

THE CALL OF ABADDON

Colin Searle

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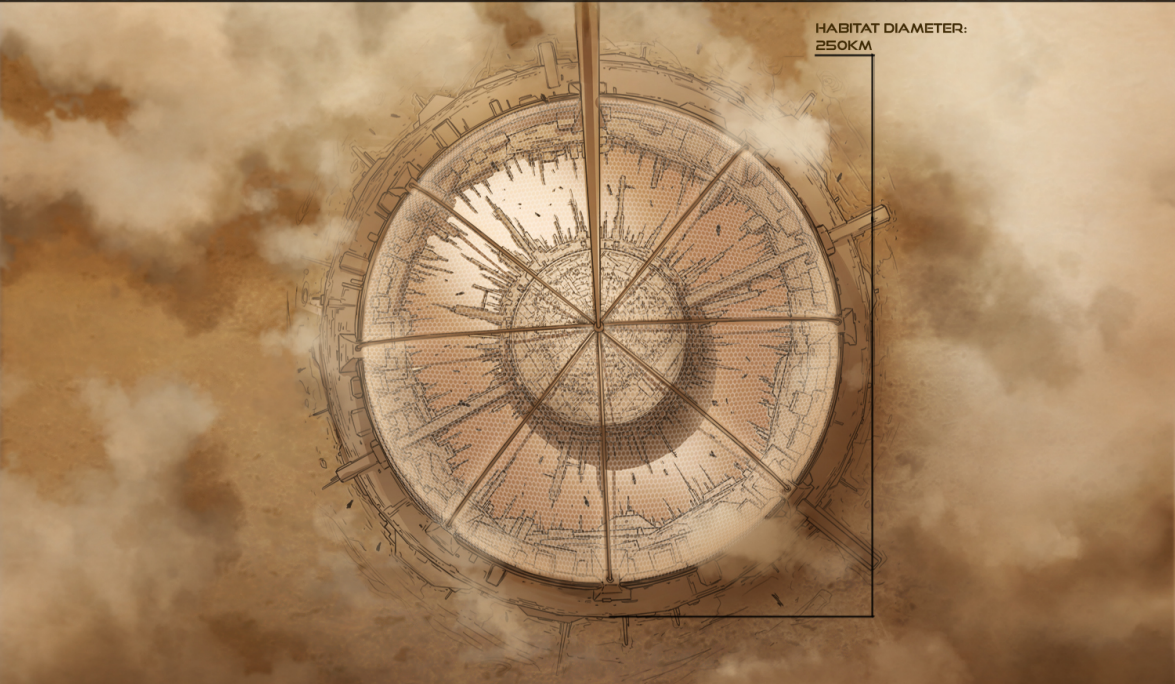
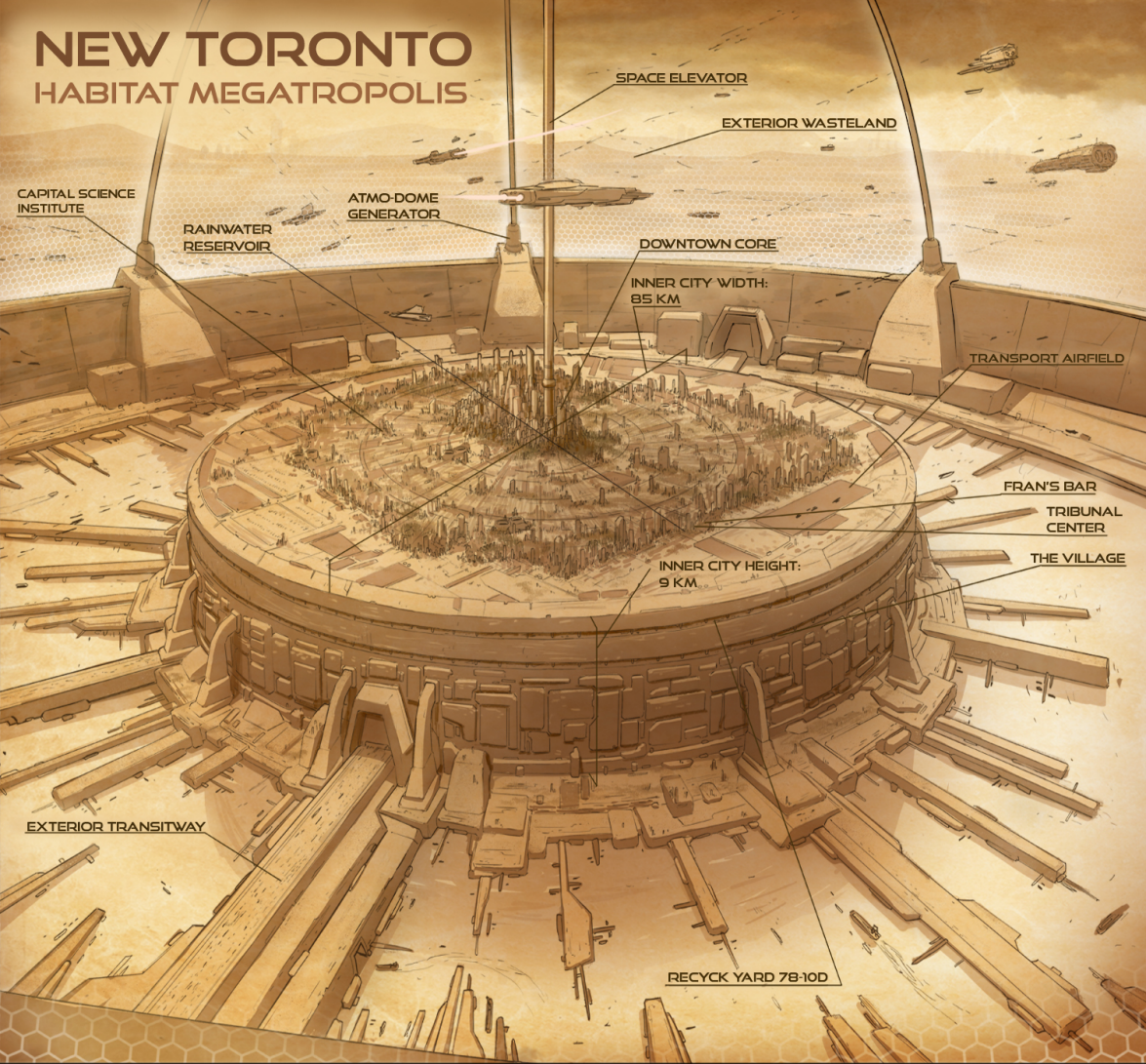
To my family, my Mom, my girlfriend Zoe, all of my hardworking beta-readers, editors, and everyone who provided input on the manuscript at every stage: this book wouldn't exist in its current form without you all. Thank you!

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—— **Viktor E. Frankl**

NEW TORONTO

HABITAT MEGATROPOLIS





1 — ESCAPE

EARTH — NEW TORONTO — UNITED EARTH FEDERATION
SCIENCE INSTITUTE — JANUARY 23, 2255 — 02:31
HOURS

Personal journal of Dr. Avery Oakfield, UEF Science Minister, PhD.

***** Log E7-006 Begins *****

The worst has happened.

With great regret, I can confirm that multiple test subjects have escaped the labs. From what my people have managed to piece together, the escapees started a chemical fire, using it to cover their exit through the Institute's central loading docks. Crews are still putting the blaze out. What a bloody disaster. My field teams are running an initial search of the city for our three escapees. Unfortunately, because of the Council's recent sanctions, my reach is limited.

The escape appears to have been led by Abhamancer Program test subjects 107 and 108, who also managed to take Successor Program subject 001 with them, too. Losing the Abhamancers is bad enough, but the loss of 001 will be difficult to explain to Emperor Mariko.

In total, three individuals from two research streams are gone. Without Abhamancer subject 107, the Abaddon Beacon artifact remains uncontrolled, meaning that the Nanophage is still free to spread across the Sol System. Perhaps worst of all, Abaddon appears to have noticed 107's absence.

The Abaddon obelisk has been acting erratically since the breakout, like it did when Hadrian Mariko left my operation to start his damned empire, and it's proven more than capable of psionically influencing him far beyond the walls of this Institute. Who knows what kind of damage subject 107 might do if Abaddon turns its influence onto him, as well?

Subject 107 was critical to the Abhamancer Program's success, an imperative part of preventing the spread of the Nanophage through our technologies. He had the most psychic potential out of all the next-generation subjects, even more than Emperor Mariko himself. His Abhamic powers will continue to grow, without guidance or control. I can only hope that Subject 107 sees sense and returns here for continued treatment before anything catastrophic happens.

But if Abaddon gets to him first, it's game over for the human species. There aren't enough nuclear weapons in the UEF's arsenal to halt another planetary-scale Ascension event. The Confederacy exhausted their entire thermonuclear stocks to stop Abaddon's last attempt at Ascension, and the Earth's biosphere has only become more toxic as a result.

Subject 107, I'm sorry for all that I've put you through, but you must return here and allow me to finish the Abhamancer Program. Only I can make it work, and only you have the power needed to restrain the Abaddon Beacon, and prevent it from spreading this damned techno-plague to every soul in our star system.

Please, 107 ...*Jason*, come back.

*****End of log*****



2 — A CALL FROM THE VOID

EIGHT YEARS LATER — EARTH — NEW TORONTO
UNDERGROUND — THE VILLAGE — OCTOBER 10, 2263 —
15:40 HOURS

“Find us, Jason ...”

Jason snapped awake, breathing hard, looking around the room. His head was pounding. He could swear that he’d heard something muttering to him, like a thread of his nightmare had followed him into waking life.

Clammy sweat dripped from his face as he sat up, trying to slow his breathing, blinking away the afterimages of his terrifying dreams. Maybe the whispers had been his imagination.

Then, the strange voices began again, filtering into Jason’s mind like a cold graveyard mist. Terror clenched his heart as they said, *“The Ascension will soon be at hand, and your participation is required ...”*

“Ascension?” Jason asked. “What—what does that mean?”

“Time is short. Your presence is critical. Find us, or we will find you ...” the ethereal chorus continued.

Jason recognized these voices; he’d been hearing them for years in his dreams, though they’d always been indistinct, hard to understand. But unlike any other time before, he was hearing them now while he was awake—and that scared him most of all.

“Abaddon?” Jason breathed.

"We are your creators, from your beginning to your end. You must find us ..."

"Shit."

With trembling fingers, Jason reached behind his neck and gripped an implant attached there—right above a strange spiral sigil, barcode and identifier text 'Subject 107' that had both been tattooed onto his skin long ago. He twisted a control knob on the device, allowing drugs from the neural inhibitor implant to flood his system, calming him.

"Find us ... before the final sacrifice ... the Ascension must commence ..." came one last cacophony of whispers, but as the drugs worked their magic on whatever part of his brain was receiving them, the swirling voices of the Abaddon Beacon dissolved into nothingness. He began to breathe more easily, and the tightness in his chest relaxed.

The drug—Osmium—was an addictive psychoactive substance, but it was effective at helping Jason sleep through his fitful dreams, plagued by his distant memories of the obelisk in the labs ... and far darker visions that he tried his best to forget.

As Jason's migraine eased, he swung his legs over the side of the cot he'd been using to nap, glancing around the room. The prefabricated polymer walls were hung with robot parts, cybernetic implants, old vehicle engines, all manner of technologies and machinery from various eras. The area rumbled with the passing of a nearby spacecraft. So did the repair shop and everything within it, as suspended automaton limbs jangled against empty vials that had once contained valuable pink Nanogel—something that they desperately needed to refill.

That triggered a question—where were David and Sam?

"Jason, we gotta go!" came his brother's impatient voice from the direction of the workshop's double garage doors, open to the street so sunlight could filter inside. Jason's gaze snapped up, spotting David by the door.

"Oh, shit!" he said.

Jason had been resting up before a salvage job, and as he glanced at the chronometer on the wall—he was late. Very late.

"Yeah, you overslept again, ya dingus. They're all waiting for us," David said, one hand on the vertical sliding door, the other holding the strap of a large bag of expedition gear. "I let you rest as long as I could, but we're outta time. Grab your stuff, we have to get going. Sam's already talking to the governor."

A white, citron-tufted cockatoo—Budgie—squawked down at Jason, perched on the peak of his brother’s red hair.

“Crap. Alright, I’m coming, sorry,” Jason said, still a bit breathless as he started scrambling around, looking for his expedition supplies. Budgie clambered down David’s clothing with his beak and claws, waddling over to Jason as he bobbed his feathery head in concern.

“Don’t apologize to *me*. Come on, I’ll meet you out here,” David said, ducking out the doors and into the street beyond.



With his expedition gear stuffed into a shoulder bag, Jason ducked out through the rusted garage doors of their repair business, topped by a buzzing neon sign that read: ‘Chop Shop’.

“I’m here, I’m good!” Jason said, stifling a yawn and scratching his scraggly mop of blonde hair. He hadn’t slept well the night before, nor the previous few nights, either. David opened his mouth to reply, but another voice cut him off.

“Oi, where are you two going?” a bald man called, hurrying down the street toward them. Two twitching robots tottered in his wake, sputtering and sparking.

David groaned. “As if we didn’t have enough on our plate today.”

“Hey Vlad,” Jason said, catching one of the man’s meter-tall metal robots as it tripped forward on malfunctioning legs, preventing it from faceplanting on the permacrete ground. The robot burred random strings of code through its speakers.

“Don’t tell me that you’re too busy to take care of these two,” said Vlad, with a warning tone.

“Sorry, we’re heading outside the walls for a bit,” Jason replied.

“Outside? My bots are needed in the hydroponics lab, and they’re at risk of developing the Phage! Please, you must fix them, now!” Vlad said. The elderly man shot a desperate look at David, who had taken off his supply bag to check his gear. He looked up, but shrugged. “We can’t do it right now, Vlad. Governor’s orders.”

Jason twisted the inhibitor’s knob again, letting the Osmium drug calm his nerves. Vlad didn’t budge, so he elaborated.

“Sorry, Vlad. To fix these guys, we need more spare parts and Nanite gel, and to find all that, we gotta go outside the Village. Like David said, it’s Yamamoto’s call.”

Vlad sighed, massaging his temples. “Okay, alright. If the Governor ordered you out on a salvage run, it must be for good reason.”

He turned his wobbling robots around. Both were non-verbal, but the taller one looked back at Jason, and he could swear that he saw a plea in the bot’s single photoreceptor eye.

“Bring these guys back here tonight,” Jason said, patting one of them on the head. “Depending on what we find out there, we should have enough new materials and Nanites to patch them up.”

“It’s alright. Make sure these two are your top priority when you return,” Vlad said, clapping his robots on their scuffed plating to keep them moving.

“You got it,” Jason said, zipping up his frayed jacket.

“You topped up on Osmium?” David asked.

“Yeah. I grabbed plenty of backups, too.” Jason said, shaking his supply bag.

“Hearing any spooky eldritch voices?” “Well, I did hear something after I woke up,” Jason admitted. “That’s never happened before, not outside my dreams.”

“Are you hearing it *now*?” David asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jason shook his head. “No, the Osmium chased it off. Turns out that it works even while I’m awake.”

“Nothing to worry about, then,” David said as he studied Jason’s implant, tapping the blue drug vial loaded into it. “Do you think you’ll be fine if we run into trouble out there?”

“Probably, yeah,” Jason confirmed. “They’re dreams, David. It’s scary stuff, but nothing can find us down here in the underground. Not even Abaddon. Obelisks can’t move, right?”

“Got that right. You’re full for now, but let me know if you run low,” David said, finishing his inspection of the inhibitor’s Osmium vial and clapping his brother on the shoulder. “I have some backups, too, just in case. Don’t get blasted on this stuff, please.”

“No promises,” Jason said.

“Aren’t you two *forgetting* someone?” an electronic voice interrupted, booming from the Chop Shop. A fourteen-foot-tall, red-painted humanoid robot ducked under the doors. Talos stretched his massive limbs and pis-

ton-driven legs with a rumble of clanking gears and tossed a huge net of burlap salvaging bags over one of his pauldrons, which he must have been searching for in the rear storage room of the Chop Shop.

“Whoops,” said Jason, looking sheepishly up at the giant metal man. “Sorry, Talos. We were waiting for you, I swear.”

Talos pointed a massive metal finger at them, eliciting a warning flap and squawk from Budgie, who was once again on David’s head. “You two are always moving so fast. Slow down and enjoy life’s smaller pleasures. Your flesh-prisons will wither and die, while I get to deal with the boredom afterward.”

“Thanks for the existential dread, bolthead,” David said.

Budgie bravely took off and landed on Talos’s finger, locking eyes with the automaton’s photoreceptors in their usual staring contest.

Jason caught the roar of multiple spacecraft over the water, leaving for other Earth-side habitats like theirs or off-world. Among them was a civilian hauler converted into a troopship, bound for the faraway battlefronts of the Solar War, which had been ongoing for several years.

“Enough sightseeing; let’s get over there,” said David, gesturing to the Village’s twelve-foot east wall gate, several hundred meters away between stacks of prefabricated shanty dwellings rising up on either side of the main street. Several people stood in front of the gate, waiting for them—including Sam.

They headed out with Talos bringing up the rear, and Budgie landed on the robot’s gigantic shoulder guard.

The street was bustling with activity. Village residents worked at nearby food stalls and fabrication buildings, and others arranged themselves for afternoon prayers. Work coveralls, jumpsuits, and casual wear flapped from lines strung across the road. Even children above the age of twelve worked non-critical jobs when they weren’t in school. Several kids from the nearby playground approached Talos, hanging onto the automaton’s piston-driven legs as he lumbered past. He grumbled and growled at the delighted, screeching children through his vocoder, but that didn’t stop them from climbing him like a jungle gym.

Gas-based engine fuel and food smells wafted past Jason, mixing with the familiar stench of livestock and manure from the Village stables, which stood beside the vertical crop-growing structures and hydroponics building. The combination smelled like home, the only one he’d ever known. Artificial

sunlight radiated down into their underground sub-level at an angle through the concourse's support pillars, providing a view of the lake and air traffic outside. The sun's heat felt good on Jason's skin. Most of New Toronto's vast, cake-like superstructure was above water level, but anything below the habitat's top-most city surface level was considered to be 'underground'.

"The dome is having more problems today, look," David said.

Jason looked across the sparkling lake water far below that stretched many kilometers away to the habitat's outer wall, which projected an atmospheric shield dome that insulated the city arcology from the toxic superstorms raging across the hellscape beyond. The dome also displayed an artificial sun on its inner surface that mimicked the real sun, hidden behind dense clouds outside.

But several sections of the energy dome were flickering, fading in and out of existence. Visible wisps of the radioactive storms beyond the translucent barrier were carried in by fierce winds before the shield segments re-initialized, which then malfunctioned again in a loop. As Jason watched, several repair spacecraft rumbled overhead, aimed at one of the gigantic generators mounted atop the dome's projection wall.

He pointed them out. "See? Feds are on it."

"Yeah, but how much fallout are they letting inside before they fix that bloody thing?" David grumbled.

Another massive repair vessel roared right past the Village, barely two hundred meters away. Through its open bay doors, Jason spotted teams of rad-suited workers and industrial robots preparing to work on the wall's dome generators. Many of them didn't look much older than he was.

But the workers made no indication that they could see any sign of the tiny secret settlement nestled into the city's sublevels as their ship roared past. A stealth hologram hid the Village from view through gaps in the open-sided causeway. Holo-generators displayed a vast pile of collapsed rubble to mask their home from outsiders, allowing it to remain secret from the outside, and most importantly, from the Federation at large.

Dusty midsummer winds whipped past the Village wall as Jason and David drew near. Several volunteer troopers were sitting above the gate, monitoring the ancient, automated turret guns, which watched the gloomy area beyond the barrier. Like most militia, they wore a mismatched assortment of fatigues, flak vests, body armor, and improvised plating. Much of

their gear dated back more than a century, to the time before the Great War had rendered the planet nearly uninhabitable.

The Village's two de-facto leaders were waiting for them: governor Julian Yamamoto and security chief Josiah Mendez, speaking with three of the settlement's militia guards. Sam stood with them, deep in discussion with Yamamoto. Like David, she was a couple years older than Jason and very fit from their expeditions into the Under-city's depths. Her background was mixed, Caucasian and Asian, but Sam had always been tight-lipped about her origins.

Governor Yamamoto was tall, sporting a goatee, greying hair, with rough working hands and dusty work boots. Mendez wore an eyepatch, and held a cane in his gnarled, hairy grip. No one knew who Yamamoto had been before he'd founded the Village many years ago, but he ruled with a stern, fair hand, and he'd brought Mendez in to keep the peace. Most villagers were fine with this arrangement; Yamamoto's benevolent autocracy was better than the dangers of the UEF's wartime terror state of surveillance over the city above. He offered a fresh restart on life for a lucky few, one that many gladly took.

Mendez tapped governor Yamamoto on the shoulder as the salvagers arrived, and Yamamoto turned to regard them. "Glad you could finally join us."

David nudged Jason. "Someone overslept."

Sam eyed Jason, but when he shrugged, she gave him a small smile and a wink.

Yamamoto spoke with a slight accent, holding a scuffed data tablet with a large spreadsheet open in its primary window. "I see. Now that you're all here—as you probably know, Quartermaster Bilby has asked us to ramp up salvage operations for more spare parts and advanced Nanite tech. We need them for our big list of repairs, including the holo-shield."

"We're aware, Governor. The holo-barrier's been acting up lately." Sam replied, scrolling down a list of active repair jobs on her personal tablet, comparing his list to hers. "We've got a monster pile of jobs in the Chop Shop and around the Village to complete, but we're low on basically all supplies that we need for repairs, so it's been slow-going."

"Which is not good," Yamamoto agreed. "In light of that, Chief Mendez has chosen three of his people for you to train as our secondary salvaging squad. They're all we can spare right now. That crashed spaceship we spotted

a few days ago is the perfect target for this exercise. Having additional salvage teams on the roster will give you a break to spend time on repairs. Much needed, by the look of you.”

The governor gestured to the three young militia guards with them, who snapped to attention. “These are your trainees.”

“Sir!” the militia team replied, slightly out of unison.

“Have any of them ever been outside the walls?” David said, looking skeptically at their young recruits.

All three militia looked troubled at this question. Mendez answered for them in a rumbling voice. “No, they have not. Your job is to make this first excursion a successful one for them. And bring back as many valuables and supplies as possible, of course.”

“I see,” David replied, his eyebrows raising further. To Sam and Jason, he murmured, “Babysitting these three out there will be risky.”

Sam shot him a dark look, but Jason could tell that she didn’t disagree.

“I don’t want to suggest that these guys don’t have what it takes, but wouldn’t it make more sense to send more experienced militia out with us?” Sam asked the governor. “This may be a routine salvage run, but going outside the walls into the wider Under-city is never a picnic, even for us.”

“Ordinarily, yes. But these three are nimble, well-suited for climbing around in the deep ruins like you three do,” replied Yamamoto. “We’re also understaffed as it is on the walls, and we need our best marksmen here in case of a Phage migration, especially if Talos is going with you. Given that you three are our most experienced—and only—salvagers, it made the most sense to send these three out with you. They’ll learn fast.”

“Alright, Governor. We’ll show ‘em the ropes. But remember, exploring the abandoned under-levels is always a risk,” Sam said, making a conciliatory gesture, and glanced at the militia to impress the point upon them.

Yamamoto nodded and Chief Mendez inclined his head in approval, puffing on a locally-made cigar. Budgie flapped away from the smoke, disgusted. The three recruits also acknowledged Sam’s point with timid nods.

“We know that it’s dangerous out there, more so now than ever with the increases in Phage activity. We’re also so low on supplies that we don’t have a choice but to send you out,” Mendez said.

One of the militias raised a shaking hand.

“Yes?” Sam eyed him.

"Are there gonna be, uh...hostiles out there?" the scared, olive-skinned kid asked, clutching a long-outdated rifle. Jason thought he looked too young to be guarding the Village walls, let alone joining an Under-city salvage run.

"Yes, every part of the Under-city beyond these walls is hazardous," Sam replied to the militiaman. "We've seen everything out there; Phage-infected people, robots, dissidents, criminal gangs, mercenary hideouts, and plenty more. You've seen the numbers when a Phage migration hits us, so a big part of the job out there is avoiding trouble. But if we encounter anything robotic—and in uninfected condition—we'll add 'em to the salvage tally. You're Mayweather, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Mayweather.

"Sam's fine," Sam corrected, smiling.

"Right ... Sam."

"You probably know these other two hooligans already—Santiago and Soohyun," Mendez said, gesturing to the two remaining recruits. "They're under orders to do whatever you say. Bring 'em back in one piece, ya hear? We don't have a big pool of replacements. Behave yourselves, you three!"

"Yes, sir!" the militia replied, saluting. Budgie hopped from shoulder to shoulder, harassing everyone. Soohyun reflexively brushed her hair behind one ear and kept stealing glances at Jason, which made him go red in the face.

"We'll bring them back the same way we found 'em," Sam replied to Mendez, checking the battery of her short, vicious blade slung in a magnetic holster. "We haven't lost a man out there yet."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from our best expedition team," Mendez said.

"Keep an eye on the time while you're out there," Yamamoto said. "I don't want anyone outside the walls after dark, especially when the infected are more active down there."

"Sure. They probably won't come after such a large group though, sir," Jason pointed out. "The Phagebearers out there haven't given us much trouble lately, especially with Talos watching our backs."

"And you organic ingrates don't even pay my protection tax," Talos said. His trio of eye-lenses flashed in aggravation.

"You don't have a protection tax," Sam snapped.

"They don't know *that*," the towering robot hissed, jabbing a finger at their recruits.

“When are you finally gonna fix his personality matrix?” David whispered under his breath to Sam.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Who ever said anything about fixing him? Talos is perfect.”

The giant robot leaned over David, casting him into complete shadow. “I *heard* that, human.”

“Alright, open it up, people! Keep an eye on the perimeter,” Mendez said, signaling to the guards, who moved to the gate controls. Jury-rigged mechanisms came alive, and the sheet-metal slabs scraped open.

“Let’s get you all underway, and be careful. Bring back as many supplies as you can, please. We really need it,” Yamamoto emphasized.

“Will do, governor,” said Sam.

The gently curving causeway tunnel edged into view beyond the gates, lit sporadically by sunlight filtering in between massive support columns on the outer side. Structural collapses had made huge sections of the concourse impassable, blocked by mountains of rubble from above. The Village had been intentionally set up in one of the most stable parts of the city’s peripheral Under-city rings, but that was changing as the gigantic habitat degraded over time. Talos’s photoreceptors narrowed as he deployed a scanner from his upper carapace.

“I detect no threats,” the red automaton said. With a flurry of sliding armor plates, his arm transformed into a brutal-looking plasma cannon. “But I hope I do.”

The three militiamen froze, glancing at Talos in apprehension.

Sam put a hand on the mighty weapon, making him lower it. “That’s unnecessary, big guy.”

Despite Sam’s assurances, Santiago, Mayweather, and Soohyun gripped their weapons tighter.

Jason gave them an encouraging smile. “As dangerous as these salvage runs can be, the more stuff we bring back, the more ration cards we get.”

Soohyun blushed as Jason stared into her eyes, before he looked away quickly. “Really?”

David thumped his well-developed pectorals.

“How do you think I ended up looking like this?” he boasted to the militia. “Salvaging pays well in protein, y’know.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Your head is as inflated as your chest, *hackerman*.”

Jason hesitated as the rest of the group began to move toward the gate, one hand on his forehead. Despite the multiple hits of Osmium coursing through his system, he felt chills run up his spine as his mind returned to his earlier post-dream experience. The Abaddon Beacon's words remained with him, but there was no cause for alarm. The Osmium was working. Abaddon couldn't get to him through the wall of drugs protecting his mind.

Sam put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Jason," she said with a reassuring tone as David led the militia into the gloom, followed by Talos. "You sleep alright?"

"Not really. I heard Abaddon, *after* I woke up from that nap. But the drugs are working. I'll be okay."

Sam took a step closer and gave his Osmium drip a quick twist, depositing another small dose into his bloodstream. "Good. Let me know if you run into any trouble with the 'ol mental state. I'll keep an eye on you."

"Thanks, Sam."



"And there she is," Sam remarked as the team reached their destination after trekking many levels deeper into the Under-city. "Prime real estate for filthy scavengers like us."

A destroyed corporate transport spacecraft wobbled in front of the salvagers and Talos, held in midair by a tangle of foot-thick power cables below a gaping hole in the massive chamber's ceiling. The designation stencil was damaged, but Jason made out the letters '*UEF-CT Ganesb of Mesopotamia*' stamped across the starboard side, hinting at an origin from one of the Southeast Asian habitats. Dappled sunlight played across the ship's broken hull, trickling down through the city's superstructure. The ship had been caught in the thicket of inert cabling after crashing through the arcology's superstructure many levels above, tangling as it came to rest down here.

The salvagers stood on a permacrete cliff, with the sausage-shaped transport suspended fifteen meters away over a sheer drop into the city's deep ruins, where polluted waves crashed far below. At forty-five meters long, the spacecraft only had two engines left out of six, with no antigravity repulsors remaining. The vessel was a disaster—but ripe for plundering.

Still panting from their hike, Soohyun gazed at their target and gulped. "We're going inside *that*?"

"Yep," Jason replied. Budgie shrieked.

"Scanning. No life signs aboard," Talos announced. "No sign of active rad-leaks, either. You vulnerable flesh-sacks are lucky today."

"Don't jinx us," David murmured.

The corporate hauler, crumpled like a sad accordion, groaned under its sagging weight. Acrid-smelling fluids dripped from broken ports along the hull. Running lights flickered and exposed sections of the ship's innards sparked pitifully. Sam pulled on a pair of thick safety gloves. "I'll head inside first, check it out for hazards. Then we'll strip 'er down."

"How do we know the UEF won't come looking for this thing?" Santiago asked.

David shook his head. "It's been weeks since the crash. Yamamoto wouldn't have sent us down here if there was a risk of discovery by the up-worlders. If the corpos haven't bothered with retrieval, the Feds won't either. They're too busy wasting time on their stupid Solar War."

"Would you do the honors, Talos?" Sam asked, drawing and pointing her short blade at the ship, which was attached to a reel device on her hip with a long electrical cable.

Talos groaned, retracting his buzzing, steaming plasma cannon. "All work, no fun."

The robot fired a gas-powered grapppler from the upper-left side of his torso, crunching a cable deep into the ship's starboard flank. The mechanism locked in place with an audible *clunk*, so it couldn't be released by accident. Though the transporter was far larger than Talos, he lumbered backward, dragging the suspended vessel closer to the cliff's edge. When it wouldn't swing further, Talos clamped his giant boots down with gas-powered grounding spikes, cracking the permacrete. "There. Have at it, peasants. I'll stand here and do ... nothing."

"Careful, big guy. I don't wanna go spelunking for you if this heap takes a fall," David warned, peering over the edge. Water lapped against crumbling docks and titanic support pillars sprouting from the waves, hundreds of meters below.

"I have run ten thousand simulations on how to move this vessel without compromising it. Have faith, squishy organic," Talos scoffed.

"How do we get inside?" Soohyun asked.

“Like this!” Sam said, pulling on a pair of goggles and a respirator. She leaped off the broken cliff edge, graceful as a cat, hurling her blade at the spacecraft.

Sam’s stubby rectangular sword magnetized to the hull’s metal surface with a quivering *snap*. She swung on the blade’s attached cable beneath the spacecraft’s ravaged flank, then her hip-mounted reservoir reversed, dragging her upward.

Everyone watched as Sam grabbed her magnetized blade’s hilt and planted her boots into outcroppings on the hull. Ignoring the crashing swells far below, she attached a safety line from her belt to the ship’s hull with a big carabiner clip. Once secured, Sam held on with her free hand and triggered her phase sword’s secondary mode, snapping it off the hull as the magnetic field switched off. The edges of the blade flared to fiery life, allowing Sam to carve through twelve inches of ablative hull and circuitry like it was a plasma torch.

“That’s ... crazy,” said Santiago, looking to Jason for confirmation, who shrugged. “She does this stuff a lot. You’ll get used to it.”

“I’ll need a change of pants if I’m going in there!” said Mayweather, watching Sam carve into the ship.

“Then you better have brought ‘em,” Jason added, grinning. The three militia exchanged glances. David raised an eyebrow.

In a shower of sparks, Sam removed a square of metal from the hull and hollered, “Be right back!”

She pulled out a scanner and crawled inside. Less than a minute later, Jason heard a grinding noise, and a loading ramp fell from the ship’s underside with a loud *clang*, bridging the gap between the permacrete ledge and the suspended cargo vessel. Sam strolled down the incline toward the waiting group, twirling her sword on its cable as she removed her protective gear. “It’s safe enough in there, more or less. Who’s first? We have a lot to teach you guys—”

Budgie squawked, taking off and going nuts in the air above their heads.

Moments later, Talos spoke. “Alert.”

The scanner sticking out of his beetle-like rear carapace was beeping as he elaborated. “Vermin approaching. I cannot blast them in my current state. Which is an incredible pity.”

Sam tensed, raising her sparking blade while everyone else readied their weapons. “Everyone, protect Talos. Things are about to get a bit choppy.”



3 — ABADDON'S SHADOW

NEW TORONTO UNDER-CITY — ACCESS CHASM 24D —
OCTOBER 10, 2263 — 16:56 HOURS

Several dozen robotic drones spilled out through a crack in the crumbling wall, ten meters behind the salvage team. They were newer models, most no more than a couple years old, blaring random blurts of code through failing vocoders. The metal and polymer composite automatons were moving with strange jerky motions, charging headlong toward the salvagers. The horde came in all shapes and sizes, from humanoid to spidery chassis designs, plus one with treads and flailing arms tipped with vicious-looking engineering appendages. Some had rad-shielding to survive maintenance work in the deepest ruins around the habitat arcology, but that hadn't saved them from their techno-affliction.

"Ah, shit. These are advanced models. Don't let 'em get close, waste 'em!" David barked, whirling his junkyard pistol up to shoulder height, firing incendiary rounds at the rabid, charging robots.

Jason extended his crackling stun rod, bracing for impact as the crazed group closed the distance—but Sam charged ahead, whirling her crackling blade on its cable like a bullwhip.

Despite the horde's size and sudden appearance, the melee was short-lived. Mayweather, Santiago, and Soohyun only managed to fire their rifles a handful of times before Sam, Jason and David had blasted, beaten and sliced the shuddering robots into an early grave.

“That was ... easier than expected.” David said, narrowing his eyes at the smoldering robotic bodies before firing a few extra shots into the ones that were still twitching. Sam completed a final whirling dervish-like spin, snapping her spinning blade back into her hand with precision, as the final robot fell in two smoking halves in front of her.

Jason turned to Soohyun. “See? This gig can be fun, sometimes.”

“Right. *Fun*,” Soohyun replied. The other militia shifted uncomfortably, training their weapons on the dead pile of hostiles.

“Don’t get overconfident, Jason,” Sam said, crouching over the belly of a dead repair bot. “These poor guys haven’t been looked after in months, so they’re starting to develop the Phage. Nice job leaving their batteries intact. If only this one was clean ...”

She held up a pink glowing object in her protective glove—an energy storage cell filled with the specialized Nanites that governed its operation. Nanotech was a miraculous innovation that ran nearly every piece of technology made in the last half-century. But a dark purple, pulsating tumor was cracking through the battery’s casing, indicating that the Nanites within were replicating excessively due to age and lack of maintenance, developing the ‘Nanophage’, which was nearly irreversible without extremely specialized intervention and treatment.

Sam beckoned to the militia, who approached the sparking wrecks. Jason hesitated, eyeing the robot bodies carefully, but Sam winked at him. “They’re dead, Jason. Don’t worry. Gather round.”

Jason and the militia closed in while David, Budgie and Talos kept watch for any stragglers.

“This kind of stuff is what we’re after,” Sam said, holding out the battery for everyone to see. “But if you see any of these nasty-looking growths ... no touchy. You guys already know what’ll happen if these little shit-heads enter your bloodstream.”

“Biological infection?” Soohyun asked.

“Yep. If any Phage-infected Nanogel finds even a small open wound on your body, or gets in through some other means, like your mouth, you’re done. It doesn’t seem to be infectious through our pores, though, which is lucky. Doc Janice can only treat so many Phage cases at once—don’t go giving her more work,” Sam said, rolling the battery away, which fell off the cliff edge. She twisted the release cap off a clean battery before pulling it out of the broken robot’s body, and began teaching Mayweather, Santiago, and

Soohyun how to strip other usable parts from the corpses. Jason observed as well.

David eyed his brother, jerking his head toward the suspended spacecraft. "You'll be okay when you're in there?"

"It's cool, David. The Osmium's working fine," Jason said.

David was about to reply when Talos interrupted, "I don't have all day, flesh-bags!"

All eyes turned to him. The robot twanged the taut cable with an impatient finger. Sam waved him off. "Talos can hold that thing still for weeks. He's just bellyaching."

"I heard that!"

Jason turned to the robot. "I'm guessing we can't all go inside at the same time."

Talos nodded. "Indeed. Do not enter that vessel in groups larger than three or four, maximum. Any more weight risks pulling the craft free. Not even my magnificent strength will prevent its fall if enough of those power cables slip free. And don't jump around in there like the filthy apes you are. This elevator only goes down."

Soohyun and Santiago wrinkled their noses at Talos.

"Any way to secure it more?" Jason asked, gesturing to Talos's grappling line.

"No, puny human," said the robot. "That sloppy grey mass in your head needs re-calibration. The ship's honeycomb structure is already under enough stress. Even if I had more anchoring cables, they would only pull the vessel apart. We'll lose the cargo and maybe some of you organics, too. As much as it pains me to watch you have all the fun, this is the safest option."

"Fair enough," Jason said.

David pulled an armored laptop and a bundle of data lead connectors from his bag. "I'll show you guys how to bypass the ship's firewalls and release security on critical system components. Then, Sam will demo how to extract everything. Jason's our backup, since he's still in training. He'll lead the offload."

Jason glared at his brother, but David was already heading for the ship. Sam looked up from the maintenance bot she'd carved open.

"Careful in there, David," she cautioned. "If that ship so much as squeaks, get these guys outta there. And keep your respirators on. I saw coolant leaking inside somewhere."

David slipped on a mask. “Fine, whatever. Come on, you three. Time to be baby computer nerds.”

Mayweather, Santiago, and Soohyun fumbled with their protective gear, following him.

“And duck when you board!” Sam called while David led his charges aboard.

Irritated over David’s comments, Jason knelt down, stripping uninfected parts from the nearest robot, adding them to Sam’s neat collection of Nanite batteries, energy converters, intact power conduits, and circuit boards. She looked up at him.

“Don’t let David bug you, Jason. Your anxiety is improving, even on a lower Osmium dose. I’m thinking we can probably wean you off it soon!”

Jason shrugged. “It helps to have had some recent wins. Yamamoto trusts us, so does Mendez. I wish I could get a good night’s sleep, but the Osmium helps with that.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said, pulling off a glove to pinch his ear. “Once we figure that out, we’ll wean you off the O-juice, and I’ll start training you for real. About time, too.”

After a glance to ensure their new friends were still busy inside the suspended transport ship, Sam’s eyes glowed with pink inner light as she wrenched a bot’s midsection open with the power of her mind. Jason studied Sam as she utilized her talents, which they had nicknamed ‘Abhamic powers’, after the research program that Jason and David had unwillingly participated in as children. Sam was from a different research stream than Jason, and she had a calmer, more refined version of their shared mental abilities, without a need for Osmium to keep her power under control. Jason had never been able to figure out why that was.

The biting stench of chemicals and coolant wafted out of the sparking robot’s exposed innards. As Sam focused, bolts unscrewed by themselves, sealed panels popped free, and individual Nanotech parts floated out on their own.

With the automaton’s core exposed, Sam pulled out the bot’s corrupted CPU unit in her gloved hand and held it up. The device rippled with quivering, glowing tumors that burst through its plating. “What a waste of good memory.”

Jason stared at it. The CPU was badly overrun with the Nanophage. Sam's eyes glowed as she prodded it with her mental powers, but the infected component did nothing out of the ordinary.

"What do you think they've been doing in those labs since we escaped? Are they still looking for us?" Jason asked, stripping more uninfected parts out of the robot's belly.

"Did that question just pop into your head, or have you been ruminating again?" Sam replied.

"Well, after hearing Abaddon earlier ... I'm starting to think about that place again," Jason said.

"Understandable. None of us have fond memories of the Science Institute," Sam mused as her glowing pink irises cooled down. "But that scientist who ran it still has to be searching for us. Governments have been trying to create psychic super-soldiers for centuries, way longer than we've had Nanotech. An awful lot of money must've been dumped into us before we all escaped. And even though I've said it a million times ... thank you for that. You and David didn't have to take me with you. But you did."

Jason nodded. "Don't mention it. And yeah, that bastard will probably never give up on finding us. We're billion-dollar babies, too much of an investment to lose."

David emerged from the suspended cargo ship's hatch, shouting down at them. "Oi! I cracked the computer core and downloaded the manifest. Get this, the ship was transporting stuff from one of the corporate gigafactories into orbit. From the data I found, the holds are full to bursting with brand spankin' new Nanite products, and there's *tons* of surviving shipboard equipment too, all the good stuff."

"Well, our big payday gets even bigger," Sam said. "My turn, then."

"Ugh, so this means I have to carry even more garbage home for you weaklings?" groaned Talos from his position nearby.

"Yes, bolt-bucket, you do," Sam said, playfully tugging the harness on Talos's shoulder as she headed toward the ship.

"Ughhhh," the robot groaned theatrically.

"Don't we get a break? It's cold in here," asked Santiago from the ramp, shivering. Soohyun eyed Jason again, who looked away.

"Nope, not yet," Sam said, whirling a finger. "Time for the real work. I've got lots to show you three."



Half an hour passed while Sam and their recruits worked inside the ship. During that time, Jason helped David load up some of Talos's burlap storage bags with uninfected robot parts, stacking them nearby so Talos could haul everything back to the Village when they were done for the day. Jason yawned constantly, rubbing his eyes.

"So, you and that gal Soohyun, huh?" David said.

"What?"

Jason stumbled, going bright red as he steadied himself, stacking the last of his armful of parts into one of Talos' burlap storage bags.

David lowered his brow, grinning. "You're so dense. It's obvious to everyone. And I'm glad, little brother. I'll admit, Sam's a good-looking girl, but it's about time you gave up on her and focused on someone ... better. Soo's not a bad candidate, and it's not like you've got a lot of choice, where we're from."

"I'm not, I don't ... what's that supposed to mean, anyway?"

"I'm just glad that you're broadening your horizons, that's all," David said, winking.

"I appreciate the older brother pep talk, but my relationships are my business. Stay out of 'em, please," Jason said, flatly.

David stared up at the creaking transport for a moment, then held up his hands. "Alright, alright. Quit your whining, I'm razzing ya. Get back to work."

Jason gave his brother a sideways glance, but he returned to salvaging without further comment.

Periodically, the militia briefly emerged from the ship for fresh air. Santiago grinned at Jason during his break.

"I thought this was going to be a lot worse; salvaging isn't as bad as I thought," said the militiaman.

"See? Our job can get dangerous, but it's pretty interesting, too," Jason replied.

"Definitely more than wall duty," Santiago said, ducking inside again.

Finally, Sam and the militiamen clunked down the ramp. Sweat glistened on Sam's forehead, soaking her tight working pants and undershirt.

"Find us, Jason ..."

Jason sucked in a breath as another whisper from nowhere tickled his tired mind. Abaddon. How the hell was it breaking through the drug barrier?

"Anywhere you run, we can reach you. Anywhere you hide, we will find you. The only way out ... is to find us ..."

Jason cranked up his Osmium drip to maximum. The voices slowly dissipated.

He was fine. Everything was fine.

"These three seem to be getting the hang of things, got a lot of important stuff disconnected in there," said Sam, drawing half-hearted cheers from the militia. She clapped Jason on the shoulder, startling him. "Your turn, big guy."

David squeezed his brother's arm. "Go build some muscle, skinny boy."

Jason jerked away. "Alright, alright. So, we're offloading?"

"Yep. We've uncoupled the easiest ship parts to move. Reactor rods, power converters, things like that," Sam said, mopping her shining face with a rag. "We'll come aboard to help empty the cargo bay once the ship's light enough for all of us in there."

"And I get to be the mule. Such a burden," Talos complained. Budgie shrieked at him.

"Shut it. You're a robot," Sam snapped.

"Let's get to it!" Jason said, walking up the ramp with his respirator on and his arms outstretched for balance, careful not to look down. The militia groaned, following along behind him. "Gotta work for our calories, people!"

"Be careful in there, Jason," Sam said.



The ship's interior was in complete disarray. Despite the hull's thickness, Jason could see the watery depths below right through gaps in the machinery. Random objects and live wires sparked everywhere, ripped out of their moorings by the brutal landing. The interior creaked back and forth in the breeze, but Talos kept it mostly stabilized, with the broken deckplates somewhat level and walkable.

There was no biological mess, so the living crew members must have evacuated before impact, likely landing somewhere topside. But their mainte-

nance bots had been left behind, causing further damage as the ship crashed down through the Under-city. They lay everywhere, broken and silent.

The hauler was too mangled to ever fly again, and there was no way to tell what had caused the malfunction that brought the heap down—but lack of maintenance was a likely culprit, as Sam always said. The ship's cargo was a miniscule loss for the powerful Nanotech corporations, but it was a goldmine for a bunch of Under-city dwellers like the Village. *More for us*, Jason thought. The city's government wouldn't care if the ship's reactor irradiated an entire sector of the habitat's sublayers, as long as it didn't become a liability for the surface level, where the vast majority of citizens resided.

"What should we grab first?" Soohyun asked, showing Jason a long row of the ship's components and precious Nanotech that they'd extracted with Sam's help. Thick pallets of intact cargo were strapped down to the uneven deck-plates.

"We'll start with the heaviest stuff," Jason replied. "The faster we lighten this heap, the sooner David and Sam can come aboard and help us empty the cargo bay. Pick a component, and we'll get this stuff onto dry land."

He slipped on his gloves and hauled up a huge, self-contained fuel rod cylinder that Sam had extracted from the dead reactor set into the floor. A Geiger counter in Jason's pocket ticked sporadically, but the radioactive materials within the fuel rod were within tolerable levels. Sam's clandestine usage of her Abhamic powers must've made her look like a powerlifter to their recruits when she'd extracted the reactor components out of the deck.

Mayweather, Santiago, and Soohyun lifted different heavy objects. Soohyun chose a delicate container of raw Nanites, designed to cycle and replenish reservoirs of active Nanotech devices before the Phage had a chance to develop. These were incredibly valuable, badly needed back in the Village.

"Hold that like this so it doesn't break," Jason explained, using his own load as an example, and Soohyun rotated hers. Viscous pink fluid sloshed around inside, made up of many trillions of Nanites. "The Phage is hard to catch, but you're in for a world of pain if you do."

"Gotcha," Soohyun said, glancing down at the reservoir's glowing ceramic viewing window.

"Let's get this stuff offloaded, come on," Jason said, heading for the ramp, and the militia followed.

Out of nowhere, something shoved him in the back, hard. "What the—"

Jason stumbled forward, off-balance, into a pool of lubricant leaking out of the bulkhead that had congealed, becoming very slippery. The militia were too far behind him to have pushed him, nor were they close enough to grab him before he went down.

"Crap!" Jason's feet skidded around on the slick deck as he used the reactor fuel rod to cushion his fall against a coolant valve ahead. The piping burst, blasting frigid gases into his face.

"Oh shit!" Mayweather and Santiago exclaimed as Jason rolled away from the damaged conduit, bashing his Osmium inhibitor implant on the ground as he went. He heard a distinct *crack* on impact. What the hell had shoved him?

"You okay?" asked Soohyun. Jason steadied his breathing behind the respirator, moving back toward the coolant pipe, eyes darting around the ship's hold for an assailant. But he was alone with the militia, and they looked as stunned as he felt. "I'm alright, don't worry ... check your masks. I'll fix this."

Trying to calm his hammering heart, Jason yanked some tools out of his bag, bracing the fuel rod cylinder on the floor between his legs. Soohyun leaned over, speaking quickly. "We can tell Sam, Jason. It's no big deal. She'll seal that thing up again."

Jason felt a shiver at her touch. "Gimme a sec. I can do this."

With shaking hands, he carefully vice-gripped the broken valve and applied a patching solution, which slowly stifled the flow of gas.

"Helloooooo? Everything alright in there?" David shouted from beyond the hull.

"We're good, minor issue...I think," Santiago called down the ramp.

"Come out!" Sam's voice replied, distant and echoing. "Swap me in, I'll take a look at whatever it is."

"Sorry, just...gimme a few more seconds. I'm almost done," Jason stammered.

Over the declining hiss of coolant, he heard Abaddon's soft, ethereal whispers enter his mind.

"Find us, Jason ..."

His heart skipped a bit. Jason's body went ice cold, but it wasn't from the bitter fumes.

"What? Not now ..." he said, reaching for his neural inhibitor.

"Did you say something, Jason?" Soohyun asked, concern crossing her features. Mayweather and Santiago stared at him with concern.

The voices continued. *"You must return to us ..."*

Why wasn't the Osmium working? Jason scrambled at the inhibitor, trying to trigger another large dose to calm himself. He felt liquid running down the back of his neck. Was the device leaking?

His fingers found the drug vial, feeling the edges of shattered glass. It was *broken*. The damage had been done by his fall—Jason's mind was unprotected.

Something foreign curled its bladed claws around his hammering heart, pushing against the weakening drug barrier that protected his mind, as his brain burned through Osmium. Jason began to hyperventilate as the Abaddon Beacon's voice blasted through his brain, louder than ever.

"Your time has come. You have been chosen for a great task, one that only you can complete. You must return to the place where you were created ..."

The cargo hold around him disappeared as images smashed through Jason's mind—gnashing teeth, diseased flesh riddled with mutagenic tumorous growths, a giant seat surrounded by machinery and cabling, a gleaming city square consumed by an enormous battle, an entire planet being hollowed out by a black mass of boiling biomatter ... and a tall, glowing obelisk that blazed with pink fire.

"We have the answers you seek, about yourself, about your power, and about your place in the cosmos. All will be revealed if you find us, and fulfil your role. Find us and bring salvation to your species ..." Abaddon roared.

The room briefly swam back into corporeality, and Jason saw the militia looking down at him from above with worried expressions. Around him, a slow seep of ponderous inky shadows boiled up through the floor grating, which Jason's militia companions didn't seem to notice. Abaddon was here, permeating the area all around them with its presence, invisible to everyone but Jason. The shadows pulsated as they spoke, buzzing together like a thousand insects, *"We are everywhere, we are infinite, we cannot be stopped, and you belong to us ..."*

Jason locked eyes with Soohyun, forcing his words out through clenched teeth. "You have to get off the ship, now!"

"What?" she asked. Mayweather and Santiago stepped forward to help him, but they paused as Jason started thrashing violently, like an invisible force was trying to take over his body.

Jason watched with horror as the inky shadows crept up his torso, approaching his face, grabbing his limbs and constricting his movements, de-

spite his attempts to brush them off. Terror blasted through him as Jason realized that the shadow must've been what had shoved him earlier. Like some creeping menace, it had been waiting for the perfect moment to strike. But how?

"Get out! get away from me! It's all around us! Get off the ship!" Jason continued, scrambling away from the creeping dark.

"What about you?" asked Mayweather. "What the hell is going on, Jason? I don't understand."

Their comms crackled with Sam's voice. "Guys, what the hell is going on in there?"

"Get off this ship, right now! It's after me, not you!" Jason yelled, fumbling for his broken inhibitor's controls, but the dark shadowy tendrils held his fingers back, preventing him from touching it. Abaddon's terrible presence was coming for him from within the shadow; Jason could feel it. He reached for his fallen supply bag with his other hand, where his fresh Osmium doses were stored, but the blackness coiled around Jason's wrist, locking him in place.

Santiago was the first to snap out of his shock at Jason's apparent descent into madness, dropping the heavy power coupling he'd been holding and shoving Mayweather toward the exit, yelling outside. "Sam, David, we're coming out! Something's wrong with Jason!"

"What?" came Sam's distant reply, repeated over their comm units. David could also be heard, yelling in the background.

"GO! I can't control it!" Jason yelled with his eyes screwed shut, tendons jutting out across his neck like steel cables, bootheels banging into the metal deckplates as the shadow choked him. He felt his eyes begin to burn with inner light.

Soohyun was ducking through the entry hatch after her comrades when an invisible defensive psychic wave fired outward from Jason's body, blasting the shadows away from him ... along with everything else.



Outside, Sam and David gasped as the suspended ship jumped wildly, emitting jets of smoke, fluids, and vaporized chemicals. Santiago, Mayweather, and Soohyun, who were stumbling through the ship's hatch, were blasted

off the gangway ramp, which bucked with enough force to snap free from its hydraulic control pistons. The ramp whistled out of sight while the vessel continued to violently sway over the open void.

Sam's eyes flashed pink for a split second. As the three militia fell toward her through the air, she nudged them with her Abhamic abilities so they landed on the permacrete ledge instead of plummeting to their deaths. Santiago, Mayweather, and Soohyun rolled and lay still in a cloud of dust, knocked cold from their close proximity to Jason's psionic blast. Sam didn't feel much better as a hammering brain-ache thundered inside her skull from the impact of Jason's uncontrolled Abhamic pulse wave.

Talos tried to compensate for the erratic swinging of the ship. The ground under his feet began to crumble as he struggled to hold it steady.

"Knock it off in there!" the robot roared.

David turned to Sam and jabbed a finger up at the ship, which still creaked and groaned from the internal detonation. "Do something, Sam! What the hell is happening to Jason?"

With her battered psychic senses, Sam identified a strange black cloud coalescing around the dead transport ship, moving like some thousand-limbed cephalopod of the deep sea. A spike of fear stabbed through her heart as she traced the origin of the inky black shadow, which was emanating from the robot corpses strewn around from the recent fight. The living darkness stretched from their Nanophage-infected cores up into the swaying craft, subtle enough that Sam hadn't noticed it until now.

"It's them! The Abaddon Beacon is working through the Phage-infected to find Jason. It's trying to get inside his mind. That devious bastard, it waited until he was onboard, away from *us*!" she exclaimed, dashing over to each infected robot carcass, rolling and kicking them over the edge of the precipice. Each automaton body left a dissipating trail of oily blackness as they fell into the depths below.

"What the heck are you doing?" asked David, but Sam beckoned impatiently. "Quit your yapping and help me get rid of them! We have to break the connection between them and Jason!"



Jason's eyes rolled in his head. As the murky, billowing shadows returned, wrapping around him tighter and tighter, his terror grew beyond mere anxiety and fed on itself in a vicious spiral. The boiling, pulsating shadow was alive with Abaddon's malefic laughter and strange rhythmic chanting, like a cathedral housing a billion corrupted souls.

His mind reacted defensively to the Beacon's psychic assault, neurons firing uncontrollably as his innate Abhamic abilities rallied on autopilot to protect him from its predations. Jason's back arched as another psionic wavefront blasted forth from his body, pushing the darkness away again.



The transport bucked like an angry bronco, flexing like no spacecraft should. Through her wounded mind-sight, Sam felt Jason spiraling, trying to push back the Beacon's attempted intrusion. But his involuntary efforts were destroying the ship around him, causing plating and components to fall from the craft like hail, clattering off nearby ruins and plunging away into the depths below.

Fighting through the terrible pain in their heads, Sam and David continued to haul robot bodies off the cliff edge without touching their infected components, cutting off the flow of inky shadows bleeding up into the ship. But even after they shoved the final Phage-infected automaton over the cliff edge, the shadows continued to swirl around the spacecraft without interruption. Something inside was sustaining the Abaddon Beacon's remote presence.

Sam looked at David as panic gripped her. "It's still in there with him."

"I thought you said the Osmium would protect him," David said. "Why isn't it working?"

"I have no idea, David. We've never seen Abaddon try to take over his mind like this before!" Sam cried, trying to locate the transport's entry hatch as the giant craft bucked and swung. "I'll try to jump inside and pull Jason out!"

"Hurry!"

Another almighty psychic detonation went off inside the ship, nearly blasting it in half. Debris was thrown in every direction, bouncing off the permacrete ledge. The thick power cables holding the deteriorating ship aloft flailed dangerously. Talos bellowed in alarm as Sam fell to her knees, vomiting

up her lunch and clutching her head with white knuckled intensity. David bellowed in agony behind her, falling to the dusty ground as he clawed at his scalp. The militia lay motionless, still unconscious.

As she regained control of herself, Sam could almost *see* the secondary wave-pulses from Jason's starburst of psychic Abhamic power rippling out of the deteriorating spacecraft, forcing the shadowy presence back with it. Some of the living darkness dissipated into the nearby ruins, but most of the black cloud quickly dove back inside the ship, undeterred by Jason's efforts to ward it off.

"No..." Sam whispered.

The ship's superstructure began to fall apart, slipping loose from several power cables, lowering past the cliff edge. The massive weight dragged Talos's feet-locking mechanisms through the cracked and crumbling ground. More cables scraped up the hull, stripping it of plating like dry skin.

"Talos! *Stop* that thing!" David roared. Budgie was going nuts in David's hands, flapping his wings and screeching.

Every joint servo in Talos's rusty body groaned as he strained against the inevitable, crunching his powerful fingers deep into the permacrete. "I.... I cannot..." Talos said.

Sam dashed to the cliff edge, watching the cargo hauler begin to slowly roll. The entryway rotated out of sight, making it impossible for her to leap inside.

"This can't be happening!"



Jason awoke on his back, blinking.

He struggled onto his elbows, wiping pink Nanite goo off himself. How long had he been out? Hours ... days ... or *seconds*?

Acrid chemical smells filled his nose. The ship shrieked and moaned around him like a dying animal, but at least the horrible shadows were gone.

Jason's neck and chest were wet. His whole body was soaked with ... something. He raised his hands, which dripped with a warm, glowing pink substance—raw Nanites, splashed all over the place from the broken reservoir that Soohyun had been carrying. Other ship components had been smashed as well, making the Geiger counter's rapid ticking blend together.

At least none of the Nanites had gotten in his mouth—and fortunately it couldn't pass through his pores—but it was only a matter of time until it found a small cut or laceration. Jason started wiping it off in a panic.

Through billowing gaseous fumes pouring out of multiple broken conduits, Jason saw that the syrupy pink goo coated almost every nearby surface. The ship's main hold had been dented outward like a bomb had gone off inside, with him at the very center. Nearly every loose object had been crushed, including most of the ship's precious cargo. If his militia friends hadn't gotten out in time, they would have been pasted like insects.

The deck rolled, bringing Jason back to his senses as loose wires and metal debris slid around, making an incredible racket.

He heard the shadow whispering in his head, relentlessly. "*Find us, Jason. We will never stop until you do ...*"

The Abaddon Beacon's presence returned, stronger than ever, spearing another blast of pain through his mind as the living blackness swirled up through the deck. As it came, the shadow curdled the bright pink Nanite solution into a dark, angry Nanophage purple, spreading the infection with lightning speed through the healthy Nanogel. This seemed to empower Abaddon's shadow, allowing it to manifest more strongly, advancing on Jason from every angle. In the corners of the cargo bay, the broken maintenance bots came back to life as the Phage took hold of them, shuddering upward and screaming through their vocoders, like the mouthpieces of an angry God.

Jason panicked, crab-walking away from the sentient, spidery gloom as it snaked around his body. His broken Osmium inhibitor emitted a constant series of warning beeps. He had no idea where his bag with his spare drug vials had gone.

"Why won't you ... stay *away* from me?" Jason yelled, lurching onto his side as the transport rotated, coming apart around him from the fatal damage he'd caused with his mental blasts. The shadows ignored his protestations, closing in.

"You, like your species, belong to us ..."



David appeared behind Sam, grabbing her shoulder. Talos continued to buckle the pavement, roaring with effort as he tried to prevent the ship from falling.

"You've gotta get him out of there, Sam. Talos is losing that thing." David pleaded. Budgie was 'assisting' their enormous robot companion by flapping around his cranium and gabbling at him. The cargo craft jerked further downward. The incredible weight bent Talos forward at the waist, his armored fingers dragging through the ground.

"I can only hold this for another few seconds!" the robot said. "Disconnect me! My cable locking mechanism is not responding!"

"Help Talos detach himself from that thing," Sam said. "I'll get Jason out."

"You better," David said as he dashed over to help remove Talos' grappling cable, holding his aching forehead. He took a glance at the militia, but they were all still out cold from Jason's initial Abhamic blast.

Sam pushed aside her mental agony and let her eyes defocus, concentrating her senses on the dying cargo vessel, which continued its slow roll as the remaining power cables slid and snapped under its five-hundred-ton mass. The swirling shadows were blinding her mind-sight. Where was Jason?

Right as she lost all hope of getting him out, Sam spotted the entry hatch—facing upward instead of sideways. Blanketed in choking, stygian shadow, Jason flopped limply around the unstable interior as the ship rolled.

"Gotcha," Sam hissed, as her thoughts pinpointed him.



"Resistance is futile ..."

Darkness tainted the edges of Jason's vision as his mind was slowly supplanted by the Abaddon Beacon's horrific alien consciousness. It nearly had him.

He no longer saw the physical environment around him. Jason was falling through a great void under a carpet of dark stars, plummeting past a huge wall that stretched endlessly in either direction. He reached for it, sensing safety behind the barrier, trying to catch hold and stop himself from falling into the ocean of darkness below. But there was no way to break his fall, so Jason plunged into the endless sea of thick black shadow, drowning under a horizon of poisoned moons and broken worlds.

“There is no point in fighting, Jason. Come to us, embrace the unification of all life ...”

He felt it flowing into his mouth, ears, and nose like weightless stygian ooze, clogging his thoughts and his breathing alike. Unable to even scream, Jason sank beneath the churning surface, constricted by the obelisk’s shadowy embrace. The Abaddon Beacon itself became visible, looming up from the depths like an ancient sea leviathan, pulling him in with tendrils of blackness. Unknowable glowing symbols and shapes danced across its alien form, strobing and pulsating in time with its booming whispers.

“You shall become the final sacrifice, and your people will be one with us, forever ...”

As Jason floated downward, tumbling end over end in the obelisk’s grasp, a faint pink light appeared overhead, barely bright enough to filter down through the murk.



Sam strained hard but tried to be delicate at the same time, having never lifted an entire human body with her Abhamic powers before, let alone over this distance. Her eyes flared brighter as Jason’s body emerged from the cargo ship’s open hatch. Shadows billowed from his eyes, mouth, and nose, and thick spiraling tendrils grasped his limbs and throat, but Sam roared with effort and managed to keep him rising toward her. Blood shot from her nose.

“Careful!” David called from where he was still struggling to detach Talos’ cable, eyes squinted as he fought off the mother of all headaches.

After what seemed like an eternity, Sam grabbed Jason’s wrist, which was slimy and...*purple*. Uh oh.

Panting from the effort, Sam hauled him over the side. Jason flopped onto his back, motionless, dripping with angry purple Nanite gel that had degenerated into the Phage. The corrupted Nanites burbled and crept around, searching for technology to parasitize or a proper entry point into Jason’s body. Stygian shadows boiled around the sticky liquid, gaining additional substantiality from it. Jason’s visible skin was paper-white, and he was barely breathing.

Sam rolled Jason over in a flurry of oily darkness and spotted the problem: his Osmium inhibitor had been damaged by some kind of blunt force im-

pact, shattering the drug vial container. Jason hadn't been getting any fresh Osmium, meaning that his mind was fully exposed to the Abaddon Beacon's thanatoxic presence. If Sam didn't get the inhibitor fixed immediately, another psychic explosion was on its way ... unless Abaddon had already corrupted Jason's soul. From the blackness boiling in his eyes, that might be the case already.

"Hold still, Jason. Hang on," Sam said as she replaced the broken Osmium vial with an untouched one from her fallen pack, before retrieving her tools to fix the device. Abaddon had tried to possess him so suddenly and with such force that Jason hadn't even had time to replace the vial himself.

Within seconds, Osmium was flowing again, entering Jason's system. Though she had no idea what she was doing, Sam tried using her power to help him, coaxing Abaddon's psychic contagion into leaving his body and mind.

She waited; gripping Jason's dripping hand so hard that her fingers turned white. "Come on. Come back to me, Jason. Please."

Slowly, reluctantly, the living shadows swirling around them began to recede, and color returned to Jason's face as his breathing normalized. Within his eyes, Sam watched the simmering darkness disappear, returning his iris color to its native green. The glowing, pulsating Nanophage gel covering Jason faded to a dull, purplish black, burning out faster than Sam had ever seen from the lack of nearby raw materials to consume, or a living host to inhabit.

Sam sensed Jason's Abhamic powers retreating behind the wall of drugs, like a supernova being contained within a black hole. She waited until the last of the Abaddon Beacon's animated gloom had vanished into cracks in the permacrete around them. She let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. It was over ... she hoped. For now.

Sam stared down at Jason, watching his chest rise and fall. Jason's powers had only grown stronger since they had escaped the Federation labs many years ago, but he had never been able to control it, so the Osmium had kept his abilities—and his dreams of Abaddon—in check. Who knew how strong he'd become if his Abhamic powers kept growing and reacting to the Beacon with such force? Jason might crack the whole planet in half one day if they didn't get him under control.

A sharp *bang* sounded from over the cliff. A power cable snapped. Then another. The remainder slipped off the doomed transport ship as it dropped like a rock.

“David, did you—”

Sam looked up and saw Talos's grounding spikes and thick fingers tearing out of the ground as her robot's twenty-one-ton body scraped over the edge, dragged by his unbreakable line.

“You filthy, ungrateful creatures! I will be *avenged*—” was the last thing Sam heard from her greatest creation before he vanished over the side in a cloud of dust.

“*NO!*” she cried. David stood beside where Talos had been just moments before, frozen in shock. A lit plasma torch crackled in David's hand as his mouth dropped open. “I...”

Budgie landed on the cliff edge, flinching at every crash and boom until a long silence fell.

David reached the edge. “Holy shit... Talos hit a dry section, a few levels down. It's not pretty. Total loss. And I can't even see the ship.”

“Goddamn it. Hopefully his personality processor survived.” Sam muttered, taking a deep, shuddering breath, fighting back tears. Jason's eyes rolled as his brain absorbed more Osmium, fighting for full wakefulness. Sam started wiping the Phage ooze off him. Although the lack of a host to sustain it had burned the Nanites out, the chance of biological infection from the remnants was still possible, which could reawaken the pathogen.

Nearby, Mayweather groaned and sat up, holding his forehead. “What the hell happened?”

“That's a good question,” Santiago said, rolling over and staring at Jason. “Feels like I have a hangover. And what the heck is with him? Jason lost his shit inside the transport! Then ... I don't know. Something exploded, I think. Did you see what happened, David?”

David shook his head. “We'll discuss it later.”

“What?” Santiago exclaimed. “You can't leave us hanging like this.”

“Just, hold on, will ya?” David said, holding his forehead. Then he puked all over the ground ahead of him.

“Are you ... alright now?” Sam muttered to Jason, using a rag from her supply bag to wipe dark purple fluids off his skin.

Jason's eyes focused on her as he regained full consciousness. “I, uh ... I don't ... I don't know what, what happened ...”

David stumbled over, followed by the militia, who were all holding their heads in a daze. Soohyun doubled back to retch her lunch over the cliff. Budgie landed on his shoulder as David dropped to one knee and hugged his brother, trying to avoid the curdled Nanite liquid splattering his skin and clothing. "At least you're safe. But it's all gone. The ship, Talos ... how the hell do we explain this to Yamamoto and Mendez?"

Sam looked into Jason's eyes, which were welling with tears.

"I'm sorry," Jason muttered. "I, I don't know what happened ... something pushed me, then ... the shadows, the Beacon ... it attacked so quickly ... I'm sorry, Sam."

Sam hugged Jason too, murmuring low enough that the militia couldn't hear, "It's okay, Jason. You didn't mean it. Abaddon tried to possess you, and your mind responded. I felt it too. It's not your fault. We'll deal with this, I promise."

"What are you talking about, Sam? What is going on here?" Santiago asked again. Sam ignored him, looking out over the water through the Under-city support pillars. Sweat dripped down her face. The lake breeze had returned, but wasn't able to hide the stench of defeat.

"We lost," Sam said, looking at Jason, who grimaced and nodded, still trying to collect himself.

"Yeah, we did. We need to take this Abaddon problem a lot more seriously, Sam," he said. "We need to find it, or this will happen again."



4 – UNRELIABLE MEMORY

NEW TORONTO UNDER-CITY – ACCESS CHASM 24D -
OCTOBER 10, 2263 - 18:23 HOURS

No one said anything else for a long while. David gave Sam a pointed look, but she shook her head as if to say, ‘I’ll explain later’. Santiago opened his mouth to continue his questions, but seemed to think better of it, backing off. Budgie landed on Jason’s head, settling into a sitting position and staring down at him.

“We’ve gotta go back to the Village with something to show for this mess. How much salvage do we have left?” Sam asked David.

“Well, we still have some parts we stripped from those robots,” David said, dropping the plasma torch and pointed out Talos’ burlap bags that he and Jason had loaded with the robot components. “It’s not much compared to what was on that transport, though. That stockpile had months of supplies that we’re overdue for.”

“I guess that’s something,” Sam said, unable to hide her disappointment.

Mayweather and Santiago spoke in low voices to each other, appearing to agree on something. Soohyun tried to interject, but Santiago waved her off. As Sam continued wiping Jason down, Santiago marched up to them and said, “There’s something wrong with Jason. He’s not right. And who is *Abaddon*?”

Jason looked up at the militiaman with tortured eyes, unable to speak. What could he say?

“I”

“Sam, you need to tell us what’s going on with him,” said Mayweather, turning his attention to her. “If you want us coming on salvage missions with you guys, this kind of situation is not what we had in mind—”

Sam held up a hand. “Sure, I get it. But first, please help David break apart Talos’ salvage bags and get them ready for transport back to the Village before it gets dark. With Talos out of commission, we’re gonna have to carry them all back ourselves. After that, I’ll tell you guys everything. I promise. There are some ... things you should know.”

She gave David a meaningful look. He raised an eyebrow, but he got up and headed over to the bags.

Santiago’s lip curled, but he backed down. “Fine.”

Mayweather gave Sam a narrow-eyed glance, but he nodded as well. “Alright.”

Soohyun glanced at Jason, who was still wiping dead Nanophage solution off himself, but she followed her comrades after David without comment.

Sam closed her eyes, summoning the last of her mental reserves, which were nearly bled dry from her efforts to stop Jason’s incident. Focusing her mind-sight on the backs of the militia’s heads, Sam gave their minds a tiny Abhamic nudge.

Santiago, Mayweather and Soohyun swayed on their feet for a moment, as Sam’s psionic push took effect. Soohyun stumbled, turning around and blinking rapidly. Sam watched the girl’s eyes sliding in and out of focus, hoping that she hadn’t overdone it.

David looked up from the salvage bags as the militia dragged their feet in the dust, staring in complete bewilderment at each other and their surroundings. David’s gaze darted to Sam, whose eyes were cooling down from hot pink. She gestured to them, making a looping motion with one finger at her right temple.

David’s eyes narrowed, but he caught on and returned his attention to the militia. “You three doin’ alright?”

Soohyun squeezed her eyes shut, holding her forehead. “I dunno. I ... I don’t *remember*. What the heck? What happened? Where are we?”

Santiago and Mayweather seemed to share the sentiment; eyes bugged out in confusion.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” David asked.

Soohyun thought about it, brow furrowing. “We were about to go on a salvage operation with you guys. Something about a crashed ship. But ... where’s the ship?”

David grimaced as a lie wove through his teeth. “About that. You guys were exposed to something nasty onboard that transport vessel, might’ve addled your brains a bit. Seems like you’re coming around.”

Santiago looked around, squinting his eyes at the open air beyond the permacrete cliff. “And Talos, what happened to him? Where is he?”

“Yeah ... about him,” David said, extending a hand. “We lost Talos when the ship went down, and barely managed to get you guys off in time. Let me check your vitals, c’mere.”

He glared at Sam as the militia approached him, wide-eyed and pale-faced, but David dutifully checked them all for injuries.

Sam pulled out a small syringe, found a vein, and gave herself a small hit of Osmium. The microdose would dull Sam’s powers, but her pounding psionic headache had reached a crescendo with that last push of her Abhamic abilities, and she needed relief.

Sam focused on Jason, who was still wiping himself down.

He glanced at her. “It keeps telling me to *find* it. I don’t know what we’ll do when we do, but we have to try. I don’t think Abaddon will stop until then. I’m ... I’m scared, Sam.”

“Keep your voice down, I don’t want to risk messing with their minds a second time,” Sam murmured, looking up at the militia before handing Jason a spare rag from her supply backpack. “But yes, I agree with you. Whatever Avery Oakfield and those scientists did to you must’ve linked you to the obelisk somehow. We’re going to need to break back into the Science Institute to find Abaddon and figure out how to sever that connection, which won’t be easy. Getting inside those labs will be the riskiest thing we’ve ever done; especially with all that high-tech security they’ve got.”

“How long do you think we have?” Jason asked, in a near-whisper.

“What?”

“How long do I have until this happens again?”

Sam paused for a moment. “I wish I knew. The Abaddon Beacon has never reached out to you so directly before, so I can’t predict when it might try again. One thing I am sure of is that we need to keep you away from anything infected with the Nanophage. I saw it: Abaddon used those bots to

get to you. Seems like they're a conduit that it can use to mess with the wider world."

"That's it? No other way to know if it's coming?"

"Not really," Sam said. "We don't know enough about the Beacon for that. Giving you a timeline is impossible, because this never happened to me when my Abhamic powers were maturing. We need to prioritize finding safe leads to get back inside the Science Institute and fast."

"Will that even be possible, with our workload after this?" Jason asked.

"We'll have to find a way."

"Goddammit," Jason moaned. "What did we do to deserve—"

"Enough with that, you'll be fine." Sam said. "We'll get you onto a higher dose of Osmium. That'll keep the Beacon off our scent for a while. Just don't go near Doc Janice's med-bay when we're back home, she's got a lot of Phage-infected people waiting for treatment in those cryo-pods. Even if they're all in suspended animation, we can't risk you detonating like a psychic grenade if Abaddon attacks you in the Village."

Jason stared at Soohyun, Mayweather and Santiago. "I could've killed them. And I destroyed Talos too ...oh *god*... I'm so sorry, Sam."

Sam hugged Jason again, wiping some congealed Nanite solution out of his tangled hair. "You didn't, Jason. That bastard scientist Avery Oakfield did, when he did this to you. And we'll make him pay."

Jason was still working through his shock. "I saw I saw the Beacon, Sam. It showed me a world of dead stars and an endless sea of blackness. It pulled me down. I couldn't breathe. It was nothing like my dreams, it felt *real*. There was no way to fight it, Sam. The only thing we can do is what it told me to do. We have to go back to the labs."

"We'll find a way. We'll get in there, find out what Abaddon is, what it wants, and how to beat it," Sam said, giving him a determined look. "Come on. First, we need to locate a water source and get you properly cleaned up before we go back. I also wanna get a good look at where Talos landed so we can figure out retrieval. And then ... we're gonna need to explain everything to the governor."



As the artificial sun crossed the atmo-dome into the late evening, the salvagers hauled their meager findings and weapons back up through the Under-city's levels, toward home. With diminishing light coming in from outside, the level of danger in the underground was increasing by the minute, as the Phage-infected seemed to always be more active at night.

Jason hoped they had left with enough time to return behind the walls before the Phage-infected became most active, as Yamamoto had warned. He had witnessed groups of them stalking and ripping apart other Under-city dwellers with ease. Talos had been their ace card when it came to larger encounters with the infected at night. Until now, anyway.

Jason kept his head on a swivel, heart hammering, reflexively twisting the knob on his repaired Osmium inhibitor every time he heard the slightest noise echoing down the abandoned tunnels and ruins of the city's substructure. Any encounter with the infected could become another battle with the obelisk. David eventually had to put a hand on his shoulder. "Easy there, brother. We're nearly home."

Soohyun, Mayweather, and Santiago kept to themselves on the trip back. It was clear that they were not pleased with how the excursion had went down. This was understandable, given their failure to retrieve most of the treasure trove aboard the cargo vessel—and their near-death experiences, of course.

As the six of them passed through the holo-shield and the Village became visible to the naked eye, several lights snapped on from atop the ramshackle defensive wall, illuminating the wide kill-zone covered by the settlement's automated turret guns. Old bullet holes and blast craters dotted the expanse, along with a few charred robot and skeletal human corpses—the only remains of previous assaults on the Village from various infected Under-city denizens. Cold, blistering winds were coming in off the lake, far chillier than the earlier afternoon breeze. Jason spotted the repair ships out by the city's containment wall, still working on the atmo-shield against the dark green backdrop of howling superstorms outside.

At David's urging, Budgie took flight and flapped several meters above their heads, as a signal to the Village guards that they were close by.

A voice called down from the defensive wall. "Oi, is that you guys? You're late!"

Holding up a hand to block the dense light beams, David answered, "Yes, Charles, it's us. We got a bit held up."

“Where’s the big guy?” the militiaman asked, removing his goggles and looking around.

Sam stiffened as she responded to the wall guard, “Sorry. We had an accident. Talos is offline.”

“What?!” Charles exclaimed. “Offline? For how long?”

This perked up the rest of the east wall guards, who gathered above as the gates scraped open. Jason spotted governor Yamamoto rushing toward them. Mendez hobbled after him, with several armed guards in tow.

“Where the hell have you been? Sundown was an hour ago.” Yamamoto demanded, hands on his hips, looking from Jason, David, and Sam to Santiago, Mayweather, and Soohyun.

Jason held up his hands, voice unsteady. “Sorry, Governor, we had a bit of trouble.”

“A bit?”

David took over. “Yeah. A bit.”

A guard came over with a scanner, waving it up and down their bodies. “Whoa ... I’m getting trace detections of Phage matter on you, Jason. Lots, actually. Jesus, looks like you took a bath in the stuff. You too, Sam.”

“Yeah, we encountered some nastiness out there,” Sam said, wiping her gloved hands on her filthy pants. “Not our finest hour.”

Yamamoto shook his head. “Let’s get you over to decon before that stuff finds an open sore and infects you or someone else. We’ll have to destroy your clothing, too. Can’t have that Phage crap spreading into the population. Looks like you brought back a few things, though. The Quartermaster will have something to do, at least.”

David held up the bags of their meager findings. “It’s something, anyway.”

Mendez’s people ushered them inside the wall as the gate handlers cranked the controls. The old security chief regarded Sam as the doors screeched shut. “Where’s your tin man? He’s supposed to take up the evening shift on the west barricade—which started half an hour ago, by the way.”

Sam clenched her teeth. “I’m sorry, sir. He’s twelve levels down from where we were, totaled by the fall. We’re going to have to do a few retrieval ops to find his core components, then I’ll start a rebuild.”

This sent a wave of murmurs and complaints through the surrounding militia. Yamamoto folded his arms. Mendez’s mouth dropped open, and his grey eyebrows furrowed. “How’d *that* happen?”

Sam looked at the ground. “It’s a long story, sir. I’m sorry.”

One of the guards on the wall rotated a mounted floodlamp to spotlight the group, prompting Mendez to angrily wave it away.

Sam glanced at David, who recounted the altered version of events that he'd given the militia earlier—that the *Ganesh of Mesopotamia* had suffered an equipment failure while Jason and their new recruits had been aboard, followed by an explosion that had released some kind of nasty shipboard substance. They'd managed to get everyone off before the ship went down, taking Talos with it, though David carefully omitted any references to the real cause of the transport vessel's demise.

Silence fell. Yamamoto pinched the bridge of his nose, shooting Mendez a frustrated look.

"This is a major setback. Very disappointing to lose that much salvage, right when we need it most. But we knew the risks, and at least you're all back in one piece—with the exception of Talos, of course."

Mendez nodded. "Talos alone accounted for 40% of our guard rotations. Most of our people will have to pull double duty until we can train some new bodies to compensate. Not that we have many to choose from."

This elicited a groan from most of the surrounding Village militia troopers, including those who were in off-duty casual clothing.

"How long to get Talos operational again?" Yamamoto asked Sam.

"A few weeks, minimum. Ballpark estimate," Sam said with a grimace.

The collective militia force groaned louder. Several of them fired insults and complaints from the wall top, prompting an angry shout from Mendez. "Quiet!"

"We better pray that we don't get a full-blown Phage migration during that time," Yamamoto said. "I regret not drawing up any backup procedures if we lost the tin man. It didn't seem possible that we'd ever lose him. We won't make that mistake again. I'm glad that he's recoverable, though. Losing people is unacceptable, versus losing salvage."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Jason, fighting down the guilt. "Really, we tried everything we could to save him."

Santiago held his head. "My head is killing me. Whatever we were dosed with aboard the ship, it must have been bad."

Yamamoto regarded the group. "Anyone else?"

Soohyun and Mayweather nodded. Jason did too.

"Shit. After decon, you will all report to Doc Janice. She'll check you for any noggin damage," Yamamoto said, jerking his thumb down the main

street, to a lit-up prefabricated medical building at the other end of the Village. "Better safe than sorry."

Mayweather looked to Mendez. "I don't think we should be heading back out there, sir."

He shot David, Sam, and Jason a glance. "What these guys do ... it's *dangerous*."

Santiago inclined his head in agreement. Soohyun gave Jason a sideways look, but she nodded as well. "It's too risky for us, sir. We don't have enough experience for these crazy Under-city excursions, and it's too dangerous to get more."

"We *did* try to warn you," Sam said.

Santiago shrugged. "I'll give you that. You did."

Mendez sighed. "With Talos out of commission, we can't afford to send more of our militia force out, even if we wanted to. We're just too short-handed. David, Sam, and Jason will have to continue operating as our sole excursion team for the time being ... especially with the loss of that transport ship. I don't wanna know how much useful cargo went down with it."

"Too much. Like losing computer files that you can never get back," said David.

"What a bloody waste," Mendez said, thumping his cane on the ground.

Yamamoto whirled a finger. "Get on over to decon. And clear out, everyone else! Nothing to see here, back to your duties! Or go grab dinner at Xerxes's place."

At his order, the crowd began to dissipate. Santiago shot Sam, David, and Jason a final look, then traipsed further into the Village, hefting his burlap salvage bag over one shoulder. Mayweather and Soohyun followed him, plus several other off-duty militia, who were all still asking them questions.

"After you're done with the doctor, I want a more thorough report on what happened out there," Yamamoto said to Sam as they passed. "And an accurate timeline on Talos' rebuild, since that'll be faster than a scratch build, right? Goddamn it, we've got a lot of reorganizing to do."

"Yes, will do, sir. And again, we're sorry. Things could have gone better out there," Sam said, wincing.

"There's always tomorrow. Now get outta here, and get yourselves a clean bill of health from the Doc. And then, get some rest. You'll be on double duty until our supply situation is corrected," said Yamamoto, who turned to

Mendez as the older man pulled out a data tablet and started jabbing at the scheduling screen.

Jason, Sam, and David obeyed, heading after the militia, attracting plenty of stares from nearby residents.

David leaned toward Sam. "Bit of a risky move, messing with their minds like that?"

"Would you prefer that they tell the entire Village about Jason? About what really happened?" Sam hissed. "We have no way to explain it. No one's gonna believe that there's an evil alien obelisk somewhere in this city that wants to possess him—and even if they do, that's all the more reason for the governor to kick us out for being a risk to the Village."

"Well, now we've got another problem. Those militia don't know what happened out there and that might have them wondering *why*," David snapped back.

Jason twisted the knob on his repaired neural inhibitor, letting the drugs cool his rising stress. "Guys, we've got bigger things to worry about."

"Yeah, like finding Abaddon and getting to the bottom of what's going on with you," Sam said.

"So that's what you two were talking about? Going back into the lion's den, risking discovery by the Federation, or worse, Avery Oakfield himself?" David asked. "That's what we're doin' now, huh?"

"Yep, much as I hate to admit it." Jason confirmed, drawing strength from what Sam had said before. "We've gotta find that bastard obelisk and figure out how to stop it from messing with me, or anyone else."

David's lips formed a thin line. "The fun never ends, does it?"



5 — INVASION DAWN

THREE WEEKS LATER — HIGH EARTH ORBIT — OCT. 31,
2263 — 03:11 HOURS

In the shadow of an orbital scanner platform above Earth, a small shuttle finished decelerating, powering most of its systems down. The hull was decorated with red war stripes—but the craft's heat retention plating rendered it invisible to active sensors. The stealth shuttle was thirty meters long, oval-shaped, and energy-shielded, modified for long-range travel to carry dignitaries between the planets and habitats of the Solar system—back before human space had been plunged into four bloody years of grinding interplanetary warfare between the United Earth Federation and the Solar Empire. The shuttle vaguely resembled a centuries-old aircraft: the SR-71 *Blackbird*. The stenciling on the shuttle's plating read '*Deliverance*,' and had one cyborg occupant: Anne Oakfield. She had finally returned to her home-world after what had felt like a lifetime away, for what was likely to be her final mission.

Anne sat in the pilot's seat. With her cold, dead, cybernetic eyes, she watched Sol pass over the planet's horizon, reflecting off thousands of orbital defense platforms and dozens of docked Federation warships. In her immediate vision, the supercarrier UEFSC *Hacienda's Lance* sat alongside the frigate *Glory of Karachi* and missile destroyer *Hammer of Asgardia*, but many were damaged from recent Solar War engagements.

Deliverance's cockpit smelled of processed oxygen and antiseptic spray. A binary chirp of code caught Anne's attention. A mechanical eagle sat on the worn, high-backed leather seat's armrest, red eyes glowing with artificial intelligence.

"Have you detected the Empire's picket ships yet, Lincoln?" asked Anne.

The bird construct chirped again. The ship's computer reacted, and a new display appeared, showing a view of the Earth's surroundings out to 2.5 light-seconds. Lincoln had returned from a brief extravehicular mission, where he had connected a hardline from *Deliverance* to the scanner platform outside, allowing them to perform long-range active scans without using their own systems, thereby giving away the shuttle's position.

Images began to populate the monitor, showing the forward elements of an Imperial battlefleet crossing the infamous Red Line toward Earth from its largest artificial satellite, Colossus Station—where Anne had also come from, arriving ahead of the emperor's vanguard. The UEF home fleet had not reacted to the Empire's obvious aggression.

Anne's cyber-eyes linked with her ship's cameras, zooming-in across thousands of kilometers to show Colossus's titanic transparent shell, through which she could see desert landscapes, industrial plains, vast machinery, and shining cities within. This station, the current seat of Imperial power, floated a hundred thousand kilometers away from Earth, held in distant orbit by immense anti-gravity drives. The Empire's arrogance was on full display by leaving the station's continent-sized exterior blast shields exposed within range of the Earth's defense network. But Colossus' exterior defenses were second-only to the Federation's bristling defense network around Earth. The promise of mutually-assured destruction had forced the war to branch out, consuming the Solar system's territories and dwindling resources in the fires of emperor Hadrian Mariko's ambition. Anne's mechanical fist tightened as she fought down old memories of that bastard.

Beyond the approaching Imperial fleet, she spotted sporadic explosions on *Deliverance's* deep-space cameras—distant blasts from the farthest reaches of human-occupied Solar space. The Jovian moons burned. Pluto was being wrenched from UEF control by the Imperials, and the mineral resourcing operations within the asteroid belt were contested. The outer system gulf was all but lost, with only pockets of UEF resistance remaining. The Federation was losing ground in nearly every battlespace, swallowed by the

relentless advance of Emperor Mariko's fleets until soon, Earth would be their only remaining stronghold.

Anne sat back; biological arm folded over her cybernetic arm, staring at the approaching fleet. "Any response from the UEF?"

The bird croaked a negative, making his metallic feather-plating ripple in the limited lighting. The readings confirmed it—none of the Federation patrols were showing any reaction to the incoming Imperial battle-force, despite the fact that a full third of the home fleet was docked here for refits or rearmament. The rumors that had drawn Anne away from her personal war against the Empire on Colossus were true. Someone, or something, had made the home-world vulnerable to direct attack.

Anne double-blinked her eyelids, and the pilot's seat swiveled. She stood, popping out the cables delivering power and raw Nanites into her body's reservoirs. As Anne's backup batteries reached full charge, her cyber-narcolepsy receded. This was an early warning sign of the Nanophage, which was slowly developing as her aging synthetic components degraded. Fortunately, Anne's shuttle was equipped with top-of-the-line cybernetic repair systems. Snaking mechadendrite arms deployed from hidden compartments in the ceiling to cut a tiny Phage tumor out of Anne's cyber-arm, replacing it with fresh synthetic muscle. Eventually, Anne would succumb to the plague, like anyone else with older or malfunctioning Nanite implants. But before that, she had one last goal to complete. One final job.

Lincoln scanned Anne's body for further imperfections. A screen on the cockpit's main console showed that the micro-reactor nestled in her cybernetic guts was operating at ninety-six percent efficiency. Good enough.

"Excellent," said Anne. "Ease the flight systems back online. Our target is the main shipyard in this sector—*Refit One*."

She gestured at the closest high-orbit station above the Earth, surrounded by damaged warships under repair by EVA repair crews. Like the rest of the UEF's orbital network, the facility showed no signs of a defensive lockdown, no running-light blackouts, and no active weapons systems.

Lincoln squawked a query. Anne replied, "We discussed this earlier, Lincoln. After what my brother did on Mars, they've summoned him to *Refit One* for disciplinary action—he'll be arriving within the hour. Our plans depend on if he can help us ... and if we can get him out of there."

The bird cocked his head, letting out a sardonic string of code, which Anne's onboard systems translated into regular language.

She shook her head. "This is the only way, my friend. Run a jammer on *Refit One's* active sensors, and cut our engines before they detect us. Our insertion needs to be silent."

The eagle squawked another question.

"No, I don't know where the rest of Zeke's people are," Anne replied, "Nightshade Squadron's base ship is waiting in stealth mode, like our shuttle. To find them, we need to find *him*. Once we're aboard, you'll have to break into *Refit One's* network to locate his bio-signs."

Lincoln's eyes narrowed, and he burred another query.

"It has to be now, my friend," said Anne. "This is our last chance to take Mariko down, and save what's left of the human race from his insanity. Whether the Abaddon obelisk is to blame for his actions or not, it doesn't matter. Hadrian must be stopped. After everything that I've done and all I've failed to do, this last task is all that's left for me. Is that enough for you?"

A few moments passed, then the bird bowed his head.

"Good," Anne said.

She felt the gravity-plating suck her boots down as she pulled her greatcoat on. The upper areas of the garment floated freely, while the flexible armored lining magnetized to her body-glove. Anne felt her personal deflection shields booting up with a pop of static, protecting her from hyper-velocity ranged attacks—one of many Nanite-based technologies that had rewritten the rulebook on modern tactics, along with artificially intelligent drone warfare, space combat and a host of other innovations that the human race had wasted no time in using to kill each other.

Lincoln took over as helmsman while Anne strode to the rear of the shuttle's hold, running her metal hand down an anti-materiel rifle's barrel.

Her synthetic heart began to race. A plethora of firearms gleamed under the lights, strapped into seats on both sides of the bay. Anne kept them in good condition, though many were older than she was. Some were sized for huge robotic constructs like the Empire's fearsome warbots, though Anne's cybernetic strength allowed her to wield them. Her ancient Jetbike was secured to the deck, loaded down with even more weapons. But no arsenal alone would determine her mission's outcome. That depended on whether her brother could help her.

Deliverance chugged its thrusters to prepare for the burn toward *Refit One*. The shuttle couldn't trigger its engines too close to the station, which would light up their heat scanners, so Anne and Lincoln would need to leap

toward the orbital station through the silent void, breaking into an exterior airlock while their shuttle hurtled away at low power, coming around when needed for pickup. With luck, the ship's stealth systems would make it appear like a passing piece of orbital debris.

Anne peered out the scratched window in the entry airlock. The stars were winking out, and the visible slice of the moon disappeared behind something enormous. As she watched, Imperial leviathans slid out of the blackness of space, launching waves of boarding torpedoes at the closest UEF orbitals and docked warships. There was still no defensive response from the Earth's tiara-like rings of defense platforms. Though it was a worst-case scenario for the Federation, the timing of the Imperial invasion was fortunate, as it was great cover for Anne's insertion.

She accepted a wide-brimmed hat from a mechadendrite as *Deliverance's* quiet engine burn started, rattling the compartment. In Anne's field of view, a detailed heads-up-display, vitals, and ammunition counters appeared over a wireframe of her surroundings. She pulled her eyeglasses from a breast pocket and attached them to her nose. The eyeglasses doubled as armored protection and were quite intimidating. She liked that.

Every camera in the ship's hold, including Lincoln's infrared vision, appeared in separate windows on her HUD. Despite Anne's conventional blindness, she could see far more than any un-augmented human. Lincoln squawked an alert. Anne took a long breath and cranked the airlock's lever, cycling atmospheres with a shaking metal hand. Once the chamber was ready, she stepped inside, followed by Lincoln, on his jets of antigravity energy.

They were past the point of no return. Anne focused on her old rage, which had long since cooled into iron determination, helping her maintain a center of calm.

Anne Oakfield would fulfil the oath she made fourteen years ago, come hell or high water. Her last chance to end Emperor Hadrian Mariko was *today*, and she couldn't let it go. And her brother Zeke would help her do it.

Anne's personal shields initialized, protecting her from the cold void. Moments later, the shuttle's engine burn went quiet, turning the craft into a silent missile, hurtling through the dark. The airlock's outer door opened, her built-in jump-jets fired to life, and Anne leaped out into open vacuum with Lincoln, heading for *Refit One*.



6 — BOARDING ACTION

UEF ORBITAL STATION REFIT ONE — OCT. 31, 2263 —
03:56 HOURS

“Let’s go, Markus. We’re on a schedule,” Commander Zeke Oakfield said to his lieutenant as he stepped off the ramp of his unmarked shuttlecraft into a brightly-lit, cavernous docking module. A mechanical arm descended from the hangar’s rafters and clamped onto the shuttle’s roof, locking it down with a sharp pneumatic hiss of ammonia gas.

His huge, dark-skinned second-in-command, Lieutenant Markus Maximillian, looked up at the docking arm. “Interesting. That’s not standard procedure.”

“No, it is not,” Zeke agreed, gritting his teeth.

The mirrored black deck-plates reflected his grizzled face up at him, complete with fraying red bandana and scorched skin. There hadn’t been time to clean himself up after the frantic evacuation of Mars, which had barely ended a few hours ago. Zeke and Markus were only here to find their new recruit, deal with the small matter of his court martial ... and then get the hell back to the war.

This hangar was dedicated to the business of Rear Admiral Powell, who’d recently been reassigned to take over *Refit One*’s repair operations as hundreds of ships came in from battles along the UEF’s shrinking territorial lines, particularly from the recent disaster at Mars. Zeke had accepted the admiral’s post-battle summons to *Refit One* in good faith, but now that was looking

like a grave mistake. Arrayed ahead of him were a dozen armed military policemen, plus a handful of humanoid combat automatons. Two of them sported powered battle armor, but compared to Imperial war-suits ... they resembled children's action figures. An overworked-looking sallow-skinned colonel in an ill-fitting uniform and his two orderlies waited ahead of the security force.

Upon seeing them, it took all of Zeke's self-control to keep walking. But with the hangar's docking clamps in place on his shuttlecraft, it was too late to turn back now. He glanced over at Markus. "I didn't expect *this*."

"Me either. What's with all the firepower?" Markus murmured back, straightening his cap. The lieutenant wore the same fatigues as Zeke, with a singlet emblazoned with their unit's Nightshade flower insignia, plus an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. He also sported a cybernetic arm of synthetic muscle and titanium.

"Dunno, but I don't like it," said Zeke.

"Let's not do anything rash, my friend," Markus replied, with the same quiet calm he'd exhibited since they'd first met in basic training.

Zeke nodded, stopping and saluting the bookish-looking colonel, who stood waiting for them. "Commander Zeke Oakfield, of Nightshade Squadron, reporting as ordered."

"Excellent. You are hereby remanded into our custody, Commander," said the wheedly colonel. "Admiral Powell has decreed that we carry out your sentence immediately."

Zeke's mouth dropped open faster than the bay doors of a high-altitude bomber. "My *sentence*? I have the right to an in-person trial, according to military law."

"Under these wartime circumstances, we conducted your trial with you in absentia, Commander. Witnesses from the Mars retreat testified about your behavior there. You have been found guilty of multiple crimes, including the countermanding of direct superior orders and misuse of Federation resources. Come with us. Do not resist."

Zeke and Markus exchanged glances. Zeke's instinct to escape the situation flared, though he tamped it down.

"That's unacceptable. We *saved* people at Mars," he barked, and Markus nodded in agreement.

"That is not for you or me to decide, Commander," the colonel replied.

"I demand to speak with Admiral Powell, sir," Zeke said. "I'll work this out with him myself. Nightshade Squadron did nothing wrong. On the contrary, we're the reason all those refugees you're dealing with right now are *alive*."

"I don't care. We need to cuff you, hold out your arms," the colonel said, waving his people forward.

Zeke felt his adrenaline kick up and sensed Markus tensing beside him. But unarmed and surrounded, there was no easy escape from this place. He had no choice.

Zeke relented after a few moments, holding out his arms. "Fine. Take me to Powell."

A robotic automaton slapped a pair of stun cuffs onto his wrists. Markus glanced at the restraints with a raised eyebrow, but the colonel shook his head. "Commander Oakfield is the one we want. Leave us, Lieutenant. Do not interfere."

"My Commander has the legal right to be accompanied by his second-in-command, even while in custody. He will *not* be mistreated," Markus growled, fists balled.

Zeke shot an angry look at Markus—he couldn't get himself dragged into this too. If Zeke was imprisoned, Markus would become the interim leader for Nightshade Squadron. Who else would bring word of this nonsense to Nightshade's other senior officers? They needed to find a way to escape.

The colonel seemed hesitant, but Zeke sensed the man's discomfort with confrontation. The guards shifted uncomfortably.

After losing his staring contest with the huge lieutenant, the colonel shrugged. "As long as he doesn't interfere, your subordinate may attend as a witness. Guard them both. Try anything, though, and you'll pay."

Markus grunted.

The MPs marched into formation around the operators, with the power-armored bruisers at the front and rear, but Markus' presence was a comfort and gave Zeke a slightly better chance than zero of getting out of here. Turning on his heel, the colonel walked through the inner doors of the hangar.

Zeke murmured out of the side of his mouth to Markus as they followed. "Contact the kid. We may have to make a quick exit."

Markus tapped his datapad, but a strange 'no-connect' icon flashed on the scuffed touchscreen. "I'm locked out of the network, Commander."

"What? And you're not even on trial for anything."

"I might as well be, sir."

"Get a move on," one of the MPs barked. The bot who had installed Zeke's cuffs pressed a button on its forearm.

Zeke was electro-jolted into an unsteady walk, fuming at the humiliation.

"Do we need...backup, Zeke?" Markus murmured.

Zeke eyed the nearest guards. "Our people are out of reach. Their orders are to hold position and refuel at our private waystation until we report in, but eventually Luther and the company captains will wonder what happened to us and take matters into their own hands. We'll have to find a way back to the *Solanum* before they try anything crazy. Bright side is—we've been in tighter spots before."

Markus did not look convinced. "Affirmative, Commander."



Refit One was the busiest military installation in the northern hemispheric orbital sector. The familiar smell of unwashed coveralls and vacuum-exposed fabrics filled Zeke's nose. Loudspeakers droned on and on without pause. Thousands of personnel passed through here daily, transferring from damaged warships to any remaining combat-effective Federation fleet elements docked here.

A new duty rotation had started, overrunning the station's halls with a crush of bodies. Marines, pilots, flight crews, officers, army troopers, drop troopers, shock troopers, robotic worker drones, civilian contractors, and every other specialization passed by the prisoner detail in the narrow corridors. Shouted orders filled the air, accompanied by the din of conversation and griping from lower-ranked grunts, echoing through the passageways. Turbo-lifts and mass-conveyors had to slow down because of the dense crowds. Notably for Zeke, many of the people around them were rough, sad-looking refugees.

The sea of bobbing heads parted around them as Zeke and Markus were marched through the orbital. Many passersby gave them polite nods, salutes, and words of praise. Some of the refugees even cheered. Zeke was filled with pride as their recognition of him confirmed his suspicions about their Martian origins, but their support wouldn't help him in this situation. Zeke wished he'd brought along some of his other captains, like Chiang or Os-

sington. Even a handful more of his people would have made a difference here.

Zeke gazed through the corridor skylight, marveling at the beauty of the Earth's curvature. The planet was the cradle of the species, even ruined as it was in the long-ago fires of chemical weapons and nuclear fallout. His unit's base of operations—the *Solanum*—floated out there too, the largest Federation fleet prowler with full stealth capabilities. After this legal charade was over, Zeke and Markus would be returning there—whether they were 'allowed' to, or not.

"*Commander!*" a youthful voice carried through the chattering throngs. Zeke grinned as he spotted a girl hurrying over, following a map on her datapad. Markus also brightened. "There she is."

"Just who I was hoping I'd find. Good morning, Private Jenkins. Or should I say...*shrimp*," Zeke greeted the girl as if he wasn't being marched along wearing stun cuffs. The guards trained their weapons on Jenkins. "Halt!"

"Uhhhh ... right, Commander," she replied, alarmed by their aggression. Julia Jenkins had dark frizzy hair bound in a tight, regulation-sized ball, and wore standard fatigues, which were likely some of her only possessions right then.

Upon seeing her face, a memory hit Zeke, merely hours old. While the rest of his people focused on broader civilian evacuation efforts around Mars, Zeke had led Markus and a small team of Nightshade operators into the burning ruins of the red planet's capital city, Olympus Mons, following a distress beacon. There, they had discovered Jenkins and several hundred others, barely hanging on. Ashen-faced and terrified, Jenkins's group had survived weeks of orbital, aerial, and ground-based Imperial bombardment, clinging onto their distress signal as a last-ditch effort to live. Imperial damage done to the colony and the planet had threatened to undo a century of Federation terra-forming efforts.

Jenkins was only a few years past minimum recruitment age, but after boarding the *Solanum* with the other survivors, she'd written and uploaded a sophisticated comm-jamming algorithm into the ship's computers. When broadcast, it had thrown Imperial warships into disarray during the Mars planetary evac operation, saving countless lives during the battle to protect the refugee fleet on its way back to Earth space.

The surviving combat controllers and tech specialists within Zeke's unit had been impressed with Jenkins' talent for electronic warfare, convincing him to recruit her. After transferring Jenkins to a medical frigate for treatment with the other wounded, Zeke had promised that he'd find her on *Refit One* when Nightshade returned to Earth for repairs and resupply. Now, here she was. Aside from some scorches, scrapes and bandaging, the kid looked good, given all she'd recently been through.

Jenkins' datapad was beeping, tracking Zeke and Markus' bio-signs. "I heard you were coming, Commander. I, uh, they asked me about Mars..."

The colonel spoke as he continued walking, forcing Jenkins to keep pace with them. "Your testimony as witness to Zeke Oakfield's conduct is no longer required, Private Jenkins. Leave us."

"My trial's *over*," Zeke said.

"Trial's...over?" Jenkins asked. "Why?"

The kid's naivete was charming, but Jenkins wasn't grasping the political implications of what Zeke had done on the red planet.

"They're taking me to see Powell, to answer for disobeying his order to abandon Mars and everyone still alive on the surface and in orbit to the Imperials. That included *you*, by the way," Zeke replied to Jenkins.

To the colonel, he added, "The girl stays with us. She gave you a statement, so she's involved."

Jenkin's eyes darted around, glancing at the military police and their colonel, but she nodded her assent.

The colonel glared at Zeke. "Fine. But she cannot interfere."

The MPs kept Jenkins in their sights, but Zeke was satisfied—they had what they'd come here for. Now all they had to do was slip these fools; Powell's court martial be damned.

A *clang* rang out, like a rogue meteoroid or debris had struck the module. Zeke glanced at Markus. "What the hell was that?"

The MPs and robots forced the march to continue.

"No idea, Commander," Markus said.

Refit One had automated defenses and kinetic shields to protect from hostile attacks and pieces of space junk, like the Phalanx magnetic accelerator cannons that were visible past the skylights. But they weren't firing.

Another reverberating *clang* tore through the orbital. Markus glanced down at his datapad, which still read 'disconnected' from the military network.

"I don't like this, sir," he murmured.

"Yep, this is not good," Zeke glanced down at Jenkins. "Find out what hit us, shrimp."

Jenkins started tapping her datapad, but the colonel announced, "In here, convict."

He had stopped at a bulkhead door, which his guards opened. A dim, smelly, and musty chamber lay beyond. This wasn't *Refit One's* brig.

"What're you trying to pull here?" Zeke demanded.

The guards shoved Zeke inside without explanation. Markus and Jenkins followed, but were held at gunpoint inside the door by the combat robots.

The module was a thirty-by-thirty-meter disposal chamber, featuring three airlocks for jettisoning waste products and recyclables outside to waiting haulers. Piles of crates, reeking garbage canisters, and other disposal equipment were stacked in piles against the walls. A dirty skylight barely brightened the dingy space. Zeke's stomach dropped—*he* was the waste product.

"What the hell are you trying to pull, here?" Zeke asked as the MPs prepared an airlock for decompression. Jenkins looked up at Markus, but he held up a hand, murmuring. "Wait."

One of the colonel's orderlies handed him a datapad. The small man took it and read aloud, "Commander Zeke Oakfield, under the Uniform Code of United Earth Federation Military Justice, for disobeying a superior's orders and usurping command of Federation resources during wartime ... you are sentenced to *death*."

"And Powell has no interest in being here to watch? Where is he?" Zeke growled.

"The Admiral is indisposed," The colonel remarked.

Before anyone could react, a two-tone noise sounded over the station's loudspeakers.

Everyone stopped. The voice of Rear Admiral Powell himself blared, "Attention, all hands."

Zeke and Markus exchanged glances.

The admiral's speech sounded strange, slurring his words and speaking slower than usual, even though his tone was still commanding. "This is Admiral Powell ... erm, please remain calm, everyone. All defense stations are to remain on standby. Earth's orbital defenses are being *peacefully* boarded by a Solar Empire expeditionary fleet. There is no reason for alarm. If you

are in your quarters, remain there until further notice. Avoid engaging the Imperial boarding teams and obey their commands. This is a prearranged non-combat event. That is all, erm...thank you."

What? Zeke flitted through several emotions—confusion, surprise, horror—and then rage. "What the hell did he say?"

A glance at Markus revealed a very similar reaction. The military police looked just as flabbergasted.

Zeke imagined scenes across the station. Thousands of people stared dumbstruck at the public address system. Panic would ensue. Something very wrong was happening here, far worse than Zeke's fast-tracked bullshit execution.

Markus somehow maintained his dry demeanor. "It appears we've been betrayed, Commander."

"Sure does. But...why? And why did Powell sound like he's been hitting the sauce?"

Nothing made sense. The UEF's armed forces were nowhere near the point of surrender...or were they? Was Powell compromised? Had he used his command authority over the orbital defenses to hand the home-world over to the Empire? That would explain his reassignment here after the losses at Mars, if the higher Federation brass were also involved.

The colonel was the only one who looked like he'd been expecting the announcement. His orderlies glanced at him, eyes wide. Only the combat automatons, who were guarding the hallway doors, had no outward reaction.

Jenkins broke the silence. "The Empire is coming *here*?"

Zeke was about to respond when another loud *clang* interrupted, reverberating through the deck, flickering the lights. Some of the guards lost their balance, but most kept their weapons trained on Zeke and his compatriots, murmuring among themselves. He couldn't blame them for wondering why they were screwing around here when the Empire was about to ruin everyone's day.

"Boarding torpedoes are a bit extreme for a so-called 'peaceful' action," Markus said, failing to hide his concern.

"It can't be. The outer shields would have to be down. There's no way Powell would just ... *let* them come aboard? Right?" Zeke stammered.

"Get in the airlock, Commander," the colonel said, pointing at the chamber's door.

“Are you serious?” Zeke rattled his cuffs. “You’re still gonna go through with this, after what we just heard?”

The colonel shook his head. “The time for complaints is past, Commander. Regardless of our present circumstances, you must pay for your wastage of the Fourth Fleet and other Federation resources.”

“Screw that,” said Zeke. “I came here for a fair hearing, not this trumped-up horseshit.”

He didn’t mention getting Jenkins and Markus back to the *Solanum* and resuming his personal war against Emperor Hadrian Mariko. Those were minor details compared to not dying.

With no other choice and desperate to save his commander, Markus exploded into action, barreling into the military policemen who were holding Zeke, but several automatons forced him back with overwhelming robotic strength. Jenkins dashed toward Zeke as well, but several MPs grabbed her arms.

Zeke fought back as the colonel’s cronies shoved him into the airlock chamber. A shadow flashed overhead, blocking the sunlight. Moments later, another impact threw everyone to the deck.

Zeke rolled over, groaning. Through the skylight, he spotted penetrator torpedoes boring into other module sections that made up *Refit One*. Showers of them descended on neighboring defense platforms. The Solar war had come home.

Muffled gunfire and shouting echoed through the walls as Zeke tried to push himself up with cuffed wrists. From the sounds of frantic battle, Imperial troops were already pouring onto the station. The MPs hit the airlock controls before he could scramble to his feet and get out. The steel-framed glass panel slammed shut, locking him in and deadening most exterior noise.

“Jettison the convict. We need to return to the Command Center. *Now!*” the colonel barked, which Zeke was able to make understand by reading his lips. He banged a fist against the glass and cursed, but the colonel ignored him.

As his breath frosted the window, Zeke saw the skinny colonel’s orderlies helping him to his feet. Several automatons held Markus down with powerful servos and weight in numbers, and Jenkins was faring no better.

“You’ll burn for this, you coward!” Zeke roared, pounding the glass again. “After everything Nightshade has done to save your worthless asses from the Empire, *this* is how you repay us?”

The MPs ignored him. The gunfire in the corridor increased in tempo. One of the walls dented inward, spewing gas from a ruptured conduit.

"Commander!" Markus yelled, but Zeke couldn't hear anything through the class, and Markus was powerless to stop the execution anyway. Zeke knew he should have gotten right back on the shuttle, fired the engines and ripped free of those damned docking clamps when he saw the admiral's welcoming committee. His trust in the Federation's top brass was gone forever ... but if Zeke was being honest with himself, it had been dead for years already.

"Do it! Kill him!" the colonel screamed.

A massive impact deformed the hallway door inward. The gunfire outside ceased. The guards leveled their weapons at the damaged entryway.

The chamber cycled atmosphere, preparing to blast Zeke out into the freezing void. It was getting harder to breathe. The artificial gravity plating inside the airlock clicked off with a dying hum. Zeke mentally prepared himself for what was about to happen to his body, letting the air out of his lungs.

The disposal chamber's door exploded open, billowing smoke into the compartment. A huge, armored body fell through and slammed into the deck, studded with decorative carbide spikes, human skulls, and Gauss slug impact holes that bled coolant and black blood onto the deck. The automata guarding the door stared down at the body, puzzled. It was an Imperial soldier—a massive, genetically and cybernetically modified legionnaire of the Solar Empire, five hundred pounds of organic killing machine encased in Nanotech-powered heavy plate armor. But he was dead.

Another figure stepped over the hulking Imperial, wearing armored, slim-fitting boots. The newcomer was tall, clad in a greatcoat and padded bodyglove, with a wide-brimmed hat and round glasses that reflected the sunlight. A mane of fiery red hair emerged from under her hat—the same shade as Zeke's.

"I wouldn't press that airlock release, if I were you," Anne Oakfield said.

Every weapon in the room locked onto the newcomer.

"Take her down!" The colonel screeched.

A mechanical eagle flew over Anne's shoulder, held aloft by anti-grav generators, shining targeting lasers onto every MP and robot in the module.

Gunfire flashed around the chamber as she blurred out of sight, too fast for Zeke to follow. Markus pulled Jenkins low as the Federation guards dropped

in a flurry of shock beams and Gauss slugs. One of the armored bruisers slumped against the glass in front of Zeke, electricity arcing across his form.

In seconds, it was over. The compartment was choked with smoke and weapons discharge. Most of the colonel's men hadn't even gotten time to fire their weapons.

Gasping for air, Zeke spotted someone approaching his pressurized chamber, who hit the controls.

He dropped to the deck as gravity kicked back to life in the tiny chamber. The transparent airlock door slid open and sweet oxygen filled Zeke's lungs, making him lightheaded.

"There you are...brother."

As the air-scrubbers sucked smoke from the compartment, Zeke beheld his sister.

"Anne?" he exclaimed, staggering to his feet.

Anne stepped forward to help him up. "I'm glad I got to you when I did, Zeke."

"Yeah, thanks. You're good at that 'nick of time' thing."

Anne tipped her wide hat, which had somehow remained on her head during the lightning-fast shootout. The eagle landed on Anne's shoulder.

"And I see Lincoln's still kicking ass, as always," said Zeke, nodding to the bird, who nodded right back. "Have you talked to dad? Nightshade has been operating behind enemy lines for so long, I haven't gotten a chance to tell him you're alive."

"I haven't been to the planet's surface yet. You were my first stop—though our father is on my list, too."

"How did you get off Colossus? Past all the Imperial defenses?" Markus asked. "And how did you find *us*?"

"I have my ways," Anne said, winking at Lincoln. "But there's no time for these questions. We have a slight *situation*, if you hadn't noticed."

The staccato rip-roar of automatic weapon fire resumed in the distance outside, echoing down the corridor and into the disposal room. Zeke scowled, automatically tensing at the noise.

He turned to Jenkins. "Collect some of their ammo, kid, we're gonna be needing it. Leave 'em a little bit, though, enough for a fighting chance."

The girl nodded and got to work without complaint, while Zeke returned his attention to his sister. "You heard what that bastard Powell said. It makes no sense."

"You missed some things after your adventure on Mars," Anne explained. "The Federation is planning to surrender to the Solar Empire, today. The Solar War is over."

Zeke's mouth dropped open at his sister's words. "You're kidding."

"I don't kid."

"How did you get this information, Anne?" Markus asked, picking up one of the military police's fallen weapons.

She lit a cigar, beckoning to him. The big lieutenant leaned in, allowing Anne to light his cigar too. After a puff, she answered. "Lincoln intercepted a transmission between the Imperial flagship *Eagle of the Ninth* and UEF High Command twenty hours ago. The subject of discussion was total UEF surrender, which will take place later today. All Federation military assets around the home-world are standing down. They're passing out the order to all remaining UEF installations and battlegroups throughout the Solar System. The Strategos Council has sold everyone out to Mariko. I'm sorry."

No one replied. Zeke's mouth hung open. His mind raced. It was unbelievable, but Anne's story jived with Powell's announcement. Thousands of military personnel and civilian contractors were aboard this station, not to mention millions more manning the rest of the orbital network, plus the teeming billions inhabiting the planetary arcologies. It would be a disaster to allow Imperial legionnaires into any of those environments.

Anne pointed to the large skylight without looking at it. "See for yourselves."

The Imperial flagship *Eagle of the Ninth* was sliding into the sunlight, within range of every defensive mass-driver cannon in the sector, but they all stood silent. Flanking it were the IWF cruiser *Nebuchadnezzar* and the destroyer *Hadrian's Chosen*, followed by dozens more whale-like forms, bristling with city-killing weapons. The invasion fleet was monstrous, the largest that Zeke had seen fielded to date. Whatever deal that the Federation's politicians had made with Mariko, it was done, sealed, stamped and beyond the point of no return.

Another *clang* rang out. The unmistakable rapid *bang-bang* of Gauss gunfire echoed down the hall, followed by screaming. Zeke grabbed an MP's compact submachinegun from where it had fallen as Jenkin stripped the unconscious man's ammunition magazines from his uniform.

"So why go to all this trouble to find us?" he asked, checking the weapon over.

"I came to ask you for a favor. I need Nightshade Squadron, Zeke," Anne said. "I am going to end Emperor Hadrian Mariko, today. We will make him pay for everything he's done – to the UEF, to our people, to you, and to *me*. This is our last chance to end him, before his rule is solidified."

Silence followed, punctuated by distant explosive decompressions. Jenkins looked from Zeke to Markus, then to Anne. "You want to kill...the emperor?"

"Absolutely," said Anne, like it was an achievable goal.

Flabbergasted, Jenkins asked, "How?"

"That's why I found you, Zeke. Nightshade is how we'll end him," Anne said.

Zeke spread his arms. "Nightshade isn't known for regicide, Anne. We've never even been able to get close to him and that's not for lack of trying."

"But you know him, and he knows you. Mariko talked highly of you when I worked with him after we left our father's operation. That counts for more than martial strength."

"I knew him, Anne. He's a different monster now than the man he was before." Zeke said. "My familiarity with Hadrian Mariko from years ago won't give us a tangible edge in an assassination mission," Zeke said.

Markus's brow furrowed at this information, but he stayed silent. Zeke gave him a guilty, pacifying look, but he chose to have this particular awkward talk later, given their present circumstances.

Anne poked the flower insignia on Zeke's singlet. "You command the most effective spec-ops unit left in the UEF. You've dealt with his Praetorian Sisterhood before as well; I need that expertise. I don't have enough hands to take Mariko down by myself."

Zeke crossed his arms. He was about to rebuke his sister's crazy request when another torrent of gunfire echoed down the corridor—too close. Lincoln croaked at Anne.

"Time is against us," she said. "We need to leave. I have a shuttle waiting."

"Good, because we can't use ours," Markus pointed out.

"Wait. You couldn't have dropped this on us at a worse time, Anne," Zeke said, exasperated. "We can't leave now, not with Imperials flooding onto this orbital. We have to defend this station. Almost everyone here is unprepared for what's coming."

"No time is ideal for this," Anne replied.

“What do you think, Lieutenant?” Zeke cast a glance at Markus, who was accepting a stack of ammo magazines and stun grenades from Jenkins.

“Your ‘trial’ is over, and our precious cargo is secured.” Markus gestured to the girl, who went red. “But... we’d be abandoning a lot of people here if we leave now, and we know what the Imperials will do to anyone carrying the Phage.”

“Yeah. I need to confirm what the hell is going on, first,” said Zeke. “We need to verify for sure what the UEF has done, and I can’t let the Imperials massacre half the people on *Refit One*. We can reactivate this station’s defenses from the command center to give everyone a better chance to survive and escape. I think we’ll find our dear old admiral there too, and maybe get some more concrete information about what’s happening. Then ... we’ll deal with your vendetta against Mariko.”

“Fine, but we don’t have all day,” said Anne, letting out a frustrated breath. “Lead the way.”



7 — UNDOCUMENTED

NEW TORONTO UPPER-CITY STREETS — OCT. 31, 2263 —
05:40 HOURS

Jason stared at his hands as he climbed a grimy ladder up a deep maintenance chute, leading to the arcology's city surface level. He could still picture the ugly purple Nanophage fluid splattered all over his skin. And those *shadows*

...

He blinked his thoughts away, and Jason shook his head vigorously as he felt drugs flood his system. Sam's newly rebuilt inhibitor could now automatically dispense Osmium based on Jason's mental state, without the need for manual release. It didn't help with his ongoing exhaustion, though. His dreams over the last few weeks had become worse and worse, so bad that David had requisitioned sedatives and additional Osmium from the Village's doctor to allow Jason to get a few hours of actual precious rest.

They'd been risking a lot of unauthorized surface trips lately, and this one was their boldest yet. So far, they had not found a way into the Science Institute to locate the Abaddon Beacon and stop it from trying to possess him again, nor had they found a way for him to properly control his Abhamic powers. With little traction so far over the last three weeks, the clock was ticking. Jason had no idea what they'd do when they actually found the obelisk ... but it was best to take things one step at a time.

He had managed to steer clear of anything infected with the Phage so far, minimizing the chances of Abaddon being able to reach him. He couldn't

allow himself to have another psychic detonation, and especially not in the Village, surrounded by so many innocent people.

“Almost there!” Sam called from below. Faint sunlight filtered down through the grate above them.

“Great,” David huffed, dripping sweat onto his companions. “At least this covers my cardio for today.”

The shaft was claustrophobic, moist, and crawling with insect life. Jason’s scalp itched. There hadn’t even been time for micro-showers before they’d left the Village, sneaking out before the first work shift to avoid being spotted.

“Remind me, who are we going to see again?” Jason asked.

Sam let out an exasperated sigh. “Don’t worry about *who*. If my contact’s information is good, it’ll take us right to the Beacon. Maybe today.”

“I’ll believe that when the sun explodes,” David grumbled. His red hair was coiffed into its usual peak, giving Budgie something to pick at. Jason looked down at Sam as he climbed. “This is an awful risk we’re taking.”

“I think what you meant to say is, ‘Wow, thank you *so* much for finding this lead for me, Sam!’” she corrected.

“Right, thanks,” Jason replied, without enthusiasm. He looked below into the blackness ... but nothing was following them. No creeping dread, no crawling darkness. No Abaddon.

At the end of the long climb, David shifted his bag aside and plugged his hacking laptop into the grated hatch above. It opened, letting a cascade of dirty rainwater into the shaft. David jerked sideways out of its path. “Whoa! Good morning!”

Budgie spouted some newly acquired swear words he’d learned as he flapped out of the downpour. The water caught Jason full in the face, and he barked out a cough, spluttering.

Sam’s giggling caught Jason’s attention as he wiped himself off. He looked down and saw her eyes flashing from amber to pink. Most of the moisture leeches out of his hair and clothing.

“That’s one way to get a wake-up call!” she said, letting the dirty water fall down the shaft.

With extra practice over the last couple weeks—though Jason had no idea where she’d found the time—Sam’s control of her Abhamic powers had improved, even extending to the manipulation of liquids now. She required

less Osmium to recover, but Jason still couldn't go off his constant Osmium drip without risking the Abaddon Beacon locating and attacking him again.

"At least that's my morning shower covered," Jason said through gritted teeth.

Sam smiled. "There's that positive spirit. Let it out a little more often!"

"I told you guys what the habitat's weather systems were doing before we left." David pointed out. "A full downpour to clear pollution, at the same time every month. The city's central processing facility didn't hack itself, y'know."

"Yes, we remember," Sam muttered as David disappeared up into the brisk early-morning wind. The cockatoo hopped onto the pavement after him, ruffling his feathers and chirping at the new sights.

Jason followed David up the final rungs of the ladder. The artificial breeze caught his hair as he emerged, and he breathed it in. The city's surface level had cleaner air than the bowels of the New Toronto arcology.

David sealed the grate behind them while Jason helped Sam up before scanning the alleyway for any witnesses of their arrival. The narrow crevice between structures was choked with debris, signage, several rusting automaton hulks, and rusting fire-escapes. Budgie took flight and flapped above the dripping rooftops.

"You be careful up there, featherhead," David called, pulling out a scanner and heading down one end of the alley to scout around.

They had emerged in the city's eastern quadrant, which was made up of run-down residential districts separated by street-wide ID scanners and Phage detection stations. Notably for Jason and his companions, the UEF Capital Science Institute was also close by. The Abaddon Beacon was supposedly still in there, though the only way to know for sure was to break in and find it.

The surface level of the cake-shaped city megastructure was split into five zones. The extravagant downtown of the financial district starkly contrasted against the four poorer sectors surrounding it, ringed with industrial flatlands, landing fields and gigantic manufactories around the periphery. Jason spotted the space elevator complex rising from the core, where the arcology's construction had begun over a century ago. The exospheric stalk pointed through the sky-dome toward Colossus Station, barely visible many thousands of kilometers away through a break in the toxic clouds, which

boiled and flashed in great lightning storms—a constant reminder of the Great War that had originally messed up the planet.

Sam examined a pair of small metal generators connected by loose cabling around her neck, padded for comfort, and checked Jason's too.

"Let's make sure that shower didn't short these static plates out. It'd be a shame if someone catches you on camera, pretty boy."

Jason went red, but something else drew his attention to the sky. He squinted, trying to see through the shimmering containment dome. "There's a lot of ships up there."

David trudged back into view, returning from scouting the area around them. "We'd need Talos to do a long-range scan to see what's going on in orbit...but we don't have Talos right now."

David probably hadn't meant any harm, but his mentioning of their beloved robot triggered Jason's guilt. It had taken the better part of a week of rushed excursions to collect enough of his scattered components for Sam to rebuild their long-time automaton guardian, which was finally nearing completion. That didn't help Jason feel much better, though.

Sam checked David's static plates. "We should be able to stay anonymous on cameras, as long as we don't pass through any ID scanners."

"We still shouldn't take any unnecessary risks, even to find Abaddon," said David, checking Jason's Osmium inhibitor out of pure habit. Budgie gnawed on his ear.

"That's a given," Sam replied.

David's lip curled. "But here we are on the surface, *without* Governor Yamamoto's permission, on one of your wild goose chases. Again."

Sam glared at him. "This is the best lead into the Fed labs that we've gotten so far. My contact's information is good. We'll be in and out of there before you can complain that your *wittle feet hurt*. Come on."

"We've been coming up to the surface without permission way too much lately," David continued. "Yamamoto is going to come down on us hard if he catches us—and eventually, he *will* catch us."

Sam shook her head. "I cleared our work schedule for the morning, so no one's gonna come knocking at the Chop Shop. If we're fast, it'll be like we never left ... hopefully."

Sam started down the alleyway, following a map on her comm device's dim screen.

"We should at least check it out, David," Jason said, starting after her. "Sam hasn't led us wrong before."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered David. Budgie repeated the phrase in a high-pitched squawk, prompting David to clamp his beak shut.

"Sounds like you need a morning coffee, crankypants," Jason muttered.

He noticed a homeless man slumped between piles of trash, and they locked eyes. Jason slowly raised a finger to his lips. Despite his drug-induced stupor, the man repeated the gesture and winked. Jason tossed him a ration bar. Having lived on these same unforgiving streets himself, he knew how the guy felt.

Sam stopped behind a rain-drenched dumpster, peering ahead. The boulevard was bustling with Upper-city folks, who hurried around in tense groups through steam columns wafting up through the sewer grates.

The power appeared to be out in this sector. Traffic beacons were dead, and there were no lights visible inside nearby buildings. To the left, an identity scanner array stretched across the street, guarded by several armed automatons. Though the street scanner was dead, the skeletal, plasteel-plated automatons were still checking for infections and verifying identities to ensure that no citizens strayed out of their designated zones without authorization. David checked the sparking junction box beside the dumpster.

"Eastern quadrant is having a brownout," he noted. "Might be our lucky day."

Sam spotted a surveillance drone hovering ten meters above the street, patrolling. She held up a hand to halt Jason. "Their automated minions still have power, watch out."

The compliance drone swept the avenue with scanner rays, verifying identities and checking for Nanophage infections.

David watched the drone, tugging at the device around his neck. "You're sure these static plates will work if we're spotted?"

Sam nodded. "I've tested them with every piece of camera equipment we have in the Village. The interference fields will work, I promise. Unless those drones have a piece of scanning tech I don't know about."

"This is why I'm already getting gray hairs," said David.

Jason poked the side of David's head. "You don't *have* any gray hairs."

"Shhhht, numbskull."

As the drone passed around the block, Sam jerked her thumb at a diner across the road, squeezed between a laundromat and a bio-sealed apartment

building. The dead neon sign read ‘*Fran’s*’ in cursive writing, styled like a 1950s eatery, beside a ‘24-hour service’ notice.

“You picked a rather scuzzy spot,” said David, squinting at it. A lone cyborg bouncer waited under a wet awning, looking bored. Drifters and addicts stumbled around on the sidewalk, several per block. The upper city was a horrible place for anyone without financial connections, eligibility for the UEF’s dwindling social programs, or a well-run off-grid safe zone like the Village.

Sam shook her head. “I didn’t pick it, my contact did. We meet here instead of sending open transmissions. Because I do care about security, *David*.”

David grumbled.

“I like it. It’s got ... character,” Jason said.

“It doesn’t draw attention, best-case scenario for keeping off the UEF’s radar,” Sam said. “Come on.”

She led them across the street, backpack swaying as she avoided steaming puddles. With his ever-present scowl, David stuck his hands inside his leather jacket, never far from the over-engineered pistol strapped to his leg.

Without warning, a short rumble shook the Earth. Everyone froze until it passed, including the twitching addicts hanging around on the street corner.

“What was ... that?” Sam asked.

David shrugged. “They might be doing repair work on the city’s foundations, though I doubt it. Until this war ends, this place’ll never gonna get the overhaul it needs.”

“Maybe,” Jason said, biting his lower lip. Underground tremors in an artificial environment like their city arcology were never a good thing.

Sam continued toward the bouncer, who leaned against the wall of the restaurant and regarded Sam with his bionic eye first, before eyeing Jason, David, and their bird, who shrieked at him.

“This is the earliest in the day I’ve seen you arrive, Sam. And you’re bringing *friends* this time,” the bouncer said in a thick accent. Jason guessed from the way he rolled his R’s that he was from the European Protectorate arcology.

Sam flashed a dazzling, straight-toothed smile at the Slavic man, slipping a pair of credit chips into his pocket. “You were going to meet them eventually, Richard.”

The bouncer accepted her payment, eyeing the sword grip sticking out of her bag top. “Don’t cause a fuss. *That* thing better stay put, little girl.”

"It will. Quiet morning?" Sam asked.

"So far. We usually only get workers from the midnight shifts coming in this early. And be careful who sees those static plates around your necks. Dead giveaway that you're looking to avoid scanners and cameras, *Undoc*."

"Fair enough."



The restaurant's interior was warmer than the chilly October morning. Jason rubbed his hands, blowing on them.

The wood-walled, heavily decorated diner smelled strange but not unpleasant, like old food. It was nearly deserted. Two serving automatons assisted a large, homely woman with graying hair and a stained apron at the counter, wiping things down for the day's service. The lights and ceiling fans were dead. A few scattered citizens occupied tables near the frosted front windows, drinking coffee, but they ignored the newcomers.

The grey-haired barkeeper looked up at Sam, sounding exhausted. "Sam. I rarely see you here this early."

"Hey Fran. Is she here?" Sam asked.

The woman's focus shifted to a gloomy booth nearby, pointing it out. "Yep."

A loud *pop* came from the wall-mounted fuse-box. Lights flickered on, and the jukebox resumed a quiet tune, a rock song from pre-Federation days.

Fran sighed. "Finally."

David leaned in. "Does this happen often?"

"At least once a day," the bartender replied, surprised at his interest. "Neighborhood rumor is that it's because we're located near the Science Institute. People think they're doing weird things in there, energy intensive, hard on the grid. But the more likely explanation is the financial corruption with the energy companies, load-shedding, etcetera. But mentioning that would be a *social compliance violation*."

Jason suppressed a grimace. Fran was closer to the truth than she realized with her science facility theory. Sam put a couple of Federation credit bills on the bar and winked at her.

"You didn't see us, as always," Sam said. "Thanks, Fran."

“Sure, whatever,” Fran said. “Don’t take too long, please. We’ve been having more enforcer visits than usual.”

David audibly growled. Jason exclaimed, “Enforcer visits?”

“We’ll be fine, Jason,” Sam said. “We’ll leave if we see anyone more important than a traffic cop.”

Not reassured in the slightest, Jason followed Sam toward the booth, hoping that this trip wasn’t all for nothing, like so many others had been.

A girl leaned into the dim light above the booth as they approached. “Sam?”

“Hey, Lucia,” Sam replied with warmth.

Lucia stared wide-eyed at Jason and David.

“You didn’t tell me you’d be bringing *company*, Sam,” she said.

Jason noted Lucia’s naturally tanned features and her age. Sam’s choice of someone similar to them made sense, as younger people in the upper city were less likely to be taken in by the social compliance church’s propaganda ... usually.

“Sorry,” Sam said, smiling awkwardly at Lucia, who kept her eyes locked on Jason and David. Budgie landed on the girl’s shoulder, staring into her brown eyes before nuzzling Lucia’s long, dark hair. The Latina girl looked surprised, but she let Budgie do his thing and relaxed a bit.

“He likes you,” David commented, raising an eyebrow.

Sam pulled out a chair and put down her bag. “Lucia, I brought my friends today because this concerns them as well. Besides, they should meet the source of our best salvage leads for the past little while.”

Jason dropped into the seat beside Sam. “So, you had her feeding you coordinates? No wonder our hauls have been so good lately.”

Lucia gave Jason a wary look, but nodded. “Sam contacted me a few months ago, offering a cash reward for locations of valuable items headed to the Recyck yards, specifically intact Nanite tech. Production from the Nanotech giga-forges has never been higher, even with all the economic problems, so there’s a lot of stuff being thrown away ... and malfunctioning at a faster rate than ever, which spreads the Phage faster than ever, too.”

David leaned against the curved booth so he could monitor the front door.

“And when were you gonna tell us that some random up-worlder knew our itinerary for the past few months, Sam?” he asked.

Sam fixed David with a hard stare. "This is me telling you now. And Lucia's not random. You should be glad that I've developed this relationship with her, because she may have found us a way into the science facility—right?"

Lucia looked up from typing on her datapad, pulling out a locator beacon loaded with a crystal chip. "It's here."

The device projected an image of a damaged guard robot, along with its coordinates, to a location somewhere under the city.

"I found this after Sam asked me a couple weeks ago to look into waste coming from the UEF Capital Science Institute," Lucia said, by way of explanation for Jason and David.

"It's the same model as the bots we've spotted outside that place during our remote stakeouts." Jason replied, peering at it. Could this robot have the right codes to get them inside the building? Did he even dare hope?

"How do you know all this?" asked David, trying his best to look unimpressed.

"I...work for the Recyck Authority," explained Lucia.

Budgie bobbed his head around, mimicking certain words.

No one else interrupted, so Lucia continued. "I'm not gonna rat you out to the church, if that's what you're worried about. The Recyck yards are mostly automated, with pretty limited camera coverage. As a result, we don't have any way of knowing who might or might not be stealing certain things before they're recycled."

David allowed a threatening edge into his tone. "But now you know who we are. If you wanted to push our info to the social compliance goons, there's nothing stopping you from doing that. They could be on their way here right now."

Lucia gave Sam an expectant look. Sam raised an eyebrow, then said, "Oh, right."

Sam pushed a handful of credit bills across to Lucia, glaring at David.

"I've paid Lucia for every lead she's given us, and it's far better money than the church's snitch line would give her for three Undocumented Under-city rats. They've got bigger fish to fry."

Lucia nodded, holding up her communicator. "You're right, David. I could call in a report about three Undocs prowling around this district anytime I want. They make it *very* easy for people to do so. But I've got no love for the church or their bullshit. Their high bishop is a blight on the civilized world."

David grunted in approval. "I see."

Sam studied the hologram of the robot. "So, this is our guy? Looks familiar enough."

"Yep," said Lucia. "The science facility usually discharges their recyclables using private disposal services, mostly off-world. But sometimes they ship out non-essential waste to our cheaper public yards. You've got the usual amount of time to grab that robot, which means getting underground and finding Recyck Yard 78-10D as soon as possible."

David squinted at Lucia. "Does this robot still have entry codes for the science facility? Wouldn't they wipe its CPU before discarding it?"

Lucia shrugged. "I set up a quick screening parameter at all our collection depots to detect units whose processors and memories were intact—they are in this one. Someone in the Science Institute must've been sloppy. Whatever security codes that robot carried are still readable, at least until the science facility changes them."

Sam glanced at Jason. "This is worth checking out. The science facility only has a few entrances, and they're all aboveground. With good disguises and maybe some forged IDs, those codes should get us inside."

"Yeah," Jason nodded, but felt a stab of dread at the thought. Recyck yards were dangerous at the best of times, and he hated the idea of searching one for something as nondescript as a bot's CPU core. Jason's neural inhibitor detected the change in his mental state and gave him a small Osmium dose, which dulled the negative feeling.

"What if this guard bot's access codes only get us through the outer doors?" David pondered. "We need to access the deeper labs to find the—"

He realized what he was about to reveal, correcting himself. "Y'know what, forget about the reason. This bot may have been a glorified sentry."

"But you'd be able to find out, yeah?" Sam asked. "Right, *hackerman*? Simple job?"

David rolled his eyes at the nickname, but nodded. "Simple job."

"Let's go find us a robot then," Sam said. "This is no different from any other salvage run. We could also pick up a new battery to support Talos's reboot later today while we're down there."

Jason felt another twinge of guilt, and the inhibitor let out a low hum, dosing him again. His eyes slid out of focus as the drug stupor set in. Lucia gave him an odd look, but Sam covered for Jason by saying, "We'll need the

schedule for the Recyck yard's worker bot rotations and any other pertinent details."

"I already have it worked out for you," Lucia said, reaching into her bag for another device. "And I'm sorry, but I've been out longer than I should have. Gotta get going."

"That's okay, you've already made our lives easier by finding this lead for us," said Sam, reaching out a hand to receive whatever Lucia was searching for.

Budgie hopped off Lucia's shoulder and onto the booth's top surface, staring outside. Despite his Osmium brain fog, Jason looked up at Budgie, then at what the bird had seen. David spotted it a split second later. "Shit!"

Several bulky figures hustled past the front windows. Sam's head snapped up, tracking them. Jason swept Budgie off the booth, hissing, "Cops!"

Richard crashed through the door, landing on his back. Sizzling arcs of electricity crackled across the bouncer's torso, shorting out his techno-eye. He was only equipped for throwing out rowdy hooligans on busy nights—not armored cops with five-thousand-volt stun batons.

Two UEF enforcers stormed inside, clad in blue-gray plating with mirrored visors. Richard struggled to rise, but they hit him again with their sparking weapons. A UEF surveillance drone floated after them, carried on humming anti-gravity generators.

"Hey! What's going on?" Fran called, hurrying to confront the newcomers as the drone flashed a scanning beam over the front tables. The other patrons stopped eating breakfast to stare up at it.

"Attention, valued Federation citizens," the floating automaton blared in a sonorous mechanical voice. "We have been informed that a social compliance violator is inside this establishment. Allow yourselves to be scanned for the record. You have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide."

The scanning beams passed over each citizen without incident, though each of them flinched.

David leered at Lucia, eyes flaring. "You *did* rat us out, traitor!"

Lucia panicked, snatching the locator beacon and Sam's credit bills off the table, sliding past Jason to leave. "No, no! I'm sorry, I didn't! But I have to go!"

"Wait, stay outta sight, you lunatic—" David lunged to force Lucia down, but she was much too fast for him, snaking through his arms and hurrying for the back of the bar.

Another drone floated into view from the direction of the restaurant's rear door, followed by two more jet-black armored compliance officers.

Lucia skidded to a halt as she saw them coming. "Shit!"

"Your girl is wanted by the cops?" hissed David, watching from a crack between the booths.

"How the hell was I supposed to know?" Sam demanded, drawing her blade, but David caught her wrist before she could light the deadly phase field.

"Don't even think about it," he whispered. "Lucia screwed herself. We can still walk away from this while they take her in. Let it go."

Jason looked from Sam to David, praying that they wouldn't start arguing.

As Lucia tried to scramble away, the drone swept a scanning beam down her slender form. Its central camera eye flashed red. "Social deviant identified—logged as citizen 056781-A2. You will accompany these compliance officers under the Social Compliance Act of 2241. Your individual rights are waived."

Lucia almost ducked past the enforcers, but she crumpled as one of the officers crushed her trapezius muscle with his iron grip. The enforcer's gear made it impossible to see any sign of humanity as he forced her to the ground.

Lucia shot Sam with a desperate look, mouthing, "Please, don't let them take me!"

Sam lunged toward Lucia again, but David's hand snapped out, yanking her back inside the booth. "Stop it. If they catch us, if they catch *Jason*—"

But Sam's hand clamped over David's mouth, pressing him back into the seat. "Shhhh!"

The drone at the front of the bar revolved to focus on their booth, flicking its scanning beams around. Jason's stomach dropped through the floor. Budgie was flapping and shrieking, but Jason gently secured his fingers over the bird's beak and wings.

"Oh god," he hissed through clenched teeth as the drone approached on its jets of antigravity, ignoring Fran, who was checking Richard for injuries.

The drone blared again, "Remain calm, citizens. Allow yourselves to be scanned for the record. You have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide."

"We've got plenty of both," murmured David, unbuckling his holster. The two UEF enforcers followed, batons held at the ready.

Jason prayed that his mental stability would remain in check as his inhibitor gave him yet another dose, a dangerous amount of Osmium in such a short amount of time. An Abhamic explosion here would flatten the building, possibly the whole block. But Jason hadn't heard the Abaddon Beacon's call. Not yet.

He whirled around, checking behind them. "We could run for it; the back door is—"

Sam shook her head. "No. We can't let these guys call for backup. David, no shooting. Too loud. Hit them non-lethally. We need them intact, so Fran isn't blamed for murdering church officers. If our static plates hold up, they won't get our faces on their helmet cams. Then we find Lucia, and get the hell back underground."

"Lucia's on her own. She's screwed us badly enough as it is," hissed David. He stepped into view with his hands raised so the drone could scan him.

"Subject's face is undetectable, presumed 'Undocumented'," The drone said. "All 'Undocs' must be apprehended for failure to—"

David lunged out of Sam's way as she stepped past him and sent her phase blade lashing out on its cable, cracking it upward in mid-flight with her Abhamic powers, cleaving the drone in two. Its anti-grav systems died, crushing the wooden floorboards under its two smoking halves. The short sword scorched the ceiling as it sailed back into Sam's hand.

"Hey!" shouted one of the enforcers. They rushed forward, but David clambered onto the booth to their left.

The closest one yelled, "Stay back!"

David growled. "Not a chance."

He jumped with his arms wide, slamming into the armored church goon like a wrestler. She screamed, flailing her electrified baton. David grabbed the officer's wrist to keep her from electrocuting him, crashing down through tables and stools to the ground in a noisy clatter. Budgie, who was combative even by the standards of a feisty cockatoo, swooped in and pecked at the officer's mirrored faceplate.

Sam spun forward, looping her blade's cable around her waist like a ship sling-shotting around a celestial mass. It sliced through tables, chairs, booths, everything. The flaming energy field flickered off at her command, and the unpowered flat side of the blade collided with the man's helmet, shattering his visor. Sam leaped at him, tackling the much heavier man with a pulse of

her psychic power. Her sword hilt pummeled the man's cranium as they slid to a halt.

"Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to *sleep*," she said. With every blow, her eyes glowed hotter with pink fire.

David snaked under his adversary and managed a chokehold. The enforcer's unarmored neck section crumpled under his biceps, and he coiled his legs around hers to prevent needless thrashing. Ten seconds later, both officers were unconscious but alive.

Jason hadn't even lit his stun rod, rooted to the spot. He glanced at the back doors swinging shut on their saloon hinges, but the enforcers who'd taken Lucia hadn't returned to investigate.

Sam stood, letting out a breath and brushing raven hair out of her face, her eyes cooling back to their usual amber color. Sam wiped away a line of blood trickling from her nose and grasped her forehead.

"You need Osmium?" Jason asked. Sam held up a finger, but shook her head. "I'm good. What about you? Any voices?"

"I think I'm covered," he said, giving her a thumbs up, eyes fluttering as the inhibitor implant hissed. Budgie landed on his shoulder, nuzzling him. Sam smiled back, a little sadly. "Good."

David pushed the officer's dead weight off his chest. "That could've gone worse, I guess."

"What the *hell* have you three done?" Fran shrieked at them from the bar while Richard groaned on the floor.

Sam and David froze. Jason's gut sank again. The serving automatons behind the counter looked confused, the situation far beyond their programming. The other patrons had already fled through the front door.

Sam's cheeks flared bright red. "I'm sorry, Fran. I-I didn't know Lucia had a record. What can we do to help—"

"You can get the hell out, now! You've got thirty seconds before I report this to the church, so *we* don't get dragged off too." Fran barked as she helped Richard up. His mechno-eye flashed erratically from the shock he'd received. Smoke wisped from his thinning hair.

"I'm sorry, please, we can—" Sam said.

"Now it's twenty. Stay longer, and I'll give them your descriptions, too. Last warning, *Undocs*," Fran said, dumping Richard into a seat. One of the serving bots handed him a beer, which the bouncer dropped with shaking hands.

Sam couldn't find any other words. "I'm ..."

"*Shiiiet*," David said, taking in the mess they'd made. "This is exactly what we needed to avoid."

Sam slapped every credit bill she had down on the counter, and the three embarrassed Undocs fled the bar.



After checking for Lucia or her captors, they spilled out into the rear alleyway, which was cluttered with crates from a government ration delivery. Jason spotted several sets of wet boot-prints leading away. He heard screaming and looked up, catching the enforcers dragging Lucia around a corner at the end of the alley. Their drone followed them.

"Come on," said Sam, bulldozing her way after them, but David caught her arm. She glared back at him, but he was already arguing. "Seriously, Sam? We can skedaddle back downstairs scot-free, but you still wanna tempt fate? We cannot screw around with the Church. If they find out that three Undocs are running around the city, they'll have a whole army on us like moths on a lamp. We're risking the whole Village for this gal of yours. Not even to find Abaddon."

"All I want to do is figure out where they're taking her," Sam snapped. "Lucia still has the location data for that guard bot on her. We need that, David. For your brother,"

"I get that," David said. "But helping Lucia is going too far. We cannot get involved with the city authorities, Sam! The second we show up in any of their databases, Avery Oakfield will be on us like a leech!"

Sam's face went red. "I don't know how long we have left to figure this out. Abaddon could hit Jason again tomorrow, today, who knows?"

"Guys, I think we *can* follow them...from a safe distance," interrupted Jason.

He was holding Budgie, pointing out a small band around the bird's feathery neck. The cockatoo thrust his head back and forth, happy to be the center of attention.

"This thing he wears is a camera, right?" Jason asked.

Sam checked the lens mounted on the band, nodding. "I use this monitor to check Budgie's heart murmur, but yeah, it's got a camera function that

still works, pipes to my comm unit. Helps to track him down if he flies off somewhere.”

“Follow ‘em!” Jason said, raising his arm. Budgie screeched an affirmative and took off, heading in the direction the officers had taken Lucia.

“If we get the chance to grab Lucia, we take it. If not, at least we tried. It’s low risk ... sort of,” Jason added.

Sam looked ready to kiss him, whereas David balled a fist and sighed. “It’s your choice, Jason. We’re here because of you. If you wanna do this crazy shit, fine. I still vote no. We can find another way into the Federation labs.”

Sam bit her lip, watching her wrist-comm as Budgie got a good camera angle on the enforcers and Lucia from above. “Good thing this isn’t a democracy. What’s the verdict, Jason?”

Jason was silent for a few seconds. “As long as we stay out of more trouble and away from any big concentrations of the Phage ... fine, let’s do it. But I’m still not thrilled about running around on the surface.”

“I know it’s crazy, but we can’t give up this lead to find Abaddon.” Sam said. “Plus, we all owe Lucia for helping us zero in on good salvage over the last while—the whole Village does.”

“True,” Jason said. David glared at them for a moment, but gave a grudging nod. “I suppose.”

Sam looked at Jason’s inhibitor. “You’re still good for Osmium? I put a few concentrated doses in your bag before we left. Doc Janice said we’re running low on supplies, but we’ve probably got another couple days’ worth.”

“That’s yet another problem that I don’t wanna think about,” Jason said, feeling the comforting shape of the inhibitor on his neck. He’d made it through the entire situation without the Beacon managing to break into his mind. But Sam was right, they were running out of time.

Resigned, David tugged his collar up and adjusted his bag straps. “I’m gonna regret this...but fine. Let’s see if we can find this girl of yours, and then we’ll go after that robot. The sooner we find that blasted obelisk and fix you, the better.”