

Onslaught

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## Prologue

### Expanding Ops

Commander Leroy Cunningham met Sadie in the reception room ten minutes after his secretary had shown her to a chair—long enough to communicate some level of agency and resistance, but not too long to keep a Darkstream executive waiting.

Cunningham emerged from his office in full uniform, which she'd expected. His lined face was clean-shaven. What gray hair she could see poking out from beneath his cap was clipped short.

Unlike some other company executives, Sadie did not relish the opportunity to subjugate military personnel or rub their faces in just how much leverage Darkstream had over the UHF—humanity's main spacefaring military. She merely sought to exploit that leverage. To use it as a tool.

"Right this way, Ms. Harper," Commander Cunningham said, pushing open a paneled door of dark oak that lacked a handle. It swung open to reveal an office that struck just the right balance between the privilege conferred by Cunningham's rank and the austerity that people tended to associate with the military.

"Please," Cunningham said, gesturing at a chair clearly meant for guests, which boasted more upholstery than the one the commander settled into. "Sit."

"My pleasure, Commander," Sadie said, dropping into the seat in a fashion calculated to convey easygoingness, as well as a modest level of familiarity.

"I trust you have the full authority of Darkstream's board of directors to discuss the matters outlined in your email, and to make decisions that concern them," Cunningham said, maintaining the same facial expression of polite formality.

Sadie's mouth quirked. The commander didn't seem to be meeting her halfway, in terms of developing a cheery rapport. His language reeked of strict military formality and discipline.

*Typical.*

Suppressing a sigh, she said, "Of course. My mandate is clear, and I'm very clear on exactly what that mandate is."

"Good. I reviewed your email just prior to your arrival, and I understand Darkstream wants to expand its operations in the Bastion Sector."

"That's right, Commander. Expanding our ops, particularly on Planet Thessaly, will allow us to justify a greater presence of Darkstream combat operatives, which in turn will confer greater security—not only to our own employees, but to UHF personnel also."

"Not to mention growing company profits by a healthy margin next quarter."

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Sadie said, "Yes..." She wasn't accustomed to hearing military officials talk so candidly about profits. Actually, she considered it somewhat rude.

*I wonder how long Cunningham will last as a designated liaison between the UHF and Darkstream.*

“After which, you’ll no doubt lobby for leave to expand your presence even further,” Cunningham continued.

“I’m afraid I’m not privy to the board’s longterm plans.” In truth, she wasn’t sure the board even *had* plans that extended beyond the next quarter. All forecasting and planning tended to focus on the very short-term.

The commander didn’t bother to suppress the sigh that leaked from his lips. “Well, Ms. Harper, like you, I’m also clear on my mandate. What you’ve requested is within what I’ve been authorized to grant you.”

“Excellent,” she said with a curt nod, having given up on her attempt at familiarity and reverted to cold cordiality. “Now, there was one other issue I wanted to raise, which I neglected to mention in my email...”

Cunningham quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“It concerns a special forces operative who I understand is under your command. That’s why it’s convenient for me to broach the subject now.”

“Who?”

“Seaman Gabriel Roach. As we expand our operations in the Bastion Sector, we’ll need talented soldiers with diversified skill sets. He fits the bill nicely.”

“That’s an understatement,” Cunningham said, and now his voice had acquired a hard edge. “Roach is the best soldier I have, out of all four platoons I’m responsible for. His performance metrics are the best I’ve ever seen.”

“Yes. I’m sure you can understand our interest.”

But Cunningham was shaking his head. “You’ve already stripped our regular forces of most talented soldiers, whose training we paid for, and whose experience was acquired on the back of the UHF.”

“Whose salaries we’ve doubled,” Sadie added quietly.

“Yes. Oh, yes. That’s why your efforts have been so effective. Well, as for Roach, I’m afraid I have to say no. He signed a ten-year contract with the UHF, and he only just started his second year with us.”

“I have good news, Commander,” Sadie said, fishing a tablet from an inside breast pocket of her blazer. “You don’t have to say ‘no’ after all.”

He accepted the tablet from across the desk, studying its screen with a grim expression.

“It’s a signed order from the Secretary of Defense herself,” Sadie said, her tone neutral. “Authorizing you to allow Roach to break his contract, provided he consents to it, of course.”

“I can see that.” The commander sighed again. “Of course he’ll *consent*,” he spat, the last word dripping with venom.

“Excellent. Then, unless you have anything else to discuss, I’ll take my leave.”

Lips tightening, Cunningham said, “This constant poaching of our best talent...this incessant capitalizing on public investment...”

Sadie stayed silent. *Somebody’s a sore loser.*

“Roach won’t get the sense of duty and honor he would have gotten from serving the full

decade with the UHF,” Cunningham said at last. “This request is highly unusual, and the fact it was actually granted is more unusual still.”

“Forgive me, Commander, but I consider this new trajectory our conversation has taken to be improper.”

Cunningham leveled a finger at her. “Someday, Darkstream will be made to pay for its deeds. Someday, the Commonwealth will cure itself of the disease that is your employer.”

Blinking, Sadie returned his stare with a blank one of her own.

“Get out of my sight,” he said.

*With pleasure.* Sadie rose, leaving the office without another word. Somehow, she doubted she’d see Commander Cunningham again.

**Chapter 1**  
**Justice**  
**3 Years Later**

Bronson shifted in the Captain's chair, just as he was sure every other captain was doing in the sizable battle group that had defected from the UHF.

"Coms, tell our missile cruisers to position themselves opposite each other, with one on each end of our formation. I want all our ships nice and spread out. I don't want to offer Keyes the opportunity for anyone two-for-ones." He paused to scrutinize the tactical display. "Tell our corvettes and frigates to shift forward—they'll serve as our first line of defense against the enemy's fighters. I want the other two destroyers on either side of the *Javelin*, and together, all three destroyers will target the supercarrier."

"Aye, sir. Relaying your orders now."

"Tell the colony ships to stay well behind us, and away from the likely trajectory of any ordnance."

The *Providence* approached at a stately pace. Alone and facing a battle group of this size, any other captain would have charged, lending more energy to their ordnance.

Not Keyes.

*He's trying to intimidate us.*

And it was working.

Willing his voice not to shake, Bronson said, "Coms, send the *Providence* a transmission request."

"Yes, sir. It's been accepted."

The hard, dark face of Leonard Keyes appeared on the CIC's main viewscreen, wearing a cold glare for Bronson.

"What's your angle here, Keyes,?" Bronson asked, keeping his tone as light as he could.

"Justice."

"Come, now," Bronson said, and a slight tremor crept into his voice. He hoped Keyes hadn't picked up on that. "You can't expect us not to defend these people. They only want to find a new home."

"They want to flee their crimes."

"I won't let you do this, Keyes. I will oppose you."

"Then you'll die." Keyes turned toward someone off-screen. "Cut the transmission. Werner, put up a tactical display, full-screen."

Keyes vanished from the viewscreen.

"Damn it," Bronson muttered.

"The *Providence* is launching Condors, sir. It appears to be her entire Air Group."

"I can see that."

"They're headed for our leftmost missile cruiser. And—sir, the *Providence* has targeted the other cruiser with her primary laser! It's been neutralized, sir!"

*Both our missile cruisers.* Now, wherever the Darkstream colony fleet went, it would lack cruisers until they were able to build more—which, without the industrial base they'd benefited from until recently, would be far easier said than done.

*Of course, that's providing we escape at all.*

Keyes was clearly very upset. And if Bronson was being entirely honest, he couldn't really blame him.

Besides the fact that Bronson himself had led two mutinies against the man, the second one successful, there were also the broader facts of what Darkstream had done to the Human Commonwealth.

For one, it had continued using dark tech—technology that enabled instantaneous communication between distant star systems, travel through wormholes to anywhere and from anywhere, as well as simulated gravity. But dark tech had also been found to weaken the very fabric of the universe.

Since Darkstream's dominance had been built on dark tech, however, it had been extremely reluctant to abandon it.

And so, it had done what it could to influence the Commonwealth's politicians, bribing them so that they would implement Darkstream's agenda. That had led to wars with alien species once humanity's allies, all while a greater threat loomed in the background: that of the Ixa.

Bronson believed Darkstream would have been able to handle the Ixa, had the public not risen up. But it wouldn't get the chance, now.

The public's uprising had ended the company's broad influence, and now Keyes was here to bring its remaining employees and executives to what he called justice; to prevent them from fleeing the galaxy as they planned.

*At least, that's what he claims is his purpose. But is he really going to arrest two million people?*

Bronson thought it much more likely Keyes simply wanted a measure of vengeance for what had been done to him in prison, following Bronson's second mutiny.

When the enemy Air Group succeeded in taking out a corvette, and then moved on to a frigate, Bronson turned to his Coms officer. "Contact the *Providence* and offer our surrender."

"Yes, sir."

Soon, Captain Keyes was on the *Javelin* CIC's main viewscreen once more.

"We surrender, Captain Keyes. All our warships have stood down. I only ask that you allow our colony ships to leave, though I hate to think that they could be going unwittingly into hostile space, totally unprotected..."

"Shut up, Bronson. I'm too tired to put up with your games today. You can take your warships and go with these criminals into oblivion, for all I care...on two conditions."

"Absolutely. Yes. Anything, Captain."

"I said shut up. One, you are to stop using dark tech immediately. Two...you will give me Tennyson Steele."

Bronson hesitated. Steele was Darkstream's CEO. He was also the man who'd mangled

Keyes's face while he'd been in jail, using a set of brass knuckles.

*So, he is here for revenge...I should really run this by the board of directors.*

On the other hand, it was possible the directors be happy to get rid of Steele. The man *did* rule them pretty harshly.

He decided to gamble. "Yes. All right. I'll give you Steele."

"I'll expect him inside my Hangar Bay E within a half hour. Keyes out."

The viewscreen reverted to a tactical display, and Bronson heaved a sigh of relief.

He'd done it. He would live, and Darkstream would get to flee the galaxy without having to face the steep consequences Keyes might have brought to bear.

Now, he just had to contend with the company's board of directors, and hope that he'd made the right call in handing over Steele.

## Chapter 2

### Scandium

Gabriel Roach had always hated going through those wormholes. Every time, he felt sure the CIC crew would mess something up; maybe fail to position the conductor correctly in order to recapture the energy when it closed. If that happened, the wormhole would collapse, its energy blasting in every direction and incinerating everything within twenty light-minutes.

Including him. Definitely including him.

Two hours after the *Providence* left the Casper System, Lieutenant Commander Bob Bronson had given the order for a wormhole to be opened, and shortly after that, the resettlement fleet had begun passing through it.

*To a whole new galaxy*, Gabriel Roach reflected as he dismantled his assault rifle, inspecting each part. He liked to check it twice—once as he took the gun apart and once upon reassembly.

A tremor passed through the shuttle, which was currently carrying him and other Darkstream soldiers through a rambunctious high-altitude weather system.

This was a first in human history, and so Gabe found it ironic that most humans wouldn't know about it for a while, if ever.

Back when Ochrin had first given humanity dark tech, the Ixan had warned against ever using it to open a wormhole to another galaxy. Based on the prevalence of intelligent life in the Milky Way, it was considered exceedingly likely that other galaxies teemed with spacefaring species, too.

By entering a new galaxy, the Darkstream employees and the rogue UHF ships escorting them had risked running into a species more technologically advanced than humans. And that would come with a host of other risks, such as the species possessing the ability to find their way back to the Milky Way, maybe by reading the residue of the wormhole somehow.

It was even possible they'd be able to tell the human ships' origins just from the metals used to build them.

But that was what made the Darkstream resettlement fleet historically unique: they didn't *care* about risking a powerful alien enemy finding humanity's home galaxy, because they were leaving that galaxy forever.

All two million people in the fleet considered remaining near other humans the greater risk.

*Either way...no sign of aliens yet.*

The very first system they'd entered in this new galaxy had contained little of interest, but no one had expected it to. It was just a lonely ice giant orbiting a brown dwarf star.

Darkstream's navigational experts hadn't brought them to that system because they expected it would contain a place suitable for colonization. No, they'd chosen it exactly *because* it seemed unattractive, and therefore wasn't likely to have unfriendly occupants.

From there, company astronomers had employed their tried-and-true roster of techniques for indirectly evaluating exoplanets. Someone had tried to explain them to Gabe, once, but he'd quickly zoned out during the litany. *Gravitational micro-something...aurora radial...*

*something...*

He gave his head a brisk shake and refocused on the shuttle's display, which showed the intense weather outside the craft. Sensors said the storm cleared up farther below, and Gabe was looking forward to that.

The astronomers had finally settled on a star that looked promising, with one planet orbiting it that had the right mix in its atmosphere, along with four that didn't.

*If I push through to the front of the shuttle, I could be the first person to step foot on a planet in another galaxy.*

He would miss the missions to the Bastion Sector, where he'd fought alongside UHF marines to put down various insurgencies. He'd relished every chance he'd gotten to neutralize a radical.

That said, he'd hated the constant red tape and stifling oversight from the UHF brass. They'd been Darkstream's most overbearing client.

Now, it occurred to Gabe that there would be far fewer rules. The only laws would be company policy. There'd be no government bureaucrats breathing down their necks, terrified that details on ops would leak to the traitorous news media.

This galaxy meant a brand new start, and Gabe burned with a sudden desire to make sure they did it right.

The shuttle finally touched down on the planet's surface, in a clearing amidst a sea of trees shaped like Earth's pine trees, except with cascading waves of bare, spindly branches where their cones should have been.

"Atmosphere checks out, according to these readings," said one of the scientists, hunching over a tablet. "Still, we should send a rover out there first, just to play it safe."

"Screw that," Gabe said, ripping off his straps and getting to his feet. "I won't have some robot be the first one to walk on this planet. If I choke out there, you'll know it's not safe." He raised his voice so the shuttle pilot could hear: "Open the airlock!"

The pilot complied.

After today, everyone would know the name of Gabriel Roach. That would make a good start for his new life.

The air outside the airlock tasted a bit like mildew, but other than that he felt fine. *What's a little mildew between exiles?* If the odor became overbearing, they could easily clear these trees, assuming they were the source of the smell.

Movement behind one of the strange plants caught his eye, and Gabe raised his assault rifle.

A creature that resembled a giant beetle trundled into view, navigating the bumpy ground with a steady, metallic whine.

The scientist's voice squawked from his transponder. "Roach. What did you find?"

"I...I think it's a robot."

"A *robot*? That isn't good. It means the planet is inhabited."

"We didn't see any structures coming in."

"Yeah. Maybe they're subterranean."

Gabe hefted his rifle. "I'm gonna shoot it."

“Do *not* shoot it. That could alert its owners to our presence. If they don’t already know.”

He lowered his gun, but only for a moment. Then he aimed it again and fired a burst.

The Ocharium-enhanced rounds flipped the thing back against a tree, and it fell to the ground, where it struggled to right itself. Gabe fired again.

Several bursts later, he’d succeeded in putting a big enough hole in the thing that its innards began spilling out onto the ground. But as quickly as the hole in the robot had opened, it closed again, and it trundled onward, in the direction it had been going.

Gabe walked over to inspect the shiny, gray fragments that had spilled from the machine’s guts. The pieces looked metallic, with lots of little ridges sticking up from them.

“That’s scandium,” the scientist said into his ear, sounding a little breathless. “A rare earth element.” For its part, the machine he’d shot was dragging itself across the ground, away from Gabe.

“I’m guessing our new society could use that,” Gabe said, raising his gun once more to shoot the robot. “Meaning we should break open as many of these little critters as we find.”

“They must be resource-gathering robots. It would be better if we could discover where it’s headed with the rest of the scandium. We can follow it, once we’ve safely deployed a full battalion to—”

“I’m on it.” Gabe strolled away from the shuttle, following the robot, confident in his com’s ability to prevent him from getting lost.

“Roach, you should wait till I’ve properly cleared the others to leave the shuttle!”

“Nah.”

“Be careful. We don’t know what sort of defense systems those robots have.”

“I’ll be fine.”

The more risks he took today, the better the story would be of the first man to step onto a planet in a new galaxy. And the better that story was, the farther it would spread through the company, and the longer it would be remembered. The longer his name would be remembered.

Everyone would remember Gabriel Roach, just as he was sure anyone he’d ever met had never forgotten him.

### Chapter 3 First Contact

“Hey. Wait up.”

Gabe turned to find Peter Price closing in from behind, pistol held at the ready.

*Damn it.*

“Leave off, Price. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“I was ordered to accompany you. The others will follow the moment they’re ready. We should probably wait for them.”

“Wonderful,” Gabe spat. “Well, *we’re* going to be the ones to make the history books. You and me, Price. You weren’t *ordered* to wait for the others, I’m guessing. The higher-ups only told you to follow me, right? They know I’m not going to stop either way, and they wanted to make sure I had a buddy. That about right?”

“Uh...yeah,” Price admitted. “That is what I was told.”

“Let’s go, then. I lost the critter I was following inside a thicket of brambles, but I bet we’ll find another one soon enough. Maybe we can claim one for ourselves. Get rich.”

Price didn’t comment on that idea, choosing instead to stumble over a root and nearly fall on his face.

“Did you hear they’re giving us ranks, now?” Price said, probably hoping it would distract Gabe from his clumsiness.

“There’s nothing you can tell me I don’t already know, Price. I wouldn’t bother trying.”

“Wonder what rank they’ll give me,” the man went on, as though Gabe hadn’t spoken.

Frowning, Gabe ignored the question as he pressed through the woods, nose wrinkling at the persistent mildew smell.

*Hope that lets up sometime soon.*

Before long, he spotted another one of those resource-gatherer things, emerging from between two trees to cross the clearing right in front of him.

“There,” Gabe said, stopping. Price drew up alongside him. “I knew there’d be more of those things. We’re way ahead of those stupid scientists.”

Again, Price didn’t engage with his comment. “You think you’ll miss the Milky Way?” he said instead.

“I feel like we’re having two different conversations,” Gabe answered. It was how he normally felt whenever he was unfortunate enough to find himself in conversation with Price, and he’d remarked on the phenomenon before, but it bore repeating.

*The easy answer would have been “scientists aren’t usually considered stupid, Roach.” But Price is too slow to pluck even that low-hanging fruit.*

The robot had made it to the other side of the clearing, now, and Gabe crept forward, wary of startling the thing from its path.

He needn’t have worried, it seemed. The thing didn’t appear to register his presence at all—it was pretty single-minded about getting to wherever it was headed.

*I can respect that.*

Gabe dropped his effort to be stealthy and strolled through the woods after the thing.

He and Price followed the critter through a patch of thick trees, across a shallow brook, and over a hill.

By then, most of the Darkstream soldiers that had come down in the shuttle with them had caught up, a few of them remarking on Gabe's taking off into the woods in tones that ranged from lighthearted to annoyed.

Gabe didn't care *how* they felt about it. He just hoped being the first to step foot on whatever they ended up calling this planet would be enough to net him some notoriety.

More notoriety would mean more respect, more demand for his services, and probably a higher pay grade, eventually.

As for the others, if they had a problem with his actions, they could feel free to try taking him up on it. He'd be happy to hand them their asses.

Either way, he didn't expect any consequences from higher up. The company tended to grant Gabe a lot of leniency, which was partly why he'd taken this job in the first place.

Darkstream respected talent—they respected someone who got the job done. The company was much more about the *why* than the *how*, and that fit with the way Gabe had been raised.

His mother, Tabitha Roach, had been a prominent businesswoman, who'd made software that automated the marketing for other entrepreneurs looking to exploit the opportunities that waited on the micronet. Whatever their product, her tools had told them the exact keywords they needed to target, along with the exact audience they'd needed to tailor their wares to, and how to do it.

"Focus on the why, not the how," Tabitha had always taught Gabe. "Folks that focus on the *how* limit themselves, and they'll be beat out every time by those obsessed with the *why*."

For Tabitha, it hadn't ever mattered how much private customer data she'd had to vacuum up and share with her clients in order to make her methods work. What mattered was that she'd helped superior products find a home. If a client ever approached Tabitha with an inferior product, she sent them straight back to the drawing board, which ended up serving her, the client, *and* the customer.

Mostly, it had served the customer.

Gabe had lapped up her teachings, and now he lived and breathed them. Having found an employer that shared the philosophy, he couldn't be happier. The UHF had focused way too much on the *how*, which had neutered their effectiveness.

But in his new position, Gabe was an unstoppable force of unbridled *why*.

The forest gave way without warning, to a vast meadow. A host of giant aliens swarmed around the meadow's center.

Raising his assault rifle, Gabe started toward them.

"Hold up, Roach," a stern voice said from behind him.

He stopped. That was Tessa Notaras, one of the few people he actually listened to. She brooked no nonsense, not ever, and he knew she had ways of making his life hell if he tried

going against her.

Besides, he respected Notaras. She was also *why*-oriented.

“We’re doing this right,” Tessa said. “Those things are huge, and we have no idea how they’ll react to our presence. We also don’t know what they’re doing, exactly, but—” She broke off to point in various directions around the meadow. “See the way the grass is rippling? I bet those are more of the robots. They all seem to be converging on those beasts. Where the aliens are gathered, that’s probably where the robots deposit the resources, so it’s definitely of interest to us. Let’s investigate. Everyone move forward in skirmisher formation.”

The platoon—the part of it that had caught up, at least—raised their guns and fell into the staggered formation Tessa had called for, designed to focus power to the front.

As they drew near, Gabe was able to make out the aliens’ appearance more and more.

They were larger than the biggest horses he’d ever seen, though the resemblance to horses ended there. These creatures were royal purple in color, for one, and their bodies came closer to a bear with unusually long legs than a horse, while their heads resembled that of a panther, as did their long, powerful-looking tails.

The beasts began to notice them, and as they did, they began to adopt a formation of their own, which amounted to little more than a single rank.

*Not bad, if you’re looking to trample your targets.* Which these things were clearly capable of doing.

Gabe had drawn close enough now to see the spectacular range of eye colors these things had: orange, purple, pink, and even black.

“Steady,” Notaras said over a platoon-wide channel. “Be ready to fire on my mark.”

But the aliens didn’t charge. Instead, after taking a couple steps forward—an act that sent a ripple of tension all through the Darkstream soldiers’ formation—they each lowered their heads right to the ground, breaking eye contact with the soldiers while flattening their ears against their heads.

“What is this?” Gabe said. “Are they about to attack?”

“I don’t think so,” Notaras said. “I think...I think they’re *submitting* to us.”

## Chapter 4

### Disaster into Opportunity

“This is quite a find,” Bob Bronson muttered to himself as he descended the wide, steel staircase that led to the underground facility ringing the enormous deposit site.

Mario Laudano only just heard Bronson’s mutter over their echoing footfalls. This site had already become a beehive of activity, but Laudano wasn’t exactly sure what he was supposed to be doing.

“The greater the find, the greater the likelihood it has someone strong to protect it,” Laudano answered, though he wasn’t sure Bronson had meant his words as a conversation starter.

“Those two aren’t always directly proportional,” Bronson said.

By now, scientists crawled all over the place, investigating everything from the robots that brought the resources to the vast repository where they dropped them.

Given that no manual laborers were authorized to come down to the planet yet, the soldiers themselves were responsible for any work that had to be done. Some of them, anyway, and they were none too happy about it. Those with more seniority remained up top, guarding against incursions from whatever threats this world ended up having to offer.

“Any sign of those beasts returning?” Laudano said, breaking the silence that had followed them underground. They’d almost reached the stairs’ bottom.

“Nope. They performed that supplication ritual, or whatever the geeks are calling it, and then they spooked. We have a name for them, now, by the way. The Quatro.”

*Everyone’s so quick to name things.* Laudano expected this world would provide an opportunity for a naming bonanza, so they could have at it, for all he cared.

“Do you trust their supposed geniality?” Laudano said.

“The rank-and-file soldiers seem to. I don’t. Actually, the fact that our fighters trust it makes *me* trust it even less. They have us placated, now, and they could use that to strike at any time.”

“Yeah.” Laudano couldn’t help but notice Bronson’s use of the term ‘rank-and-file.’ That was fine for Bronson to say, since he’d been put in charge of this whole operation.

But Laudano...sometimes, Laudano wondered whether ‘rank-and-file’ was all *he* was. In truth, he had no idea what his position in the company was supposed to be. He’d been assured by multiple executives that he would have a wonderful home with Darkstream, a well-paid home, but that had been before the company had fled the Milky Way.

*Where do I fit in, now?* Apparently, they were getting ranks soon. If Laudano didn’t get a high one...

*What? What am I going to do?* It wasn’t as though there existed another company in this system to apply for. This was it. This was life, now.

“Even if the aliens do intend to remain friendly, and are likely to stick to those intentions long-term,” Bronson continued, “their presence still poses a problem. The company has identified this region as ideal for colonization. The other regions will be fine to expand into, over the coming decades—fine—but this one’s *ideal*. And if we resolve ourselves to sharing it

with these Quatro, at some point we're going to hit a wall in terms of the resources we can extract. Whether they own the robots or not, they're obviously using some of the resources. Incidentally, I don't think they do own the robots. They seem too primitive to have created them. But that doesn't matter."

Laudano wondered whether he was hearing Bronson's own thoughts, or whether the man was regurgitating thoughts passed down to him from the board of directors.

They'd finally reached the entrance to the underground facility, where each resource deposited by those robots was sorted and stored in its own container. Every container had an unprotected dispenser accessed via the facility, where anyone at all could collect the resources for transport back up the stairs. No security clearance needed. No code to enter. No auto-turret to contend with.

The company geeks said that, in the future, they could prevent the robots from depositing their resources into the automatic sorter at all, and then they could do their own sorting, right on the surface, where the resources wouldn't have to be carried back up the long staircase.

Bronson went on: "We have an incredible opportunity, here, Laudano. If we can capitalize on what these robots collect, we can expand faster than we'd ever imagined possible. We can turn our exile from the Milky Way, which everyone's viewing as a disaster, into an opportunity. That means skyrocketing up the corporate ladder—for both of us. If we do this right, that is."

"How do we do it right?"

Bronson opened the door, holding it ajar for Laudano. "Step inside, away from ears too curious for their own good. Then I'll tell you."

Laudano joined Bronson inside the dimness of the facility. And he listened.

He liked what he heard.

Twenty minutes later, he was alone, speeding across the landscape in one of the hoverbikes the company had sent down a few hours after the first shuttle touched down. He'd secured his assault rifle to the front, just above the throttle.

Avoiding thick woods, he stuck to sparse copses and open meadows. He'd turned up the bike's hover function, which would burn through its energy stores quicker but which also kept him mostly clear of the sea of tall, brittle grass. That grass was just as good at inflaming his sinuses as any grass he'd ever encountered.

It didn't take him long to track down one of the aliens from before. The thing walked across a spacious meadow by itself.

*So maybe they don't travel in packs after all. Either that, or this one's a lone wolf, so to speak.*

That made Laudano's mouth quirk into a half-grin. Then, he raised his gun before the alien had even registered the advent of the hoverbike. He put a round straight into the thing's haunches.

The beast barked in pain, then swung around to stare at Laudano, flanks heaving.

Laudano had brought the hoverbike to a stop around forty meters away, and now he waited for the alien to react.

It didn't. It just stared at him, still breathing heavily with the pain Laudano had inflicted.

"I shot you," Laudano called across the ground that separated them. "Do you get that? What you're feeling right now—I did that."

Nothing. Laudano wondered whether the alien had access to any sort of language at all.

*It must have some level of intelligence. They know enough to collect the resources.*

He rested his gun's muzzle on top of the hoverbike's windshield, aiming it straight at the four-legged beast.

Still nothing.

He fired into its chest.

The Quatro roared, rearing, then crashed to the ground. Laudano fired again.

That did it. The alien charged, and Laudano took his cue. He swung the hoverbike around, keeping a close eye behind him as the beast gave chase.

"Good," he muttered. "That's real good, you big dummy."

## Chapter 5 Raise That Gun

Gabe paused to check his rifle's action before continuing. Some soldiers waited till after an engagement to perform routine checks on their weapons, but that had never made sense to him. Something could go wrong with a firearm at any time, and so he liked to check his periodically.

"Anything happen since you checked your gun five minutes ago?"

Gabe turned to eye Peter Price's dopey smile. The man was trying to joke with him, that seemed clear. Problem was, Gabe had no interest in building up camaraderie with this man.

"I'd better get a higher rank than you," he said instead.

"I'm sure you will," Price said, his expression unchanged.

Turning to refocus on his patrols, Gabe continued his trip around the site's perimeter. Generally, he didn't bother making friends with any of the people he worked with, and the only people with whom he had any interest in establishing a rapport were those under his command. Since he had no one under his command, he didn't want to establish a rapport with anyone.

Something on the horizon caught his eye, and he froze, squinting until he felt sure of what he was seeing.

Then, he raised his assault rifle to sight down the barrel.

Price fell in beside him, his own rifle wavering uncertainly.

"Raise your gun, Price."

"That...that Quatro is chasing that guy on the bike, right?"

"That *guy* is Mario Laudano. Darkstream considers him a valuable asset. And yes, that *is* an alien in pursuit."

"But they're friendly. They submitted to us..."

"Clearly that was a ruse, now wasn't it? There may even be more of them coming."

Still, Price hesitated.

*"Raise that gun, Price!"*

That did it. Price raised his rifle to his face.

"Now, shoot!"

The Quatro was chasing Laudano at an angle oblique to their position, allowing them to fire on the alien without hitting the man.

Their bullets barely seemed to affect the beast. After several rounds, it did acquire a limp, but that didn't seem to slow it by very much.

"We need backup!" Gabe shouted as he lowered his rifle to run forward, chasing the man and alien while glancing over his shoulder at the tree line—to see whether more of the things were emerging to attack.

*Nothing, so far.*

He turned back to the sound of increased gunfire. More soldiers had joined Gabe and Price in shooting the beast, and their bullets finally appeared to have an effect.

The alien stumbled, falling to the ground with a crash that was muffled by thick grass.

Seconds later, it rose again, staggering after Laudano before falling once more.

Soldiers converged on the alien's position, continuing their firing.

When Gabe arrived, he found the Quatro covered in its own blood, its royal purple coat mostly stained red.

Miraculously, it still lived, its flank rising and falling with labored respiration.

"Wow," Gabe said. "These things are almost impossible to kill."

Laudano sat astride his hoverbike, sweat gleaming on his forehead.

"You all saw this thing try to run me down," Laudano called to the gathered men and women. "I was scouting the nearby terrain under Bronson's orders when it attacked me. I was lucky to keep my seat and get away!"

"They're crafty, then," Bronson himself said, as he emerged from the staircase that led to the underground facility. "They pretended to be peaceful, but now they strike the moment one of us is vulnerable."

"Not *that* crafty," Gabe put in. "They could have used the element of surprise to hit us with greater numbers than this."

"I don't think this one expected me to escape," Laudano said. "It probably figured it could pick me off while I was alone, maybe whittle down our numbers by doing the same to whoever came looking for me. Well, you lot thwarted its plan. Good work."

A cheer rose up from the gathered soldiers at their own success.

Gabe just smiled.

*Looks like this planet won't be half as boring as I thought.*

## Chapter 6 Full Retreat

Gabe was happy enough with the ranks Darkstream had assigned everyone.

“Seaman” was about all he would be if he’d stayed with the UHF back in the Milky Way, especially considering he’d have likely procrastinated the advancement exams as long as they’d let him.

Besides, if he’d stayed back there, he’d be making half what he was now...and he wouldn’t be making history.

*Yeah. That’s the order I want to put that in.*

The most important thing about the ranks they received was that Peter Price had gotten Seaman Apprentice—below Gabe. If Gabe had gotten the same rank, he would have kicked up shit.

And if he’d ended up ranking *below* Price, he would have quit on the spot.

*Yeah, right,* a voice said—a voice that sounded kind of like his mother.

“You got me, Mom,” he muttered. “I wouldn’t quit.”

“What did you just say?” Price asked, from where he marched alongside Gabe.

“Nothing. Keep your eyes on the horizon, Seaman *Apprentice*, and tell me if you see anything that might be a threat. Just so you know, tree stumps don’t count as threats, except to scrubs as clumsy as you.”

They’d quickly discovered that the resource-collecting robots, which everyone had taken to calling Gatherers, always took the same paths back and forth between wherever they were mining and the deposit sites.

As a result, those paths were well-worn, the grass trampled, the dirt hard-packed. Sometimes, the soldiers even stumbled across the dried-out husks of trees that the machines had snapped off to clear the way.

That surprised Gabe. *Turns out those things have more fight in them than you’d think.*

Bronson had done Darkstream the favor of ordering the crew of his orbiting destroyer to deploy the ship’s supply of surveillance satellites, providing everyone with grainy photos of the planet’s terrain. From those photos, you could just make out the light-gray specks of other deposit sites. Those were basically everywhere, and Gabe and Price were headed to one of them now, along with an entire platoon commanded by Chief Petty Officer Tessa Notaras.

Gabe could tell that Bob Bronson was doing everything he could to make himself useful to the company, or at least to appear useful. Bringing his own destroyer was a great starting point, not to mention convincing a battle group’s worth of UHF ships to accompany Darkstream to another galaxy.

But the man clearly didn’t believe in resting on his laurels. He’d been scrambling to remain relevant ever since, even though the board had already given him command of the entire planetside operation.

It had been Bronson that had come up with the name “Eresos” for this world. Apparently it

had been a Grecian village back on Old Earth, before that planet's Degradation.

*Whatever.* The name had a suitably science fiction-y sound to it, and that was enough to pass for a suitable planet name nowadays, in Gabe's experience. If you went far enough back into humanity's past, you found words sufficiently alien that it seemed right to slap them on whatever you found in space.

Tessa raised her right fist in what Gabe recognized as the signal for "halt."

"What is it, Chief?" Price asked.

"Shut up," Gabe hissed. "Silence is the whole point of using hand signals, idiot."

Price's cheeks went scarlet.

Notaras appeared to be peering into the woods, her head cocked to the right, as though she'd heard something.

Then, Gabe heard it too: something was approaching through the forest.

*Something big.*

What had started as a distant rustling soon became the sound of branches snapping, which turned into a very large something crashing through the forest.

Gradually, it dawned on Gabe that those weren't branches being snapped: they were whole trees, getting cracked off as whatever approached stampeded toward the Darkstream platoon.

He caught his first glimpse of it, above the treetops: it was a robot, whose surface resembled that of the Gatherers. The main difference was that this thing was many, many times bigger.

"Fall back!" Notaras yelled. "Fall back and fire!"

They'd been marching in column formation, and there was no time to get into a better one. Even their present formation began to crumble as the soldiers retreated, peppering the metal abomination, which was coming more fully into view.

It fired back—with a pair of rockets. One exploded several meters in front of the soldiers, bathing the front ranks in flame, and the next connected directly with the woman in the very front.

The explosion vaporized her instantly, and it tossed the nearby soldiers through the air like blocks knocked apart by an angry child.

A wave of heat hit Gabe full in the face, and he raised his arm to protect himself, continuing to fire blindly in the colossus' general direction.

But the bullets were having no discernible effect.

"Forget shooting," Notaras said. "Full retreat!"

## Chapter 7

### Mobile Command Unit

Darkstream's board had done Bronson the kindness of sending down a mobile command unit from orbit, which featured a fold-down bunk in the rear. It wasn't much, but it was a hell of a lot more comfortable than what the rest of the company soldiers had to put up with.

Bronson accepted every little perk the Darkstream board bestowed upon him without qualm. After he'd handed Steele over to Keyes, it had quickly become clear that it had been the right move.

No one said anything about feeling glad the old CEO was gone, of course, and there was even talk of naming this star system after him. But Bronson was pretty sure all of that was for show, to cover up how much the board had resented Steele's authoritarian approach to running the company.

There was also the fact that giving Steele to Keyes had meant that the rest of Darkstream had gotten to leave the Milky Way without facing charges of any kind.

That had helped smooth things over.

Either way, Bronson now found himself in command of the most important campaign the company currently had underway. They'd not only allowed him to retain his old rank of lieutenant commander; they'd bumped him up one, to commander, as a gesture of their appreciation. That wasn't in line with UHF protocol at all, but then, he wasn't in the UHF anymore, was he?

"Sir," Laudano said over a two-way channel, his voice cutting through Bronson's thoughts. Unlike him, Laudano had been bumped down a rank, and his irritation with that fact was usually bubbling just below the surface of everything he said.

"What is it, Laudano?"

"Notaras just returned with her platoon. They ran into some sort of giant mech, as far as I can tell from the ravings of one of her soldiers. It tore the platoon apart pretty good."

"Casualties?"

"Four dead and seven injured."

"Send Notaras into my office."

"Yes, sir."

Bronson settled into a plush office chair—the only seat available in here. Soon, a knock came on the command unit's door.

"Come in."

Notaras entered, coming to attention near the door and saluting. Noting her pale skin and the way her hand wavered near her temple, Bronson waited a few seconds before he said, "At ease," allowing her to lower the hand.

"Sir, we were attacked by a mech. Bigger than seems possible. It towered over a lot of the trees, and it hit us with rockets."

"How many dead?" Bronson asked, his voice grim. Laudano had already told him, but he

knew that having Notaras say it would knock her even farther off-balance.

“Four, sir. And seven injured.”

Slowly, Bronson shook his head. “We can’t afford to keep losing people, Chief. These were good people—hard workers. Not to mention, we’re kind of short on trained soldiers. We can turn accountants into soldiers if we need to, but I don’t think the result will be very beneficial to anyone.”

“I...sir, I had no idea these things were even out there. It’s the first time we’ve encountered one of them. Presumably they’re too small to see using the satellites, but—”

“Ignorance isn’t really an excuse, soldier. That’s why the UHF drilled preparedness and situational awareness into us during training, long before Darkstream ever hired us. You, of all people, should know that.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t know what to say.”

Bronson sighed. “We need to give the soldiers their spirit back. Give them a clear target to focus on.” He leaned forward, and his chair squeaked softly beneath him. “There’s a way you can help with that.”

“I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

“That’s good. Because my order may seem unusual to you at first, not to mention dangerous. I need you to find that big mech again, and I need you to lure it to the entrance of a system of caves we discovered yesterday morning. It’s where the Quatro in this area appear to reside.”

Notaras paused, her head tilting slightly to the side. “L-lure it, sir? Why is that necessary?”

“I need the soldiers to believe with every fiber of their beings that the giant mech is guarding the Quatro. I need them to believe that the Quatro control that thing, along with the Gatherers.”

“So...they *don’t* control them, sir?”

Bronson cleared his throat. “Our current intel indicates they don’t.”

“Who does, then?”

“We have no idea. Someone far more advanced than those beasts, though. That seems clear.”

“And you want me to help you trick the soldiers under me? You want me to help you fabricate a lie? I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that, sir.”

Nodding, Bronson said, “I’m not comfortable with it either. But I’m even less comfortable with more soldiers dying because we *didn’t* sell them this fiction. There’s obviously something going on, here, Notaras. The situation is far from stable, meaning it’s in our best interest to consolidate our position as fast as we can. That means expanding all over this region, and seizing all of its resources for ourselves—not leaving it for a species that recently attacked us.”

“*One* of them attacked us.”

“They’ve shown aggression toward us, Notaras. That’s good enough for me.”

“Sir...this goes against my better judgment.”

“Fair enough, but I wouldn’t be too quick to trust your judgment, Notaras. Isn’t that the same judgment that led to an Ixan getting access to the master control for every wormhole generator on every UHF ship, back in the Milky Way? The same judgment that led to over seven hundred thousand deaths?”

Notaras' head sunk so low, Bronson wondered whether it would fall off.

To be fair, the Ixan she'd allowed passage into Darkstream headquarters had been the company's Chief Science Officer, and she was hardly to blame for his betrayal.

Of course, Bronson had no interest in being fair to her.

"All right, sir," Notaras said at last. "I'll do it. If you think it's for the best, I'll complete this mission."

"Of course you will. I knew I could count on you, Notaras. Now, here's how we're going to time this..."

## Chapter 8 The Greater Good

Tessa wept as she left the command unit, which increased her shame. She cried only a single tear, and it rolled down her cheek to fall to the trampled grass that now surrounded the deposit site for two hundred meters in every direction.

From what she'd heard, Darkstream would soon be authorizing workers to come planetside and start felling more trees, in order to allow for better defense around the site.

*This place will probably end up being this planet's first permanent settlement.*

She'd already started hearing names kicked around for the settlement, among them "Beginning," "Spark," and "Ingress."

Slowly, she shook her head as she walked toward the soldier in charge of dispensing hoverbikes, where she would check one out, on Bronson's orders.

The way her thoughts were jumping from topic to topic...

*I'm trying to distract myself.*

That had been the case since before leaving the Milky Way: a constant game of mental acrobatics, necessary simply to get through the day.

The thought-contortions she'd needed to perform, over and over again, just to escape the conclusion that all those deaths had been her fault...

But Bronson had just smacked her over the head with it. And it had caused her resolve to crumble.

*But if I can prevent further deaths...*

She shook her head again, knowing there would never be atonement for what she'd done.

After signing out a hoverbike from the petty officer in charge of them, she hopped onto it and gunned its engine across the flattened grass without hesitation.

The landscape blew by her—leafless trees, tall grass, and hilly terrain, all passing in a blur as she accelerated to the vehicle's top speed.

Her aim wasn't to endanger herself, necessarily, but if she ended up accidentally crashing and killing herself, she doubted her last thought would be regret over her death.

It took her less than a half hour to reach the site where the giant mech had attacked her platoon, and from there, she simply followed the wide swath of felled trees and trampled undergrowth.

The metal dome of the mech's head soon caught her eye over the treetops, and she could tell it was just ahead of the next turn. She took that as a cue to stop and remove her com from her waist.

"Sir, I've located the mech. Do you read my location?"

"I read it," came Bronson's reply. "I'll be nearing the cave mouth with three platoons at my back within the hour. Follow it for ten minutes more, then start to lure it."

"Yes, sir."

She ended the transmission and drew a deep breath. Everything inside was screaming at her

about how wrong this was.

*But it's for the greater good. The Quatro have proven themselves dangerous and crafty. The soldiers need to see them as such.*

Steeling herself, she gunned the hoverbike's engines once more, until the full mech was in view. That done, she raised her pistol and opened fire on its back.

The bullets *clinked* off of it like pebbles thrown at a tin roof, and the colossus turned, pausing momentarily before firing on her.

By that time, she'd already swung the hoverbike around and was accelerating in the opposite direction while firing blindly over her shoulder.

She heard the mech crashing after her through the woods, and then came the throaty roar of a rocket leaving a launch tube.

Tessa accelerated, and the rocket exploded just a few meters behind her, bathing her back in heat.

She fired back at the thing again, and sped on, astonished at how much speed was required to stay ahead of the mech.

## Chapter 9 Rent and Torn

Gabe crept through the undergrowth, keeping an eye not just on the ground ahead but also on his fellow soldiers, who were spread out to both sides of him, advancing through the woods in a staggered line.

*If they react, there's something coming.*

His skin tingled in anticipation of the coming engagement, in a way it never had back in the Milky Way's Bastion Sector.

This sensation was totally new. They had no idea what the enemy's capabilities were, and so today would likely demand every ounce of skill and tactical knowledge he possessed.

Ahead, the terrain grew brighter, meaning they were approaching the edge of the woods and would soon emerge.

"Easy," Commander Bronson said over the wide channel, to all three platoons he commanded. "Don't leave the cover of the woods. Our target approaches."

It was true. Gabe could hear it crashing across the terrain, and he could *feel* it, too—the tremors it sent through the earth with each footstep.

Something caught his eye, far to the right, and he looked, staring hard before it vanished.

"What is it, Roach?" Price said from his position to Gabe's left. He was staring at Gabe. "What do you see?"

"Could have sworn I just saw the ass end of a hoverbike disappear into the woods, a few hundred meters to our three o'clock."

Price chuckled. "Hallucinating now, are you? There's no way someone would be this far out unless they were surrounded by soldiers, like us. Not with all the nasty surprises Eresos seems to have for us."

"Like that mech approaching across the plain? Why don't you focus on that, Price, before it puts a rocket up your ass?"

Bronson's voice cut through their squabbling, coming in over the wide channel: "Kilo Platoon is in position. They're about to hit that thing with mortars. The moment the first one falls, I want Sierra and Bravo Platoons to advance out of the woods, firing steadily, spreading out to get a nice broad arc, and hitting it with everything we have. Small-to-medium arms fire first, to get its attention. Then, rocket launchers. By the time it recovers from that, our heavy guns should be set up on our flanks. I expect this to be short and sweet, people."

Without further preamble, the mortars from Kilo Platoon began to fly. Many of the shots missed, but a lot of them hit, causing explosions to blossom on the large mech. It teetered a little, stopped, and turned.

The soldiers had begun calling the mech an Ambler, for the slow, inexorable way it walked. Gabe supposed it fit.

As the Ambler moved to engage the mortar teams, Sierra and Bravo platoon opened fire, peppering the mech all across its back.

Now that the smoke from the mortar explosions had cleared, Gabe could see the Ambler had taken very little damage, if any.

*This fight might prove harder than we thought.*

Rockets flew, next, once again knocking the mech off-balance. It staggered before righting itself and turning to fire on Sierra and Bravo.

Its accuracy was eerie. Three of the eight soldiers carrying rocket launchers were taken down by the mech's autocannons, which then continued to sweep the Darkstream ranks, neutralizing soldiers at an alarming rate.

A few of the higher-ranking soldiers drove hoverbikes, and now most of them veered wildly, struggling to get away from the Ambler's line of fire.

Gabe ran forward to grab a rocket launcher whose operator had fallen, hoisted the weapon onto his shoulder, and fired at the mech. When he ran out of rockets, he reloaded from the case the dead rocket man had carried.

But from this range, the rockets didn't seem to be having the desired effect.

Then, the Ambler managed to shoot a hoverbike driver, causing the vehicle to careen through Sierra Platoon—Gabe's platoon. It took out two men and one woman before the other soldiers in its path realized what was happening. They sprinted out of the way.

The bike came to a stop near Gabe, who walked over to the driver, slumped over the console.

Setting down the rocket launcher, he dragged the man off of the vehicle, unceremoniously depositing him on the ground.

"Sorry, friend," he said to the corpse as he hauled the launcher onto the bike so that it rested between his legs. He sped toward the metal colossus.

He refrained from firing, at first, and the Ambler didn't seem to notice his approach, having turned to fire on the mortar teams again.

That was good, because it took some time for Gabe to remember how to properly handle one of these damn bikes. He tried not to think about the fact that, in a few seconds, he'd need to drive it one-handed while firing a heavy rocket launcher from his shoulder.

*Good thing I've been working out.*

The Ambler noticed him when he was around three dozen meters away, turning twin rotary autocannons toward the hoverbike.

*Now seems like a good time.*

Gabe released the hoverbike's handlebars, heaved the launcher onto his shoulder, steadied it, and fired two rockets right into what he chose to consider the Ambler's groin.

That seemed to get its attention. It stumbled sideways as Gabe fishtailed around it, and heavy ordnance tore up the ground just behind the hoverbike.

*That would have ripped through my body if I hadn't fired when I did.* The thought wasn't the most comforting thing that had passed through his head this week.

Knowing two rockets remained in the launcher, he fired them both, hoping to knock the mech off its feet. It stumbled, coming dangerously close to losing its footing, but it managed to steady itself.

Gabe had no rockets left, and he was now totally exposed to the beast. He decided to head straight for the thing, hoping that would put him too close for it to fire on him.

Three more mortars from Kilo Platoon hit the Ambler in quick succession. This close, Gabe could see that the machine had actually taken a fair amount of damage—it was dented and singed in several places.

His eyes chanced upon a brace of grenades strapped to the side of the bike. As he closed with the Ambler, he ripped one of them off, pulled out the pin with his teeth, then cooked it.

Just as he was passing between the thing's massive legs, he flung it upward as hard as he could.

The *clink* of the grenade hitting the inside of the Ambler's thigh was followed by the explosion, along with the sound of metal being rent and torn.

The shockwave threw Gabe off his bike, but he managed to hit the ground running.

A glance over his shoulder told him the mech was coming down—right on top of him. He veered to the left, then dove.

The Ambler crashed to the ground just a few feet away from him. More mortars were sailing through the air, and Gabe forced himself up to keep running away.

"You can stop fleeing, Roach," Bronson said over the com. "You're safe."

Stumbling to a halt, Gabe turned to see that the Ambler had been converted into a charred, smoking wreck.

"That was absolutely insane, Seaman," Bronson went on.

This time, Bronson's voice didn't come over the radio. The commander now stood several meters to Roach's right.

*The man moves fast.* Commander Bronson must have jogged, to reach him so quickly—he certainly hadn't been keeping to the front of the platoons during the battle.

Coming to attention, Gabe snapped off a salute. "Sorry, sir. I just followed my gut."

"Your gut had the right of it. Many more soldiers would have died today, if you hadn't done what you just did. You're spec ops, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going to have to make better use of you, going forward. In fact, we'll start right now. I want you to be the one to fire on the Quatro caves. Come with me."

Ten minutes later, Gabe was hoisting a thermobaric grenade launcher onto his shoulder. He dropped to one knee, lining up the arc of his shot with care. He really didn't want to mess this up. Not with Darkstream troops milling all around the area, making sure no Quatro escaped.

"Careful, son," Bronson said, behind him and somewhere to the left. "That's a fuel-air explosive you're about to deploy."

"Yes, sir. I've fired them many times before, back in the Bastion Sector. I know the risks."

"Good. We want to set the air *they're* breathing on fire, not ours," Bronson said with a chuckle. "Are you ready?"

*I think so.* "Yes, sir."

"Then fire."

Gabe did, angling the launcher upward, bracing for the kickback, and pulling the trigger. The grenade left the launcher's tube with a *whoosh*. He watched it arc toward the mouth of the cave system where this group of Quatro had made their home.

“Right on the money,” Bronson said. “Hit them again.”

## Chapter 10 Hold Your Fire

Bronson had Gabe bomb the Quatro caves for almost a half hour. After that, they waited around for another hour to see whether anything emerged.

*I wonder how far underground the tunnels extend.*

If they were small enough, then the Quatro had probably all died within the first ten minutes. But considering this appeared to be a permanent dwelling for them, Gabe thought it likely that they'd chosen a more extensive cave system than that.

It would probably be better for them if they'd all died. After the fuel air grenades had finished converting their home into fire, and the shockwave tore through the confined space, any alien who hadn't simply been incinerated would have caught fire.

If they'd been far enough away, some Quatro might have only suffered internal injuries—concussions, burst ear drums, ruptured lungs, blindness.

Gabe didn't want to think about any of that, but he couldn't help it.

*It needed to be done. It was us or them. They attacked us, when we'd done nothing wrong.*

The Quatro had loosed their giant mech on them. That couldn't be forgiven. Bronson had been right to order this assault, to prevent any more human death.

Thermobaric weapons had been controversial for use on humans, back in the Milky Way, even though they'd been employed widely throughout the Bastion Sector.

For use on aliens who'd attacked humanity first...

*It's justified. Isn't it?*

"Look." It was Tessa Notaras, standing nearby and pointing at the cave mouth. Near her, Peter Price stood, clutching his rifle.

Gabe followed the gesture and saw that, incredibly, something was dragging itself out of the ground.

"It's a Quatro," Price said.

And it was. The alien was charred mostly black, instead of its original royal purple. In places, it had no fur left at all.

It seemed to be dragging its hind legs across the ground as it labored toward the soldiers, many of who raised their guns to sight along the barrels at it.

"Hold your fire," Bronson said. "See what it does."

"Sir..." Gabe said. "We should...shouldn't we put it out of its misery?"

Bronson turned a hard stare toward him. "It's the enemy, Roach. It killed your brothers and sisters, and it would claw you to pieces in a heart beat."

"Yes, sir."

Then, without warning, more Quatro emerged from the tunnel, some of them singed, and some of them virtually unmarked—though of course, they might have had internal injuries.

They all gathered near the cave mouth, around fifty of them, assuming a formation similar to the one they'd adopted on the day the Quatro had submitted to Darkstream soldiers.

Tessa spoke: “Are they—”

The Quatro charged.

The tremors created by their approach grew stronger with every second, and Gabe could already make out the wicked snarls that twisted their faces.

“Shoot, damn you!” Bronson managed to get out. “Shoot—shoot them all!”

What was left of Sierra, Kilo, and Bravo platoons—ninety-one soldiers in all—opened fire on the enormous aliens.

“Aim for the heads!” Bronson yelled.

At first, the soldiers’ bullets didn’t seem to have very much effect. Then, as the soldiers focus-fired on the lead Quatro, with rockets and mortar fire added to the deadly mix, the beasts began to go down, one by one.

If the Quatro hadn’t already been injured from the fuel air explosive barrage, Gabe didn’t think he and the others would have been able to stop them in time.

As it was, a slaughter ensued, and the last Quatro to fall did so mere feet from the front rank.

Even then, the shooting didn’t stop—the soldiers continued to send spray after spray of bullets into the Quatro bodies, to ensure they stayed down. After nearly two minutes of that, Bronson raised his hand, and they did stop, then.

The commander marched through the soldiers, coming to a halt at the nearest Quatro. Kicking it to ensure it was dead, Bronson lifted his foot and placed it atop the thing’s paw.

“Excellent work, everyone. But know that this is only the beginning. We have an entire region to clear, and we have two million people who are waiting for us to do it, so that they can have somewhere to live other than a spaceship. We cannot afford to take our time, here. Our supplies will only last so long—we need to settle here, grow food, and find peace. But before peace, there must be war. That war has only just begun.”

The victorious Darkstream soldiers raised their guns into the air and cheered. One of them fired toward the horizon, until Bronson made a cutting gesture across his throat, since that was a highly dangerous thing to do.

For some reason, Gabe didn’t feel like joining in with the cheering. He merely stood there, instead, with his hands at his sides.

**Epilogue**  
**Not Gods but Devils**  
**18 Months Later**

They were calling it Valhalla Station.

Gabe's footsteps echoed against the thin steel of the temporary corridors. The part he walked through was supposed to be the Core, even though it was the only part of the station that yet existed.

Apparently, the board of directors planned for Valhalla to expand into four massive quadrants, and the builders and their robots were hard at work to make that happen.

For now, the Core was divided into dozens of sections, each with a specific function.

Gabe was currently entering the psychiatric wing of sick bay.

There, he found Peter Price, by himself in a locked room. A doctor let Gabe in to visit Price, locking the hatch behind him, so that Gabe would have to use the intercom when he was finished, to ask to be let out.

Price sat on the side of his bed, his hands folded between his legs, eyes on the floor, and mouth slightly agape.

"Price."

Slowly, Peter Price lifted his head until his eyes met Gabe's.

"Roach."

"How've you..." Gabe cleared his throat. "What are they feeding you, in here?"

Price shrugged, his gaze sinking to the floor once more.

Lowering himself into the only chair, Gabe stared hard at the man slumped before him.

Part of him felt angry at Price, for letting himself get this bad. Mostly, he felt only pity, however.

"You know the Quatro don't control the Amblers and Gatherers," Price said. "Right?"

Gabe's breath caught in his throat, and he held it there.

"I think, eventually, all of us realized that," Price went on.

"What are you talking about? Cut it out."

But Price continued, as though Gabe hadn't spoken. "None of us wanted to say it out loud, because that would make it real. So we kept following orders. Kept shooting. We'd already slaughtered hundreds of Quatro, and to stop would have been to acknowledge that we're not soldiers at all, but butchers."

"They attacked *us*, Price. They started this."

"They don't *own* the machines. Some other species created them. The Amblers protect us as much as they protect the Quatro—which is to say, not at all."

"Do you have proof for any of this?"

"Ask Tessa Notaras."

"What does she have to do with it?"

"She helped Bronson trick everyone into thinking the Quatro are more powerful than they

are.”

Gabe rose slowly to his feet. Then he started for the door without another word.

“You know it’s true, Roach,” Price said. “If they owned the Amblers, they’d have sent them at us all at once! Why would they leave the Amblers to roam the wilderness while we bombed their homes?”

When the doctor unlocked the door for him, Gabe slammed it behind him.

Ten minutes after he used his com to ask Notaras to meet him in a corridor between the station’s only functioning landing bay and a cargo hold, he found her there.

“What can I do for you, Petty Officer?” she said, using the new rank Gabe had recently attained.

“Price says you helped Bronson trick us into thinking the Quatro control the Amblers.”

Notaras froze, and the color drained from her face. “Price is delusional.”

“Maybe. But judging by your reaction, he’s right on the money with this one.” Gabe was trying to sound casual, but his voice had a hard edge.

“The Quatro...the Quatro attacked *us*, Roach.”

“One of them attacked Laudano. *One of them*. And this is Laudano we’re talking about, who has a long history of double-crossing people. Besides, it wasn’t that single attack that really got the soldiers riled up, Notaras. It was the idea that the Quatro had sent one of those metal giants against us, to kill our people.”

“That’s *Chief* Notaras to you, Roach,” she said softly.

“Not anymore.” Gabe hadn’t known he was going to say that, but it felt right now that he had.

“What are you talking about?”

“They’re colonizing Alexandria right now. You’re going to go live there.”

“What makes you think you can speak to me like this?”

“Because if you don’t do what I say, I’ll expose you. I’ll tell everyone what you helped Bronson do. And they’ll believe me. You know they will. I’m Gabriel Roach. The first man to step foot on Eresos.”

Notaras stared at him, eyes wide, saying nothing.

“You don’t get to enjoy the fruits of the planet you helped cleanse, Notaras.”

“What about you? You have blood on your hands, too.”

“Because of you. Because of what you made me believe. Trust me—I’ll never attack the Quatro again. I’m done with that, even if Bronson orders me to do it. I’m done, unless the Quatro attack us first. *Actually* attack us, I mean.”

“The Quatro won’t attack,” Notaras said, her voice dripping with bitterness, now. “Our best intel says they’re basically wiped out. And those that are left fear us like gods.”

“Devils,” Gabe said. “Not gods. Devils.” He turned to leave her standing in the corridor. “Get out of my sight. If I see you again, you know what the consequences will be.”

As Gabe walked away, he didn’t feel vindicated, or sad, or tortured...or anything.

He felt hollow, as though he’d finally lost the capacity to feel at all. What he’d just done, in

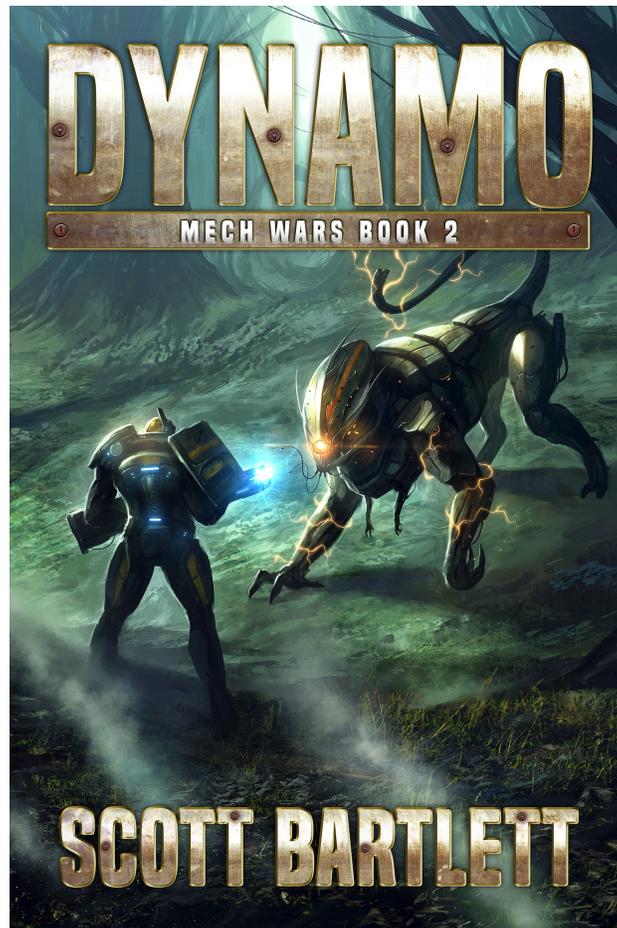
banishing Notaras, had merely been something that needed doing—a chore.

And now that he'd done it, he could move on with his empty life, working for the company that paid him to kill.

*But not Quatro. Not innocent beings. Never again.*

**Thank you for reading!**

Book 2 of Mech Wars is available now. It's titled *Dynamo*, and you can [click here to get it](#).



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