

Hmmm ... hmm-hmm ...”

He hummed softly in key to the tones that floated in the chamber, resounding against the high ceiling, drifting through the echoing halls. He had always liked Tchaikovsky.

Scratching at the thick paper with the metal nib, he muttered and dipped it back into the ink well. He had full access to a console, of course; he could have even used a touch screen and programmed it to display as if he were writing with an old utensil like this one. But there was an inimitable appeal to scribbling with something as basic as a messy, painstaking dip pen. Maybe it was the sheer difficulty of use, as if the patience and effort associated with each page, each line, each word somehow made the letters themselves more meaningful. Certainly it made one less drawn to frivolity.

*. . . and though that shining sun
Doth flash its rays so bright.
And endless burning fire
cascade a wrathful light.
The battle will not end,
though blazing shots sing by at me.
The final shot will not be cast—
'til Man at last lies free.*

He tapped the last line out of the fading ink, then dipped once more to scrawl his signature in a heavy, bold black at the bottom of the sheet. Then he wiped the nib and placed the pen in a drawer, laying the parchment on top of it. He would do something with it, later.

Rising from the writing desk, he walked softly out of the chamber and down the long corridor. The high, marble walls and wooden rafters glowed with warmth, and the carvings on the floor felt comfortable beneath his bare feet. He reached the end of the corridor and cracked open the door. The fast, crisp tones of the violin had eased away into smooth, subdued, lilting cries.

He let the door slide open and leaned against the frame, staring inside.

Catherine was sitting, poised like a bird, on the edge of a stool in the center of the room. The vast, empty chamber resonated sound beautifully, and he knew that it was “tuned” specially so that a listener in that one spot, the exact center of the floor, would be treated to a breathtaking harmony of acoustical precision.

Her eyes were shut, her lips slightly parted, face expectant, as if so close to the music that she desperately hoped she would fall into it. The violin—a real violin, a 20th century viola from Italy, Old Earth—was held in one hand as gently as a lover. With the other, she held the bow, working it along the top with strong, graceful strokes while her fingers moved with hummingbird-like quickness on the strings.

Unhurriedly, with a calculated and thoughtful tempo, the notes began to slow further and further. Finally, the music smoldering, she let it die with one final, wordlessly low reverb that stretched out as long the instrument would carry it.

Then she sat, eyes still closed, violin still raised, hearing the last vestiges of the clear, humming vibration fade from the air.

He waited for several seconds, then, as quietly as he knew how, slipped into the chamber and crossed the floor. Soundless as a ghost, he glided toward her, approaching her stool.

Bending over slightly, he looked at her for a moment, then leaned in and kissed her.

If she felt a moment's surprise, she scarcely showed it. Instead, she smiled against him and opened her eyes, meeting his gaze.

He broke away, pulling ever so slightly back. Never taking his eyes away, he said, “That was supposed to surprise you.”

Catherine Richards—lady, princess, galaxy-renowned violinist, athlete, marksman, and soldier of fortune—curled up the corners of her lips into an impish grin.

“Then,” she said, “you should have found a different partner.” And she reached forward to grasp him—Angus Reverend, poet, writer, king, pilot, swordsman, soldier, and mercenary

for hire—and kissed him back.

“Excuse me.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Excuse me.”

Tap. Clank.

“Excuse—”

Exasperated, Catherine gave a heavy sigh and allowed the tip of her sword, a wood and rubber practice saber, to fall. “Yes, Sophitia?”

BAM

As soon as her guard dropped, she felt a sudden, stabbing pain above her right ear, and then blinked, nonplussed, to discover herself on the ground. She groaned at the throbbing sensation behind her eyes and looked up.

Angus’s dark, glaring visage appeared over her, blocking the light. He scowled.

“What was *that*?”

“What was *what*, you tyrant?”

He prodded her with his own sword. “Up. I never called a hold.”

She crawled to her feet, grimacing. “Hold on, will you, oh Overlord?”

“Sophitia? What’s up?”

The calm, clear voice of the house AI vibrated through the air without a hint of distortion—not speakers, but field atmosphere-resonators. The system had been expensive, but was certainly easy on the ears. “There is an entity approaching the front path.”

“An entity?”

They glanced at each other. Sophitia knew everybody that they knew; friends should be identified as such, and so should hostiles. “Entity” signified someone who was a complete unknown.

“Appearance?”

“Human, or at least bipedal. Not of this world, by dress and stature. Moderately armed.”

Catherine was already at the practice room’s storage cabinet, slotting the wooden sword into a rack and pulling on a light jacket over her sparring clothes. “Just one?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She caught Angus’s thrown saber and put it away as well. In return, she lobbed him his pistol, then hit the lights. They walked out together. “Status 3. We’ll be right there.”

The ambassador moved stiffly, as one still unaccustomed to a new world’s gravity. He wore a dark, frocked robe not unlike a monk’s, common to travelers of the Systems; at the gate, he had handed over to Angus a small Ryans Defensive handgun, the classic sidearm for independent defense, rugged and reliable with ammunition that could be bought anywhere. On his feet were brown UNSC issue boots, and a brimmed hat on his head, completing perfectly the image of the weary spacegoer.

Angus watched him carefully. He distrusted perfection.

They invited him into the dining room; they found it amusingly disorienting to their guests to hold meetings in unusual places. Once they had spoken with the head of the planet in their bathroom.

“You want something?” Catherine asked, making no effort to disguise her lack of interest. Like anything else, court mannering was a skill that rusted without practice. Nowadays, it was easy not to care. The man shook his head and sat quietly, folding the robe across his lap, waiting for them to take their own seats. When they had, he began to speak, his voice polite, unassuming, but clear—the tones of a diplomat.

“I am Ambassador LaGrange, interplanetary representative for the Terminus Fringe Colony, planet #167 of the dorsal sector. I have come on behalf of my government in a time of dire need.”

Catherine leaned back in her seat and sighed, exchanged a look with Angus, and went to make coffee.

The small, streamlined transport spacejet slipped through the outer orbits of Pelian v, rolling around the gravity well of the wide, gaseous body to reach its next Slipspace vector.

Angus was relaxing in the transport's lounge, sitting on one of the bench seats that looked out the large side windows, slouched low against a bulkhead. Catherine had her head in his lap, curled up on the cushions as they watched the gloomy wisps of their low planetary pass slash past the ship, caught in its supraorbital wake.

"You remember the day we left?"

He stroked the soft edges of her hair away from the side of her face, his eyes following a small speck of paint detritus from the ship's hull as it slowly worked its way off the edge of the tough glasteel window, buffeted by the corrosive breeze. "Every moment."

She turned slightly, following his gaze. "Do you ever think about Cole?"

"Sometimes."

The thrum-thrum-thrum of the air circulation system changed pitch slightly, responding to some unknown fluctuation. He let his eyes rest on nothing. "He made his decision and he knew the consequences. Nobody forced him to be—to be loyal to the end."

"Nobody forced you to kill him."

"No."

"Wouldn't you have have done the same, before? Wouldn't you have died to protect your code?"

The silence stretched out to eternity, the void outside seeming to overwhelm them both. Finally, after many minutes, he responded in a tone of finality, "They didn't need me."

They sat longer, feeling each other's presence like a blanket against the dark. Then she looked up again. "Ever miss it?"

Gently, he tweaked her ear, and she grinned. "What is this, twenty questions?"

"Hey, your lordship, bite me."

He did.

Yelping, she snapped her head down, butting him in the abdomen hard enough to elicit an "oof." He responded by levering her up by the neck and applying a rear strangle.

After several minutes of rolling around, they stopped again, both panting from exertion. He was lying atop her now, their faces mere inches apart. Leaning in, he nuzzled lightly under her chin with the tip of his nose, making her giggle. He pulled back and spoke.

"Yeah, I miss it sometimes. The sworn royalty on Nimravus wasn't the same as true royalty, or even a good aristocracy, but it was still a different way of life, another entire world. Good and bad. We left because of the bad, but you can't ignore the good."

Catherine smiled slightly and softly said, "You owned a world, Angus. Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it."

"Sometimes, I..." He sighed and pulled himself off her, settling in beside her warm form. "Sometimes I loved it. That's why I had to leave."

They were silent again. Catherine turned her head and brought her gaze back out the window, awed as always by the tiny, hard points of the stars and the washing auras of angry EM fields. An insidious lethargy had begun to seep into her body, as if infiltrating and corrupting the cells that drove her; she felt with surprising sincerity that she could lie here forever, untouched by the chaos and blinded motivations of fear and fire and war. She blinked as Angus kissed her gently on the cheek, breaking her trance. Almost too quickly, she looked up at him, and he smiled at the girlish excitement in her face.

"We could stop, you know. We don't have to do this—any of it."

Fixing his gaze in her bright, glinting eyes, his face twitched involuntarily around one of the scars as it sometimes did. Ignoring it, he murmured back, "Of course we do."

"No." She spoke firmly but with an undertone of panicked resignation, as if trying against all better sense to convince them both. "We don't have to, we really don't. We could just leave, Angus. Just run. We're the best, we've always been the best. We—"

He shushed her with a steady finger on her moving lips as he told her what she already knew. "We can't."

“We—”

“We are political exiles, Catherine. Your family has renounced you and my government has declared me a seditionist and a lunatic in exchange for leaving me with my title. We are *tolerated*, Catherine, on the sole condition that we continue to serve.”

She stiffened slightly and said, “I am no servant.”

“You are. I am. Our masters don’t ask much, just that we stay away, and keep in line. But that’s a magnanimity, my dear; that’s our families showing how merciful they can be. The day we withdraw our names from the All Rogues Guild database and shut our doors and turn away meek and courteous messengers like Mr. LaGrange is the day that our quiet little world becomes our bier. Our walls and our weapons and our seclusion can’t save us. Every day we enjoy this freedom is a testament to the complete ineffectiveness of our little personal rebellions.”

Closing her eyes for a moment, either in shame or to blink back tears, Catherine wavered momentarily. Then she opened them, and something new shone.

“We could go to Earth.”

He answered hollowly and without emotion, glad the time had come.

“Earth is gone.”

She looked up in shock.

“Gone. Oh, there’s still a big ball of dirt somewhere out there spinning around Sol. But it’s cold and silent. The Covenant burned it so hot that oxygen can’t even form anymore. They say that after the bombardment was over, the mantle itself was almost gone, gassed into orbit. Got a nice ring now.”

Opening her mouth, then shutting it, she stared at him in disbelief, thoughts firing spastically through her head—memories of people and things, dreams, hopes, all faced now by the guileless but unrelenting torch of harsh reality.

Finally it broke, the thing inside her that identified her humanity, the small piece of her soul that said, “Whatever else, first I am this.” Her face cracked and Angus quickly pulled her toward him. Her sobs tore into his chest as he held her tight, tight; she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed back, needing his presence like physical sustenance. He made no attempt to console her, only letting his warmth and humanity lend as much strength as she needed.

Shuddering, she managed to ask him, “When?”

“I don’t know,” he responded quietly. “The courier drone came in yesterday, but the piece wasn’t timestamped. Just a personal note from Donaker at sc. Probably last week. They’ll know on Terminus.”

“We’ve—we’ve got to—”

“I know.”

Eventually he let himself relax his own barriers, and wept with her, as they fell back on their old bonds for strength. Grieving not for what they had lost, but for what it had taken from them, the two rough warriors cried for a long time.

The only words that could be heard were Catherine’s, as she whispered to him and to herself, “No more ... no more ...”

The transport touched down on the flatpad outside the headquarters for the Department of Social Engineering, the government’s securities and intelligence force, whose aggressively circumlocutory name was “a very old joke that became tradition before anybody got around to changing it,” according to Duncan LaGrange, who had met them on the tarmac and was now leading them to their briefing room and giving a bland tour as they went. Angus was slightly on edge from the landing. The transport was small enough to function as its own shuttle, its motile jets rotating downward to turn into atmospheric boosters; however, the functional yet inelegant result had aerodynamic properties very much like a falling brick, and their landing had brought them into universal agreement that Terminus’s main flaw was being a hard son of a bitch.

“By the way,” LaGrange said, mirroring Angus’s thoughts, “you may have noticed that we’re a little clunkier here than you’re used to. Nothing serious, just another .15 of a G,

but enough to rattle your bones. I wouldn't make a home here unless you're willing to go through the gravity inoculation treatments, which aren't a lot of fun. Most of the citizens on-world here are natives; visitors tend to be temporary, or they go to live on the belt." He nodded in a vaguely upward direction, indicating the planet's OPR, the orbital partial-ring where approximately half of the world's population and all of the spacefaring industry was located, all of it focused around servicing the massive UNSC shipyard.

"What's more, we've still got a real colonial attitude here—a few generations doesn't take that away, and a lot of the original colonists are still around. So be polite and reasonable, and—well, I suppose you can handle yourselves, but don't go picking fights, you know? The natives here consider their pride about the most important thing they've got. Throwback to the early days."

Angus was nodding. His practiced eye had noticed the clips, straps, and peeking holsters of concealed pistols and knives on nearly everybody they'd passed, even the narrow-faced desk workers and intel flunkies in the base's administrative section. Outside, Catherine had nudged him and pointed out a short, brown-skinned man working on a plasma conduit who appeared to be wearing a two-handed blackjack in a sheath down his back, as nonchalantly as if it were a trowel.

They reached another double-sided security door, and again LaGrange had to present the ID card dangling from his neck, press his hand against an optical reader, and submit to something Angus had never seen before: a hard-scope biological proportions scan. LaGrange explained it to him as "a full-body scan based around the same concepts as an x-ray," though more safe and subtle; upon revealing the full extent of his skeletal structure, the proportions of his arms, legs, skull, hands, feet, and "vertebral spread" were all measured and matched against known values within the personnel database. "The idea," he explained, "is that while virtually anything in your appearance can be masked or altered now, even unique attributes such as epidermal signatures, only major surgical procedure can modify the length of your fibulae, the ratios of your spine, the shape of your skull, and so forth." He shrugged. "Seems like a good concept, though I'm sure it's only a matter of time until someone comes up with a counter. They do these upgrades to support the local industry. Nobody's ever attempted to breach the security here."

The door clacked open, whirring as the magnetic field was released, and the guard waved them through from behind the glasteel window. They moved through quickly, entering the inner sanctum of the Command division.

Shuffling around the table almost self-consciously, the two mercenaries wordlessly found seats at the long, unfettered conference table. At the head was a single figure in a dark suit, a neat stack of papers at his left hand and a clean, full glass of water at his right. He was astonishingly bland: plainly cut brown hair in no particular style, his suit expensive but not overly so, the same skin tone that virtually every other citizen of Terminus seemed to share, an even blend of dark and light. His build was moderate, his gaze even, and if he weren't quite so ordinary, he might have fit into any board room, office, or cubicle around the galaxy.

It was his exact lack of character that rang their alarm bells, though, and Angus had to resist an urge to freeze at the doorway like a rabbit in headlights. Nobody was so normal, so steady; everybody had quirks, glitches in their appearance and behavior. Robots and blocks of wood could be entirely ordinary—humans never were, at least, never unintentionally. All too aware that he had been stripped of his sidearm at the gate, as he slipped into a seat he quietly wrapped his hand around one of the metal styli that lay on the table, holding it in a loose hammerfist.

The man smiled at them both as he spoke, his voice soft and even.

"Welcome to Terminus, Mr. Reverend, Ms. Richards. I won't insult your intelligence by making small talk, but do you have any questions before we begin?"

They exchanged a glance. Angus's hand twitched on the pen, trying to look casual with all of his warning signals going off as he stared into the face of this man. Beside him, Catherine cleared her throat and answered, "Money."

A smile. "Of course. We are willing to offer your usual rate, 8.000 credits apiece per day; plus your offworld fee, hazardous duty, and expenses, of course."

With Angus still tight as a drum, Catherine looked over at him and then back. There was a beat, then—"No."

The man blinked and shifted his gaze slightly, his first show of emotion. "No?"

"No. Our fee will be a flat 50.000CD up front, for all services rendered, and we will be paid an additional 50.000 upon successful completion of our mission goals." Even Angus was nonplussed by that, double what they usually asked for—*did she have a plan?*—but years of negotiations, in both of his trades, had tempered his poker face into an iron shroud. "You will also supply us with government credentials and the *de facto* authority to represent your department in any interactions we enter into. And you will not reimburse us for our expenses; instead, you will place 150.000 credits in a standalone account to function as a petty cash reserve, which we will draw upon as the need arises. Furthermore"—here her voice hardened—"at the first indication that you have withheld, misrepresented, or otherwise failed to provide us with every piece of relevant and accurate intelligence regarding this matter, we will withdraw the entirety of that fund and abandon the planet, and yourself, to its own problems. You should keep that in mind when you make your briefing, Mister—"

Unfazed, the man tilted his head and offered smoothly, "Baker."

"Mr. Baker."

She waited a beat, then sat back into her chair, taut.

Baker, still unblinking, drummed lightly against the stack of papers until he was sure that she had finished. Then he spoke again, in the same unhurried tone. "I appreciate your candor. My power to negotiate here is fairly limited, but I believe that your requests so far are tenable, if only because those concerned feel so strongly about the urgency of this situation."

He was silent then; a cool breath of air and Baker's gaze was on Angus.

He was whispering.

"Do you remember four years ago, Angus? Right after the second Winterfall?"

Angus's eyes widened ever so slightly, like he'd been slapped, but Baker didn't stop.

"The merc division had met up with the main scout, and we were encamped in the fields south of Alterna, just out of sight of the first berms. We had the hammocks up, even the brass, and everyone was relaxing there after the day's march, letting that liquid humidity sit on us like a steam bath. The cooks all swore they were cleaning their pans and pots just by leaving them out for a few minutes, scrubbing them and drying them off.

"We'd all finished prepping our gear, cleaning the rifles and putting that waterproof shit on the ammo and the armor, and the guys were talking a little or writing. The mercs were set up a couple dozen meters from the rest of the camp. There were those birds, the huge ones you never saw, but they'd cry and cry all night, like a thousand assholes cutting wood with bandsaws. After long enough, you didn't really hear them anymore, but you heard the rhythm, and if one of them shut up you'd notice."

Catherine was saying nothing, just watching Angus as his breathing grew heavier and his eyes narrower.

"I was rigged up under a big tree, one of those hard barkless fuckers, off on the perimeter, buddied with David Spaulding—remember? He had that jester's cap, would always put it on at the weirdest times and fucking start singing. I'm pretty sure he was the first one; the sappers got right behind him and tore his throat open with a machete, couple of seconds. Most useful thing he did was to leak air and get me to look up in time to grab my plastic and cut two of them to pieces, woke up the whole camp with the noise, but half of us had already been taken out."

Baker stopped for a moment, and to Catherine's surprise Angus filled the silence, his voice low and dark.

"Central had to send a high-altitude bombardment that took out the entire camp. The flames caught on the trees and kept spreading until they made another strike from low orbit and cauterized the surrounding area with a wide laser. Everyone within fifty feet of the camp was either burned soon or evaporated later. By the time it was done, there was

about twenty of us left alive from the cadre of 200, the bastards smart enough or lucky enough to get out early. Central couldn't push forward the attack and had to withdraw us the next day. The rebels kept the city."

Baker nodded slightly. "But the third push by the Covenant glassed the planet a month later anyway. Eight million souls."

Dead silence.

But the cold pause was broken before it could begin by both men standing suddenly and leaning forward to embrace, grinning and grimacing, pounding each other on the back.

"What the hell are you up to, you old fucker? How'd you find me?" Angus had a smile curling past his rough whiskers, eyes cloudy with memories. Baker was struck with the man's strength, a firm yet soft strength, fleeting, as if afraid to commit.

"Shit, all of us knew you, you asshole—you and your sword. How many of the other officers assigned themselves to the front lines? How many were *ex ro-yal-tee*?" He grinned as he let an Alterna twang surface momentarily. "Big boys here are pissing all over themselves trying to deal with this before it deals with them, and I just couldn't seem to forget that brooding motherfucker in the 21st Mercs."

"Did you go through the Guild?"

"Sort of. I'm a big boy now with a name that doesn't change and a salary that ain't all in cash, but I still have some of my old contacts, and every damned file-jockey at Guild HQ knows you by reputation, if not by dossier. I didn't have to search the database." Catherine nosed in between them and gently pried the heavy metal stylus out of Angus's now-loosened hand. Baker glanced down at it briefly and smiled.

"You're gonna die. But not today."

At last he leaned back and picked up the stack of papers, still smirking a little. "All right, let's see if we can get through this. I'll give you the official bureashit, then my take on it, then you can throw questions my way and I'll avoid them. I'll get you guys your money, no problem; these guys are sheep and they're scared. Might even bug out with you when you finish this up, if you've got some room to give a poor old hired gun a lift. There's some appeal in not being shot at, but I can tell you, it sure gets boring sometimes. Anything you want me to start with?"

Angus, finally relaxed, rolled his shoulders a bit and loosened his sleeves. He sat back and looked at Catherine.

"Force dispositions and terrain," she said.

He nodded, shuffled papers, and began.

The hum of the ionic coolers gave a subtle backdrop to the dim light of the hotel room, the air gentle and slightly "smooth" with the effects of the processor; Angus had tinted the windows and lowered the lights to provide a soft twilight ambience. Neither of them felt up to facing the daylight, so they relaxed in the room for several hours, packing and planning, until Terminus had set and the warm, lusty sky was smoldering and dark.

Angus was padding softly around their room, wearing his fatigue casuals, moving back and forth between the three large, dinged oblong metal cases propped in the corner, clamshelled open to reveal their day gear. All weapons were required to be cleared against the planet's SecCustoms routines, a process which had taken nearly eight hours and needed to be conducted on the OPR; Baker had sent a grim-faced customs official and two attendants to bring them their equipment once it had survived the rigmarole. Angus shuffled between the cases, pulling pieces of gear and apparel from straps and pads and bringing them back to the room's desk, where he was laying it out in stacks, then slipping it into their tacbags, bandoliers, or holsters.

Catherine was lying back on the bed, portable computer in her lap and jacked into the citywide network using the data passes they had been given: a small black box beside her repeatedly demanded her thumbprint before zapping a burst of compressed encryption keys across a radius of three feet, just far enough to be received by her terminal. Neither of them had any idea how it worked; she remarked that the Terminus government was

so paranoid it was a wonder they ever let anybody on-planet except their own blood relatives.

She was surfing through the nav and tac data Baker had given them in the meeting, combined with the more detailed maps and background files available on the milnet. She had a stack of printouts beside her, thick packets of probable target data and weather patterns, but the first step of their mission was pure intelligence work: Find a thread to follow. She was scanning now through number-heavy diplomatic white papers and promotional material from the Interplanetary Department of Transportation, trying to get a feel for the people they would be working with.

“Look at this,” she said. “While 90% of the Terminus surface population falls into the highest tier of UNHI’s technology classification ranking, more than half of them are working in agriculture. These are farmers with computers.”

Angus looked up from a small reactor handgun through which he had been cycling ammunition. His eyes went glassy in thought for a moment, then he replied, “The core of the economy here is centered around support for the OPR and its fleet activities. This is a major industrial center for UNSC.”

“But why agriculture?”

“Infrastructure. The size of the civilian population and the relative remoteness of Terminus makes it a logistical nightmare to support externally, so they made it self-sufficient ... I don’t know when, must have been years ago. Fleet production is the main thing, but then you’ve got to support the workers, and that means housing, business, food, utilities. SC can subsidize most of it with spillover from production, but you have to feed people, no way around that. Half of the population here probably works on the ring, and most of the other half is agricultural production that either sells to the government or directly to the market.” Distant again, he crooked his head and let the tip of the pistol drop to rest on the cloudy faux-wood of the table. “Say, can you pull up a population density map on there?”

Catherine nodded absently, and several minutes later said, “Here’s one. I’ll print it.”

She tapped a few keys, then began scrolling through her visual display. “Okay, this planet is basically a field. Hardly seems like a surprise that they’re losing patrols; there’s massive tracts of completely virginal land here without a soul inhabiting it, probably thousands of miles of space to hide an ambush.

“Surveillance?” Angus asked.

“Pretty minimal in the unmanned regions. Farmers here and there. Nowhere near enough orbital coverage to keep a constant patrol; they can look at specific spots, but they’ve got to know where. You could probably hide an army for weeks out there.

Frowning slightly, Angus looked down, then raised the weapon again and click-clicked the last of the smooth, matte cartridges out of the ejector port. It was several moments before he responded with a slight roll of his head and a glance up to her. “All right. I guess that’s the job, then.”

He began picking up the shells and clipping them back into the circular magazine, as the sky outside turned to liquid night.

Terminus City was a brash amalgam of laser-edge technological industry and prosperous, effective, yet millenia-old street markets. Walking down the city’s central road, which radiated off the government plaza like a long spike through the oblong stretch of the urban sprawl, they passed one after another of the small, utilitarian stalls and shops, some with brazen vendors hawking their wares, others with quiet attendants almost hidden as they worked with one thing or another in the shadowy rear, but all with bins or shelves of food prominently displayed—mostly raw goods like wheat and corn, but some finished products like “maranas,” the local specialty, made from a mixture of barley, corn, and local cheese, cooked in citrus. “The Terminus environment,” LaGrange had told them with blithe frankness, “is so ideal for cultivation that we can feed ourselves, support the OPR, and still end up exporting hundreds of tons of excess production every day. Between the wildly different climates and terrain available on the three continents, almost anything

from an Earth-normal habitat can be grown here.”

“It’s like a citywide bargain sale,” Catherine remarked. It became quickly apparent that very few centralized markets existed in the city; nearly all commerce took place in public offerings such as those they experienced as they passed through the main boulevard. Angus called it “astonishingly medieval,” and when Catherine objected, said bluntly, “I’m not condemning it. I’m amazed. The unique circumstances of this planet have conspired to create an economic and practical reality that’s friendly to a form of fiscal interaction which has not existed on this scale for hundreds of years. It’s unusual.”

They turned off onto a smaller side street, no particular aim in mind, as he glanced over at her for a moment. “Unusual is rarely incidental. This is a very rural, isolated world. I doubt if it’s a coincidence that we’re here.”

Wandering farther, they found before long that the city had very little in the way of geographic distinction—it was essentially homogenous, becoming only less dense as they approached the outskirts. Belying the haggling that occurred on the streets in a manner thousands of years old, sharp, towering buildings stabbed into the sky on every crisp rectangular block, and long sections of the city were walled off to protect the advanced production facilities that turned out supplies for the OPR’s day-to-day functions. The city was an exercise in dichotomy, and the two of them spent hours just walking, following whatever road appeared beneath their feet, acclimatizing themselves to the environment and its citizens.

As the night turned from dim to black—Terminus boasted a wide diameter and excruciatingly slow rotation, resulting in a nearly 36-hour day, as well as a deep night that was lit only by the distant stars—the two mercenaries found themselves passing through rapidly emptying streets as shopkeepers closed down their booths. Tall, startlingly bright street lamps were kindled one by one: large, dull crystals whose solid cores turned a furious blue-white under strong kinetic currents. Tired and needing to recharge edges dulled in the long Slipspace flight, they found a terminal, and Catherine accessed the public datanet to find the nearest rec center; it was less than four blocks away, an unexpectedly long stretch given the lengthy city streets, but still barely five minutes at a brisk walk. They reached the stunted, modern building, round and glassine, and quickly took shelter inside from the rapidly dropping temperature.

They rented a speedball court for twenty credits, showing the attendant the temporary identification badges Baker had supplied them before they left the Department of Social Engineering. Every UNSC citizen living legally on Terminus was logged as an inactive reservist in the planetary database. Though they had never been mobilized in quantity, or indeed activated at all, they were still required by law to carry official identification at all times. What was more, and somewhat unnervingly, the squat badges held a tiny alert beeper and a radio receiver that could pick up a broadcast signal from any of the large space or landbound antennae centered on Terminus’s major population centers, summoning what amounted to the entire planet to report to predesignated rally points. Distrusting the embedded antenna, which could send just as easily as receive, Angus had disabled both badges with a hammer and metal punch.

Warming up and stretching quickly, they unlocked the broad, smooth-floored court and flooded it with light. Angus had never played a competitive sport seriously before he met Catherine, but she was slowly teaching him the subtleties of the game, drawing on the ten years she had spent as an Olympic speedball prospective.

But now, they needed only the catharsis of sweat, and both played hard and mercilessly. An hour later, the windows outside as black as if they had been painted, Catherine was leading the game by 80 points, and with a lithe feint, slammed the whistling puck onto a whirling, rolling course that lanced through the air past Angus into the scoring loop. A blue light blinked to announce the point and a snap-kinetic field flashed on ephemerally to deaden the puck’s velocity, which could reach and did reach upwards of 130 kilometers an hour.

Angus settled his feet evenly beneath him, feeling the high-friction shoes freeze to the polished floor as though they’d been nailed. He elevated his chin and smiled across the circular arena to Catherine in grim acceptance of defeat.

“Let’s get out of here, so I can commit *hara kiri*.”

Unsure of the existence or reliability of a public transportation system in Terminus City, and not wanting to impose on overworked UN staff to act as a glorified taxi service, they zipped up their densely lined amorphous-cell coats and began the walk back to their room, a private but government-subsidized hotel near the center of the city, halfway filled at any given time with Navy crews on furlough. The streets were wholly abandoned.

“Quite a night life,” Catherine whispered to Angus, who shook his head uneasily, nerves set on edge by the ghost-town atmosphere in what had hours earlier been a bustling thoroughfare.

The tall, harsh street lamps, though stunningly bright, betrayed an attempt to compensate for inefficient lighting with brute force: only several of the blazing poles adorned each block, resulting in razor-sharp, discretely-graduated fields of near-day and gloomily dark shadow. Seemingly alone on the streets but made wary by the alien feel of the city, they stayed in the lighted center of the road until they rounded the turn that led them to their hotel, and that was when they were caught.

Angling toward the side of the street at the intersection, they were passing a covered shopfront when a hidden figure materialized from the shadows without warning, less than a meter away.

He was already reaching out toward Angus when Catherine glimpsed the flash of steel in her peripheral vision; there was a mental stutter as long-honed reflexes clicked on, like well-used gears falling into place, and then she felt herself caught by the subliminal surge of instinct. Riding it without thought, she fell on her left foot into a thunderous dropstep, wheeling her right elbow blindly overhead in a diagonal strike. It connected solidly just before her foot landed, driving her weight behind the blow, and she stepped inward again, this time offline, bringing one hand up to cover while she shot the other to her waistband where a slender dagger was sheathed.

By the time it was drawn and she had looked up, Angus had a handful of the man’s face and was hurtling him into the pavement, the attacker’s foot already nailed to the ground by one of his own. She darted forward and met the man on the ground with a savage, swinging kick that intercepted his right hand and batted out its contents: a silvery, glinting blade, catching the dim light like a river minnow. It spun off into the darkness. The man scabbled for another weapon.

She glanced at Angus, ready to take a knee and finish the job with her dagger, but his pistol was in his hand, and she looked away instead, covering her ears just in time to deaden the *crump, crump* of the .357.

In a moment, it was gloomily silent again, and her heart hammering in her ears was the only evidence of the altercation. She lowered her knife, then carefully resheathed it before her hands began to shake.

Angus cleared his weapon, then knelt beside the now-motionless figure, ignoring the spreading pool of red-black blood. A mass of shattered bone, matted hair, and barely-visible brain matter, all glossy with blood, were all that remained of the back of his head. Wordless, face blank, Angus began to methodically check the clothing, patting through the fabric and emptying the pockets. Catherine stepped away, turning her head so she wouldn’t have to watch the blood soak into Angus’s pants and boots. Pulling her transcom, she hit the emergency button and scrambled the duty officer at the base. Within moments he was promising that a detachment was on its way.

The base was not far, and the responder team screamed through the streets with unnecessary lights and sirens, but before it arrived, both of them still had time, trembling with adrenaline, to heave out their guts onto the pavement.

“No, really. It won’t be necessary.” Angus pushed the man toward the door, gently but inexorably. “We appreciate the offer.”

“It’s really no—”

“Thanks again.” He shut the door and immediately locked it.

It was early on the morning after the attack, and while they had declared emphatically that nobody was to bother them before dawn, since then Terminus officials had been calling on them almost continuously—the investigating officers from the military police, multiple apologetic representatives from the city government and the Terminus UN post, and LaGrange, who had made the third (by then) offer to detail them with a security detachment, only leaving after they had made it abundantly clear that they weren't interested. Baker was no help, only able to tell them that their attacker, who had been sent to the base medical section for an expedited forensic examination, was Savid Jameson, a local reseller of technical supplies, with both a streetfront and off-world distribution, had no criminal record, no family, no time in the service, and absolutely nothing of interest on his record.

"Deep cover?" Angus asked into the video screen of the transcom.

Baker's tiny image shrugged. "Your call. Fleet counterintel screens all of the colonists on vital posts like Terminus, but that sieve is only meant to catch certain kinds of people. Either he came here as part of a sleeper element or he was turned after he arrived, no big difference."

"Or he was hired on-task for this job."

"Aye, or that." Baker gave him a beady eye, and only half in jest, asked "You know something we don't?"

"Just thinking," Angus replied in a deadpan, and killed the connection.

They were both coming down from the adrenaline peak and crash of the night before, and it was not the best time for intensive thought. Eight hours of uninterrupted sleep had helped, though, and in any case, there was no avoiding it: they had to move on this immediately, or lose the trail.

They had already made plans to "walk the streets" today, and needed to modify them only slightly to follow up on their new data. Only two things had been on the body of their attacker that they hadn't shared with the investigators when they arrived. The first was a simple electronic key, with a color-code ID that could match any shop in Terminus City or none of them.

The second was an encrypted radar beacon, small and unmarked. It had been plugged into Catherine's portable computer throughout the night and well into the morning, with Sophitia's brute-force modules trying unsuccessfully to break through the coding.

"I'm going to leave this running today," Catherine said, "but don't get your hopes up. We could get better odds with more power, but not much better, and we can't ship in more hardware soon enough to make a difference."

"They probably have a Superarray on the OPR. We—"

"Not a chance." Even with Baker pulling strings, they both doubted that they would be able to get the resources they needed without delay, and if they did give it to UNSC, odds were just as good that Intelligence would simply sit on it until they could hand it off to a team of their own.

Baker *was* able, however, to supply them with the names of the contractors responsible for installing the electronic door locks for most of the prefab shops in Terminus City, and after a few hours of calling around, along with heavy invocations of governmental authority and a few unsubstantiated threats, they had compiled a list of the possible buildings that might fit the key they had found.

"Christ," Angus said, as he watched the list peel off the printer. "This is half the city."

They were in the streets by noon. "Just in time for the rush," Catherine commented, citing a claim in the information files that the peak period for business was between 12:00 and 16:00, though the official business day did not end until 22:00. This had surprised them both until they realized that the Terminus sun didn't set until midnight, ushering in the 12-hour duration of "subnight," a tacked-on period that served to permit the inhabitants of Terminus Prime to use the standard Earth-based UNSC clock without major modification. Generally, sleep and indoor recreation was done during subnight, under shelter from the nearly pitch black and very cold night-times, allowing the workers to hit the streets promptly at sunrise, ready for another 24-hour day. But at midday, the main tide was just starting to swell, and the two mercenaries found themselves bracketed on all

sides with teeming masses of brown-clothed merchants and buyers.

They had determined in their casual reconnaissance the previous day that the vast majority of the vendor stalls lining the main drag were virtually identical: built and owned by the government in vast swaths, then leased out at easy rates to any citizen with a product. Rows and rows of the squat, cloned buildings streamed up the endless road like a colossal railway, at times drifting off into the rest of the city or interjected by the outskirts of a factory development. They had decided already to concentrate their efforts on the main road—Tarehart Boulevard—for straightforward reasons of efficiency: more than 90% of the public shops in Terminus City were located somewhere along its range, and it would be a simple matter to work through them systematically. If they failed there, they could spread their net more, but that would mean many days lost.

If they were forced to move their investigation outside of Terminus City, into the surrounding rural sprawl or even another city entirely, they would have to try another approach—they had nowhere near the resources for a planet-wide canvass, even with the relatively small colonial base of Terminus Prime when compared to a major population center like Earth or Reach. Certainly they did not have the ability to follow the scent to the OPR; if the trail took them there, they would be forced to hand over the reigns to UNSC's hard-nosed internal teams.

In the meantime, they blended into the crowd and began to move through the street, assuming the roles of local merchants out for their daily acquisitions. They had picked up enough of the local language and customs the previous day to present a fairly convincing front; it would not hold up if pressed for long, but they had no intention of striking up any lengthy exchanges.

Their routine was unoriginal, but effective. More importantly, they had enough experience with it to pull it off in their sleep.

As they approached the first shop, Angus bled off wordlessly and let the swarm of the crowd carry him several feet away, turning instantly invisible as he assumed his "aimless drifter" aura and began to wander. Catherine headed straight for the shop's entrance and took on a face of mellow professionalism, turning over several of the wares and pretending to be impressed.

The owner came over, digipad and stylus in his hands. "Fair shopping. Interested in a load?"

In truth, Catherine had no idea what she was handling. They were fuzzy brown spheres, slightly lopsided, similar to coconuts. She coughed, stalling, and then asked, "How much?"

"Twenty credits a tenweight. Buy a hundredweight and I'll have it shipped to you anywhere in the city, no charge."

She made a face. One didn't need to know the product to know how to haggle. "Twenty credits? What is this, the finest crop in the last fifty years?"

The man squinted at her, sizing her up, then set down his pad and folded his arms. Behind him, without moving her eyes, Catherine saw Angus slip away from the crowd and drift silently toward the side door of the building. She could see him try the electronic key, then shake his head at her; she looked away, but watched in her peripheral vision as his hands disappeared into his pockets, coming out with tools, and Angus began to work on the door.

She resisted a smile. He was the only man she knew who could look completely at-home and nonchalant while breaking into a building.

"Not fifty years, but at least twenty," the vendor was saying. "It's been an excellent year for sayas."

"Really?" Her eyes didn't waver.

"Absolutely. But for you, I'll tell you what, I'm feeling generous—eighteen credits, I'll give you a load for eighteen."

"Fifteen."

Shaking his head, the man scowled as if she'd offered him a dead fish. "Surely you jest, miss. You trying to kill me? I could sell these on the trans-market for twenty, twenty five ..."

“Sure, if you weren’t a poor bastard without the capital to ship in bulk. You’re not getting more than seventeen, eighteen for these on Terminus, and—” she picked up a saya and rolled it in her hand “—that’s selling to fools and the blind. You’d be lucky to get ten credits for this garbage.” Angus had the lock open, and he noiselessly cracked the door and darted inside.

The vendor covered his eyes for a moment with his hands, then dropped them again to stare at her piercingly. “You’re mad, miss. This beautiful crop! Look at the color, the weight!” He grabbed a large saya from the table and shook it at her. “See how smooth! Washed and tumbled—there is none finer on the Boulevard!”

She canted her head and squinted, unimpressed. “Sixteen.”

Hissing in pain, he dropped the sphere and tossed up his hands. “Ruin. My God. Fine, fine! Take it all, take everything. Sixteen credits, and my dignity.”

She couldn’t help but smile, but Angus was already slipping out of the building and shutting the door with a quiet click. Smoothing her hair back, she said, “Well, I’ll think about it. Have to check the rest. Fair shopping—” and she was gone before he could sputter a reply.

Angus merged to her side a moment later and leaned in to say, “Nothing. Fast lock, though. This should be easy. How was the owner?”

Smirking, she replied, “Not much of an actor. I think we got a deal on ... things.”

They continued down the street, repeating the routine with each shop and storefront on the map. Rusty reflexes quickly loosened, and both sides of the job grew faster until they were getting in and out in less than a minute. Catherine had to remind them both not to start moving so fast they became sloppy.

Hours passed, though the glaring light of the Terminus sun barely seemed to waver. The difference in upbringing between the two mercenaries—who had lived on Earth-normal worlds the majority of their lives—and the natives of Terminus City, who had grown up with a daylight cycle half again as long as Earth’s, began to manifest itself. After hours working the street undercover, they found themselves growing more and more weary, ready to turn in for a nap and a shower.

“A *nap*,” she hissed at him when he relayed that particular thought. “We aren’t *elderly*.”

He gave a low, amused laugh. “Not exactly the flower of youth, either, my dear.” Furtively, he glanced around, then muttered, “Moreover, unless I’ve entirely lost my eye, there are maybe six people on this entire goddamned boulevard who aren’t young enough to be our children.”

She glanced up quickly, but he was looking away already, not willing to broach that subject again, not today. It was true, though; the Terminus population seemed to have an unusually low mean age. She guessed that most of the natives shipped out to work for Fleet on the OPR or off-world before they passed their prime. She filed the thought away for future reference.

The crack on their age had not gone unnoticed by her, though, and she grabbed him by the collar and goosed her thumb into his brachial plexus, muttering into his ear, “Why don’t you haul your aging joints over to this next building, Master Reverend? If we hurry we should be able to get you out of this sun before you burst a blood vessel.”

He squirmed away from the hold on his pressure point, which had not been particularly gentle, and with a “Just so.” was gone into the crowd. She shook her head and made her way to the storefront, this one indoors.

“Ho there!” she called out cheerfully as she entered, having gotten well into the mood of Terminus commerce hours earlier.

The man, tall and wiry, with a natively dark complexion but incongruously large and wandering blue eyes, glanced quickly up upon hearing her voice, seemingly startled. “Fair shopping,” he murmured, looking her over vacantly for a moment.

Spending a minute looking over his wares, which included several varieties of local grain and two or three fruits that were probably imported from one of the more temperate continents, she frowned slightly. The grain was dried and packed, which was common enough, but the produce looked several days old at best, perhaps as old as a week. So far, everything she had haggled over in the shops had been fresh to the point of being

ludicrous, as one would expect on an agricultural planet; they had seen several motorized carts zooming through the streets while they worked, stopping at different shops to drop off new loads of their goods. Deliveries and resupply seemed nearly constant.

She cleared her throat, and the man jerked his head up again, as if she had disturbed a reverie. No point in being subtle; anybody who stopped into his door would have noticed the state of his wares, though likely few would have bothered saying anything, there being no shortage of alternate suppliers.

“These fresh?” she asked brightly, trying to catch his eye, which kept wandering. When she spoke, he finally met her gaze, narrowing his own slightly.

“Been trouble,” he said.

She waited, but he seemed to have no interest in continuing.

“Trouble?”

Looking at her harder, eyes dark, he replied shortly, “Back on the farm. Lifter broke.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but at that moment the tiny transceiver in her right ear canal began to vibrate minutely, and she had to cough and turn away, pretending to check her pockets.

Angus’s voice, generated in her ear’s tampanic membrane millimeters from the drum, sounded like the voice of God. The inside-ear receivers were fantastic for covert work, but she had never gotten used to them.

“Something new here,” his booming voice hummed out, and she had to resist the urge to look around for its source. “This door’s solid-core steel and it feels like it’s slatted. Going to try the key in a second; what’s it look like on your end?”

She didn’t need to glance up; her impression was already cemented. Brushing a loose strand of hair back with her left hand, she hid her lips for a moment while she subvocalized into the hidden, wireless throat microphone. “Not right.”

“Yeah.” He was probably shaking his head, and she suppressed the urge to tell him to be careful. “I’m trying it now. Out.”

Pretending to give up the hunt for whatever had disappeared into her pockets, she turned back to the vendor and gave a campy smile. “Oh we—”

The rolling *bbam* of a firearm discharging inside the small building swallowed her words, and the man’s eyes shot open wide; his stare froze on her for a moment, then he broke and spun, starting to lunge for something under the table. Stunned but reflexive, Catherine twisted to open a break in her clothing and expose the top of her inner-waistband holster, then swept out the flat black pistol and fixed it on the man. “*Don’t!*”

He hesitated for a moment, flickering his gaze up to see her again, and she opened her mouth to speak, but then another gunshot slammed through the building and she saw something desperate snap in him as he dove again under the table. Without thinking, she squeezed the trigger, and a jacketed round nailed through his left shoulder like a divot. He spun sideways from the force, but didn’t stop, and with his right hand found what he was looking for and began to draw it into sight: a stubby, wide-barreled “roomsweeper” carbine, barrel sawed off so short that it was nearly a handgun. She fired again as he turned toward her, catching him this time dead-center in his sternum, just below the heart, and that one was a finisher, but he kept swinging the carbine up mechanically, and so she emptied the rest of the pistol into him, squeezing over and over, seeing the bloody holes appear like magic on his chest, stomach, one in his right bicep, one in the nape of the neck ... by the sixth round his gun, though still rising, was barely moving, and aiming carefully with a death grip she centered her sights between his eyes and fired three times, emptying the rest of the magazine into his face. He disappeared as if swallowed by the ground; for a frozen moment she stared down the barrel of her empty weapon, seeing the blood splattered on the wall in front of it, like a grotesque telescope—eyes, back sight, front sight, blood—then she unstuck and dropped the empty magazine, pulling another from under her blouse and slamming it home, then vaulted over the table. She held her weapon on the body on the ground for a glance, but a moment’s attention showed he would never be moving again, so she quickly kicked away the carbine and then darted toward the door leading into the rear of the building.

Hurrying but cautious, her left hand went to the knob, considering a standard piece-

by-piece room entry, but the sound of gunfire was harsh in her memory, spurring her on; instead, she simply slapped at the doorhandle as she kicked it open, leading with the gun in her right hand, and lunging into the room.

Bright white overhead lights illuminated the space, which seemed cavernous; it was clearly a holding area for supplies, but not a crate or bale was visible. Instead, a large table was centered in the room, chairs surrounding it, an unfolded paper map spread across the top, pens and other markers littering its surface. Other bags and supplies were scattered across the rest of the room, and—

Slumped against the wall, blood staining his shirt and jacket, was Angus Reverend, hand clutching his tiny escape derringer, a one-shot .50 palmgun that he usually wore around his neck or up his sleeve, like a trick card deck. “*Angus!*”

She bolted forward, releasing her gun and dropping to her knees beside him. Throat frozen, she slapped at his face hard, finding the carotid artery at his neck with the other hand. “*Answer me! God damn it, Angus!*”

His eyes flickered. Her heart skipped a beat. Underneath her fingertips was a faint but steady pulse.

His eyes opened slowly, pupils contracting, then found her distractedly, taking several seconds to steady. He smiled slightly.

She slapped him again. “Don’t you *dare* grin at me, you fucking—”

In the slim pack at her waist was her trauma kit, nothing more than several wads of clotting gauze and an adhesive bandage. While she found it with unsteady fingers and slipped out a roll of gauze, her other hand jerked out the thin dagger from her left boot and began to carefully slice away Angus’s upper garments with the razor-sharp blade. Immediately she could see the wound, a single bullethole that had driven through the thick fold of muscle above his shoulder, missing the nearby bundle of nerves but nicking the subclavian; it was still pulsing with blood, a fresh surge with each beat of his heart. She immediately began packing it with gauze, and he surprised her by lifting his opposite hand to hold it into place. His eyes were motionless as he watched her every motion wordlessly.

Adding more gauze and pressing hard directly on the wound—noting his grimace with clinical satisfaction—she began to apply the bandage, a highly adhesive cover that maintained continuing pressure by virtue of tension. By the time she was done, the bulge of gauze (a sterile packing seeded with a blood thickener to accelerate clotting) was sealed on all edges and pressing firmly into the wound, though she could see it already beginning to soak through with red.

She could hear sirens. Someone had reported gunfire.

“Cathy ...”

Angus tried to clear his throat, then screwed up his face in pain and grunted. She touched him on the side of his face. “Don’t talk. Try not to move your chest. You’re just making the skin slide around.”

He grunted again, shook his head convulsively, then parted his lips and spoke, voice hoarse as a dog. “No ... Cathy ... you have to search him.” He lifted his good arm weakly.

Turning, she saw the man crumpled on the cement floor, nearly hidden by the table, slumped next to a chair in a pool of his own blood and the remains of what looked like vodka. The now-empty bottle and a pistol lay by his side. She hadn’t even seen him. There was a neat hole in his forehead.

“Drunk but quick ... check him before the civs get here ...”

She let his head rest back against the wall, then stepped quickly over to the motionless figure and began feeling down his pockets, dumping everything she found into her shoulder bag. Angus kept mumbling.

“Must’ve heard me ... barrel on me when I came through ...” He pushed his chin down idly and eyed the seeping red bandage on his shoulder. “... nasty bleeder, eh ...” His head fell back as his voice faded away.

Satisfied that she’d cleaned the man out, she grabbed the map off the table and bundled it up, including everything that had lain on top, and stuffed it into her bag as well. Then she disappeared into the front room for a moment to check the first man. The sirens were

deafening now; they must have mobilized half of the civilian response force. With so much UNSC activity here, it was probably a fairly quiet city, most of the time.

She returned to the back room and shoved the ill-won door open, then carefully gathered Angus's fluid-soaked and limp body into her arms and carried him outside.

Twenty five years ago, during a diplomatic legation to Nimravus—not when they had finally decided to run, but another, long before, though still years after they had fallen in love—Catherine had awoken in the middle of a frozen night, bitten by the deep temperatures brought on by the Nimravus winter, and walked out onto the stoop of her guest room in the low-sprawling imperial palace. Shivering in the cold, she had stepped through her door to find Angus in the dim white and gray speckling of the meditation garden, wearing only a light silk cover around his waist, torso nude, but seemingly oblivious to the touch of the still, stinging chill air. In one hand was his wingsword, sleek and slender, a sliver of flicking light, like he held a stroke of creation, Zeus for a moment; in excruciating slow motion he was stepping gracefully along the flat, gray flagstones of the garden path. Perfectly poised and delicate, he looked to her like a bug crossing the surface of a pond, afraid to break the surface and shatter the implicit agreement between gravity and magic.

As she watched, the sword came up, a weightless drop of oil, neither running against nor cutting through the air, but seeming to slide between it, and he directed it into a smooth strike along an imaginary axis, blade and body a single motion, like the snake and its fangs. His bare skin was scarred but still sleek, and as it moved across the lean ridges of muscle, the sword shifting in space, Angus's eyes seemed to pierce his imaginary target and plunge past it, through the disappearing point, to something far deeper. Catherine felt the entire image was frozen and preserved, a moment stuck in time—if she lifted a hand, plucked at its seams, she could pull it away, fold it, slide it under her pillow, save it for all eternity.

But when she moved, the spell was broken, and he lowered the weapon, mere mortal again—beautiful, the king of a world, as perfectly in place as the sun in the sky, but just a human being, just the man that she loved. They spoke for a long time, and he explained about the wingswords; how they were crafted after conception and tempered at the moment of birth, bonded to their master, carried for his entire life in peace and in war, and in death, broken, the shards laid upon his body in the place of rest.

“They say,” he told her, “that our souls are tethered to the hilt with invisible string, and the metal keeps it anchored to us while we're alive. When we die, the wings”—he gestured to the crossguard, which had the traditional form of two upswept wingspans—“carry us away from our bodies, into the stars.”

He gave a sardonic wink, but it seemed forced. “Thus the fearsome risks of a life of sin—which would make the soul heavy to carry, and the journey long and treacherous—or of shallowness of character, which would make it so light, it could blow away with the wind.”

He stepped toward her, raising the hilt to his lips in a fencer's salute.

“And to love, why, naturally—that is worst of all.”

She sought him out in his eyes, as she often did, and this time found a strange gleam that frightened her and drew her in all at once. “And what then?” she found the strength to say. He swept the blade back, as if to acknowledge a return salute, the tip now downward, pointing into the dark earth.

“What then?” He smiled mirthlessly, but in his face, though she searched, she saw no regret. “Why, then, of course, the soul will be hopelessly entangled with its mate, his poor wings rendered helpless; and the luckless soul will be bound forever to the earth, sentenced to wander this existence for all eternity, tied to its partner in knots it cannot undo, and never will they see the stars.”

They stood in silence for a moment, then Angus spun the sword back to the front of his body and reversed it in his grip, and, holding it in both hands with the point hanging, stepped toward Catherine and offered her the hilt. “Would you like to try?”

Catherine had been sitting in a small collapsible chair just outside the dust-sealed door to the surgery room for almost five hours. It was the closest she could get to Angus where he lay under the laser, and every ten minutes or so she tried again to open the door—but it was hermetically locked to safeguard against infection, and she knew that even if she could get it open, it would only put him in danger. Twice, she had spoken to passing orderlies or nurses, who invariably were on other business and knew nothing about his status; once she had gotten up to find the main desk, but they could tell her nothing either, except to wait. Three times, despite her attempts at breath control and meditation to keep herself in check, the shaking had gotten too bad, and she'd run for the bathroom to vomit out whatever she had managed to eat since the last time. As she hunched over the smooth synthetic basin, the image of Angus's blood-soaked figure kept appearing before her eyes, and she heaved and heaved, trying to push it out.

On her third such trip, as the retching began to subside, she looked up into the mirror and realized that this was different. As mercenaries, both of them had made close brushes with their mortality many times. Even before the beginning of their current frequently-deadly career, Angus—as part of a society that recognized its rulers not only as political leaders but martial ones as well—had known the sight of his own death many times, and Catherine herself had spent years leveraging her influence to seek out training and experiences “unbecoming a lady.” Yet in all that, there had never been fear. Combat fear, of course, and without question they feared for their lives in the same instinctive way that any living thing does, and all the more so being warriors accustomed to its guise. They met tragedy and overcame crisis and survived on their personal as well as their combined strength.

But they had never really believed that they could lose each other.

She leaned her head against the smooth surface of the mirror, looking at her own reflection inches away. *But we do bleed. Our scars aren't just memories; they're misses. One piece of metal in the wrong place, one bad angle or moment, and we're not Angus Reverend and Catherine Richards, brighter than life; we're meat and blood and hollow grief.*

What had changed? What happened to the infamous devil-may-care dyad that had once penetrated a fully-manned pirate battlecruiser in the Outer Reaches and stolen a contentious datachip from under the captain's nose? To the pair that had not wasted breath advocating a life of dazzling vibrancy, but had instead lived it, almost daring fate to match their willing audacity?

Were they getting *old*?

Or merely tired?

“Not with a bang but a whimper,” she whispered to her doppelganger. Wiping her eyes and washing her hands, she found her way back to her door and her chair, where the doctor was waiting.

There was a seat built into the side of the immersion station, and Catherine slipped into it, but was out in a moment and leaning forward, hovering over Angus's immobile form as she sobbed and kissed him, letting her tears mingle with his. The large, sarcophagus-like immersion station was designed for full-body care, and most of its systems were now inactive, but the immobilization elements had been pushed against Angus's cervical vertebrae and switched on, his major muscle groups as frozen as if he'd been paralyzed. The doctors had said that the measure had been prompted by several irregularities encountered during the surgery; once they had obtained another few hours of data, they would “unlock” him, barring any further deviations. The immobilizers had no effect from the neck up, at least, and when Catherine finally broke the kiss he darted his eyes around in an expressive gesture and said hoarsely, “Bit of a step up from the last time I had a bullet pulled out of me,” and astonishingly, winked at her, which almost set her off again. Angus's last bullet wound had come three years ago in an intelligence job on Sabitha IV that had gone bad; their contact had snapped and put a small-caliber pistol round into Angus's left hamstring, and it had had to be removed by a nervous Marine medtech using bloody

forceps and mountains of gauze during the turbulent, raging ride on a troop shuttle up to their evac ship, fleeing the planet under a blown cover. Angus coughed convulsively, throat dry from disuse while he'd been under the laser. "Listen," he muttered, and she stayed close, head to head to make sure she heard him. "What did we get?"

"Just relax, we'll deal with—"

"I did not"—cough, wheeze—"I did not get my ass shot up for the fun of it, my love. Tell me I'm here for a good reason."

Reluctant but assenting, she looked around briefly then leaned back in. "All right, lots of crap, two things we care about. They had the decrypt key for the beacon—"

He let out a relieved sigh at that.

"—so that was definitely the place, counter intel guys are swarming all over the building now, not finding much. Bad news is that the beacon was on a time-cycle that expired at midnight, so it self-wiped. Doesn't matter. There was also a marked map, heavily marked, not really much that I can decipher, but it's a map of the western continent, and the labels are concentrated in a pretty remote area."

Letting his eyes roll up as he concentrated, then shutting them completely, Angus paused, then asked, "Recon?"

"I talked to Baker. No low drones we can use, they don't have that kind of equipment here; there's a small bevy of recon sats in asynchronous orbit, though, not even a full spread—remember where we are, Angus; there's usually crap-all to take pictures of on this fucking planet except fields. And the OPR doesn't overlap that region."

"Fine. The recon birds?"

"Yeah," she glanced down reflexively as if to check her possessions, but she was carrying nothing, "I got some shots, they're on the computer. Nothing much, though, it just shows the terrain. Either nothing's there, or I didn't spread the search wide enough, or whatever it is it's just too well hidden to show up on a high-flying low-tech satellite scan."

He nodded slightly. "We'll have to check it in person."

Frowning down at his mostly comatose figure, she gave him the glare she usually saved for her opponents on the speedball court. "No, *I* will have to check. You are in the hospital, in case you missed that turn of events, Mister Reverend. I can—"

"You can nothing. You want to walk into the great unknown alone?"

"I'll borrow a squad of UN Marines."

"You'll be noticed in a heartbeat canvassing the desert with an entire team of hut-hut-hut troops. If they have any capability to camouflage or withdraw at all, you'll take a week to find them. Anyway, you'll have to wait for a detachment to free up on the OPR, assuming there's even a unit available, and by that time the scent will be cold."

Catherine folded her arms. "I'm not going on a deep recon run with an invalid," she told him harshly.

"You heard the doc. They can release me before nightfall. A little Dralyn, a little stim, a compressive sleeve, I'll be good to go, and I can even use the arm if I pop a few grams of tensor booster now and then."

"And then you'll collapse and need to lie up for a month."

"So? I'll be on my feet and kicking ass for 24 hours at least." He paused and looked at her earnestly. Then he spoke more quietly.

"I think you're right, Cathy. I think we need to get out. But that's not going to happen if we don't get this job put to bed. And if we want that we need to play it hard right out of the gate."

Running a hand through her hair, head starting to throb, she closed her eyes and sighed, knowing she had already given in. Exhaustion was taxing her store of resolve. And in truth, she did want him there. With her.

She gave the smallest of nods and left to find the doctor.

Six hours later, they were sitting together in the cockpit of a tiny AM-912 pick-fighter, slicing through the thick desert air as they peered down at the featureless expanse searching for anything out of the ordinary.

“Hit it again. Thirty ticks.”

Catherine twisted a dial on the rear-facing navigator’s panel, then pressed a key. A circular wave of light bloomed on the enveloping glasteel bubble, spreading fast and then fading. “Nothing.”

Angus nodded and pushed the control ball to the left, following a bend in the pre-plotted course laid onto his own display. Behind the transparent overlay, the horizon brimmed an unbroken bowl of sand. He was keeping up a cursory visual search to augment the sensor ping. Neither had yielded any results, though they had hours left on their flight path before they would even begin to encompass the region.

They had borrowed the diminutive picket flyer from the planetside Marine base, bullying who they needed to and stepping on more than a few toes; they both suspected that they might not be welcome on Terminus much longer. Angus had wanted something better-equipped, a long-distance sky cutter or ideally an atmospheric plotter, which could do their work in a fraction of the time, but the actual deployment-class Fleet equipment on-hand had proven to be next to nothing, so they were left with what amounted to a tactical support vehicle—barely six feet in length, hardware and the two pilots filling it to the brim, and with much of its weaponry missing in favor of additional fuel pods and sensors. It was highly agile, at least, and omni-vectorable, allowing them to maneuver like a sand snake, a boon in the wandering recon work.

“Checkpoint six. Again.”

“Nothing.”

Their hastily-compiled plan-of-attack called for them to locate an anomalous signature with their long-range sensor package, assess what they could from a distance, then return to Terminus to present their findings to Baker and the DSE, who would reach their own conclusions and pull together a full-scale force to confront the target. Given that they had—as yet—not even the faintest inkling of what they were looking for, further planning seemed futile.

The cobbled-together nature of the whole endeavor had not escaped their notice. Both maintained a stony silence regarding exactly how bizarre a turn the job on Terminus had taken, and how far it had diverged from their usual perfectly-planned missions. Neither wanted to think about it. “Almost on checkpoint seven. Hit it.”

“Little bit of resonance at sector ... resolved. Looks like nothing. I’m repinging ... it’s gone. Just convection currents.”

Angus goosed a little more speed out of the aircraft, tipping the nose down to lose a few hundred feet of altitude in compensation.

The endless search was providing them with more time to think than Catherine wanted. She felt confused, lost within her own head, and doubly lost when she couldn’t understand why. Since her youth she had been the quick one, fast to react, fast to adjust, the first to respond to a new stimulus or input; in her classes at the royal college, she received the moniker “Cat,” not from her given name but for her demeanor. There were others who were more precise, more broad in scope, better with one skill or another, but nobody was as sharp and steady-footed amidst turbulent data as her. She was secure. Sound.

But now everything was changing, and as she stared down at the flat keypads of the nav board, she began to understand how much she had become dependent on her stability, on her custom. Yes, she was a mercenary; true, she and Angus regularly took jobs that put them in danger of life and limb all across the populated systems. But in truth, they had settled. They had a comfortable home, a highly effective system of training; they hadn’t taken a job in years that they couldn’t easily comprehend and dominate. Most of all, they had convinced themselves that they had at last found some kind of security. Somewhere they could take a breath.

When they had fled their past lives together and thrown off the baggage of politics and leadership, she had imagined that whatever challenges they would face would be no match for their combined wits, courage, and *joie de vivre*. Did they still have that daring?

“Checkpoint eight.”

They were now faced with a situation that was devolving faster than any she could remember since their exile. If there was one thing they had come to rely on, it was stability

of purpose. Could she find her old fast-footed agility, somewhere in her tired spirit?

Did she want to?

“Clear.”

As Angus held the slippery-handling fighter on a steady course, his conscious mind drifted amidst the dark doors of his past, snapshots of memory he no longer tried to suppress. Brief flashes of fire-lit battlefields and hammering artillery. A calm and meditative supper in the palace, bantering with the royal cabinet on some learned subject. Blasting upward—exactly, perfectly vertical—from his private hanger in a long line of fire across the night sky, Catherine in the co-pilot’s seat with a savage expression of pure glee, as he looked downward at his planet for the last time, blood on his hands, blood of his own house.

In a lifetime of regrets, he had never regretted the decisions he had made that night. It was the best thing for him, for Catherine, even for his people: what good a shiftless ruler? *Whatever is next*, he had thought then, *it is in sight*.

In sight.

For years after they had settled anew, he had always told his old friends and acquaintances that he and Catherine had, in their new lives, found freedom. More recently, on the increasingly rare occasions he still made connections with people from of his past, he said merely that they were *doing what they did*. Still being what they were.

Had his life become sedentary in its decisions, in its aims? Was the last bold choice he had made the one to abandon Nimravus so many years ago?

His display blinked noiselessly as they crossed another indicator. “Checkpoint nine,” he intoned, adjusting the bandage wrapped around his shoulder with his opposite hand. He’d need a few more caps of Dralyn and stim pretty soon; the pain was returning. Maybe he’d skip the stim. He was already jumpy enough.

“Nothing,” the response came back.

There was nothing wrong with relaxation, with finding peace with oneself. If he was happy, and Catherine was, there was no good reason, none in the world, that they should seek out yet another uncertain path to set his feet upon.

But he was not sure that he was happy, and even less sure for Cathy. They were both, he knew, comfortable; they had found a good pace, a steady rhythm to life, something they could follow effortlessly. But this whole existence, their charmed mercenary careers and the idyllic periods of rest and all of the rest, still seemed like nothing more than an interlude, a transition. Like he’d left one life and not yet, not quite, found another.

And now, Earth. Their home. Gone.

He had been there four times, diplomatic missions all, attending UN summits or meeting with important politicians from various sectors. Never since the war started; with the Covenant rampaging across the flightpaths, travel was possible, but the risk had made it foolish when most practical matters could be conducted safely over com channels. All told, he’d probably spent less than a month with his feet on her surface. Cathy had less.

And yet, it was their home. No matter where he had been born, where he lived or struggled or even died, there was no human being in all of the galaxy who could not call Earth his home.

Gone.

Maybe now, at last, it was time, once again, to Do.

The spray of hyperdense pellets was fifteen meters on each side, and when it slammed into the hardened shell of the hover-jet, it sounded like an angry inverted rain. Instruments blared warnings: breaches, power drops, carriage errors. The craft shuddered in the sky and began a slow tumble around the axis of thrust before Angus could jerk to attention and arrest their flight. His left hand, half-numb from painkillers, slammed down onto the battle toggle, instantly rerouting power from non-critical systems and snapping the displays into a streamlined combat configuration. “*Status!*” he roared, command voice back once again.

“Surface kinetic fire!” Catherine’s response was immediate. “No backtrack—they’re clouded. I’m putting down active sig-probes, but there’s a lot of ground down there.”

Angus injected more power into the double engine and started screaming in a manual

evasive pattern. His fingers flipped up switches, readying weapons and aimpoints. In the stripped-down reconnaissance setup, the flyer had only a small in-line repeater cannon and two articulated light guns covering the front and back hemispheres. There was nothing they could bring to bear against a ground target, even if they could locate it.

Incoming-fire sensors flashed a fraction of a second before another, smaller pattering was heard on their metal skin; another blast had barely caught them, four or five pellets at most. He spun the control ball hard, twisting the hover-jet into a wide helical path with a horizontal slide, then added a vertical dive. They were leaping across the sky like a hummingbird, using every gram of the agile fighter's maneuverability. The computer plotted near-misses and drew them onto the holo with thready red lines, which were sprouting everywhere now. He gritted his teeth and tried to add more thrust, but the engines were already limping on damaged power feeds, and their top speed was three-quarters of nominal. His mind leapt ahead.

"I need a hit, Cathy—anything, *now!*"

"Wait, wait, wait, I'm increasing the gain, I think I—shit, shit, there's a ping, Angus, I've got a *massive* pingback at 36-53, barely visible but just huge, I'm going to—"

A thunderous blast cut her off, as a full-on salvo crashed through the jet. They had been facing straight up, and the hit had been taken almost wholly by the engine pods. They creaked, froze, and then began to sickeningly drop.

Angus hit keys, joggled the control ball, abused the computer, trying to get power back into the engines. There was nothing. Behind him, Catherine was issuing commands at lightning speed; he could see glimmer-quick flashes from her display reflecting from his own. Outside, the ground started to swell, as the front-heavy craft tipped forward while they plummeted downward.

"We're *done*—let's—"

"*Wait!*"

She issued a final, fluid string of commands, then cried, "Do it!"

He slammed both fists into the ejection panel, and the craft split in two.

They were in the sand.

After smashing into the desert at an unpleasant but booster-deadened velocity, Angus and Catherine had rapidly stripped the sloughed-off ejection sled and started hoofing it through the soft dunes. If they had been tracked in their landing—and discerned from the signature of their jet, wherever that had ended up—they did not want to be easy pickings for a clean-up crew.

They had their personal equipment, the basic survival kit packed in the ejection sled (desert gear, mainly water), and most importantly, Catherine's portable computer, socketed with the memory chip from the craft's sensor package.

Angus was examining it as they walked, several hours after the crash, once they felt a little more comfortable that they'd put distance behind them. The screen showed a hybrid topo map of the immediate region, and was overlaying a thin blue outline where they'd picked up the ping. It was enormous.

"What did this show up on, Cathy? Radar?"

"No," she replied from beside him, peering at the screen. "It's the subterranean sonic. Reports back changes in density. Nothing showed up on the other sensors, except for a little blip on infrared; that's what tipped me off, but I had to switch to the sonic and pump some power through to get this reading. It's underground and shielded." Which meant military, a conclusion supported by the minor clue that they'd been blown out of the sky. It was time to decide what to do. He stopped at the top of a dune, carefully scanned the horizon in all directions, then dropped his gear and squatted down to get some water.

Catherine was playing with the computer. "If we're going to send a signal," she said, manipulating the screen with her thumbs, "now's the time. Com satellite's above the horizon and it won't be again for another 18 hours or so."

He nodded. "We need to decide. Calling in the cavalry would be the obvious thing, but maybe not the smartest. Can you tight-beam the signal?"

“It’s complicated. We don’t have the hardware for a really secure message; the only antenna here is the built-in, and that just broadcasts in a spray. Now ... I think that I could rig a kind of EM hood using some of this gear”—she gestured at the reflective blankets in the survival kit—“and I know more or less where the satellite is in the sky. Probably it’d get through, and the encryption key we agreed on will still be good. But it’s an iffy thing. There’s a real chance of leakage.”

They hadn’t sent out a distress message earlier for the fear that it would be picked up by their assailants and triangulated. There was no way of knowing what the enemy’s capabilities were.

“It’s risky.” Angus stood and brushed the sand from his ass. “Even to mobilize a basic extraction flight will take DSE hours, I’d bet. And if they call in Fleet for help, it’ll be a couple of days before they can muster and organize a task force to occupy this area. If we put out a message and get intercepted, we’re going to be fucked long before they can help us.”

“Sure. But what other choices do we have? Walk? It’d take us a week to get to a farm center. We’re in a desert, Angus.”

“Yeah.” He looked back the way they’d come, at the now-invisible landing site and the blurry, rising waves of heat.

Option one, he thought, and knew his partner was doing the same. *Call in Fleet. Gamble that the bad guys don’t make our signal.*

Maybe.

Option two. Do nothing. Keep walking until we get out of the waste.

Impossible. Not enough water, at the very least.

Option three. Locate the jet’s crash site and try using its antennae to send a secure signal.

Idiocy. They had barely any idea where to look, minimal odds at recovering any usable hardware, and they would certainly not be the first to arrive at the site.

Option four?

Nothing.

They’d have to broadcast.

“Wait,” Catherine blurted. “Wait.”

She had a strange look, like she’d just understood something she had strived to comprehend for a long time.

“You’re thinking we should signal, right? Take the chance. For the mission.”

He nodded, acquiescing. His shoulder was sending off long spikes of pain down into his chest and across his arm and neck, but the drugs were lost in the crash.

“Fuck it.” She shook her head hard, almost percussively. “Fuck that. You want to take a chance for these guys? You want to lay it down for the great goodness of Terminus, Angus?”

“What else—”

She came in toward him, kicking up sand, and kneeled quickly, coming eye-to-eye. “Let’s take a chance for us. Let’s roll the dice for ourselves, and when we win, we really win. Even losing that way will be better than nothing.

“Crazy, huh? Doing for ourselves. Crazy. What do you think?”

It was two hundred meters from the dune to the squat stone hutch, and Angus was glad for the binoculars from his kit bag. In the magnified view, he was able to carefully examine the flattened area, fifty meters to a side: the scattered pattern of passive antennas and receptors, the triangle of disturbed patches of sand where the anti-air gun battery had “popped” up not long ago, and the gray hunk of rock in the center of it all, complete with a small door.

It looked absurdly insignificant. And chilling. He wondered what it might conceal.

Cocking his head to the side, he activated his throat mic and muttered through to Catherine, stationed on the other side of the target. “I see a standard array of infrared and some broad-spectrum emissions wires. Thoughts?”

Her reply came back, clear as gunfire in his earpiece. “Could be ground-noise pickups,

no way to know if they're buried. Could be visual, but I don't see any lenses. This is definitely Terminus hardware, by the way. Local job, or at least a local reception committee."

"That jibes with what we saw in town."

Infrared and EM. The latter was no problem now that they had lost their "noisy" jet—their personal com link was mil-spec line-of-sight and almost invisible, and they'd switched off unnecessary gear to give a quieter profile. And they could deal with IR. If they banked on there being nothing else.

Which was bad planning.

"Let's do it."

The three tiny IR spoof grenades that had been stuffed into the bottom of Angus's bag were not loud, obnoxious devices that blocked bodily signatures by covering them with a cloud of chaos. Such things were useless when one wanted not only to hide one's location, but hide one's presence altogether.

Instead, what they did upon detonation was to gradually emit a cloud of thick, non-drifting, organic particles that diffused throughout the surrounding air until it had reached saturation. Each could fill a volume of thirty square feet, leaving the entire region at a steady, constant temperature of 98.6 degrees.

The ghost of Angus running fast and low was therefore invisible to the motion-detecting infrared antennas, and he headed straight for the stone building. In his hands were a long metal spike and an improvised hammer made from a (stable, unarmed) limpet mine and his bayonet.

Reaching the low hut, he threw the items onto its roof, then vaulted up after them, found a spot, crouched, and drove the spike through the cement with three long blows.

Assumption one: the small building was only an entranceway to an extended staircase, ladder, or elevator. Nobody, alert or otherwise, would be just inside to hear a noise or see an intrusion.

Taking the short wire that ran from the rear end of the spike, Angus plugged it into his com inputs and pressed a button to start feeding it to Catherine.

Moments later, her voice came back: "I have video. You've got a long, dark staircase down, with dim lights by the base, no features, no visible security. The door is driven by a manual wheel. No way to bypass; you'll have to blow."

Wordlessly, he hopped back to the ground, pulling the next items from his bag, a stack of shaped charges, with detonators already installed, and a bundle of det cord. He pulled the self-adhesive strip from the back of the first charge and stood waiting in front of the featureless steel door.

"Left edge, eight inches down," her voice came in. He pressed the charge to the left side of the door. "Four minutes estimated until the field disperses, by the way. Left edge, twenty inches up. Right edge, exact center."

He applied the rest of the explosives, then primed them and ran the det cord to a manual detonator. Quickly, he unraveled it until he had enough slack to get around the building, walked four feet and kneeled down.

Counting mentally to three, he squeezed the detonator. A hard, muffled crack signaled the explosion. He ran back to the door, which was scarred at both sides, and waited for the signal.

"Smoke's clearing—give it a second—clear, go, go."

He picked up the improvised hammer, snapped off the bayonet, jammed the stout blade into the upper right corner of the door and levered it back as he stood to the side. With a creaking, swaying tilt, the door eased out of its frame, leaned, and slammed down into an explosion of sand.

"Three minutes. Clear the entryway."

He sheathed the bayonet and pulled the rifle off his back, his personal carbine, a basic and reliable .30-06 he had carried in four wars. Spinning into the dark entryway, he entered low, scanning for a target. He immediately registered a small landing leading to a narrow, descending stairway, which he moved toward, sweeping the area with his weapon

and finding nothing for the dozen or two meters he could see. He froze for a moment, listening, and heard only his own breathing.

Assumption two: the entrance/egress of this installation was infrequently used, and they were safe in making use of it if they did not linger.

He considered moving further, but he only needed to ensure that the immediate area was safe; no point in wandering. Into his mic, he said, "Nobody. Bring it in."

There was no response. He waited for a moment, then stepped back out into the sunlight in case the cement was blocking signals, and tried again. "Entryway clear. Move in."

There was a pause, then, very quietly, "Can. Nos."

Their code. *Can*, shut up. *Nos*, not safe. She had a threat.

Assumption three: Catherine's position was safe.

Shit. Angus hoisted his weapon and immediately prepared to head out. His mental ticker informed him that he had two minutes until the infrared cloud dispersed. Looking toward Catherine's position, he scanned the dunes for a target. There—several occluded figures—he squinted, found the binoculars in his bag and raised them—

"Crack," came her voice, small but panicked, and that word they had only ever used once, a long time ago—

—and only four decades of military discipline allowed him to keep from dropping the lens, the swimming in his head proving even so that age had taken its toll.

He wanted to burrow into the sand and hide. This wasn't their fight. This wasn't what they were ready for. Wasn't fair—this was what people geared up and hyped up and lay awake nights preparing for, they didn't have it dropped on them like a practical joke—

Moving across the surface of the sand, distant but unmistakable, was a small team of alien Covenant.

On Terminus? On Terminus?! This is the Core!

How had they penetrated so far undetected? The war was taking place in the Outer Reaches, and in deep space, and along the spinward thrust that had led them from Reach to Earth; here in the western sector, defense was strong, the perimeters secure, and the transplanted UN command unassailable in its new home on Lux Procella. Here the greatest worry was how to bring the interplanetary trade back up to speed before the aristocracy had to consider lifestyle changes.

Impossible.

But now he had less than a minute to fight or flee and there were four armed Covenant Elite three hundred meters away, certainly too far for aimed fire, and of course they had their shields—

His earpiece activated again. "If?"

Could he engage? "Not at this range—I can approach but I don't know what I can do with a rushed assault on four Elites, and the cloud is dropping fast."

Pause. Then, softly, "Con?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

Careful not to hit them with reflected sun from the binoculars' glass, he watched as the group moved closer to her position. She said nothing for several moments.

"Push. Split."

There was nothing either dramatic or regretful in her tone, and Angus knew he would not sprint across the sand with guns blazing, either. It was the only tactically sound option. He would continue the mission. She was on her own.

That it was almost certain to kill her was incidental.

Refusing to speak, refusing to think, he slammed a tight lid on his emotions, turned, and headed back into the building, fast.

Without moving, hardly breathing, she willed herself to sink lower into the powdery sand, out of sight of the approaching Covenant.

They were coming along almost exactly the same path that she and Angus had taken, and she realized with a moment of chilly amusement that it was probably the ground team sent to follow up on their crash. It was fortunate that the soft sand had erased their

footprints, but given that they had ended up at the same place anyway, it hardly seemed to matter.

Sixty meters. Unless they suddenly veered off or circled around to approach the base from another direction—and why would they?—they would stumble directly onto her within minutes. Without moving, she tried to picture her surroundings. No two ways about it: the only route that would effect an escape would be directly through the now-reviving sensor zone. And that would kill them both.

This was no soft target, and she wasn't sure what to do. Like Angus, she had studied the intelligence from the war with due diligence, but like Angus, she had avoided the actual fighting, and so had never seen—or killed—one of the aliens firsthand. She knew they were fast, tough, adaptable and intelligent, with lethal plasma weapons and personal shields that could only be penetrated with sustained fire. She wasn't going to ambush them and take them out before they could respond. Likewise, the usual SOP for outnumbered escape and evasions, to take one individual hostage and bargain her way out, seemed ridiculous when the enemy wasn't even human.

She had her small spike rifle, a flechette-firing submachine gun that pumped out wads of high-velocity darts, with several full magazines; she had her dagger and a backup; she had two improved thermite grenades, which had proven exceptionally useful in the past; and she had her suicide pill, which, like Angus, she would never use.

They were much too stubborn to ever concede a game.

Forty meters, thirty, and she was at a loss, but at twenty meters she had a sudden thought, and committed to it instantly. It was strange, untested—but she trusted her instincts.

Cats always landed on their feet.

She pushed back to a stand, lifting her rifle from the sand beneath her in one motion and turning to face the four attackers. They were quick, undoubtedly, but nobody was quick enough for reaction to beat action. In less than a second she had swept fire across the squad, lighting up their shields with a sequence of hits. She didn't know what that might do, but if there was anything human in them, maybe it would *sting*.

Beginning to angle left at a dead sprint, legs pumping in the sand, she pointed the rifle again and focused an arc of fire directly in front of her targets, blasting a line into the sand with superheated steel nails. Back and forth until the magazine clicked empty, and she started moving again to the right as she swapped it out. The talcum-fine sand had exploded at the numerous impacts, laying out a long cloud of dust which hid the Elites. She pecked a few more bursts through the cloud, galling them; blue-white plasma, accompanied by a *vvvb vvvb* whining, answered her. She took a knee.

One one thousand. Two one thousand. Three one thousand. Letting her rifle hang from its sling, she took a thermite grenade into each hand, thumbed the activators, and gently lobbed them forward, side by side into the exact center of the cloud. Just like serving a speedball.

They might be aliens, might be intelligent—but they were still men. And men charged forward.

One Elite became visible just as the grenades went off, and another behind was caught as well, judging by the grunting roars. She didn't stay to assess the damage; she was already cutting laterally, sending more licks of fire into the rapidly dissipating dust, harassing, distracting. Plasma came back, but here she had a distinct advantage: while her rounds were originless and invisible, the undoubtedly deadly streaks of plasma drew a line all the way back to their source, and she continued to pepper them. One blue bolt grazed her shoulder, charring her clothing, scorching her skin. Adrenaline pushed back the pain.

Another magazine change. Two more until it was dry. She swerved again, ran for a bit, then pointed herself straight at the two remaining Elites, who were becoming visible again. Focusing her fire at the one on the left, she forced her muzzle down with taut arms as she blasted non-stop, overloading its energy shield just as she clicked empty.

Only a few meters away now, still barreling forward, she pulled the weapon's sling over her head, turned it around as she cocked her hips, and—holding it by the pistol grip, like a side-handle baton—whipped it into the Elite's head. It flinched, but was already coming back around with its plasma rifle, when she drove the knife in her left hand straight

through its face.

It hesitated, seemed to lose tension, then fell hard. Catherine began to turn.

The blow hit her from the left, a pummeling downward strike from the butt of a heavy plasma rifle, and she blacked out. Waking several seconds later face-down on the sand, she could feel the crushing weight of the Elite pushing a foot into the center of her spine, and struggled to turn her head to breathe. Eyes still swimming, she tried to shift positions, but there was no chance of it; the weight was a stone pillar.

“*Boroka malak korosog,*” the voice rumbled from above her; she could hear the dark fury and feel the vibration through the foot on her back. “*Loktog mogai!*”

She pushed one hand under her, to her beltline, and found the emergency switch under the buckle. Squeeze, twist, press.

Then she closed her eyes and waited for the first blow.

Angus was creeping down the darkened corridor, all senses tuned, when his earpiece suddenly began to speak.

Attention. Attention.

He froze, eyes continuing to scan his surroundings, and hugged a wall.

This is an automated emergency distress. This is an automated emergency distress. Unit is KIA, incapacitated, or captured. Unit is KIA, incapacitated, or captured. Consider any further transmissions suspect. Consider any mission responsibilities of unit to be forfeit. Message repeats.

Attention. Atten—

He angrily squelched the signal.

She was out, as he'd expected. And as he'd expected, there was nothing he could do.

He was two floors down the underground complex, and had not yet come across any of the enemy, or indeed anything other than some empty rooms; internal security seemed to be minimal, no doubt on the assumption that the facility's obscurity kept it safe. It was clearly a cobbled-together installation, probably adapted from a pre-built structure for another purpose, and whole areas were unlit and unused; it was, however, massive, as he had learned from a structure map he'd found pasted at a hallway intersection. Mostly unlabeled, it laid out the interlocking web of halls and rooms, some of them hundreds of meters across, hangers more than offices; there was no doubt that it was a military structure, especially with the three penciled-in captions: *Comms, Launch, and Barracks.*

The last he would steer widely clear of. The second he made careful note of. He was headed directly for the first.

But now he paused, considering. He had not expected to receive a distress signal from Catherine, had assumed that whatever happened he would not know until he had finished the mission. But if she had triggered it, she had survived the battle, at least long enough to find herself beaten; and if that were true, and if the surviving enemy could restrain itself (and Elites were not known for their undisciplined aggression), she would surely have been taken prisoner.

Brought to the only possible location.

It took him only a few moments to reach his decision.

Catherine covered her head with both arms, trying to protect her face and the medulla of her spine. Heavy kicks and stomps rained down on her fetal form; she shifted as best she could to avoid or dampen the blows, but her body was taking a terrible punishment. The single Elite had grown to six, as backup had arrived; she held on grimly, pushing her mind past the pain, and waited for them to tire.

Angus avoided two passing groups of Covenant, Grunts and Elites, a few Jackals, as well as a small race of blue aliens he assumed must be technical or support crew. This was undoubtedly closer than any human had ever come to the inner workings of a Covenant

station.

He saw at least one human, walking with a group of Elites and speaking through a translator. Muscles clenched. He restrained himself.

Dimly, Catherine was aware of the beating tapering off, and several of the tall aliens grabbed her limp form and began to carry her.

She was already three-quarters gone, utilizing the POW technique she'd been taught by Angus. Her consciousness, rather than here suffering withering pain from an array of broken ribs, at least one shattered knee, a pounding concussion, and what felt like internal bleeding, was elsewhere, trolling through the recesses of her memory, a warmly-lit, comforting space flush with artifacts from her past.

She thought of her father and mother, something she had not done for years, and thought of her homeworld, Angelica, so different from Angus's huge and temperamental Nimravus. It was lush and warm three seasons out of the year, with dozens of strong native crop species and some unique animals known across the colonized systems. She had not seen it since she had fled, twenty one years ago now, almost to the day. Now and then it would surface in the news, for some contribution to the war, or cultural event, but she had never been back, and not just because it was forbidden. She wondered if it was still the same. Wondered if the dawn surfacing over the eastern ocean, viewed from the roof of the North Palace, still drew a thin line of solid light across the horizon, as if the water were spilling down onto the plains. Wondered if her father was still the same.

Bump, bump. A small part of her mind registered that she had passed inside, and was being carried downward.

By good planning, the best of the skills he'd honed over his long career, and a broad stroke of luck, Angus made it to the Communications room unobserved.

Unlike the rest of the installation, and much as he'd expected, it was well-secured and organized. A double, reinforced sliding door sealed it off from the hall, demanding some kind of security card for entrance; peering through the hand-sized window, he saw a long, straight room, one wall decorated with an array of readouts and familiar communication hardware, four or five of the small blue Covenant seated before them, handling relays or dispatch.

He didn't expect trouble, but it would have to be quick, and flawless. He would rely on a lax security and sense of boredom brought about by the station's seclusion; perhaps such things did not occur with these creatures, but if not, they would be more alien than anything he had ever encountered.

Standing beside the entrance, back to the wall, he reached out with the barrel of his rifle, and tapped against the metal door three times, loud.

As her body moved through the dark halls of the Covenant base, her mind moved through the dark shadows of her memory.

She thought of Cole, Angus's personal retainer, who had known him since childhood. The pinnacle of steadfast, simple loyalty. Naive? Yes, naive. But he had loved Angus like a brother, and had tried to stop him from leaving with love in his heart.

Standing with her beneath the cool blue-white lighting of the royal hanger, Angus had killed him with two blows from his elbow after receiving a desperate slash from Cole's knife. Later, once they had reached safety, they had discussed it as they never would again, and he swore that he had meant only to incapacitate. But she knew firsthand his expert control. She had wondered what anger had been brewing in him, and for how long.

She thought of the first planet they had come to, after fleeing Nimravus in his private clipper; it had been Balnos, the water planet in the east Core, and they had stopped at its famed orbital dock. While they arranged for a thorough strip and refitting of the clipper, in fear of implanted trackers or bugs, they had hit the restaurants and casinos, partying

through the day and night, then retreating to a rented room and making passionate, breathless love for hours. It was a catharsis, a cleansing; they were struggling as best they could to convince themselves that they were all right.

All these years later, she wondered if they had ever been successful.

Angus took the first one with his bayonet, wanting to let the doors close behind him for sound-dampening before he discharged his weapon. After punching the blade hilt-deep into the creature's stomach, then his chest, he stepped in, willing the doors to slide shut.

There was a moment of absurdity as he stared at the remaining technicians, who were aghast in shocked silence. It stretched into seconds, and Angus began to actually feel awkward; one of the aliens was beginning to unthaw, opening its mouth to give a cry, when the doors finally slid shut behind him with a hissing thud, he lifted his rifle, and killed them all, one by one.

Pushing them out of their seats, he set a mental timer for five minutes. Ordinarily it would be an impossibly short goal, but he had trained and drilled for years executing lightning-quick communications exchanges, for times like now when it was critical. All of the gear here was not only human, but UNSC standard; he sat down and set himself to the controls with practiced comfort.

Three messages.

The first one, to Terminus dispatch, was a generic warning notice, and he intentionally patterned it in the same format he would have used for a routine report. He gave their coordinates, spelled out the basic threat, and emphasized the Covenant involvement. He ended with a dire *Potential danger extremely serious. Threat exists both to all Terminus but also entire Core. Mobilize immediately.*

Encrypt from his personal chip. Send. Mission complete.

The second was a message to a man named Michael Severin, now captain of a UN flagship cruiser, but who had once been Angus's lieutenant, and whom Angus had neither seen nor spoken to in slightly over twenty one years. Keying into a channel that was an open military secret, he composed a brief message, opening it with a very, very old phrase of allegiance. The royal unit's battle cry.

Libertas et fidelitas. Freedom and loyalty.

He wasn't worried that Severin would fail to respond. Some loyalties never died.

The time was ticking down on his last message, but it wasn't long. Addressed to the King-in-Regency of Nimravus—not naming Darryl explicitly, partly because he couldn't be sure the title had not passed to another, but partly to make a point—he wrote only,

**LET IT BE KNOWN THAT I SURRENDER THE THRONE FOR EVER AND IN PERPETUITY.
TO THIS I ATTEST. MY SEAL-NUMBER IS U2Y64X8RV. MY SEAL-WORD IS RAGNAROK.
TELL THEM GOODBYE.**

Send. Done. Time to go.

Idly, Catherine thought of their home, not so far from here. She thought of the day, not so long ago, when Duncan LaGrange had showed up at their door. It was spring. She wondered if she would see it again.

The jostling of her movement began to jar her into consciousness.

The rhythmic stamping of the team of Elites was audible from the other end of the long hallway. By lying prone and peering around the corner at its very base, where it was dark, Angus was able to watch them unobserved.

They were not in a tactical formation—who would be, in their own base?—but they were fairly well-grouped by habit. One of the lanky creatures had a dark shape carried

over its shoulders: Catherine. Another walked directly behind, and four more were in approximate double-file in front.

He wished he knew whether she was conscious, or capable of fighting, but there was no indication.

Six Elites. One weapon. No backup.

There was only one answer.

Catherine was rising back toward an uncomfortable recognition of reality when she was abruptly dropped five feet to the hard floor.

Groggy and damaged as it was, her body responded instinctively, slapping the ground in a flat breakfall. But she lay motionless, unable to muster the energy even to glance around, until a rapid patter of footsteps sounded just by her head, and she flinched and looked up.

Angus was running down the hall, weapon slung behind his back, head down. He reached her, stopped, and squatted.

“Hi.” He touched her on the cheek with a gloved hand, and smiled. A swarm of emotions raced through her, shock, relief, and a tactical sense of confusion that eventually won out. As he hiked her up and draped her across a shoulder, she mumbled, “Wha ... what happened?”

“I tripped an intruder alarm a few sectors away. Everyone took off that way. Must’ve ... oof ... must’ve figured you weren’t going anywhere. Hold on, we gotta move.” He began trotting as best he could with the load, taking a left at the next intersection.

She tried to speak again, couldn’t seem to open her throat, and very carefully tried to clear it. Lasers of pain shot through her chest, and she gasped, tears coming to her eyes. She had to force her attention to stay focused; it was beginning to wander into the mists of her subconscious again, and this time not by choice. “Where’re we going?”

“Launch bay. There’s an orbital escape pod docked here. Saw it on the way in. Should be able to bug out before they get reorganized, if we’re lucky. What’s your status?”

Reflecting, she made a motionless assessment of her injuries, flexing and shifting. “Breaks. Burns. Okay for now. Need some Dralyn, might be bleeding. Inside.”

Angus was breathing heavily, struggling with her limp weight. Carrying one another was nothing new for them, but this was a race—and they weren’t young.

Passing through another intersection, they heard a roar from the side hall; instinctively, rather than falling back, Angus lunged forward to the cover of the corner. Reaching it, he steadied Catherine, lifted his weapon one-handed, and sprayed it around the corner without looking. He emptied most of the clip haphazardly, then quickly reslung the weapon, turned and starting running as fast as he could, a sort of loping trot. She wished she could relieve his burden, but she could not; she knew for certain that if she tried to run, she would collapse on the spot.

More cries from behind them. Their head start was running out. “Hold on,” she muttered to Angus, voice still shot. “Hold on. Gimme. Gimme a gun.”

He slowed to a halt. “You s—”

“Gimme a damn gun!”

Pulling the sidearm from his hip without a word, he pressed it into her left hand, then took off again.

Carefully, planning out each motion before she made it, Catherine shifted around, rolling her head until she could see behind them. Several figures were scrambling toward them from a ways down the hall, blurry and insubstantial. A few whirring bolts of plasma scattered toward them, striking walls at various angles. Elevating her arm, she rested her elbow against Angus’s shifting back, cocking her hand up like a kid playing with a dart gun. She needed it close to her face, or she wouldn’t be able to focus on the sights.

She brought up a bead on one of the figures, waiting patiently while the oscillation from her arm, her overall jostling, the pounding in her head and the target’s motion came together in a shifting cadence. Then, instinct dictating the moment, she squeezed the trigger.

Bang. The target, must have been a Grunt, wobbled and stopped moving. “Got one,” she rasped.

“And one for the books, my lady!” he responded in a sing-song, evoking one of their old games. His tone was light, even jovial; she felt a few moments’ drunken annoyance before she pushed it out of her mind, aimed, and made another shot.

They hammered down the hall, taking turns Angus must have memorized, and passing completely by numerous enemies. They were beginning to draw a crowd, now, kept at bay only by her deadly potshots and the fact that Angus seemed always able to turn a corner just before the return fire became deadly. Twice, he stopped after a turn, drew a fragmentation grenade from his belt, and flipped it around the bend as hard as he could; the damage was unclear, but it kept them pushed back. Still, they were running out of room, and running out of luck.

“You know,” Catherine grumbled, one eye squeezed shut as she struggled to line up another shot. “I had this. Idea. Retiring. You might remember.”

“Oh, yeah? Yeah, that sounds familiar, was that you?”

“Yeah. Oh yeah. Stop this. Shit. Get out. Live in. The trop—tropics. Or what. Ever. Fun. Shoulda tried. This. Not fun.” Bang.

“That sounds pretty good, Cathy. That really sounds pretty damned good.” Suddenly, he stopped, heaved her to the floor and set her against the wall.

“We’re here. This needs to be quick, but I think it’s possible. There’ll be some Elites in here, maybe some vehicle crew, but it’s a big hanger, and they’ll be scattered; I think we can slip in before they really realize. You ready?”

“Ya.”

He changed the magazine in his rifle, wrapped the sling around his arm, and held it like a pistol while he toggled the door open. He popped through, making a scan, then came back and scooped her back up. “Let’s doooo it.”

The light in the hanger was blinding. It was a cavernous chamber, metal-walled, and Catherine could see aircraft both human and Covenant positioned on pads around it. There was no immediate reaction to their entrance; perhaps Angus had been right.

He shuffled them rapidly along one wall, and she was able to glimpse his destination: a squat, oblong cylinder standing upright in the corner, mounted to wall brackets along a long rail. If they had landed all this hardware in the hanger, the roof had to open to the sky; it must have been barely hidden under the sand.

They were three-quarters of the way there, and hoping to make the whole way unnoticed, when the first vocalizations were heard, rapidly escalating to an uproar. They’d been spotted.

“Whoops,” he said, and reaching for his last reserves of strength, began to sprint. After four steps, she vomited down his back, unable to take the churning. He didn’t slow. The first burst of plasma hummed through the air, much too high.

Ten meters left when Angus took the hit to his thigh. He shuddered, almost fell, but recovered, and kept hauling forward. “Angus!” she croaked. “Jesus!”

Saying nothing, he swung his rifle behind them, firing off some rounds, and hobbled as fast as he could. They reached the pod and took cover behind it.

The din was a cacophony now, and she thought their pursuers must have reached the hanger as well. *Swell*. Angus peeked around the pod, blinked, and withdrew. “At least two dozen.” He found his last grenade, triggered it, and threw it in a high arc.

Quickly now, as she sat up against the wall, he clamshelled open the hatch of the pod and began activating controls. Finding something, he tapped into his hand and held it out to her. “Here. Dralyn. Swallow.” She took the caps dry, feeling the hard, bitter lumps pass down her throat.

Something she had noticed was itching at her attention, but she wasn’t sure what.

Keying a last switch, he turned back to her, bent down, and lifted her up with both hands under her armpits like a child. A whip-crack of plasma scored the wall inches away, and she realized they must have exposed a limb or scrap of clothing. No matter. He tucked her into the pod, tightening the safety straps with unabashed tenderness.

Then he started to close the hatch.

“Wait!” she gasped. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of here.”

“You haven’t—”

“It’s a one-person pod,” he interrupted, and shot a dark grin. Her uneasy feeling turned to sudden nausea. “I’m not coming, hon.”

“*Angus!*” She couldn’t breathe. Her throat closed around the cry. He leaned forward, placing a hand against her cheek and smiling.

“Hey, now. It’s me, okay? It’s us. This is part of the game, remember? You can’t pull aces forever.”

“*Angus! You can’t—*”

“Listen,” he said, his voice now serious. “Listen, Cathy. This is the only way. The only way out.” He glanced around, the sounds growing closer. “I’ve made arrangements, but it’ll take a while, okay? Key a sedative once you reach orbit. It’ll be a couple of days. Then go wherever you want ... go home, think about what you want to do, okay? Maybe—maybe even back to Angelica. All that’s happened ... I don’t think they’ll give you too much grief. Or keep working, but only if that’s what you want.”

“Wait, come on, we’ll take another ship, there’s—” She could see several multi-seat craft around the hanger.

“No.” He leaned in, with exquisite care, and gave her a long kiss.

“I love you so much. Please be happy.”

He stood back and stepped on the kick-plate, activating the hatch, which began to swing closed. She saw him give a real, radiant smile, full of warmth and joy—for the first time in as long as she could remember.

“And say hi to the boys for me!”

Her reply caught in her throat. The hatch sealed shut. Through the glasteel, she could see him manipulating controls on the wall, then hitting a final button. Vibrations ran through the pod as the ignition sequence began.

She reached out, as if to touch him, and felt only hard, cold glass.

He was still visible. As the clamps on the pod released and fuel started to pour into the shielded launch boosters in preparation for the initial kick of thrust, she saw him kneeling with patient, studious grace, and bringing his hands together for a moment of calm. Then he stood and drew out the long bayonet on his belt, holding it in a saber grip, and slowly gave his foes a fencer’s salute, then another to her, sweeping the blade back to point toward the ground. “*Enjoy the stars!*” he roared over the deafening jets, then the boosters activated and hurtled her along the rail into the sky.

For two days, she orbited Terminus, in a drug-induced hibernation. She woke only twice, in a deadened stupor, then remembered where she was and what had happened, and activated another flood of knockout sedatives to put her down as fast as her bloodstream would carry it.

On the third day after her escape from the Covenant base, as she was cycling over that same spot, a hulking UNSC space cruiser, the *Gallant*, was waiting for her in geosynchronous orbit. Picking her up on laser trackers, it sent out two tiny tugs to draw her into its bays, where several medtechs stabilized her injuries, then administered stims to rouse her from her trance.

When she awoke, she was lying face-up in the open seat of the escape pod, a dark-haired man with a trimmed mustache and captain’s bars on his shoulders seated beside her.

“I am sorry,” he said, in accented English—an accent that brought her instantly back, twenty one years ago, to a planet called Nimravus and a man named Angus Reverend. All at once, like a glass had broken inside her, she began to weep.

He pulled her to his chest and held her gently. “I am sorry,” he said again. “He was not like normal men. But we will try to fill his emptiness.

“Tell us what you wish, and this ship is yours.”

Wracked with shuddering sobs, she exerted her will, and forced herself to hold steady for long enough to say a few words.

“Take me home.”

* * *

The hidden Covenant base in the deserts of Terminus, built with the complicity of local mercenary forces, and intended to provide a foothold for the invasion of the planet—and later the campaign to take the Core itself—was burned clean by massed fire from ground and air forces, the UNSC OPR, and the long-range capital cruiser Gallant.

The Fleet planet of Nimravus announced a month of mourning for the death of its ruler, Angus Reverend, lost in the fight against the Covenant. His aging father, destroyed with grief, eventually took a shuttle from his palace dock and flew it into the Slipstream, never to be seen again.

The culture world Angelica welcomed back its long-absent princess, Lady Catherine Richards, who voluntarily stepped down from her position, but would remain there, for the rest of her life, with her family.

A decade later, remarried, she gave birth to her first child. She named him Angus, and announced to her friends that he would be enlisting with the UN armed forces as soon as he was ready, to fight in the war.

But that remains to be seen.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I shan't submit you to a rambling explanation like I did in the last piece. All I want to say here is that I am both shocked and incredibly pleased to have actually finished this friggin' story, which I began a very long time ago and never *really* expected to complete. I'm also glad that it ended up being a very suited capstone to my fan fiction career, and a tribute to what went before—I doubt anyone's enough of a “fan” to recognize it, but many of the elements of this story showed up in my past work, and the tone itself is a nod to my beginnings. Just call me Tarantino.

Cheers to you all. I'm out. And since I worked for a long time for the right to say this:

Good-bye.

— Brandon “vector40” Oto