religious, and she had never been religious either, but she felt an urge to say a prayer for him anyway.

In the end, she couldn't remember the words to one, so she just spent a while reminiscing about their time together.

It was Jazael who had taught her a lot of the survival tricks that now seemed like common sense. When she first started out as a scavenger after running away from a refugee camp, not many people were willing to take her seriously. She got awful deals on scrap and found it hard to partner up with anyone. Jazael was kind and, despite his grouchiness, he taught her what she needed to do in order to start earning respect around Lamplight. He had introduced her to Tulio, to Crumb, to Lazyday Hostel, and to a myriad of other useful contacts. His influence would stay with her forever, no matter what she did next.

It would have been nice to have made it out of Daybreak alongside him, she lamented. Jazael had been pushing sixty, but weathering hardship for so long had made him seem even older than that. Not a single day of his life had been lived outside of the shadow of war. He had been tired of the fighting, tired of this country, and he had deserved something better. All Faina could do for him now was to remember him fondly.

Jazael was entombed beneath the cliffs, those prison wardens who would watch over him until the end of everything.

V.

Faina was heading back towards Lamplight at a slow pace, taking periodic sips from her canteen. She didn't have much to look forward to there, but she thought about getting a big, warm meal at one of the Copper Street diners that Jazael used to frequent. There would be quite a few regulars who'd want to hear about what happened to him, and Tulio would be unlikely to spread the miserable news much further than Crumb. After that, Faina would go to the lockers at Lazyday Hostel and sort out his belongings.

Her plans were interrupted when a strange sight entered her view. It appeared at first to be a small dust cloud spinning wildly around a single point in the otherwise empty desert. The rest of the sand was undisturbed by wind, and there was naught but the faintest breeze on her neck. When she examined the cloud more closely, she realized that it was encircling a small concrete structure. The storm swirled around the site rather than through its broken windows or flimsy wooden door. It was as though its purpose was to protect the building from intruders.

Faina rubbed her eyes and cautiously moved closer. When she was about a meter away from the vortex of sand, she tried to peer through at the building on the other side. At that moment, the swirling abruptly stopped. Sand began to fall to the ground, and it was a matter of seconds before the cloud had dispersed entirely.

A broad-shouldered figure now stood before Faina. She had not seen him emerge from the building; it felt more to her like he had just simply taken the place of the vanished dust cloud. She took a couple of steps back, surprised, and he advanced menacingly towards her.

In his face she saw a young man, an old man, a boy, a girl, a smile, and a frown. She saw him grow and shrink, bulge and shake, and effortlessly blink his entire body across the distance between them. She stared into his blue, green, black, brown, red eyes and felt a wave of fear crash through her. This man did not exist. His existence was not possible.

The man could not have existed, and yet he reached out with an oversized hand and gripped Faina's shoulder. His grip, at least, did exist. It was a tight grip that dug into her skin and threatened to bruise her, even break her. She imagined herself like one of the porcelain dolls they'd sold to Crumb the day before.

Faina pulled away, turned her body to one side, and then threw a punch at the man's face. It was a quick and hard jab that should have stunned him, perhaps even knocked him out. Her fist connected, and then a sharp pain shot up through her forearm. The figure did not move even an inch.

"What the hell? Who are you?" Faina gasped as she stumbled backwards.

To her shock, there were now two more figures jittering towards her. They were quickly closing in from the left and right, even though there had only been open wasteland in these directions before. Both of the new assailants were just as ethereal as the first. Their bodies and faces changed as she observed them, making her feel dizzy and nauseous.

The figure to her left pounced, but she managed to swerve away before they could grab her. She knew that fighting the three demons head on was out of the question, so she just had to hope that she could find an opportune moment to make a run for it. Something tripped her up.

It was as though the ground beneath her had shaken and come loose. There was nowhere for her feet to stand, no way to regain her balance, and she fell flat onto her face. Dazed and frightened, Faina waited for her attackers to make their move. She readied herself to grab Jazael's energy knife and launch a surprise counter with the powered blade.

An attack never came. Faina stood up and the figures were gone. She kept one hand on the hilt of the knife as she started to back away from the building, erratically checking her surroundings for

danger. She had no idea what she had just experienced, but it felt too dangerous to stick around and find out.

“Hold up!” a voice shouted from inside the building.

“What?” said Faina, lost for words. “Who the fuck are you? What just happened?”

Out of the house emerged a woman in a rust-coloured jumpsuit with a pair of oversized sand goggles on her forehead. She was about a foot shorter than Faina and significantly less muscular. Her long black hair was tied into a messy bun that looked as though it could fall apart at any moment.

“Who are you?” asked Faina once more, calming down slightly as she assessed that the woman was posing no threat.

“I’m Rayli. I’m sorry if we hurt you at all. We weren’t sure who you were and didn’t want to take any chances. We thought KA had people around here.”

“Why would KA have people skulking about all alone? And who is ‘we’, exactly?”

Faina studied Rayli for clues about her person. She was young, and the jumpsuit could well have been an old PLM mechanic’s uniform with the patches torn off. A conscript turned deserter? It was hard to tell. She didn’t seem like a soldier at least, and the PLM hadn’t been seen in these parts for a couple of months.

Another person stepped out of the building and came to stand a few paces behind Rayli. He was tall, likely in his mid thirties, and had wavy copper hair with messy stubble that made him look goofy rather than rough. He had a lot of gear on him, and it was really high-grade stuff. The body armor covering his chest looked like one of the special models that the militaries of Daybreak only ever offered to their commissars and spec op units, and he had a powerful BLAST-250 revolver holstered on each hip. He gave an awkward smile and waved at Faina.

“Well,” Rayli continued, glancing briefly at her silent companion. “There’s not much to it yet. We’re just scav, really. Scavs with a

dream, I guess. That's Airam there behind me, and he's the closest thing we have to a leader, but we like to think we're pretty democratic. It's just us two here at the moment."

"Airam... As in Airam the Adrift?" Faina asked, surprised.

She had never seen him in person before, but Jazael and his friends had mentioned him a few times while trading news and gossip. She knew that he had been born in Lamplight and had a good reputation amongst scavengers there, but that he would often go off the radar for months at a time. If she weren't so irritated and confused by what she had just experienced then she would have been kind of excited to meet him.

"He sort of hates that nickname, but yeah," Rayli smirked as Airam let out an exasperated breath behind her.

"Well, I'm Faina, and I'm a scavenger too. I still don't understand what I just saw. Who were the three people that attacked me? What was up with their faces? Were they with you guys? I couldn't get a good look at any of them; it was terrifying."

"They weren't real people, they were just hardlight constructs. Like I said, it's only me and Airam here at the moment."

Faina did not appreciate the abrupt simplicity of Rayli's explanation. She had no idea what a 'hardlight construct' meant and that gave her the immediate impression that she was being toyed with.

"Uh, let me try and explain," joined Airam. "The 'people' you saw were basically physical holograms. Our device can project and shape them, but also imbue them with real force and tactile sensations, within a certain radius."

"And was the dust cloud a hologram too? It seemed different somehow," inquired Faina.

"In that case, we were practicing something a little more experimental. I have to say, it went pretty well. While we can't sustain large constructs very easily with the rusty old generator we have right now, we're brainstorming ways to use small constructs to large effect. One example of this is using thin threads of hardlight to sweep and

throw sand! We also learnt today that this same technique can throw people up into the air, but I feel bad now about testing that out on you.”

“I’m not going to say your experiment didn’t scare the living shit out of me, but I’m unharmed, so I’m not going to hold any grudges. That said, where the hell did you find this ghost projector? I’ve never heard of anything like it, and I’ve heard some tall tales.”

“So, you know that creepy facility to the east of Lamplight? It’s irradiated to hell, I know, but there’s all kinds of high-tech stuff there if you know where to look. We, that was then me and Serdesh, Rayli’s brother, were pretty desperate for a good score when we were tipped off to one of the warehouses there that was supposedly full of equipment and in surprisingly good shape. We’re idiots, so we didn’t think too much about the danger and just set off as soon as we could.

Initially, the plan was to just sell whatever we found. I didn’t expect it to be something so practical. And Serdesh, well, he didn’t make it back to Lamplight, but he was the type of person who always strived to be better, to make the most of his situation, to try. I felt like I owed it to him to be that kind of person too. Do you know that feeling?”

“Sort of,” Faina said. “I know what it’s like to lose someone and I know the feeling of needing to turn that emotion into action. I’m still going through it myself.”

“I’m sorry about that. And I know this might sound kinda crazy, but I think this projector has the potential to make a difference to the war. I don’t think anyone else out there has tech like Phantom Soul.”

“Phantom Soul?”

“Sorry, that’s the hardlight projector. No detailed blueprints, but I found notes on how to use it and that’s what it was called there. Is it too theatrical?” he touched the collar of his shirt nervously.

“It’s fine! And wow, even in campfire rumors, nothing like this exists. The major factions will all want to get their hands on the projector as soon as they learn about it, as will just about every bandit and crook in this broken country and probably far beyond. If you want

my advice, you'd probably be better off selling it on than telling strangers in the desert about it."

"Do you want to see it? It's inside," Airam beamed, completely unbothered by Faina's warning.

"Hm? Well, sure, I'm interested."

She was surprised that he was letting her get so close to something so valuable. It was a once-in-a-lifetime haul. Rayli and Airam seemed so trusting and open about it, which was not at all what Faina had come to expect from chance meetings in the wastes. The idea that it was some kind of trap crossed her mind, but it seemed too incompatible with their relaxed body language and Airam's good reputation back in Lamplight. Their guards were down, and she was already emotionally vulnerable from having lost Jazael, so she let down hers too.

They led Faina to the small concrete building and she followed them through the door. There was only room inside the structure, and it didn't contain much of note. There were shelves with scattered jars, cans, and crates of food and supplies. Then there was a table with a generator beneath it and an odd projector on top. The generator had been turned off but Faina could feel the resonant heat in the room from when it had been last used.

Faina focused on the projector. It had a large blue lens on a bulky metal body, with switches, dials, and datachip ports crowded across its face like a dashboard salvaged from something that had never been a car. She wasn't techy enough to even begin making logical sense of it, and could only think about how it seemed more excavated than invented.

"Um, so, I actually saw you back in Lamplight," said Rayli. "You and your friends were leaving Crumb's place last night. I was there to pick up supplies with another member of our group, Kravitz, who should be here in a bit with a truck. I remembered it because he seemed to know a few things about who you guys were, but I didn't

recognise you until after we dropped you on your face with Phantom Soul.”

“Oh? Sorry, I can’t say I remember seeing you there. I was exhausted yesterday. Are you one of Crumb’s regulars?”

“We’ve dealt with him from time to time. He’s not a bad guy.”

“I wonder how he would react to this ‘Phantom Soul’ you found. If anyone in Lamplight could figure out a good price for it, it would be him.”

“We’re not selling Phantom Soul,” Airam cut in. “We have a mission, a dream, we believe we can actually do something really good with this technology.”

“Like what exactly?” Faina asked.

“A society for people who grew up in the rubble. A society built by scavengers and for other scavengers and their families. A society that can hold its own against the larger factions and carve out a little piece of paradise right here in the middle of Daybreak. There’ll be no more quarrels between the people at the bottom, no more fighting just for the bare minimum standard of living, we’ll be able to rally together for once and actually make something better together.”

Airam’s words just made Faina feel sad. She wanted something better, sure, but what he was promising was too good to be true. Vague ideas about bringing people together weren’t nearly enough, she needed something actionable.

“I think you’re getting ahead of yourself here, Airam. The projector’s pretty rad, but you can’t build a nation with it. Everyone wants to build their own ‘paradise’ but I’ve never seen anyone actually do it, even with the backing of entire armies. It’s a pipe dream.”

Airam shook his head.

“I mentioned before that we’re using a diesel generator to power Phantom Soul. It wasn’t built for that, of course, it’s supposed to be able to take a power core. We’re really not yet seeing the full extent of what the device can do. It’s going to be a superweapon.”

“Okay, sure, but how would you get your hands on a power core? It’s no small hurdle to cross.”

“We’re going to use Phantom Soul to take down a mech!” Rayli blurted out excitedly with a huge grin on her face.

“Seriously? Aren’t mechs pretty much only ever taken down by other mechs? They’re tougher than tanks. It takes some really heavy ordinance to deal any sort of damage to them at all.”

Faina didn’t get an answer. The sound of an engine outside grabbed everybody’s attention. It growled closer to the building and then stopped abruptly.

“That’ll be Kravitz!” said Rayli.

The three of them headed outside and Faina watched a man in full khaki emerge from the driver’s cabin of a small truck painted in an almost identical color. The vehicle itself was old, rusty metal with a tattered canvas tent covering a bed with low sides, but its all-terrain tires were brand new. She noticed a pink plush toy on the dashboard that looked like one she could have owned as a little girl.

The man took off his cap and wiped some sweat from his forehead before greeting them with a toothy smile. Faina didn’t recognise him but thought to herself that he seemed like the kind of guy Lamplight has in spades. He was a 40-something year old man with an average build and an indistinct face. The only notable thing about him was that people out here didn’t usually stay as pale as he was.

“Hey there Airam, Rayli, and you, you’re from Jazael’s group, right? I didn’t know you guys were part of the plan. I’m Kravitz.”

“I’m Faina, and it’s nice to meet you, but I’m not part of any plan. I didn’t know these people until a moment ago. They told me about the projector but what they’re suggesting seems honestly kind of crazy.”

“Do you want to be?” asked Airam. “Do you want to be a part of the plan, I mean, not do you want to be crazy. We really need people on our side. I know it seems like I might be in over my head here, but I

really believe we can do it, and I owe it to the world to make the most of the opportunity in front of me with Phantom Soul. You're a scavenger like us and, my gut tells me, a good person. We'd be happy to have your help and we'll be able to compensate you for it plenty."

"Look, I..." Faina trailed off.

The more thought she put into it, their plan just seemed hopeless and ridiculous. Scavengers don't take down mechs even if their equipment is top-tier. They don't take down armies. They don't build real lives. They just survive for as long as they can.

"If you need to get back to your team or discuss it with them, I understand."

"No." Faina said, an image of Jazael's lifeless eyes flashing through her mind like a bullet to her psyche.

"I'm in. I want to be part of whatever you're doing, even if I think you might have your head in the clouds. Let's take down a mech!"

The team smiled at her and the nightmare of Jazael melted away in response.

VI.

They moved the generator and then Phantom Soul into the back of the truck and secured them in place amongst its other cargo using ratchet straps. Kravitz and Rayli entered the truck's cabin while Faina and Airam sat down in the back. Airam started an enthusiastic explanation of his plan only as the truck's engine roared to life. She could smell the exhaust gas.

"There have been a few mechs stomping around Smoke Desert lately. A pilot serving the KA took down another from the DNA not too far from where we were hiding out. Using a scavenged radio that we bought from Crumb, we lucked into a good idea of where they are right now. They're going to be heading from a small Forward Operating Base, where the pilot's been resting up in the immediate aftermath of the fight, to a larger base in the northwest that's capable of handling mech repairs. We're 90% sure we'll be able to intercept it while it's on route."

"Alright, and then what? You trip it up with Phantom Soul and we just hope it doesn't blast us to pieces?"

"Uh, almost. We trip it up with Phantom Soul and then we blast *it* to pieces!"

Airam, with too much dramatic flourish, pulled a cloth covering away from a wooden crate. There were two MVMs on beds of straw, portable anti-tank missile systems most commonly referred to as 'mums'. They were powerful weapons, but Faina remained skeptical.

"That most likely won't be enough. Mums can probably hurt a mech, damage it a little bit, but if that's your whole plan then I've just agreed to a suicide pact. There's no guarantee we will be able to pierce a mech's hull and completely take it out of action if we're using anything short of plasma weapons."

"Like that one?" Airam nodded towards Jazael's knife.

"Huh?"

"The energy knife. I saw it, I know what it is, and I know what it can do. You can slice through basically anything with one of those."

“Nobody’s ever taken out a mech with a knife, Airam, that’s insane!”

“Yeah, but that’s only because they haven’t been able to get close enough. It won’t be hard to slice into the mech with that thing once we’ve knocked it over.”

Faina didn’t know what to say. She sat for a moment in stunned silence. With the energy knife she really could cut into the thinner sections of a mech’s hull if she got the chance, but the idea was still absurd. It wasn’t impossible, sure, but neither was the truck getting blown up before any of them even spotted the mech.

“Alright, it’s possible,” said Faina, “but you were planning this before you even had me and my knife on-board. What were you going to do?”

“Keep hitting it and hope for the best, but I promise that’s not as delusional as it sounds. They really don’t build mechs to counter what we’re about to pull. We just need to be fast and aggressive.”

“You’ve got to think through what you’re doing better than that. If we live, I’m going to make sure you’ve got a real plan next time.”

Airam only smiled in response. There was an arrogance in it. Faina wondered if the man she was looking at was really no better than Tulio, stubbornly putting everybody’s lives on the line, but she also couldn’t imagine the two of them being friends. Airam was too relaxed and Tulio too somber. Still, she supposed she’d have to introduce them if this worked out.

They stopped by the side of a stretch of highway where a number of other vehicles lay in ruin. Aside from its tires, their battered truck fit in fairly well. Anyone moving through the area at speed wouldn’t pay a moment of attention to them. It was a good place to stage an ambush from.

Waiting for the mech was agonising. There was no more conversation, just tense silence as they waited and watched the road through an opening in the back of the truck’s canvas tent. Faina half hoped that the mech wouldn’t come, that Airam got it wrong, that they

would give up and drive her back to Lamplight where she would get drunk on Copper Street and forget that she ever agreed to something so reckless.

Taking down a mech was a terrible, terrible idea. What if Phantom Soul wasn't as effective as this team believed it would be? What if the mech's hull was thicker than they expected? What if it was followed by an escort of soldiers? What if they succeeded? Was Airam just thinking one step at a time or did he really have a vision for the future?

The ground rumbled. A large, gray shape came into view over the horizon, its hard metal edges shimmering with the light of the sun as they took form. It was tall and humanoid with guns for arms, one cannon and one powerful mech-scale heavy machine gun. Both were capable of tearing through armored tanks, let alone trucks like their one. Faina could hear the roar of its machinery growing louder. The monster was here and the plan, good or bad, was going into motion.

"Wait for my signal and then aim for the leftmost cannon using the mum," Airam ordered.

He flipped a switch on the diesel generator and then used two hands to configure Phantom Soul at an impressive speed. It spluttered loudly. Faina could not follow his movements or tell the purpose of any of the various dials he was tuning, but he felt to her like the composer of an orchestra. When he was done, and it didn't take him long, he hit a switch next to a datachip port with the word 'WALL' taped above it. The air in front of the mech shimmered and there followed a deafening crash.

Airam jerked one of the dials 90 degrees counterclockwise and Faina watched in awe as the mech was swept off its feet and onto its back in the blink of an eye. Airam then hit another port switch labeled 'THREAD' and spun the dials until the mech's cockpit was covered with a cloud of whirling sand. The pilot would have no idea what just knocked them on their ass and now they would be struggling to make out anything at all through their viewfinder. They were blind!

“Now, Faina!”

Without that encouragement from Airam, Faina believed that she might have sat in stunned silence forever. She raised the MVM and fired it at the mech’s left arm. In sync, Airam fired the other MVM at the right arm. Explosions engulfed the mech, leaving its main weapons mangled and unusable.

“Let’s fucking go!” shouted Rayli excitedly as Faina realized she had already sped out of the truck and was towards the collapsed mech, calling on the others to follow her.

Rayli’s goggles were down and her long hair was now loose and blowing about in the wind. She was holding a huge breaching charge using both hands. She hastily stuck it onto the mech and pulled a tag, setting it off. It looked powerful, but it wasn’t enough on its own.

Faina jumped out of the truck and caught up with Rayli. She pulled Jazael’s energy knife from its sheath and hit the trigger to ignite its blade. The edge lit up bright blue. Rayli looked surprised, like she’d never seen a weapon of its kind in person before.

Stepping up onto the mech’s collapsed metal frame and crouching over the area damaged by Rayli’s breaching charge, Faina cut into it with the knife. It was effortless work. The metal offered no resistance to the plasma infused blade edge. It couldn’t. Only energy shielding stopped energy weapons.

Once the metal was loose, she and Rayli pulled on it to expose the mech’s interior.

A terrified pilot, a disheveled man with huge wild eyes, scrambled out of his seat and lunged towards her. Faina was caught off-guard.

She knew immediately that this pilot was a trained soldier who could handle himself in a fight even when separated from his mech. He grabbed her wrist with one hand and her bicep with the other, twisting her arm sharply to reverse the direction of her blade. Scrambling on top of her, pushing her over, he let his body go limp so that his weight would drive the knife into her chest.

She tried to push the trigger to disable the energy current in her knife, but she was too panicked. Even if she did manage to disable it, she'd be screwed. She was about to stab herself. The pilot's crazed eyes bore into her soul. He knew these might be his last moments and was just trying to take her down with him.

Then the top of the pilot's head disappeared with a red flash and a boot swiftly kicked him off of her.

"Well, shit," Rayli said, the disgust plain in her voice.

Airam was standing with both of his BLAST-250s drawn, smoke trailing off from their barrels. He looked totally calm, almost like he was posing for a camera, with one leg on the highway and the other up on the collapsed mech. The sun turned the tips of his hair gold. For the first time Faina got a heroic impression from him. She wasn't sure if it had always been there and she just hadn't noticed before.

"And that's that," he said, matter of factly. "Everyone okay?"

"I'm not! That was so gross. You splattered the pilot's brains all over the highway. I'm going to have nightmares about this for weeks," replied Rayli.

"Ah, sorry. What I meant to say was, are you okay, Faina?"

Faina's ears were ringing from the gunshot. She felt dizzy. It had been a chaotic couple of minutes. They had taken down a mech, she had very nearly died, and then someone else had. She turned off her knife and placed it in its sheath before she sat up and got her bearings. The dead pilot was still next to her, but she avoided looking at the body.

"That pilot... He's dead. Was this always the plan?"

"If we could have taken the mech core and left him alive, I suppose we would have. It was never very likely though. Really, don't sweat it, these pilots kill people like us all the time. Tormenting scavengers is like their bread and butter. They're scum, every single one of them."

Faina was instantly reminded of Jazael's rants. It disarmed her and made it easy for her to accept that Airam was right, even if she disliked how casually the killing of a human being was being treated.

“That went so well! Let’s do it again, I want revenge for Serdesh!” Rayli said, excitedly.

“Serdesh was killed by a mech pilot?” asked Faina.

“Yeah, like I said, they kill people like us all the time. We’re still thinking big here, but Airam says he’ll recognize the vehicle if and when he sees it, and revenge is going to be sweet.”

There had been no revenge for Jazael. The boy who shot him had been in a similar position to them, a scavenger who was scared and struggling and doing things that he didn’t want to do, and it was their fault much more than his that anybody had died. Faina would feel guilty about it for the rest of her life, even if the decision to jump the scavengers hadn’t been her own.

A mech pilot? That was different. There’s a power imbalance. It isn’t killing a peer with a similar story, or an equal with a similar struggle, it’s actually punching up for once. She still wasn’t excited about killing anyone, but she could understand why Airam and Rayli might feel gleeful about revenge.

Airam helped Faina to her feet. Rayli was behind him, already climbing into the mech. She was so full of energy that Faina was exhausted just looking at her.

“You two might want to step back!” Rayli shouted, as the downed mech began to roar back to life.

“Seriously?” gasped Faina.

When a mech is about to be breached, usual practice is for pilots to enter self-destruct codes that wipe the computer systems in order to prevent their technology from falling into enemy hands. This pilot must have been so panicked that he didn’t realise they were about to get inside until the last moment, when he went into full fight-or-flight mode, so he never bricked the mech or its activation key. AI copilot systems are also capable of initiating self-destruct, but it’s not unheard of for the AI to make mistakes or for pilots to bend the rules and switch them off in order to get some alone time.

"We didn't just get a mech core, we got the whole damn mech!" Rayli's voice rang out through its speaker system.

"I think our dreams just got a little grander," Airam mused.

Even though Faina was still in shock, she couldn't help but feel hopeful. She wasn't entirely sure what she was becoming part of, but it was new and powerful. Scavengers taking down a mech was unheard of, and she had just seen it happen with her own eyes, *she had even been part of it*. Maybe scavengers were still scum as far as the rest of the world were concerned, but anything felt possible now.

VII.

They took down the truck's canvas tarp before driving it into Lamplight. Airam needed people to see him as they entered the town so that there wouldn't be mass panic when they saw the mech trailing behind. Rayli was also careful to keep its movements slow and predictable. Still, many people disappeared into their homes or down dark alleyways. Mechs were typically only associated with violence, destruction, and the enemy.

"This is our debut," said Airam. "There's no going back for me or for this town now. Everything is going to change."

"How do you feel about it?" asked Faina.

"Good. Nervous. I think everything will turn out okay, but it's a lot of pressure just thinking about it. The next step is to start turning in all of the favors I've been saving up. I'm going to need the help of a lot of people to make all of this work out just like I want it to."

Faina jumped off the truck as it ground to a halt. The gravel-littered road crunched beneath her boots as she steadied herself. She adjusted her clothes and rolled up her sleeves to cover some of the bloodstains.

"I've got to take care of a few things," she said, "then I'll meet up with you again, okay?"

"Alright, we'll be at The Cockroach," Airam replied.

The Cockroach was a plain little bar frequented primarily by long-time Lamplight residents. It wasn't the best place to find work or hire help, it didn't have the best drinks or the best food, and it wasn't the best place to spend a lot of cash and have a good time, but it did have loyal regulars who appreciated its relative quiet. She could assume that it would be full of people Airam grew up alongside.

Faina felt slightly jealous. Her own hometown had been destroyed when she was still a child. What was left of her family had then been bounced around various cities and towns without ever really giving her the chance to feel like she was truly from anywhere. No matter how long Airam left Lamplight for, many of the same people

from his childhood would always be waiting for him when he came back. This was alien to her.

She took a swig from her canteen and gave herself a moment to appreciate her surroundings. A breeze hit her face and she felt her spirits rising. Despite everything, she was alive and in good health. She might even be okay, although she never forgot how transient that state could be. There was more unpleasantness to come yet.

Faina took it upon herself to hunt down people who knew Jazael and inform them of what had happened. Some of them responded only with sad looks and curt nods, while others wanted to talk about what had happened and check if she was okay. Despite their good intentions, each conversation was painful. The wound of grief was reopened again and again.

She couldn't find everyone she had hoped to, maybe some of them were out of town, but the word would spread. Enough of Jazael's friends liked to gossip and share news that it would not take long for everyone to hear he was gone. All in all, it took a few hours of her time and the sun was setting as she politely excused herself from a final round of reminiscing with an elderly man who was vastly exaggerating a game of billiards that he and Jazael had once played.

After that, she stopped by Crumb's Dealership, which thankfully stayed open until very late most evenings. Faina entered the building to a familiar bell ring and cluttered interior. Crumb was behind the counter, again listening to the rock music of a long lost era. He looked over right away and put down his magazine before she was finished closing the door behind her.

"Ah, it's you, I was hoping you'd show up," Crumb rasped, smiling sympathetically as Faina approached.

"Hey, I take it you heard from Tulio already then?"

"Yeah, he told me about Jazael. It's sad, unfortunate stuff. The desert is an unforgiving place," he muttered.

"I miss him a lot already," Faina said, sorrow staining her words.

"I'm going to miss him too. This dealership grew alongside him. He was always there for me, not just as a business partner, but as someone I got along with. I also can't help but blame myself a little for what happened, seeing as I was the one who tipped you off about the wreckage. Tulio was furious with me for overselling it."

"Don't put all the blame on yourself. We made a poor decision while we were in the field. It was our fault that there was ever a firefight."

"He was worried about you, you know, Tulio. He told me to tell you, if I saw you, that all the profit from today is on the shared wallet chip even though he had to haul everything in all by his lonesome. It's in your locker at Lazyday."

"Is Tulio there too? I hope he's getting some rest."

"No, I don't think so, he seemed like he was getting ready to go out again. He bought some field supplies and refilled his canteens."

"He's out there all by himself?" Faina asked, and even the thought of it was giving her a headache.

"Yeah, all by himself as far as I know. He was acting calm, as he does, no tears or anything, but I can't imagine even he would be okay deep down after losing a friend. He probably needed some alone time that this town can't offer him," Crumb explained.

"I think he throws himself into whatever he's doing as a coping mechanism. He tries too hard. He'll put himself in danger."

"I told him to take it easy."

"How firmly, if he still went out anyway?" Faina questioned.

"Well, I mean, not very. You can't blame me, can you? If he makes money then I make money. It's business."

"Damn it," Faina murmured. "Well, I hope he didn't go too far at least."

Crumb's eyes darted to the energy knife attached to Faina's belt, but he chose not to say anything about it. He looked back at her and appeared to be studying her for a second.

"Stay safe, Faina."

She left the shop and walked down Copper Street to the quieter, more run-down part of town. Finding and talking to everyone had taken longer than she had expected it to, so she was slightly worried that Airam and the others would have moved on from The Cockroach. Still, they had brought a mech into town, so there was no way they would be hard to find. Every voice on the street was still talking about it.

Sure enough, she saw the mech as soon as she turned the corner leading to the bar. It was an intimidating sight. The mech stood directly outside The Cockroach's unassuming façade, looming over the building like a threat. Rayli was still in the cockpit and was using the mech's speakers to communicate with a group of women who were ogling at its machinery. They seemed to be incredibly excited about it, even the parts that were clearly very damaged, to the point where Faina was able to peg them very quickly as being either mechanics or engineers.

Their conversation seemed too technical for her, so she just waved at the mech and hoped Rayli would notice her. She did, and she used one of the machine's mangled gun arms to wave back. Some of the women turned their heads as she passed.

Faina entered the bar part-way through a conversation between Airam and a man she didn't know. They were sitting at a table with half a dozen others, including Kravitz, with another dozen crowding around to listen to their conversation. They were gracious enough to make some space for her in the circle as she approached.

"I mean, Eastern Sun ain't so bad. Their goals align with a lotta what you're sayin', actually. They wanna help people," the man was saying.

"They're a world away. They're on the other side of the radlands and are utterly besieged on multiple fronts. It makes them a bit of a non-factor right now. They're too focused on staying alive as a faction and defending what they've got. It's even creating a kind of siege mentality, from what I hear," Airam explained.

"If you say so. I juss think if you're plannin' on actually carvin' out territory in Daybreak, it'll be a lot easier if ya have allies. They're the only ones who're likely to give you the time o' day. They always say they believe in self-rule and all that."

"Maybe in the future we'll have something to talk about. Right now, we just don't have anything to offer each other. Besides, the way they're organized, I have no idea who I'd be supposed to contact."

"Fair enough," said the man, relaxing into his seat.

"What about the PLM? The People's Liberation, urm, Militia? Movement? You know the one I mean, right?" asked someone from the standing crowd.

"Fuck the PLM!" another person replied, vitriol in his voice like they'd done him some personal wrong.

"Good cars though," said Kravitz, "I'd love to get my hands on the wheel of a Kestrel. It's high-performance but with a beautiful vintage design. You don't see that often! ES on the other hand are all about buses or some shit."

"Only the top party officials ever get issued Kestrels," said Airam. "Also, it only takes twenty minutes to walk from one side of town to the other, so what would you need a civilian car for? That's really not important."

"Cars are always important! Hey, maybe we'll expand now that we have your big fancy mech. We could build a ring road," he smirked.

"Come on, let's take this a little more seriously," Airam said, noticing Faina standing in the crowd and gesturing towards her. "Someone grab a chair for my friend, Faina, she's a hero! She helped us take down the mech!"

At this, people gasped, cheered, and patted her on the shoulder. She enjoyed a barrage of compliments that came too fast for her to discern who was saying what. Someone squeezed a seventh chair by the table and she was practically pushed into it.

As they talked, Airam workshopped some of his plans for the future. The mech would need repairs, first of all, but he had a lot more

savings than most scavengers. By focusing on long excursions that took him further away from town, often into irradiated areas that others would never dare to approach, he had all but guaranteed valuable hauls. Then, thanks to being born in Lamplight, he had plenty of reliable contacts who always gave him their very best prices. He seemed confident that he would be able to get the mech's weapons and hatch replaced while still having money to burn.

After that, he wanted to establish a kind of rapid response system. He envisioned checkpoints in a radius around Lamplight that would watch out for faction-aligned convoys and mechs. If they entered the radius, word would be communicated back to town and he or Rayli would go out to meet the threat. Using the mech and Phantom Soul together, although he held back all the specific details of his superweapon, would make them formidable in combat. Weapons and equipment from the convoys would then be used to supply a 'Lamplight Defence Front', and eventually the larger factions would begin to steer clear of the area as it became too inconvenient.

Airam was optimistic, but seemed open to listening to the crowd. Criticism never dampened his spirits. He would either suggest a slight change to his plan or admit that he was merely hoping for the best. He still had a recklessness about him, but Faina felt like community and compassion would keep it tempered. As he talked, his excitement increasing, Faina found herself lost in his words.

"Faina!" a new voice yelled out from behind her.

She turned her head to see Tulio staring at her with his hawk eyes, a glimmer of concern on his face.

"Tulio, are you okay?" she said.

"Forget about me, what the hell happened? You wandered off into the desert! I should have followed you, I'm sorry, I know I really should have. I wasn't thinking straight and I regretted letting you go like that. I was worried. And now I hear you were involved in taking down a mech? How did that happen?" his voice remained calm as he spoke but his words betrayed his agitation.

“You aren't even going to believe what I've been up to. Pull up a seat and we'll talk,” Faina replied.

She recounted her story to him and the eager crowd around them, starting with Jazael's burial. The crowd consoled her about her loss and then cheered as she described their victory over the mech. An impressed punter even paid for them to drink to their heart's content. When the story was done, talk returned to the future. People chimed in with all kinds of ideas. Some were more useful than others, but all were provided with smiles and good spirits.

Faina drank more than she had planned to, and somewhere in the noise and the warmth she stopped counting the dead and just let herself be alive and amongst the living.

VIII.

Faina and Tulio had been working for Airam for a couple of weeks. Things had moved quickly and there were now a lot of people wrapped up in their operations, from Airam's extensive network of friends in Lamplight to a number of hired mercenaries with relatively classy records. Some of those mercenaries were with them today, as they prepared to attack a Forward Operating Base for the DNA.

This was an aggressive move, they knew, striking against an entire base full of professional soldiers. Still, the base was small, and they had prepared carefully. Faina felt no guilt about it either. These soldiers had been harassing and killing scavengers in Smoke Desert for some time, making it dangerous to venture too close. By taking out the base, they could make the desert safer.

The FOB was composed of several tents inside a chainlink fence with hastily constructed watchtowers at each of the four corners. The plan was to attack through the east side of the base because they knew that its vehicles were all parked on the west side. With luck, they could quickly scare all of the soldiers in that direction and then just keep up a menacing presence and watch them drive away.

One of the watchtowers spotted them before they were very close to the base and a siren began to sound. It wailed far and horribly. It didn't matter. They had expected this.

The mech, piloted once again by Rayli, had been repaired to the best of Lamplight's ability, renamed 'The Liberator', and painted in its entirety with a bright yellow color. It wasn't effective camouflage, quite the opposite, but it was striking and unique, especially as the orange sun hung low in the sky. It was also covered with jagged iron spikes that, while again not exactly practical, gave it a powerful aggressive edge. The message was that the scavengers of Lamplight weren't just hiding away anymore, they were ready to make their mark.

She put it into a running stance and it sped ahead of the two trucks that were carrying Faina and the others. It fired its refitted heavy machine gun at the watchtowers as it ran. Bullets tore through the

structures, which collapsed instantly, sending their sentries tumbling down to the earth. When The Liberator reached the base, it stomped a section of the chainlink fence flat against the ground to create an opening. They were in.

Faina thought back to how the mech had seemed when she first saw it. Her pulse had hammered. It had been terrifying, and *it was still terrifying*. The difference was only that now this monster was on their side and fighting their battles.

As the trucks caught up, Faina watched soldiers emerge from the tents wearing gray-blue fatigues and helmets. The ones with rifles were already taking cover, but some were carrying MVMs and RPGs. They attempted to fire on the mech as quickly as they could, hoping to disable its weapons before it could deal any more damage to their base. Rayli activated Phantom Soul in response, and a wall of hardlight blocked the projectiles. They exploded violently against the wall without so much as scratching The Liberator.

Faina dismounted her truck alongside Tulio, Airam, and a couple of others. The heat of the sun bit into her skin. Mercenaries were dismounting from the other vehicle. They were highly trained and heavily armored, but Faina wasn't sure they would even be needed.

Rayli switched Phantom Soul from 'WALL' to a 'SLICE' pattern that struck out at a parked APC. This was a newly written routine, untested in the battlefield, but made possible by the mech's power core. It worked better than Faina could have imagined. The APC was cut cleanly into two separate parts.

As she crossed the collapsed section of fence, raising her SVD and scanning for hostiles, she could see that most of the other side were already panicking. Some were already making a break for their trucks with the mercenaries happily firing at their backs. Faina ignored them and spotted an actual threat. She pointed it out to Tulio and Airam with a couple of hand signals.

A number of the soldiers who had fired rockets into Phantom Soul's hardlight wall had been brave and smart enough to rearm and

try again in a flanking pincer maneuver. They were planning to aim at The Liberator's sides and catch it unaware. Rayli was still focused on threats that might be in front of her, leaving her vulnerable.

Airam ran for the three soldiers on the right with both his BLAST-250s drawn. He punched large, gaping holes into two of them with well-placed shots to their chests. Faina shot the third one through his eye and winced as he clutched his face and fell to the sand.

Tulio had gone for the two on the left. He shot two bullets into the first, one in the chest and one in the head, and then dove to the ground as he realized the other was about to launch an MVM at him. It went over his head and exploded against a section of chainlink, low enough to spray sand and rocks in the air. Tulio pulled out his pistol and fired five times at the panicked soldier. All five shots connected and he slumped to the ground.

Fighting stopped for a second and the three of them were about to let their guards slip when one of the mercs was abruptly torn apart by a machine gun volley from one of the tents. Grenades flew out towards The Liberator and several soldiers swarmed out during the chaos created by the booming explosions.

Rayli, Airam, and the mercenaries all opened fire in the direction of the tents, but it was Tulio who reacted best. While everyone else was spraying and hoping for the best, he carefully spotted and picked off his targets. Faina noticed that *he was smiling*.

It unnerved her. She knew that he was good with a gun, but she had never imagined him actually taking pleasure in the fighting. It wasn't audible over the gunfire, but for a second it even looked as though he was laughing. Worse yet, some small part of her could understand it.

The base's gates were open and trucks full of retreating soldiers were on their way out. The Liberator lurched after them to hurry them away. The grenades had been too weak to do any significant damage even without Phantom Soul's wall in between the explosions and the vehicle. Mech hulls were too tough for such mundane weaponry.

One final DNA soldier jumped up from where he had been lying prone, assumed to be out of action, and lunged for Tulio in a mad, desperate maneuver that took everybody by surprise. Most likely, he was trying to take Tulio hostage. Faina aimed her rifle but couldn't get a clear shot. The soldier's gambit was that nobody would shoot at him for risk of hitting Tulio by mistake.

Instead, Tulio dropped his rifle, then twisted the soldier's arm to throw him hard against the ground. He dropped to his knees and began punching the man in the face with all of his viciousness. He hit him until he was unconscious and then hit him a few more times for good measure, leaving him bruised and bloody. There were splotches of red all over the sand.

As Faina approached, Tulio was reaching for his pistol, but he stopped once she was standing next to him. She picked up his rifle and helped him to his feet. He brushed the dust off his clothes, wordlessly.

"Good shooting, everyone," Airam said. "It's time to load up all their guns and equipment into the trucks. We want to pick this base clean and get out of here before they have any time to retaliate."

Tulio had adapted well to being infantry, and Airam had adapted well to being a leader. His voice was loud and clear for everyone present and they all began stripping their fallen enemies of their guns, helmets, and utility belts.

"Hell yeah!" said Rayli, her voice distorted by mech's speakers. "We wiped an entire base, no sweat! We can really do anything!"

"Rayli, you left The Liberator exposed for a second there. You've gotta be careful," Airam scolded.

Faina entered one of the tents and looked around. Rays of light shone through the holes they had put in the fabric and there was a soldier lying on the ground with a gaping injury in her leg. She had no weapon or helmet and was desperately applying pressure to her wound. She looked frightened for her life.

"Please, I surrender. I didn't even pick up a gun! I had no time to react!" she pleaded.

“One soldier in here, injured and unarmed,” Faina shouted.

“Alright! Just keep an eye on them. Anything else in there?”

Airam replied.

There was a table with a radio and some documents. Faina grabbed what looked like a recent map of the DNA-KA frontline and shoved it into a utility pocket. There were also chairs, some bottles of water, and a stack of large plastic crates. They were olive green and numbered but were otherwise unmarked.

“What’s in those?” she asked the injured soldier, gesturing to the crates.

“Ammo tins. There’s a lot of them. They were only meant to be here temporarily before being transferred to the other bases.”

“There’s ammo here! We’ll need multiple people to carry it!” Faina shouted again.

“Alright, we’re coming,” Airam said.

He entered with one of the mercenaries, gave the injured soldier a glance, and then checked that the crates were indeed full of ammunition. He and the mercenaries then made several trips in and out of the tent, carrying the heavy crates one at a time and in pairs.

“Why don’t we just shoot the last of the soldiers? They’re making me nervous,” said one of the mercenaries, just loud enough for Faina to overhear.

“We could,” said Airam, “but we have to pay attention to our reputation now that we’re drawing attention to ourselves. If we never leave survivors, never show mercy, we’ll be even more hated by the other factions than we already are. We don’t need to make the target on our backs any bigger.”

“If you say so.”

Once all the crates and equipment were loaded onto the trucks, the surviving soldiers were roughly dragged to the edge of the camp, where they’d be out of the way, and left there while Rayli flattened every tent and every stretch of fence using The Liberator. It would make it much harder for the DNA to reestablish the base, and it was

also a clear warning against doing so. This area was in Lamplight's sphere of influence now.

Faina climbed back into the truck. With the ammo crates, it felt more cramped and uncomfortable than it had on the drive over, but she was relieved the mission was done with. She felt herself starting to return to a resting heart rate.

"Ready to leave?" yelled Kravitz from the cabin of the truck.

"We're ready," Airam said. "Let's get home."

IX.

Lamplight's newly created flag was flying high over the old mayoral building. It was white with three thick stripes, red, orange, and yellow, placed atop one another and then curved like a rainbow. They were chosen for the colors of the desert, while their shape represented hope. Rayli had put together several designs and then chosen this one based on feedback from the locals at The Cockroach.

Faina had already come to associate the flag with something else. The yellow was the same as Rayli had used on The Liberator, and the image of the mech standing in front of the sunset was burned into her mind. Flag ideas intentionally centering the mech had been floated, but were always vetoed in favor of the 'non-violent' designs. Perhaps there was no such thing.

It was late and she was walking through the hallway connecting the various bedrooms. They were generally housing three or four people to a room, with Tulio sharing his with Kravitz and some recently hired mercenaries. Faina, meanwhile, was sharing with Rayli, which made for a nice change from sharing a room in the Lazyday Hostel with two men, but she still wasn't used to it. Even having a nice mattress felt odd and, surprisingly, made it more difficult for her to get any sleep. She needed fresh air and a mental reset.

Airam had a room all to himself which marked out his status as leader in a way that he was initially apologetic about but had since embraced. It was adjacent to the old mayor's office in the front-center of the building. The office had wide windows that gave him a panoramic view of Lamplight. They would spend hours there together, planning the movements of the LDF and The Liberator. She was thankful that he was taking things seriously and that at least some of what they were doing was well thought out and prepared for.

She headed down the stairs. On the ground floor there was a kitchen and dining room that provided food to everyone working in the building, a growing armory, several rooms for conferencing, and the radio room. The radio room was perhaps the most important one in the

building. Without it, they wouldn't be able to say they were holding territory at all. They wouldn't have a good sense of what was going on out in the desert, and they wouldn't even have solid intel on what was happening around town.

As it was, if there were any trouble or murmurings of trouble in Lamplight or the surrounding area, the radio guys would hear about it right away and report the important information back to Airam. There was at least one person staffing the room at any given time, so there would be someone there even now. They listened to reports of gunfire, fistfights, coal seam fires, sandstorms, and mysterious strangers, then sorted through it all for what was actionable.

Faina strode across the black and white marble tiles of the foyer and pushed open the building's heavy double doors. There were armed guards on either side of the entrance and she exchanged nods with one of them as she stepped out. His face was covered with a balaclava, so she couldn't tell if she knew him or not. One of the mercs, maybe, or one of the boys from Copper Street who'd signed up in the last week. He was already wearing some of the gear that was acquired during the FOB raid. Everything was moving so fast.

Tulio was outside and he turned around to face her, leaning back against the concrete balustrade that walled off the patio in front of the building. He was only dimly lit by one of the building's fluorescent wall lamps and the smoke from his cigarette trailed behind him and up past his shoulder like the strings of a marionette. He smiled at her, but he looked pensive.

"Hey, Tulio. How are you doing?" asked Faina, gently, but having to speak over the hum of the lamps.

"The same as always," he shrugged.

Faina was wearing a white tank top and some baggy pajama pants, but Tulio was still dressed like he was ready for a fight. While Faina had continued wearing the clothes they used as scavengers, mostly practical civilian clothing like cargo pants and shawls, Tulio had begun to dress himself up like a soldier. He had even shined his boots.

"You were impressive today. I haven't seen anyone fight like that before. It scared me a little bit."

"Thanks. It's egotistical to say it out loud, I know, but I'm good at fighting. I can keep a level-head during combat. I can make snap decisions. That's the key, I think."

"It didn't really look like a level-head, it looked more like you were enjoying it," Faina probed.

"I might have been. I don't think that's terrible. I was still efficient."

"I just want to make sure that you're okay."

"Sure. I'm fine," Tulio replied, bluntly.

"You're not still feeling bad about Jazael? Or..." she paused. "You don't feel guilty about what happened that day, when you had to shoot that kid?"

"No, not really. Things like that just happen sometimes."

"But it was our fault. It's in my nightmares. I feel like we're bad, broken people."

"Well, we're fixing everything, right? We're building a better world or whatever. I don't buy everything that Airam says, but we can make people less desperate. That's what kills us, the desperation. Already seeing fewer drunks and junkies."

"We still fucked up and got four people killed, Tulio," Faina said.

"We've both killed more since then; you didn't complain. The DNA soldiers don't seem to weigh on your mind at all."

"That's not what I'm asking you about right now."

"I'm not saying that it was good, I'm saying that we have to keep moving forward regardless. Everyone makes mistakes, does things that are terrible, and not all of it can be fixed. We keep going," Tulio insisted.

"I've been throwing myself into this project as much as I can, but in a way it's just a coping mechanism. I was feeling the need to distract myself from our problems and make myself believe that I was

making a positive difference, but all of this has its issues too. I've been wondering if this is actually what Jazael would want for us."

"What Jazael would want?" he raised an eyebrow. "Elaborate on that."

"I mean, he hated all of this faction stuff. We're establishing ourselves as one now, becoming passengers for this big militarized project, The Lamplight Defence Front. We don't have the resources and reach of the other factions, but even so."

"It's a faction for scavengers by scavengers. This is good, it means we can stand up for ourselves. He hated that we were Daybreak's lowest of the low. The LDF lets us change that."

"I suppose so. It sounds pretty good when you put it like that."

"And it can be even better once Airam does what some of us keep telling him to. We need to lay down the law here and start making some real money. If we're protecting these people, they should pay us. We have to start taxing trade. It would let us do a lot more."

"See, that's the thing, it's going too far. We will end up replicating the problems of other factions if we start propping up the same structures that they use to control people," Faina said.

"We've got to make money somehow, both the LDF *and* us personally. It will fund staff, training, and equipment. It will also fund us getting to live some pretty good lives. We can get our own houses, luxuries, and people to do all the shit we don't want to do anymore. Jazael always wanted us to live well," Tulio replied, unmoved.

"I think he mostly just wanted us to get out of here and live away from all of the fighting. Not luxury, just peace, maybe sipping piña coladas on a beach somewhere. I've never even seen a beach," Faina said wistfully.

"It's just more sand, isn't it? Who cares?" Tulio gave a half-smile.

"Very funny."

"You know, I'm hearing you. If you want to go, we can still make that happen. It'll just take a few more months of working for Airam and we can guarantee a safe and comfortable exit."

"And you'll come too?"

"No, I've decided that I want to stay here in Lamplight. I think this is right for me, but I do want what's right for you too. If it will make a difference, I'll let you use some of my half of the group savings."

"I worry," Faina said.

"About what?"

"That you'll..." Faina struggled to find the right words, "become someone different."

"Maybe I will. I'm already a different person from who I was a month or even a week ago. We always change and, for better or worse, there's no going back. I know I've done bad things. I know I'm a harder person than I was once upon a time. It is what it is."

"You're not wrong in principle but I still feel like there's a whole side of things you're just not seeing here."

"Just relax, okay? That's all we can do."

Faina tried her best. She exhaled and let her shoulders drop. The conscious effort required for it didn't totally defeat the point, even if it did make it dampen it. She felt a bit better right away.

Tulio took one last drag from his cigarette and then put it out on the banister, tossing it away into the darkness. He rubbed one of his eyes and Faina noticed there were bruises on his knuckles forming large red rings. She thought about how much they must hurt.

"The night is beautiful," Faina said.

"What?" Tulio looked up at the sky as though he hadn't realized quite how late it was until just now. "Yeah, it is."

She thought back to an earlier time, before the flag waving above them. She, Jazael, and Tulio had trekked to a recently abandoned factory on the edge of PLM territory. To avoid Smoke Desert's radlands, they had taken an indirect route that made camping out in the desert a necessity. Jazael had been complaining about

something, she wished she could remember, when she revealed some candied fruit that she had been keeping hidden to surprise her team with. It was a small and frivolous thing, but they, even Tulio, had been overjoyed like small children.

“The stars seem so bright.”

X.

As the sun was rising like a big red bruise in the sky, a serious threat was called into the radio room. For the first time since the establishment of the checkpoint system, a mech had been spotted and was confirmed to be heading in the direction of Lamplight. A radioman burst into Airam's office with the news and frantically woke him up to organize the response. Fifteen minutes later, The Liberator was on the move with two trucks full of LDF soldiers as backup.

"I should be piloting," complained Rayli from the back of one of the trucks. "I'm the better pilot. Airam knows I'm the better pilot. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. I know The Liberator better than anyone."

"I know, but you agreed he was better with Phantom Soul, right? That's why you let him take the chair?" Faina asked.

"He is good with Phantom Soul, sure, but I mostly just didn't want to start a debate with him in the middle of a crisis. We needed to be able to respond quickly. I just wish he had actually given me the opportunity to talk it out with him in advance of something like this happening. He's really starting to weaponize his authority here."

"Well, he *is* the leader," argued Tulio.

"I think I just liked him better when he was willing to lose an argument. He doesn't do that anymore. The best you get is an 'I'll take it into consideration'. Maybe it's about maintaining his image to keep the mercs in line? Maybe his ego is getting bigger? Probably both. It sucks either way," Rayli slumped her body sulkily.

"He's maintaining discipline. As the LDF grows, he spends all day negotiating with people. If he never worked out how to get his way, the whole project would have already fallen apart."

Driving over a particularly rocky stretch of ground, the truck bounced and shook uncomfortably.

"Hey, be more careful!" Rayli shouted angrily.

"How do you expect me to do that?" Kravitz shouted back, "I'm doing my best! It's not my fault the ground is this uneven, and I need to maintain this speed or we'll start to fall behind Airam."

It was hard to hear him, but he was right. At full speed, The Liberator would easily outrun Kravitz's truck. Airam was piloting it just fast enough that the trucks would be able to keep up, but not giving them any slack beyond that.

"Sorry!" yelled Rayli.

"What do we know about this mech?" asked Faina.

"Not a lot. The guys manning the checkpoint hid pretty much as soon as they saw it in their binoculars. Its trajectory though, definitely Lamplight, and we know that it's fast."

"And we're absolutely sure it wasn't just cutting through our territory to go to the labs in the radlands? Or trying to do some elaborate flanking maneuver targeting one of the other factions?" questioned Tulio.

"Yeah, we're sure. It's very directly going towards Lamplight."

"Why?"

"It's a KA mech," suggested Faina, "and we stole a KA mech. They know we've been using it, probably know we killed the pilot, and they want revenge. They're aiming to draw The Liberator out so they can attempt to destroy it."

"Not get it back?"

"Maybe, but that's usually a lost cause. Mechs almost never get captured, even if we got lucky once, it's always safer to plan around the idea that you're going to be destroying them," Rayli explained.

"I see," said Tulio.

"Get ready everyone," Kravitz's voice boomed from the cabin. "The enemy mech is up ahead. And it looks like, uh, like a spider or something. It's creepy."

"That'll probably be a MASOCHIST," said Rayli, as she put on her goggles, "which shouldn't be a big problem for Airam. They're not usually packing much armor. We can help him out by disabling its legs so that he can deal a decisive blow to the cockpit."

"I'm going to have to brake pretty quickly so we don't end up in its range. Brace yourselves!"

Faina held on tight to the walls of the truck bed as Kravitz hit the brakes and swerved the vehicle across the sand until they had a good view of the enemy mech. It was imposing, but still over half a meter shorter than The Liberator. Each of its four legs was protected by a machine gun that would shoot at anything that got too close, but those didn't look like they could actually harm another mech. Its main weapon was a cannon on top of its main body that had swivelled in Airam's direction. Still, he had Phantom Soul, so the cannon would likely be useless.

"Something's wrong," Faina said, "you said that their goal would be to destroy The Liberator, but why would they send something that obviously doesn't stand a chance against it."

"I guess they're still underestimating us," Rayli said, waving her hand.

Faina passed MVMs to Rayli and Tulio and then prepared one for herself. It would be difficult to hit the mech at this distance, but the truck would have been at risk if it had ventured any closer. The other truck had stopped at a similar distance from the mechs and would also have people preparing their weapons.

"Word must not be out yet to the KA about Phantom Soul, it's got to be either that or they just don't believe what they've been hearing," Tulio said.

The Liberator had slowed down. Airam was waiting in order to maximize his advantage. The spider mech fired its powerful main cannon. Phantom Soul's shimmering wall appeared to block its shot. Everything went as smoothly as possible.

Then, as Faina and the others were just about to fire, the spider jumped several feet into the air and to the side with incredible speed. Sand sprayed up into the air. The mercenaries in the other truck hadn't held back for long enough. They fired their MVMs and all three of them missed.

"What the hell are we supposed to do if it can move like *that*?" panicked Rayli.

“Just do your best to hit it! Don’t worry about where your shot lands,” said Faina.

Picking out a specific leg to disable would be too difficult. Hitting the cannon would be near impossible. Hitting it at all would be better than nothing.

They fired together. Two rockets connected with mech’s hull while the third one flew off into the orange-gray clouds behind it. They failed to do anything significant to its armor, but the shots connecting at the same time was enough to knock the hostile mech slightly off-balance. Its frame was pushed with the explosive impact and its legs had to scramble to keep stable.

Airam took the opening. He activated a Phantom Soul routine that Faina had never seen, or even been told about, before. The hardlight punched through the air like buckshot from a gun the size of a building. They shimmered gold as they spread out from in front of The Liberator and tore holes into the MASOCHIST. The enemy mech’s legs gave out and its body crashed to the ground with a deafening thud.

Taking no chances, Airam followed up this attack with the combined firepower of The Liberator’s cannon and HMG arms. Sparks and debris flew out from the mangled remains that were left in their wake. Faina was stunned. That was yet another mech, another one of Daybreak’s apex predators, taken down right in front of her.

Then heat, pain, whiplash, and freefall.

Something struck the truck’s cabin with explosive force and threw the vehicle onto its side. Faina landed on her shoulder at a bad angle and felt the impact spread through her upper body. Everything burned.

The world was refusing to stay still around her even as she stood up and planted her feet as firmly as she could. Sound arrived late and wrong, with a piercing ring sitting over it all. When Rayli started to scream, it seemed to come from very far away and right beside her at the same time.

Faina had to assume that Rayli was most in need of help out of everyone. She grabbed her tight and tore her away from the wreckage of the truck. Her shoulder responded with new heights of white-hot agony.

Tulio was already up, seemingly unharmed, and scrambling to his feet. His face looked determined. He had even managed to save an MVM from the wreckage.

In the distance, Faina saw that the other truck had met the same fate, and there were craters in the sand surrounding its burning frame. She couldn't make out any survivors. A whole volley of missiles for each truck? And from where? Her head was still spinning.

The Liberator was still standing over the destroyed MASOCHIST, but was now turning in their direction. Had he spotted the threat?

"Kravitz, Kravitz, fuck, fuck, no," Rayli was shouting.

Faina looked back at the truck and through its shattered cab window at Kravitz's charred remains. Flames were engulfing him as black smoke billowed into the sky. She spun around again to look for whatever had done this to miss. The answer was impossible to miss.

Bounding towards them on all fours was the most terrifying mech she had ever seen. It was shaped like a beast of an animal, but its head had no 'eyes', just huge toothy jaws resembling the grin of the Cheshire Cat. Its sharp white teeth stood out in contrast to its jet-black hull. Missile launcher systems were perched behind its left and right shoulders.

"Everyone get out of the way!" Faina shouted to her companions.

It was too late. The mech was too large and too fast. It closed the gap between them in seconds as it barrelled through them on its way to attack The Liberator. Faina held tight to Rayli as the pair tripped and crashed into the sand. As she fell, she saw the mech's giant clawlike foot slam down onto Tulio.

"No!" Faina screamed, her voice shrill from pain.

Her cry was drowned out by explosions as the animal mech fired another double volley of missiles, this time at The Liberator. From the ground, she didn't get to see if Airam managed to throw up Phantom Soul's wall in time.

This had been an ambush. They had wanted the weaker mech to be spotted by the sentries at the checkpoint, to draw out The Liberator, and to then catch the LDF by surprise with the real threat. The animal mech was a mech-killer, a mech created for the primary purpose of assassinating other mechs.

She got back to her feet, leaving Rayli on the ground, and did her best to stay calm. The mech was opening its terrifying jaws and preparing to leap towards The Liberator. Steam surged from exhausts on its 'neck' and blue light filled its mouth. Energy ignition, like Faina's knife, but on a colossal scale.

As it leapt, Airam activated Phantom Soul to slice at it. It wasn't known how the two abilities would interact, so both sides were gambling. The blue-edged teeth of the predator mech turned out to be more powerful, scattering the glistening hardlight in all directions. The scattered hardlight then bit into the face and shoulders of the beast mech, gouging into the metal and pushing it back away from The Liberator. It closed its jaws, having failed to bite its target, but it was still hardly much worse for wear. It would attack again.

Faina spotted the MVM lying next to Tulio. Blocking out the pain and suffering around her from her mind, she sprinted towards the weapon. She grabbed it and aimed at the mech.

It was moving erratically in order to make its next move unpredictable. She knew this would be an even harder shot than last time but it was all she could do to help Airam. The force of it aggravated every injury in her body. She suppressed the thought that she might be doing permanent damage to herself. A loud pop and the missile sailed through the air with a white trail behind it.

Miraculously, it connected with one of the shoulder-mounted missile launchers. It had been more luck than skill, but Faina had never

been so proud of a shot in her life. When the mech attempted to fire its third double-volley of shoulder missiles, only those from the left launcher were a threat to The Liberator. The right launcher exploded and took an already-damaged piece of the beast's shoulder plating along with it.

Airam didn't manage to put one of Phantom Soul's defensive configurations up in time. The missiles hit The Liberator directly and knocked it off-balance. It tumbled onto its back.

Faina instantly lost all hope as she saw the animal mech loom over The Liberator and open its jaws, getting ready to tear into its meal. She could only watch.

Airam activated Phantom Soul. A thick spear of light pierced through the head of the enemy mech as its teeth were re-igniting with plasma energy. The spear penetrated through the mech's mouth and struck out through its neck, pointing towards the burning sun. A blue explosion from somewhere deep inside the beast's throat ruptured upwards and tore its head off. With that, its legs seemed to falter.

The Liberator fired its HMG as it maneuvered to its feet. Airam was being haphazard, not aiming at anything specific, just trying to deal damage as fast as possible without having time to stop and think. He didn't stop firing for a solid fifteen seconds. The beast mech twitched strangely, like it had real muscles and nerves, before finally going still.

Faina looked around. Her shoulder was still burning. Rayli was sitting, out of breath and covered in black and red scrapes, gazing at Kravitz in the truck. She was clutching the pink plush toy that he used to keep on the dashboard.

Tulio was lying in an ever-growing pool of blood with his entire lower half crushed. Faina realized then, with horror, that he was still alive. His head and arms were *trembling*.

She ran over to him and threw herself onto the sand to be with him in his final moments. She tried not to look at the shattered bones and splattered guts. It was not going to last forever, but somehow he still clung to life. Faina gently stroked his hair.

Hands shaking, Tulio used all of his remaining strength to reach into one of his utility pockets and withdraw something. He pushed it into Faina's hands and then coughed up blood as he started to talk. She was horrified by the torrent that flowed out.

"All together. It's all you need. To... Out... Out of here." He gasped. "Out. Out. *Out...*"

Tulio trailed off and Faina could only think about how soft and frail he looked. He had never once seemed frail before. His lithe body went completely limp and his hand fell away from hers. His final expression was one of pure terror.

Faina's eyes were welling with tears as Rayli cautiously approached and dropped to the ground beside her. Jazael was dead. Tulio was dead. Her old team was dead. Rayli didn't say anything, the two of them just shared a quiet moment of misery until Airam broke the silence with The Liberator's speakers.

"Rayli? Faina? You're okay?" Airam's voice was energetic beneath the metallic rumble.

The Liberator lurched towards them with slow and heavy footsteps. Despite the missile barrage that had knocked it down, it was doing well. Airam would be entirely unscathed. The light reflected sharply off the metal spikes decorating the mech.

"Well done today, both of you," he continued. "We're going to be able to salvage some parts from these mechs. We can use them to upgrade The Liberator and be more powerful than ever! We're going to make all of this count for something."

"Airam, now's not the time," Rayli replied with hollow eyes. "Just stop for one moment."

Rayli stood up and walked over to Faina, still holding the plush toy. She put her hand on Faina's shoulder, the one that hurt, in a gesture that was supposed to be comforting. Faina flinched.

"I'm sorry, both of you. This went worse than expected. Something like this won't happen again. We're going to get stronger from here. We're not going to forget the ones who helped make this all

happen either, we're going to carry them in our hearts as we keep pushing towards the future.

I'm about to radio in some more trucks. They'll get what we need from these mechs and then take you back to the base, okay?"

The sand stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see, littered with brown rocks and vehicle parts. It had a reddish color in this area of the desert, like a bloodstain. A half-buried building jutted out from a hill in the distance. It was made of concrete, but its purpose could no longer be discerned. The mountains loomed in the distance, threatening Faina with their knife-tip peaks.

"Sounds good," Faina said, clenching the silver chip in her palm so hard that it hurt.

END.

THE FACTORY STORY

Retreat. The order stung.

Inside the silver chrome frame of his mech, Mirrorknight, Adexe Gallian angrily slammed his fist into the console. He had come to the front to make a difference. It was something he needed to do, not just for his comrades or for the people of Thorne Hill, but for himself. How long had it been since he had really accomplished anything?

It was a sick feeling to see yourself on propaganda posters, always looking ten or twenty years younger and a hell of a lot more muscular than you really were, while knowing you weren't worth shit outside of them. Branding him a hero had just been convenient. He was, at least once, a good-looking guy with a good-looking mech, and he had at least been around for a lot of pivotal battles, but that was it. He had never truly changed the playing field and the aching in his joints was telling him that he was running out of time to.

He watched the feed from Mirrorknight's forward optics through his main monitor. Fiery explosions tore through a row of tower blocks in the distance. Prefab concrete panels burst into pieces and exposed steel rebar twisted into Gordian shapes. The whole city would be panicking right now, trying to get away from the violence. Those buildings might not have even been evacuated. They had assured people a situation like this would never happen and it had, like a lot of things, just been a lie.

Command lied constantly, not just to the people on the ground, but even to 'ace pilots' like him. He knew this and yet every day he got up and chose to put his faith in whatever they told him anyway. War makes it necessary to control what information ends up where. War makes it necessary to aggrandize or downplay the truth. War makes it necessary to tell shameless, barefaced, and outright cruel lies.

The National Army dogs attacking Thorne Hill are chaotic and disorganized. Our restraint so far has been strategic. As soon as

reinforcements arrive, among them the valiant Mechcommissar Adexe Gallian in the indomitable Mirrorknight, we will quickly break the siege and restore order. Stunned by the might of the People's Liberation Movement, their lines will collapse, and we will push the fascists all the way back to the hostaged capital. Let them see our fury!

All bullshit. He had believed it because he wanted a chance to be the guy who gets to save the day. As soon as he arrived, it turned out he was just here to help cover the evacuation of military assets.

Adexe moved his mech forward. He marched at a brisk pace down the road and then turned the vehicle into a public park, crushing fences and foliage underfoot. Mechs as large as his weren't intended for urban warfare, but this sort of damage was inconsequential during a crisis. As long as he didn't turn any civilians into a black and red paste, he didn't care what he stepped on.

After cutting through the park, it was only a short distance to the highway, and he'd already made up his mind. His pride would take too much of a hit if he just turned around and ran. He had to make the enemy hurt first, even if he wouldn't be getting the heroic victory he had been promised. Everything else be damned, he would show them all what he was capable of.

On the highway, elevated above street level, a convoy of PLM transport trucks were being pursued by foreign Cascadia-supplied fighting vehicles with mounted turrets. One of the PLM trucks crashed into an abandoned civilian car and the others were forced to slow down even at the risk of getting shredded by the enemies chasing after them.

"Targets acquired," said the copilot AI as the enemy vehicles were marked with blue outlines, the color of the enemy.

Adexe aimed and pulled the trigger of his machine gun joystick. Quick and easy. Fighting vehicles torn to shreds. Trucks given the opportunity to drive away unharmed.

That was something. He had taken some enemy lives, destroyed some expensive enemy hardware, and saved a few of his

comrades. It still didn't feel like enough. It was too effortless. He needed to keep going. He needed to make it count.

Continuing up the road, he flexed his fingers where they were aching and kept a close eye on everything around him. Traversing the urban jungle, you never knew where the next threat was going to come from. There could be enemies down any street. They might have had time to infiltrate a building and could well be on the rooftops above him with portable anti-armor weapons.

It was a good thing that Mirrorknight was agile. Heavy, like any mech, large and destructive, not really even fast, but agile. It looked and moved in many ways like a giant bionic man. Anyone who underestimated Adexe's reaction times was in for a surprise too, even if they weren't quite what they used to be.

Sure enough, as soon as a column of tanks came into view, he aimed. As soon as he could hit them, they were wiped. That was the power of mech-scale heavy machine guns, even against vehicles like that. But he wasn't satisfied. He still needed more.

"We've left the suggested mission area. Will we withdraw?" asked the copilot system in a flat, synthetic tone.

Adexe ignored it. He'd spotted something to the left of the elevated highway. There was another mech on the ground below.

This newcomer was a sleek quadruped with track treads on complex pivot systems to act as feet. There was a large cannon on a swivel above its body, where the cockpit would be, and a light machine gun chattered underneath. It was painted in multi-scale camouflage, highly desaturated yellows and browns that worked as well against Thorne Hill's sand-blasted concrete as it would work against much of Daybreak's natural environment.

His body tensed up instinctively. Mech-to-mech fights were always terrifying encounters. As a pilot, you felt unkillable a lot of the time, but any other pilot could remind you that you weren't. It was fine. He could still take it.

"We're engaging the enemy mech," he told the AI system.

Adexe was honestly unsure of whether letting it know his plans would improve its combat readiness or not. Part of him really hated having the thing with him at all. It was too bland and bureaucratic, only ever pointing out the obvious. He didn't need an assistant. He worked fine alone.

The most important part of this fight was something that had to be settled quickly. He needed to close the distance enough that the enemy mech wouldn't be able to use its cannon.

Adexe kicked down the pedals of Mirrorknight's jump-jets, compressing the hydraulics in its legs, and then unleashed that energy with a daring leap from the highway overpass. Mid-air, he directed Mirrorknight in unsheathing its sword with the arm not attached to his HMG, then thumbed the ignition switch to send a thrum of red plasma coursing along the blade's edge.

Red energy weapons were unusual. Striking. Socialist. And the visor on Mirrorknight's face glowed the same color.

He swung the blade in an overhead cleave.

The quadruped reacted quickly. It skidded backwards across the asphalt, dodging. Mirrorknight's sword sailed through the air in front of its target before leaving a gash in the road as the mech landed with a heavy thud. His spine reported the impact in painful detail. Ten years ago, he wouldn't have noticed.

"Warning! Secondary contact detected on our rear," said the AI, sounding as unbothered as ever.

Shit, thought Adexe.

A screen to the right of his primary showed camera feed from the rear optics. There was a second mech, a squat contorted silhouette creeping out from underneath the highway. A floodlight, in place of its face, burst into life.

The mech adjusted its posture once it had the room to, but still had a hunchback look to it. It wasn't quite as tall as Mirrorknight, but it was much broader, and it was flanked by a pair of rotary cannons that immediately started spinning.

Surrounded. But Adexe had been told so many times that he was one of the best pilots out there. If there was an ounce of truth to that, he was confident he would win.

“Come on and show me what you’ve got,” he said, directed at the enemy but felt only by himself.

He fired on the quadruped in-front of him. Although he doubted his HMG would be enough to get through its hull, it would startle the pilot and might do some damage to its limbs.

He then spun around to swing his sword at the hunchback, successfully gouging through some of the armor on its chest.

Depleted-uranium bullets hit Mirrorknight like metal thunderclaps, denting and scraping away Mirrorknight’s silver chrome, but it would hold.

Adexe fired back at the hunchback, aiming for the area he had already struck with his sword. The attack tore into the weakened area and through the hunchback’s electronics.

Seemed like a kill. No time to confirm.

Mirrorknight took a cannon hit to the back. The mech stumbled forward and Adexe reacted by stabbing its energy sword into the ground for stability.

He let go of the sword and turned the mech around to face the quadruped again, activating his energy shield as he did so. Mirrorknight’s sword arm unleashed a giant disc of energy that shone with the shape of a red star. The crimson blaze echoed across the reflective surface of its chrome body.

The powerful shield effortlessly blocked the quadruped’s second cannon shot in its entirety, but Mirrorknight’s power core was working overtime. Adexe could hear pained whirring from the engine it was hooked up to, and its heat was bleeding into the cockpit.

He fired again at the quadruped, this time focusing his attacks on its cannon. If he could take that out of action, the odds would be stacked heavily in his favor.

It seemed like he'd done it. The enemy mech went into reverse again, speeding away like an insect running from a boot.

The quadruped was in retreat. It turned a corner and disappeared out of sight, but Adexe wasn't about to let it off the hook. He set Mirrorknight into motion after it, chasing it down the side street.

He couldn't see where it had gone, but there were enemy ground troops. As they were highlighted by the AI, he used his HMG to reduce them into limbs and clouds of blood. The rest scattered in panic.

With the street now empty, Adexe made the decision to fall back. It was better to confirm the kill on the hunchback than to chase the quadruped through unknown territory.

The hunchback's metal carcass was still lying on the ground next to his sword. If the pilot had survived the attack earlier, they would have evacuated by now, but they were a much less valuable target than their vehicle. He pulled the sword out of the ground and began repeatedly slicing at the hunchback's body until it was utterly shapeless. He made sure there was no mech left to salvage.

Now that was something.

Adexe sheathed Mirrorknight's sword and used the free arm to climb back onto the elevated highway. A lot of other mechs, and most vehicles, had no way to get off the ground at all, but Mirrorknight really was a superior piece of engineering.

The moment of satisfaction was brief.

Something rocketed against the back of Mirrorknight's leg, and something in its hydraulics system reacted by exploding violently. The mech toppled backwards and fell off the highway.

While his reflexes were sharp, there was nothing Adexe could do to break his fall except trust in his pilot harness. Mirrorknight hit the road with such force that all of its electronics felt the hit. Every screen and light around Adexe flickered in and out of life.

"Alert, we, *you*, iwey, uit. Elewey—" babbled the AI.

More explosions hit Mirrorknight, but Adexe couldn't tell what they were or where they came from. His optics were dead. Everything went dead. The explosions stopped.

The cockpit was pitch black and boiling hot. Everything smelled burnt. Adexe wondered why not a single one of the emergency lights was coming on. And he wondered why it felt like the mech was still falling. Then he realized that his head was bleeding.



Adexe Gallian was down a mech, an eye, and an arm. Adexe Gallian was up several cybernetic replacements and a couple of shiny medals. The cybernetics were the best that the PLM had to offer, of course. His new arm was stronger than any human arm, and his new eye could see things no human eye could see, but he knew which he'd rather have. The medals meanwhile felt undeserved, even laughable.

After he'd lost consciousness, he'd been rescued by Comrade Nauzet in the fortress mech, Iron Giant. It had been too slow to catch up with him before he went down, but there weren't many mechs in the entire world that were more heavily armored. Nauzet had shrugged off the enemy's attacks, grabbed what was left of Mirrorknight with a winch tool, and then dragged it back to safety.

The thought of Iron Giant trying to traverse Thorne Hill sent a shudder down Adexe's spine. The thing was ten meters tall and shaped like a boulder. It was not capable of moving precisely like Mirrorknight was. He was almost thankful that he had been blacked out during the rescue. He didn't want to know how many buildings Nauzet had torn through just to get to him.

Despite all of that, it didn't seem like Nauzet even liked him very much. He'd visited him once, in the hospital, but all he'd said between explaining the rescue and coming up with an excuse to leave was *'looks like you really bit off more than you could chew'*. Not wrong, but it made Adexe feel old. Obsolete.

StarTV spun it well.

“Mirrorknight and Iron Giant fought side-by-side in the Defence of Thorne Hill. Hordes of fascists and enemy mechs were repelled by the valiant duo while they secured a clean tactical withdrawal for the People’s Liberation Movement. Comrade Nauzet was seen visiting his friend Adexe Gallian in the hospital where he is expected to make a quick recovery from injuries sustained during the defence.”

Whatever.

Adexe really had made a quick recovery, at least physically, but he was still waiting on Mirrorknight’s. The mech hadn’t just been damaged superficially, most of its systems had been devastated beyond repair. Getting it back into fighting shape wouldn’t be quite as resource-intensive as building a new mech from scratch, which was incredibly laborious and expensive, but ‘quite’ was doing a lot of work. The rebuild would be very slow.

He desperately wanted to get back to front for the counterattack. Everyone knew the next major battle would be a tight one, and every day Mirrorknight was still split across two dozen parts factories was a day that Adexe wasn’t helping poke holes in DNA’s defences. He knew almost for certain that he’d be back too late to matter, but it was hard to accept.

Originally, his superiors had filled his free time with a calendar of ‘morale boosting’ events. They told him that while he waited for Mirrorknight to be repaired, he should be cutting ribbons, making speeches, and shaking hands with party members over glasses of whiskey. Adexe insisted that no, he needed *real* work to do. Command had compromised and sent him to shuffle papers around in factory offices, which was funnier than plenty of jokes. But it’s good for the workers to see the pilots, apparently. Good for them to see a hero filling out requisition forms.

Paper was used because of the brownouts. They had been affecting PLM territory since trouble on the northern front put the Incides Nuclear Power Plant at risk. Terrorists had hit it more than

once. This meant shortages, it meant a power curfew, and it meant keeping physical records was important again.

Today, Adexe had been to a recycling plant and acquired the numbers for waste import. He had then gone to Factory Ercoli and Factory Hentz to make sure that the numbers for waste export matched the ones at the plant. In both cases they had fallen within acceptable ranges, although these ranges were broad enough, he supposed, to cover up a fair amount of mismanagement. If an issue was ever serious enough to actually get flagged, it would have to be pretty serious.

The last stop of the day was Factory Kirov, a place that made parts for large artillery, and he was making the journey on foot. Riverpoint's huge factory sprawl was highly interconnected and well-planned, so any buildings that often dealt with one another tended to be close by. The road layout was also simple and direct, and there were numerous back-passages and service alleyways that could be used by anyone with the proper authentication.

Adexe looked up at the mountains which formed the backdrop of this whole area. Gray threads of smoke were rising off the mines. Those too were interconnected. Conveyors and elevators strung the ore down into the refineries, and from there into the transit yards and factories. It was infrastructure on top of infrastructure. So dense with industry that there was hardly any room to stop and breathe in the choked air.

There was efficiency to it. Everything went exactly where it needed to go without anyone having to argue or negotiate. The supply chains were written out in cold logic and then turned into steaming hot reality. There was also stagnation. Change still required bureaucrats, people with human flaws, to listen to requests and act on them. There were either never enough of those people or they just didn't allocate the resources with equal efficiency.

At Factory Ercoli, for example, Adexe had been wondering if they really needed as much steel as they were drawing. He could

easily picture a production line somewhere else in the sprawl sitting idle because a resource they needed was being hoarded by another factory just a few blocks over. With pieces of Mirrorknight out there somewhere, the thought frustrated him.

Adexe's 'assistant' walked a half-step behind him, the way he always did. On occasion, being assigned an assistant was a way for the party, or at least someone within the party, to spy on you. Mennar didn't seem competent enough to be a spy. He was a true mid-level bureaucrat through and through. It was visible in his spectacles and his slicked back hair. It was visible in how he wore his jumpsuit with all the buttons up. It was visible on his facial expressions and it was probably even inscribed on his bones.

Command probably just hadn't expected Adexe to give a damn about an assignment this small and this unlikely to be useful. They believed that he would lose interest in a few days or a week and then kick back and let Mennar do all of the actual paperwork. Adexe was partly doing it to spite them, but it had now been two weeks and he was still checking every form himself.

Mennar limped on a metal prosthetic. His leg had been blown off by a foreign airstrike before he had reached military age. They'd never conscripted him, which probably suited him just fine, but they'd replaced his missing limb as cheaply as possible. Adexe wondered if Mennar resented his own, high-grade, prosthetics, but it didn't seem likely. When they'd first met, he'd told Adexe that he was one of his heroes.

"Uh-huh," Adexe had said, and he hadn't thought about that interaction again until just now.

6AM start, 6PM end, with a long break in the middle. It was already early evening. Adexe was sick of the sepia-stained dust that seemed to coat every surface, every railing, and every window.

People still liked to claim that all of the concrete factories and walls would eventually be painted, although nobody could say by whom. In artwork, Riverpoint's buildings were always shades of pastel

blue, green, yellow, or pink, and they were always surrounded by trees, benches, and belts of grass and flowers. Nobody had gotten around to making this vision a reality. Understandable enough, given the war, that painting and decorating wasn't the highest priority for the party. It was far from the biggest lie.

At least there was still the occasional mural. Factory Kirov was marked by one next to the main entrance. It depicted kids in Red Youth outfits smiling as they surveyed an idealized version of the factory sector from the nearby mountains, one that had all the promised pastels and trees. Most likely, there was no such viewing spot, but it was still a joyful image.

A soldier standing guard by the mural saluted Adexe as he and Mennar walked past. He stood stiff and proper.

Adexe opened the factory doors using his keycard and the pair stepped into the building's foyer. Inside the low-roofed room was an open passage to a metal stairwell, another to the factory floor, and a door labeled 'Admin'. They went straight for that one.

The office was cluttered, every surface covered with stacks of paper and loose junk like plastic bottles and half-eaten snack packets. A man, who had been reviewing a technical-looking manual with a confused look on his face, turned around from the desk with an embarrassed expression. He'd only been reading, but he made it look like they'd caught him in a vulnerable moment.

The man was overweight and old, a little more than Adexe on both those fronts. His chubby red fingers were attached to rough hands. Adexe could tell that this was someone who, like him, was probably feeling the strain of his job on his body. He lacked any obvious physical charisma, but probably commanded the respect of his colleagues through the depth of his experience. Maybe he felt like needing a manual for anything was a sign of incompetence.

"Ah, Mennar, here for the paperwork. And?" asked the man in the office, not recognizing Adexe.

"I'm Adexe Gallian. I'm the Chief Investigator today, keeping myself busy while Mirrorknight is being repaired. Mennar is acting as my assistant," he said, standing up straight and sucking in his gut to try and offset the disappointment of his appearance.

"Oh? Yer Gallian? Ah, uh, it's an honor. I've uh, followed yer career. We all have. Sir. I'm the foreman here, sir."

He was flustered and had clearly been expecting someone who looked a little, or a lot, different. Red crept up his already ruddy cheeks as he realized how casually he'd addressed one of the PLM's 'greatest heroes'. His eyes were also glancing back and forth at Adexe's cybernetics. It gave the impression that he was uncomfortable with them. They'd never been on the posters, after all.

"No, it's an honor to meet *you*," Adexe said, switching into a certain mode of speech that he had learned many, many years ago. "Workers like you and your people are the beating heart of Daybreak."

"Mind if I announce yer being here? I promise nobody'll get in yer way, but it'd probably make their week," asked the foreman.

"Go ahead."

"Arright."

The foreman led Adexe and Mennar out of the office and onto the factory floor. There was a radio there that was blaring out electronic music at a ridiculous volume in order to be enjoyable for the laborers over the top of clunking machinery. The foreman had to stop and adjust the volume before he could make his speech. While he did that, Adexe eyed the slogans on the factory wall.

LABOR SHOWS YOUR LOVE FOR THE LAND.

He kind of liked that one. He believed it, or at least the spirit of it. It reminded him that they were all, in their own practice, fighting for the same thing, for the same country.

YOU MUST ARM YOURSELF WITH THE IMMORTAL VALOR OF CHAIRMAN HENTZ.

And that one, he wasn't so sure about. He'd met the man. And it wasn't as though he disliked him or didn't respect him, but he'd seen

enough of Idoran Hentz's human flaws to understand what a message like this might be covering for. Idoran was someone who let a lot of 'un-socialist' behavior go without challenge in his party so long as those responsible for it buttered him up with the proper lip service.

"Everyone listen erp!" said the factory foreman to the workers, who'd already noticed him turning down their music. "We herve a guest today, so yer better be on yer best behavior. Mechcommissar Adexe Gallian's here in arr factory."

The foreman spoke loudly and proudly, which made his south-river accent stand out even more than it had initially. Every person in the room reacted and tried to catch a glimpse of Adexe. He watched the familiar but peculiar mix of amazement and disappointment wash across their faces. This was their hero, but not exactly as they had imagined him. Most of them still remembered to salute, a kind of programmed response.

Adexe had a programmed response of his own. He rattled off a few greetings and encouraging phrases. They came so reflexively to him that he didn't really even register his own words. He wouldn't be able to repeat what he said back to himself even a minute later. It was the result of thousands of interactions like it, thousands of interactions he could now hardly tell apart.

After that, the workers returned to their labors. Tools and machinery whirled through mechanisms and for methods Adexe could not decipher, but he could tell that everyone had their place, and he could pick out a few things he recognized. A metal arm that looked like a primitive version of a mech's was holding a cylinder of red-hot steel. Further along, a hydraulic press was turning one of those cylinders into a giant metal disk. The work was, apparently, stellar. The factory floor was hot, loud, grimy, and unpleasant, but the plethora of certificates by the office door proudly boasted the fact that it always came in above quota and produced quality work.

It was a shame, then, that the office was in such a state. Adexe and Mennar re-entered it with disappointed faces. Not only were the

tables messy, but none of the filing cabinets or folders had any legible markings. Everything was either unlabeled or it was labeled with some of the worst handwriting Adexe had ever seen.

"Excuse me," said Mennar to the factory foreman. "Where are the waste requisition forms?"

"Ah, right, I'm sorry. They're right here," he said, gesturing at a loose pile of papers. "I really meant ter get around ter sorting them out better for yer, but it's not really my strongest area."

"This is going to take longer than expected," Adexe muttered, as the foreman sheepishly exited the room.

The papers were in no particular order and many of them were totally irrelevant. It was as though the stack had fallen over and been hastily scooped up from the floor, or perhaps dredged up from a deep sea of bureaucratic waste. Aggregation was wrong, too. Whole categories had been logged that shouldn't have been, and items that should have been counted together were instead listed individually. Untangling the mess meant cross-checking everything by hand. Moreover, coffee stains and handwritten corrections made everything very difficult to parse.

For the first time, Adexe thought that having Mennar around as his assistant was actually quite useful. He was able to read some of the less legible papers as he'd seen similar sloppy work before. He'd seen it on previous visits to this very factory, as a matter of fact. But it was still a lot of work, even with two people. As they pored over the papers, minutes bled together and became hours, and the evening quickly started to slip away.

One of the factory workers knocked briefly on the door and then let herself in without waiting. She seemed anxious.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm not trying to bother you or anything, I just thought you'd want to know, our shift just ended. The guys are going to be locking the front up tight when they leave, so you might want to, you know, call it a day," she said.

“Thank you, comrade, but we’re not finished,” Adexe said. “I want to stay until everything’s done. If the front’s closed, we’ll just leave through the service tunnels in the back.”

“Well, that’s alright, sir. I’m happy to help. Just be careful with the power curfew and all, you could get stuck in the dark.”

“We’ll be alright.”

The worker left the room and, soon after, the loud machines and energetic music of the factory floor turned into deafening silence. Adexe and Mennar continued working until every data point was accounted for and written legibly in its proper place. Finished.

Not even two minutes later, after Mennar had scooped up their documents into a folder and they’d begun their walk across the factory floor to the back entrance, the lights went out.

“Oh, *no*,” said Mennar with tired frustration.

The darkness wasn’t a problem for Adexe. Without being asked, his right optic toggled into a simulated phosphor matrix, rendering the factory in cool blue monochrome. Every shadow lost its depth, revealing all of the factory’s rusted pipes and concrete crannies in clean high-contrast detail. He could see the room more clearly even than he had been able to with the lights on using his organic eye, and part of him resented that.

“Stick close, Mennar. I’ve got night vision.”

The pair crossed the factory floor and entered the service tunnels through the back door. Mennar stumbled behind Adexe, his prosthetic leg almost tripping him up once on a loose grate.

These passageways were part of the interconnected nature of the factory sector. They were everywhere and meant that maintenance workers and cleaners could easily move from one job to the next without needing to go back to street level and without getting in anyone else’s way. They were also wide enough for forklifts and burden carriers so long as they were kept clean of stray cargo and furniture.

Before getting far, Adexe noticed a bright light, blooming in his phosphor vision. He stopped to investigate.

Adexe assessed it with his organic eye. It was a bright green LED light, and just the one, small but powerful against the darkness around it. It cast its emerald glow over an otherwise unassuming steel door, and was attached to a keycard reader that hummed quietly with electric current.

"The curfew's in effect, the power is out for the rest of this building and presumably every other one, so how is this keycard reader still running? It could be connected to an illegal power source."

"I noticed that another time I was here," said Mennar. "I reported it and they said it was nothing. It's just residual electrical charge."

"And what's in there?" asked Adexe.

"Storage, I guess," Mennar spoke hesitantly.

"So you don't know."

"No, sir, I don't know for sure. They didn't tell me and I don't have a keycard to check anyway. It's not one of my jobs to investigate buildings after dark or look for power grid anomalies."

"My card will work. It does everywhere," Adexe said with confidence.

"With all due respect sir, I'd rather we just went home. It's late."

"You can go home. I'm not going to stop you. But I'm going to take a look anyway."

"Hey, we're a team. If you stay, I have to stay."

Adexe couldn't spit on cooperation, but he didn't want to affirm Mennar either. He just whipped out his keycard and swiped it through the reader. The locks on the door released and it slid open hands-free.

The room inside was very small and largely unadorned, but it was populated with two PLM soldiers. There was a young grunt standing with his submachine gun hanging loose on its strap, and another sitting behind a flimsy-looking wooden desk with a newspaper and a mug of coffee. A second door waited directly ahead, plain and unmarked, and Adexe started towards it without a word.

"Hey, you can't be here!" barked the soldier with the gun.

“My authentication works, doesn’t it?” asked Adexe, surprised that anyone would dare to speak to him so rudely.

The other soldier, who had been sitting at the desk, stood up and shared a glance with his partner. The one with the gun held it tight. They both seemed very nervous, and it made Adexe suspicious that they were guarding something of significant importance. He could feel a tension building that he hadn’t felt since he was last in Mirrorknight.

“Look,” the soldier spoke again, trying to stay calm, “we both respect you a lot, sir, but you’re inviting a lot of trouble by being here.”

“Is that a threat? You’re well aware that I outrank you. I don’t know who you work under yet, but I probably outrank them too.

Mennar and I are investigating logistical anomalies in the area. Running power to this place post-curfew is certainly an anomaly. This means that if there’s anything going on down here, you’re not going to stop me from finding out what it is. I’m going in.”

“With all due respect sir, this isn’t the cowboy mech pilot fieldwork you’re used to, this is Internal Affairs. You can’t just do whatever you want here,” said the soldier, raising his gun. “So yes, sir, you can consider this a threat.”

“Hey, let’s back off,” said Mennar, worried. “I don’t know who these guys are, but we shouldn’t risk anything. Tomorrow, we’ll just ask the foreman—”

Adexe, in one sharp and sudden movement, lashed out with his cybernetic right arm and grabbed the barrel of the soldier’s gun. The arm whirred as he used its full force to crush the weapon where he held it. Then, while pieces of the gun were still falling to the floor, he clocked the soldier in the face with a left hook.

The disarmed soldier stumbled back into the wall as Adexe drew his service pistol and turned to stare down the soldier behind the desk. He didn’t raise the gun. He didn’t need to. The soldier sat down back in his chair while his comrade clutched what seemed like a dislodged tooth.

"You pointed a gun at someone a hundred stations above you? Now I'm really curious about what you've got in here," growled Adexe, feeling powerful for the first time since Mirrorknight went down.

"Oh, *oh*," breathed Mennar. "That was a *fucking* gamble. They could have fucking killed us."

Adexe had never heard Mennar swear before.

He took a heavy step forward and used his keycard for a second time. The pair advanced through the door, leaving the soldiers and their checkpoint behind. It opened straight into a set of dirty metal stairs that stretched down steeply below ground level. With Adexe leading, his eyes focused firmly on the path ahead, they began their descent without a moment's hesitation.

"I'm getting old, Mennar, but I can still read people. They weren't going to shoot someone who outranks them."

"You're assuming they're loyal to the PLM. They could easily be smugglers, criminals, or, like, spies for the fascists."

"I said that I can read people. I can read them and see their allegiance in their faces. I know they're loyal to the PLM because they had that same little glare of disappointment everyone else has."

"What do you mean?" asked Mennar, confused.

"Don't worry about it," replied Adexe, his fight-fueled rush of adrenaline suddenly giving way to the melancholy norm.

It was cold, despite Daybreak's usual climate, and there was the ozone smell of air purifiers working overtime. Pilot lights lined the path down, but their orange glow provided only the bare minimum comfort to prevent tripping and falling. It wasn't an unknown that rejected them, but one that felt like it was only conceding to their presence in order to grab them in its snare.

"Perhaps you should leave," Adexe said, realizing that more danger was almost a given.

"No way," said Mennar. "I'm here to the end."

Adexe didn't want to argue the point. He could reason out that he was taking a risk and that there were better, safer ways to approach

whatever was going on here, but he felt himself sinking back into a familiar feeling. He had to keep pressing forward. He had to 'make it count'. He didn't even let himself question what that meant.

At the bottom of the stairs was a hallway. It had windows on both walls that made it immediately clear this was a suspended walkway over a cavernous hangar. The hangar itself was full of scaffolding, shipping containers, and crates that looked like they could contain weapons or ammunition.

And the hangar was full of mechs. Adexe was forced to a dead stop. He couldn't speak.

"What is this?" asked Mennar. "Some kind of military stockpile? Are those mechs? Are those... finished mechs? Five of them? Sir?"

Adexe didn't answer.

There was no way to see from here if they had power cores in them yet, but they definitely looked like finished mechs. They were using a variety of different presets and each one was armed slightly differently, equipped for a different role on the battlefield. Some were equipped for killing infantry, others for killing mechs. They all, however, had the PLM's flag, a splash of red with a distinctive three-point star in gold, painted on their hulls.

Adexe breathed in and tried to process what he was seeing. They seemed to be, at the very least, PLM mechs. This wasn't a secret counter-revolution. But mechs weren't easy to produce. They had no signs of wear and tear, but there was still no way that these had all been constructed recently. So why hadn't any of them been deployed? Why hadn't he seen any of them at Thorne Hill? The PLM, according to public knowledge and including Mirrorknight, only had 21 mechs. If these mechs had been at Thorne Hill, things would have certainly gone differently. And if these mechs were being withheld from the front, from their victory, for any reason...

He pulled out his radio. He needed to talk to his superiors. It wasn't working. He felt sick.

The door at the end of the hallway opened on its own, but there was no one there. It stayed open, inviting them deeper.

"This isn't right," Adexe said as he walked towards the ominous opening, in a dazed autopilot, and stepped through.

This room was some kind of lounge. It stood in stark contrast to the windowed walkway, the dim stairs, and the tiny room with the guards. The lighting was good, it was fairly spacious, and it had four curved couches arranged around a circular table in the middle of the room. Each wall had another door, indistinguishable from the one Adexe and Mennar had entered through, as well as tables, filing cabinets, and the occasional quaint desk ornament that looked like it had been stolen from a display case in his grandmother's old home.

It struck Adexe that he had lost track of how deep underground he was and had no idea how large this facility might be. It certainly did not parallel any particular building on the surface above. Each direction could contain any amount of secret facility.

The door opposite him opened and a middle-aged man walked in holding a stainless steel mug. Instinctively, Adexe raised his pistol.

And his flashy new cybernetics just stopped working.

It was no spasm, no glitch, no one-off error. Adexe's mechanical arm and eye went totally, instantly, dead. It was as though some backdoor failsafe had been initiated to disable them as soon as he had started to threaten the man. His pistol clattered to the floor and his arm fell heavy to his side. Unused to the dead weight, Adexe was off-balance. Suddenly unable to see in one eye, he almost fell.

"Adexe?" cried Mennar, who was still a few paces behind him.

He felt powerless. It didn't matter that he was unharmed and that most of his body still worked. He had been reduced, at what seemed like someone else's mere whim, to the state he had been in when he was pried out of Mirrorknight's wreckage. Fat and fleshy with missing parts.

Footsteps behind him set off alarm bells in his head. He spun around and came face to face with the two guards from before. They

had followed Adexe and Mennar down here and had their hands on their service pistols, but they seemed to be waiting for a signal from the man with the steel coffee mug before they drew them. Adexe turned back to him. This was clearly whoever was in charge.

Adexe could not judge what kind of person the man was just by looking at him. He took in every detail and yet found no purchase for his instincts. Whether it was fair or not, he tended to form first impressions very quickly from the way people looked, how they styled themselves, and their body language. They usually didn't need to open their mouths before he had pegged them as smart or stupid, kind or cruel, humble or self-important, and this man was nothing.

It was disarming. The man's long ears, deep philtrum, and dark eyes stuck out as unusual, but they didn't seem to mean anything at all. When he smiled, it wasn't friendly, but didn't quite come across as antagonistic either. It was an intentional expression that somehow still carried no real implications. The rest of his body, clothed in a standard issue khaki jumpsuit with the party's pin affixed neatly to its left breast pocket, remained completely still.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mechcommissar Adexe Gallian. Please take a seat on the couch and I'll explain what sort of work we do here. Would you like something to drink? A biscuit? We have coffee blend no.6. It's lovely."

Without waiting for Adexe to respond, the man motioned in Mennar's direction, angling his hand towards the door on his right. The two soldiers perfectly understood whatever he'd just ordered. They grabbed Mennar by the arms and hurriedly escorted him through, his folder full of papers still in his hands, leaving Adexe and the man alone.

"I imagine you have a few questions and, for you, I'm willing to answer them all," said the 'nothing' man.

"What about Mennar?" asked Adexe, opting to remain standing for this confrontation.

"This conversation isn't for him. It's unfortunate, but he should never have stepped foot into this facility. It doesn't just put us at risk, it puts the nation at risk."

Adexe's jaw tightened. He clenched one fist and glanced at the gun on the floor.

"There are five working mechs down here?" Adexe spat.

"There are five working mechs down here," parroted the man.

"And what are they for? Why are you hoarding resources that the fatherland needs to survive? It's treasonous."

"Consider them a vital reserve force for crisis situations. It's actually all very much *for* the fatherland."

"Crisis situations? So where were they when we were getting torn to pieces at Thorne Hill?"

"When the Daybreak National Army was posturing emptily over an economic black hole."

"That's not an answer."

"No," said the man, taking a measured sip of his drink. "It's a policy. It's a rational policy. Territory in Daybreak has been in ebb and flow for a century now, and history clearly shows that whatever they gain from us will, in time, be lost again. We're focused on a bigger problem than where exactly our borders come to a stop. We're focused on what happens within them, because that's what really determines whether or not those borders will even exist tomorrow."

"Whatever happened to serving the people? We let over a hundred thousand people fall into the clutches of the enemy. Those mechs could have been there, fighting with us, and they could have turned the tide of the battle."

"Yes, but we can't let people know that we had them built. If they are unleashed too early and co-opted for the broader purposes of the army, we won't control who pilots them or what they do. The upper hand in the upcoming conflict will be lost. My comrades and I will, most reasonably, be executed. And then, as the traitors begin to tear this country apart, it too will die."

"It's deception! You're letting people die on the front line with the belief that we're doing everything we can, all of us, in order to push it forward. You're lying to them," Adexe said.

"Of course it's lying, but consider that lies are often for the best. Our nation's entire command structure is built around the tactical deployment of lies, and it's no different for anyone else involved in this war. The positive side is that this lie actually helps our side. It will make sure our enemies never win. The PLM won't, can't, be torn apart by revisionists or eaten up by fascists and foreign armies."

Adexe's feet were hurting, and it was making it harder to process what the man was saying. He collapsed into one of the couches and rubbed the palm of his good hand across his face. The seat was comfortable, plush leather.

"All my life, I've strived for that, and I've been doing it on the front lines. I've been doing it where those mechs could have made a difference," bemoaned Adexe.

"And what has it got you? What has it cost you?"

Adexe didn't reply. His mechanical arm was still dangling limply at his side.

"This isn't a self-serving mission, it's even heroic in its own way. It's a necessary part of the struggle," continued the man. "We need people like you, true believers, to keep the big red star of socialism shining. To make sure our dear Chairman or a few bad apples within the party can't come too close to spoiling it for everyone."

"What would you have me do?" asked Adexe, his voice quieter than before.

"Keep our secrets. Enjoy our gifts. And be on the right side of things when things begin to fall apart and these mechs come out of hiding with your comrades, real comrades, inside them. I say 'when' because it isn't an 'if'. The rot has been growing for far too long and in too many places. I'm sure you've noticed it."

"And then what?"

“And then, once the rot has been purged, I believe we can make things better. Put the right people in the right places. You’ll see it, and everyone else will see the role you played in making it happen. No sacrifice will have been in vain.”

“That’s just... fantasy.”

“You don’t need to believe it at all, but we do need you.”

Adexe didn’t believe that either, but he so wanted to. His shoulders sagged and he once again found himself unable to reply to the man.

“Just relax,” the man said in an oddly cheerful voice. “Your part here will be easy. We have a plan for every situation.”

A single gunshot echoed from the adjoining hallway.



A television in the corner of the room buzzed to life with a familiar melody, the dreamlike theremin sounds of the PLM’s interval signal. It was attached to the StarTV broadcast beginning, every day, at 4PM. Each note was long and strangely heart-wrenching, even though Adexe had heard them thousands of times before. They had been the same since his childhood.

“This is a StarTV broadcast.”

A logo appeared on the screen. It was the PLM’s star in bloody red, with its three points stretched out ambitiously beyond the edges of a blue silhouette of not just Daybreak, but of the whole continent. Adexe felt as though he could reach out to it and prick his finger on its sharp edges.

“This morning, the brave fighters of the People’s Liberation Movement heroically engaged the nationalists on the western front,” the anchor announced, his voice full of loud triumph. *“Despite heavy casualties inflicted on enemy armor, sure to be felt by the fascists for a long time to come, Central Command wisely organized a*

reconsolidation of our forces to ensure maximum fighting potential for the next phase of the war.”

Another miserable result for everyone involved, dressed up as something worth lauding. He leaned back in his chair as the television began a fast scroll through a long list of honors. Names, of both the living and the dead, attached to medals of varying importance. It was all just words to him, too divorced from the reality of these soldiers and their lives to mean anything.

Adexe turned his eyes to his desk. There was a stack of logistics forms that he still needed to fill out, a notice about Mirrorknight, and a navy porcelain mug filled with freshly-brewed coffee. He pushed the forms to one side with his cybernetic arm and then opened the notice.

Mirrorknight was almost finished. The engineers were working on the finishing touches and making sure that every detail was absolutely perfect. Most of its parts were brand new. It was due to have cutting-edge weapons, a stylish interior with an upgraded cooling system, and an AI copilot who was supposedly tweaked for maximum compatibility with Adexe’s ‘unique’ psychological profile.

The coffee smelled good. He raised it to his lips. It was rich, dark, and smooth. That was something. It was coffee blend no.6.

The packaging had been just as plain as all the other blends sold in PLM territory and handed out in ration packs, but it was completely free of the usual wood chip taste that most people had convinced themselves was just normal for coffee. The difference was enormous, and yet anyone who caught a glimpse of the container without trying its contents for themselves would have no idea just how much better it was. Even so, there was still so much bitterness.

I went and buried her beloved

a poem

I set a watchful eye on this ravaged valley
while in a tent by the river, she gets some rest.
I buried her love somewhere in those hills
and now I keep my own close to my chest.

I'm ashamed to say that it healed me
after a lifetime of making myself small for men.
With a gun in my hand, and a person to protect,
I've got a reason to be strong again.

By no means should she have to stay,
but there remains nowhere else to go.
And I love her even as she cries,
and even if she will never know.

ZERØED METRICS

The cockpit reeked of sweat-coated leather and chemical coolant. Janmar twitched nervously as he ran his hands over the console and watched the threat-assessment overlay on his main monitor turn a pulsating, hostile crimson. His mech was rapidly approaching a camp full of potential insurgents.

“You’re doing so well, darling,” said a woman’s voice on the internal speaker system, and he instantly relaxed in his chair.

Her voice was so gentle, so comforting, and for his ears only. It was a blanket that covered up all of his insecurities and protected him from the information overload on his screens. She was his copilot, and she would tell him whatever he needed to know. He could trust her.

“Sensors are picking up movement in those tents. They’re preparing anti-armor weaponry. I don’t want them to get the chance to use it,” the voice said, sounding concerned.

“Don’t worry,” replied Janmar. “I won’t let them touch us.”

He grabbed a joystick in each hand and rotated his mech’s gun arms to face the camp, a haggard assortment of white tents, squeezing the triggers without hesitation. On his central display, streams of fire erupted from his vehicle and began to engulf everything. Wood splintered and figures came scrambling out into the sand, but he kept his weapons hot. He heard their screaming for just a second, then his copilot shut off the external microphones.

“The enemy are running, Janmar. Don’t let them get away.”

A screen to his left flashed a boxy outline over a truck that was speeding away from the camp. It looked crammed with more people than he’d ever seen in a vehicle of that size. He turned the mech towards it and fired light machine gun rounds until it and all of its passengers were no longer moving.

“Area clear. Threat level reduced to 0%,” the voice said as the red overlays vanished. “Oh, Janmar, you’re so good at this. What would I ever do without you?”

Janmar smiled, a deep sense of peace washing over him. He was happy that she was happy. He would tear the whole world down to keep hearing her satisfied voice.

“You’ll never have to find out,” he said.



“Look at that freak,” said the munitions officer, leaning across a stack of ammo crates and lighting up a cigarette.

Janmar was walking across the base with a stiff, unnatural stride. His gray jumpsuit was drenched in sweat and covered with various stains. In his hands, clenched tightly, was a plastic tray with some kind of nutrient-enriched slop from the field kitchen and a pair of electrolyte drinks. He didn’t stop to acknowledge any of the other soldiers.

“He walks over to the mess, grabs his rations, and then goes right back to that fucking mech. He eats there, sleeps there, and won’t even look us regulars in the eye.”

“What, you think he’s got it in his head that he’s better than us because he’s a mech pilot?” asked one of the infantrymen.

“No,” spat the munitions officer. “I think he’s fucked in the head. Insane! He’s got this crazy glassy-eyed stare, if you ever actually manage to get close to him before he scarpers back his killing machine. He gives me the fucking creeps.”

“You know, apparently some of the guys watched his gun-camera feed from the fight with the locals earlier. He burned a triage camp to a crisp and then went hunting for the survivors. He didn’t even give them the option of surrender before pulling the trigger. Just absolutely merciless stuff.”

“That’s messed up. A guy like him has got to be a total psychopath. I don’t care if we’re on the same side, I’m not turning my back on him for a second.”

“Ah, lay off him,” said a third soldier, a mechanic, as he finished off a can of cola. “He’s just devoted.”

“To what?” the munitions officer snorted. “To the VMA? To the ‘buffer zone’? And there I was thinking we were all in it for the money.”

“Nah, man, to his wife. Haven’t you heard? He talks to her in his mech even when most of the base is asleep. It’s all sappy-like, joking around, making promises, calling each other pet names. The guys from night patrol said he sounds like a giddy teenager.”

“And you’re sure he’s not just hearing things and talking to himself?”

“It’s not to himself. All the mechs these days come with artificial intelligence copilots. They’re really lifelike too.”

“Hah, so he married a fucking robot? Who does that? That’s ridiculous,” the munitions officer chuckled.

“Even worse,” said the mechanic, leaning in. “I saw his papers and it’s not some standard template AI with a personality added on top of the default tactical suite like an afterthought, it’s a neutral-print.”

“A what?” asked the munitions officer as he and the infantryman stared blankly at the mechanic.

“He and his wife were both from the slums on Vitaria’s east side. When she got sick, there was no way they were going to keep up with all the medical bills, so he joined the VMA on a tailored contract that offered them a full brainscan. They probably didn’t expect it to be fused to target acquisition software, but that’s what’s in his mech. It’s his wife’s memories, personality, speech patterns, all mapped in as the AI copilot.”

Everyone went quiet for a moment. They looked towards the Janmar’s mech, Gildhome, a heavily armored, heavily armed, metal monster. Janmar had already sealed himself back inside. The

munitions officer's cigarette burned away between his fingertips as he studied the way the sun reflected off its brassy paint job.

"So," the officer began, pausing as he used the underside of his boot to snuff out his cigarette in the gritty sand, "he thinks that she's alive and in there with him?"

"That's right, and her programming means that she only feels safe when the threat metrics hit zero. He isn't killing people for fun, for the 'glory' of the VMA, or even for the money to live a good life back in the city. He knows that if he ever stops shooting, she's gonna suffer, and she's going to do it the way his wife would. If he runs off or his mech goes down in battle, that's it, she's dead again."

Inside Gildhome's dark cockpit, Janmar had just finished eating his meal in the cold blue light of a single monitor. His wife was on the screen, leaning in towards him and smiling. He took off his left glove, revealing his wedding band. And he held it to his lips.

SOVEREIGN

Even from this height, Daybreak looked like a warzone. It was a sandy patchwork of cracked ochre clay, bone white salt flats, and distant, jagged mountains speckled with thorny scrub, but he could still pick out the scars easily enough. There were plenty of villages and fields being gradually reclaimed by the desert. You could spot the black and burned-out husks of vehicles abandoned in the roads. And every so often you'd come across earthy craters and black smoke. It was his job to make a few more of those today.

A comms chime cut through the smooth hum of his jet's twin turbine engines. It was a call from Newsom Air Base.

"Sovereign One, what's your ETA on the first target?" asked a thick valley accent through electronic noise.

"Two minutes. On the approach now. Smooth sailing," he replied, voice flat.

"They've got our guys pinned down."

"Tell them to sit back and relax. I've got this."

He did have it, most likely. Nothing was guaranteed in Daybreak, and the CDF's air superiority was at times oversold. Every faction was capable of shooting planes out of the sky if the pilots ever got lazy. There were SAMs, MANPADS, and fucking mechs with fuckass cannons. You couldn't fly over Smoke Desert either, which created a massive no-go zone. But hey, it was still a lot better to be in the air than on the ground.

Folks back home didn't know any of this. Most of them believed that Cascadia was absolutely dominating the battlefield, even when they were opposed to their country's involvement in it. He was glad. He didn't want his wife to know how risky it was to be out here.

He didn't even want his wife to know that he flew a bomber. He'd let her believe that he was just doing reconnaissance missions, taking in the sights like some tourist. It wasn't as though he'd actually

ever told her that was what he was doing, so he didn't feel like it was a lie, but she had gotten it into her head somehow and he had decided that there was no reason to correct her. It saved them and their marriage a lot of stress, he imagined.

He nudged a throttle and his jet dipped its nose, piercing white clouds and lowering into position for the first target. His helmet projected a blue vector grid over the world below, clean and mathematical, that was speckled with white thermal hotspots. It showed him where to look, a stubborn hill covered with ramshackle fortifications, and what to do.

Inbound, weapons away, and score.

Far below him, the hill exploded. Whatever they had going on down there was over. And that was as much as he thought about it.

It was something they told you during training, to not think too hard about what you're doing, just to do it well. He'd gotten good at that kind of compartmentalization a long time ago. He'd learned it over Colorado with American lives at stake. He could manage it just fine over some nameless patch of dirt in Daybreak.

It was the same war, in a sense. Cascadia had won its independence, but it still needed to keep that independence safe and secure. To do that, it needed resources. And cheap resources meant someone, somewhere, needed to be blown up. It didn't matter to him whether he was bombing Denver, Harapetrum, or Timbuttfuckingtu. It was all one fight and for one reason, Cascadia's survival.

He was flying over fields now, turning the plane towards his second target. It was a large warehouse. He didn't know who or what was inside, and he didn't really care.

Inbound, weapons away, and shack!

These people were freaks anyway. They were somehow both godless and fundamentalist at the same time. It didn't make any sense to him. Why did they cling so violently to a 'religion' without any paradise to offer? He'd decided a while ago that their brain chemistry must be pretty fucked up. Call it Occam's razor.

Even the guys from the DNA, their allies, the ones he was theoretically saving the asses of here, just weren't normal. They didn't have any western values to speak of and seemed, to him, to straddle a strange line between miserable stoicism and utter degeneracy. He wasn't proud of himself for thinking of them as less than fully human, but he couldn't help it.

He knew that there were a growing number of Christian missionaries in Daybreak City. This continent had always been hostile to mission work before, but the DNA-CDF alliance had created some new opportunities. He wasn't actually very religious at all, never really got into the whole church thing, but he still hoped that it would finally do the locals some good.

Third target. It was residential this time. A fairly indistinct building, but surprisingly modern for the region, like the one he'd lived in back in Portland. He caught himself, for half a second, picturing him and his wife down there in one of the apartments. She'd probably be watching one of those godawful housewife reality TV shows and he'd be pretending he hadn't been paying enough attention to remember all their names.

Cut that shit out.

Inbound, weapons away, and score.

His wife was in Eugene now. There was just the Whilamut passage bridge between their home and Franklin, the new-build capital of Cascadia where all the big decisions were being made. He didn't like either city at all. They were both dull and full of smug paper-pushers who'd moved there for cushy government jobs. Parasites.

Once he was back home, they'd move back north. Maybe they'd go all the way to Vancouver. He liked staying in the city at least. And he liked the cold.

This shithole was too hot. It was probably a big part of what drove the people here so crazy, and he half-suspected the same phenomenon was to blame for California. The bleeding hearts were always out protesting, doing exactly what the Texas Country

propaganda mills wanted them to be doing, bringing the country down to its knees so it could suck foreign cock. They didn't understand how good they had it. Didn't realise that if they wanted to keep things good, they needed to keep him in the air. He had a lot of words for people like them.

Another comms chime.

"That's all, Sovereign One. Good job. Back to base."

Soon enough he was down at Newsom, wheels hitting the sun-baked asphalt runway with hardly a jolt. A ground crewman waved him in with a pair of glowing sticks. He taxied to a stop and pulled off his sweat-caked helmet.

Heat blasted the cockpit the moment it opened. The air was thick with the smell of jet fuel and desert dust. It made him want to hurry inside as soon as possible.

Across the tarmac, there was a mechanical whir as a massive CC-17 slowly lowered its cargo ramp. Below it, kids in desert camo waited to load it up. They had a row of coffins, each one draped with the Cascadian flag, bound for a long flight home across the Atlantic.

He climbed out of his jet with his back to the transport plane and headed straight for debrief. They were going to be happy about this one.

At least your mother still loves you

a poem

To see you here, my darling boy,
my beloved child, my sweetest joy—
to see you here makes me sick.

And yet I smile when you speak to me
from within your metal tomb.

And I smile when the neighbors say
you'll save the nation from its doom.

I smile for every time you shout
that you're going to make us proud.

Smile even as the neighbors
sing their war songs all too loud.

Because to see you here, in all your might,
in all your bloodshed, a fearsome sight,
may be the last time I see you at all.

A BURST OF LIGHT

Some of the caves were carved by water, but others were carved by human hands, decorated in places with careful engravings. The network spread deep into the mountain, connecting settlements in the Veruvan valley and even providing a home for many. However, despite being of great interest to archaeologists and historians, none had been able to visit for a long time. Idaira felt honored that she was able to be there, even if it was as a soldier in what was now known not as a wonder of ancient civilization, but as one of Daybreak's most intense close-quarters battlegrounds.

She was a fighter with Eastern Sun, a group centered in the valley who wanted to liberate the world of borders. Attacking from the other side of the tunnels were the Korvarian Ascendancy, a group who were desperate for any chance to use them to get behind ES lines and take control of mountains they viewed as rightfully theirs.

Enemy fighters were ahead of her and her two comrades. Although the passage was only wide enough for a couple of people to walk comfortably side-by-side, sandbags and improvised steel barricades provided cover at regular intervals. Both sides hid behind these and fired at each other, hoping to gradually push the front forward to the next areas of cover.

They swapped out fighters regularly. Nobody could stay at the forefront of this battle for very long. Every fighter who went into the tunnels came out with some kind of damage.

"How much longer on this rotation?" asked the girl next to her, who was passing Idaira a plastic canteen while trying not to blind her with her headlamp.

"Just ten more minutes," replied an older man crouched behind the barricade in front.

Idaira took a sip of water and she swallowed some grit with it. The air was thick with rock dust, and gravel found its way into her

mouth so often that it felt like she must be breathing in more stone than air. She handed the canteen back.

"It's been quiet, all things considered," Idaira said.

As though she had summoned it, a gunshot cracked off the wall next to her. It returned twice as an echo before fading, and before she noticed how loose chips of rock had cut into her already ragged uniform.

"Speak of the devil," said the man in front, already returning fire.

Idaira and the girl next to her raised their submachine guns and joined him. Although she had stuffed foam plugs in her ears before the fight, they weren't doing much. Every gunshot was like the mountain moving, retching, and churning them into vomit. It was auditory torture. After a while, her ears no longer registered individual shots. They just became one, continuous pressure in her skull.

Eventually, the KA fighters stopped firing back, but there were no cries of pain or any clues to indicate Idaira and her comrades had actually hit anyone. They seemed to have retreated, and they didn't seem to have sent replacements either, but it was too risky to do anything more than peek from a distance.

The man in front had a lantern next to him which painted him as a huge flickering shadow on the wall, but beyond that was just darkness. Even as he lifted his gun above the barricade and shone its torch down the passage, there was no sign of the enemy.

"Thank god," said the man, invoking his religion's *other* deity.

Then something loud and mechanical started barrelling towards them. Sandbags fell and metal barricades buckled like they were putting up no resistance at all.

Painted dark green with a black vine-like pattern, it moved on treads and had a silvery steel plow welded to its front for ramming through obstructions. Two guns were attached above. It could have been mistaken for a kind of tank, but it seemed to use mech technology. Pivots and folded-down parts suggested it had a level of adaptability she was only seeing one side of.

Muzzles flared as both sides opened fire on each other. The bullets of Idaira's comrades rang impotently against the mech's hull with ugly clangs, while the mech's machine guns quickly shredded them to pieces.

The red mist looked pink in the mech's blaring headlights. Idaira immediately ducked down and ran, but the blood echoed in her vision as the shots echoed in her ears.

She had to escape. Nobody had been expecting a mech this deep in the tunnels, where so many passageways were incredibly narrow or fragile, but it was an extraordinarily small mech. Even after having seen it with her own eyes, seen her comrades die to it, she found it hard to believe it was here.

Idaira had long since stopped being able to track which passages led deeper into the mountain or closer to an exit. Every direction felt the same. Quite often, every direction looked the same too. You just had to make sure you knew where your comrades were relative to yourself, or otherwise, where the forward operating base was. The rest was near impossible.

When the path ahead of her forked, Idaira made sure to take the road she was certain *didn't* lead back to her base. It meant that she was entering unknown territory, but she couldn't risk bringing the mech back home and getting everyone else killed along with her.

This new tunnel narrowed and widened like something that was breathing, but still never got quite so tight that the mech couldn't force itself through in pursuit. Even as its metal hull scraped against the walls, it kept coming.

Idaira was panicking, starting to feel nauseous. The idea that a powerful machine like that could care so much about an individual kill was sickening.

There was another fork, this time giving her the option of a route that looked more like a slim, jagged seam than a walkway. Anyone too much larger than Idaira might have needed to move through it sideways. The mech wouldn't be able to enter.

Idaira slid into it, cutting her shoulder on the raw rock in her haste to get inside. Minor, she told herself. She just needed to get away.

But she had run into a dead end. Idaira had only half a second to understand that before the mech swiveled around to face her.

It didn't fire a bullet. Instead, a metal canister arced into the seam with a pop and then bounced off a brick-shaped rock that was sticking out from the wall just a meter away from Idaira's head. It burst into a spray of burning phosphorus which scattered through the passage and caught Idaira in the face before she could turn away.

She collapsed into the wall behind her and screamed. She didn't decide to, her body just forced her to. The pain was unbearable, and her gun slipped from her grip somewhere during it. As she slid to the floor, the entrance to the passage collapsed in front of her.

The smell of burnt matches pervaded everything, overpowering the damp earth and disturbed rock before it had even stopped falling. But she was alive, she told herself, not blown up or crushed to death. She'd been burned, but she could still move.

The flashlight taped to her gun threw a cone of white light across the rubble on the ground in front of her, illuminating the dust that was thick in the air. Everything outside of the cone was pitch-black, and there were no other light sources. It was hard to tell how bad the collapse had been.

She wanted to touch her face, which still felt like it was still burning, but she knew not to. Instead, she distracted herself by running her hand across the wall. It was smooth in places, and it made her wonder if this 'dead end' had a purpose once. She imagined all the palms that must have run across the rock before hers.

Then the rubble in front of her started moving. Two pairs of strong arms came into view before Idaira saw the fighters they belonged to. They were guys from her base, clearing her a way out. She didn't know either of them well, but she'd never felt so happy to see anyone in her life.

The guy on the left was Sami. His curly hair had come loose from the tie that usually held it back, and there was a streak of someone else's blood drying on his sharp jawline. She'd talked to him a handful of times, but only briefly. He was the kind of person who knew everyone and moved effortlessly from conversation to conversation, like society's connective tissue.

The one on the right was Ajax, though she wasn't sure if that was just a nickname or not. He was massive, with well-toned muscle all over his body, and his gray tank top was cut short enough to make sure everyone knew it. He had a shrapnel helmet over his buzzcut that looked like it'd come from a different war. She'd never spoken to him before, but he always looked like he was making himself busy.

Sami looked disturbed as he helped her out of the seam and to her feet.

"Oh crap, you're hurt. We've got to move," he said.

"Your gun," said Ajax a moment later, picking it up from the floor and handing it to her with a nod.

Idaira took her gun into unsteady hands. Her face throbbed, like it was constantly reigniting, but her legs worked. That was enough for now.

They retreated back down the same path she had taken when fleeing from the mech, back to where Idaira had first seen it. Ajax led with the others close behind, and nobody said a word. Their haste was everything.

KA fighters had already used the mech's push through the tunnels to advance, and Idaira spotted them crouched low behind reassembled barricades in a place that had safely belonged to Eastern Sun just an hour ago.

The three of them opened fire together, not to hit anyone in particular, just to force their enemies to seek cover or duck down. Their shoulder lamps swept the passage in snappy, agitated arcs, crossing and uncrossing with a disorienting effect.

It worked. Nobody stood up to return fire while they ran past, and then they were already around the next bend. They didn't slow their sprint until they were sure they were approaching ES territory.

"Vulture," yelled Ajax, louder than Idaira was expecting.

"Merchants!" replied someone up ahead, answering the countersign.



A makeshift infirmary had been put together in a small passage to the side of the main area of the base. There was a simple curtain between it and the central cavern that could have been extended for a small amount of privacy, but Sami stood there instead, keeping Idaira company as the medic cleaned her wounds. The medic did his job in the orange glow of a single oil lantern hanging from an iron peg overhead. It didn't seem like enough light, but he made it work.

"Hold still," said the medic, tilting Idaira's face up towards the lantern and prying something small and gritty out of her cheek using the edge of a scalpel. "This is the last of it, which makes you honestly pretty lucky."

"She was brave, doc. She went one-on-one against a mech!"

"That's one way to put it," Idaira said. "I was just running for my life. I didn't— I couldn't do anything to that monster."

"Ah, you could have taken it. You just got unlucky!" Sami joked.

"Yeah, I'll get 'em next time for sure."

"Next time?" asked the medic. "I hope you're not thinking of ever seeing that mech again in your life."

"Yeah, it's not a good idea to go back out there," said Sami.

"I can still be useful to everyone."

"You know," said the medic, now dabbing on an ointment as he spoke. "I heard that the pilots, of those mechs, they're all insane. They've got, like, computer systems inside their cockpits. They talk to them and drive them crazy."

“Why?” asked Idaira.

The base had a computer in it, a laptop. It was an ancient one, but apparently it was still very useful. Idaira didn’t know all the ins-and-outs, but Eastern Sun’s resource networks were heavily dependent on those things. Whenever someone took or returned equipment from the collective, it had to be marked down. It was what kept scarcity manageable.

“It keeps them in line. Computers, they’re not just tools, I think. They use you as much as you use them, and it changes your way of thinking.”

“Sure,” said Idaira. “Where are you going with this?”

The ointment was helping. The burns were already much less painful than when she’d first arrived in the infirmary.

“Well, they mold the computers to mold the pilots. The computer can be your mother, your lover, your god, and you’re going to do what it says. You’re going crazy in exactly the way they want you to go crazy.”

“Are our pilots like that too? We have mechs, but that doesn’t really sound like our style,” wondered Sami.

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never met any of our mech pilots. I mean, we’ve hardly got any compared to any of the other factions! Still, I wouldn’t be surprised if at least a few of them are wackos. Mech pilots aren’t exactly our ‘style’ to begin with, so the mech collective could be up to all kinds of messed up things.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Sami. “They rely on the rest of us just as much as we rely on them. So no matter what, they’ve got the same responsibilities as everyone else.”

“I’m just not going to trust any mech stuff until I meet a pilot and they prove to me, face-to-face, that they’re not insane.”

“I don’t think ‘insane’ is the right word. It’s reductive. They’re not broken, they’re just being manipulated, and that’s something that– I guess everyone’s being manipulated, to varying degrees. ‘Wacko’ is just insulting. Aren’t you supposed to be a doctor?” asked Idaira.

“No, actually,” said the medic, now applying bandages to Idaira’s cheek. “Doctors are a totally different thing. Medics are really only for emergency care. I just get giddy when people call me ‘doc’, so I don’t like to correct them.”

“Hey, doc! Sami, Idaira,” said Ajax, who had somehow arrived unnoticed. For a big guy, someone who often had to duck to avoid the cables and lamps hanging from the base’s ceiling, he moved quietly.

“Is it time?” asked Sami.

“Time for what?” replied Idaira.

“We’re going to make some of the tunnels narrower. The mech from earlier was small enough that it might be able to find its way here. We haven’t had to deal with that risk before. Shrinking down some of the passages will mean we can actually sleep at night,” Sami explained.

“Yep,” said Ajax. “It’s time.”

“See you around, Idaira,” said Sami, waving her goodbye.

He left with Ajax. It felt like a kind of blasphemy, cutting into a place with millennia of history just for their own small purpose of survival, but Idaira couldn’t think of a better way of keeping the mech out. Nowhere got to stay ancient forever.

By the time the medic was finished, Idaira’s left cheek, jaw, and temple were entirely bandaged up. The rest of her felt fine, save for a few scrapes and bruises, but she was still covered in more than enough gauze to draw attention. She wanted to avoid looking in any mirrors, but even more than that, she wanted food.

The canteen area was small, just empty crates for tables with a scattering of plastic chairs around them. A single cook maintained three or four electric cooking pots all by himself as the base’s impromptu field kitchen. He’d marked out his area by hanging up colorful fairy lights on a green cord, which was just about the only decoration Idaira could see. Almost everything else in the base was purely practical.

She walked up to the cook and he gave her a few ladlefuls of lentil and chickpea stew along with some flatbread to scoop it up with. She wondered if he'd given her a larger portion because of her bandages, but she wasn't complaining. The food was good. It had a slick of olive oil on top and flavors of cumin and coriander. She was wolfing it down.

"Idaira, hey! How are you feeling?" someone shouted, warm but concerned.

She knew who the voice belonged to. It was Daim, her delegate. Daim worked as an in-base liaison with the other groups in the tunnel network and with the committees outside of it. Their many years of experience with Eastern Sun were visible as lines on their face and rough marks on their skin, although their hair was still more red than gray.

"Hey, Daim, I'm feeling okay. What's up?" Idaira asked.

"I'm glad you're up and about."

"Yeah," she swallowed another mouthful of flatbread. "I'm really doing much better than I look. Promise!"

"That's good, that's good, but you should take it easy."

"We've got a mech in the tunnels. It's got to be all hands on deck, right? There's no time to sit and lick my wounds, but it's okay. I can still fight. I'll be fine," she tried to reassure them.

"No," Daim started firmly. "You got hurt. You should go back to Etri. Rest up. That's my request."

"I can't leave you guys a fighter short just because of an injury that isn't debilitating," Idaira argued.

"Honestly, I'm sure everyone would be okay with you leaving right now. Sami and the doc talked to me earlier and they were both pretty worried about you going out there again."

"It would be wrong to abandon you all."

"I just told you, nobody would mind," Daim said, sounding slightly annoyed now.

"I would mind."

“Okay,” Daim said. “Look, there was a guy in one of the other squads who went home just for a couple of blisters. He said they were making it hard to walk around. Some people grumbled about it, might even hold it against him, sure. He could have been exaggerating how much they hurt, could probably have found something else to do, but we’re better safe than sorry. The tunnels are too tight for slip-ups, they’ll kill you if you’re not one-hundred-percent here for it all. See what I’m saying?”

“You’ve got bandages all over your face. You say it’s okay, but I still don’t believe you, and I don’t think anyone here sees you all wrapped up like that and believes you. Maybe you’re right and we’re wrong. I’ll own that if you go back to Etri and tell me in a month that you could have fought. I won’t own you sticking around here and getting yourself killed.”

“I’ll own it myself. It’s my choice.”

“Shit,” Daim huffed.

There was nothing else they could do. Daim could think Idaira was acting foolishly, but they weren’t really an authority, they just communicated with people and tried to gauge consensus. No one was going to refuse to work with Idaira, even if they thought she deserved some rest, so she’d be able to stay regardless of what Daim wanted. Pushing the point wouldn’t go anywhere.

“Alright, just take care of yourself,” they said, after a pause.

Idaira went back to her stew. Her burns were stinging underneath her bandages, but she really did believe they wouldn’t be a problem. Besides that, she just didn’t want to think about them.



They were back in the tunnels, firing on KA again. Idaira wasn’t sure exactly how long it had been since she was last in combat, time was slippery in these tunnels, but her face was still tender.

News of the mech had brought more fighters than usual to the forefront of both sides of the fight. Muzzle flash lit the passage white for a fraction of a second, and then again and again. Between the shots, the darkness was stark. It was a chiaroscuro of violence.

Rounds were sparking off the rock around her, throwing chips of stone in every direction. She fired back at the general idea of the enemy without a clear line of sight on anyone. The fight felt spiteful and bickering. Neither army actually believed that the shooting would help them to advance through the wall of enemies ahead, they just hoped to score hits against each other anyway.

“Come on!” a man shouted, but she couldn’t tell from where.

The way sound echoed this deep, a shout from thirty feet away sometimes seemed like it was coming from someone right next to her, but this voice was urgent in a specific way that cut through the general noise of the fight. There was a plan in motion, one that put Idaira and her group in a position that others had refused, and she was more than ready for it.

“The mech! The mech! Word’s just come down that they’ve spotted the mech! They’re bringing it this way.”

More fighters spilled out of a side passage, their boots pounding the dirt below them with a dozen different rhythms. Their faces also contained multitudes. Some looked like they were about to burst into tears, others like they wanted to yell battle cries.

“Come on, come on!” they shouted, sweeping Idaira along.

They picked up their pace, a jog in tension with a sprint. The mech would be chasing close behind, and its threads rumbled through the floor below them before their echo hit anyone’s ears.

They took a fork into a passage with a sagging ceiling. Wooden beams lined its walls, just barely offsetting enough of the mountain’s weight to allow them through. Somewhere behind her, someone was stumbling with the arrhythmic clap of boots that told her they were injured. She hoped they were able to keep up.

When her comrades stopped, she stopped too. It would just be a few seconds more. Idaira counted her heartbeats and clutched the pistol grip on her submachine gun. She wasn't looking forward to seeing the mech again after what it had done last time.

A beat later, the vehicle emerged.

For a few seconds, almost everyone was completely still. Only Ajax and the injured soldier were moving. He was trying to support her weight and stop her from toppling over. Sami stood next to them, quietly surveying the state of the group. Everything was about to fall into place.

"Now!" someone screeched.

Small, sequential explosives detonated along the length of the tunnel. They weren't anything that could harm the mech's advanced armor, but they were perfectly in place to tear apart the supports that were holding the tunnel together.

The timber shattered and sections of the ceiling collapsed in a cascading wave. Rocks tumbled down and slammed into the mech's frame. They pounded it into the floor, pinning its treads and trapping it in a position where it was unable to aim its weapons. Dust blasted out towards the ES fighters.

It was an agonizing moment before the air cleared up enough for Idaira to see again. It hadn't been a total collapse, the tunnel was actually still navigable, but it had been remade. Fractured stone piled up on the floor while more balanced precariously between it and the ceiling, leaving just a small triangle of space for someone to ditch their gear and squeeze through. Maybe not someone like Sami or Ajax, but someone small.

The cockpit of the mech hissed and popped open.

The pilot began climbing out of her struggling vehicle to a soundtrack of fast-paced electronic beeping. She wore a sleek black pilot jumpsuit with a full-face protective helmet. It no doubt came with its own night-vision and breathing apparatus to make navigating the

tunnel system effortless. The pilot still moved gracefully, uninjured in the crash.

Idaira raised her gun and fired a couple of haphazard shots, her hands too fast for her aim to catch up.

They had stopped the mech, but if she was unable to kill the pilot right here and now, she would have no trouble getting away and back to wherever her base was.

Idaira needed to get closer. She started scrambling over the fallen rocks and preparing to squeeze herself through a gap that separated her squad and the mech.

Then someone grabbed her fatigues and yanked her back.

It was Sami, looking frenzied. He wrapped his arm around her and violently tore her away from the debris before diving into the ground.

They crashed into the rocky earth with enough force to stamp their bodies with bruises.

“What the hell are you doing?” Idaira shouted at him.

And a huge explosion rocketed through the tunnel seconds later, a self-destruct protocol activated by the fleeing mech pilot. Idaira, her body pressed hard into the mud, only saw the light.

Sami’s breath was warm on her face.



“You’ll never amount to anything,” Idaira’s father had once told her, as the sweltering afternoon sun tanned her bare shoulders. “You’ll waste away here, in this desert, just like everyone else. You’ll get a dead-end job and marry some smug piece of shit. Probably become a junkie.”

Idaira, then still a child, had been relaxing outside of their house on the hood of a junk car with no tires or engine. She wore a discount store pair of shorts and a tank top with a goofy mascot on. Her bony legs were stretched out in front of her. Before her father had showed up

with disgust audible in his voice, she had just been lounging there, minding her own business.

Going into the front yard had been her way of avoiding her father while he was drinking, but it hadn't worked. He got lonely when he was drunk, and he liked to pick fights. Idaira was usually the most available target.

"That boy you were watching on the TV earlier, the ballerina," he slurred. "You can't do anything like that."

"What are you even talking about?" Idaira asked, annoyed.

"He wasn't much older than you. He could do it. It was beautiful. It was special. People all across the country, watching him. You couldn't do that in a million years, could you? No, you couldn't."

"I'm literally just sitting here?"

"Yeah, exactly."

In Puratova's southern deserts, there wasn't really much else to do. She had read that this area had once been part of the Veruvan homeland, an ancient valley civilization responsible for marvellous pyramids and carvings, but that meant nothing for what she saw in the present. The town's only purpose was to exist in the space between other towns, acting as a hub for border patrol agents and little else. It wasn't large enough to have many amenities, and it wasn't small enough for the people there to feel like family. Every building and every person was tired and lacking in life. Either you eventually got up and left, like Idaira's mother had, or you ended up like her father. He, and many others here, worked along the border to catch refugees and drug traffickers trying to enter the country from Daybreak, Puratova's war-town neighbor.

"What do you want from me? You're just being an idiot."

"I never wanted much... in my life. I thought it'd work out. I didn't do anything to deserve otherwise.

"I wanted your mother, but she was a whore. I wanted some fucking money, but I guess there's none to be made. I wanted to live somewhere that felt like home. What I want from you?"

Idaira's father mumbled to himself incoherently and started laughing. It didn't sound like a real laugh so much as an expression of pain, or an attempt to mock her for things he was unable to articulate.

"I thought you'd make something of yourself," he said, "but you're just a brat. I'm seeing it now. It's all for nothing. I'm going to work, feed you, and pay rent on our shitty house, and I'm just stuck with that. What a life!"

He trailed off and then went back to his twisted laughing. He wasn't coherent. For one thing, Idaira prepared practically every calorie he consumed that didn't come out of a bottle. There was no reason to engage with his rambling. Even so, she knew what he was trying to say, and she knew that he meant it all.

With the front yard now off-limits along with the rest of the house, Idaira jumped on her bike and rode off. It was a bike he had taught her to ride, long ago, when he was sounder of mind. She spent the rest of the day riding around town and looking for quiet spots to think in. Nobody spoke to her, but that was probably for the best. The town was full of impotent drunks like her father, as well as many people who were worse.

As the sun set, casting a golden glow over the desert sands, she returned home. She was relieved to find her father passed out on the couch, and relieved moreover that he didn't seem to have pissed himself or broken anything. She retired to her room where she listened to music on her headphones until she was tired enough to sleep. Her dreams that night were of her mother coming back.

Just a couple of weeks later, while her father was out on patrol, he was shot dead by insurgents from Eastern Sun. Their group didn't respect hard borders, nation states, and the institutions that make those possible. They actively rejected whatever kind of peace they could gain by compromising with those things, so were often out in the desert helping to escort refugees into Puratova and away from Daybreak's state of endless war. Border patrol were a natural enemy. Eastern Sun never hesitated to fire upon them, and despite their

alleged disorganization, they were far better trained than any small town drunk like her father.

Idaira didn't cry when she got the news.

Instead, as refugees streamed north through the corridor opened up by ES, she climbed on her bike again and rode it south. She crossed the border into Daybreak as a sandgrouse might, not thinking for a second about the war or its reality.

When she ran into a group of fighters, they gave her a ride in the back of their truck. They were nice to her, so she lied. She exaggerated her age, pretended she just looked a lot younger than she really was. She told them she shared all of their ideals, that she was an internationalist fighter who was there to help. She repeated these lies over and over until she believed them, and until they gave her a gun.



Her deployment in the Veruva cave system was over, though the echo of gunfire in those tight passages had stuck around as a phantom in any moments that got too quiet. Idaira was back in Etri, the de facto capital of Eastern Sun's operations. There were plenty of larger cities in Daybreak, but she'd never been to any of them. Etri was the largest city in the Veruvan valley, so it might as well have been the largest city in the world.

She sat by the river eating some bread she'd grabbed from the local distribution subcenter. She could have asked for a side to go with it, but it was kind of nice on its own. Although the food in the caves had never been bad, the flatbreads were always slightly stale. It was satisfying to finally eat something that was freshly baked.

The day was bright and Idaira's image was reflected in the clear river in front of her, distorted by the flow of the water. All of the bandages were gone from her face and her burns had turned into red scar tissue that seemed to branch and scatter across her cheek from a dense central cluster of marks. She couldn't help but stare at it and

think about how it was all the result of a single moment, a moment that could have gone much better or much worse with the most minute of changes.

Sami's face appeared in the river next to hers as he sat down beside her. He had a broad smile on his face that was instantly contagious. Idaira didn't need to look for Ajax to know he'd also be nearby, providing a silent, comforting presence.

"Hey," Idaira said, barely louder than the river.

"Hi," Sami replied, matching her tone.

They sat there for a while, the three of them, just eating, watching the water, and enjoying the weather. It had been a long time since any of them had gotten to do this, and the caves made you miss the light, the wind, and air more than you realized. They were amazed to just soak in the world around them.

"I look horrible," Idaira said, finally breaking the peace.

She felt instant relief. Even since leaving the tunnels and seeing her face in good lighting, the insecurity had been nagging at her.

"Don't say that. Nobody thinks you look horrible."

"You know what I mean," she replied. "The scars are horrible."

"No, they're like—" Sami paused to find the right words, his eyes tracing the red lines reaching across her cheek. "They look like the sun. Like a sunburst."

Wordlessly, with Idaira still watching their faces in the water, their hands connected.

MATERIAL ADJUSTMENTS

Rain pounded relentlessly against the scrap-iron roof of the shack as Sister Darexha worked with sharp precision to prepare for the incoming CDF prisoner transport. Using a pair of pliers, she bent pieces of wire into position, attaching a blasting cap to a heavy block of packed explosive. It wasn't the first bomb she had made, and she thought it unlikely that it would be her last.

For weeks, she had been moving incognito through enemy territory. She most commonly made bombs to be attached to flagpoles, posters, and other things that her targets would tear down only to inadvertently trigger their own deaths. They would never see her and she would never see them. Today though, the enemy would be getting closer than usual. It demanded full presence.

On a metal table next to Darexha's, one of her comrades was also preparing an improvised explosive. She wasn't as composed as Darexha was. Her hands were trembling and Darexha could hear her quietly muttering reassurances to herself.

"Come on, it'll all be over soon. It's always worked out this far. I've got good luck. I always make it through. I'm a survivor," she was saying as she finished up.

"To work in the material world is to obey its weight," Darexha said, quoting a well-known Ascendency religious text. "If your work is that which is in front of you, you must therefore focus only on that which is in front of you."

"Yeah, but it's terrifying! These aren't toys that we're putting together. I've been with the cause for a while now, but I've not been on the front lines like this before," replied the other insurgent.

"You can rule all that your eyes behold, mastering your world, but only so long as you remain present in it. Lose your thoughts in abstractions and you will lose everything else along with them."

“Look,” she said, annoyed with Darexha’s preaching, “I just don’t like this. I don’t think I’m cut out for it.”

“We do whatever we must in order to liberate the holy land,” Darexha said, matter-of-factly.

“I know. I mean, the fuckers destroyed my village and my parents are stuck in some camp somewhere being tortured by foreign mercenaries. I get it. I want to fight. I just don’t know how you stay so calm when you could be blown to shreds at any moment.”

“When has that not been true? Life is dangerous. Our vessels are fragile and impermanent. To accept this is to overcome it. To overcome that is to overcome everything.”

A third person came over to the tables from the other side of the dimly-lit room, checked that the bomb-makers were done, and then picked up the finished explosives. He carried them outside where they were concealed among the debris and loose tires that spilled out onto the sides of the muddy road. The three fighters then picked up their rifles and crouched near the windows of the shack. The trap was set, ready to be sprung into violent motion with the press of one red button.

On the other side of the road, set against the backdrop of silvery gray light of the early evening, were more, equally run-down, shacks. Rust and sodden filth crept up their walls while their roofs were unlikely to be keeping out all of the rain hammering down on them. The civilian population of this village was now closer to zero than to its height from six months ago. It wouldn’t be long before the last of them were out of here and scavengers would be in their place, stripping out everything anyone left behind. But for today, at least, these buildings were hosting several teams of KA fighters.

Her companions next to her were gripping their weapons so tightly that Darexha could see their white knuckle bones pushing against the rough skin of their hands. It wasn’t just nerves affecting them, it was hate. The DNA-CDF coalition had taken so much from everybody. Darexha hated them too, but she could suppress its action

on her body. It wasn't useful for the fight. Staying calm was always the right thing to do.

Rumbling engines heralded the arrival of the enemy much sooner than she expected, but it wouldn't change how things went. Everything and everyone were in their right place. That was all that mattered. Tension was an illusion of the mind.

When the armored jeep at the front of the convoy rolled close enough, the fighter who had hidden the bombs pressed the button on their detonator. They exploded, throwing up mud and debris as they appeared to fuse into one massive fireball. It engulfed the vehicle, roasting an exposed soldier who was manning its .50 cal gun turret, and rattled the walls of the shack.

In synchronized motion with the other teams, Darexha and her comrades stood up and opened fire on the startled convoy. They shot through the glass windshield of the truck behind the burning jeep, killing the two soldiers in the driver and passenger seats with a furious hail of bullets. They then quickly picked off a survivor from the jeep explosion who was still struggling to pull his pistol from its holster as he crawled across the road with bloodied stumps for legs.

A wasteful amount of ammunition, Darexha thought.

Behind the truck was another armored jeep, but the insurgents in their shack weren't in the best position to target it. The soldier on its gun turret was still alive, and he was panicking. He sprayed bullets in a wild arc at the shacks on their side of the road. Darexha tried to duck and make herself small as the bullets easily punched through the rusty walls and zipped past her, bringing rain and slivers of metal with them.

The jeep was reversing, trying to turn around and flee the ambush, but it wouldn't get far. Someone in a building on the opposite side of the street fired an MVM that punched right through the vehicle's armor and quickly annihilated it. A few seconds later, the gunfire stopped and shouts of celebration replaced it as KA fighters swarmed into the street to rescue the prisoners in the back of the transport truck.

Sister Darexha did not cheer, although she allowed herself to feel elated. There was nothing indulgent or distracting about that feeling. It was an honest, and earned, reaction. Muscles in her shoulders, which she didn't realise she had been keeping stiff, finally relaxed.

She then turned to one of the insurgents next to her, the woman with whom she had prepared the bombs. She hadn't been so lucky when the gun turret had fired on their position. Red blood was gushing all over her ragged uniform and across the floor, illuminated by light shafts spilling in through the bullet holes in the wall.

"Shit, shit, fuck, oh fuck, shit, I don't want to—" the injured woman was saying, her shivering hands smearing her own blood across her body.

Darexha moved the woman's arms to the side and began applying pressure to what appeared to be the worst-hit area, but it very quickly became clear that it wasn't going to help her.

The other soldier in the room did a double-take while clutching the back of his head in an act of disbelief. He froze there for a moment, then paced over to the door and shouted for a medic.

The woman looked at Darexha, eyes full of sadness and fear, and Darexha spoke to her in the only way she knew how.

"You are the sole master of your world," she said, quoting one of the Five Great Truths, and the dying woman's lips began to move with hers. "All change in your world must come from you as only you can interpret your world."

The insurgent was clearly still suffering, both physically and emotionally, but she was doing her best to control her situation. To remember The Words.

"Your work here is finished," continued Darexha.

"End... end your reliance on the material... surpass your reliance on the world," replied the insurgent, through pained gasps, this time quoting one of the Five Righteous Actions.

The dying woman's expression changed as if becoming suddenly very focused. She stopped shivering entirely. She was trying to master and move beyond herself, trying to ascend.

Her breathing slowed. Her pulse slowed. Her face softened into a neutral position. Eyes watching nothing. And she went pale.

Darexha stopped applying pressure to the fighter's wounds. It was time to prepare for her exit. She grabbed a rucksack and began filling it up with the remaining bomb-making equipment, her hands still slick with the other woman's blood. They would need to abandon this position before the DNA or CDF sent more soldiers.

Some of her compatriots would escort the prisoners and the injured or dead into safe territory, but for others the front line always held more work. Sister Darexha accepted this dutifully, and sank back into the shadows to await her next assignment.

You know, these guys don't look too hot

a poem

Up on that serrated ridge under
the soft moonlight glow, I
watch in silence as the patrol rolls past
and ready my sniper, my baby.
You know, these guys don't look too hot.
We'll hit them in the back
and leave them to dry in the sand.

Losing on scratchcards under
the old corner store's halogen lamps, I
watch our so-called heroes through a window
and I know it's just about over, again.
They're really not looking so hot.
My brothers never made it home
but it's time for me to leave it too.

Coffee getting cold on my desk under
the whirr of my high-power ceiling fan, I
watch pixelated lines dip and go red,
and think about the evening, the weekend.
These guys really aren't doing that hot.
Good thing we already shorted them
before the army rolled in.

CROSSROADS

His watch read 6:47am but the city was already heavy with activity. A low layer of industrial smog blanketed the rooftops, choking out most of the sunrise, while streetlights still flickered in the gloom. The air smelled of diesel exhaust, which lingered alongside the spiced aroma of the slow-cooked beans and za'atar coated flatbreads being served at early morning street food stalls.

At the intersection of Mariana Avenue and Quarry Street, inside a painted circle, stood the traffic controller. He wore a peaked cap and a formal, militaristic green uniform with gold epaulettes. It looked stiff and form-fitting. He took pride in making sure that it always stayed spotless and well-ironed; it was an integral part of his morning. As a traffic controller, it was his job to anchor the chaos around him, and he knew that his appearance would always be a big part of that. The uniform was iconic. It made an impression.

The controller blew into a brass whistle and waved an arm, halting the line of vehicles pushing up Quarry Street. He then swept his hand forward to clear the cross-traffic from Mariana. Instantly, a chorus of horns erupted, the soundtrack to any minor inconvenience on Daybreak City's roads. In this line of work, it was all just background noise.

Sleek sedans with blacked out windows carried corporate climbers and government bureaucrats to their jobs, bumper-to-bumper with dark blue taxicabs plastered in gaudy advertisements. Behind them, sooty trucks and battered buses were packed full of blue collar workers, and swarms of mopeds hunted for opportunities to filter ahead of the traffic. Beneath them all, the asphalt roared as rubber ground against loose gravel. It was a hectic mix of traffic, but not unexpected from the nation's capital and most populous city.

The sidewalks were even more congested. Crowds of people were pressed up against one another, waiting for an opportunity to

cross the road. There were large groups which the controller could only assume to be internal refugees, displaced from the towns and cities being churned up by the front line, who were carrying their entire lives in grubby rucksacks and plastic bags that rustled like autumn leaves.

He blew his whistle again, twice this time, to cut the flow of cars and allow the throngs of pedestrians to safely make their way over the asphalt. They were chattering so much, some even shouting, but he failed to pick out any precise topics of conversation. He could only guess as to what their lives were like. He enjoyed doing that.

There were still plenty of people anxiously trying to cross when the traffic controller noticed a military convoy making its way down Mariana. Unfortunately for the civilians, they'd have to wait. He abruptly forced them to a stop and then waved the queuing cars back into motion, clearing a path for the convoy.

The trucks and ATVs rolled past, painted with blue-black urban camouflage and a swamp's worth of mystery mud. He held the road open to them for as long as it took for every single one to go through before he signalled another change. This was one of the reasons, aside from the brownouts, that Daybreak City used human traffic lights like him instead of a fully automated system. He was able to make sure the army got top priority. His real purpose wasn't just making sure that traffic was flowing smoothly, but doing that while keeping civilian life and the war effort from colliding. He saw it as keeping a balance between two distinct worlds.

Incoming call, signalled by an electronic buzz from his earpiece.

"How's the traffic over there?" came a woman's voice, friendly but professional.

He recognised it instantly. He'd talked to her plenty of times before, although their interactions were always brief. Sometimes she would even ask how he was feeling, or if the weather was okay, but usually she didn't. He liked to imagine how she looked, just guessing from her voice, but he still didn't even know her name.

“Traffic’s a bit heavier than usual,” he replied, quietly. It was the most he’d said to anyone since leaving his apartment. “It’s moving, but slowly, and it always builds back up. And did something happen? It seems like there’s more refugees in this neighborhood every day.”

“I’m calling to let you know there’s an elevated threat level in the area,” she said. “Use your visor and start scanning for unsanctioned vehicles. Stop any that are flagged by the system. Peacekeepers are on standby.”

He hadn’t even noticed them before, but there were peacekeepers on every corner. They were in uniform, dark plate carriers over charcoal gray uniforms that were covered in pockets and pouches, but they still managed to disappear easily into the thick crowds surrounding them. He swallowed, hoping they hadn’t been called out for anything too serious.

The controller lowered his visor, which extended down from a concealed space in his cap. It covered his eyes with an Augmented Reality display. Electric light hit his face as it automatically began booting up its plate scanner software and establishing a connection to the SECNET database. It always felt strange and dissonant that they used a technology developed by Allwell, a Vitarian company sitting on the board of one of the very armies they were at war with, but apparently people much more important than him were able to maintain that contradiction without trouble. It was far above his pay grade and, really, he preferred it that way.

As he looked at each car, the visor’s plate scanner checked for ‘Outstanding Concerns’. If a concern was detected, a red border would flash, and if no concern was detected, a green border would flash. What exactly qualified as an Outstanding Concern would change depending on the day, and it wasn’t knowledge he was usually privy to. It was decided by people he would never meet based on information he would never have clearance to read.

Forty plates, fifty, sixty, all green.

Thinking about it, ‘unsanctioned vehicles’ could really be anything. It could mean terrorists from one of Daybreak’s rebel factions. It could mean fertilizer car bombs. It could mean someone who pulls a gun on him the moment he tries to get them to brake.

A plate flashed red. He felt cold sweat on his skin as he blew his whistle hard and thrust out his hand to stop the marked sedan. The driver hit the brakes just in time, and the sedan’s tires skidded to a halt with a violent hiss.

The traffic controller didn’t look at the car in any more detail. He couldn’t bring himself to gaze into the barrel of a gun or the eyes of a mad bomber. He looked instead at the peacekeepers who were already sprinting forward with their blocky machine pistols raised.

The driver was hauled out. He was just a chubby man in his fifties with messy stubble on his face. His outfit, nothing more sinister than jeans and a t-shirt. No bomb vest and no gun. Panic.

“Hands behind your head!” shouted the peacekeepers in unison, spinning him around and pressing him against the hood of his car before he had any time to follow the order.

One of the peacekeepers touched an earpiece similar to the one worn by the controller, expression serious. Car horns were blaring out in symphony all around, but the controller barely registered them. The moment, to him, felt stretched out and silent as he watched the peacekeepers do their work.

Another incoming call, with a woman’s voice to break the silence.

“Nothing big. Warrant for selling bootleg cigarettes. Threat level remains unchanged. Stay vigilant!”

“Thanks for letting me know,” he replied, relieved, but she had already closed the connection. He wondered when he’d hear her voice next, and when he’d hear it for the last time.

The peacekeepers removed the man and his car with startling efficiency before dissolving back into the crowd. The controller made sure he was still standing in the center of his painted circle. He then

blew his whistle and gestured for traffic to resume, his visor still flashing green borders with each new vehicle.

Car after car after car, stretched out into the endless dawn.