

ZERO

(Mech. chronicles, Book #1 - Revelation)

ADAM MOON

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Part 1:

Jack's Journey

The year was 2299. Jack Peterson graduated high school a month ago and he got a decent enough job at a nearby rock quarry, but it turned out that everything he ever did was for nothing because he just got diagnosed with cancer. It wasn't one of those cute, easily treatable cancers either. It was going to kill him pretty soon.

He knew he needed to tell his dad before it ate him alive. He needed to put together a bucket list soon too. But his bucket list would be a long one. There was so much he wished he could do in life. He was barely eighteen, and even though the life laid out for him wasn't going to be great, it was sure better than no life at all.

First things first: he needed to quit his day job. That would be fun. His boss was a jerk. Scratch that; he'd just stop going in. What could the guy do about his absences but fire him anyway?

Then he needed to tell his dad that he's going to die in a matter of weeks. It'd break his already fragile heart. He lost Jack's mom to cancer right after Jack was born and they both watched in vain as his older brother died of Leukemia. He knew that with a family history like his, he should've expected the worst. He could only hope his dad didn't eat a gun when he was gone, but then again, worst things could happen, like continuing to suffer when all hope was lost.

The next thing he wanted to do was to get laid as often as possible, but that was not likely. He didn't exactly have the time left to wine and dine someone.

He'd love to go into space or visit another planet, but those dreams would never come true now. They probably never would have anyway, given his lowly station in life. Maybe he could stow-away on a transport though? He had a few weeks to think about it. He wouldn't mind dying in

space or on the Martian colony. He'd love to leave the shackles of home to experience one last adventure before he died.

There was no way he could know just how small his dreams were in comparison to what he was about to undertake. And if he did, there was no way he'd ever believe it.

He put his work boots on because he wasn't thinking. He wasn't going to be working anymore. He wasn't ever going back because dead men don't need money. He kicked them off and put on his comfortable shoes. It was scorching hot outside so he went shirtless to avoid succumbing to heat exhaustion. He ate a protein bar for breakfast and looked around the apartment.

Knowing he was going to die soon gave him a new perspective. The apartment looked foreign to him now. His dad was already at work. Empty booze bottles littered the coffee table from last night. He would get over his hangover quick in the heat,

though. It would ooze out of his pores under the unforgiving sun. He felt bad for his poor dad. He was a good man.

A note on the fridge from him said simply:

Jack, take plenty of water today and wear a shirt, for Gods sake. You'll get skin cancer walking around shirtless all day.

That put a wry smile on his face. Sorry dad, he thought, but bone cancer got to me first.

He took the bus to the doctor's office. He'd be getting medication today. But not the good kind that fixes you; this was the other kind, that lubes the transition into the afterlife.

He got off the bus at the next stop. Luckily, it was downtown Milwaukee, so there was plenty to do for a young man running out of life. He could get high or drunk all day. He could make new friends or help the downtrodden. It was so odd for him to know he had such little time left but not knowing what to do with it. He'd have to weigh his options

after seeing the doctor.

He pulled his water bottle out and gulped down half of it. It was a hot one today.

An old homeless lady, leaning against a storefront, watched him from the corner of her eye. She licked her lips and turned from him, too thirsty to witness his enjoyment. He walked over and gave her the bottle. She tried to thank him but he just walked away, leaving his bottle with her. She smelled like a landfill and it made him want to chuck up his own water.

He checked his funds even though he always knew exactly how much cash he had on him at all times. He had enough for a sandwich, a fistful of beers, and a ticket back home.

He stuffed the cash away before anyone saw it. He'd heard of people getting themselves killed for less. One guy last year lost his life because some vagrant wanted his shoes. Apparently, the shoes didn't even fit the guy and when he couldn't sell

them he just threw them away. Life was cheap but it turned out that Jack still put a high value on his own, even though it had become a rapidly perishable commodity.

He took the steps two at a time up to the doctor's office. The building was covered in graffiti.

He had to sidestep a bunch of homeless people on the way up. He was almost certain some of them must have been dead, lying on those steps, but he wasn't about to check.

He got buzzed through the doors, and after following a winding hallway, he took a seat in the waiting area. When the receptionist returned to her desk, she nodded and he told her who he was. That bummed him out because just two days ago he was flirting with that same receptionist, and now she didn't even recognize him. Maybe she did, but now that she knew he was about to die, he no longer mattered to her. He didn't know either way.

He was the only person in the waiting room,

so it kind of pissed him off that he was made to wait for an hour. Dying people should not have to wait around for anything.

When the doctor opened the door, he pasted the phoniest smile he had at his disposal on his face and followed him through to his office. He took a seat and beckoned for him to sit in the opposite chair. He didn't see any pill bottles around and that made him mad too. He'd better not tell him that he had to go somewhere else to have a prescription filled. His time was valuable these days.

His name was Doctor Jacobs, and he asked,

“How are you feeling, Jack?”

“I'm dying.”

“I know, son. But how do you feel today?”

“I don't feel any different yet. I actually feel pretty good.”

Jacobs nodded and scribbled something down on a sheet of paper, clipped to a clipboard.

“Do you have any family?”

“Just my dad. I haven’t told him about the cancer yet.”

“Are you close to your dad?”

That question threw him but he answered it anyway, if only to keep moving things along. “Not really. I mean, he’s a great guy, but he’s always had to work so much just to keep a roof over our heads and food in our mouths that I hardly ever saw him as I was growing up, and now that I have a job too, we never see each other.”

Absently, the doctor mumbled, “That’s good.”

He knew right then that this guy didn’t see him as a human being. He didn’t care that he was about to die.

Jacobs put his clipboard down and rested his elbows on his knees in a conspiratorial fashion. He looked Jack in the eye, and that made him a little uncomfortable.

He asked, “What would you do to defeat the

cancer growing inside of you?”

Jack sighed. “You told me I only have a few weeks left. I’m pretty sure that means that the cancer is too widespread to stop.”

Jacobs smiled and said, “Answer the question.”

“I’d do anything, of course.” He was starting to get angry. Was he trying to sell him something?

He wouldn’t be the first doctor to profit from someone else’s death. Maybe he’d try to send him to some expensive retreat where they’d give him acupuncture and bathe him in incense smoke as his life and his life savings slowly trickled away.

Maybe he was going to try and sell him some snake oil, dressed up as a miracle cure.

Jacobs said, “You can survive this, but it will require more of you than I think you can give.”

Now he had Jack’s attention. This suddenly sounded legit.

“What would I have to do?”

Jacobs sat back and took in a breath. “It can’t be done on Earth, son. We don’t have the equipment here to eradicate your cancer. But it can be done off-world.”

Jack sat up straighter. He’d never been off-world before. No one had except for scientists and rich people. Maybe he’d get to go to the moon or even Mars. He’d heard of a potential colony being looked into on one of the moons around Jupiter or Saturn but that was a long way from becoming a reality. More likely, he was referring to a space station in orbit around one of the planets. It looked like his bucket list was about to get another checkmark if he played his cards right.

“There’s a machine that can regenerate your cells but it’s on planet Epigog 31 out near the edge of the galaxy. It’s run by the Securacell Corporation.”

“Ok.” He was telling him things he knew weren’t possible. No one had managed to travel any

further than the Centauri system, the nearest star system, which was basically in Earth's backyard in regards to the vastness of space. He'd never even heard of Epigog 31.

"It is not cheap to send someone that far out.

It's not cheap to use that machine."

"How is it possible to send me to an alien planet? Technology hasn't even come close to that yet."

"The Securacell Corporation has technology that they do not have here on Earth."

Jack shook his head. Why would a corporation keep technology hidden that would make them money if they announced it to the world? It made no sense, but he kept his doubts to himself because he didn't want the doctor to think he was more trouble than he was worth.

"What would I have to do?"

"You'd have to give yourself to the corporation."

“So I’d be some kind of indentured servant?

I could do that. How long before my contract runs out?” He was starting to get excited. This was an escape route that wasn’t there just moments ago. He’d get to live.

“It wouldn’t. If they saved your life, you’d be expected to do their bidding for the rest of your life.”

Jack nodded, waiting for him to say more, but he didn’t. Could he become a slave? Was it worth it? “What would they require of me?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. But I need an answer now. The transport leaves in two hours.”

“Are you kidding me? I need more time to think about this. I need to ask what my dad thinks.”

“No time for that. It’s now or never, kid. I can’t tell you how fortuitous it was that you chose me as your oncologist. I can’t begin to tell you how lucky you are that you weren’t late for our appointment today. The stars have aligned in such a

way as to save your life. Will you let fate save you?"

"I guess so."

"Good. Sign these waivers and let's get you to that transport."

The doctor drove him across town in his car.

Cars were a luxury, but he was a doctor, so he was probably used to such luxuries.

Jack tried to call his dad to say goodbye and tell him he loved him, but he couldn't get a signal.

By the time the car came to a stop beside a large aircraft hangar, he gave up and wrote a quick note to him, explaining everything. He scribbled his own address on it and told the doctor to make sure it got to his dad. Jacobs promised he'd get it there.

Jack stepped from the car and took a deep breath. He regretted it right away. The air was hot and putrid. It burned his lungs when he exhaled. He wondered if he'd ever breathe in Earth air again.

"Will I ever be allowed to return home?"

“If Securacell wants you to, then yes.”

There were things he'd miss about Earth, but not many. He missed his dad already, but when he got the note, he'd understand that this was his only option. He was pretty sure his dad would rather have an absent son than a dead son.

As they walked towards the big hangar doors, the doctor asked, “Have you ever heard of stasis?”

Oh shit. Stasis was bad. It was an unruly technology with mixed results. When it went wrong, death was imminent and horrible. But if he didn't go through with this, he'd be dead in a few weeks anyway.

He said, “I've heard of it. I know it has faults, but they don't worry me at this point.” The last part was a lie, told more to himself than the doctor.

“Good. There's no other way to get to Epigog 31. It's too far out to live through the

journey so you'll have to be put on ice. I'll need you to sign another waiver for it, though."

You didn't really get *put on ice* as the doctor put it. But it was a popular euphemism and those things die hard. In reality, stasis was achieved by a cocktail of chemicals that induced rapid hibernation inside a perfect vacuum. The temperatures did drop inside the stasis pods, but there was no ice involved. In this way, you could travel for years and only age by a few minutes or less. And the entire process was supposed to hurt like hell.

Once inside the hangar, Jack saw the ship that was to be his savior. It was big, about the same size as a jumbo jet. But the doctor was right; the ship looked like nothing he'd ever seen before. The technology far more advanced than the typical Mars or Moon shuttles he'd seen take off. He could only imagine why the corporation was keeping its interstellar technology to itself.

To his surprise, there were other people

milling around, signing forms and talking excitedly.

Doctor Jacobs whispered to him, “They’re all terminally ill too. They’re all going for the same treatment you are.”

Jack hadn’t even considered the possibility.

In his imagination, he’d be going alone. This made him feel a little safer in his decision.

He filled out the stasis waiver without even reading it through. What did he have to lose anyway?

He was about to ask Jacobs how long the journey would take when a girl around his age put her hand on his back and asked, “What do you have then?”

He turned around. She was cute as a button, with fluffy blond hair and dark eyes.

He said, “Huh?” because he was awkward with girls.

“What is it that’s killing you?”

“Um, I have cancer.”

She smiled and said excitedly, “Me too.”

Then she held her hand up for a high-five. It was

too surreal. You shouldn't congratulate someone for having cancer. You shouldn't enjoy the affinity. He gave her a weak high-five just because it would have been rude not to.

She said, "Look around this place. I bet no one in here is over twenty five. I think Securacell likes 'em young."

He searched the surrounding faces. She was right.

"I'm Stacey. What's your name?"

"I'm Jack."

She gave him a quick hug and walked away.

Over her shoulder she said, "Good to meet you Jack.

I'll see you again on Epigog 31, I hope."

He awkwardly replied, "Ok then. Um, thanks."

Doctor Jacobs shook his head at him. Jack got the meaning: he was a loser with women.

When the big drop-down door to the ship opened up, the hangar went silent.

Doctor Jacobs barely said, “Bye,” before leaving him to his fate. Half the hangar emptied out and he could only assume the ones that left were all doctors or sponsors of some kind.

The rest of them started to board the ship in single file.

To his utter horror, he saw Jacobs pull the folded note to Jack’s dad from his pocket and crumple it into a ball before letting it fall from his fist. He’d only met his doctor a few days ago, but nothing from their meetings would’ve suggest that he was so cold-hearted.

He considered getting out of line to chase the doctor down for an explanation but he was being shoved in the back and there was no way to get out of the huddle. The dread grew in his heart until he got inside the ship. Then his focus changed in a heartbeat. The stasis pods looked old and in various stages of disrepair. How could they survive stasis in pods so filthy and over-used? In fact, he

had no idea how long they'd even be in stasis. He

had no clue how far away Epigog 31 was.

A handful of uniformed men and women

awaited them inside the ship and assigned each of

them their own pod. Jack's was a piece of shit. The

glass faceplate had cobwebs across it and the metal

body was rusting in spots. He quickly checked

behind it just to be sure that all the hoses were

connected.

The uniformed guy that led him to it got

agitated with him and forcefully shoved him inside

the pod. He would've struggled but it caught him by

surprise. The guy slammed the door shut and then

fiddled with some switches.

Jack pushed against the door to test it, and

sure enough, it was locked. The air smelled of farts

and raw sewage. A wrapper rustled around beneath

his feet but there wasn't enough room in the pod for

him to bend over to pick it up. It looked like a food

wrapper of some kind. He watched as all of the

terminally ill were ushered to their pods. He couldn't see Stacy. He thought if he had seen her, it would've made him feel better about his predicament.

The trip could take anywhere from a few weeks to several years, for all he knew. Any more than a few weeks outside of stasis would lead to his death from cancer, so he knew the trip was probably at least that long, or else why put them under in the first place? But years in stasis was equally dangerous. He hoped the corporation had advanced stasis technology too. Otherwise, to get them to a star system he'd never even heard of could take thousands or millions of years using current technology, and that long in stasis was a frightening proposition.

Why hadn't he asked the doctor about the duration of the trip before now? Maybe he avoided asking because stasis was his only option and he didn't want it to be a poor one. He didn't know. He

usually wasn't so careless.

He yelled out when something sharp punctured his neck. It was a syringe filled with the chemical cocktail that preceded stasis. He tried to claw at it, but his arms were already going dead. He felt sluggish. His breathing slowed and he slumped against the wall. The back wall moved forward and held him up. A headrest pushed down on his head from above, holding it still. He felt the sidewalls cinch against him, and then his thoughts went out like a light.

He was lying on a gurney when his eyes fluttered open. The bright light was obnoxious, so he closed them back up as tight as he could.

Someone laid a hand on his chest and said something to him but the words were all jumbled together, impossible to decipher. He drifted away lazily.

He woke up with a start. His heart was racing and he was already sitting bolt upright. He

looked around the room. It was small, white, and it was empty except for him and his gurney. The only door out was closed. There was something ominous about that door being closed.

Only then did his memories come flooding back. He had been revived from his journey across the stars. He was a bonafide space traveler now.

A kindly face of an old man swam into view.

He asked, “How do you feel?”

“I’m starting to feel better.”

“I’m doctor Henshaw. Do you know how long you were out?”

“No.”

“You were in stasis for a little over eight hundred years.”

“Oh shit!” He wanted to ask about his dad but he was dead already if he’d been asleep for that long. He wanted to ask about the state of the Earth, but he couldn’t formulate the appropriate question.

He wanted to ask if they’d already removed his

cancer. Instead he asked, “How is that girl Stacey doing? Did she make it too?”

Doctor Henshaw looked at him quizzically.

No doubt he expected a more thoughtful question to pass through his lips. “I don’t know who you’re talking about, but if she came here with you she’s fine.”

He tried to sit up but Henshaw put a hand on his chest. “You need to relax. We still need to get you prepped for the operation.” Henshaw was weak but Jack allowed him to lay him back down.

“I thought you’d cured us already.”

“You’re still recovering from stasis. We’ll get to work on your cancer once we’re sure all of the chemicals are out of your system.”

“Is this Epigog 31? I can’t wait to see it.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait to see the planet. We’re in orbit around one of its moons.”

“Then why did you wake me? I was supposed to stay in stasis until I got to the machine

that'll cure me. What's going on?"

"The machine you speak of is here, onboard this space station. It's a delicate piece of equipment that works optimally in low to zero gravity so we can't use it on Epigog. Don't worry. You'll see it soon. Then you'll get to see the mother planet."

He had no idea what Henshaw was talking about, but his mind was too foggy to dwell on it.

Henshaw continued, "If you ever get back up here, you'll have to tell me about it. I've heard so many wonderful stories about the surface, but I always have time to hear one more."

Jack stared at him, trying to figure out if he was kidding. He wasn't. "Why have you never been to the surface?"

"Oh, I've been in space too long."

He thought he meant that his bones would be too brittle or his heart too weak from zero-G's, but that couldn't be right because there was some kind of artificial gravity in the space station. At

least there was in the part of it they were in. He could feel it.

Henshaw must've seen the confusion on his face because he said, "I have no immune system. My body hasn't been subjected to the same illnesses and contagions that affect others living near one another. If my white blood cells ever had to get into a fight against a foreign contaminant they'd just roll over and give up. If I went to Epigog 31 I'd need to wear a space suit to survive. Weird, huh?"

Jack wanted to tell him how awful he thought it was that he'd never get the chance to breathe in natural air or see a sun set over a mountain or swim in an ocean, but he thought it might upset him so he kept his mouth shut.

"How long have you been here?"

He ignored the question. He acted like it was because he had work to do but Jack suspected he just didn't want to talk about it.

Henshaw said, "I'm going to administer a

sedative to help you sleep. You should be fully recovered from stasis by the time you wake back up. I'll check in on you from time to time and then we can talk some more.”

Jack felt a tightening in his veins and then his eyelids felt like they were made of lead as the sedative worked its magic.

He was pretty groggy when he woke up the next time. His head hurt and he felt light and discombobulated. The sedative must've still been coursing through his veins.

His eyes opened mechanically, like they were being forced open by an invisible hand. The first thing he noticed was that he was in a different room than the last one. This one was darker, with weird contraptions lining the walls all around him. His body was held in a standing position and his head was stuck in some kind of brace, because he couldn't pivot it up or down. For a second he wondered if he was back in stasis, but that was

stupid because he was awake.

He couldn't feel his toes and when he tried to wriggle them, he found that he couldn't. Worried that he was paralyzed, he moved his fingers. The sounds of a dozen miniature electric drills came to his ears. He didn't know what that meant but he was relieved to feel his fingers moving.

He tried to loosen up whatever restraints had him fastened so tight to his upright moorings but they held fast, despite his struggles.

He cried out for help but the voice was odd.

It was his voice, just more strangled and monotone than he was used to.

He started to panic. He heard another voice cry out in the darkened room, from very far away.

He turned his head as much as he could but the darkness was too pervasive to make out who or what had made the sound.

He heard a soft click and then his eyes slammed shut like a vise. He had only a second to

ponder what had happened because a moment later his brain followed suit and shut down like an appliance being switched off.

He awoke in a brightly lit room, all alone.

This room was small, like a hospital room, with gadgets and medical crap all over the place. He was still anchored in an upright position but he felt a little better about it this time. Maybe that was because he was getting used to it, or, more likely, he felt calmer because the lights were up.

He heard a pneumatic door slide away and then heard soft footfalls approach. Doctor Henshaw's kindly old face swam in front of his view. "How do you feel?"

He said, "I feel like we already had this conversation," but his voice had that odd quality to it like before.

Henshaw said sadly, "You must be confused.

I need to debrief you before I can let you down from there, okay?"

Jack nodded lazily. He had no clue what he was talking about.

“Your body is being treated as we speak, in the other room.”

He had to take a minute to make sure he'd heard him correctly. “What the hell are you talking about? I'm right here.”

“Your mind is here, Jack. Your body is undergoing treatment elsewhere.”

He wriggled his fingers again. Sure enough, he felt them move. “Bullshit. I can feel my body. I just can't see it because you've got me latched in tight as a drum.”

“That's not your body, son.”

Angrily he blurted out, “Then whose body would you have me believe I'm inside?”

“Not who. What.”

“What?”

“I've uploaded your consciousness into a robotic unit. You can control it with just your

thoughts. It has already been calibrated to your unique thought patterns. We call them mechs.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Let me down.”

“I’ll release your head restraints so that you may see for yourself that I’m speaking the truth.”

He reached behind him and yanked on a cord. His head felt suddenly lighter. He was able to move it around now. He immediately looked down and to his horror he saw mechanical legs, feet, and a metal torso. He shook his head out of sheer confusion. The body was bulky, like it belonged to a giant.

Henshaw said, “Turn your head.”

Jack was staring off into space, disbelievingly. His mind wasn’t ready for any of this.

“Do it. Try it for me.”

He turned his head because it was far easier to take directions than it was to try and unscramble the myriad confusing thoughts rifling through his

tired head.

To his surprise, his head kept turning. He had to make a conscious decision to make it stop once it had made a full panoramic circuit of the room. It spun all the way around, like an owl's head, except he didn't need to spin it back. He knew he could've let it spin and spin like a helicopter rotor.

Doctor Henshaw clapped like a child.

Jack wanted to smack him in his kindly, eager face just to make himself feel better.

“Why did you do this to me?”

“You belong to the corporation, mind and body and soul. Why let your mind fester inside a body that's undergoing treatment when they can evict your mind and put it to work?”

“Because that's the sane thing to do. How long does the damn treatment take?”

“In your case, it'll take awhile.”

“How long?”

“Maybe ten months, but if there are

complications, it could take as long as two years. So get used to your new body because you're not going anywhere else anytime soon."

"I didn't agree to any of this crap. Put me back in my own body. Screw the procedure."

"Many patients say the same things. It cost a fortune to ship your dying ass out here. No one's going to just fly you back to earth because you suddenly had a change of heart. If you want out, we'll stop all treatment and allow you to live out your final days on this space station."

Jack shook his head angrily. At least he thought he was conveying anger through his robotic features. He wasn't really sure.

Henshaw said, "This is part of the deal.

When your body is cured, you're free to go. It's actually a good deal if you think about it. The corporation could have enslaved you for life and you would have probably signed on the dotted line anyway. In this way, you just have to do their

bidding until your body is ready.”

Jack nodded absently. He was right. He had considered giving his entire life away in exchange for an extension. “What do you think they’ll make me do?”

“I’m just the technician, son. That’s way above my pay grade.”

“I thought you were a doctor.”

“I’m both. But a mere doctor doesn’t have the skills I do to extract and repurpose consciousness. I consider myself a technician first and foremost.”

“Can I get down from here? If I’m going to be stuck in this robot, I’d at least like to test it out.”

He was amazed by how quickly he had attuned to his new predicament. But that was his nature. He wasn’t exactly happy with it, but what choice did he have?

“Sure. Make it quick though. The reprogramming session starts soon and you can’t

miss it.”

“What the hell is that?” It sounded bad enough to unnerve him. He didn’t like the sounds of reprogramming.

“Son, your world is about to expand exponentially. Your understanding of our place in the cosmos is about to grow ten fold.

Reprogramming is just an academic way of saying you need to be educated in the worst way.”

Now he was even more nervous.

Henshaw reached behind him and a moment later Jack’s body dropped a couple of inches, his immense metal feet hitting the floor with a loud clang.

He took a tentative step forward and heard those weird little sounds again, like a dozen miniscule power tools were being used nearby.

The sounds irritated Henshaw. “This damn thing is too new to be making God awful noises like that. Give me a minute.”

Jack stood still as Henshaw injected lubrication all over his metal body, at various points. He paid particular attention to his knees and hands. Then he got to work with a set of tiny screw drivers, tightening here and loosening there. Within a few minutes, he said, "Give it a shot."

He took another step forward, but silently this time, besides the thud the footfall made. He flexed his fingers noiselessly too.

Henshaw smiled and said, "Wander around. If anything feels strange to you let me know. I had some problems with the gyroscopes a couple of times so let me know how your balance feels, okay?"

He walked back and forth, from one end of the room to the next. He spun around quickly and paid close attention to his balance. The gyroscopes were working fine.

Finally, Henshaw said, "Time to get you to the session. Everyone else is waiting for you." As

an aside, he said, “Hey, that girl Stacey is there too. She’s a cute little thing. Now I know why you were so interested to find out about her.”

If Jack wasn’t a robotic mech he might have blushed. But the embarrassment was fleeting, replaced by a steely dread that would’ve seeped into his bones if he’d had any. He had to live the next several months to two years as an appliance, albeit, a pretty cool looking one. He didn’t know how to process such bizarre information so he just followed Henshaw’s lead and pushed his concerns to the darkest, most hidden recesses of his mind. He walked from the little hospital room/mechanic shop and he stomped along after him.

As they walked he said, “I thought you said I’d be going to Epigog 31. Am I still going to go there?” He was starting to think everything he’d been told was a lie. He knew there was little he could do about it, but he wanted the doctor to be clear.

“That’s where your training will take place.

As soon as we deem you fit to move on to the next stage, you’ll be taking a shuttle down to the surface.”

“How will you know if I’m fit to move on to that stage?”

“You’ll see. There’s always one who can’t take it.”

That was an ominous thing to say but it had him excited to see what was next.

Around the corner and at the end of the corridor, they came to a halt at a doorway. Henshaw looked back at him, smiled, and then he opened it.

Inside the large room was a sight right out of a horror movie. There were about two dozen massive robots. Jack jumped backwards with fright until he realized he was one of them. In fact, they all looked identical to him besides a single variation in color. Some of them were silver and black, like him, while the other half were silver and blue.

For the first time, he got to see Henshaw stand next to one and he realized just how big they all were in comparison to flesh and blood people. They were massive, with feet the size of shoe boxes and hands as big as a toilet seat.

The mechs were all standing, facing the front of the room. Each one of them turned and watched as Henshaw waved Jack to a spot where he was expected to stand. He wanted to ask around and see how everyone was doing, but he got the sense that they were all equally as mortified as he was, and therefore in no mood to make small talk.

Henshaw walked to the front of the room and addressed them all. “A representative of the corporation you all now work for will be with us shortly to debrief you.”

Jack nodded, as did most of the other mechs but one solitary voice cried out in a monotone inflection, “I can’t do this anymore. I just can’t. Someone has to get me out of this thing. I’m

freaking out in here.”

Henshaw shook his head sadly and pulled out a contraption. He scrolled around with his finger on a screen none of them could see and then, right in the middle of his freak-out, the mech stopped and his head hung low.

Henshaw said, “He isn’t the first and he won’t be the last. He will be reconditioned. He won’t like how that feels and neither will any of the rest of you should you decide you just can’t handle your new situation. I hope the rest of this group deals with this with a bit more composure. You are all super soldiers. Act like it.”

A few heads nodded, but Jack was flabbergasted. What did Henshaw mean when he said he’d be reconditioned? Had all of them already been conditioned for this before they were woken up?

A woman in a pants suit walked in and all metal heads turned her way. She clearly enjoyed the

attention as she lit up with a big phony, yet infectious smile. She waved the doctor off with a flick of her wrist and he obediently took a seat off to the side while she took up residence, front and center.

“Welcome, recruits. Your lives are about to change forever, and I hope, for the better. While we work on getting each and every one of your bodies back up to optimal health, we require your services. As you can see, you’ve been supplied with top of the line technology to flourish in your new roles as agents of the corporation. The corporation I speak of is called Securacell, but since it’s the only corporation within several hundred light years, we all just call it the corporation. Feel free to do the same.”

A few heads nodded as she took the pause to break out that fake smile again.

“Once you’re trained up, you’ll each be stationed throughout the quadrant. Some of you will

pick up security details for various diplomats.

Others will be required to maintain order on our penal colony. A few lucky fellows will even be given access to corporate headquarters to act as security.”

Heads nodded, so Jack just knew she'd smile again, but this time she didn't. She looked them over carefully and continued, “I am about to divulge information to you that few human beings in the galaxy know about. I'm about to blow your little minds.”

Henshaw stood up and walked past her, right out the door.

She waited until he left and then said, “We humans are not alone in the universe. There are at least a dozen known intelligent alien civilizations in this quadrant of the galaxy alone.”

Now Jack was intrigued. He'd expected to one day hear about the discovery of a newfound intelligent alien life, but so far, every probe and

human excursion had only ever discovered sea foam and sludge and moss-like crap. It was all mundane and passé. But humanity held out hope that one day they'd find something more advanced, with a real brain. Apparently that day had come.

She said, "And the best of all is this: we have made contact with one such alien civilization and it is friendly. In fact, we found that we have more in common with one another than any of our brightest scientists could've ever imagined possible. They are bipedal, reproduce sexually, have a head with two eyes and a mouth, and their language is so structurally similar to human languages that they were able to construct translators so that we could communicate with them."

A mech stepped forward and said, "I might need to be reconditioned. I'm freaking out here.

Where's Henshaw?"

She smiled ruefully and pulled her very own contraption out. She swirled her finger across its

surface and the excitable robot shut off like its plug had been yanked.

She said, “Before I introduce the alien ambassador, does anyone else feel like panicking?”

A female voice called out, “One of them is coming here? Is he dangerous? Will he kill us?”

She stared at the mech offender and then she shut her off too.

“Are you done? Can the rest of you handle this?”

They all nodded even though Jack wasn't sure he felt altogether safe anymore. But what choice did he have? If he said he couldn't handle it, they'd recondition him and he'd probably then have to go through all of this again anyway. At least that's what he thought.

Plus, he had to admit, he was super excited to see what the hell this thing was going to look like.

She said loudly, “We're ready, doctor. Bring in the ambassador.”

Only then did Jack realize she'd never once introduced herself, like they were somehow beneath her. Maybe they were. Apparently, there was a lot he still had to learn. That realization faded away when the beast followed Henshaw through the doorway.

It was just familiar enough to be relatable but weird enough to evoke a couple of gasps from the room. It was tall and bulky. To Jack's surprise, it wore clothing but not like anything he'd ever seen before. Its head was large and didn't seem to suit its body. Its skin was a milky blue color, like a cloudy sky, and its eyes were far too big. The eyes were what most of the mechs were staring at in fear and shock. They were as big as footballs and so black it looked like you could reach right into them. The mouth was a mess. It opened and closed like a butt hole, widening and then shrinking to nothing. Inside was nothing that made much sense. No teeth were visible but there was a cluster of colorful bumps

that jutted from within, where you'd expected to see only shadow and darkness.

It had two legs just like the lady in the pants suit had said, but they weren't exactly like those of a human. They were thick with musculature and segmented by way too many knees that made it look like it was bobbing along on a lazy river when it walked. She'd said they reproduced sexually, so Jack had to wonder if there was a weird alien dick where the legs met.

It took her place at the center of the front of the room and she joined Henshaw, sitting down, placing her hands in her lap like a good little girl.

The alien spoke and a part of Jack's mind opened up. Its language was a cacophony of hisses and grunts, whistles and squawks. Somehow it managed to make all of those ragged sounds seem melodious. But they were absolutely foreign to Jack's ears until his robotic programming opened a hole in his mind and translated for him. The guttural

alien din soon coalesced into words he was starting to understand.

It said, "Can you all understand me?"

That was a stupid question, because how could you respond if you couldn't?

It repeated, "Do you understand me yet?"

Jack nodded because he didn't know what else to do. Others soon followed suit until the entire room was full of nodding mechs.

"Good. I'm the ambassador of my people on this space station. We call ourselves Beetars. My name is Quiss. Welcome, recruits. Let's get all of you up to speed." The mechs all nodded, completely dumbfounded, and it continued, "My race controls this quadrant of space. We are a peaceful species and we've been working hand in hand with humanity for over forty years. We have a harmonious, symbiotic relationship with your people which has only grown stronger the longer it lasts."

The lady in the pants suit smiled like a lunatic, which could've made Jack uncomfortable, but it did the opposite. It put him at ease because she adored the damn alien. If she adored it, maybe it was okay.

It continued, "We Beetars maintain peace even when warlike races rear up in our galaxy, hell bent on conquest and destruction. We bring order to chaos. Ultimately, it's our goal to further our knowledge by exchanging ideas and philosophies with all we come into contact with. Humanity approached us with similar ideals, so here we are, working together for the betterment of all."

A mech yelled out, ""Which planet are you from?"

Quiss smiled, which would've made Jack puke if he had a stomach or the contents to puke up. It wasn't gross; it was just too odd for his still stunned brain to accept.

Quiss said, "We do not divulge our planet's

location to anyone for fear of reprisals. We often have no choice but to maintain peace by force.

There are terrorists who would attack my planet if they knew where to find it.”

“But we’re not terrorists.”

“I know that. You’re the closest thing we have to like-minded allies. But we also have a long tradition of secrecy that has served us well. Perhaps in time we’ll divulge the location of our home world to mankind, but today is not that day.”

That made sense to Jack. If all the jerks in the galaxy wanted to take a potshot at you, it was probably best if they couldn’t find you in their sights.

Quiss said, “You are here so that we can heal your broken bodies. While our machinery works its magic, we ask that you repay us in kind with your service. I believe that’s a small price to pay for an extension of life. The mechanical units you are inside right now were designed by my

people and then tweaked to perfection by your own scientists. You are in control of the most formidable war machines in the known galaxy. I hope you appreciate the gravity of that.”

Jack wasn't sure he did but he nodded anyway.

It continued, “Most of you will repay your debt with menial guard duty or a few high profile security details. A few of you will qualify for corporate privileges whereby you'll be allowed to serve out your terms under the protective umbrella of your Securacell corporation, guarding entryways and protecting high ranking corporate officers.” It paused and looked at each of them in turn. “Two of you lucky humans will be stationed on my warship to act as hired help.”

The pants suit bitch stood up and clapped.

The alien regarded her quizzically until she retook her seat.

It turned back to them and said, “We've

never before entrusted such a unique privilege to your people. No alien creature has ever stepped foot on a warship. The two who get selected are truly blessed individuals.”

The mention of a warship confused Jack. If these aliens were peace loving, then why did they have warships? Of course he was just being naïve. You couldn't force peace upon others without backing it up with a threat of some kind. He wasn't sure if he wanted to get warship duty or not. He still didn't know if it was preferable to the other available duties. And the idea of being surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of aliens like Quiss made him nervous.

Quiss said, “Now that you know the state of this section of the galaxy, let's get your training underway. You'll be transported to Epigog 31 for testing. Good luck to each of you and I look forward to working with you in the future.”

With that, Quiss nodded awkwardly to pants

suit and then waited for Henshaw to escort him from the room.

The pants suit lady was giddy when she addressed the room. “This is a turning point in history. I hope you understand the significance of what just transpired here today. Two of you lucky bastards will get to board a bonafide Beetar warship. Let’s hope there are two recruits here who are up to the task. Let’s get you prepped to go landside.”

Jack asked, “How long does training last?” hopeful that she wouldn’t shut him down for interrupting her.

“Some of you will make it through training faster than others. I heard of one recruit who made it through in less than two weeks, Earth time, but most need at least a month. A few washouts fail to make the cut at all but that’s very rare. I doubt anyone in this room will fail training. Otherwise, training will help us place you in a vocation for the duration of your physical therapy. But be ready to

be tested to your limits. Just remember what the rewards are and you'll do fine."

Jack couldn't for the life of him figure out what those rewards were unless she was still referring to the warship duty. Then again, the ultimate reward for him was getting a perfectly healthy body back at some point in the future. That must've been what she meant, but he was so overwhelmed by what had transpired that he'd lost sight of it.

He wanted nothing more than to gaze upon his human body because he had a feeling he wouldn't be seeing it again for a long time, and when he finally did get reunited with it, he suspected he'd be changed in fundamental ways.

He cursed Doctor Jacobs under his breath.

Jacobs must've known about the existence of the Beetars. He must have known that he'd be interred inside a robot while his body healed. Jack understood why he'd kept that information to

himself, because if he'd told him he might not have agreed to participate.

When Pants suit was done with her speech, she left them without saying goodbye. The room felt empty without her. Technically she had been the only human being in the room, so that made sense.

Jack turned around to face the other mechs.

“Is one of you Stacey?” It hardly mattered in the grand scheme of things, but he suddenly had a growing urge to connect with someone else.

A blue and silver mech waved its hand in the air and split the crowd to stand beside him.

She said, “This is a total mind-job, huh?”

He nodded, thankful she wasn't one of the robots that got shut off. “An hour ago I had no idea aliens existed or that they were our long time friends.”

“It seems like a one-sided friendship to me.

They order and we obey.”

He looked at her with genuine concern.

“Stacey, we have no choice in any of this so it’ll probably be better if you get used to it.”

She nodded her mammoth head and said,

“You’re probably right. I don’t know enough about any of this to judge them yet.”

He noticed a few other mechs cozying together, no doubt trying to make one last connection before their worlds got flipped on their heads.

Only then did he notice Doctor Henshaw standing before them. He must’ve slipped back inside silently. He said, “A transport is being prepped just now. Follow me.”

If he had a heart it would have been tripping along at a mile a minute. If he had bones they would’ve quaked. He wanted to tell Henshaw he wasn’t going. He wanted to curl up in a comfortable bed and shut his eyes to this new, strange reality he suddenly found himself in. Instead he followed the

crowd as it surged after Henshaw towards the transport to Epigog 31.

Henshaw fastened each of them to the walls of the transport ship. In reality, the thing looked more like a cargo crate than a ship, but Jack assumed you didn't need frills when the payload was technically non-organic.

Henshaw gave a short speech about how lucky they were and about all the weird and wonderful things they'd see that few humans had ever seen before, and then he left the transport, closing it up behind him.

He started to worry, but that was fleeting because as soon as the interior lights of the ship dimmed from the power gulp necessary to start it up, he felt a pressure in the middle of his back and his consciousness turned off.

He awoke to a human face. The face belonged to a man in his mid fifties. He had many wrinkles and deep-set blue eyes. Older women

would have found him handsome. He backed up and said, “This is Epigog 31, son. Take as much time as you need to adjust. Then I’ll uncouple you from your restraints.”

Jack nodded his big stupid metal head and the guy moved on to the mammoth mech beside him, saying the exact same thing.

He could see sunlight stream through the hatch in the back of the ship and he could smell the hot air wafting inside. He had no idea why he needed a sense of smell but he appreciated it at that moment.

The guy who’d woken him up stood in the center of the ship. He addressed the opposite wall. “Who’s ready to come down?”

When heads nodded, he unlatched them from their secured mounts and pointed towards the back hatch. They obediently traipsed off in that direction, no doubt nervous or even petrified. None of them knew what training would involve. Would

it be dangerous? Could they die?

A few scared mechs remained on that wall when he turned around and asked Jack's wall who was ready to get started. Jack nodded first so he unhooked him. He looked around for Stacey but it was impossible to tell which one she was. Then the old dude impatiently put a hand on him and pointed towards the back of the ship. Jack nodded again and walked that way.

At the opening of the hatch, a man and a woman were outside. They waved in a beckoning motion so he walked down the steel ramp and right up to them. They were outside in a desert, brown and tan and dry as a bone. The moon he'd been orbiting was in full view in the bright sunny sky.

The air smelled sterile but the climate was temperate. It had been a long time since he'd felt the sun on him without worrying about cancer or heat stroke, but this time the sun was gentle and he had no skin for it to attack.

The woman said, “Get out of the damn way, Recruit. You’re not the only one getting off of this transport.”

The guy said, “Get in line with the rest, stupid.”

Jack had been so preoccupied with the sky and the weather that he’d barely noticed the cluster of confused mechs huddled behind the two humans. He walked towards them, partly for companionship but mainly so the dickheads would stop berating him.

He approached them and then turned around to face the same direction and watch the rest depart the transport ship.

A masculine voice whispered from behind.

“How are we supposed to train in the damn desert?”

It was a question directed at no one in general, so no one answered.

A blue robot emerged from the ship and walked right past the two agitated greeters. It took

up a place beside him and said, "It's me, Stacey.

Are you Jack?"

"How'd you know?"

"I guessed." She pointed her metal finger at her chest plate and then ripped a deep scratch in the surface of the metal with astonishing ease. "Now you'll know me when you see me." Then she put the same finger on his metal chest plate and etched a similar groove into it. "Now I'll be able to tell you from the rest."

The human greeters must have heard the screeching from metal on metal and so they scolded her in front of everyone. "Do not damage Securacell property. This is a final warning to all of you. Those units are prototypes, and in as much, they're considered priceless. Do I make myself clear?"

Stacey's mouth transformed into a smile which, to that point, Jack didn't know they could do. She said, "It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

When the guy turned his attentions back to

the hatch of the ship, she elbowed him in the side and smirked.

The faces of the robotic units were strangely malleable and human-like; at least in that they had a mouth right around where a human mouth should be, and eyes and ears that closely resembled those of a human. He had no idea why that was important.

Maybe it was so they didn't freak out. Maybe it was so they never forgot their humanity. Or maybe the designers just thought it was a nice aesthetic touch.

He was getting bored by the time the final reluctant mech exited the transport ship. It joined them and then the two human greeters parted so that the guy who'd woken them up could face them all.

He had a cold detachment to him that wasn't out of place in the sterile desert of an alien planet.

He said, "I'm Commander Delacourt.

Welcome to Epigog 31, Recruits. You've already been debriefed about the nature of mankind's place in the universe. I understand how stressful that must

have been. But we're here to show you your unique place in that universe. This is where it gets serious. This training will test all of you; separating the wheat from the chaff. Training is the only way we'll know what you're capable of and which assignments to grant each of you."

He pointed to his left and said, "A lift is coming for us. It will take us a thousand feet below the surface to your new home."

A mech to Jack's right asked, "Why do we need to go underground? I'm kind of claustrophobic."

"Son, no one here cares about your fears.

You will do as you're told and keep your mouth shut. These fine sands on the surface wreak havoc on your bodies. Training up here would cause most of you to shut down after enough time. I trust that this will be the last time I am questioned. From now on you will all do as I say. Do you understand?"

Delacourt was a dick but the mech nodded

because there was now no doubt that he was in control.

A rumble in the ground made its way up Jack's thick metal legs. The sound that accompanied it was faint, like a distant engine. And then the sand to their right rose up slowly like a hill growing before their eyes. It fell away in waves, revealing the lift that had disturbed it. The lift was about forty feet long on each side and twenty feet tall. Delacourt and his two minions led the way when the big double doors split open.

Jack filed in first and was immediately jammed into the corner by the mechs who filed in afterwards. He noticed that his head had no clearance from the ceiling of the lift. The human instructors, or whatever they were, got inside a steel cage and it didn't take too long for Jack to figure out why. As the lift filled to capacity, metal scraped on metal and mechs started to shove one another for more space. The steel cage was knocked into twice

by lumbering mechs before Delacourt yelled, “If everyone’s in, stop moving. We’ll be beneath the surface in less than a minute.”

Then he pressed a button on a handheld device and the sun dimmed as the doors jammed shut.

Jack felt the lift descend through the sands.

He’d been through a lot in a very short amount of time, but this was the worst. It felt like they were going to the bowels of hell and there was no way out.

Only then did he realize why they’d woken them up for this when it would’ve been so much easier to take them below ground and then turn them on: they wanted them to see how secluded they actually were. It wasn’t enough that they technically weren’t even human anymore. They wanted to make sure they knew there was no escape, even as a mind in a machine. The beauty about volunteering for something was that it was easy to

back out of it, but they found out with a dark certainty that that wasn't the case for them. They were in this until it was said otherwise.

It did no good when Jack tried to convince himself that this was his decision and that it would benefit him in the end.

The doors slid open when they bottomed out and before them was nothing but black, pocked here and there with inadequate strings of lights that seemed to only emphasize how dark the caverns were.

Delacourt yelled at them to exit the elevator when they dawdled too long. Him and his two companions filed out after them and then led the way down the labyrinthine corridors. The rough hewn rock walls were damp, which surprised Jack, since they were under a desert, but he understood his surprise was rooted in an inadequate understanding of geology. Just because all was barren above didn't mean it had always been that

way. For all he knew the dampness could've come from a monsoon that happened on the surface a million years ago.

They reached a heavy blast door at the end of the corridor and Delacourt made a show of slowly opening it. He walked through and waited for the rest of them to join him. Through that door was another world.

There was gunfire all around them.

Explosions lit up the room, echoing off the walls.

There was a war between robots going on right before their eyes. The room was huge, as big as a sports stadium, with bright lights illuminating it.

The air was far less harsh. Jack didn't need to breathe, but his mech body could taste its superior quality through whichever sensors did that for him.

Three of his fellow mechs hit the dirt defensively. Stacey was one of them. Jack noticed that the others had crouched down reflexively. So as not to be left out, he bent his knees and took up a

defensive position too.

Delacourt smiled and yelled over the commotion, “Good. You’ve all passed the preliminary test.”

The warfare slowed to a halt and the din became silence. Then the mechs that had just been attacking one another simply wandered off through three sets of doors set into the walls of the stadium-sized room.

Delacourt waited for the last of them to go and then continued, “We test interface compatibility down here. We want to find out how well your minds integrate with the bodies they gave you. The robotic bodies are set to go on the defensive when an attack is perceived so we have the graduating class conduct a virtual attack to test the newly arrived for compatibility issues. At the end of your training, you’ll be the ones administering this test on a new group.”

Jack stood fully erect and the others either

got back to their feet or stood to attention.

Delacourt explained further, “Your human minds could have overridden the built-in command to defend yourselves. Had you done so, you would’ve been reconditioned. You need to be able to work with the superior tech we supplied you but that is not always the case. You see, sometimes a user fights the basic commands of the body and in the field that can lead to his or her death. There must be a perfect balance between programming and rational decision making. Because each of you reacted appropriately to the perceived danger, you all pass to the next stage.”

The whole thing seemed childish to Jack.

Surely there was an easier way to see if they had integrated fully with their mechanical bodies than to blast a bunch of guns around them. But he learned something useful too: his new body had a whole set of basic commands that he had little control over.

The realization unnerved him. Could he trust the

subcommands with his life when the time came? He didn't even know if he could trust them to get him through training.

But worse, his body hadn't commanded him to take up a defensive posture like Delacourt thought. He had consciously decided to bend his knees and join the others in their defensive stances because his programming hadn't forced it upon him. If he wanted to avoid reconditioning, he knew he had to fake the appropriate responses if or when his mechanical body failed him again.

Delacourt pointed right at him and said to one of his helpers, "That one had the slowest reaction time. Make a note of it."

The others looked at Jack like he was the puny kid in gym class or the dumb one at a spelling bee. But did his lack of a reaction mean they were any better than he was? Did it mean his mech was weak or that his mind was too powerful to be subverted? He already knew the answer: his body

was defective.

If he could hide that from everyone he might just make it through training.

One of the guys next to him asked a question that he was ashamed to admit he hadn't thought about at the time. "Why do human mind's need to be inside of these things if they're already programmed?"

Delacourt took a deep breath. Jack could've sworn he was silently counting to ten to avoid losing his temper. He explained, "They work optimally with our consciousnesses running them. Alone they are lumbering mindless hunks of crap but with a human mind driving them they are capable of extraordinary feats. As you saw, each of you reacted differently under duress. The mechs would have all done the exact same things as each other had your minds not been controlling them. Predictability is our enemy. A foe could second guess a mindless robot and defeat him."

The guy nodded, but Jack wasn't sure he got the answer he wanted. Jack thought he wanted Delacourt to say something like: *Huh? I never thought of it that way. We don't need you after all. You're free to go.*

Delacourt motioned to his two companions beside him. "These are your new training officers. They are Sergeant's Davis and Hildebrandt." Davis was the male and Hildebrandt was his female counterpart. Both of them seemed like assholes but Jack was hopeful that was all for show.

Davis stepped forward and screamed at one of the mechs, "What's your name, recruit?" The mech said, "Stephen Simpson, sir," in a trembling synthesized voice.

Davis got right in his face and yelled, "Wrong! You have no name down in the pit. Down here you go by a number only. You'll be assigned numbers and answer only to your number. Do you get me?"

“Yes sir. What’s my number then?”

“Hildebrandt stepped up to join Davis. She yelled, “You are a big fat zero until we assign you a more appropriate number.”

Jack hated the Goddamn place more and more.

Davis and Hildebrandt puffed their chests out and screamed some more until they were reasonably certain they were all appropriately terrified and then they calmed down as if on cue.

It was a dog and pony show and they all knew it, but none of them wanted to step out and confront them with it because they’d probably just escalate their verbal abuse to drive their point home.

Or worse than that, it might escalate into violence.

Of course, any one of the mechs could probably kill either of them with a well placed bonk to the top of the head, but none of them wanted to test that theory. They weren’t murderers.

When he caught his breath, Davis said

serenely, “Follow us to your new quarters.”

Their quarters turned out to be a communal barracks with no amenities to speak of. They had no beds or bathrooms. They had no entertainment either except for a few board games. Jack knew they didn’t need much, like a toilet or a bed, but to see their absence struck him; he was a robot with no needs.

Hildebrandt said, “Today you should take some time to grieve for those you’ve lost. Get it out of your system because tomorrow is a new chapter in each of your lives.”

Jack hadn’t spent any time grieving for his long dead dad. His bones would’ve already crumbled by now, being eight hundred years since the last time he saw him. His only hope was that his dad had figured out what happened to him and decided to go into stasis until he returned, but that was an idiotic thought. Not only was stasis dangerous but it was pricey too. Folks of their

station didn't even bother daydreaming about frivolities like stasis or off-world transport. Jack had achieved both, but in the process had lost his freedom.

Davis and Hildebrandt showed them their docking stations, personally assigned to each mech, set into the walls. They were round ports as big as dinner plates about ten feet up each wall. They jutted out by a few inches. There they'd hook up at the end of the day to recharge. Jack wondered if they'd dream. He wondered what would happen if there was a power surge.

Once they'd given them the nickel tour, they left them alone.

Jack didn't want to dwell on his dad. As far as he was concerned, he'd just seen him yesterday. He was pretty sure most of the others felt the same way about those they'd lost because no one moped around morosely or broke into oil filled robot tears. Stacey grabbed a box of checkers before

anyone else could get to it and laid it down in front of him. She sat down and tried to cross her legs but they were too thick. She nearly tipped over in her seat, which made him smile.

She asked, “Do you wanna play? I can’t grieve when I’m nervous.”

Jack sat down in front of her and opened the box. The box and the board and all the pieces were built for their huge hands. The set was three times bigger than normal and it was all made of steel, probably so they didn’t accidentally crush any of it.

Jack set the pieces on the board and she went first.

It was weird for them to suddenly feel so normal when their worlds had become so surreal, but the game grounded them to reality.

A fight broke out at the other end of the room that had them spellbound for a few minutes but it devolved from a shoving match into a battle of name calling until it eventually fizzled out altogether. Jack wondered what would’ve happened

had it escalated. Their bodies were formidable and terrifying. They weren't adept at controlling them yet but that fact might've just meant they were even more dangerous.

He wondered too what would happen if they both damaged each others mechs. Would they be reprimanded? Would they be reconditioned or simply turned off?

A male and a female sat beside them, watching their game. At first Jack was annoyed by their presence, but that was because he was a bit antisocial. He knew he had to change his habits, though. He was pretty sure he'd need friends here.

His name was Alex. He had an inoperable brain tumor. Jack wasn't surprised to find out that he was as young as he was. Everyone he'd seen at the hangar back on Earth was around his age.

Her name was Jackie, and she had bone cancer like Jack. She had a mom but she'd never met her dad and her brother had died when she was

young. Her story was eerily similar to his own.

It started to dawn on him that they were all young and they wouldn't be missed when they suddenly went missing back on Earth. He was starting to wonder about the legality of what they'd agreed to. He couldn't get the image out of his head of his oncologist crumpling up and tossing away the note he wrote to his dad. Why had he done that?

Stacey was far more gregarious with their new friends than he was, so they ended up bonding with her and merely putting up with him.

They barely had time to talk or grieve when Davis popped his head around the corner and said, "Lights out. I'll help anyone who needs it, but after today you're expected to know how to hook up on your own."

Jack watched as Davis helped a mech hook up to his power port. It looked easy enough. You just had to back into it just right. As soon as he was hooked up, the robot's eyes closed and its mouth

drooped open. Jack considered putting something inside his mouth, like all the checkers pieces or a bunch of books, as a joke, but Davis lingered too long, watching them get acclimated to their new and improved version of sleep.

Jack helped Stacey zero in on her port and then he went to his own across the room. He got it right on his first try. His consciousness went black. And then he dreamt of home and of his oncologist and traveling the stars. He dreamt of Henshaw and Quiss the Beetar alien, and of robots. He dreamt of thousands of robots. They were armed to the teeth and they were coming after him. They were covered in wet blood and rough gouges from ancient battles won long ago and far away. They were angry that he was alive. They shot him and torched his skin and clothes as he tried in vain to escape. Every time he thought he'd gotten away, there were more of them; each new wave came after him with a ferocious vigor that he barely

understood. He wanted to cry but he didn't have the time. He wanted to ask them why they hated him, but he already knew the answer. He would die because they deemed him unworthy of life. He ran and ran but they never stopped chasing. They hunted him down with such passion that even he started to doubt whether he deserved to live.

His eyes fluttered open when the dream became too intense. The room was dark. He had no way to tell how long he'd been out, but he was the only one to wake from his induced slumber. The other mechs stood upright in place against the walls, eyes closed and heads hung low, charging for tomorrow's adventures.

He tried to detach from the wall, but it was too hard so he gave up.

He waited for the fear to dump from his system, but it didn't work like that. His body used no hormones anymore so there was no adrenaline dump like he was used to. He just had to wait until

he got over the dream.

Then, slowly, his eyes slid shut once more.

This time the robots left him alone.

The next time his eyes opened, Davis and Hildebrandt were in the barracks with them, and their demeanor had changed. They looked focused and energetic. It made him nervous.

He fell from his docking station by an inch and hit the floor with a clang. He wanted to rub his eyes out of habit, but he caught himself in time.

The other mechs fell one after the other.

They stood and watched Davis and Hildebrandt pace back and forth, glaring at them like they'd done something wrong.

Hildebrandt said, "The motion sensors picked up movement in here last night. Did one of you malfunction and power up?"

Jack held his breath. Not really. He had no breath, but he tried anyway. He wasn't about to out himself and be put through reconditioning. He had

no idea how long that even took or what it did to the psyche, and he didn't want to know. The truth was he didn't want to be separated from Stacey. She was the only person he even knew.

Davis added, "Sergeant Hildebrandt and I will be taking shifts at night for the next few days.

If the motion sensors trip again, we'll know right away. You might as well fess up now. You're in no trouble. Glitches happen, especially in new units."

Jack stared across at Stacey for strength, but he couldn't see the identifying chest gouge from so far across the room so he had no idea if it was her or some other female robot.

Davis waited an uncomfortably long time in silence and then pointed at the door and said, "File out, you Goddamn maggots. Welcome to hell!"

Jack wanted to smirk but he didn't yet have that kind of control over his facial movements. The place was a joke and so were its residents.

Then again, when he walked from the room,

he started to reevaluate his recent conclusion.

Before them was a line of busted up and battered mechs. There must've been thirty of them and they looked pissed. It reminded him of his dream.

Davis stood between them and said to Jack's group, "The first to draw his or her weapon to defend themselves moves on to the next stage. You will all be timed and graded."

One of the evil robots stepped forward and nodded over his shoulder at the open cavern. "We'll use the training course. We're using rubber bullets, and beanbags, but don't think that means this will be easy. This is going to hurt a lot."

The other mechs across from them parted in the middle and the leader pointed through the gap.

"Run for your lives, cadets!"

None of them had a clue what Davis meant when he said they had to defend themselves. They didn't have the weapons he thought they had and Jack didn't see a cache of them just sitting around in

a crate in the middle of the training course. But none of that mattered. They were about to be assaulted and they had no choice but to run for cover.

Jack was the second one through the gap. He ran towards a dilapidated building, set up specifically for training. There were some rusted shuttle parts, a makeshift area with fabricated walls, and a few big natural boulders, but the buildings offered the most cover. He wasn't the only one of them who thought so either because soon enough, he was joined by others.

Stacey was with him. She asked the group in a hushed whisper, "Where the hell are the weapons Davis mentioned?"

A few mammoth shoulders shrugged and Jack said, "Maybe they hid them or maybe they don't exist. This is a test. But who knows what they're testing for?"

Stacey shook her head. "They explained the

rules. We defend ourselves with weapons and we'll pass. I can't work with theories; I can only work with the information I have."

She was right, of course. Jack was overthinking it.

And then the walls of the building started to come apart in front of them as the evil mechs took it down with round after round of fire. Jack doubted the walls were made of wood or bamboo or anything else natural because the world above them looked mostly barren and it was hardly cost effective to transport such material from another planet. Whatever it was made of, it stood no chance against the constant firepower. They knew then that they would've been better off taking cover behind a boulder.

They'd effectively cornered themselves because behind them was the wall of the cavern and before them was a quickly evaporating wall.

A shadow loomed over them. When he

looked up he saw one of the evil robots balancing precariously on the wall. It aimed down at them with an oversized shotgun and pulled the trigger. Jack took a blast of rubber to the top of the head. It hurt worse than he'd imagined, like getting hit on the head with a hammer.

Stacey yelled out, "Run. Take cover."

A couple of the other guys started to shove against the wall to knock it over or at least unbalance the mech standing on it. Before they had any success, they got boxed in. One of the bad mechs appeared at one end of their escape route. It used a beanbag shotgun that stung like a bitch as it unloaded on them. The victimized mechs started to scream out in pain and fear. Jack couldn't be sure if he was one of the screamers or not, because panic had already started to set in.

As one, they turned to the only available escape route, in the opposite direction, and they started to rush that way. Before they were free of

their self imposed trap, two enemy mechs blocked the exit and blasted them with beanbags and rubber bullets.

Jack thought they were going to be killed.

He had no idea how to get out of the situation.

Maybe if he raised his hands and surrendered or just started to cry they'd take pity on him. But the notion was foreign now that he was a battle-bot from space. He should've been able to fight back or at the very least, escape.

Just as his knees started to buckle, his entire vision lit up and his ears rang from increased firepower. But this time, it came from his fellow recruits. Somehow they'd all armed themselves. He searched around for the crate or hiding spot where they'd found the weapons but he couldn't find it.

When he stared at Stacey, he noticed her body had changed slightly. A hatch had opened on her hip. It was exactly the size of the pistol in her hand. He cocked his head to the side and saw an even larger

hatch had popped out on her other side, running the length of her entire thigh. In her other hand was a rifle. Jack stood in the center of his fellow recruits like a damsel in distress as they protected him with their acquired firearms.

Just then, a horn blared that cut through the gunfire. The enemy mechs lowered their weapons and retreated but the recruits continued to fire just in case. Slowly they eased up on their triggers.

Stacey finally holstered her pistol when it was obvious that the threat had passed and said to Jack, “Just will your body to give you the means to defend yourself. It’s easy if you try.”

He concentrated with all of his might. He checked his hip but nothing changed. He really wanted to see his guns and feel their weight in his hands but he couldn’t make it happen.

The other recruits started to stare at him. He was the failure. He was the guy holding them back. A few of them gave him advice.

One guy said, “Just imagine that you already have the gun in your hand.” He tried that but nothing changed.

A girl said seriously, “Pretend you’re not a wimp. Just imagine you have the means to help protect us the way we all just protected you.”

That made him feel like shit.

Stacey told her to shut up. She looked at him with concern in her robotic features. He wanted to run away and hide, but he had a feeling that might make him look even more worthless in their eyes.

A small figure appeared before them. It was Hildebrandt. “The test is over. Follow me.”

Jack was the only one of their group to fail the test. He could only hope that at least one other recruit had failed too so he had company.

They were led away from the crumbling wall of the building to the center of the cavern.

Davis was already there with a group of recruits who’d found cover elsewhere. They all looked

pleased, so Jack was reasonably certain he was the only one of them to fail.

Davis had a thick marker in his hand. He went up to Stacey and wrote the number one on her chest plate. “You were the first to react to the threat. Your new name is Number One.” The look on her face was priceless. She was giddy beyond belief.

Davis went from robot to robot, with Hildebrandt helping to direct him with whatever she had written on the clipboard in her hands. He wrote the number two on the next guy and three on the girl after him. He was up to number twenty two when he got to Jack. He’d come in last. To Jack’s utter horror, Davis put the cap back on the marker and walked away without scrawling a number on his chest.

Hildebrandt whispered to Jack, “You failed to even draw your weapon. You’ll progress when we find out why you malfunctioned.”

Enough of his group overheard her because

as soon as she walked away, they smirked derisively at him. It was the third lowest point in his life, the first was being diagnosed with inoperable cancer, and the second was finding out his dad was dust.

Stacey smiled as she sidled over to him. She whispered, “None of them know how they did it, really, so don’t beat yourself up because you couldn’t figure it out.”

He appreciated her comforting words but they didn’t alleviate the dread in his heart. He might have to go for reconditioning now.

Davis said to the group, “You’ll find that now that combat simulations are over, you will not be able to access your weapons so don’t even try to become gunslingers when we’re out of sight. You’ll be wasting your time. Good work, everyone.”

Hildebrandt added, “We need you to recharge for the next test so head back to your barracks and get a power nap in. We’ll fetch you

when it's time to begin.”

Jack started to follow after his fellow recruits when Davis tapped him on the back.

He turned around and Davis asked, “Where the hell do you think you're going? You don't get to move on to the next test. Come with me. We need to find out what's wrong with you.”

Stacey looked back as Davis led him in the opposite direction.

As he lumbered along after Davis he couldn't help but wonder if this was all worth it.

When he got through training and finished up his tour for the corporation and the Beetars, and finally got his newly healed body back, what kind of world would he find himself in? Everything he knew was dead and buried eight hundred years ago. And if he went back to Earth, it would be another eight hundred years before he could get there. It seemed like a lot of work to earn a life that might not be worth living.

Of course, if they'd put number one on his chest, he would probably feel very different about his situation. He was pretty sure Stacey wasn't having the same doubts he was having.

He was happy for her but he couldn't help but believe a gulf had just emerged between them in the aftermath of the test. She was the best and he was the worst.

He had to duck through a doorway when Davis led him into an office. Delacourt was sitting behind a desk. He looked up and his face first showed puzzlement and finally anger.

“What's the meaning of this? These things are not pets, Davis.”

“I know that, sir. This one is malfunctioning.

I need authorization to link up to Henshaw for a diagnostics test.”

Delacourt cocked his head to the side. “Are you sure it's that serious? Why not just recondition it and start over?”

“We’ve never had a unit fail the weapons test, sir. You can’t recondition for that. This thing is busted beyond my understanding.”

“Henshaw won’t be happy. He’s as busy as ever so don’t expect him to jump right into it.”

Davis nodded. “If we need to shut it down until he has time, that’s okay. This thing hasn’t shown any promise anyway.” He tapped the back of his hand against Jack’s torso.

Jack hated to be referred to as a *thing* or an *it*, but it hardly made him feel any lower than he already felt.

Delacourt said, “Permission granted. But if Henshaw can’t get to it immediately, don’t shut it down. Find it some menial labor up top.”

Jack sure hoped Henshaw had the Midas touch and could help him reunite with the other recruits. But the way things had gone for him, he just knew his luck wasn’t about to get any better.

Davis knocked on his chest plate like he was

an oak door and said, "Follow me."

Jack walked after him.

He sort of hoped Delacourt would say goodbye or at least ask to know his name, but he simply went back to perusing his paperwork.

Jack looked down at his bare metal chest and realized why Delacourt didn't give a shit about him; he didn't even warrant a number down here, let alone a name and a back-story.

He ducked through a few more doorways until they arrived at a large, well lit room with gizmos and devices and display screens that made no sense to him. But it was obvious that it was some type of lab or R&D department or something. It was a room to tinker with robots.

Davis pointed to a circular port nestled into the far wall. "Plug yourself in over there."

He did as instructed.

Davis hit a few buttons on one of the consoles and Henshaw's face appeared on one of

the screens.

The doctor looked perplexed. “What has happened?” The concern was evident in his constricted voice.

“We’ve had a malfunction with this unit.”

Davis gestured Jack’s way.

Henshaw stared at him hard, like he couldn’t believe for a second that one of his precious units had the audacity to fail.

Jack thought about nodding or waving, but he just hung his head in embarrassment instead.

Henshaw guffawed. “Impossible! The last batch I sent was pristine. What did you oafs do to it?”

“Nothing. It wouldn’t activate during weapons testing. We’ve never had a washout so early in training, so I thought I’d ask if you could take a look at it.”

“I’ll take a look, but if its files are too corrupted to fix quickly, you’ll have to send it back

up here for further diagnostics.”

“We both know Delacourt won’t let us waste the fuel for that. Let’s just hope it’s an easy fix.”

Henshaw shook his head. “That man is a buffoon. He ruins more units than he trains.”

Davis smiled but he said, “I disagree with you, but that’s beside the point. I have the unit plugged in and ready.”

Henshaw let out a deep, disapproving breath and started to tap his fingers on a console just out of view.

Jack felt his mind flicker and then it switched off.

He awoke to a pounding headache. He could overhear Davis and Henshaw talking.

Henshaw said, “I don’t know what to tell you. All of its systems are fully operational. I saw nothing that gave me any concerns.”

“Well then we can’t allow it to move on in

training.”

“I’d prefer you send it my way so I can get my hands inside of it, but you’re right about Delacourt. He’ll never allow it. I have another shipment of units coming your way in a few weeks. You could send that one back after they offload. Just shut it down until then.”

Davis sucked air between his teeth and said, “Delacourt wants to put it to work if it can’t be used for traditional combat. I doubt he’ll put too much stock in rehabilitating one single unit and allocating so many resources to it when we have so many more constantly coming our way.”

Henshaw sighed. “These units cost a small fortune each. Just because Delacourt receives dozens of units a month doesn’t diminish their value, just their perceived value in his eyes. Like I said, he’s a buffoon.”

“Well, he’s the guy giving us our orders, so until you talk the ambassador into coming down

into the trenches to deal with him, you're stuck doing it his way."

"Hey, I'm just griping. I'm an old man.

Permit me the occasional grumbling session."

"I'll probably put this guy to work on the surface. He can offload freight when it arrives and help man the defensive positions." Davis paused for a second and then asked Henshaw, "Have any of the rebels managed to zero in on your location yet?"

"Don't worry about me. Even if they could detect me so far out from Epigog, they'd have to get through the motion sensing defenses I'm surrounded by and I don't like their chances. Worry about yourselves."

"We're not too worried really. They've all been inept fools so far."

Jack interrupted them both. "What are you talking about? Who are you talking about?" He had to know. If he was going to be used in defense he wanted to know who the enemy was that he'd be

defending against.

Davis cut him with his eyes. “We supply troops and protection to the Beetars. They’re the apex species in this quadrant of the galaxy and because of that they have jealous enemies who would like nothing more than to see them fall from grace.”

Henshaw added, “Every now and then a species will discover where we train the troops that will eventually go on to suppress them or keep them civilized. You’d be surprised by how many life forms in the galaxy do not want to be civilized by any means. They’ll then launch a few raids on Epigog until they realize there’s no way they’ll get through our defenses. Then we’ll never see them again. Another race will figure out where we are and the cycle will repeat itself. It’s futile, but it’s a part of the deal here.”

Davis said to Jack, “That’s enough questions.

You’re lucky we even found a purpose for your

sorry ass. You might not be able to draw your own weapon, but you can still mount a turret.”

Davis stared at him for too long and Jack realized he was waiting for confirmation from him.

He said, “Of course.”

“Good. Then that is your assignment. You won’t be going off-world. You won’t protect dignitaries or stifle rebellions or guard penal colonies. You’ll protect us for the duration of your term. You’re lucky that’s even an option because otherwise you’d be worthless to the program.”

This was even worse than reconditioning.

They were giving up on him and forcing menial labor down his throat because he was good for nothing else. And now it seemed they were trying to convince him to thank them for the privilege.

He knew then that he’d never see Stacey again. He’d never visit strange planets and work as an enforcer for the Beetars.

They might even reconsider giving him his

body back. They could deem his reduced service to them unworthy of rewards.

Jack wasn't even allowed to say goodbye to his fellow cadets.

Davis led him back towards the lift. He waited for him to enter and then he pressed the button that ushered the lift upwards towards the surface.

Jack was more frightened about this than he was about the training because he was all alone in this, whereas he had a support group for training. He asked, "Can't I practice or something? I just know I can deploy my weapons if you give me more time."

Davis looked at him like he was an idiot.

"Your weapons deploy during a threat. There's no greater threat than a bunch of battle mechs bearing down on you with weapons firing all around. If that didn't activate your weapons then nothing will. I'd have to use a cutting torch to get those guns back

from you. I'm sorry son. It's not your fault. You got a shoddy unit."

That didn't make him feel any better.

The lift shuddered to a halt and Davis led him outside. It was daytime on the surface. A little sand kicked up at his feet but otherwise the weather was calm and quiet. The transport that had delivered him was gone.

Before he asked the question, Davis explained, "A shuttle is coming for you. It should be here in a few minutes. You're going to be alright. It's not so bad up here."

"I thought I heard it's dangerous for mechs on the surface. Didn't Delacourt say that the sand would deteriorate our bodies or something?"

"It does if you don't practice proper maintenance. We can't expect new recruits to spend an hour every night to clean their joints out. But the truth is that it's not as big of a deal as Delacourt would have you believe. We don't train below

ground because of the sand; we train down there because we come under attack from time to time. Delacourt insists we keep that info from the new recruits so we don't worry them unnecessarily."

That made sense now that Jack had more information to go on. The sand didn't feel particularly corrosive to him although he had no idea what the cumulative effects would be over time. He looked into the sky, trying to find the moon that the space station orbited but the skies were empty. He wondered how his body was doing. He wondered how much longer before he would be healed.

Davis said, "Look on the bright side: at least you don't have to keep training. You have no idea how hard it gets later on."

A distant dark blotch appeared on the horizon, growing larger as it closed in on them.

Davis said, "Ah, good. That's your ride.

Good luck to you, son."

With that, he turned on his heels and walked back into the lift. A moment later the sands swallowed it up greedily.

Jack felt very alone all of a sudden.

The transport gently set down a dozen feet from him. It was much smaller than the one that had dropped him off on Epigog, but it was far more maneuverable and sleek looking, despite the scuffed surfaces and rust spots.

A robotic pilot sat in the cockpit and a lone mech hung from an opening in the side. The passenger was filthy and rusted out but that just added to its menace. It yelled at Jack, "Hurry up, man. We don't have all day."

Jack ambled towards the ship. He wondered what would happen if he took off running for his life, but he knew it wouldn't bode well for him.

The rusty man held his arm out, so he grabbed it. The transport started to take to the air as the mech swung him up and into the ship.

The strange mech shoved him into a seat beside him and said, “Hold on. The ride can be bumpy and Dan is a shitty pilot.”

The pilot said jokingly, “I’m not a bad pilot. I purposely try to make you fall out.” Then he looked at Jack and said, “Welcome to hell. I’m Dan. That’s Carlos.”

Jack said, “You’re not the first to welcome me to hell.”

“Yeah, but I’m the first to mean it.”

“I’m Jack.”

Carlos roughly jostled his shoulder. “Good to meet you, dude.”

The transport turned all the way around and took off quickly, pushing him back into his seat.

Carlos smiled and said, “I told you he sucked.”

Jack wanted to smile back but he couldn’t force it. He was terrified.

Carlos tapped his chest. “Where’s your

number?”

“I didn’t get one.”

Carlos stared at him confusedly. “You mean you failed the weapons deployment test? I didn’t think that was possible.”

Jack looked at Carlos’ chest and saw the number twenty one written on it, faint but still legible.

He already knew he was going to be the bottom feeder again, even amongst rejects.

The ship touched down in a dune pocked area of desert. Some of the sand dunes were larger than any he’d yet seen on the surface.

It wasn’t until he disembarked that he realized the hills were sand covered structures. He couldn’t tell if they’d been covered intentionally or if sand storms had covered them naturally. They weren’t exactly inviting.

Carlos helped him down from the open hatch and waved for Jack to follow. Dan stayed

behind to put a huge tan-colored tarp over the ship.

Carlos led him to the largest dune and

kicked enough sand away to reveal a thick steel

door. He swiped his palm across a reader off to the

side and the door clicked. He shoved and it strained

against him, metal grinding against metal as he

bullied his way inside.

The inside was well lit but that was about

the only redeeming quality about it. Several steel

chairs were stacked against the walls. A gathering

of four mechs sat in a circle around a big steel table,

playing cards, ignoring him as though he wasn't

their first new arrival in a very long time. Each of

them had a faint number drawn on their chest plates.

They were all in the twenties, meaning they were all

at the bottom of their various classes. Jack was in

good company.

The far wall had a dozen recharging ports

but they hung out loosely, dangling by thick, brittle

cables. The place was the opposite of what he had

seen below ground in his old barracks. It was a dump.

Carlos went up to the group playing cards and kicked one of their chairs. “This is Jack. He’s new.”

They all turned and stared. One of them said in a female voice, “What’s your malfunction?”

“I couldn’t get to my guns.”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t make my guns deploy.”

“I’ve never heard of that. You must be the worst reject we’ve ever had here.”

Carlos laughed but he said, “Leave him be.

You all remember how frightening it was your first day here. Have a little compassion for a change.”

One of them punched him in the abdomen good naturedly and said in a baritone voice, “Did you pick out a nickname for him yet? He couldn’t get to his guns. We could call him Gunner.”

Carlos shook his head disapprovingly. He

looked at Jack's chest. "He didn't get a number. We should call him Zero."

The table erupted in sophomoric laughter.

Part 2:

Jack becomes Zero

Jack/Zero hung his head in shame. He had lost everything and now, it seemed, he'd also lost his own name.

Carlos came over to him and kicked him in the shin. "Buck up, dude. We all have nicknames and most of them are as bad, or worse, than yours.

From now on, Jack is dead. Long live Zero."

Zero asked, "What's yours then?"

"My nickname is Volts. These dicks call me that because I don't hold a charge as well as everyone else. I need to recharge twice a day instead of just once."

That did bring a smile to his face. "So everyone here is defective somehow?"

Carlos/Volts said, "Yes sir. But at least we have a purpose. Not everyone is so lucky. I've heard of recruits who keep churning in and out of

training, never passing but never fully washing out.

They are worse rejects than we are if you ask me.

They'll never have a purpose."

Zero nodded, unsure whether he agreed with

Volts or not. The mechs before him hardly appeared

to be purpose driven, but what did he know.

"So what should I do now?"

"Make yourself comfortable. We have a

shipment of food coming in a few days for those

bastard training officers, and a few other supplies,

but I can handle that alone. Since you can't deploy

your guns we should probably get you acquainted

with the ship mounted turrets."

One of the mechs at the table whooped and

stood up. He bowed like a Chinaman and said,

"Thank God. I thought I'd be stuck with turret duty

forever." He said to Volts, "I want to pilot a ship."

Volts shrugged. His metal shoulders made a

creaking sound as they moved up and then down.

"You can take mine for now, at least until I get Zero

up to speed.”

Zero was already starting to like the nickname despite its obvious negative connotations. But he was nervous about manning a turret. That other mech sure seemed pleased to have him as his replacement.

Volts said to him, “I’ll give you a quick tour.” He pointed to the far wall and said, “Those are our recharging ports. They’re old and crappy but most of them still work just fine. This is our living quarters. Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the buildings. If you get bored later you can come with me while I do a sweep for insurgents.”

“Does this place come under attack often?”

“Not really. But when it does, we’re much better off if we see it coming. We’ve lost some good men and women because they got caught off guard. I won’t let that ever happen while I’m in charge.”

A female voice at the table said, “You aren’t

in charge, Volts. That douche bag Davis is.”

“Davis hasn’t been out here in months and I could probably pinch his little head off between my thumb and forefinger.”

“Yeah, but he could press a button and shut your mind off forever.”

Carlos shrugged again. Zero was getting the impression it was his favorite gesture.

“C’mon, Zero. If you let them, these jerks will waste so much of your time you’ll get nothing done.”

Zero smiled to the table but they just turned from him and resumed their game.

Zero followed Volts back out through the door.

Volts said for clarification, “We average an attack a month here, more or less. I’ve seen two species’ since I’ve been in charge. The first type only attacked for a few months before they decided to give it a rest. They were little orange dudes with

triangular heads and no feet. I nearly freaked out the first time I saw one. The newest group hasn't given up yet but they will. They're these spider-looking things with huge heads and hairy backs. They're multicolored, like butterflies. We wipe them out each time they send a new wave. They haven't been around in awhile so we're probably due for another attack, but don't worry, they're easy to defeat."

"Have you ever lost a battle to any of them?"

He chuckled. "If we had, no one would be here right now. Like I said, they're a mild nuisance at best nowadays."

That was a relief.

The wind had kicked up, sandblasting them as they squinted to see. Volts approached the closest sandy hill and dug out the door. He shoved it open with his shoulder and said to Zero, "This is the armory, but it also doubles as a hangar. It sucks because every time we open the roof for launch we

have to shovel all the sand out that falls in.”

The space was big, holding a dozen crates of mean looking weapons and four attack ships. Zero could only assume they were designed for battle based on the fact that they were fitted with scores of guns each. Two of them housed a domed turret at the top. He would be working from within one of those turrets if they ever came under attack.

Volts pulled two identical pistols from one of the weapons crates and handed them to him. “We have no use for these things so it’s a good thing you’re here or they’d just go to waste.” Zero knew he was referring to the fact that he was the only one of them who couldn’t access his own guns.

He was surprised to find that he already had a pretty good idea how to use them. He checked the chambers and the magazines for rounds. He held one up and aimed down the sights.

Volts looked at him quizzically. Then he must have come to a realization because he said,

“Oh, I see. You’re just finding out that you have built-in weapons training. Most of us found that out the first time we deployed our guns. You’ll find out that there are a few things like that. It’s like your body has a bunch of subroutines that only kick in when you need them to.”

Zero nodded. It made sense now that he said it.

Volts handed him a shoulder holster vest. He struggled to put it on, so Volts helped him and then he took the guns from his hands and slipped them into their new holsters near his armpits. Zero felt like a fool even though Volts pretended it made him look like a badass.

Dan peeked his head through the door and said, “The scout ship’s all covered up. I’m going to settle in for the night.”

Volts nodded. He gestured towards Zero.

“We’re calling this guy Zero from now on.”

Dan shrugged. “You know I hate the

nicknames, dude.”

“That’s because you got a bad one.” He looked at Zero conspiratorially and said, “His nickname is Piss-pants.”

If Zero thought his new name was bad, this guy’s was worse. “Why?”

Dan interrupted, “My hydraulics used to leak. They sent me a new hose system and it hasn’t leaked since I installed it but that doesn’t mean anything to these assholes around here. If they find a nickname that hurts your feelings they’ll use it forever.”

Volts said, “Ah, you’re too sensitive, man. We only nickname the people we love.”

“Sure,” said Dan, AKA Piss-pants, before he slipped out of sight again, presumably to join the others in their card game.

Zero asked incredulously, “They didn’t wash him out for something as silly as a hydraulic leak, did they?”

“No. He struggled with problem solving during gunplay. His software would override his own mind every time he was put in a battle simulation, even to his detriment. In combat, that can get you killed if the enemy were to figure out the programming installed in these mechs. That’s why he flies. If we put a gun in his hand, he’d become an automaton and get himself killed.”

“So he’s not much different than me?”

Volts paused for so long that Zero knew he was trying to find the right wording to avoid hurting his feelings. “He got quite a bit further in training than you did, but in regards to being worthless with a gun, you’re right.”

If that was him letting Zero down gently, he was underwhelmed.

Zero crossed his arms and tapped the pistols under his armpits. “Now that I have these, I’m back in business.” He sure hoped he was right. He hoped he was now considered an equal.

“You have a lot of catching up to do, Zero.

You didn’t make it through even the most rudimentary training. But that’s okay. That’s what you’ve got me for. I’ll show you the ropes.”

He had lost a friend in Stacey, but he was starting to think he’d gained one in Volts and for that he was eternally grateful.

“You can join me in a quick scouting mission. Piss-pants will be mad that we’re uncovering the scout ship that he only just got covered but he’ll get over it. He’s been here almost as long as me, so it’s understandable when he gets all huffy.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A little over a year.”

Zero didn’t really want to ask the next question because he was afraid of the answer, but he had to know what he thought. “Do you think they’re going to give you your body back?”

“Of course I do. They have no reason not to

give it back when it has been fixed. There will always be burn-outs like you to take my place down here.”

Zero nodded, hopeful that Volts wasn't just deluding himself.

The scouting mission was dull as hell.

Everything was tan from the overabundance of sand.

They only knew where the entrance to the training center was because it pinged on the ship's tracker.

Otherwise they'd have missed it.

They overshot it by a few hundred miles and searched for heat signatures and some other

invisible trace signatures that Volts didn't make

Zero privy to, probably to save time. They found nothing out of the ordinary; no alien invaders were camped anywhere near the training entrance.

Volts explained to him that orbital trackers caught most intruders before they ever breached the atmosphere, but on a few occasions, infiltrators managed to sneak past them. That was why they

had to sweep the surface.

Zero didn't care. If he'd known it was going to be so dull he would've asked to stay behind with the others. Volts re-swept the area and finally called it a day when the sun started to dip below the horizon.

He touched down outside of camp and Zero helped him put the tarp back over the scout ship.

“This is Piss-pants' job but I'd feel like a dick if I made him do it again.”

Zero nodded even though he didn't care. His mind had slowed to a stop during the sweep and it would take more than conversation to wake it back up.

Luckily, Volts did not disappoint. Just as they were finishing up, he heard a dull thud. At first he thought nothing of it but as he walked around the ship, he saw Volts' body laying face down in the sand.

He ran to him and flipped him over. His

eyes were shut. He tried to jostle him into wakefulness but he wouldn't stir. He grabbed him under the arms and dragged him towards the living quarters. He barged through the door dragging Volts and several heads turned his way.

A female voice said, "Shit. We need to hook him up quick or we'll lose him." She joined him and helped him heft Volts' huge overweight body to one of the dangling ports. She plugged him in and they rested him on the floor on his side. She asked, "When did he conk out?"

"Just now. We were putting the tarp on the ship."

"Good. He'll be alright then. There's just enough juice in the back-up to last an hour or so. If that ran out, his mind would evaporate into the ether and we'd never get him back."

"Holy shit! That's a pretty significant design flaw. I'm surprised they didn't give him a different unit."

“They don’t do that. We’re all expendable,
despite what they’d have you believe.”

Zero stared down at Volts and his heart
nearly broke. He could die at any time, doing a
thankless job for a faceless corporation that was in
cahoots with strange aliens none of them knew
anything about, and he did so with a smile on his
face and a spring in his step. Zero knew right then
that he wanted him as a friend. He’d mature as a
human being with Volts in his life.

When he stood rooted to the spot for too
long, she said, “Don’t sweat it Zero. He does this all
the time. We’re all screwed up. You’ll just get used
to it.”

He took a seat at the table. No one invited
him but no one objected either.

The cards were shuffled and he was dealt in
without asking. “What are we playing?”

The previous turret operator he’d replaced
said gruffly, “Texas Hold ‘em.”

The cards were as large as cutting boards
and made of thick corrugated cardboard.

“What are we playing for?”

Piss-pants sat down with them and passed
him a handful of steel rods. “Bet with these. If you
win you get to opt out of tomorrow’s sweeps with
Volts.”

“So I’m not the only one that thinks the
sweeps suck?”

The girl who’d helped him hook Volts up to
his port said, “We all hate them. He volunteers
every day, which is nice, but he needs a copilot to
act as a spotter. If you win tonight, you don’t have
to worry about being picked tomorrow.”

“How many sweeps does he do each day?”

“It depends but never less than half a
dozen.”

“Ugh. I’m playing to win then.”

“We all are.”

It had been a long time since he’d played

poker but it came back to him after a few hands.

The stakes were high. He wanted to win in the worst way.

He didn't win at poker, so that meant he was in the mix to be chosen as Volts' spotter. He was mad about that.

The girl who'd helped him plug Volts in was nicknamed Eve because she was the first female to get rejected from training that was a member of the current group of rejects. Eve was nice but he noticed a few melancholic moments from her during the game where she just stared off into space like her mind was miles away.

The guy he replaced as turret gunner was nicknamed Twitch because every once in a while his limbs twitched uncontrollably. He was visibly flustered by it but there was nothing he could do to stop it from happening. At one point he kicked the table over by accident. No one made a big deal out of it. They just flipped the table back over and dealt

the cards all over again. It sucked because Zero had a decent hand, but he didn't want to be the jerk to overreact.

It surprised him to find out that he was their previous gunner. It was even more surprising that they were going to let him pilot a ship now that Zero had arrived. He had a lot to learn about their ways.

The only other girl was nicknamed Creaker because her joints weren't well manufactured. They ground together with a creaky metal on metal noise whenever she moved. She spent a lot of time filing at her body with a metal file and applying oil to her joints during the game. None of it made a difference.

The last guy was nicknamed Stomper. Zero assumed it was because wherever he walked he stomped the ground like a madman. At first Zero thought he was being an impetuous baby until he noticed he did it even when no one was paying attention to him.

None of the rest of them offered up their true names. They went by the nicknames only.

Besides the initial introduction, he would always go by Zero while he was with them.

It could've been worse. They could've nicknamed him Piss-pants.

Eve showed him how they recharge every night. It wasn't like at the barracks. They didn't stand against a wall because all of the ports here had wiggled free of their moorings with overuse and general negligence. He propped himself up in a sitting position against the wall with enough room behind him for the port. He picked out the best cable, but even that one looked like a piece of crap. He slid it into place in the center of his back and his thoughts disappeared in a flash of black.

He woke up once during the night but he decided there wasn't much point in exploring his surroundings. Everyone worth knowing was asleep beside him and the world was covered in dusty sand.

It sucked so there was no use learning any more about it.

He sat still and recalled memories of Earth.

That made him sad, but it must've helped, because before he knew it he'd fallen into a blissful sleep.

Volts woke him up. "Thanks for saving my ass, dude. I owe you one. Come on. Since you're the new guy, you can sweep with me today."

He wanted to refuse, but it seemed pointless, and it might even serve to upset Volts.

"But first we need to get cleaned up. The sand out there can wear out your joints if you let it build up."

He nodded because he'd already heard as much.

Volts helped him to his feet and said to everyone in the room, "Come on. Today's sand blast day."

Zero followed him out of the living quarters.

The wind had died off since last night and the sun

was beating down oppressively, although he only sensed it rather than felt it. Volts led them to the smallest sand dune, kicked and swiped the sand away from the entrance, and walked inside. The building held nothing but a compressor and a coil of airhose. The mechs all filed in and the lights came on. Volts turned the compressor on. He made Stomper go first.

Stomper slowly flexed his limbs and moved his joints while Volts air blasted the sand granules away. Stomper slowly spun on the spot as Volts worked. Then Stomper took over the airhose and it was Zero's turn to get clean. It went quicker for him because apparently he was still very clean from lack of exposure. Then he had to man the hose and blast Eve. It went like that until Piss-pants finally made a complete circuit by hosing Volts down. Then Volts went around and applied a slick oil to all of their joints. Eve followed behind him and covered the oiled spots with a transparent film to keep the fine

sands from collecting and sticking later.

He felt very low at that moment. This was his life and it was mind numbingly dull. He was a space robot from the future and he was bored out of his skull.

The sweeps weren't going to improve his spirits either.

The first sweep was actually alright. They took one of the fighter ships instead of the scout ship. Volts let him fly the ship for a few minutes. He was surprised to find how naturally it came to him, but then again, it was probably just programming. Then Volts showed him how to operate the roof mounted turret. He even got to let off a couple dozen rounds. His entire metal body shuddered with each successive round fired. It made the trip worthwhile.

When they got back, he found out what he'd meant about all of the sand that had to be removed from the hangar. A ton of the stuff had spilled

inside when the roof had opened to let them in. It took them an hour or so to remove it.

They'd barely made it through the door of the living quarters when a shrill siren clawed at their ears. A bright red light flashed and all the defense mechs tensed.

Eve said, "It's those damn spiders again.

How many times do we need to kill those guys?"

Volts grabbed Zero by the shoulder and said,

"The sirens alert us whenever the sensors pick up an incoming threat. You're with me. Don't be nervous.

It's like shooting fish in a barrel. Come on."

He tugged him back towards the door and they went back to the ship they'd just landed.

Volts said, "You're lucky, you know. I spent my first week here worried half to death about combat. It wasn't until after the first skirmish that I realized there's nothing to worry about. You'll see just what I mean."

"So should I shoot to kill?"

Volts smiled. “Yes. Shoot to kill. They’ll be trying to kill us so we might as well return the favor.”

The ceiling opened and they took off into the air. Two other attack ships joined them with Eve, Creacker, and Twitch in one and Stomper and Piss-pants in the other.

Volts pointed upwards and ahead. “There they are. We’ll intercept them before they ever get anywhere near the training camp. It’s the spiders again. You can tell by their ships.”

He saw about ten small black ships descend towards the surface of Epigog. They were orbs, about twenty feet in diameter studded with dozens of guns. They were fast little things but the mech’s ships were clearly faster because they were closing the distance rapidly. He was already settled into the turret when Volts said, “We’re in range. You can start to pick them off whenever you’re ready.”

The other two ships with him started to fire

as if on cue. He focused on the closest ship and fired a quick three round burst. The ship evaporated in a puff of black smoke. A second later the boom of the explosion reached his ears.

He was operating on some kind of autopilot.

He was no killer. He'd never killed anything before then, especially an alien advanced enough to pilot a spaceship. But here he was, blasting away at them like it was his sole purpose in life. It came naturally to him, like instinct, so he knew it was mostly built-in programming driving his actions.

But the regrets were his own.

He saw one of the orbs come at them directly, so he pivoted the turret that way and let off a hail of bullets until the thing blew apart. Volts whooped like a teenager. For all he knew, maybe he was that young. He hollered up at Zero, "Good job, dude. You're better at that than I am."

He was pretty sure he was just bolstering his confidence, but he appreciated the gesture.

Two more black orbs disintegrated and fell from the sky from the barrage of bullets let loose by his companion ships.

The five remaining alien ships split up and came right at them, from different angles.

He aimed at the one heading directly for them and fired. It fired back, but its bullets, or whatever it was shooting, pinged off of the outside of their ship harmlessly. When Volts said, "I'm gonna ram it," Zero panicked. He held the trigger and filled the sky with bullets until the little ship exploded in a fine mist of shrapnel.

The other four ships fell out of the air at around the same time. Some blew apart while others lost control from damage and plummeted to the surface.

The threat was over. Volts was right, it was a cinch.

The other two attack ships broke away and headed down.

“Where are they going?”

“They’re going to make sure there are no survivors.”

“Shouldn’t we join them?”

“We’re going to cover them while they work.”

They descended and Volts said, “Keep an eye on the skies.”

He did at first, but he had a morbid curiosity to witness the landside destruction. Even from so high up, he was able to see just what an unfair advantage they had. The five mechs that were running around on the ground with their guns drawn were each larger than any of the intact alien ships. He saw one of his comrades tear a ship in half with its bare hands and then fire off a silent round inside the cockpit. Besides that, it looked like the spiders had all died. He double checked the skies, but they were devoid of reinforcements.

The mechs on the ground got back in their

ships.

Eve's voice came over the comm. She said,

“It's all clear. Who's going to stay behind to make sure no others show up?”

He just knew Volts would volunteer them

and he was right. Volts said, “You guys can head back. We'll scout and keep you posted.”

The two ships on the ground lifted off, turned about, and headed away. Zero came down from the turret to join Volts in the cockpit.

Volts smiled when he saw him. “That was some good shooting. You're a natural.”

“Thanks.”

“It's all clear, but we have to hang back for a bit just to make sure.”

“I understand.”

“That's how those damn spiders operate.

They're small enough and sneaky enough to get past the orbital defenses but too weak to put up a fight once they do.”

“They hardly seemed like much of a threat.”

“To us, nothing is a threat. Remember that the Beetars are the mightiest species around and we are their enforcers. We’re basically unstoppable.”

“Do you think any more will come?”

“Probably not. They send everything they have at us to try and overwhelm us. I’ve never seen them hold back. We’re just being overly cautious.”

They circled the crash sites of the spider’s ships and then they did a wide circuit around the entrance to the training camp. Zero manned the turret once more just so he wasn’t caught off guard, but there was nothing to fire at. Volts was right; the spiders had sent everything they had all at once. It was eerie how easily they’d been taken out. They hadn’t stood a chance. They must have known how futile their attack would be, so why did they do it? Did they really hate them so much they’d risk certain doom for the chance to kill them?

Volts, satisfied that the threat was past,

radioed camp. “It’s all clear. We’re coming back home.”

Eve answered. “It took you long enough. Hurry back. Stomper thinks he’s found something.”
“We’re on our way.”

They landed and cleaned away the sand that had fallen into the hangar. The ship was spotless. If there were dents or bullet holes from the fight, they were too small to see.

When they got back to the living quarters, there was an eerie quality to the collection of pensive mechs. The others stared at them as they closed the door.

Eve whispered, “Volts, we found it,” with a reverence that confused Zero. What was so important?

Volts said incredulously, “No way. Are you sure?”

Zero chimed in, “What did you find?”

Eve looked at him suspiciously for a

moment and then said, “We found the kill switches in the suits.”

Volts added for clarification, “We’ve been searching for them for a long time. If we can circumvent the kill switches then Delacourt can’t threaten to deactivate us.”

“Why do you care? They’re not threatening to shut us all down, are they?”

“It’s not that they will do it; it’s that they can do it that bothers us. Who needs that kind of pressure? Who wants their lives in the hands of people who barely even care that they exist?”

He still didn’t see what the big deal was but he paid attention anyway out of respect.

Eve stepped aside and they saw Stomper sitting on the floor with Piss-pants sitting with his back to him. Piss-pants’ back was opened up. A metal plate, four inches thick and as big as the surface of a coffee table, was propped against the wall nearby. Stomper was pointing inside Piss-

pants' back to show them what had him so excited.

Volts moved closer so Zero followed suit.

Stomper pointed to a large strike plate with a thick contactor touching it. He tapped Piss-pants on the shoulder and asked, "You ready?"

Piss-pants nodded, so Stomper gingerly pinched the contactor between thumb and forefinger and moved it away from the plate. An electric arc ripped from the contactor to the plate and then vanished when the contactor was moved too far away. Piss-pants immediately shut down.

Stomper saw Zero clench up so he said, "The back-up unit will keep his consciousness stored for an hour or so before shutting down too. As long as we restore power before then, he'll be right as rain." He allowed the contactor to slip from his grasp and as soon as it hit home against the plate, Piss-pants came back to life.

Volts asked, "What can we do to make sure that contactor never stops making contact?"

Stomper smiled like a lunatic. “That’s the easy part. We could use a fat rubber band or a tiny weld spot or a piece of tubing tied in a tight knot. If we had any paper clips they’d work perfectly.”

Volts said, “A weld is too risky. It’s electromagnetic, so a weld could interfere with the current and interrupt the magnetic attraction. I’ll find some rubber sleeves or something in storage. Get everyone opened up and I’ll be back in a minute.”

Zero wanted to opt out. He didn’t want these dumbasses fussing around inside his body. But he thought it prudent to go with the flow. Going against the group so early was out of the question if he wanted their acceptance, and he did, in the worst way.

They all sat in a circle with their backs facing inwards while Volts went rummaging for something that might work.

Funnily enough, Zero actually felt Stomper

removing his back plate. When he started rummaging around inside of him he felt nothing, though.

Stomper gasped and stood up. Zero heard him whisper to someone and then two bulky shadows fell over him. He looked back and up at Stomper and Eve and asked, “What’s up?”

Eve said, “You don’t have a kill switch.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Yeah. But why don’t you have one?”

“I don’t know.” Then he remembered doctor Henshaw saying something about his group being prototypes. “Henshaw might have decided to forego them in my group.”

“He couldn’t. The kill switches are their failsafe in case we go nuts and try to kill everyone. No one says it out loud, but we all know that’s why they’re there.”

“Then I have no idea why I don’t have one.

Maybe he put it in a different spot in me.”

Stomper said, “You have a contactor and strike plate right where we do, except yours is a single unit instead of two. Yours couldn’t separate if we tried to turn you off. We’d have to use a cutting torch back here to shut you down.”

Zero shook his head. Wasn’t that a good thing? Wasn’t he exactly what they were trying to aspire to be? If so, then why were they acting so suspicious?

Eve said, “I wonder what the hell Henshaw was thinking. If Delacourt finds out about this he’ll have him executed.”

Stomper shook his head. “This makes no sense. I might as well close him back up.”

That was music to his ears.

Volts barged in with a fistful of rubber sleeves. He said, “What’s wrong?” when he saw the look on Eve’s face.

“Zero can’t be turned off. He’s a new model or something.”

“No way. He has to have a kill switch. It’s a safety precaution. Henshaw would never omit such an important detail.”

“He didn’t. It looks like he designed it specifically so that Zero could never be turned off.”

Volts adjusted quickly. “We’ll worry about the ramifications of that later. For now, let’s disable our own.” He handed Stomper the bundle of rubber sleeves and Stomper went around the room securing the contactors against the strike plates inside each mech. With that done, Volts removed Stomper’s back plate and worked on him.

Then the back plates went back on and the mood lightened considerably. These mechs must have lived in constant fear of being shut down and now that threat was no more.

Zero wished he could’ve joined in their jubilation but it turned out that technically speaking, he was not the same as they were. He was a freak among freaks. The reject of the rejects.

Before they started jumping up and down for joy, Volts dampened the mood by shutting down and falling over onto his side. Zero helped drag him to the nearest port and Creaker plugged him in.

Eve said, "He must've overexerted himself.

He usually holds out until later in the afternoon."

Twitch's head jerked to the side uncontrollably. He asked, "Did you guys hear that?"

Zero strained to listen. Sure enough, he heard a distant supersonic boom outside, followed by another.

Twitch said, "We're being invaded. Why aren't the warning sirens blaring?"

Eve yelled, "Man your ships! Zero, you're with me."

If he could have, he'd have shit his pants.

Stomper, Twitch, and Creaker took one ship while Zero, Eve, and Piss-pants took the other.

Eve piloted while Piss-pants handled the readouts and Zero tried to get comfortable in the

turret.

Eve said to him over the intercom, “Don’t get us killed, Zero.”

That didn’t instill him with an overwhelming sense of confidence, but he didn’t blame her for not yet trusting him.

She veered off course and said, “Fire off a few rounds to loosen up.”

He didn’t waste any time. It irked him that they’d left the other ship alone because of his lack of experience. He knew that if Volts was here, they wouldn’t be doing this nonsense because he trusted him.

He let off about a hundred rounds before Piss-pants said urgently, “He’s got it. Get back on course.”

Just then a distressed message came from the other ship. Stomper yelled in a panic stricken tone, “Fall back, Eve. We’re going down. There are too many of them and they have superior firepower.

The training center has already been compromised.

There's nothing left. Fall back. Do you here me?"

Eve punched the throttle and replied, "We'll

be there in a few seconds. Hold on."

Just then at least twenty small blue alien

ships whizzed over and around their ship. The blue

ships didn't fire on them or even pay them much

attention. They were too fast for Zero to respond to

in time. He tried to get them in his sights but he

couldn't. They shrunk from view as they left the

atmosphere. He was glad they ignored them because

there was no way they could match their speed or

maneuverability.

He left his post to get a better handle on

what was happening. And then a light started

blinking on the dashboard that made Eve yell out in

anger.

He asked what the light was and Piss-pants

said, "It means the other ship went down. It means

the homing beacon has been activated.

They saw the smoke first. There was a huge dark crater where the entrance to the training center was and about half a mile away a thin tendril of smoke marked the crash site of the other ship.

They zipped right past the training center to get to the crash site.

Zero wanted to jump ship and rush into the bunker to check on Stacey but he knew better than to interfere with Eve and Piss-pants. They were already pretty upset about their fallen comrades and, to be honest, he was too. He was sure Stacey was fine anyway. She was a battle mech surrounded by other formidable robots just like her. That crater looked mean but it was only about twenty feet deep. He doubted they'd even heard the explosion from a thousand feet down in the training center.

They landed, but it was already clear they wouldn't find any survivors of the crash. The ship was in a hundred pieces, scattered across a thousand yards of desert. The largest section was smoldering,

but besides the flickering flames, there was no other movement.

Eve and Piss-pants were out of the ship the moment it landed. They left him aboard to man the turret in case there was a follow-up attack. Luckily for them, there wasn't. After half an hour of dragging wreckage around in the sand to try and uncover their fallen comrades, they gave up once it was certain there were no survivors. At one point he saw the entire trunk of a robot jutting from the ground, upside-down.

Eve was on edge and Piss-pants was despondent.

Eve said, "None of them made it. This hasn't happened before. We've never been overrun like that. We need to let Davis know what's happened."

Piss-pants fiddled with some buttons on the dashboard console. He was getting increasingly frustrated. Then he slammed his fist down on it,

putting a spider web crack across its surface.

“There’s no answer from training camp.”

“Shit. There’s no way they infiltrated it so soon, is there?”

Piss-pants stared out of his window and said,

“We need to check it out.”

Eve lifted off as Zero worried whether

Stacey was alright.

The crater at the entrance to training camp

was larger from close up.

They jumped ship the second it settled. Zero

refused to stand guard again. “I know someone

down there and I need to make sure she’s okay.”

Eve looked at Piss-pants to see what he

thought but Zero didn’t care what his answer was

going to be, they weren’t keeping him from

checking on her.

Once inside the crater, everything became

clear. The gaping maw that was the lift chamber

was littered with rappel ropes and a handful of

contraptions that Eve explained were alien jet-packs, abandoned after their mission down below.

So they had invaded training camp. He could only assume everyone within was dead, but he had to be sure.

He bent down and grabbed two ropes. He tugged on them to see how strong they were and then he dropped over the ledge.

Eve and Piss-pants tried to stop him but they were wasting their breath.

A thousand feet didn't sound like much but it was a long way to go down when all he had to work with was a rope. Luckily he was a super strong robot so he didn't need to worry about fatigue or whether he'd have the strength to make it back up. All he had to worry about was what he'd find at the bottom.

He felt ground beneath his feet and then suddenly, lights erupted from his own body. They pivoted around, illuminating the darkness. He had

no idea he could even do that, but apparently his body knew it was dark and decided to light the place up. He could only assume it hadn't done so before then because this was the first time he'd found himself in the dark in a potential combat zone. It gave him a sort of half-hearted relief though. It was good to know his mech body wasn't completely useless.

Some of the walls looked as though they were ready to crumble. Parts of the strutted ceiling had fallen away. He ran to the doorway up ahead. It was opened up to the training arena that, to his horror, was littered with mech bodies.

His huge foot splashed in a puddle of red alien blood. He had a quick glance around for its source, but the aliens must have recovered all of their wounded and dead. Then he remembered that there were three humans down here who might've been responsible for gushing that blood. He would check for them, but he had to find Stacey first.

There was a grouping of four mechs, all felled within ten feet of one another, metal limbs draped over other limbs, floating in a pool of hydraulic fluids.

He checked them over for signs of life but they were all fully shut down. None of them had the chest plate etching that would identify them as Stacey. His hopes weren't altogether dashed until he ran to the barracks and found Stacey within. Her body was pocked with bullet holes and her metal frame was buckled in places, most likely from an explosion. She wasn't moving. She was gone. He hefted her body over his shoulder and carried her to the doorway exiting the arena and propped her against the wall. Then he went searching for any human survivors. But his heart was no longer in it because he truly only cared about Stacey and she was already dead.

Davis and Hildebrandt were in pieces right next to each other. Davis' arm had been blown off,

leaving a ragged stump that had bled out.

Hildebrandt had been shot in the chest. The hole was so big that an antitank gun or something must've been used to make it. Zero could've reached his arm right through it. It was overkill, but then again, the aliens must have used some serious firepower to take down dozens of super soldier robots. Hildebrandt just took a round meant for one of them.

He heard a scuffling sound and ran past the bodies of the trainers to find Delacourt on the floor in his office. He was trying to crawl along the floor but his feet kept slipping in his own blood. He saw Zero's shadow loom over him and he looked up. He tried to talk but his voice was constricted and gargled, meaning he was drowning on his own blood. He coughed a fat glob of blood out and his arms gave way, putting him face down on the floor. Zero flipped him over and he screamed from the pain, so he propped him on his side. Delacourt was

faint and dying rapidly. He gasped and tried to speak again but he was too far gone. Zero had never watched as a person died. It terrified him. He wished there was something he could do but he knew Delacourt would never survive the thousand foot ascent up the lift shaft. It would take him too long to drag him up and he was guessing he only had minutes to live.

Delacourt lazily ran his forefinger through the growing puddle of blood and then used it to scrawl on the floor in front of him. He had to dip it back in every time the blood thinned out. Zero was enthralled.

He wrote two barely legible words. But they were useless, selfish words. Zero was hoping he would write down who'd done this to the camp or let him know if there were any survivors. Instead he wrote *Get Henshaw*. Zero hadn't taken a liking to Delacourt and in his dying moments he hadn't redeemed himself to him. He didn't want to die. He

wanted a doctor above all else. It was understandable given the circumstances, but he expected more from the Commander.

Zero nodded his head as though he even thought it was a possibility, which it wasn't because Henshaw was in space and Delacourt was already slipping into the afterlife.

He considered putting him out of his misery.

He even fidgeted with his holstered guns for a second but he didn't have to act because Delacourt died right before his eyes.

He shook his head sadly and then used his foot to erase the bloody words. A Commander should be remembered for his accomplishments in life, not his final selfish act. He'd hate for anyone else to know how terrified Delacourt was in his waning moments. Then again, he didn't really know the guy. Maybe he wasn't the heroic badass he assumed he was.

He left the horrific scene, walked back past

Davis and Hildebrandt, and picked up Stacey's body. He had to at least try and see if there was a way to bring her back to life.

He used one of the dropped rappel ropes at the base of the elevator shaft and tied it around Stacey's torso. He tied the other end around his own and then he climbed up with her dead body in tow, dangling beneath him.

Eve and Piss-pants were waiting for him up top. They helped him out and then pulled Stacey up and over the top.

Eve looked at her and then looked at him like he was an idiot. "She's gone, Zero."

"I know that. I couldn't leave her down there. Maybe there's something we can do to wake her up."

"It has been too long. Her back-up unit won't be operational anymore. Even if it were, that body isn't fit to inhabit. The body itself is destroyed."

He nodded grimly. He knew she was right.

Maybe he was just too stupid to hear her logic, because he said, “I don’t care,” and hefted Stacey’s body towards the ship. He laid it gently down on the floor and then he sat beside her.

He knew how idiotic he was being. He hardly knew Stacey in life, but she was the last person he remembered from earth and he did not want to let go of that connection, despite the fact that it had already been severed.

Eve and Piss-pants looked at each other forlornly and then joined him in the ship.

They lifted up and headed back to camp in silence.

Piss-pants helped him carry Stacey’s body into the living quarters. He even humored him when Zero insisted that they had to plug her in, just in case it helped.

Eve unplugged Volts to tell him the bad news.

He hung his head. “I can’t believe they’re dead. How did the invaders get past our orbital defenses? How did they destroy camp before you got there?”

There was implied blame in his last question.

Piss-pants said, “You wouldn’t believe how fast their ships were. They shot Stomper’s ship out of the sky the second it arrived. We’re only alive right now because we got there too late.”

“Did anyone check out the training camp?

Did any of you see it with your own eyes?”

Zero said, “I went down there. That’s why she’s here.” He pointed to Stacey’s lifeless body.

“So they’re all gone?”

“Every single one of them.”

“I wish I could have helped.”

Eve said, “It wouldn’t have done any good.

There were a lot of them and they buzzed around like hornets. They were so fast that the motion sensors didn’t pick them up - the warning siren

didn't go off. We responded immediately when we heard their supersonic booms but we were too late."

Volts checked over the warning siren. He hit a button and it sounded. He hit the button again and it turned off. He shook his head in confusion.

"There's just no way they were too fast to trigger the sensors."

"Well the sensors didn't see them."

"This is worse than any of you realize.

We're only alive because we served a purpose. If we didn't have training camp to protect we would've been shut down as soon as our defects were discovered."

Zero hadn't thought of that. He was too caught up in the moment to consider what might happen next. Those in charge might decide they were now redundant.

Volts said, "We need to get back to the training camp and try and open up a link to doctor Henshaw. He'll know what to do."

Zero said, “You’re not going to like what you see down there. It’s a mess.”

Volts stared at Stacey’s broken body and said, “I can only imagine.”

When they approached the crater that marked the entrance to the training camp, they saw the transport ship that brought supplies and new recruits. They put their ship down beside it and surveyed the area to make sure it wasn’t some sort of trap. The transport wasn’t due to arrive until tomorrow.

Once they were sure it was safe they all boarded the ship. The dock door closed on them automatically. Volts went to the command console to override the autopilot to get the doors back open. He yelled for them. “I got Henshaw on the horn. Get up here.”

Zero was the last one to arrive up front. Sure enough, Henshaw’s kindly old face hovered like an apparition, holographically.

Henshaw asked, "What's the situation?"

Volts did the talking even though he wasn't there to witness any of the destruction. "We were attacked by an unknown enemy. They didn't trigger any of our sensors and they were lightning fast. They'd already destroyed the training camp before anyone got there and they blew one of our ships out of the sky. Then they vanished."

Henshaw looked at each of them in turn. He paused a moment too long when he saw Zero. He said, "I'm just glad you are all okay."

Volts said, "What do you think the Ambassador will do with us when she finds out?"

"Someone at the training camp activated a beacon when they came under attack. That's why I sent this ship as a precaution in case an evacuation was necessary. The Ambassador would have been notified at the same time that I was. I'm actually surprised I haven't heard from her yet."

"You didn't answer my question."

“Son, I’m sure you know how this works.

You folks are rejects. You had a purpose, but that purpose is now gone.”

“I’m not going to let her shut us down.”

“Neither am I. But we need to concoct a cover story for you. If she thinks you are the last survivors from training camp she might consider keeping you around. But the moment she discovers you’re defective, you’ll probably be decommissioned.”

“So what should we do now?”

“I need you to make sure the camp is obliterated. If she decides to see it for herself and discovers anything that might indicate that you guys aren’t what we tell her you are, she’ll shut you all down. Demolish your own camp too, just in case she decides to check on the status of security. We’ll tell her they’re all dead so we’d better make sure it looks that way. Then you need to come back to this transport and come to me. You need to hurry. I

don't know how much time we have.”

Zero chimed in, “I found one of the units down there. She's charging back at our living quarters but she's unresponsive. I'd like to bring her back to see if there's anything you can do to fix her.”

The others stared at him like he'd just lost his mind.

Henshaw said, “I'm sorry, but if she's unresponsive, she's gone. There's nothing I can do for her.”

“Well, you're going to try.”

Henshaw shook his head, but he relented.

“Go and fetch her unit while the others cave in the training camp.”

“Can you save her?” his virtual heart was racing.

“Probably not, but I also don't want to waste anymore precious time arguing about trivialities like this. Now get moving, people. The clock's ticking.”

“Promise me that you’ll save her.”

Henshaw sighed. “I promise.”

Zero didn’t care that it was a long shot. He had hope again. He was the first to leave the transport.

Volts said to everyone, “I’ll take Zero back to get his friend. You two need to make sure the elevator shaft is caved in by the time we get back.”

Eve glared at Zero. He knew she was worried about getting to the space station before the Ambassador got there. And he knew that if they didn’t, he would be blamed because he had put his own selfish desires ahead of their mission. But he didn’t care.

After retrieving Stacey’s robotic body and setting about a dozen charges he retrieved from the armory all around the camp, Volts got back behind the controls of the ship and they set out to rendezvous with the others.

Little faint pops announced that the charges

had worked. Volts brought a couple with him to blow the ship they were in after they no longer needed it.

Zero asked, “Who do you think did this?”

“Well it certainly wasn’t the spiders. I don’t know of any race that’s capable of this. The Beetars have plenty of enemies, but none powerful enough to take out an entire training camp of robotic cadets. Remember Zero, we’re their muscle. The mechs that graduate go on to guard penal colonies and end armed skirmishes. We put down rebellions and take a bullet for whomsoever they deem worthy. One of us is enough to instill dread in the hearts of the enemy. There were dozens of cadets at camp. I can’t imagine what could be mighty enough to wipe them all out so quickly.”

“Should we be worried about them returning?”

“Yes we should. We need to get to the transport and get as far away from here as possible,

or else we might be next.”

We touched down and Volts helped him heft Stacey inside the transport. He fastened her to the wall and then they went back out to see what progress the other two had made.

Luckily they had just finished up. Zero noticed new numbers on their chest plates. Eve had the number seven written on hers and Piss-pants had two scrawled across his.

Volts asked Eve, “What’s up with that?” pointing to the numbers.

“Henshaw said we have to make it appear like we were cadets in training. He said if we make it look like we did well at camp then the ambassador will be more inclined to let us live, and put us to work. Zero’s friend Stacey already has number one so just pick a number under ten that hasn’t been used.” She handed Volts the same marker the trainers used on the cadets.

Volts wrote the number four on Zero’s chest

and told him to write nine on his. Zero tried to convince him to go lower but Volts said that would seem too obvious. He was right, but Zero wrote the number six before he could stop him.

Volts was mad, but he didn't make a big deal of it.

Eve said, "The shaft is caved in. We need to go."

Volts set the two charges inside the scout ship so that there'd be nothing left of it if the Ambassador came looking and then they boarded the transport ship. Volts put the autopilot back on because they had no idea how to pilot the damn thing or how to find the space station.

The lights dimmed as the ship gulped up the power to lift off. It rose above the surface and they hurriedly strapped in for the ride. Zero made a conscious decision to avoid plugging in to the power port at his back right away.

He didn't know how the others felt about

this turn of events. Maybe they were ecstatic that they would finally get off-world. Maybe they were excited about the new possibilities they now had in their newly acquired personas as phony recruits who'd survived the attacks. But he was overwhelmed.

In the past couple of days he'd had his mind inserted into a robot, found out that aliens were real, and had washed out of training camp. He'd barely acclimated to his role as security on Epigog and now that role was gone in a flash. What did the immediate future hold for him? He had no idea and the implications frightened him half to death.

He felt the G-forces pulling on him as they accelerated through the atmosphere. For the first time he wondered if the shuttle was even fit for transporting human beings. He couldn't tell if there was oxygen pumping into the ship. He didn't know if the warmth he felt was too hot or too cold for a flesh and blood human. He didn't see a way to eject

biological waste or any type of food stored anywhere. He assumed it was only good for transporting non organics like him and his friends. The G's lessened and then he saw Epigog through the little circular porthole across from him. It was a brown hell-hole from that distance, with a few swirls of black and white here and there that were just sand storms and rocky areas devoid of even the sand that so plagued them on the surface. He wasn't going to miss it, probably because he hadn't been there long enough to get attached. He was looking forward to seeing Henshaw again. He hoped they had time to get their stories straight before the Ambassador arrived for a situation report. He prayed Stacey could be saved. Volts and Eve had aligned themselves with the recharging ports so they were already out like lights. Piss-pants turned from staring out through the window and said, "I'm plugging in. I have no

idea how long the journey to the space station is but I'm guessing it's long enough to bore the shit out of me. I'll see you when we arrive." He looked over his immense shoulder to see exactly where his recharging port was and then he nestled against it. The moment he did, his eyes closed and his head drooped.

Zero looked over at Stacey. He sure hoped Henshaw could do something with her but the clock was ticking and it had probably already run out for her. But he couldn't let despondency settle in.

A few very serious questions took up residence in his mind. If Henshaw could transfer their thoughts, then why wouldn't he create a back-up or something and keep them stored in a hard drive of some sort? Maybe they wouldn't worry so much about Volts powering down if there was a back-up of his mind stored somewhere safe. Maybe Stacey would still have a shot at life if Henshaw had the forethought to keep another version of her

tucked away on a disc or something. Then he could just upload her consciousness again into a new mech. He realized right then that he didn't have enough knowledge to make such assumptions. After all, if copies could be made, then there would be no need for so many different minds to run the mechs. Henshaw could just find the perfect mind and put copies of it into every single unit.

He rubbed his metal temples and immediately realized how stupid that was. It was an instinctive motion he no longer needed.

He decided against grilling Henshaw about his methods. He began to realize how stupid his questions would be perceived, especially since the doctor was trying his best to save their lives. He wasn't incompetent. In fact, he was the only decent flesh and blood human he'd met since leaving Earth. And now their lives were in his hands. If he pissed him off, he might decide he's not worth saving. No, he had to go with the flow. He had to stop

questioning everything and just give himself over to Henshaw's wisdom.

It was an epiphany that he wished he'd had from the beginning. It was so much easier to trust that others knew what was best for you than to doubt everything everyone told you.

He rolled his shoulders as he tried to zero in on his power port. He knew he'd found it when his vision turned black.

He awoke to a familiar face. Henshaw had a wry smile as he looked him over. Zero stepped away from the wall and saw that the others were waking too. Stacey's body had already been taken out of the ship by the doctor.

"How do you feel, Jack?"

"They call me Zero nowadays. I'm alright, all things considered."

"I was surprised to hear about your weapons malfunction. I thought I'd programmed you better than that."

Zero nodded, wondering why the hell he cared. They had to get their shit together before the Ambassador arrived and Henshaw was wasting valuable time on trivialities. “Is Stacey going to make it?”

“She’s fine. I was able to retrieve her data.”

“I knew you probably kept a back-up just in case.”

“I’m ashamed to admit that we can’t do that.

We can’t store so much information indefinitely.

But I was able to retrieve her data from the transfer unit. Normally all of that info gets wiped clean when I transfer the next recruit to its robotic unit, but she was lucky enough to be the last recruit from your batch that I transferred. I still had a ghosted copy of her data. We got really lucky, son.”

It was serendipitous to say the very least. To say she got lucky was the understatement of the century.

“Is she doing alright?”

“She seems fine, but you have to remember that she has no memories of Epigog or training. To her mind, she only just arrived from Earth.”

“Can I see her?”

“No. She still needs to be debriefed. You’ll be pleased to know that I was able to give her a new body. That other one was damaged beyond repair. I already jettisoned it from the ship. I wouldn’t want the Ambassador to start asking questions.”

Zero was glad to hear that. Her original robotic body was a mess, unfit for combat or much else.

Volts and Eve watched impatiently as Henshaw wasted time blathering to Zero. Piss-pants was pacing irritably. He said to the doctor, “We should get ready for the Ambassador, right?”

“Of course, yes. Follow me.”

The others looked at Zero curiously, and he knew why. They wondered why Henshaw ignored

them while concentrating solely on him. He had no answers for them so he shrugged his shoulders as he joined them in pursuit of the small old man.

Henshaw led them through the space station and to the large room they'd had their reprogramming session in a couple of days ago.

They faced the front of the room and the doctor pulled a chair out and sat down.

He said, "I've tried to find out how the invaders got through our defenses but the sensors picked up nothing. Did any of you actually see them?"

They all shook their heads.

The doctor stood up. "Ok, then let's move past it. Now we need to make sure you each have a good cover story. With no training center you can't be reprocessed, and if anyone finds out you were rejected who knows what they'll do to you. I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to just shut you all down until a new training camp can be

built.”

Volts said, “What’s so wrong with that idea?

They can turn our minds off and wake them when the camp is suitable for training. Maybe some of us will make it through this time around.”

Henshaw shook his head slowly. “That’s an option if they decide to exercise it. Or they might decide to scrap the lot of you and pin their hopes on the next batch of recruits. The robotics arrive the day after tomorrow and the recruits will be here in three weeks.”

Zero asked, “Would they do that?”

“I hope not but you never know. Is it worth the risk?”

They all mumbled amongst themselves. Of course it wasn’t worth it to trust a stranger to decide if you should live or die.

Henshaw said, “The Ambassador will arrive shortly so let’s get things straight. You’ll tell her that you were just days into training when the camp

was attacked. You didn't see the attackers because you were recharging at the time. Through some stroke of luck the enemy didn't find you while you charged. You'll tell her that when you woke up everyone was already dead and the invaders had already left. Then I'll recommend to her that because you were all at the head of your class you're ready for the field. I don't know if she'll go for it, but it's worth a shot."

Eve said, "They'll find us out the second we malfunction in the field."

Henshaw smiled devilishly. "We still have some time to work out your various bugs. If I'm lucky I'll be able to fix all of them before she gets here."

That was music to their ears. But they knew their bugs weren't the only way to identify them as rejects. The fact that they had almost no experience training would be a dead giveaway if anyone pried deeply enough. But what choice did they have? This

seemed like the only way to survive their new, shitty predicament.

Zero saw Piss-pants slap Volts on the back and clap Eve on the shoulder and he knew right then that he was the only one of them to have reservations about any of this. It wasn't the first time he felt alone in a group and he doubted it would be the last.

Henshaw asked, "Do you think you can all remember your cover story?"

Zero nodded, hoping the Ambassador was dumb enough to buy it.

Henshaw said, "Jack, I'll look at you first. It should be easy enough to figure out why your weapons won't deploy. Take those ridiculous holsters off and hide them and then follow me." To the rest he said, "I'll be back for the next as soon as Jack's done." Then he walked from the room.

Eve and Volts helped him wrestle the holsters off. Volts said, "We'll take care of these.

You'd better hurry up before you lose the doc."

He nodded a thank you and rushed from the room.

He caught up to the spry old man and he led him inside a room that looked more like a workshop than anything else. Strapped against the wall was a single shiny new mech.

Henshaw said, "That's your friend. I'll wake her and get her up to speed as soon as I'm done with you guys."

Zero didn't know enough about how any of this worked, but he had a question that needed to be asked before it ate away at him. "What will happen to the human bodies of the training camp victims? Their data can't be retrieved, so does that mean that they'll be mindless zombies when you fix their bodies?"

Henshaw swallowed hard. "There's no hope for them. Stacey's was the only mind stored and that was only by chance, because she was the last

transfer. The others died without such a back-up.

Their bodies just didn't know it at the time."

"So what will happen to them?"

"Protocol demanded that I flush them."

"What does that mean?"

"They're no longer useful to the Beetars because the Beetars need only their minds to control the robotic units and their minds are gone. As humans, they're technically brain dead, so treatment had to be stopped. Once they're taken from treatment they die immediately, without a mind to drive them. I can't have a pile of corpses rotting up here with me so I had to jettison them off of the space station."

Zero almost gasped.

Henshaw's eyes misted, so Zero didn't try to make him feel any guiltier than he already did on his own. But he was starting to see the other side of the wise old kindly doctor that he didn't like. He pushed the horror from his thoughts because there

were more immediate concerns that required his undivided attention.

He wanted to get a closer look at Stacey. He wanted to make sure the doc wasn't lying to him but he didn't give him the chance.

“Stand against that wall and we'll figure out what happened to your software.”

He did so and Henshaw used a pneumatic wrench to remove his chest plate. He plugged three wires inside of his chest. Zero was afraid to look down at the open cavity. He felt like if he did and saw the mechanical workings, he'd have no choice but to accept that he had lost his humanity.

The doctor picked up a handheld tablet and started to play around with the numbers that scrolled across the screen.

Zero tried to make small talk but it became immediately obvious Henshaw wasn't listening. He was too focused on the task at hand.

Henshaw tapped the screen with his index

finger and Zero felt a weird twitch in his legs. Then he heard a mechanical squeal and looked down to see two hatches open on each of his thighs. Inside were two handguns. Henshaw hit the screen again and a larger hatch opened lower down on his right leg. Inside was a rifle of some sort. He didn't even know he had that in him.

Henshaw hit the screen again and all three hatches slammed shut. He unplugged the three leads from his chest and finally said, "Try to get to your guns now."

He didn't even know how.

Henshaw must've seen the confusion on his face. "Pretend you need them to protect yourself. You need to need them for them to deploy."

He imagined a couple of scenarios, but nothing happened.

The doc said, "Imagine that you were at the training camp when it was infiltrated. Imagine that you were the only one there who could save

everyone.”

He'd barely formed the thought when all three hatches opened up and his hands shot down to retrieve the two handguns. He held them up menacingly before he realized how inappropriate the gesture was.

The doctor said, “Good. I think we got it.”

He slowly put the guns away and then the doc closed his chest cavity up with the wrench.

Henshaw looked him in the eyes and said conspiratorially, “I’m sorry for your malfunction. I think it was my fault. I tweaked your settings away from their factory presets and I think I must’ve done something wrong. It’s all fixed now.”

“Is that what happened to the others?”

“Oh, no. They simply malfunctioned. It happens.”

So his malfunction was a direct result of whatever Henshaw had done to him. “Why did you change my presets?”

Henshaw avoided eye contact now. “I was just tinkering around, is all. You’re all better now.” He knew he was hiding something, but before he could grill him he waved him off, saying, “Send in the next one. Be quick. We’re running out of time.”

He took one last look at Stacey and then went to fetch the next patient.

Eve volunteered to go next. He wasn’t really sure what her malfunction was but she was eager to get rid of it, whatever it was. She came back a few minutes later, beaming. Her body was shiny and new looking. She said excitedly, “He knocked all the rust off these old bones and gave me a spit shine. I feel like a brand new girl.”

It was a smart move, otherwise the ambassador would suspect they were lying about being new recruits based on their decayed bodies alone. The only thing that remained of the old Eve was the number on her chest.

Piss-pants went after her and he too returned within just minutes, shiny and new.

Volts went last. He was gone almost as long as Zero was. That was probably because his malfunction was so severe. Maybe he needed an entire systems overhaul. He returned with a spring in his step, his metal plates buffed and reflective.

He whispered, “The doctor had to go in through my back plate. I was scared to death that he’d mention the hack job we did to bypass the kill switch back there but he didn’t say a word about it and he didn’t undo the work.”

Zero screwed his face up. It was great that the doctor was suddenly on their side and wanted the best for them but there was something off about his behavior. “Wouldn’t you think he’d remove the bypass if he wants us to pass as recruits? If someone else finds out what we’ve done they’ll know there’s something different about us.”

Volts shrugged his shoulders. “I’m just glad

he didn't fix it."

Eve whispered, "I agree with Zero. There's no reason for the doctor to go to such lengths to help us. He has an ulterior motive he's not telling us about."

Piss-pants said, "Maybe he's helping us because he's a good person."

Eve shook her head. "He tore our minds out of our bodies and stuffed them inside robots. Good people don't do things like that."

Zero didn't know what to believe but he knew suspicious behavior when he saw it, and the doctor was hiding something from them.

Before they could go any further, Stacey walked into the room, followed by Henshaw.

Zero stepped forward and she said, "Is that you, Jack?"

He nodded and added, "It's me but they call me Zero nowadays. We all have nicknames."

She smiled weakly. "This is all so weird."

She looked around the room at the identical mechs that stared back at her.

She dug her finger into her chest plate and ran a deep groove down its length. “You’ll know me by this mark,” she said. Then she put her finger against his chest and froze when she saw the etched groove already present.

The moment was awkward, so he spoke up.

“We did this already a couple of days ago. Plus I have this number four to identify me.”

She smiled, but there was a hint of sorrow in it that nearly broke his heart.

She said, “I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t miss anything worth remembering. Epigog sucked. Training sucked. At least you got a second chance.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m lucky,” she said with a total lack of conviction.

It was odd. He was ecstatic that she was alive but she didn’t seem to share his enthusiasm.

He wrote the number one on her chest plate with the marker and explained that she was the only one of them to actually earn her number.

She waited for him to explain further but before they had a chance to talk anymore, Henshaw spoke to them from the front of the room again.

“I just overheard Jack tell Stacey that you are all using nicknames now.” To him and Stacey he said, “I apologize for eavesdropping.”

Zero shrugged. A little eavesdropping was hardly a breach of trust compared to ripping his mind out of his head and putting it inside a robot.

Henshaw continued, “We can’t have any confusion. You need to either go by your nicknames or your birth names from this moment onwards.”

It made sense to keep things as simple as possible. The best lies are the clean ones with little elaboration or back-story to muddle them up.

Henshaw said, “Who among you vote to go by your nicknames?”

Every hand went up except for Piss-pants' and Stacey's.

Henshaw said, "Majority rules. You'll go by your nicknames from now on."

Piss-pants said, "That's bullshit! My nickname is Piss-pants."

Henshaw snorted and the room erupted in laughter. Even Stacey managed a chuckle.

Henshaw said, "That's unfortunate but standards must be maintained. If most of you refuse to go by your birth names then none of you should use them. If anyone asks, just tell them that your parents had a weird sense of humor."

Piss-pants pointed at Stacey and said, "She didn't even get a nickname. She gets to use her birth name so I will too."

Henshaw looked around at the rest of them.

"Is it possible for each of you to never again use this young man's nickname?"

Volts said jokingly, "I don't know. I'm too

worried I'd screw that up.”

Piss-pants yelled at him, “You always call me Dan in private. Stop making this more difficult than it already is.”

Volts smiled and said, “I'm just kidding. Of course none of us will refer to him by his nickname.”

Henshaw sucked air between his teeth in agitation. He was clearly flustered by the back and forth banter. Maybe he was too old to understand that Volts was just messing with him. “No, no. I think we need to stick to parameters. I'm sorry son but you'll just have to live with it. You'll be called Piss-pants until your assignment is over.”

Piss-pants punched Volts in the shoulder.

“You're a dick.”

“I was just kidding. I'm sorry.”

Henshaw cleared his throat loudly to get them to shut up. “The Ambassador will be here in less than an hour. With any luck she'll believe our

story. Fill Stacey in on details about training so she can at least pretend she's been there before." Then he left the room.

Piss-pants shoved Volts aside and skulked off to the far end of the room. Zero didn't blame him for being upset but a silly nickname was the least of their problems.

He walked over to him and said as gently as he could, "Get over yourself and get your ass over there with the rest of us. We have more important things to consider than stupid nicknames."

His aggression caught him off guard. He was normally pretty docile and understanding but the situation required more of him than that.

Piss-pants stared at him as though he'd just punched him in the dick. Then he smiled and shrugged. "I knew I was going to like you. You're right. I can be a bit of a baby sometimes."

He put an arm over Zero's shoulder and they joined the others.

Zero was glad he understood.

They each gave Stacey specific details about training. Zero didn't have much to offer since he wasn't there for long. The others gave her info about the first days of training so she would have a cover story that would cover the appropriate span of time.

She seemed perplexed, but she kept her mouth shut and her ears open. The doctor must have told her how important the cover story was to their survival because she treated it with the gravity it deserved.

By the time the pant-suited Ambassador arrived they were fairly confident they had their stories straight. Her ship docked and Henshaw looked like he was about to keel over from a heart attack. They waited patiently while he scurried around frantically to get squared away. Henshaw finally returned to the room with her taking up the rear.

She regarded them coolly, like she barely knew what to make of the situation or of the wide eyed mechs staring back at her. Henshaw took a seat as she stood front and center of the room.

“The doctor filled me in on what happened to you. We’ll find out which species did that to the camp and punish them accordingly. Luckily you all led your class so I’m going to recommend that you are given assignments rather than wait until the camp can be rebuilt.”

Henshaw looked like he wanted to jump up and run around the room but he contained his enthusiasm.

The Ambassador looked at them seriously.

“The Beetar Ambassador has been informed of the situation too and he agrees. In fact, he wants us to stick to our original plan and send two recruits out to his warship. He wanted me to send him more qualified candidates but he’s confident that two of you will be sufficient.” She stared at the numbers on

their chest plates and pointed to Piss-pants and Stacey. “You two led your class so both of you will be stationed on the warship. You’ll travel with me when I leave here.”

Henshaw stood up slowly. He looked upset.

With a quavering voice he said, “Zero showed some promise in training too. Would it be possible to station him there instead?”

The Ambassador’s brow wrinkled. Her voice raised an octave. “I’ve made my damn decision. I didn’t ask for your opinions. Sit down.”

Stacey looked at Zero out of the corner of her eye. He couldn’t tell if she was happy he’d written the number one on her chest or not but there was no doubt that his actions had gotten her the post onboard the warship.

The Ambassador said, “As for the rest of you, we’re prepared to station you three on a Beetar controlled planet not far from here. You’ll act as enforcers to put down rebellions and maintain

civility among its alien residents. Don't worry about your lack of training. You'll be taught by the others already stationed there."

That didn't sound too bad but his enthusiasm was short lived when she added, "You will be launched from this space station and take up orbit around the planet in about a month. Then you'll be picked up and brought to the surface. But here's the part you won't like: you won't be in a ship. Your bodies can withstand the rigors of space on their own. So the good doctor will prep you and then launch you bodily." She smiled when they were rendered speechless.

Zero was the one to break the silence.

"Screw you. I won't do that."

She looked over at the doctor and Henshaw turned to him. "You'll do what's asked of you. I will empty your fluid systems prior to launch and your consciousness will be turned off for the duration of the trip. It is nearly risk free. We've

done it plenty of times. The planet isn't far from here. It's in this very star system, so you don't have very far to travel." To The Ambassador he said reassuringly, "It'll be done. Don't worry about it."

She nodded and then pointed at Stacey and Piss-pants. "Follow me. We'll launch in a moment."

She walked from the room but neither Stacey nor Piss-pants made a move to follow her.

Henshaw rushed forward and said in agitation, "Hurry up. We got very lucky just now. Don't blow it."

Stacey gave Zero a hug. She was trembling, even though she was a mech and trembling was not part of her programming.

She whispered, "I'll see you when our assignment is over." It was part statement and part question.

He said, "We'll meet again soon. Go on now."

She followed after Piss-pants and his heart

went still.

Volts said to Henshaw, “You’d better have a plan because I’m not about to let you shoot me into space without a ship.”

Henshaw shook his head. “You don’t understand. This is a best case scenario. She didn’t even double check to see if our story was true. The alternative might have been scrapping the lot of you. Please be grateful for such good fortune.”

Zero felt no gratitude. The doctor was nuts if he thought they should kiss his ass for this.

The doctor was supercharging them to make sure they had enough juice to last almost a month in a hibernation state as they ripped through space.

When they were fully charged he fitted each of them with an array of jets that could course correct their trajectory should something unforeseen occur that knocked them off course.

He said, “If even the smallest asteroid or rogue body was to interfere with your linear course,

you could end up floating through space forever.”

If he was trying to alleviate their fears he sure had an odd way of doing it.

Henshaw picked up on their apprehension and added, “The chances of any of you crossing paths with anything larger than star dust are infinitesimally small, but why take the chance.”

Volts stared at the floor the entire time the doctor spoke and Eve kept shaking her head.

Henshaw whispered to Zero, “Should the opportunity arise, I’ll make sure you get posted aboard the warship. It’s a great honor and I wish you’d been picked for it.”

“Why do you care about me more than the others? Stacey and Piss-pants are way more qualified to serve on the warship than I would ever be.”

He looked away, which Zero was starting to realize was his tell: he was about to lie. “Your body was modified. It’s superior to the others. I just

wanted to show it off.”

Maybe that was the truth, but Zero doubted it. He had yet to show any signs of performing better than his fellow mechs and in some cases he significantly underperformed.

Volts shouted to Henshaw, “I want to see my real body before you launch us. I want to be reminded of what I’m doing this crazy shit for.”

Henshaw stared at Eve and Volts and said, “Your bodies are six months from being ready. If I interrupt the sequence for even a moment to show you your bodies then the program will have to start all over again. It’s against protocol to let you near them and I just won’t allow it.”

Zero spoke up. “How long before mine is done?”

“Your body has only been here for days. You’ll be in the program for a substantially longer amount of time than your friends because they’re almost done. My best estimate is ten months, but

that's because I'm an optimist. Don't be surprised if you're here for as long as a year and a half to two years."

"Shit."

"Sorry."

He asked a question he should've asked before he ever agreed to any of this. "Can I go back to Earth when I'm cured?"

"Of course you can. But do you really want to? There's a whole big, mysterious galaxy out here tailor made for a young man with a new lease on life."

Zero would have to consider his options.

The Earth had probably changed in major ways since the last time he'd seen it eight hundred years ago. And if he decided to go back, he'd have to go back into stasis for another eight hundred years. For all he knew his home planet might not even be fit for life by the time he got there. He'd have a better idea of his options after his assignment was over

and he'd seen another planet or two. Maybe there was a paradise out here perfectly suited to him. And Maybe Stacey would decide it suited her too. That was a wistful dream he had to make sure didn't rule his thoughts. He liked Stacey. He wanted to get to know more about her. But he had no idea if the feeling was mutual, so it was stupid to dream up a phony scenario based on no facts whatsoever. But he held out hope that their shared experiences would draw them closer over time...if he ever saw her again.

Henshaw unhooked them from their chargers and said, "It's time. The planet you'll arrive at is called Cogmore. It's temperate and fairly pleasant considering how hostile its inhabitants are, and lucky for you, it's in this very star system. Just try to catch up to the other mechs already stationed there and make sure to stick to your cover stories and you'll be alright. Come with me to the launch bay so we can drain your system fluids and put you

in sleep mode. Don't worry. I've done this dozens of times before."

Volts looked like he wanted to run and hide.

Eve looked pissed that she'd been forced into this predicament. Zero was just really apprehensive.

They followed the doctor to the launch bay and he went to them one by one, shutting them down. Zero was the last to go dark. Right before his vision gave out he heard the doctor say to him, "You might be our only chance."

He had no idea what the hell he was talking about.

Then everything turned black.

When he asked, "What does that mean?" he was already in orbit above a green and blue planet and the doctor and the space station were nowhere in sight. The doc was right. He'd made it to Cogmore and the transition seemed instantaneous. His question evaporated in a heartbeat as he stared down at the slowly tumbling orb of a planet.

He was space debris. He was helpless. He hoped someone would come and get him like the doctor had said they would.

Part 3:

Cogmore

He saw the ship approach from behind. A jet on his left side let loose a burst to adjust his trajectory so his orbit wouldn't decay. If the planet Cogmore was as large as the Earth then he knew he was probably traveling in orbit at around seventeen thousand miles an hour just to keep from falling inward. The ship was closing on him, so it was traveling even faster than that.

A large door opened up when it was near enough for him to make out details. A mech was inside, fiddling with something he couldn't quite make out.

Then he saw him toss something his way like he was throwing a dart. It was a steel cable. It got close enough to grab, so he got hold of it and waited to see what would happen next. The cable went taut, so he grasped it as tight as he could. His

grip was loose and weak but it was enough. And then he started to move towards the ship. When he got close he saw that the other mech was none other than his buddy Volts. Eve was standing behind him, coiling up the cable as he fed it back to her.

Volts smiled when he took his hand and pulled him all the way in. He tried to shake his hand but he couldn't move. He fell over as though he'd been shut off. Volts pulled him along the floor enough to allow the door to shut. The atmosphere hissed, filling the room.

Eve said, "Hold on. I'll refill your system fluids and then you'll be able to move a little better." She fetched a thick hose and hooked it beneath his chest plate. He felt the liquid fill his robotic veins and his body began to feel normal once more. He slowly stood up, careful not to do too much too soon.

Volts clapped him on the shoulder and Eve gave him a hug.

Volts said, “You’re late, dude. We thought you were a goner.”

“How late am I?”

“You should’ve arrived yesterday when we both got here.”

“Maybe I went off course like the doctor worried we might.”

“Isn’t that just about the scariest thought imaginable?”

He was right. The notion sent a phantom shiver through Zero. It was a good thing Henshaw hadn’t listened to him. It was fortuitous that he had the foresight to attach those jets to their bodies just in case one of them went off course. He had been on a space adventure that he would never know about.

But at least he’d made it to his destination, a day late.

Eve said, “We need to strap in. The ship is already tipping landward.”

Volts said, “We received a transmission

from down there just a few hours ago that if you didn't arrive in another day we would be brought landside without you."

"I guess I made it here just in time."

"Come on. We'll be grinding against the atmosphere in a few minutes."

He followed Eve and Volts to a small chamber with a dozen spots along the walls to strap in. He watched Eve slip her harnesses over her body and he did the same. Then the turbulence hit and he was glad to be secured to the ship. There were no windows or monitors to watch their descent and for that he was thankful; it was violent. He wondered how well built he really was. Would his components vibrate loose with enough turbulence? And then he felt the ship start to slow down and then list to its side as its course corrected to take them to their eventual destination. Several loud bangs startled them. It sounded like the ship was being fired upon.

The ship shuddered when it finally touched down. They released their straps and walked back to the door Volts and Eve had pulled him through. They waited there to see what would happen next. When the door finally opened, he stepped backwards in reaction to the absurd sight before him. A human wearing a gasmask stood beside a severe looking Beetar who stood next to a mech the same as them that towered over both of them. The mech was the scariest thing any of them had ever seen. It had rust spots all over and dents all across its body from gunfire. But worse, its entire left side was coated in fresh, sticky blood. The rest of it was stained a dull, faded brown color, no doubt from blood that couldn't be washed off entirely. Several plates covering it looked to be newer than the rest, meaning it had sustained enough damage to need repair. Everything about it inspired awe as well as a healthy dose of fear.

Behind those three was the weirdest little

alien imaginable. It was gray with black and white mottling on its skin. It had a single circular lidless eye in the center of its flat face. The iris was green, like an emerald. If it had a nose or ears, they weren't immediately evident. It had a tiny mouth that was nothing more than a thin slit below its big green eye. It wore a colorful robe that covered its entire body, so they had no idea what it looked like underneath. It was about five feet tall and it sort of bobbed up and down as it stood there watching them. They assumed that it was one of the indigenous inhabitants of Cogmore.

The Beetar stared at them disapprovingly, or so Zero thought, and then turned and walked away.

They were within a large aircraft hangar with an open roof that was empty besides their landing ship.

The human lifted his gasmask and wheezed,

“Follow me inside. I can't breathe this filthy air.”

The mech bowed to them and said with an

air of authority born of experience, “Hurry up. The

ship's automatic. It'll take off with you on it if you stay there."

The grey alien stared at them. It was impossible to tell from its face what it was thinking.

They stepped from the ship and then followed after the human in the gasmask and his alien companion. The mech stayed put as the ship lifted off. As soon as the ship rose through the roof opening, several pops came to their ears. Zero turned around and saw little sparks as projectiles bounced off of the exterior of the rising ship.

When they'd descended in the ship and he'd thought the ship had been fired upon, he was right. It was being attacked right before their eyes.

The mech crouched down and then leapt high into the air. Before it started to fall, its metal feet lit up like the sun and it lifted into the sky.

Before it vanished through the roof opening it reached for its guns. Zero had never seen anything so impressive in his entire life. It was a robot built

for battle and eager for it too.

It swerved out of view and then he heard its hand cannons blasting away relentlessly. It was killing the Cogmore's who had attacked the ship.

Volts said, "I wonder when we'll get cool rocket boosters like that."

The human removed his gasmask and his expression was full of confusion. "What do you mean? They're already built in to your unit. Don't you know that?"

They didn't, but it was exciting to find it out.

The mech appeared at the roof opening once more and was about to descend when it was hit with a shot. It spun around, lightning fast and then whooshed from sight again. They didn't wait around for it to return.

Once they left the hangar the guy in the gasmask waved off his alien counterpart and then he removed his mask. The alien scurried off through a doorway like a pet. They walked down one long

hallway after another until they came to an office.

The guy took a seat behind the only desk in the room and they stood before him, waiting to see what he had to say.

He laid the gasmask on his desk beside two others just like it. “My name is General Parsons and I’m in command. I used to be just like you. I had an inoperable brain tumor on Earth but our humble benefactors fixed me up and gave me a new chance at life. After my commitment to them was up I decided to stay on and help in any way I could.”

It sounded empty, like a speech he’d reiterated a thousand times. On closer inspection the General wasn’t much older than Zero was. He was in his mid twenties, prematurely balding with faint crow’s feet wrinkles that painted a picture of a man who’d lived too fast too soon.

He picked up a coffee cup, sipped from it, scrunched his face up and spat the contents back into the cup. “This place is a hell hole. That’s why

you're here. I have to admit how disappointed I am that there are just three of you. I was expecting eight trained soldiers, not three untrained bozos."

He glared at them like it was their fault.

Eve said sarcastically, "Well, it's nice to be appreciated."

"Shut up. You have so little time to prepare for this place that I'll be surprised if all of you survive it long enough to get any good at your job. But I also understand that this is not your fault, so I'm going to invest some time getting you trained up. It would be murder if I set you loose without the basic essentials to defend yourselves. I have four soldiers at my disposal here, which means I'm desperately undermanned already, but I'm going to dedicate one of them to training you three. It'll be accelerated training that'll focus only on combat and survival."

Zero was starting to get excited. If he could do half of what that mech in the hangar could do

then he was about to become a veritable superhero.

Parsons keyed a desk mounted radio and said into it, “Jackson, come to my office. The new arrivals are here.”

A moment went by before a masculine voice returned over the speaker, “Shit. I was kind of hoping the Cogmore’s would blow their ship out of the sky so I didn’t have to do this.”

Parsons chuckled. “I hear you. Get our ass in here.”

Jackson had char marks on his torso and several dents from bullet hits across his metal frame.

He said, “Come on, troops. I’ve got something special set up for you.”

Parsons stared into his coffee mug with a disgusted look on his face, ignoring them completely. Jackson smirked at his commander and then ushered them from the office with an impatient wave of his hand.

The same Beetar that greeted them when

they landed walked past. Jackson bowed his head low but they were caught unprepared, so they didn't get a chance to follow suit. The Beetar regarded them coolly but it said nothing.

As soon as it was out of earshot, Jackson turned on them. "Didn't they teach you etiquette? You bow when your saviors pass you by. Do you understand me?"

They nodded. It wasn't their fault that they didn't know that yet.

He shook his head angrily. "We're here. It's time to prove your mettle."

Inside the room he led them into was a gathering of those little grey aliens. They were naked though, which caused Eve to gasp and Volts to mumble something under his breath.

They had upper bodies similar to humans in that they had two arms and a flat torso with few distinguishing features. But the lower half of their bodies was a tangled mess of thin tendrils, grey and

semi-opaque. There were thousands or maybe millions of them, pencil thin and three feet long. Some of them moved while others stayed rooted to the spot. There was nothing on Earth Zero could compare them to except maybe a box jellyfish, but even that was a weak comparison. He couldn't help but wonder if their many skinny tentacles were poisonous too.

Jackson said, "These are Cogmore criminals. The Beetar garrison has sentenced them all to death for various crimes. I want you three to carry out the executions."

Zero gasped and shook his head. Volts said, "No way," and Eve whispered, "That's murder. I won't."

Jackson sneered. "You will do it, whether you want to or not. It seems barbaric now, but give this place a few months and you'll wish you could kill all of these sons of bitches."

The grey aliens stared at them like they were

devils. Their single eyes watered, but Zero couldn't tell if they were tears or if they just did that all the time.

In an act of desperation Eve asked, "Don't you want to give us a tour of the facility first, or show us our living quarters?"

Jackson laughed but there was little humor in it. He pulled a handgun out and tossed it to the crowd of naked Cogmore's. At first the aliens just stared after the firearm suspiciously but then they all made a dive for it at once. One of them came up with it and aimed it at Zero.

Automatically the hatches in his thighs opened, giving him access to his weapons. His programming, fixed by Henshaw, was doing what it was supposed to do. Volts and Eve were ready to defend themselves too.

The Cogmore alien seemed to be in two minds about what he or she should do next. It stared at the gun and then flung it at its feet like it was

electrified. It understood enough about them to know that they would react in ways detrimental to its health if it continued threatening them with bodily harm. It was a smart little guy.

Zero sighed with relief when his hatches slammed shut.

Jackson looked disgusted by the aliens and by the mechs. He took a giant step towards the aliens and nudged the gun nearer to them with his mammoth foot. When no one picked it up, he pulled his other handgun and shot one of them in the center of its chest. It fell over slowly as the others tried to move out of the way.

Then Jackson stepped back and waited for them to take the hint: they could go out fighting a futile battle against them or they could give themselves over to their fate. Either way they were going to die.

One of them would take a step forward only to hesitate and step back again. Some of them were

shaking.

Jackson tired of their indecisiveness, so he shot another one.

They watched in utter horror as he loomed over the little creatures, carrying out his sadistic tortures.

Zero looked at Volts, who had a look of confusion and terror. They were way outside their comfort zone. Eve looked to be in a fugue state. Her mind couldn't handle what she was seeing.

Zero just couldn't stand it anymore. The Cogmore's were terrified and there was no escape for them. They could die immediately without all of the suspense or they could play Jackson's game and let him get his kicks out of their reluctance and the Cogmore's fears; and in the end, they'd die anyway.

His hatches slid open and he grabbed his guns. He started to fire into the crowd. His aim was perfect, hitting each Cogmore center mass, killing them instantly.

When the last one fell, he put his guns away,
walked up to Jackson, and punched him in his face.

“Is that what you wanted, you piece of shit? Well
there you go. They’re all dead. Let’s move on.”

Jackson slapped him on the back good
naturedly. “Good job.”

Volts and Eve were casting awkward
glances back and forth when he turned around.

He said, “I’m sorry. That asshole would
have toyed with them and basked in their terror
until we killed them. I figured, why should I give
him the pleasure?”

Volts said, “You did the right thing under
the circumstances but it’s a bit of a shock. I’ve
killed too, but never defenseless creatures like that.”

Eve added, “It had to be done,” but Zero
thought she was just trying to convince herself of it.

He holstered his guns and the hatches
clicked shut. He hung his head in shame. He was no
killer. But they had no choice in the matter. Had he

stalled, they would've had to watch as Jackson humiliated and tortured every last one of them. But the reasoning did little to alleviate his guilt.

Jackson laughed. "You're all so glum. You passed the first and hardest part of your combat training. Cheer up. Come on and I'll show you to your living quarters."

Zero wanted to put a bullet in the back of his head as he led the way.

As they walked, Jackson said, "One day you'll be asked to take new troops to execute Cogmore criminals like I just did with you. When that day comes, you'll be ready. I know you can barely imagine it, but it's true. You'll hate them with all of your hearts."

Eve cleared her throat and asked, "What did those criminals do?"

Zero thought she was hoping to hear that they were all serial killers or rapists. That would make her feel better about what he'd done.

Jackson shrugged nonchalantly. “The Beetars judge them. We just carry out the sentencing.”

The living quarters were even shoddier than the one they had back at Epigog. The recharge ports hung from the walls and the floor was littered with trash and broken objects that looked like lighting fixtures. He looked up and saw that there was only one working light on the ceiling, with the two that sandwiched it burnt out or otherwise unlit.

A voice issued from speakers somewhere nearby. It was Parsons’ voice. “Jackson, the unit named Zero may rest, but the other two need to prove themselves immediately. Bring them back to the execution chamber.”

Eve said, “What the hell does that mean?”

Jackson smirked. “It means you’re not off the hook yet.”

She said, “I won’t do it. You can’t make me.”

Jackson sighed. “Every new arrival must prove themselves. I assumed Parsons would give you guys a break because you’ve been through so much already and because your training was cut way short, but I guess I was wrong. Come on. I’ll fetch us some more victims.”

Eve and Volts looked to Zero to help them, but there was nothing he could do. In fact, they were more advanced than he was so they should really be guiding him, not vice versa. He had never proven himself. He had made it through just one day of training before washing out. Then, the only time the defenses on Epigog had ever been overrun by an invader was during his tenure. He hadn’t even made it into orbit around Cogmore on time. He was a reject in every way imaginable, and in his book, he’d failed the last test too because he’d slaughtered unarmed alien civilians.

As they left him alone, he felt the loneliness seep through his circuits. He wasn’t sure what kind

of man he would be when it was time to upload him back into his human body when he was done here, but he was sure he would be far more jaded and heartless than the man he started out as. They would fix his body and break his mind.

He stood against the wall and waited for Volts and Eve to return. He considered etching a hash mark into the wall to start his countdown to freedom, but he'd been given no specific end date so that was futile.

The mean looking mech that had greeted them upon their arrival walked into the room. He said, "I'm Mike. I heard you passed the first test but those other rejects failed out. Good work, soldier. You'll do just fine here."

"Thanks. When will we begin our assignments?"

"I don't know. We've never received a bunch of unproven cadets before so I don't know if or when you'll be ready. That's for Parsons to

decide.”

That hurt his feelings. “Did you kill those aliens that shot at the ship?”

Mike smiled wickedly. There was genuine joy in his voice when he said, “Those dirty little bastards keep it up even though they know I’ll turn them into spaghetti. They’re the dumbest bunch of backwoods aliens you could ever hope to kill. I got about two dozen of them but that doesn’t mean it’s over. Others will seek retribution for those deaths, so they’ll keep sending meat into my grinder.” He paused and looked him up and down as though he was evaluating him on the spot. “I can’t blame them for trying to take down the ship though. They know that reinforcements come in that ship so it only makes sense for them to try and destroy it.”

He pulled a huge box away from the wall and flipped the lid open. Inside was enough ammo to take down God and all of his angels. He grabbed his left forearm with his right hand and jiggled it

around. His forearm opened up like a door. Then he started to insert the ammo into the opening. When he was done, he did the same thing to the other arm. He gestured for Zero to come closer. He stepped forward and Mike asked, “Did they show you how to reload?”

“No. We didn’t get far enough in training.”

Mike snorted and said, “Try it yourself.

You’re already programmed to know what to do.”

He was right. As soon as he grabbed his forearm, he knew how it all worked. The ammo fed up through his arm, into the palms of his hands and then directly into the guns. He filled both arms until he could fit no more in.

Mike said, “You’ll be refilling a lot on this planet. Those Cogmore’s are relentless.”

“Why do they hate you so much?”

“Who cares? This is our assignment and there’s no point second guessing its merits. The Beetars are trying to civilize the Cogmore’s and the

only way to do that is to force civility down their throats. That's where we come in. If we do our job we get our bodies back better than they were when we left them. It's a good gig that benefits everyone."

Zero nodded, even though he was pretty sure the Cogmore's weren't getting much benefit from it. Then again, there were numerous instances in human history where a more advanced civilization forced its values and practices upon a backwards one and both sides gained in the end so maybe this would work out for all involved.

But to get to that eventuality could be bloody. The history books tended to omit or gloss over how many of the conquered had to die before their people embraced the foreign ideals of their conquerors. It took some of the polish off of the boots that marched towards progress.

He just didn't have enough information to form an opinion yet. And maybe Mike was right;

maybe it was better to just do what was expected than to question everything.

“My name’s Zero. The other guy is Volts and the girl’s name is Eve.”

Mike cocked his head to the side, probably trying to figure out if he was pulling his leg. Then he said, “You’ll do well here, Zero. I’m going to charge up while there’s some downtime. I’ll see you when I wake up.”

He said, “Okay,” and watched Mike go to the furthest port and plug in. His body slumped against the wall and his head hung low.

Once again, he was alone.

Jackson returned an hour later with Eve and Volts in tow. He said to him as though they were life long buddies, “These two cowards got it done eventually. I thought I was going to have to execute the entire lot and bring in a fresh crop of Cogmore’s, but they got the hint and did their part before I ran through them all.”

He clapped him on the shoulder and when he saw Mike charging said, "I see you met Mike. He's great. It's our down day so you'll be seeing us around all day today. Tomorrow you'll meet Kathy and Winthrop. Winthrop's a tool, but watch out if he gets angry. You'll see what I mean soon enough, I'm sure. I'm going to charge up since there's nothing going on. If Parsons calls for me could you unplug me?"

Zero nodded, wondering why the training had ended so abruptly. He thought it was supposed to be an accelerated crash course.

Jackson plugged in and his body wilted.

Volts said, "We ought to kill him where he stands."

Eve nodded.

Jackson's head shot up and he turned on Volts. Only then did they notice he hadn't actually plugged himself all the way in. "If you think you can take me, come on!"

Volts took a step towards him but Zero shoved him back. “He’s doing his job. Let it go. If you kill one of our own, you’ll be punished.”

Jackson laughed heartily. “That coward could never kill me. These suits are awesome but only when they’re being piloted by warriors. That wimp is a waste of a suit.”

Volts’ hand went down to his thigh, searching for his gun. But the hatch wouldn’t open.

Jackson laughed again. “You idiots truly are untrained fools, aren’t you? You can’t deploy your weapons against friendlies. We learned that in our first week of training. Apparently I have my work cut out for me with you guys.”

Zero still had a hand on Volts’ chest. “Just let it go, dude. Let him charge and we’ll talk.”

Volts slapped his arm away like he was the bad guy. He walked over to the other end of the room and sat down against the wall.

Jackson smirked and plugged into the port,

all the way this time.

When they were sure Jackson was offline, Eve said, “He gunned them down, one after the other, saying he’d keep bringing in new fodder until we did our duty. It was awful, Zero. Volts and I killed more of them than you did, and Jackson told us afterwards that our victims weren’t even criminals. We killed innocents because we didn’t have what it took to do what had to be done the first time around.”

He put an arm around her waist and walked her toward Volts. She sat down and Zero sat between them both.

Volts wouldn’t look them in the eyes. He was a shell of his former, confident self and it broke Zero’s heart to see such a rapid decline in him.

Eve picked up one of the fallen ports and handed it to him. “You’ll need to charge up soon.”

Volts said viciously, “No I don’t. I’m fixed now, remember? I’m no different than anyone else.”

Eve gently put the port down and stared at the filthy floor. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

Zero picked the port up and jammed it into Volts' back before he could stop him. He instantly went limp.

He explained to Eve, "He's always in better spirits after a charge."

She tried to smile but she couldn't manage it.

She said sheepishly, "I'm going to plug in too then, if that's okay with you?"

He hated to be left alone again but there was no way he could deny her when it was so clear she needed to get out of her own head for awhile.

She plugged in before he responded so it was probably for the best that he was about to tell her to go ahead and do it.

Misery loves company, but so does failure, and they had all failed their humanity by executing innocent strangers. He'd been a very sad and lonely robot lately, but it was worse this time.

He stood up and took one last look around before leaving the inanimate mechs to explore the facility. With no one to talk to, he had to move around, change his perspective, and get out of his own mind for a little while.

He wandered the corridors, peering inside rooms as he went. Some of the rooms held Cogmore prisoners while others were completely empty.

He saw an opulent room with large ornate doors. The doors were open so he had a look inside. The Beetar who'd met them when they landed stood at an alien console in the center of the room. It saw him staring at it so he averted his gaze and bowed his head. He turned to walk away when he heard a squelching sound that coalesced into words.

“What are you doing?”

He turned back and sheepishly said, “I’m new here. I was just taking in my surroundings. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“You humans are so curious. I understand

you were one of the survivors of the training camp attack on Epigog.”

“Yes.” He felt like the Beetar wanted him to elaborate but he was worried he’d dig himself a hole he wouldn’t be able to pull himself out of if he said more.

“We’re still looking for the perpetrators of the attack. They’ve gone dark, but they’ll surface eventually.”

Again, he wanted to interject, but according to his cover story he’d been charging when the attack occurred, so he kept his mouth shut to avoid putting his foot in it.

The Beetar said, “My name is Thrimmel.

I’m in charge of this facility.”

“I’m Zero. It’s good to meet you.”

“Yes. You may go.”

He walked away unsure of whether he liked the Beetar or not. He had the feeling that he’d annoyed him with his mere presence.

After another couple minutes of walking he saw a room just packed from wall to wall with Cogmore's. It was a holding cell of some kind. He wanted to let them out but his presence had them scrambling away from the door in fear.

Parsons voice came from a nearby speaker.

It said, "Mike, bring the new meat to my office.

You'd better not be sleeping, you lazy sack of shit."

Zero was the only one of them who could hear the message so he quickly walked back to the living quarters and started to unplug everyone except Jackson.

He told Mike that Parsons wanted him to bring them to his office.

On the way there, Volts grabbed his arm.

"Thanks for plugging me in. I feel a bit better now."

Eve added, "Me too. I'm still a little shaky, but I'll get over it."

He said, "Next time, I get to charge and one of you guys can stay awake." He was mad that

they'd gotten over what they'd done so easily when he was still despondent.

Parsons was standing when they arrived. He said to Mike, "Next time I call, you'd better move faster than this."

Mike smiled as if he didn't give a damn.

Parsons asked, "Were you asleep?"

"Nope."

"Liar." He cleared his throat. "I need you to take these guys out on patrol."

"That's not safe."

"Nothing's safe here."

"Fine. But I'll choose the location."

"Fine."

They followed Mike out to the hangar and he stopped them. "When you arrived, I noticed you were surprised by my boosters. Do you know how to operate yours?"

Volts said, "We didn't get that far in our training."

“It’s easy. Do what I do.” Then Mike jumped high into the air and the bottom of his feet sparked to life. He hovered for a second and then fell back to the floor with a clang.

Zero jumped, but his heart wasn’t in it and it showed. Nothing happened. Volts leapt higher than he did and his feet lit up, but he lost his balance right before his boosters gave out and he fell over onto his side.

Eve smirked at Mike when he turned to her, but she complied and succeeded. She hovered five feet above the floor until Mike said, “Good job. Now turn it off.”

She did and she hit the ground with a loud thud.

Mike said, “If you use it too long you’ll run out of propulsion and fall out of the sky like a stone. It’s happened to me before and it’s not pretty. You have about ten minutes of constant use. When you run out, you need to wait for your internal systems

to create more from the air around you.”

Zero assumed they had something within their bodies that separated oxygen out of the air, or maybe something even more flammable, and stored it.

Mike said, “Try again until you have it down. The boosters give us a tactical advantage over the Cogmore’s so they are our most useful tool.”

He jumped as high as he could and as if on cue, the bottoms of his feet opened up and shot out thick streams of fire. He hovered there and asked, “Why are the boosters flammable? Don’t concentrated jets of air work just as well or better?”

Mike chuckled. “It’s a toss-up. But flaming boosters can be used as weapons where jets can not.”

Zero imagined burning a frightened Cogmore’s face off with his feet and the mental image broke his concentration. His boosters

flickered and he fell awkwardly to the ground.

Not to be outdone, Volts jumped up and stayed there. Then he rose higher and started to bank this way and that, showing off.

Mike said, “That’s good, man. We’re ready to go and put some fear into these scurrying insects. Let’s go.”

Mike went over to the closest wall and hit a big red button. The overhead doors slid open. Then he jumped up and his boosters lit, taking him higher. He zipped from view once he’d cleared the hangar doors.

Volts looked at Zero and then Eve. He shrugged and jumped, his boosters carrying him through the doors too.

Zero waited for Eve to go next. He thought it was the chivalrous thing to do, although he was not sure why he thought that. Sure she was a girl but she was piloting a mech that could tear a tank in half. She jumped and after a brief hiccup where she

listed too far to the right, she vanished too.

He leapt up and felt himself rise. Once above the hangar, he took in the scene. The planet wasn't much more hospitable than Epigog 31, although this planet at least had indigenous life forms. He could see smoke from a few fires off in the distance and smelled rotten produce in the air. No building was higher than a single story, and most of them looked like lean-tos. It was a shanty town as far as the eye could see, and most of it looked to be abandoned. He must've hovered in one spot for too long because he was hit with gunfire. Before he could react, he saw Mike zoom past him and then he heard his guns go off. A moment later Mike was beside him yelling, "Move it, asshole! These guys are the enemy and you gave them a stationary target."

He felt like a fool. He followed after Mike as he swerved through the air. As he flew behind him he saw blood spatters running down Mike's

back and legs.

He landed in a flat area devoid of vegetation or life of any type. Volts and Eve were waiting for them. His boosters kicked up little dust devils as he landed. Flying was fun despite the hazards associated with it.

He thought they would regroup but Mike wasted no time. “Move it. Follow me. If you see anything suspicious, fire on it.”

“How will we know if something is suspicious?”

“Everything’s dangerous on Cogmore. Let’s go.” He took off at a jog and they followed after him the best they could. Mike had his guns out so they made the conscious decision to open their weapons hatches. They opened up upon silent command and they grabbed one in each hand. Zero felt like a badass.

They ran down an alleyway, possibly the only alley in the city or town or hovel or whatever

this place was. Most of the buildings were too rickety or small to have walls big or sturdy enough to hide behind. As soon as they emerged, they came under fire from small arms. The bullets pinged harmlessly off of Mike and he took to the fight like he'd been looking forward to it all day. He whooshed into the air and swooped up and down, in and out, taking out the handful of attackers.

They stood rooted to the spot and watched him work. He fired each time he was close enough to the assailants, blowing them apart into splattery, sludgy messes. Some of the Cogmore's hid behind plywood boards and piles of trash while others hugged the walls, taking potshots around the corner at them. They had nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. An RPG exploded in front of them, knocking them back a foot and sending Eve into the wall.

Volts shot into the air and went straight towards the source of the attack. He had his guns out and fired as he descended on the lone attacker.

The Cogmore flew apart like a burst water balloon and Volts hovered above his corpse to make certain he would never move again. Mike fired a quick burst a hundred feet and to the left and then he flew back to join them. Volts turned and came back too. They set down, Mike plastered in thick blood and gore and Volts hyperventilating even though he had no lungs or adrenaline.

The coast was clear, but Mike didn't let his guard down for a second. "Hurry up. More of them will show up soon."

As they ran Zero said to Mike, "These people don't seem conquered to me. In fact they act like they're at war."

"This is a big planet. The rest of the world has learned to do what's expected of them but all of the revolutionaries come here because this is where we are based and where the Beetars operate from.

The attackers actually make up a fraction of a percent of the Cogmore population. The rest of

these insects have bowed to their superiors.”

Mike fired his gun and a single Cogmore ahead of them fell over dead. Sure enough, it had a rifle clutched in its tiny hands.

He turned back towards them and pointed at the alleyway they'd come from. “That's Beetar headquarters. They call it a garrison but we do all the soldiering for them. It's mostly filled with diplomats and strategists and such.”

That explained why the buildings stood out from the neighborhood.

A shadow fell over them and Mike reacted like a coiled spring. When he saw what cast the shadow, he relaxed. He put his gun down by his thigh and said, “That's Kathy up there. Winthrop's bound to be flying around here somewhere. They're a good team. It's their watch, that's why we're just dicking around today. You'll be with them all day tomorrow.”

If this was dicking around, Zero was scared

to death to find out what the real job entailed.

Kathy waved down at them, and in that split second she was fired upon.

Mike ran off, shouting, “Hurry up,” over his shoulder.

They didn’t see anymore Cogmore’s but they were hit from behind a couple of times.

Mike stopped them and beckoned for them to turn around. They were on a barren patch of land.

Beyond that, there were three buildings. Two were identical, side by side. They were the Beetars headquarters. Towering above them from behind was a fat lump of a building. That one was their building. Besides that, as far as the eye could see was nothing but a barren wasteland dotted with makeshift huts here and there.

He said, “You’d be surprised by how civilized the Cogmore’s are around the rest of the planet. The assholes all congregate here.”

Eve asked, “What’s the rest of the world

like?”

“They farm for the Beetars. They grow this seed or something that the Beetars enjoy grinding up and drinking in their water. I’d compare it to coffee but it would be a terrible comparison.

Parsons says it tastes like sludge with a hint of diarrhea and cigar smoke. He keeps trying to learn to like it but he can’t.”

Volts asked, “Where’s all the wildlife and vegetation?”

“From what I’ve been told, the Beetars killed everything off that didn’t aide the Cogmore’s in growing their cash crops. It was a smart move if you think about it. They took away their infrastructure. The Cogmore’s now serve one purpose and that’s to grow the crops. In return, they’re fed and kept safe.”

Zero said, “That doesn’t sound like a good deal. It sounds like the Cogmore’s are slaves.”

“I don’t have all the answers. The Beetars

work in mysterious ways. We had a guy here who thought the Beetars had to intervene to stop the Cogmore's from ruining their own planet the same way we humans ruined Earth. If that's right then the Beetars saved the Cogmore's from themselves."

Zero sighed; unsure if he was playing for the good guys anymore.

Mike said, "It's best to obey orders. You can question everything later, when you get your bodies back. Until then, we serve a purpose. Once you go on patrol you won't give a damn about motives or reason, you'll just want to kill as many Cogmore's as possible because they'll be trying to kill you."

Zero looked at the three buildings in the distance. It was ridiculous to him that so much blood was being shed over three simple nondescript structures. "If all the bad Cogmore's convene on those three buildings, then why not evacuate them and nuke the shit out of the entire area? We could then set up base somewhere else."

Mike nodded as though he was considering the merits of Zero's idea. Then he shook his head abruptly and said, "We don't make those types of decisions. Like I said, just keep your questions to yourselves and do your duty and maybe you'll survive long enough to get reunited with your flesh."

A mech flew their way from the direction of the buildings. It landed a few feet in front of them. It had blood dripping from its metal surfaces and little char marks here and there. It said to Mike, "Kathy told me the new meat is here." To them it said, "It's nice to meet you. I'm Winthrop."

He went around and shook each of their hands as they told him who they were.

Winthrop turned to Mike. "If you're heading back to base now, I can cut a path for you."

Mike looked them over and seemed to judge them on the spot. "Yeah, that might be a good idea. We'll be right behind you."

Winthrop leapt up and then shot off through the air.

Mike started to jog. "Hurry up."

They got through the alleyway between the two identical buildings without being ambushed and flew up and in through the opening at the top of their base without taking fire.

Winthrop whooshed about like an angry hornet, letting loose burst after burst of small arms fire wherever he saw a potential threat.

Mike set down between them and said, "Good job, soldiers. What do you think of the place?"

Zero said, "It's a nightmare. Has anyone ever been taken down out there?"

He laughed. "Oh yeah. It happens all the time. That's why we were in such desperate need of replacements."

Volts said, "But we were the last of them.

Does that mean there'll be no more troops coming

through here?”

“No way. They’ve probably rebuilt the training center back on Epigog already and a fresh batch of recruits is probably being processed as we speak.”

That was a good thing. Zero could already tell they were woefully undermanned here.

Mike added, “Give it a couple months and we’ll see some new meat come through here again.”

Zero hoped he was right. He hoped they would survive long enough to see them too.

They met with Jackson even though none of them had yet forgiven him for what he’d made them do to the captive Cogmore’s. Mike went off to meet with Parsons.

Jackson led them to a filthy room with dented walls peeling paint and light fixtures that hung from the ceiling like they’d been yanked out. There was a wall of monitors against one wall and nothing else besides a single table in the middle of

the room.

Jackson said, “The reason most of this place looks like a bomb hit it is because it did. We were infiltrated last year and the Cogmore’s hit us hard. They killed three units before we wiped them all out.”

Eve asked, “How many Cogmore’s were there?”

“Thousands. It was a concerted effort to get rid of us once and for all. That’s why we run round-the-clock sweeps now and eliminate threats on sight.”

Jackson waved towards the monitors. “And it’s why we have those things. Now we can see everything within a twenty mile radius of this building. Once we get a few more soldiers based here, we’ll make someone a dedicated surveillance officer who can stay with the cameras and keep a constant vigil of our surroundings. Until then, we only use this room at night when our patrols are less

effective.” He pointed at Zero. “You go and get recharged just now. You’ll take the watch with me tonight.”

Zero hated the notion of staying up all night with Jackson the jerk, but if manning the monitors was part of the job then he’d do what had to be done.

He said, “Goodnight then,” and left them.

He walked back to the living quarters and plugged in for a quick charge.

He awoke from his charge. Mike was in the room with him. He locked him in a stare and said incredulously, “You’ve only been charging for twenty minutes. There’s no way you’re fully charged.”

He knew he was right. He felt drowsy still.

He said, “Sometimes I pop awake in the middle of a charge. I don’t know why.”

“That’s impossible. Charging shuts you down until it’s over.”

“Well then there’s something wrong with

my unit because it happens all the time.”

Mike stared at him as though he didn't quite believe it. He changed the subject. “I relayed your idea to Parsons and he said he'll think about approaching the Beetars with it.”

“What idea?”

“Your idea to evacuate the buildings and nuke this area.”

“Oh.”

“I doubt they'll consider it though. As long as they have the situation contained, they won't change a thing.”

“Thank you anyway.”

“Hey, if they go for it and it gets rid of most of the attackers, I'll be thanking you.”

He felt weary. He said, “I'll see you when I wake up.”

Mike watched as he closed his eyes. Right before he fell back to sleep he heard him mutter,

“That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen.”

He awoke to Jackson's mechanical face. He was holding his charge port in his fist. "Rise and shine sleepy head."

Zero stepped away from the wall and counted three mechs, inanimate as they charged. He also noticed two big blocky objects dangling from power ports. He'd never seen anything like that before.

Eve, Volts, and Mike were down for the night while Winthrop and Kathy stayed on duty.

Jackson walked away, so he followed after him. They came to the monitor room and he stood three feet from the bank of screens. He said, "It gets boring, but it has to be done. I've personally saved lives by paying attention in this room. I've had my own life saved too."

Zero asked, "How is it that Winthrop and Kathy can hold a charge for so long?" They'd been operating all day long without a charge.

Jackson looked at his feet. "We've lost so

many troops here that we have spare parts readily available. We keep four back-up power packs rummaged from dead units that can be interchanged in the middle of a shift so that we can stay on duty for twice as long as usual. Mike swapped Kathy and Winthrop's out an hour ago. Their used power packs are charging as we speak, to be used later, probably on me and Mike sometime tomorrow."

So that's what those blocky things were dangling from the charging ports back in the living quarters. If only Volts had known it was possible to swap out power packs he wouldn't have powered off so often in the middle of a shift back on Epigog. Then again, that would require there being an extra pack to work with, and he wasn't sure he had one at his disposal on Epigog.

He asked about the oversized paper map that covered the entire surface of the table behind them.

"What is that thing and why isn't it digital?"

"You know what it is, dumbass. It's a map

of the area. It's paper because Parsons likes paper. He draws a new one up every few days. I think he likes to see the progress we've made."

"But digitizing it would make changes so much quicker."

"Listen, man: Parsons has nothing to do while he's here. It's not his fault either. He's limited by his flesh and lungs. He can't breathe the air so he's a prisoner in this facility because he's not mechanical like we are. He keeps his sanity by doing busy-work and that's okay by me."

He finally understood.

They double checked the monitors for movement but all was still outside.

Jackson told him a story; he thought it was to help clear the air about the executions he'd had them perform earlier.

"There was a unit here named Jennifer Hastings. We went through training together and formed a bond, and wouldn't you know it, but she

got stationed here with me. I had no idea what she looked like in real life but our personalities clicked. We made a vow to stay together after we got our bodies back. It would be like a blind date except that I already knew everything about her. It was perfect. We were fish out of water in this part of the galaxy, in this time frame, but at least we'd have each other. Well, two months ago during a routine patrol of the perimeter she was ambushed by around a hundred Cogmore's. I was in here watching the monitors. I saw them coming, but they were too fast. By the time I alerted her, she'd already started to take fire. She put up one hell of a fight but they brought her down. When her teammate arrived, the Cogmore's took him out too. I watched as those little bastards tore parts of her off. I saw them drag her head away into the desert. By the time we reacted they were long gone."

Zero wanted to put an arm over his shoulder, but he was too despondent already. Physical contact

would probably make him jump out of his metal skin.

Jackson finished the story up with, “That’s why I enjoy killing Cogmore’s. I had one chance at real happiness and they stole it from me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You hate me now for what I made you do, but you’ll learn to loathe everything about them.

Mike told me about your idea to lure them all in here and then bomb them off the face of the planet so I know you’re starting to see them for what they really are too.”

“No, I don’t hate them yet. I just thought you guys were spilling a lot of blood in these small skirmishes and not making a difference. A large scale attack with an exclamation point behind it would make an impact. Think Hiroshima or Nagasaki.”

“What does that mean?”

“The first atomic bombs ever dropped as an

act of warfare were dropped there and they caused so much devastation all at once that the enemy had no choice but to surrender.”

“I see. It’s a good idea but don’t be surprised if Parsons doesn’t bring up your suggestion to the Beetars. They tend to look at us like we’re rabid dogs or something.”

“It wasn’t much of an idea anyway. It just came off the top of my head.”

“I think it’s a great idea. There’s nothing here worth preserving anyway. And if we took out most or all of the hostile Cogmore’s and peace is finally achieved, we might even get stationed somewhere else.”

“Are there better places than this?”

“Everywhere is better than this place. We once had a guy come here from Ishca, the penal planet. Ishca is widely known as the worst place to get stationed. Well, this guy had been on Ishca for a whole year, and within a week on Cogmore he was

dead. The dangers here are underreported and not nearly as glamorous as the dangers elsewhere. Here, they take your head out to the desert and you're never heard from again."

He shook his head and said incredulously,

"All of this death and mayhem is so the Beetars can have a nice cup of coffee made from Cogmore seeds? What a joke."

Jackson looked at him like he wanted to punch him in the head. "I don't fight for the seeds. I fight for Jennifer Hastings. Give it time and you'll be fighting for something similar. You'll make a friend for life only to have them fail to return from a patrol or you'll watch as the facility is overrun and half of the people you know die in front of your eyes."

"I apologize. I didn't mean to diminish your motives like that."

"I get it, dude. I was an overzealous idealist when I first got here too. Most new arrivals look at

those cute little Cogmore's and wonder why we hate them so much. Everyone comes around sooner or later. You will too."

"I sure hope not."

"Me too, but you will."

Jackson spotted some movement on the monitor and radioed Kathy and Winthrop. In less than ten seconds the monitors lit up with strobing flashes of fire. Seconds later they got a thank you from the patrollers. It was quick, deadly, and efficient, and sadly it did nothing to give the Cogmore's pause because only moments later they saw additional movement on the monitors as Cogmore's converged on their fallen comrades.

He noticed a shadow from behind them and turned to see the same little Cogmore who'd met them when they first landed. It must've been the same one because it was freely walking about.

Jackson tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Ignore him. He's a mild irritant at best. He's

actually one of the good ones. We call him Hobbs. Don't ask me why. He was already here when I got here. He keeps his feelers out in the community for any whispers concerning Cogmore attacks and lets us know when they're coming. He's also responsible for bringing in most of the prisoners. Cogmore's would consider him a traitor if they ever found out but he's one of our best assets."

Hobbs the Cogmore bowed before them and scurried away. Zero could've sworn he heard it mutter something under its breath as it retreated. He didn't trust it. For all he knew it was a double agent, working for the Cogmore resistance as it pretended to aid them.

Jackson must've read his mind. "The Beetars have his entire family unit in custody. If he's caught playing both sides, they'll be executed."

"That's pretty harsh, don't you think?"

"That's life out here. Nothing's fair and nothing is off limits. In matters of life and death,

nothing's sacred.”

He spotted movement on the monitors as soon as they turned back around. Jackson let him call it in, and with the help of the hand drawn map, he gave accurate coordinates.

Seconds later there were dozens of smoldering Cogmore corpses twitching on the ground.

Before he had a chance to feel guilty for what he'd done, Jackson put a hand on his shoulder and shook him excitedly. “Good job. You just saved lives. You're a natural at this.”

Jackson's math was skewed though. He'd saved two lives, potentially, but ended dozens to do so.

He was right that it was harsh on Cogmore.

He could only hope to become numb to it or he'd lose his mind.

Winthrop and Kathy whizzed through the skies all night long as they supplied them with

targets. It was exhausting from his end so he couldn't imagine how they felt about it.

As soon as the sun came up, they went out to the hangar to greet Kathy and Winthrop.

Kathy set down and said jovially, "That was fun. Thanks for the intel."

Winthrop added, "That was one for the books. It was one of the best nights we've had in a long time."

Zero wanted to ask them if they'd lost their goddamn minds but thought it prudent to hold his tongue.

To his utter horror, Kathy and Winthrop helped change out his power pack. They changed Jackson's too. Apparently they would patrol the skies until Mike was fully charged to relieve them.

Zero's mind went black and then switched back on as soon as the new power pack was pushed into him. As soon as his eyes opened, he saw his power pack lying at his feet and every mech there

was staring at his gaping chest cavity.

Winthrop was feeling around inside his chest. “This is weird. How’d you do this? It looks like you’ve got extra shielding or something that covers your entire battery compartment.”

He shrugged. “I know doctor Henshaw said he spent a little extra time with our units. Maybe that’s a modification.”

He could only hope they didn’t look into his make-up any further or they’d find his kill switch disabled too and really start asking questions.

Winthrop stood up and smiled. “That doctor’s a genius. I’m going to rig up the rest of us like you when I get a chance.”

Kathy asked him what was so special about the shielding.

“The extra shielding will withstand an EMP burst. All electronics become disabled after an EMP burst, but a battery shrouded in this additional protection would remain working.”

Jackson said, "Hook me up with one too.

I've always worried what a close quarters nuke would do to our circuits."

Winthrop looked at Zero like he was a specimen under a microscope. "I'd like to root around inside your body later to see what else the good doctor improved upon."

He said, "Henshaw wanted his modifications to be a secret. He was worried he'd get into trouble if the Beetars found out what he'd done."

Winthrop chuckled. "I'm no snitch. No one is going to run off and tattle tale to the Beetars."

Kathy clapped him on the back. "You've just contributed more to our cause than any new arrival ever has. We're not about to go and throw you under the bus for it."

He wanted to tell them about the disabled kill switch, but he resisted the urge. He liked their enthusiasm and he did trust them, but he hardly knew them well enough to trust with the doctor's

life.

He stared up through the opened roof of the hangar with trepidation in his heart.

Jackson said reassuringly, “You’re ready for this. Cogmore’s vanish like cockroaches when the sun comes up. It should be pretty calm out there.”

Kathy added, “It’s a ghost town out there.

You’ll be fine. If Mike’s not up in ten minutes I’ll unplug him myself.” Then she banged his chest plate back into place and slapped him on the ass.

Luckily they didn’t see much activity.

Jackson swooped down on one poor Cogmore and ripped it in half with concentrated fire. At first Zero thought it was barbaric because the Cogmore just looked like a lost nomad in a dirty cloak, but when it fell to the ground and its cloak draped open, he saw an array of weaponry dangling from various holsters all over its body.

He heard a cacophony of rapid gunfire and followed the noise to its source. On top of the east

Beetar building was an unmanned turret, shooting wildly. He got out of its way and looked to see what it was firing at. A turret on the west building came to life and started to fire too. Then he saw it; a camouflaged wall was slowly moving towards them, being pushed by Cogmore's. It was about twenty feet long and six feet high. It was obviously made of metal or stone or some other type of hardy material, but the turrets took minute chunks out of it until there was nothing left and no one left alive to push it.

The Cogmore's were truly relentless in their attacks.

Just then Mike appeared beside him.

"Thanks Zero. Go on and get inside."

He didn't need to be told twice.

Before he left he told Mike about the camouflaged shield wall.

"I've never seen that before. They were probably trying to get close enough to plant charges

on the buildings. I'll keep an eye out for it.”

After seeing the turrets working so well it dawned on him that the Beetars had some seriously misguided ideas about security. The turrets worked more efficiently than they did. Drones could patrol the skies, taking out any sign of advancing Cogmore's. Satellites from space could pick up heat signatures and light the place up. Why were mechs controlled by human minds necessary when better means of defense could be employed? He didn't know the answer but he was getting the feeling it was because they were cheaper and more expendable.

He swooped towards base and slipped in through the open roof. He went over to the big red button and hit it, closing the roof over. He felt like he was starting to get the hang of things.

And then everything took a turn for the worse.

A loud boom shook the building. It was

followed by an eerie silence that was almost as frightening as the explosion. Zero looked around frantically to try and see what was happening. He saw a single Cogmore rush him with a handheld device clutched in its spindly little fist. It aimed it and fired. An electrode hit him in the chest and his systems went haywire. He froze to the spot. He watched helplessly as several more Cogmore's joined their comrade. They pushed him over onto his back and then they hefted him up like a trophy. They ran as a unit to the north end of the hangar. He saw a gaping hole that he hadn't seen before. Once through the hole, he saw a tunnel that had been dug in the ground. They'd tunneled their way underneath the building.

The Cogmore's rushed into the dark tunnel just as mech reinforcements arrived, firing intensely. His heart filled with hope. These little rats didn't stand a chance once his teammates gave chase. That hope was dashed when the Cogmore's caved in the

tunnel with explosives as they ran through it. Every twenty feet they'd plant another, just in case his fellow mechs had found a way through the last cave in. Dirt hit his eyes as the ceiling slowly collapsed on them. But the Cogmore's stayed ahead of it.

Ten minutes of running through roughly hewn tunnels and they finally came to an opening.

The sun blinded him as they emerged. He was surrounded by thousands of chanting and cheering Cogmore's. His captives lofted him higher into the air for all to see. He was hit with a stone and some disgusting pig rubbed shit on him. He was spat on and hit with more stones before their delirium finally subsided.

A Cogmore split the crowd and everyone quieted down for it. It said, "Shackle the mechanical man. We can learn much from it."

Another, timid voice called out, "Aren't you worried they'll come looking for it?"

The leader said authoritatively, "They're

cowards. They fight for nothing. They'll assume we destroyed this one because it's easier to assume it's lost and do nothing than accept that it might be salvageable and try and find it."

As he was moved along through the crowd the leader said, "Once it's secured tightly, mobilize it so I can see its power flow. We'll take it apart piece by piece to figure out how to destroy them all."

That didn't sound fun. Zero hoped the Cogmore was wrong about his side. He hoped they'd come looking for him, and sooner rather than later.

He was taken inside a camouflaged tent and his arms and legs were latched to a huge boulder sticking out of the ground. When they mobilized him he was pretty sure he couldn't break that boulder to bits with sheer strength alone.

They used chains and ropes and nylon straps.

He looked like he was trapped inside a cocoon

when they were finally satisfied he wouldn't get loose. Then they hit him with that handheld taser thingy and his circuits popped to life like an appliance plugged in. He wanted to test the restraints but thought it would look bad to do that so soon and right in front of so many of them.

They left him alone for a few seconds and then the leader came inside the tent. It wore a long cloak with colorful beads sewn into it. He could just barely see its myriad tentacled legs jutting out from the base of it, squirming and moving over each other. It also carried several hand tools that no doubt were going to be used on his metal frame. It placed the tools on a wooden table beside him and walked all the way around the boulder, taking him in.

It stood before him and said, "All you machines know is death. I wonder if you even have the capacity to fear what's about to happen to you." It shook its head sadly and picked up a chisel.

Zero yelled out, “Wait,” but the words came out odd. Only then did it occur to him that the Cogmore’s were speaking an alien language that his translator had deciphered into English and so when he spoke to it the words were foreign to his ears for just a split second.

The Cogmore jumped back. “Machines don’t know our language. We’ve captured units like you and all they do was drone on indecipherably.

Why did they program you like this?”

“I’m not just a machine. The Beetars put my mind into this robotic unit. I’m a human from another world.”

The Cogmore blinked, which almost made him scream. Its huge eyelid slid from out of nowhere and made a sucking sound as it slipped across the surface of its oversized eye. “This is trickery.”

“It’s not. I’m a modified unit so my translator has your language stored in its database.”

As he said it he realized that was probably true.

“The other units you captured did not have that function.”

It regarded him with suspicion. “Perhaps this is fortuitous. We may get more information from you than from the others we’ve examined.”

So the Cogmore wasn’t touched by the fact he wasn’t just a machine. It didn’t care that he was a living creature. It just saw it as advantageous. But it meant he’d bought himself some time to find a way out of his predicament. It was too bad for the Cogmore that he knew nothing at all about operations on its planet. It was only his second day on the job. But the Cogmore would assume he was lying to it and then the torture would probably begin.

It stood in front of him and began to interrogate him. “You say you are a living creature inside of this machine. So if I cut you open, I could question you directly?”

“No, no. Only my mind is in here. My

thoughts control it, not my body. My body was dying, so the Beetars promised to heal me and in exchange I would do their bidding until my body is ready to inhabit again. It wasn't laid out so clearly at first, but that's what happened in the end."

The Cogmore rubbed its rounded temples.

"Why do you trust that the Beetars will give you what they promised?"

"I signed a contract."

The Cogmore snorted derisively. "It seems you know less about them than we do. The Beetars can not be trusted. Have you even seen what they've done to my planet? They did all of this just so we wouldn't cut off their Chee supply."

Chee must've been their name for the seeds the Cogmore's grew.

"Chee was a worthless crop to us but the Beetars developed a taste for it. When we told them we had to stave the supply so we could grow real food for our citizens, they took over our world and

enslaved us to make sure we did exactly what they wanted. When we resisted they brought in killing machines just like you to enforce our servitude. We believed all of the lies the Beetars told us about galactic cooperation and sharing knowledge but now we know the truth. I think you've been swindled just like we were but you just don't know it yet."

He nodded. He'd worried about that exact thing ever since they'd put his mind inside the mech. But this Cogmore couldn't be trusted either. It was the leader of a faction that brought death and destruction to Beetars and humans alike. And he only had one side of the story. The Beetars hadn't told him anything about Cogmore so the little alien before him could've been lying through its teeth for all he knew.

Before the Cogmore leader worked itself into a lather, he confessed, "I've only been on this planet for two days. I know almost nothing about

how things work here.”

The alien regarded him closely. “How can I trust you?”

“You can’t. But you should know that when my power supply dwindles, I’ll die. So if you need information, you need to question me soon.” He didn’t know why he divulged that piece of info. He thought if it hurried up and got all the intel it needed from him, then maybe it would let him go before his batteries drained, killing his consciousness. But he had no reason to believe this Cogmore had any compassion or would ever consider letting him go.

The Cogmore smiled sickly. It looked him over saying, “Trust the Beetars to build you haphazardly. I might have a solution for that.” Then it stood up and walked from the tent.

He strained to hear the sounds of his friends swooping in to rescue him but the skies outside were silent.

A moment later the Cogmore came back

with a wheeled dolly that had a large rectangular apparatus on it. “We use these to power our weapons. These chargers recharge themselves. It’s a simple design that the Beetars know about so there’s no excuse for them to not employ one in each of you machines. With this I can interrogate you for an eternity.”

He should’ve kept his mouth shut. He’d never been held hostage before but he should have known better than to divulge so much information to the enemy. Now even death couldn’t save him.

The Cogmore asked, “Where’s your power cell located?”

He told it the truth because otherwise it might take him apart looking for it. “It’s under my chest plate.”

It got to work removing the plate. It was weak but it had tools and alien technology to aid it. He watched his chest plate clang on the dirt floor and then the Cogmore called outside the tent for

assistance in removing his battery. Three others joined it, yanking his battery free. As soon as they disconnected it, his mind went blank.

When he awoke, he felt like he'd been supercharged. His mind was sharp and he felt physically stronger. The chest plate was still on the ground and the Cogmore was standing beside it, staring at him.

The Cogmore said, "You'll never have to charge again. My men are looking at your old battery pack to see what it's made of. Until they unlock its secrets I want you to tell me the layout of the Beetar buildings."

"I've only ever been inside the building we humans use as a base of operations. The twin structures are for Beetars only." He wasn't sure if that was true, but he'd never once been formally invited inside the Beetar buildings, so it felt true.

It stared at him, trying to ascertain if it could trust him. "Tell me about the layout of that building

then.”

He didn't want to but he also didn't want to refuse. He wasn't a real soldier. He hadn't been trained for any of this.

“There's the main hangar. They use it when supplies come in and to leave the building for patrols. There's a monitor room so they can scan the perimeter remotely. There's a living quarters where they recharge each night. The General has an office. That's all I've seen of it so far.”

“How many of you are there?”

“I was one of seven robots stationed there.

Besides that there's a human in the flesh and a Beetar liaison.” He didn't mention the little creepy Cogmore that wandered the halls because he didn't want to out him as a traitor.”

“I believe you. We have a man on the inside and that's the intel he's supplied us too.”

So the creepy Cogmore named Hobbs was a double agent. Now he wished he'd mentioned him

because the Cogmore leader would think he was lying by omission.

He said, “I didn’t mention him because I didn’t know he was working for you.”

“That’s the point. But if you’ve never been inside the Beetar buildings, then you have no fresh intel for me. I need to know more.”

“I don’t know much. I’ve told you all of it.”

“That’s a pity.” It reached down and picked up his chest plate. Before putting it back on him it reached inside his chest cavity and fiddled with something he couldn’t see. Then his mind went out like a light.

His senses came back in a flash. Two Cogmore’s were staring at him when he looked up.

The leader said, “There’s been a development and we need to know what you know about it.”

“How long was I out?”

“Several days. We were going to power you back up a couple of times but we didn’t have a good

enough reason.”

So he'd been out of commission for days.

He had no idea what had happened in that time but he was furious that he was still in Cogmore custody.

His friends really had abandoned him to his fate.

He tried to move but he was still secured to the big boulder. “What do you want?”

“They've left the planet. The Beetars and the killing machines like you all left this morning in several shuttles. Our inside man hasn't been heard from so we don't know what happened. We want to go into their empty buildings but we don't know if it's worth the risk. It smells like a trap.”

He wondered if the Beetars had taken his suggestion to leave the buildings in order to draw out the rebels and then bomb the crap out of them.

If that was the case then it was a trap. He said, “I know nothing. I'd check it out while you have the chance.”

The Cogmore rubbed its head, deep in

thought. It looked at the other one and they both blinked to each other. It said to Zero, "You're right. We might not have much time to ponder this. If they come back we'll have squandered the perfect opportunity. If you're lying we'll kill you."

That didn't bother him as much as it should have. He already felt like he was doomed.

The Cogmore said to its companion, "Get your brothers and sisters together. Tell your mother that I've made my decision. If we succeed we'll be free once more."

So the other Cogmore was the leader's son or daughter, and he was sending in all of his children to infiltrate the Beetar base. The thought of a mother and father losing their children made him think about his own long dead father losing him. He knew how devastated he must have been to lose his last living relative and it tore him up inside. He had second thoughts about sending them all in to their deaths, even though they were the enemy.

He said, "Wait. It's a trap. Once they think enough rebels are in close enough proximity to the buildings they're going to nuke them and kill you all."

The Cogmore looked at the ground. Then he looked back to his child and put a hand on its shoulder. "We came very close to losing everything. We'll hang back and wait to see what they do next. Spread the word that no one is to go near those buildings."

His child blinked once and nodded before leaving the tent.

The leader said to Zero, "You could have let us all stumble into the trap. Why did you stop us?" "I've lost loved ones. My father died thinking I had preceded him in death. You don't deserve that kind of sorrow. I don't know much about you or your people but it seems clear that none of you deserve to die when all you're doing is fighting for freedom."

“That’s an odd stance for you to take.

Machines like you have killed thousands of us.”

“We thought you were the enemy. You attacked us so we fought back. My people are just doing their duty.”

“Well, thank you anyway.” He looked at him for an uncomfortably long time and finally seemed to make a decision. “I’m going to release you from your restraints. I trust you won’t take advantage of my generosity and attempt to kill me or any of my people.”

“I won’t. Even if I did, I have nowhere to go now that my people have left the planet.”

“So we’re your only friends,” he said as he went around unlatching him from the boulder. He patted him on the head when he was done and stood back with the handheld device that could render him immobile if he deployed it. He said, “I’ll be carrying this around as a safety precaution until I’m positive you pose no threat.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. If we would’ve rushed the Beetar headquarters we would’ve been massacred and my entire civilization would be doomed to eternal slavery. As long as we can rebel we can hope for a brighter tomorrow. Now I just need to find a way to trick the Beetars into thinking we are raiding their base so they’ll launch their attack.

When they think we’re all dead, they’ll let their guard down and we can catch them by surprise the moment they return to the surface.” He looked at him for confirmation, like he would know how good or bad his idea was.

Zero shrugged. “I have no idea what they plan to do after they fire their nukes.” He could only hope the Beetars wouldn’t fall like the Cogmore leader wanted. The Beetars had to survive because they were his ticket off of this rock and back to his body. Once again, he had a thin sliver of hope to hang on to. It was too bad that he was starting to see

the darker side of the Beetars because they were his only chance at a future worth living. He was very confused about who he was and what he stood for. He hoped he'd made the right decision by telling the Cogmore's about the trap, but he couldn't be sure. He felt a bit like a traitor.

The Cogmore leader told him his name was Damonesterpastor but he let him just call him Damon.

He lied and said his name was Zero for the sake of continuity. Damon led him around his camp as the other Cogmore's stared at him like he was the antichrist. But at least no one threw rocks at him this time, probably because he was in Damon's presence. After a while Cogmore's started to follow in their wake, whispering as they tried to catch up.

Damon pointed out things that he found fascinating but had little meaning to Zero. He pointed out a tent, saying, "That one is mine. As the chief of this clan I get the biggest and brightest

abode made of the finest materials.”

He couldn't care less but he acted like he was spellbound.

Damon showed him a mean looking squirrel-like creature with thick and sharp fangs and six legs, telling him that it was his pet and also an endangered species because of the Beetars penchant for eliminating anything the Cogmore's cared for.

He introduced him to his sons and daughters and their significant others as well as those not directly related to him.

Each time Zero said, “Hello,” to the passing Cogmore's they looked like they wanted to run and hide from him.

He finally met Damon's wife. That was uncomfortable. Apparently she wasn't as willing to let bygones be bygones. Him and his kind had slaughtered her sons and daughters and she wasn't about to forgive and forget because the circumstances had changed. He apologized, but he

was wasting his breath.

They went back to Damon's tent. He had to duck down to enter. Inside was a war room with maps and little figurines that represented each side.

There were three severe looking Cogmore's huddled around the map table, staring at it like it held a secret. Behind them was a modest bed and a lamp with little moldy old pamphlets scattered around it. When they saw him the Cogmore's all stood rooted to the spot like their muscles had seized, but because Damon had walked him in, they didn't make a move to draw their weapons.

Damon nodded to them which must have meant that he was no threat. Then he said to the entire room, "Before the Beetars arrived I had all kinds of luxuries. I had information at my fingertips via handheld devices. I had virtual reality games that would make your head spin. You'd forget who you were in those games within seconds. I had a nice home in a nice neighborhood with kind

neighbors and friends who would come over to laugh and play. That was a long time ago. I was just a boy when the Beetars arrived and took everything from us. They leveled anything higher than a single story, claiming we were congregating in higher buildings and using their size as a vantage point to spy on them and launch attacks. My house was one of the first to be razed to the ground. My own people did that to me and my family. We stood back and watched as fellow Cogmore's destroyed our lives out of sheer cowardice and blind obedience to a higher power that could not be trusted. Now they don't even let us erect stone walls in fear that we're scheming behind them. My dad was turned in as a traitor by his best friend and executed. My mom died of pneumonia, which would have never killed her before the Beetars had us living on the streets and starving to death. Most of my brothers and sisters were rounded up and sent off to work camps to farm. I never saw them again. I'm the last of that

clan and I'll be damned if I'm going to give up without a fight."

It was quite an unnecessary speech, but Zero thought it was meant more for the other Cogmore's in the room than it was meant for him because they were pumped up by the time he was done.

One of them jabbed its pointed finger at the map and said, "We have to be careful. They could be watching from the skies."

Damon said calmly, "We won't be raiding their base. Zero here has told me that it's a trap."

One of the others yelled, "How can you trust one of those machines?"

Damon said, "I thought it might be a trap but Zero confirmed it. He says the Beetars plan to nuke it once they're sure they'll get enough casualties from the attack. It makes sense."

They mumbled to one another but they soon came around. One guy said, "If that's the case, what should we do?"

“We need to force their hand. We need to stage a fake invasion so that they attack. Then they’ll set up base somewhere else and we can ambush them.”

“How can we stage an invasion?”

“Zero knows where the cameras are mounted. He knows their surveillance limitations so we can use them against them.”

Zero had not once offered the Cogmore’s his services. He did not know the surveillance weaknesses. But here he was, aiding the enemy.

He wanted to say, “No,” and fly off into the sky, but he didn’t because he was starting to think he was finally fighting for the side of righteousness.

The Beetars would kill him if they caught him helping the Cogmore’s. He just knew it. They’d probably have Henshaw flush his human husk out into space. But he had finally found a purpose that made sense to him. These people were fighting oppression and for the right to freedom. Just

because he'd been recruited to the other side didn't mean he personally stood against the Cogmore's or what they fought for. He wondered if the others from base would feel the same way if they had all the information, or if they'd been so jaded by the constant attacks that there would never be peace with the Cogmore's.

He was in two minds. The Beetars had never once done anything to him to make him doubt their motives but the Cogmore's had. They'd attacked him and kidnapped him. Maybe he had Stockholm syndrome, where the captive starts to empathize with his captors? Or maybe he was finally learning something about his place in the universe.

It didn't matter how he felt, though, because more and more it seemed like he didn't have much choice in the matter.

He asked if they were far enough away from the Beetar base to survive it being hit by a nuke and everyone stopped chattering. They hadn't thought

of that.

Damon said, “We could tunnel underground until the fallout dissipates.”

All Cogmore heads nodded and one of them said, “It’ll be easier if we dig up the tunnel we used to abduct him.” He was pointing at Zero.

Another added, “It would go quicker if we asked him to do it, nicely of course.” He was referring to him too.

Damon looked up at him and said sheepishly, “It would go much faster if you did it.”

He sighed. “Take me there and I’ll get to work.” He wasn’t expecting to be put to work but it would seem that he was now an integral part of the Cogmore resistance.

They’d caved the entire tunnel in, but the rocks and dirt were loose enough to easily move aside. Damon made an attempt to help him but it was pathetic in comparison.

Zero said to him, “You have some

strategizing to take care of. I've got this."

He expected Damon to hesitate because he didn't yet trust him, but he clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Thank goodness you came into our lives, Zero. I'll be back soon. Let me know when you start getting tired."

Zero smiled and then he turned back around and dug like a machine as Damon walked away.

He'd made it three hundred feet in by the time Damon came back. The sun was going down and the outside of the tunnel was a mess of rocks and mountains of dirt.

Damon looked weary from his time in the makeshift war room as he shouted his name down the newly dug tunnel. He traipsed inside and looked around in amazement. "Another hundred feet or so and this will do nicely."

Zero propped against the wall and said, "I could finish it up tonight."

"No. You need to rest. The sun will be down

soon.”

“If that battery you put in me really recharges itself then I can work indefinitely.”

He looked at him sadly. “You didn’t have to help us. I know we didn’t meet under the best of circumstances, and for that I’m eternal sorry. Just know that I’m very glad you’re here.”

Zero opened his mouth to speak when a flash of light blinded him and a deafening boom reached his ears. A moment later the ground shook like an earthquake had hit. And then they felt the heat. That was when he knew what was happening. A nuclear device had been detonated but closer to the Cogmore camp than to the Beetar base. It made no sense.

Damon started to scream in agony as the heat blistered his skin. Luckily they were enclosed in the tunnel or the blast would have shredded them both. He grabbed Damon and shoved him to the ground. He covered him in a five foot high mound

of loose dirt and then he stood between him and the mouth of the tunnel to try and deflect some of the intense heat. For Damon's part, he didn't fight back as Zero buried him alive.

The heat subsided, but before it was gone completely, another blinding flash and another boom occurred, this time closer. He felt his senses flicker once but other than that scare, his extra shielding kept his new battery and circuitry safe from the EMP bursts.

One final blast caved the tunnel in.

He stood in the dark until the ground stopped rumbling and then he dug a peep hole to see if the attacks had subsided. After half an hour of silence and uninterrupted darkness, he dug a hole large enough to get out and then he dug up Damon from where he'd buried him alive. As he removed the dirt from his frail body he worried what state he'd find him in, but he was mostly fine besides some bleeding and blistering. Damon coughed and

dark streams ran down his face from dirty tears. “I need to go. I need to help the survivors.”

Zero led him from the tunnel. He walked ahead of him into camp. It was already clear that there were no survivors though. In fact there was nothing discernible where the camp site used to be.

Damon wandered around anyway. He was a man lost. He stumbled and fell. He stayed down and sobbed. His single eye twitched and the lid fluttered as fat streams of tears ran down his muddy face.

If Zero had the ability to cry he would have joined him. All the Cogmore’s he’d met were now dead except for the wrecked old man at his feet.

Damon had lost everything. He’d lost a wife and countless daughters and sons as well as his closest friends. Everything had been taken from him in a matter of a few minutes, including his cause.

Zero hefted him up and said, “We need to get you as far away from here as possible. The radiation is already killing you.”

“I don’t care. Your people did this. Are you a mole? Did they plant a homing beacon on you? How did this happen?”

He shook his head. “This wasn’t the plan. I don’t know how they found you, but if they knew where I was then why didn’t they rescue me before dropping the nukes?”

“Because they have no decency or compassion. They probably looked at you as collateral damage.”

He was wrong. Volts and Eve would’ve intervened on his behalf. He had to believe they wouldn’t let him get nuked without trying to help. He picked Damon up like a rag doll and chucked him over his shoulder as he kicked and screamed for him to let him go. Damon wanted to stay and slowly die where his fallen family had died but Zero didn’t have it in him to allow that. He started to jog away from the mushroom clouds. He had no idea what to do about Damon’s

radiation poisoning. All he had were a smattering of memories of his dad talking about it when he was a boy and those memories were cloudy. He thought he remembered him mentioning baking soda but he didn't have any. Damon probably needed to be put on an IV drip soon or he'd puke and shit out all of the water in his system. He wasn't a doctor so he was no help in that regard.

But he knew if they stayed, Damon's chances of survival would drop dramatically. That was his sole impetus in running as fast as he could away from the source of the radiation.

The sun had risen with a vengeance. The day was hotter than the last one and that did not bode well for Damon. He had gone still as Zero walked through the desert. He needed to find him water or he'd die on him before the day was over. But even with ample water, Zero didn't think he'd make it. He'd received massive doses of radiation, and with a body so small, it was only a matter of

time before he succumbed to it.

He jumped up and let his boosters carry him high into the sky, with Damon clutched in a death grip so he didn't fall. He saw a shimmer in the distance and decided to investigate it. It looked like a pool of water, but as he closed in on it, it became clear that it was only a mirage.

He slowly turned in the air, checking the horizon for any sign of liquid water. Just then he saw something dark fall from the clouds back where he'd come from. It looked like a ship and if so then there was still hope for him and for Damon. If his people came back for him he had to make sure they found him. He pivoted in the direction of the camp and ripped through the air as fast as he could.

The ship wasn't hard to find since the rest of the area had been bulldozed by multiple nuclear blasts.

As he got close, he saw several flying objects zipping through the air. It took a full minute

for him to realize they were his friends scouting the area.

He sure hoped the ship had life support or Damon wouldn't survive the flight. Then again, he wasn't even sure if they would be going up into space to join the Beetars or if they'd look for another place to set up base camp on the surface.

The old camp would be condemned because of the radiation. The Beetars and Parsons would get sick there.

Zero yelled, "Hey," as loud as he could and a mech swooped into view. It saw him and came at him fast, like it was going to attack, but when it got close it slowed down and dropped gently to its feet. It was Eve, and she had a puzzled look on her face.

"Is that you, Zero?"

He nodded.

"That's impossible. The Cogmore's abducted you almost a whole week ago. There's no way your battery could hold out for so long. It's a

miracle you're alive."

"They gave me a new battery."

"How did you survive the attack?"

"I got lucky." That was very true. If he'd been above ground during the strike he'd be a pile of molten metal sizzling in the sun.

"Why are you carrying a dead Cogmore?"

He shook his head. "He's not dead. I saved him." He put Damon down gently. Damon's mouth flopped open and his eyelid slid halfway shut. He checked for a pulse. He checked for signs he was breathing. He was already dead.

Eve stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

He wanted to cry. He wanted to shout at the sky and shake his fist at God. He wanted to slap that look right off of Eve's face. Instead he stood there and stared at his dead friend.

He whispered, "What are you doing here then if you thought I was already dead?"

"Zero, we didn't know you were still here. If

we had we would've tried to get you out before they dropped the nukes. We're the clean-up crew. We're here to eliminate any stragglers but it looks like the bombs took care of them all."

He stared off into space. "They were good people."

She moved closer to look into his eyes.

"They were not. They attacked us mercilessly. You saw it with your own two eyes. Get a hold of yourself, man. And make sure you keep your newfound opinions to yourself. No one wants to hear that shit."

She was right. He'd had a change of heart, but that didn't mean he could convince the others that his opposing opinion was the truth. "What happens next? What's the plan?"

She looked him up and down. "First of all, you need to come up with a cover story. If you tell Parsons or the Beetars that the Cogmore's messed with your battery and that's how you survived for

so long without a charge, they'll assume the Cogmore's rigged you to blow up. In fact, I'll have Winthrop give you a once over before we head back up, just in case they planted explosives in you."

He nodded. It was a fair assumption from her point of view. "What happens after we head up?"

"No one has told us yet. I think the Beetars will build a new base of operations, but so far they haven't told us if that's the case or not."

Just then, another mech appeared above them. It was Jackson. He swooped down and landed. He walked right up and looked at him incredulously.

"Zero, is that you? How the hell did you survive?"

Eve said, "Give him some space. He just survived a nuclear holocaust."

Jackson ignored her. He smiled when he saw Damon dead at his feet. "How many of these little bastards did you kill?"

He sighed. He wanted to tell him the truth

but he was too far gone to reason with. The Cogmore's had broken him beyond repair. He deflected by asking a question of his own. "How did you guys know where to drop the nukes? I thought the plan was to evacuate the base and lure them in, and it looked like that had started to happen when their camp was targeted instead."

"That was the plan at first. It was a good plan. It was your plan, remember? But then when we evacuated base, we noticed a change in Hobbs. He started to get shifty. It looked like he wanted to jump ship. The little traitor Cogmore was hiding something. So we got suspicious and interrogated him with violence until he broke. He told us he was working with the Cogmore resistance and he told us where they were camped. He was fidgety because we didn't give him enough warning before evacuating for him to get word back to the Cogmore base about our attack."

"What did the Beetars do to him when you

told them he was a traitor?”

“They sentenced him and his family to death.

We’ll probably have to carry out their execution as soon as we get back.”

Zero had almost forgotten that the Beetars had Hobbs’ family in custody as a safety precaution in case he tried to work against them. Their threats clearly hadn’t worked.

He made his mind up that he would have nothing to do with their executions.

Eve said to Jackson, “Zero needs a cover story. Apparently the Cogmore’s replaced his battery. That’s why he’s still functional. We can’t let the Beetars find out he was tampered with or they might not let him rejoin us.”

Jackson looked at him with barely hidden contempt. “Why did you let them tamper with you?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“Well, Eve’s right. We need to come up

with a lie or the Beetars will leave you behind or shut you down. They'll think the Cogmore's booby trapped you."

Eve added, "We don't need to worry about getting caught in the lie because they'll just have one of us open you up to confirm whatever story we concoct and we can lie about our findings."

He felt like a child trying to hide a secret from a parent. "Fine. I'll say whatever needs to be said."

Winthrop and Kathy appeared together to the south. They hovered their way. Volts dropped down right next to him. "Is that you Zero? What the hell happened to you?"

Zero hugged him, partly because he'd missed him but also to shut him up. He was weary. He didn't need to keep answering the same questions over and over again.

Winthrop landed and said, "They're all dead.

We wiped out the entire resistance." He cocked his

head to the side. “Is that Zero?”

He sighed and nodded.

Winthrop checked him over to be sure the Cogmore’s hadn’t rigged him to blow. He marveled at the new battery. Then Kathy came up with a cover story. It was weak but it was the only one that seemed plausible. They would say that the Cogmore’s discovered how to shut him down and they only reawakened him when they needed to interrogate him. He knew they could be shut down without losing their lives because Henshaw had done it to them before he shot them into orbit above Cogmore. He just didn’t know how to do it, but he didn’t have to know how in order to tell a convincing lie.

Then they got aboard the ship and left the once inhabited nuclear wasteland. He wondered if the nuclear fallout would spread far enough to affect the crops. That would be an embarrassing backfire.

Volts kept staring at him as they ascended

through the cloud layer. He said, “It’s good to have you back, man.”

“It’s good to be back,” he lied. He was glad to be reunited with Volts and Eve but he wasn’t happy to be working for the Beetars again. But at least he had hope once more. He’d come full circle but with a new, tarnished perspective.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember his humanity. The best he could come up with was to try and recall Stacey’s face, but he couldn’t do it. He’d only seen her human form once and that was so fleeting and seemed so long ago that he just couldn’t recall it. He wondered how she was doing. He wondered if Piss-pants was driving her nuts. He wondered if he’d ever see her again.

Jackson yelled, “We’ll rendezvous with the orbiter in twenty two minutes. I’m going to get some shut eye until then.

Volts eagerly said, “Me too.”

Zero wanted to go offline too, but now that

he was using a new power source, he didn't think he could anymore. He plugged the charging port into his back and nothing happened.

Eve smiled. "I guess you don't need that anymore."

She thought that would make him happy but she was wrong. He yearned to shut down. He needed the peace.

He smiled back anyway. It's a lonely feeling to be the only sad person in a group, but it's even lonelier when the group finds out you're sad and tries to jolly you out of it.

He rested his head against the wall and tried his best to acclimate to his new surroundings.

A vision of Damon's tiny blistered body crept into his thoughts. He had inadvertently led to his demise and the demise of everyone he loved. It had been his idea to nuke the entire area, even though the plan had been tweaked when Hobbs folded like a cheap lawn chair. But the seed was

planted by him. He was a monster among monsters.

He tried to shake the thoughts from his head,

but they were too fresh to be sloughed off so easily.

He avoided eye contact as he fought his internal

demons. He had to get a grip before he met with

Parsons or he'd start to ask questions that he did not

want to answer. He had to put on a convincing act

for the Beetars too.

They docked with the Beetar ship and he

helped unplug the charging mechs. They filed out

into a large open ship with alien markings and alien

interior design. The walls and floors were shiny and

black which made it nearly impossible to judge

depth. He stumbled twice before getting his

bearings. Lights illuminated the area from sources

unknown.

Parsons met them wearing a radiation suit.

“No way! Is that Zero?”

He stepped forward. “Yep. I survived.”

He looked him up and down. To the others

he said severely, "You should have told me about him before bringing him aboard the ship. For all we know he's been stuffed full of explosives."

Winthrop said, "We're not stupid. We checked him over. He's clean."

Zero said sarcastically, "Well I'm happy to be here too."

Parsons smirked. "Come with me. I need you to debrief me on what happened to you down there. If I don't like your story, you can't stay."

He followed after him, hopeful he'd buy into his story.

Parsons led him to an oversized office with odd furnishings and even stranger technology. By way of an explanation he said, "This was designed for Beetars. I don't know what any of this crap does and the chair hurts my ass." He pointed at a huge chair and said, "Take a seat but don't break it."

He sat down and Parsons ran a Geiger counter up and down his body. It beeped

continuously, meaning Parsons had to keep the suit on while in his presence.

He sat down and asked, “What happened to you?”

Zero told him the entire story with the little twists necessary to keep him from kicking him off the ship. He left out the fact that he’d started to change his mind about the Cogmore’s. He left out that he had sort of befriended their leader; their sworn enemy. He also failed to mention that he was now more energy efficient since he was running on Cogmore batteries that somehow recharged themselves. It took all of his will to refrain from asking him why no one had come looking for him.

When he was done, Parsons paused for a minute to gather his thoughts and finally said, “You’re very lucky. Let’s go join the others. I have some exciting news. I’ll have Winthrop check you over again just to be sure you’re safe.” He stood up and said, “Follow me.”

He walked behind as Parsons led the way
down one black, oily looking corridor after another.

Parsons said, "This is an observation ship
but it doubles as a failsafe in case the Beetars ever
got overrun on the ground. Then they could escape
up here and wait for reinforcements to arrive. It's in
geostationary orbit above their ground base."

Zero didn't really care. He was more
interested in this news he spoke of.

He turned a corner and the others were there
standing around inside a large, cavernous room with
poor lighting. He took a place among them and
Parsons faced them all. "The Beetars are running
sweeps right now but they think the resistance on
Cogmore is no more. If they're right then some of
you may get reassigned. That's good news because
anywhere is better than here."

It was good news. The thought of going
back to Cogmore put a weight in his heart.

To Winthrop he said, "Check Zero over with

a fine toothed comb. I want to know if a single wire is out of place.”

Winthrop said, “Yes, sir.” To him he said, “Follow me, Zero.”

He followed Winthrop down corridors with thick atmosphere and poor lighting until they got to a room that was just full of tools and various gadgets. “I’m not really going to do a thorough check. I’ll give you a once over to satisfy Parsons. I already know how different you really are.”

That last line made him feel like a weirdo, but he was right. He was different.

Winthrop took him apart, stared at his components, and then fastened his plates back up.

They went back to the cavernous common area when enough time had passed.

Eve had yanked two recharging ports from the walls and was busy wiring them together.

Winthrop asked, “What are you doing?

You’ll get in trouble.”

“I’ll say it was an accident. I’m wiring these together so one end can go into Zero and the other can plug into one of us. That way, we can use Zero as a mobile charger.”

Zero said, “We don’t need that, though. We have chargers.”

She looked at Volts and said, “While you were gone, Volts had a panic attack when they wouldn’t let him plug in two or three times a day. I kept telling him he can hold a charge just fine now but old habits die hard. This is more of a security blanket for that big baby.”

Volts glared at her, but he didn’t stop her from doing it, or from mocking him.

Zero asked if that would work.

“I don’t see why not.” She finished up, then coiled the wires in a loop, and with Winthrop’s help, stuffed them inside her chest cavity so Parsons wouldn’t find out what she’d done.

Volts smoothed over the walls where the

ports had been pulled so that it was only obvious they'd been removed if someone knew what they were looking for.

He finished up when Parsons and three Beetars appeared before them. The Beetars looked concerned, but Parsons looked like he wanted to jump for joy. That must've meant they were going to be stationed somewhere more hospitable.

The largest Beetar was also the bluest of the bunch. Its eyes took them all in as it stepped forward with a handheld tablet in its hand. It read from the screen. "The oldest units here are David Jackson, Michael Freeman, Winthrop Jones, and Katherine Jasper. You will be stationed on the human corporation planet. This is an easy assignment, granted to you as a thank you from us for all of your hard work and diligent service."

Kathy whooped with joy and hugged Winthrop. Jackson said to Mike, "We made it. It's time to take it easy for awhile."

The din died down and the Blue Beetar continued, “Eve, Zero, and Volts are the newest units. You will be given a special privilege that few have ever been granted. It’s a harder assignment, but not by much. You’ll be stationed on one of our warships that has been coming under increasing fire from an unknown enemy. The ship needs reinforcements and I thought you three would do nicely. I understand two other units from your training class are already there, so you’ll be in good company.

Volts said to Eve, “We’re going to see Piss-pants again.”

Jackson looked like he wanted to comment on the name but he refrained.

Zero would get to see Stacey again. He didn’t know how he got so lucky but despite all he’d been through, things were starting to work out.

The Beetar put its device away and said,

“The resistance has been eliminated thanks to your

suggestion.” He pointed at Zero. “We’ve detected no more movement from that area and all other Cogmore citizens are accounted for. You have won us a reprieve from their attacks, quite possibly forever. Parsons will stay behind with us to train up the new arrivals coming in the next month, but as far as we can tell, they won’t be necessary. We have finally civilized those people after all this time.”

Zero couldn’t help himself. “You mean subdued, right? You’ve finally subdued them into blind servitude. There’s a difference between civilizing a race and subjecting them to your rule.”

Parsons stepped forward and angrily yelled, “Hold your tongue, soldier.”

The Beetar waved Parsons off and calmly said, “I don’t know what you’ve been told about the Cogmore’s but your version of reality is wrong.

They were destroying themselves and their planet when we intervened. We managed to revive one of the few crops that will even grow down there

anymore and in exchange for a percentage of their harvest we provide sustenance, medical aide, and a structure they can build upon.”

Now he was confused. The Beetar seemed sure of its story, and it made some sense. Maybe Damon had lied to him or maybe he had his facts skewed. Then again, the Beetar might just be a convincing liar.

Or more likely was that both stories were partially true. Maybe the Beetars did intervene, but without being asked to do so. And in exchange, maybe they expected some of the harvests, whether the Cogmore’s liked it or not. Maybe both sides were in the dark about how events had unfolded. Because he didn’t know what else to say, he said, “I understand. I’m sorry for speaking out of turn.”

“It’s understandable. You were there for just a short amount of time and you saw many terrible things. And worse than that, none of my people

walked any of you through the history of our struggles on Cogmore.”

Parsons seemed to relax.

The Beetar stared at Zero with its overlarge black eyes and said, “We should have eased you into things on Cogmore. We should have been more transparent, and for that we are sorry. But that’s in the past now. Just know that we have your best interests at heart.”

Now that sounded like a lie but he kept quiet because he’d already caused too much turmoil with his mouth. He nodded so he didn’t have to speak.

The Beetar said, “General Parsons will get you all ready for your new assignments. It was an honor working with each and every one of you.” It turned and walked away with the other two Beetars following in its wake.

Parsons waited for a full minute before hissing, “You almost ruined it for everyone, Zero.

The Beetars are a benevolent race but there’s a limit

to how much shit they'll take."

"I'm sorry I spoke."

"Shut up. Mike, Jackson, Kathy and

Winthrop, you guys can follow me. The corporate planet is located at the next nearest star system.

There's a ship waiting for you. It'll get you there in a few weeks."

Jackson said, "Good. I can catch up on my beauty sleep."

Mike slapped him and said, "You'll need about three weeks of it so my eyes stop burning every time I look at you."

Parsons said to the rest of them, "I'll get your ship prepped to rendezvous with the warship. Stay put until then." Then he walked from the room.

Jackson hugged Eve and Volts and then he shook Zero's hand. Apparently they'd all become good friends while he was in Cogmore custody.

Kathy gave him a hug but the others just said "Goodbye," before chasing after Parsons.

Volts waited until they were all gone before saying to Zero, “I doubted your story about the Cogmore’s, but after hearing the stream of bullshit come out of that Beetars ugly mouth, I think I believe you now.”

That had him confused because the Beetar’s speech had the opposite effect on him, actually convincing him of Beetar righteousness.

Eve said, “It doesn’t matter what we think.

We just need to do our time and get through this for the payoff at the end.”

Volts nodded. She was right. The past was behind them. They had to move forward to their eventual destiny, which was to get their minds back inside their bodies.

Zero almost bought into his own denials, but then he heard a Cogmore voice call out for help from down the corridor.

He excused himself from his friends, saying he needed to stretch his legs, which was silly, but

they didn't argue.

He followed the sound of the distressed Cogmore's voice until he came to a door. When he opened it he saw five little Cogmore's huddled together, crying behind bars.

The Cogmore who stood up and approached the bars was the double agent, Hobbs.

He spat at Zero.

Zero said in his weird Cogmore voice, "I'm so sorry for what has happened to you."

Hobbs stepped back suspiciously. "What is this? Is this another twisted trick? How do you know my language?"

"It's in my database. It was programmed into me. I'm a living creature inside this mechanical body and my body was upgraded."

Hobbs looked him over. "I did not know that you things were alive."

"The rebellion has been thwarted. Your leader and his clan are dead."

“I know. They made me watch the explosions from up here.”

That was awful. They’d be executed for Hobbs’ betrayal. At least he would not be required to carry out their sentences since no one had mentioned it since they arrived. The Beetars probably wanted to do it personally.

Zero asked, “Why do your people hate Beetars so much?” The curiosity had him by the tail and would not let go. He was starting to understand the situation between the Cogmore’s and the Beetars was not black and white by any means, but he was curious about the nuances involved. Seeing both sides the way he had, and buying into both diametrically opposed ideals had his head spinning. A straight answer would set his mind at ease. But Hobbs did not supply it.

Hobbs sighed. “They were our friends and now they are not. Just because they are allies with you doesn’t mean that alliance will last forever. Be

careful with them. They can't be trusted. As soon as they can't exploit you with your willing participation, they will subject their rule upon you like they did to my people."

He nodded, still wondering who to trust.

Hobbs said, "Let me out."

Zero gasped. It hadn't even crossed his mind.

How could they escape from orbit aboard an enemy vessel?

"I can't. They'll kill me."

"You have to. You've killed innocents. Now you will purge your guilt by releasing us."

The way he said it, so forcefully and direct, had him convinced. He did have to do something to help. He couldn't just let them die.

"What would you do if I sprung you free?"

"We'd grab a shuttle and get back to our people. We'd start a new uprising."

He pondered his options. His mind screamed out for him to turn on his heels and close the door

behind him, to forget the entire conversation, but he couldn't do that now that Hobbs had confronted him. He had to help, if he could do so discreetly. He didn't want to get caught and he certainly didn't want Volts and Eve to get punished along with him, so he had to formulate a plan for Hobbs that ensured his involvement would never be discovered.

Because he was no sleuthing genius, he came up with the simplest plan that struck him. "I'll bust the lock on this cage but you have to assure me that you'll wait to escape. Me and my friends are leaving this ship soon. Wait until after we've left to make your move. That way it'll look like you broke free on your own."

Hobbs nodded. "It's the least I can do."

He wanted to trust him because he had to trust him. His life depended on Hobbs doing what he asked.

He grabbed the door and pulled. The lock crackled and finally snapped loose as the door

opened. He pushed the door back into place and said, "Wait until you hear our ship take off. Promise me."

"I promise. Thank you."

He walked from that holding cell with a heavy heart but also a hefty dose of fear coursing through him. He was not normally the trusting type, but he had to trust Hobbs to do the right thing.

He felt a cathartic wave wash over him. He had executed Cogmore's in cold blood and it was his plan that had destroyed their only rebellion. But by helping Hobbs, a new rebellion could spring up under his leadership. At least that was his hope.

That single act of his could be the start of a rebellion that would break the shackles of Beetar tyranny for good. Or Hobbs could get impatient and doom them all. He just had to wait and see how it played out.

He returned to his friends and played it cool.

Luckily, they didn't ask him any questions.

Eve said, “I wonder who’s been attacking the warship we’re going to?”

Volts snorted. “They can’t be any worse than those damn Cogmore’s.”

Zero wanted to speak up for the Cogmore’s, but considering what he’d just done, he thought it prudent to keep quiet.

Before the conversation grew, the floor shuddered, meaning the ship carrying Jackson, Mike, Kathy, and Winthrop had just left, causing their ship to rumble. He was going to miss them despite their flaws, or perhaps because of them.

Parsons came jogging into the room and said breathlessly, “Your ship is ready. The journey will only take two days because the warship’s going to meet you half way. I stowed all the ammo you’ll need onboard. Come on.” His eyes were red and puffy like he’d been crying, which Zero realized was probably the case. He’d wept as he launched the others towards the corporation-run planet.

Zero's virtual heart was fluttering in his metal chest for various reasons. It was a matter of time before the prisoners escaped and he could only hope they did so silently and peacefully because he didn't want Parsons to get caught in the crossfire.

He was going to board a genuine warship in space captained by an alien race. And he was about to be reunited with Stacey. He sure hoped she was as excited at the prospect as he was.

He could barely contain himself as he followed Parsons through the corridors.

They bowed as they passed a Beetar. It acted like they didn't even exist despite the fact that any one of them could have squeezed the juice out of him like a tube of toothpaste. He thought even Parsons could've taken him. His arrogance did worry him, though. What if the warship was teeming with guys like that?

The shuttle was small but large enough to fit them all in snugly. This was it; if Hobbs could

wait just another minute, he'd be in the clear for the escape.

Parsons teared up as he bid them farewell.

Zero impatiently hissed, "Hurry up, man.

This ship isn't going to launch itself."

Parsons wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and exited without saying another word. A second later the ship came to life as a hatch in the Beetar ship opened up. They floated towards the black and once they were far enough away, they shot off.

Volts said, "That was too harsh. He's a good guy."

"I know that." He studied the concerned look Volts was giving him so he decided to come clean. "I released the Cogmore's they're holding prisoner and I wanted to get away before they made a break for it so I don't get fingered for the crime."

Volts paused for a very long time before saying, "You're a damn idiot."

Eve shook her head. “You are, Zero. You’re an idiot.”

He didn’t expect anything less from them, but it did hurt being called an idiot by his two closest friends.

Eve said, “I’m plugging in for the duration of the journey,” and Volts added, “Me too.”

He said desperately, “I don’t need to charge though. You’re going to leave me by myself?”

Eve grabbed him by the shoulders and said severely, “You might need the time to get your head straight. We’re about to board a Beetar warship as hired muscle and you’ve gone and convinced yourself that they’re the bad guys.”

Volts said, “They probably are the bad guys, but who cares? We just need to keep our noses clean. Setting enemy prisoners free is hardly that.”

He plugged in before Zero could retort.

Eve said, “They’re saving our lives. We literally owe them our existence. Let that sink in to

your thick skull before we rendezvous with them.”

Zero nodded, because she was right. He had made a soap opera out of something pretty cut and dry: when someone saves your life, you should do anything to repay them.

She went to the opposite wall and plugged in, her head drooping and her eyes sliding shut.

This was going to be a long and boring trek with no one but his own twisted thoughts to keep him company.

Part 4:

Warship

A faint warning siren sounded that startled him out of his daydreams. He checked the monitors to see the biggest, meanest warship he could've ever imagined. They docked with it with a shudder and he unplugged Volts and Eve.

The doorway opened up and Stacey and Piss-pants were there waiting for them.

Stacey rushed inside and wrapped Zero up in a hug. It was the best thing that had happened to him in a long time.

She said, "We got word that the orbital station over Cogmore went silent. After some investigation, it appears that the Cogmore prisoners overtook it, killed everyone off, and then destroyed the ship. We know the Cogmore's got off before it blew but we couldn't be sure you guys had until now."

Volts gave him a look that could kill and Eve bumped his shoulder as she walked past. She said to him, “Good plan, genius. You killed Parsons.”

Stacey stepped back and asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Eve softened. “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

Piss-pants asked, “Which one of you dambasses turned off the communication console? We’ve been trying to get through to you all damn day.”

Zero shrugged. He hadn’t messed with any of the controls but that didn’t stop Volts from glaring at him like he had.

He had Stacey back in his life but it seemed like he’d lost two friends in the process.

Stacey led them from the ship and said, “Make sure to bow when a Beetar comes near. They’re sticklers for that crap. And don’t strike up a conversation with any of them either. They hate that.

Steer clear of the Captain. His name is Flimfor and he's an asshole. Otherwise, they're easy enough to get along with."

The corridors were coated in a shiny black substance that reflected the lights above in disorienting ways. It took a few seconds to get used to. The black that covered the walls seemed to move like it was an organic material or somehow intelligent, but Zero chalked that up to his overactive imagination coupled with the disorienting effects of the walls. He ran a finger across a wall, and when he inspected it, it was unmarked and his finger was clean. Every few feet, they passed a closed steel door.

They walked past a huge window that ran the entire length of the section of corridor they were in. It must have been thirty feet long.

As they ogled it in sheer awe, Stacey said, "It's not really glass. It's some type of material that projects what it sees from the opposite side. It's

technically just an image.”

That took the splendor out of it. But then a little blue alien ship zipped past that got all of their attention as it fired on their ship.

They didn't feel any of the direct hits so he could only assume the Beetar ship had some sort of force field or super thick hull capable of absorbing impacts. Return fire came from above them but none of it hit the jittery little ship; it took evasive maneuvers which took it out of their view.

Eve gasped, “That's one of those bastards that killed Creacker, Twitch, and Stomper. That type of ship was what took out the training center on Epigog.”

Stacey put a hand on her hip. “Piss-pants told me that too. Whatever took out the training center was advanced and gutsy, and these little ships are that same way. Thirteen of them followed us all the way out here, taking little potshots at us whenever they get the chance. There are just seven

of those thirteen left, but their lack of success hasn't slowed them down or given them pause for concern.

Volts was mesmerized by the window, watching intently for the ship to return. "Have any of them gotten through your defenses?"

"The damage they do is minimal but it's cumulative. That's why you're here. We're going to take the fight to them."

Zero stammered, "But we're not warriors, we're all washouts."

"The Beetars don't know that. They think we're the cream of our batch, but that we were unlucky enough to have our training cut short. They need to keep believing that.

He wondered what type of weird-looking aliens piloted those little blue ships. "Which planet do they come from?"

"We haven't found their home world yet.

The Beetars have their feelers out, but so far no one has any answers. All we know of is the quadrant of

space where their ships seem to congregate. That's where we'll be heading."

Eve asked, "How long until we get to them?"

"We'll be there in a couple of days. Don't worry about them just yet. We have a lot of catching up to do. Follow me and I'll show you our living quarters."

Piss-pants had remained mainly in the background as Stacey led them. It was clear she had taken the lead since boarding the Beetar ship.

They walked past a few Beetars as they stomped down the halls, careful to bow their heads as they passed. These Beetars looked far more regal than the ones they were used to. They looked bigger too, like they could take a punch and give one back.

That thought sent a shiver through Zero's spine.

Until then he'd always assumed Beetars dealt out their justice from a safe distance, using humans as their muscle, but these guys looked like they were

bred for war.

Stacey led them into a huge brightly lit room with white walls that clashed with the black oily walls they'd walked past. There were two communal tables set in the middle of the room with board games laid out on each. Twenty charging ports lined the walls.

Eve winked at him and whispered, "We won't be using those things anymore."

Stacey overheard and cocked her brow so Eve explained. "Zero was abducted by enemy aliens, but instead of killing him, they enhanced him with a never ending battery. If we find ourselves in a pickle we can all just charge from him now."

Stacey looked him up and down like it was the first time they'd met. "A lot has happened to you three since we last saw each other. I'm eager to hear your stories, but I have to meet with my liaison officer first. Then we'll catch up."

Piss-pants stood beside her and said to them,

“Don’t go anywhere. We’ll be right back. We just have to check in.”

Volts didn’t waste any time. He rushed over to the nearest wall and plugged in.

Eve shrugged. Zero looked at her for an explanation. “He’s been that way lately. He freaks out if he goes too long without a boost. Best to ignore it until it passes.”

He sat down in one of the mammoth chairs at the table and Eve sat opposite him. In a serious tone she said, “When you released those Cogmore prisoners you could have gotten all of us killed.

What the hell were you thinking? Why did you do it?”

He rested his chin on the table. “I helped them because I think we’re the bad guys.”

Eve slapped him on the top of the head like he was her kid brother and he’d just said something idiotic. “We’re robots designed to kill. What in the world made you think we’d be planting flowers and

petting bunnies? You have to get with the program or you'll take us all down with you."

"I know. It won't happen again."

"Good. I missed you, Zero. It's good to have you back, even if you were returned a little broken."

He smiled up at her and she reached across the table and patted him on the shoulder.

When Piss-pants and Stacey returned they were solemn. Piss-pants unplugged Volts and told him to take a seat. This new attitude of theirs had them spooked.

Stacey said, "Apparently when the Cogmore prisoners escaped and destroyed the ship you guys just left, it sent shockwaves across the empire.

There are new uprisings on Beetar controlled planets erupting by the minute as word spreads that the Beetars can be taken out. My liaison just instructed me to ship out two of you to help quell these uprisings and to protect high ranking Beetar citizens. Captain Flimfor apparently blames you

three for failing to suppress the Cogmore's. That's why he's chosen to send two of you back out, as a sort of punishment."

Eve and Volts bored holes through Zero with their eyes.

Stacey added, "Just be content that he didn't decide to kill all three of you instead. He's not one to be trifled with, so there will be no discussion about his decision. It must be done."

He hadn't met Captain Flimfor but he already disliked him.

Volts asked in a quavering voice, "Who gets to stay?" Zero didn't understand why there was fear in his tone. Maybe it was because he understood more than he did. It wouldn't be the first time.

Stacey said, "It's my choice who gets to stay and who has to go. This was a hard decision, but Volts and Eve will be sent out to help establish order. In the mean time we'll stay out of harms way until you return. Then we can go back and take on

the mysterious blue ships that have plagued us.”

Volts stood up suddenly and looked back at the ports on the walls. He was shivering with unbridled fear. Zero finally realized why he was so afraid of leaving; his phobia of powering off was growing by the second.

Eve said, “Volts needs a rest. He’s overexerted himself in the past few days. Zero can leave with me.”

Zero wanted to refuse, but he was the person responsible for this mess. He’d be a worthless coward if he let his frightened friend go off to fight his battles while he stayed behind in relative safety.

Desperate, he said, “Aren’t there other mechs out there that can handle this? What about Mike, Jackson, Kathy and Winthrop?”

“I don’t know who those people are.”

“They were stationed with us on Cogmore.

They were reassigned to a corporate planet.”

“Then they already have assignments that

have nothing to do with this. And like I said, you were hand picked by the Captain as a punishment. I know it's not fair or even justified, but there's nothing I can do about it."

She was wrong though. It was justified. In fact, they were getting off light. If Captain Flimfor found out what he'd done, he'd do far worse than this.

He looked Stacey over to see if this was some kind of elaborate joke, but she was deadly serious.

She said to him, "It's a big empire out there, and it's being tested because of what happened in orbit around Cogmore. You have no choice in the matter. Two of you need to go, although I'd prefer for you to stay behind and let the other two go instead. If you have an enemy built power source inside of you, I'd hate for you to be questioned out in the field and fingered as an enemy collaborator or something."

He appreciated that she was pulling excuses out of her ass to keep him close, but Eve and Volts knew what he'd done. He'd never be able to look them in the eyes again if he bowed out and let them go in his stead. "I need to go. Volts needs to stay behind."

Stacey looked disgusted. "I just got you back, Jack. I don't want to lose you again."

His heart skipped a beat. She did care. It wasn't just him who felt that way. But he couldn't let it influence him. He had to be one of the two that got sent off-ship. "My name is Zero and I have to go. I'm sorry."

Volts put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, pal. I appreciate this. I promise I'll get over this psychosis by the time you return."

It was a shame to see him deteriorated like that, but Cogmore had changed them all. It had made Eve stronger, Volts jittery, and it had literally changed Zero physically and mentally. He just

didn't know if he had changed like Eve, for the better, or like Volts, for the worst.

Piss-pants looked overjoyed that his best buddy was going to get to stay but he held his enthusiasm inside so as not to upset the rest of them.

Stacey said to Eve, "You'll be going to the penal planet called Ishca. It's hell on Ishca, but you'll be in good company. Some of the best soldiers are stationed there already."

She looked at Zero and sighed. "You'll be personal security for a Beetar diplomat who is working with a new alien race the Beetars are trying to bring into the fold. Advancement is not always greeted with open arms so this Beetar has become the target of attacks, especially now that news has spread about Cogmore."

He desperately wanted to switch with Eve.

She'd drawn the short straw. Or more realistically, Stacey had given it to her to keep him safe. He opened his mouth to voice his objection when Eve

cut him off with, “That’s perfect. I’ve been itching for more action. From what I’ve heard the horrors on the penal planet are grossly over-exaggerated anyway.”

Stacey said evenly, “They are not, but I appreciate your enthusiasm. Come with me. You ship out right away. It’s not far from here so you’ll arrive shortly.” To Zero she said, “I’ll be back for you.”

When Stacey left with Piss-pants and Eve, Volts whispered, “You shouldn’t have saved those Cogmore’s. They’re bad news, dude.”

He was about to correct him when Volts walked away and plugged into the nearest port, shutting down completely. Apparently the implications of his new battery and the cable that might allow him to recharge anyone at a moments notice had yet to sink in to Volts’ fevered mind.

That was okay though. He’d protect this diplomatic Beetar dork until the heat was off and

then he'd be back aboard the ship in no time.

Perhaps he was deluding himself. The galaxy was far more dangerous than he would have ever imagined, and lately, his actions were a big reason why it was so dangerous.

If he died, he knew he probably deserved it.

He went to the big bay window hoping to see Eve's ship take off. He watched as faint mist issued from somewhere outside and below. And then a black and yellow ship shot away from the Beetar warship.

One of the little blue alien ships gave chase but guns from the Beetar warship scared it off, giving Eve's ship a clean getaway.

As soon as he saw the blue ship circle back, his limbs loosened. Then he realized he was about to go through the exact same thing when he took off, and his joints tensed up again. The blue ships had speed on their side but they had the superior firepower on theirs.

Stacey approached from his right and said angrily, “You can’t wander the halls by yourself, Jack.”

“You need to stop calling me Jack.”

“I forgot. Sorry, Zero.”

“I just wanted to make sure Eve got away safely.”

“You three have formed a bond together then?”

He understood what she was getting at.

“We’ve been through a lot together, but you have to remember that I was a prisoner for most of my time on Cogmore. Eve and Volts have history together, but I’m still a bit of an outcast.”

She smiled. “You are different, that’s for sure.”

“When do I ship out?”

“Soon. Piss-pants is prepping your ship.

He’ll come and get us when it’s ready.”

“If it was so important to bring us here, why

don't any of the Beetars on this ship object to our reassignment elsewhere?"

"The Beetars on this ship are the ones who reassigned you, remember? Those blue ships out there pose no real danger to us. But they became such an annoyance that it was decided to bring in reinforcements to take them out for good."

"So I guess taking out the blues is no longer as important as my new assignment."

"Nope. They'll live with the annoyance for a little while longer to make sure other corners of their empire are secure. I'm not supposed to know this, but I think this ship is like their hub of operations or something. It's built to withstand just about anything. I'll be safe while you're gone."

"My head is spinning. I wish I could just get an assignment and stick to it."

"You'll do fine. The more experiences you have, the better prepared you'll be for what's coming."

There was an ominous quality to her voice that disturbed him. “What are you talking about?”

“Shit. Nothing. Worry about the Beetar diplomat for now. If you lose focus, you’ll just make yourself an easier target.”

“Don’t change the subject. Tell me what you meant.”

“I can’t. I promised. Just come back here in one piece, okay?” She moved forward and embraced him. She pulled her head away and for a horrifying moment, he worried she would try and kiss him with her big metal mouth, but she didn’t. She looked into his eyes and said, “You need to survive. Make sure you do.”

“That’s the plan. When I get back here I expect you to tell me what you know.”

“I’ll try. It’s way more complicated than you think and you’re not going to like what you hear.”

He already didn’t like what he was hearing.

Wasn’t his reality complicated enough? Hadn’t he

been through the meat grinder already? How much more bullshit could he take?

He asked a question that sounded silly as it left his mouth. “Are we the bad guys?”

She pulled away and smiled. “I’m glad you’re concerned about that. No we are not. We’re the good guys. But that’s all I can say just now.”

Thankfully Piss-pants came rushing towards them at that moment or Stacey might have felt the need to tell him more than his fragile psyche could handle. “The ship’s ready to go.” To Zero he said, “You’ll be there in about a week. I’d catch up on my beauty sleep if I were you.”

He sighed. “I can’t power down or recharge anymore because of the stupid Cogmore battery inside of me.”

Stacey shooshed him and then she looked up and down the corridor to make sure no Beetars had overheard him mention the Cogmore modification.

She whispered, “If you can’t go offline then

just relax and enjoy the solitude. You deserve a little downtime.”

She was wrong though. Solitude was the last thing he needed. He’d spent two days alone on the shuttle to the Beetar ship while Eve and Volts went offline, and before that he’d spent days as a prisoner and then as a willing collaborator to an inhuman enemy. He needed a human connection in the worst way.

But he took solace in the knowledge that he had no choice in the matter. He just had to do what was required of him and keep his complaints to a minimum. As long as he looked at it that way, it was easier to accept his role.

Piss-pants said, “Our launch window’s closing. Hurry the hell up.”

He followed after him, bowing rapidly each time he passed a Beetar. Some of them were decent enough, and a couple even bowed back, which was weird. He had to wonder though: were they their

saviors, benefactors, or their masters? He wondered how they saw their own role in their lives. He was pretty sure it wasn't the same way they saw themselves.

The shuttle was small and the inside was cramped. Piss-pants slapped him on the ass, his hand making a loud clang. "Good luck, man. See you when you get back."

Stacey hugged him quickly and then shoved him inside the shuttle. "It leaves in less than a minute. Hurry up and strap in or you'll bounce around in there like a pinball on takeoff."

He didn't need to be told twice. He found the harnesses and secured himself as they closed the ship up.

Stacey yelled over the intercom, "The planet is called Dosia and its inhabitants are called Dosians. From what I've been told they're mostly peaceful. I don't know much else beyond that. The Beetar you'll be protecting is named Frad."

He laughed, and she must have heard him because she giggled back. “Frad is supposed to be a smart guy who knows what he’s doing. My liaison didn’t have any intel beyond that. Good luck.”

He was about to say thank you, but he was suddenly pushed against the wall as his shuttle blasted away from the Beetar ship.

The shuttle was fired upon. He knew because he saw the little blue ship strafe him, but his ship didn’t sustain any damage. He saw several lines of fire erupt from the Beetar ship and the blue ship zipped around and then away from him. After that scare, the trip became uneventful and would probably remain that way.

It became immediately apparent his ship either didn’t have an artificial gravity generator, or it did but it hadn’t been turned on. Because he didn’t like floating around without control, he stayed strapped in for most of the trip.

The journey was dull. He spent most of it in

a maelstrom of self-pity and doubt. It occurred to him that he was quite possibly the worst creature the universe had ever shat out. He had failed as a human being. Had his cancer not led him here, he would have toiled away in the quarries until the day he drank himself to death. Even as a mechanical monster, he had failed. He was the only recruit to not make it past the firearms deployment part of training. Then, under his watch, the training camp had been obliterated. On Cogmore, he annihilated both sides, Cogmore and Beetar, with his mere presence. And as if that wasn't enough, he released those Cogmore prisoners, which had a ripple effect that could possibly topple an empire. He was his own worst enemy, and if anyone knew what he had done during his short stint away from Earth, he'd probably be executed for gross incompetence.

Towards the end of the trip, the ship came very close to a huge star. He knew stars were big, but to see one up close was something else. It filled

his entire monitor, even when he zoomed out.

Luckily he didn't fall into it, which was a serious concern of his for a few minutes. The planet came into view ten minutes later. He didn't know what kind of propulsion system his shuttle was using but it was way beyond anything humans had ever invented.

Dosia was light blue with green swirls here and there and a few dark patches where land muddied the cloud color from below. He wondered how long he'd be in orbit before another ship came to pick him up, but that didn't happen. His shuttle came at Dosia at an entry angle and descended towards its surface.

After a few horrific moments of bone shattering terror, the turbulence subsided and the ship leveled off. It settled down gently and the door opened a minute later. He released himself from the harnesses and walked to the open doorway.

He was in a concrete jungle of white and

grey buildings. His ship had set down in a courtyard with a fountain and small neatly manicured patches of blue grasses. All around him were benches and each one had a creature on it. A big Beetar with flowing robes approached and ushered him from the ship. “You’re ruining the view, human. Get off the ship so I can send it away.”

He walked from the ship with trepidation in each step. Everyone was staring at him like he was about to level the city or set them all on fire. If only they knew how frightened he was, they’d laugh at him.

As soon as both feet hit the ground, the Beetar punched a code into a hidden keypad on the outside of the ship and it closed up. He walked twenty feet away, and when Zero didn’t make a move to follow him he yelled, “Get over here or it’ll melt you into a puddle.”

He felt the heat from the thrusters of the ship and jogged over to the aggressive Beetar. He turned

in time to see it lift off. It quickly and silently vanished through the cloud layer.

“Where did you send it?”

The Beetar looked at him bemusedly. It looked like it was going to tell him he needed to learn his place or to stop asking questions, but instead it said, “It’s going into orbit for now unless the mother ship calls it back.”

“Are you Frad?”

“Yes I am. You must be my protection.”

“Yep. My name’s Zero.”

“Forgive me for being so honest but I was expecting someone a little more formidable.”

“We’re all built the same, sir.”

“I know that. I wasn’t talking about your external machinery.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. Come with me and I’ll get you up to speed on what I expect of you. Hopefully you’re up for the challenge.”

The other creatures on the benches were Dosians. As he walked past one of them, he looked it over. It was tall and spindly, in a humanoid way. It looked like a prototypical Grey alien from the movies except that it wasn't grey and its eyes had far more intelligence in them. Its skin was yellow with brown mottling. Its head was too big for its skinny body, but it had a mouth and two green eyes, little ears on both sides, and a thin nose. The nose had just one nostril though, so maybe it wasn't a nose at all. A shiny stream of translucent slime ran from its single nostril down its face. The more he stared at the sticky stream the more revolted he was. It winked at him and he almost jumped. The eyelid was transparent. Then its other lid closed. Each lid opened back up a split second apart. He gave it a wide berth when it did that and its mouth curled into a cruel smile. It was amused by his cowardice. It stood up and turned his way, winking and blinking rapidly.

Frad turned around and yelled at the Dosian,
“Knock that shit off. He’s new here. You bastards
scare the shit out of everyone with that eye blinking
crap.”

The Dosian smirked and said in a rough,
crackly, Beetar inflected voice, “I was just saying
hello.”

“That’s not how you say hi. Stop being a
dick.”

The Dosian laughed in a high pitched, whiny
voice and turned from them to retake his or her seat.

Frad said, “Don’t mind them. They’re
actually pretty funny when you get used to them.”

He liked Frad already. Maybe he’d
misjudged the Beetars. Frad seemed like a gutter
mouthed Beetar with a happy go lucky nature that
was infectious. He reminded him of a fisherman he
met once when he was a kid. That fisherman looked
like he ate bullets for breakfast and punched people
for fun but when he spoke there was genuine joy in

his voice. He was a man who enjoyed his own existence with an almost detached bemusement, like he just couldn't believe he'd gotten lucky enough to live his life the way he lived it.

Frad had that same quality about him. He was an everyman sort, except that he wasn't a man, he was a Beetar.

He caught up to him and asked, "What the hell is that slime running down their faces and why don't they clean it up? It's disgusting."

"They have overactive mucous membranes.

And why should they clean it up just because it bothers you? The problem is yours. You're the one that needs to adjust, not them. Variety is the spice of life. Embrace it."

Zero's attempt at making small talk had backfired. Frad was right, of course; he was the newcomer, he had to change his outlook.

He had to duck down to get through the entryway of the building Frad led him into.

Frad said, "I'll get that widened. Let me know if this place needs to be modified and I'll get it done. I'd hate for your fat ass to get stuck in a doorway just as gunmen come for me."

He nodded, aware of how much he stood out in this place.

The foyer of the building was open and elaborately decorated with alien plants and grasses dotting the concrete landscape. Some of the plants swayed and moved on their own. Statues loomed over them as they walked. He had no idea what the hell they depicted though. The planet was truly alien to him in every sense. A plant nipped at his arm as he passed it.

Frad slapped it hard. "Watch out for the plants on Dosia. They're assholes."

He smiled even though he felt nothing akin to humor. He wondered if his dread shone through his smile.

Frad said, "Lucky for you, I'm stationed on

the ground floor of the building.” He was alluding to the fact that the stairs going up were too narrow for him and the elevators were far too small for him to fit inside.

They walked into a large room devoid of the plant life he’d seen along the way.

“This is my office and domicile. I’m almost always in here so get acquainted with the layout.

When I have to attend a meeting or a function, you’ll be the first to know. Have a seat at my desk and we’ll chat.”

He sat down and broke the chair.

Frad laughed and said, “On second thought, just stand. I’ll have a steel chair built to your specifications by tomorrow.”

He apologized and moved the wreckage aside with his foot.

Frad said, “You don’t talk much, do you?”

“I do. I’m just nervous.”

“Good. I want you to be on edge around

here. I've already had two attempts on my life in the past week. Ever since that debacle at Cogmore, the Dosians have rallied together in an attempt to shuck off Beetar influence. It's a shame. We're only here to help, but suddenly they're looking at us like we're the enemy."

"I was on Cogmore. I saw the way Beetars treated the Cogmore's with my own eyes." He knew he shouldn't have said that.

Frad's smile wavered. "My people are not always so kind when we are resisted. And the Cogmore's certainly presented a challenge. But that has nothing to do with why I'm here. Dosia is being invited into a union with my people. We're not trying to subdue them or manipulate them to our own ends. Quite the contrary; we're trying to help them advance to our level."

He resisted the urge to ask if the Dosians were as eager about the union as the Beetars were.

Frad continued, "The Empire is huge. One

end of it doesn't behave exactly like the other. So for the Dosians to equate Beetar/Cogmore relations the same as Beetar/Dosian relations is absurd. It's completely different. You see that, don't you?"

He was starting to. "I can understand the difference."

"But you have to understand that if I'm killed down here, my people will treat it like an act of war. Everything I've worked towards will be toppled with my death. I can't allow that."

Zero pulled his guns out to show Frad exactly what was protecting him. "I wouldn't worry about attacks. I've got your back." He thought about turning his thrusters on too, but he knew that would probably burn the office to the ground.

He expected Frad to clap or smile or something, but instead he stood up fearfully and said, "How are you able to pull your weapons in my presence?"

"I don't understand the question." He put the

guns away and the hatches in his thighs cinched shut.

“Your programming shouldn’t allow you to deploy your weapons around my people except in extreme cases where we need protection from an attacker.”

He had to think fast. “I’ve been through a lot, sir. Maybe my programming is wonky from all the battles I’ve survived.” He knew that was a lie but he had to calm Frad down before he got worried enough to have him checked out.

Frad sat again and said, “They sent me a robot with buggy programming, huh? That sounds like something high command would do. Oh well, you’ll have to do. Just don’t pull your guns out around me, okay?”

“Yes sir.”

“Stop calling me sir. Call me Frad.”

He nodded. He felt like a fool. “Where will I be staying?”

Frad looked over his shoulder. “You’ll be staying here, in this room, with me. There are three chargers on the far wall back there.”

“Oh.”

“I know it’s unusual but I can’t risk you not being by my side if an attack occurs.”

“I understand. I’ll try to keep to myself.”

“Nonsense. Do whatever you want, as long as you stand between me and the bullets.”

A smile crept across his face. He liked Frad more and more.

He stood up and said, “I need to urinate.”

Zero nodded and waited for him to leave.

He started to walk from the office. “You have to come with me.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’ll get used to this.”

He followed him back out into the foyer and then through a door. He went inside and told him to take his post outside the doorway until he was done.

He wasn't sure what to do so he blocked it from anyone who might have wanted to go in.

Passing Dosians ogled him fearfully and took a wide berth around him. One foolish Dosian tried to squeeze past him until he put a hand on its chest and gently shoved it backwards. It hissed an indecipherable language at him, but eventually left.

After a few minutes, Frad returned. "Good job, Zero. I was using Dosian security before you got here but those assholes would just wander off whenever they got bored. We're going to get along just fine."

He thought so too.

He stood guard outside the office door for an hour and then, when it was clear no threats were imminent, wandered inside and took up a post at the back of the room. He saw a pantry tucked away in the corner and a makeshift bed along the wall towards the back. Frad carried himself well but he was living like a college freshman. There was a

little steel door set into the floor that he assumed was a panic room in case he was ever overrun by enemies.

Frad sat at his desk and conducted teleconference calls all day, sometimes speaking to Dosians in their language and sometimes in Beetar. When he spoke in Beetar Zero could understand what he said.

He was explaining to various groups of Dosians how mutually beneficial an alliance with the Beetars could be, both financially and intellectually. He also spent some time explaining that threats on his life were no longer an issue. He tilted his camera Zero's way to show them he was there to protect him. He explained that since he was here, talks could resume and must resume quickly. He heard him mention High Command on more than one occasion, each time his voice strained, like he hated to bring it up.

Zero started to daydream a couple of times,

but he caught himself before his mind wandered too far. He had to be ready for anything. He had to stay alert. Frad's life depended on it.

Frad stood from his chair and approached, saying, "I think you should recharge."

"But, what if you come under attack?"

"It's getting dark outside and Dosians, being cold blooded, don't operate well at night. Plus, I want you at your best and if your battery is depleted then you're not going to perform optimally."

He nodded and went to the back wall where the charging ports were mounted. He backed into one of them and heard it hiss as it connected with his body. He felt nothing but he knew Frad probably expected him to shut down as he charged so he let his head droop and he closed his eyes, mimicking the offline pose.

Frad sighed and whispered, "Why did they have to send me a dumbass?"

It took every ounce of Zero's willpower to

keep still as Frad critiqued him.

He knocked on his hip, which was probably as high as he could reach on his mammoth body.

Then he felt him pull on his gun hatch. He assumed he was checking to see if he'd rigged his hatches so they'd open at any time, regardless of whose company he was in.

Frad seemed satisfied when the hatches stayed in place. Then he heard him shuffle off, rustle around for a few minutes, and then he was silent. He must have gone to bed.

The hatch issue almost became a problem.

He could only guess it was another software modification Henshaw had installed in him. Or maybe he had malfunctioned, like he'd told Frad.

He'd been modified by Henshaw and by the Cogmore's, so it stood to reason that those alterations could play havoc with the rest of his systems. He was glad Frad didn't overreact and insist on shutting him down.

As he stood there, hooked to the wall, immobile, he fell asleep. He didn't know he could still do that, but it felt great to give his confused mind a rest.

He awoke to Frad unplugging him from the wall. He had a handheld tablet that he was hooking up to the port Zero had been hooked to.

Frad explained, "I can extrapolate data from the power source. None of you know this, but data is relayed back to the ports as you charge so we can monitor your progress. We only ever do this in extreme cases, though."

"So why are you doing it to my port?"

He paused and looked up at him. "I need to find out if your database has been intentionally corrupted. I need to find out if you've been sent to kill me."

"Why would I do that?"

"It's not a stretch of the imagination to think that high command might have sent you to kill me

and then pin my death on the Dosians to instigate war.”

“No way. I thought Beetars wanted to coexist with the Dosians?”

“You don’t know my people. They want this alliance whether the Dosians want in on it or not. We’re going the diplomatic route now, but if that fails we’ll get what we want through force.”

Frad stared at the screen, tapped a few buttons, and then threw the tablet at his feet in disgust. “Nothing works around here. Your port didn’t record any info.”

Thank God for that. The last thing he wanted was for Frad’s paranoia to have any basis in reality. He was glad his battery didn’t actually connect to the charger or else Frad would know everything he’d done, and probably trust him even less than if he found out he was an assassin. He was worse than a hit man: he was so incompetent that he got those around him killed.

Frad said, “I guess we’re just going to have to trust one another then.”

“No one screwed with my programming before I came here. I’m here to save your life, not end it.”

“I hope that’s right. I’d hate to die for the Beetar cause.”

“It doesn’t sound to me like you’re behind your people or their agenda.”

Frad shrugged, his weird shoulders making a slurping sound as they moved. “My people don’t know what they want. But they always want more. Their greed is their bane, but also their one saving grace. Greed has led them to the forefront of discovery. It has opened up whole new worlds and made the galaxy a smaller, more organized place. But greed is selfish and headstrong. Greed for its own sake is chaos. My people step on either side of that line all the time. I’m just waiting and watching to see which side they fall on.”

He didn't know what the hell he was talking about specifically, but he had the gist of it figured out. "What will you do if the Beetars end up disappointing you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll cut ties with them.

Maybe I'll work to right the wrongs they cause. But more likely, I'll take the coward's way out and just go on living my life and adjusting my morals to suit my needs."

Frad rolled his shiny black eyes and said in a hushed whisper, "You're not recording this, are you?"

"I wouldn't know how even if I could."

"I suppose it doesn't matter. In a few days, either Dosia will be ours or I'll be dead. Either way, no one will care that an old fart like me had second thoughts."

Zero was suddenly losing interest in all of the Beetar intrigue. He wanted easy answers, but he knew that was because he was young and idealistic.

The universe was far more nuanced and complicated than he could appreciate. And the truth of the matter was that he had no horse in this race. He just had to do his duty. And if it was all going to be over in just a few days, like Frad said, then he wanted to get on with it to get back to Stacey as soon as possible. If that meant he had to kill a bunch of Dosians and save Frad's life to get there, then so be it. He said, "I need ammo."

"Of course. I have just the thing. How much do you need?"

"As much as you can get."

Frad smiled wickedly. "I like the way you think. Come with me. You're gonna like this."

He walked by his side through the foyer and then down a flight of stairs. His feet were too big for the steps so he asked if Frad would mind if he used his rocket boosters. He told him to go ahead, so Zero floated down the length of the staircase into a basement with a huge reinforced door blocking

their path. The stairs were alight behind him but they were made of some type of stone, so the little fires went out on their own.

Frad ran his hand from the top of the door to the bottom and it hissed open. “This is for Beetar’s only. Even the Dosian High Priest isn’t allowed through here.”

He thought Frad expected him to be honored so he lied. “I’m honored.”

He ducked down, nearly folding himself in half to follow Frad through the door. It was a vault in there. It was no bigger than Frad’s office but it had crates upon crates of ammo and firearms along one wall with the other one lined with food.

Frad waved at the wall of canned and bottled food. “Dosian food would probably kill me in a week so I get sent care packages once a month.

Some of it is pretty good. I haven’t had to go through the stockpiles of weapons yet, so I’m just as excited as you are to see what’s in here.”

Zero wasn't excited about weapons. He was excited to know that a few days from now he would get to leave, but to leave he had to survive, and to survive, he might just need some more ammo.

At that very moment the entire building shuddered. Dust fell from the ceiling, and one of the bottles of food cracked, spilling a black sludge everywhere that smelled like day old farts to his mechanical olfactory senses.

The building rumbled again, but this time it was accompanied by weird alien screaming.

Frad said, "They're here for me, Zero."

"I got this," he said as he tore box after box open, looking for the ammo for his guns.

Frad pointed at a crate and said, "The ammo in there should be compatible but it's illegal for me to supply you with it. Your kind is not allowed to possess it. But under these circumstances, load up."

He popped the crate open and started filling his forearms with as much of it as would fit. He

closed the doors on his arms and said, “Stay here.”

Frad was already holding a mean looking rifle, so he knew he was ready for the worst, and with Zero protecting him, he’d probably get it.

He took a deep breath, pulled his guns, and rushed from the vault.

Frad’s office had been reduced to rubble. It was no more than a smoldering cavity, quickly filling with armed Dosian men. They wore protective gear that was plated in armor but also somewhat mechanized. One of the Dosians picked up a huge chunk of outer wall and thrust it aside like it was nothing. Zero could do the same thing, but Dosians were slight and brittle looking. There was no way any of them had that kind of strength without some technological help.

He didn’t wait for them to spot him. He fired first. He was as surprised as they were when the bullets hit, exploding like grenades upon contact.

Not only that, but they released a concussive boom

that knocked everyone within twenty feet down and disoriented the rest of them. He took advantage of the only opportunity he would get to surprise them by unleashing everything he had.

When they spotted him, some of them ran, while others fired back. He floated in the air, dodging the occasional round but taking the bulk of their volley. They had advanced mechanized armor, but their bullets were ineffective, causing him minimal damage.

He ran a line of sustained fire the entire length of the room and then he moved in to finish off the stragglers.

He came to the open space that was a fully furnished office mere minutes ago. He watched as Dosians scurried away, some running, and others crawling for their lives. No one fired upon him. The threat was over that fast.

He floated through the opening, outside, and watched as hundreds, maybe thousands, of Dosians

ran away. Some of them were bleeding thick yellow streams of blood. Others were dragging their damaged armor like it was a burden now rather than a benefit. A handful of armored vehicles drove off quickly. They rushed in every direction, like a fan. He didn't know which group to follow or even if he should follow them. If he left, maybe a second strike would come and finish off Frad in his absence. He flew upwards to watch from above. A round hit him and he tilted around, saw the gunman and killed him on the spot. Then two alien jets strafed him, hitting him with a few rounds as they retreated too. He took one down with concentrated fire but the other got away. Other than that last futile attempt, no one fought back.

They were cowards, which was a good thing because otherwise he wouldn't have stood much of a chance against so many of them at once. If that was the best the Dosian resistance had to offer, Frad had nothing to worry about.

He waited for the screaming of the wounded to die down and then he floated back down to the ground. He stepped over writhing bodies of those who'd survived his onslaught. He didn't know much about Dosian anatomy but he seriously doubted they'd survive much longer. As if on cue, several of them stopped moving.

He stomped through the wreckage and then the foyer. He floated down the steps and announced himself so Frad wouldn't shoot him in his confusion.

"It's all clear, sir. But you won't like how they decorated your office."

Frad peeked his head around the doorway and smiled. "Who gives a shit about an office? I'm just happy to be alive. You saved me."

He had finally succeeded in doing his job correctly. For once he wasn't an abysmal failure.

And he respected Frad enough already to puff up with pride at his appreciation of his skills.

On the other hand, he deflated when he was

tasked with cleaning up the mess. Apparently none of the Dosians wanted to help, and Frad was too busy setting up a new base of operations, so that left him alone cleaning up blood and guts.

When he found a severed Dosian head that had the entire left side caved in, he started to have second thoughts about the way he'd conducted himself.

He filled a rolling dumpster lined with plastic with body parts and Dosian gore. After the sludge of death had been mopped up he refused to help clean up the rubble, and in that instance, Frad had his back, insisting the Dosians clean up the rubble themselves.

Frad showed him into his new office, which was just across the way from his old one. It was just as big but it was obviously hurriedly thrown together.

A Dosian technician was busy mounting a single recharging port in the wall when they walked

in. Another was sealing the windows with metallic blocks while a third was installing a blast proof door. None of them looked thrilled to be there.

Frad said, "I need to handle some damage control for the rest of the afternoon, so make yourself comfortable."

Zero stood at the back of the room as the Dosians avoided eye contact. Each time he looked at one of them he noticed a visible shudder overcome their limbs. They thought he was a monster, which he probably was to them.

They left one after the other over the course of ten minutes and then he had a chance to overhear Frad speaking to the Dosian diplomats about the attacks.

He was at his desk saying, "My people will look at my death as an act of war. I need more help from your end to ensure my safety so that an alliance can be properly forged between our peoples."

A diplomat replied in Beetar, “Images of that protector who defended you have been circulating across the globe. My people are scared witless. If you wish to form an alliance, now is the time while we are still in awe of your might.”

Frad settled back in his seat. “I see. What are the odds of a follow-up attack?”

“There will be no more attacks. The rebels expected to handle you easily after word of what happened on Cogmore, but they now know that will not be the case.”

Frad looked over his shoulder at Zero and smiled. He turned back and said, “Good. Let’s proceed immediately.”

He signed off and walked to the back of the room to join Zero. “I had no idea your presence would inspire so much fear and awe in the Dosians. If I had, I’d have sent for you sooner.”

He mumbled, “It’s too bad that people had to die to get to this point.”

“People die all the time. At least they died on their feet fighting for something they believed in.”

Zero nodded even though he wasn't sure why he just said that. “So you admire the Dosians who tried to kill you because they died for their cause?”

“I don't admire them but I respect their commitment. Of course, I'd prefer to succeed without bloodshed, but their sacrifice wasn't my idea. Anyway, as soon as the Dosian high priest signs off, you're free to go.”

He almost jumped up in the air with excitement, but then his rocket boosters would've probably ignited and scorched Frad, so he was glad he kept his enthusiasm stuffed down.

Frad grabbed his hand and tried to shake it, but it was too big and probably weighed as much as his entire body. Zero moved his hand up and down, making sure not to grip too tight.

Frad let go and said, “I’ll be right behind you once this is finalized. I can’t wait to get off of this forsaken rock.”

“I thought you liked it here. You’re the first Beetar I’ve ever met who seemed kind of happy.”

“How many of us have you met?”

“Just a few. Mostly I’ve only passed them in corridors or listened to short speeches from them.”

He paused, realizing that he had never actually interacted with his kind until now. “I guess you’re the first Beetar I’ve ever actually met.” That was a revelation for him.

“We come in all varieties. I’ve met some assholes too, but that doesn’t mean we’re all assholes.”

He was right. For some reason he’d painted them all with the same brush, based on none of his own experiences. He’d listened to the Cogmore rebel Damon and let his personal experiences seep so far into his psyche that they’d become his own.

He'd looked upon the Beetar's treatment of Cogmore's with disgust even though he had none of the facts. For all he knew, the Cogmore's deserved such brutal treatment. Damon had kidnapped him and would have killed him. He'd helped Hobbs escape, but instead of quietly retreating, he killed everyone, including one of the only flesh and blood humans Zero had met so far, before escaping to the surface. From that perspective, the Cogmore's were the evil ones.

His own experiences with the Beetars were limited, and the only one he'd ever actually spent any time with turned out to be a good guy.

Frad added, "Maybe you think I'm different because I'm a female."

He almost did a double-take. Frad was a woman Beetar. It blew his mind but it affirmed to him that he was operating on preconceived notions that could easily be wrong.

He said, "I did not know that. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. I’m proud of it and I’m sure we all look the same to you.”

He didn’t want to tell her that was true. He worried it would sound bigoted.

He waited for her to continue but she just smiled impishly and walked away.

His time on Dosia was now coming to a close. He couldn’t be happier.

Sure, he’d just killed scores of aliens, but that was part of the deal, and as long as he maintained that perspective, he could hold his head high and continue on.

Frad spoke to several more Dosian diplomats over the course of the next two days. No follow through attacks occurred, but Zero was ready if they did.

He spent his evenings standing still for hours on end with his eyes closed, trying his best to mimic the charge-up stance Frad expected to see. It was lonely and gave him way too much time to

think about himself. It was funny, but when he had a real body on Earth, all he ever thought about was where to get his next meal and who he could trick into getting into his bed. Now he had no need for those desires, but instead of that coming as a relief, it made him ache inside. He'd do just about anything to eat a mouthful of seasoned rice or taste a woman's skin. The thought made him wonder how Stacey was doing. He'd be seeing her again soon. And hopefully, once they'd both fulfilled their commitment to the Beetars and been cured of their cancers, they'd get to spend some time together in the flesh. He could hardly wait. He was starting to worry if the desire would be there anymore when he got his body back. Maybe he'd spend too much time as a robot and forget how to act as a man. The notion made him sick.

He wondered about Earth. He didn't even know where it was in the night sky. Was it worth going back there? If he did, would it take eight

hundred years to get there or had technology advanced enough to get him there more quickly? How would his people view him if he told them the truth? He wondered where the rest of the cured went. There must be hundreds or thousands of humans out there who'd been in his position at one time and now they were out in the galaxy with freshly cured bodies. But if so, where were they? He'd only met a few flesh and bone humans so far. He assumed the rest went back to Earth, but that was an assumption with no proof to back it. He thought about all the cadets from his class who'd died and he realized he was one of the few lucky ones. Just as his thoughts started to irritate him with their perpetual recurrence, he'd drift off to sleep for awhile. It was nice to sleep and to dream, because his dreams bore no resemblance to reality. He escorted Frad out to the very same courtyard he'd arrived at in the ship. She was going

to sign the alliance publicly.

He noticed that the destroyed section of building was nearly reconstructed. In a matter of two days, they'd erased any signs of the attack.

Frad stood before a smattering of important looking Dosians at a podium and spoke to them in their native tongue. Zero didn't know what she was saying and he didn't care because he was too focused on making sure she was safe from potential dangers.

She bowed when she was done and the Dosians surrounded her. He tensed, but it turned out they were embracing one another, as was their custom.

Frad smiled pleasantly and spoke intermittently to anyone that approached her and then she returned to Zero. "I'm glad to have had you at my side. They recorded the whole speech. Every time a Dosian watches the signing of the alliance, they'll see you standing in the background

and they'll be reminded of Beetar might.”

He smiled and followed her into the building
as the sun went down.

They'd spent the past two days packing up
her office in anticipation of her leaving Dosia. All
that remained was her desk, bed, and his charging
port.

She sighed. “Get a charge while you can.

You ship out tomorrow.”

“When are you leaving? More importantly,
where are you going?”

“I'm heading to Ishca. Ishca is a penal
planet. Ishca is a hell hole. In a way, if I'd known
high command was going to reward me like this, I
might have tried to fail just to stay here.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. I've heard horror
stories about Ishca. Are you going to be okay?”

“I'll be fine. My station among my people is
elevated enough to ensure my safety on Ishca.”

He asked, “Can you get word to someone on

Ishca for me?”

“Who do you know that’s stationed there?”

“She’s a mech unit like me. Her name is Eve.

Let her know I made it back to the Beetar warship
in one piece.”

“I might be able to do better than that. I’ll do
my best to have her stationed aboard the warship
with you.”

“She was already stationed there for an hour
or so before they sent her off to Ishca as extra
muscle. They probably won’t just let her go back.”

“That won’t matter. I just brokered an
alliance with an entire species. I’ll get whatever I
ask for, within reason.”

“Then why don’t you ask to get posted
somewhere safer?”

“Because I serve wherever I’m needed. If I
can help restore peace and order on Ishca then it’s
my duty to do so.”

Frad was a complicated Beetar. Maybe that

was why he liked her. “I understand. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Zero.”

Frad personally escorted him to his shuttle, which would have felt like an honor until he saw that her ship was beside his, ready for departure as well. It still made him feel good that she wanted his protection right up to the very end.

She said, “Just strap in and the ship will do the rest. Thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

He yelled, “It was a pleasure,” but his voice was drowned out by the sound of the hatch on her ship opening up. She bowed at him from the doorway and then disappeared inside. Her ship started to lift off so he got settled in and waited for his ship to do its thing.

It closed up and lifted off without incident.

He had scared the pride right out of the Dosians.

They didn’t even have the will to attack them when they were vulnerable, just in case he retaliated.

He couldn’t wait to brag about his adventure

when he got back to the warship.

Part 5:

Reunion

According to the readouts on the ship, he was still about two hours from docking with the warship when one of those zippy blue ships appeared on his screens. It was in front of his shuttle, matching his pace, and facing him. It was almost nose to nose, flying backwards.

By the time he heard the warning buzzers and saw it, he nearly leapt from his skin. His shuttle had no defenses that he knew of. He considered abandoning ship, with hopes that the Beetars would come and pick him up later, but that was beyond risky, and for all he knew, the blue ship would notice him sneaking off and shoot him down anyway. Then, he thought about going on the offensive. He had guns; he could open the door, reach out and blow that bastard apart. By the time he'd wasted valuable action-time formulating

various plans, the blue ship zipped away from him at baffling speed.

He waited for it to return with back-up or something, but that didn't happen. He had no idea why it spared him, and he didn't trust his luck enough to really believe it had. Maybe it had planted a bomb under his ship. Maybe it put a tracker on it, or maybe it was trying to scare him right before it swooped in to finish him off. When the Beetar warship appeared on screen, and his ship didn't start ticking, he knew he'd be alright.

He docked noisily and he eagerly waited to see Stacey, Volts, and Piss-pants.

Because he'd gotten so lucky on Dosia, he suddenly worried that the universe would seek balance and devastate him now. Good fortune was not something he deserved, according to his recent history. He wondered what new bad luck would greet him, to balance the ledger. So he was surprised to see three smiling mechs when the door

opened.

Stacey rushed in, saying, “Good work on Dosia, Zero.”

Volts waited until she took a step back and then said, “You finally got something right then, huh?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it turns out I’m a badass.”

Piss-pants smiled and nodded. Zero thought because they’d spent so much time apart, and he’d never really gotten to know him as well as the others, each time they met up it unnerved him a bit. He could understand that. He wouldn’t have cared much if only Volts and Stacey were there to greet him.

Stacey asked, “Are you charged? Do you need to juice up?”

“I don’t need to do that anymore, remember?”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.”

Volts said, “This place is awesome. I haven’t had to kill anyone yet. As long as you bow your head when you’re supposed to and you cater to the occasional demand of our benefactors, everything is plain sailing here. I even helped Stacey and Piss-pants install shielding around their battery compartments. I don’t know if we’ll ever need it, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

He remembered how giddy Winthrop had been when he discovered the shielding inside Zero’s battery compartment. He’d said that he would install it in the others and apparently he’d done just that; it was the only way to explain how Volts even knew about it.

Volts sure was chatty. Zero looked him in the eye, to try and ascertain his mental health. Volts must have figured out what he was up to. “I’m fine. I had a breakdown or something but I’m over it now. I only charge once a day now, twice on boring days.”

Stacey took him by the hand. “Come on. I didn’t get the chance to give you a tour of this ship the last time you were here. I think you’ll be impressed.”

“Do you think they’ll let me stay this time?”

He said it half jokingly but she replied anyway.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Volts followed behind them and said, “Eve is headed back to us too. We just got word. She should be here soon.”

He was going to tell them that he had put a good word in for her, but that seemed too much like bragging. “I’m happy to hear that. I’m sure she’s got tons of exciting stories.” He was just glad to hear she’d survived.

He realized then that Piss-pants had wandered off to take care of something or other.

Volts matched their pace. “So, what was your experience with the Beetar on Dosia?”

He knew what he was getting at. He worried

that he had come back to him even more bitter and twisted than before.

Volts seemed relieved when he said, “I’ve had a change of heart about Beetars. The one I worked with was awesome.”

“Most of them are okay here too.”

Stacey stopped at the huge bay window so they could see the magnificence of space. It was as spellbinding as the first time he’d seen it.

He asked, “Have there been any more attacks from those little blue guys?”

“There have been a few, but nothing to worry about.”

“One of them found my shuttle a couple of hours ago. It matched my speed for about a minute and then it flew off.”

Stacey looked at him like he had just told a lie. “Why didn’t it attack your ship?”

“I thought you might know that.”

“I don’t. That’s interesting.”

“I thought maybe it had used the time to place a bomb on my ship or a tracker or something, but I didn’t see it do anything like that.”

She looked at Volts. “You’d better go and check it out just in case.”

Volts started to walk backwards, saying, “I’m on it.” Then he took off down the corridor at a sprint.

When she saw the look of horror on his face she said reassuringly, “It’s just a precaution. I’m sure it’s fine.” She squeezed his hand and said, “Come on. I’ll show you the rest.”

He didn’t know why but she thought every little thing about the ship would interest him. After the fourth supply closet, and the third pantry, he said, “You don’t need to show me any more of those. Where’s the bridge or whatever they call it?”

“They call it the command hub. We’re working our way there. The Beetar quarters are just up ahead.”

Once they entered the hallway that connected to the Beetar living quarters, everything changed. The ship was alive with color. The walls were green and the floors pink, and then around the next corner, they'd be yellow and red. Each door was brightly colored too, some having depictions on them that he couldn't quite decipher.

Stacey let go of his hand, probably because it would freak the Beetars out to see them that way. Beetars passed them, smiling and yapping to one another. They bowed their heads each time but most Beetars ignored them. The few who bowed did so more for their benefit than anything else.

It was the opposite of what he expected. It was pleasant. He tried to make out conversations, but it was too busy to make out any single sentence. By the time they made it through the living area, his head was spinning.

When they walked through the next door, everything changed again. The control hub was

enormous. It was peppered with work station consoles, and sitting at each console was a severe looking Beetar, hard at work. None of them looked up at them when they entered. A huge screen at the front of the room showed various images of their surroundings. One view showed the front of the ship and another, the rear. One tracked the zippy blue ships, losing them momentarily only to catch up to them again a second later.

In the center of the room was an orb, twice as big as his mechanical body. Stacey saw him staring at it. “That’s where the gunners work from. If the automated guns aren’t enough to get the job done, Beetars can control them from in there. If you ever get a chance to go inside it, it’ll blow your mind. The inside walls show a panoramic view of the space around the ship. When you go in there, it feels like you are the ship.”

A Beetar approached Stacey. It said angrily, “We need more food and drink in here. Please fetch

it when you're done doing whatever it is that you're doing."

Stacey nodded and then bowed. Zero wanted to bring his fist down on the top of the little bastard's head but he maintained control.

When the Beetar turned on him and glared, he reconsidered his self control until Stacey whispered, "Bow, dumbass."

He bowed in as disrespectful a manner as he could muster, but the subtleties were lost on the Beetar because it just walked away, satisfied.

As Stacey led him from the room, she said, "Some of them are better than others but you'll get used to it. Just make sure to bow from now on."

He had just started to think Beetars were alright. "When I get a chance, I'm going to put my metal foot up that guy's ass."

"That guy is a girl and she's the First Mate of this ship. Don't act out of line, especially here."

He nodded slowly. She was right, even

though the Beetar was out of line from his perspective. He'd been through too much to risk it all now. These Beetars were the real deal. They commanded a warship. They were not to be trifled with. He just had to get that through his thick skull before he smacked one of them upside the head and risked losing his life because he was too impulsive to control himself.

Stacey led him to a pantry just two doors down from the command hub. Inside, it was littered with fancy trays and eating utensils as well as carts and crates of food. She lifted a cart filled with exotic flowers. She pointed her toe at another cart filled with wriggling alien fruits, still planted in soil. "Pick that up. Don't try to wheel it out or you'll snap the wheels off with your weight."

He hefted the cart as it writhed with alien plant life. A fruit that resembled a banana except that it was black and oozed blood red liquid from its tip touched his hand as he carried the cart. It moved

up and down against his metallic skin rhythmically.

It creeped him out at first, but there was something soothing and mesmerizing about it.

Stacey quietly entered the command hub and placed her cart gently on the floor just to the right side of the entrance. She nodded to the left side.

“Put yours over there.”

He put it down gently and the black banana moved away from his hand, leaving behind a red trail that was sticky to the touch and damn near impossible to wipe off. He felt bad for the banana. It was about to be killed and eaten by one of those blue slug monsters.

Stacey walked out of the hub, so he followed after her.

She stumbled against the wall. He rushed over and put an arm around her waist.

She said, “I must have overexerted myself. I need a charge. Can you help me?”

He walked, holding her weight as she leaned

against him.

He asked, “Why didn’t you make sure you were charged up all the way?”

“I can’t charge all the way up. I can only charge for ten minutes at a time. Any longer and my databanks start to upload into the ports and I can’t have the Beetars knowing what I know.”

He wanted to ask what she was referring to but time was of the essence.

They made it past the Beetar quarters and into their cold, bland section of the ship. He picked up the pace as her body slumped into him even more.

Piss-pants saw him coming. He ran over and took her under the other arm. Together they rushed her into the living quarters and hooked her up to a port. Her head flopped down and her eyes fluttered shut.

Piss-pants whispered, “She can’t charge for more than ten minutes or her battery starts to

overheat.” Then he patted him on the back and left him alone in the room with her.

To his surprise, her eyes opened, and she was alert and awake.

She whispered, “I had to lie to him about it before he got suspicious.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The ports we use to charge also relay information about us back to the Beetars. They don’t check it that often, but if they did and they found out what I know; they’d kill me in a heartbeat. That’s why I can only charge in ten minute increments. If I charge any longer, the ports open a link and I can’t let that happen.”

He already knew the ports relayed data about them back to the Beetars but he didn’t know why Stacey was so nervous about it.

“What are you hiding? What’s your secret?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be my secret. I’m not even supposed to be here. You were supposed to do

this alone, but events unfolded in ways that couldn't be predicted and you allied yourself with me and Volts, Piss-pants, and Eve. So now we're all involved.

He had no idea what the hell she was talking about. He thought it might be some form of delirium brought on by her lack of charge, but she seemed lucid enough. "Charge up and then tell me everything."

"Give me ten minutes. I'll tell you what I can."

As he walked out of the room, he wondered why she was even conscious. Then again, he'd always had the ability to regain consciousness as he charged while others couldn't. She was no different than he was. But that fact alone meant that she was different. He was unusual and now he knew she was too.

Stacey met him by the bay window. "You're not supposed to just stand around, getting in the

Beetars' way. Come on. Let's go somewhere quiet and talk."

Volts walked up on them, happy and chatty.

He couldn't have come at a worse time.

To Zero he asked, "How did you like the tour?"

"It was an eye opener."

"Wait until I show you the bowels of the ship. We don't get to go down there unless we're called for, but the next time I get called, I'll try and bring you along too."

"Sounds good."

"It's like we're in two different ships. This part is clean and fancy and organized but below us is utter chaos. I barely understand most of what I've seen down there."

"Okay." he was starting to get irritated but he didn't want to be rude so he let him talk. He was his friend, after all, and he probably missed him during his absence. He could hardly begrudge him

his enthusiasm.

“Eve’s going to be here soon. I’ll let you guys know when she arrives. I can’t wait to see her.”

Stacey said, “I want to hear all about her travels.”

Volts had a jaunty step as he walked away down the corridor.

Zero hissed, “No more distractions. You need to tell me everything.”

She looked at him like he’d just slapped her across the face. “Settle down. When I tell you what I know, you’ll wish I hadn’t.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Lead the way.”

She turned and walked towards the docking bay. “We can talk by the dock doors and if anyone gets suspicious, we can say we’re waiting for Eve to arrive.”

He didn’t reply because he didn’t want anything, even small talk, to get in the way of

finding out her secrets. He followed closely behind her, his mind racing.

She stopped by the docks and looked around.

Then she went to the corner and sat down. He sat beside her.

“First of all, you don’t have cancer. None of us do.”

“Are our bodies healed already? That’s good news.” He couldn’t believe it.

“No. They were never broken in the first place. The Beetars and their human accomplices tricked us into willful servitude.”

“That makes no sense. I saw the x-rays. My family has a history of cancer.”

“You do not have it. Neither do I. We were duped.”

“But why?”

“The Beetars needed us to pilot their mechs. They’ve tried various ways to get humans to do their bidding but they’ve found that fear works best

as a motivator with our race. Fear of imminent death coupled with a promise to rid us of the very danger they concocted has worked wonders for them in manipulating us over the decades.”

“I don’t believe it. The Beetar I worked with on Dosia was kind and honest. She would have told me.”

“Maybe she didn’t know the truth. This is a huge empire with too many moving parts to keep track of.”

“Do the Beetars on this ship know we don’t have cancer?”

“They do. This ship is their hub of operations. They know everything.”

“So will we ever get our bodies back?”

She hung her head. “Henshaw told me not to tell you.”

“Tell me what? What does Henshaw have to do with all of this?”

She stood up and said, “He’s right. If you

know, it'll alter your outlook.”

“Tell me right now!”

Just then, as if the universe was conspiring against him, the proximity siren sounded, meaning a ship was about to dock.

Stacey seemed to relax at the momentary reprieve but she wouldn't be getting off the hook that easily. “It must be Eve.”

“You'll tell me the rest at the first opportunity we get.”

“I will.”

A Beetar appeared out of nowhere. Stacey saw him and bowed, so he did the same. It said, “I am your liaison officer, Zero. My name is Quiss. I'm here to greet Eve.”

“It's good to see you again,” he lied. He barely remembered Quiss from Epigog, and he wasn't happy to see him at that moment.

“If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask someone else or keep it to yourself.”

He knew his expression must have been priceless.

Stacey elbowed him in the side. “He’s joking.”

Zero smiled awkwardly. To him, this was the worst time for humor. Luckily the weirdness was interrupted when the dock door opened showing the inside of Eve’s ship.

She marched out, looked the Beetar over with obvious contempt and said to them, “I need to rest. I’ve been through a lot.”

Quiss tried to introduce himself but Eve cut him off. “Can it wait? I’m very weary.”

Quiss looked upset but he was gracious enough to relent.

He walked away as Stacey glared angrily at Eve. “What’s wrong with you? You can’t talk to them like that.”

“I hate those pieces of shit. I’ll talk to them any damn way I want.”

“Come on then. Let’s get you that rest you asked for,” Stacey said impatiently.

Zero’s curiosity about Stacey’s secrets waned ever so slightly because it was being shoved aside by his newfound curiosity. What the hell had changed Eve’s mind about the Beetars so abruptly? The last time he’d seen her, she was scolding him about his distrust of them. It appeared their attitudes had flip-flopped.

As they made their way to the living quarters, Volts ran towards them. He hugged Eve but she stiffened uncomfortably. She slowly pushed him back and said as evenly as she could, “Give me some time to get used to being here, okay?”

Volts was visibly deflated. “Sure. Let me know if you need someone to talk to.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

Zero noticed several dents and pock marks in Eve’s armor as they walked. Char marks covered her left side. Her left gun hatch was buckled. It was

then that he noticed a holster over her left shoulder with a gun tucked in it.

She saw him staring. “My gun’s jammed in there so I have this thing,” she said as she pointed at her holster.

Stacey looked at it with concern in her eyes.

“You need to give that to me.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“You will if you want to stay on this ship.

The Beetars will not allow weaponry in their presence.”

Eve shucked the holster off, letting it hit the floor with a thud.

Stacey glared at her when she didn’t pick it up. “Do we have a problem here?”

Eve sneered. “Don’t test me, bitch. You asked for the gun. There it is.”

“Pick it up and hand it to me.”

Eve turned and walked away, leaving Stacey exasperated and confused by the unnecessary

aggression. She bent down and grabbed it up angrily, saying to Zero, “What the hell happened to her? Has she always been so angry?”

He remembered that Stacey had spent almost no time at all with Eve. “I don’t know what happened but she has definitely changed. I’m curious to find out why.”

“We need to contain her. If she acts this way around the Beetars they’ll put an end to her one way or the other.”

He ran with Stacey to the living quarters.

They were both relieved to find Eve already there, sitting at a table, fussing with her gun hatch.

Stacey hid the holster at the back of the room behind a stack of board games and then took a seat opposite Eve.

He sat down because he felt odd being the only one of them standing. He asked, “What was it like on Ishca?”

Eve reached across and put her hand on his.

“I forgot to thank you, Zero. That Beetar you helped on Dosia told me you requested for me to be reassigned to this ship. If you hadn’t done that, I’d probably be dead by now.”

He smiled, glad that his limited influence had made a difference.

She continued, “She was the only Beetar I met there that I didn’t wish a terrible death upon.

She was sweet. The rest of them treated us like cannon fodder.”

She leaned back in her chair and pried at her chest hatch. It opened up and she reached in, pulling out the coil of cables that connected the two ports together that she’d made in orbit above Cogmore.

She dropped the tangle on the table. “Those things have been driving me nuts. They rattle around every time I move.”

Stacey picked the cables up, fingering them thoughtfully. “I remember you talking about this. You said we could recharge from Zero using this

cable, right?”

“Theoretically, yes, it should work.”

Stacey plugged one end into her back and handed him the other end. It was the perfect solution to her predicament, but he was nervous because he had no idea if it would work or if it would cause them both damage. He plugged it in anyway. It caused him no ill effects.

Stacey leaned towards Eve. “I can’t charge for more than a few minutes at a time with the mounted ports here.”

If she thought Eve would be intrigued, she was wrong. Eve said, “Whatever.” She didn’t even ask why Stacey was still conscious.

Zero asked, “Does it feel like it’s working?”

“Yeah. I can feel it.”

He wanted to make a sexual joke but the timing was all wrong.

Eve started a monologue to no one but herself. It seemed like she was exorcizing her

demons or something.

“As soon as I got to Ishca, I came under attack. They keep all kinds of aliens there. It’s like a Petri dish planet, with all kinds of swill mingled in one place. It’s worthless besides being used to punish life forms. My landing shuttle went down from gunfire near the garrison but it took them half a day to get through to me. Luckily the prisoners didn’t find me first or else I’d be in pieces right now. The convoy that brought me in was reduced from a dozen armored trucks to just two. I was lucky enough to be in one of those two. Air support is nonexistent on Ishca because the prisoners take particular delight in taking aircraft down, and they’re good at it too.

“We drove through a shanty town made up of various aliens. Some were Cogmore’s; some of them looked like these weird spiders with orange heads and little pink feet. Some were so small the others ate them. There were a bunch of green guys

and grey dudes. They all looked pissed or tired. None of them looked that happy to be alive. And I found out why pretty quickly. The Beetars tormented them and then, just as they reached their breaking point, we would get sent in to quell the violence. As soon as we had a situation under control, the Beetars would instigate another uprising. It was orchestrated murder with the Beetars pulling the strings, but it gave them plausible deniability if anyone cared to ask why so many prisoners were dying every single day.

“My ass was put on the line several times a day needlessly. I felt like my life was worthless. That’s why I’ve come to hate them.”

She let out a long sigh. “I need a charge. Wake me if you need me.” Then she stood up and shuffled off.

As soon as she hooked up to the port and her head drooped he said to Stacey, “You’re going to finish telling me what’s going on.”

“I don’t have the energy. Can it wait?”

“Are you kidding? Of course it can’t.

Stacey sat back, making sure not to damage the cable jutting from her back. “Henshaw wanted to explain this to you, but he wanted you to experience the empire for yourself first. The Beetars are evil, Zero, just like you suspected. And Henshaw is one of their human collaborators. But he’s been left alone for decades doing their bidding and in that time, he’s been trying to conspire against them. He set up a base of operations on the moon his space station orbits and he’s repurposed tons of the Beetar’s supplies for his own use. But you are his life’s work. You are the beginning of the end of the Beetar’s supremacy as far as he’s concerned. That’s why you are so different from the rest of us. He built you to be able to defend yourself in any situation, which is why your gun hatches don’t work like everyone else’s. It’s why you never truly go offline when you charge. He didn’t want you to

be vulnerable. It's also why he took out your kill switch. He built your body to stand up to the Beetars. But he couldn't convince you to fight for him with mere words. He knew how worthless that would be. He wanted you to experience the atrocities first hand. He wanted you to be fueled with the same hatred that fuels him."

Zero shook his head. This was bullshit. But he must have believed some of it because he didn't stand up and walk away. "What's so important about me then?"

"Technically, nothing is special about you. But your body has been modified; it's the body that's unique. That's why you arrived late in orbit around Cogmore. When Henshaw learned you'd be stationed there, he told me he was going to hold you back to install their language in you so you could communicate with them."

He nodded. Just because he didn't remember it didn't mean the doctor hadn't installed the

language while he was shut down. It explained his late arrival in orbit. It made some sense too. He could communicate with Cogmore's when no one else could.

She continued, "But when he built you, he couldn't replicate all the tests you'd experience on Epigog 31. That's why you washed out of training. The gun hatches he rigged to open even in the company of Beetars failed to open during training. When he found out you wouldn't get to advance through training, he got desperate. You see, he had to make sure you got out in the galaxy. He had to ensure you fulfilled your role, and you would never get that chance if you were stuck for years guarding the training center."

He recalled the destruction of the training camp. He remembered finding all of the mechs dead and their human trainers in bloody pieces. And he remembered Commander Delacourt writing in his own blood moments before he died. He wrote, *Get*

Henshaw, as Zero loomed over him. He'd assumed he wrote it because he wanted a doctor but he had misunderstood. Delacourt was telling him to go after Henshaw. He was letting him know Henshaw was responsible for his death.

As if to confirm his suspicions Stacey said, "Henshaw had no choice. He had to wipe out all records of you failing. He had to use his secret fleet to destroy the camp and everyone inside. That way he could make up a lie to get you stationed elsewhere in the empire."

"I can't believe he'd go to all of that effort just for me," he said, even though he was starting to believe it.

"You have to understand that your body was the culmination of years of study and experimentation. He worked on your unit for too long to just watch it wither on Epigog without fulfilling its destiny."

"He doesn't have the option of telling me

what my destiny is. I'm not his puppet.”

“He knew that. That’s why he set you loose in the empire, to find out for yourself just what needed to be done to right the wrongs of the Beetars.”

His head hurt. It was too much information to take in all at once. Stacey was right when she warned him he wouldn’t want to know her secrets.

He sat forward. “If those blue alien ships that destroyed camp were built by Henshaw then what the hell are they doing swarming this warship now?”

“They’re tracking its position and getting ready for you to make your move.”

A question was on the very tip of his tongue when an earth shattering siren blared. A Beetar voice issued over the speakers. “We’ve arrived among the hostile alien fleet. Humans, get ready to fight.”

Stacey gave him a fearful look. “It’s too

soon. You don't know enough. You need to hear from Henshaw."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"He has a prerecorded message he built into you. It's supposed to activate the moment your outrage becomes unbearable. In it he'll explain everything."

"Is there a way to manually turn it on?"

"There is but we don't have the time. We need to attack those ships."

"But those ships are Henshaw's, right?"

"They are. They're on our side. But we need to go through the motions or the Beetars will find out we're conspiring against them before you're ready."

He huffed. "I'm still not on board with that.

I only just started to see them in a different light."

"You met one decent Beetar. That doesn't mean they're all good."

He shook his head. He couldn't take down

more than a few Beetars on this warship before they took him out anyway. If this was Henshaw's plan, it had some serious flaws.

In a way, he hated Stacey for telling him so much. But he barely had time to dwell on it when Piss-pants and Volts came rushing into the room. Piss-pants looked at the cable connecting them and said, "Unplug and come with me. We're going out there whether we like it or not."

Volts looked scared. "We're going out just like this. They're sending us out without a ship."

Zero stood up and unplugged the cable from his back. "Can they do that? Can we maneuver in space?" he genuinely did not know the answer to that.

"I don't know. They just said to do it. I'll go first, but if nothing happens and I drift away helplessly then you guys need to refuse to go out there."

Piss-pants started to move towards Eve but

they stopped him. “She’s low on juice. Let her charge up.”

“I don’t know if they’ll let me do that. They said all of us had to fight.”

Stacey said, “I’m still our personal liaison with the Beetars. If they want to blame someone for it they can blame me. She’s not fit to be among us or them in the state she’s in.”

Piss-pants turned about and ran out of the room. “Hurry up then. They’re expecting us to join in the fight.”

Zero felt the first impact as it rocked the ship.

Stacey put a hand on his shoulder when they were the last ones left in the room. “Don’t hold back. The Beetars need to believe we can be trusted.”

He smirked. “I wasn’t going to hold back.

Those drones killed some of my friends, including you. They’re going to pay for it. I don’t care if

Henshaw built them for that very purpose.”

Stacey said, “There’s more to it than that,”

but he was already running down the corridor away from her. There was a lot he did not know. He didn’t know if he was one of the good guys, he didn’t know if he’d ever get put back inside his body. And he didn’t know if he could believe a word Stacey said. But he did know that those drones had killed people he knew and he knew how to exact revenge on them. He had a singular purpose, which was a good feeling considering everything Stacey had just dumped on him.

He got to the docking bay just in time to see a small hatch open up and Volts crawling inside.

Piss-pants shut the hatch and they waited. A clicking sound meant the outside hatch had been opened and Volts had been sucked out into space.

He had no idea how to tell if Volts was alright.

They waited with bated breath and then they heard a very faint tapping coming from outside. To get

through the hull of the ship he must've been hammering with all of his might.

Piss-pants said, "That's him. He's okay.

Who's next?"

Zero stepped forward just as Stacey put her hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off and waited for the hatch to open again. It did, and he crawled inside the cramped space, feeling more like a torpedo than a living creature. He was afraid, but he was just as afraid to stay behind and listen to Stacey explain his destiny to him or the twisted, convoluted plans Henshaw had for the Beetars. He couldn't take any more intrigue. He had to be alone and it didn't get much lonelier than being in the vacuum of space.

His gun hatches opened and he got ready to fight. Then the outside door opened and he started to get dragged out into space along with the gasses that surrounded him. He saw only black with faint gray trace gasses shooting past him. He felt

something grasp his leg and saw Volts with his boosters lit up, holding him steady. Volts' entire body was issuing gasses and flames. He moved towards Zero and put his lips against his ears. "Try and move around. We have more than just boot boosters. They're all over us." His voice was faint and distant, like he was talking through tin cans connected by a string. But Volts had to send the vibrations directly to his ears because sound doesn't travel in a vacuum.

Zero concentrated on trying to move about and small doors immediately opened all over his body. Little jets slid out and started to spew gasses, jostling him around like a buoy.

Just then, the hatch in the ship closed and behind them a tiny blue object zipped past. He doubted they could match the drones' speed but they had to try.

Turrets somewhere above them fired at the blue ship but it was just too fast. He could only

guess, but if the mechs had any value in this battle, it was probably to lure or distract the blue ships long enough for the turrets to zero in. He hated to be used as bait, but in this instance, he was fine with it. Those drones needed to be destroyed. He didn't care that they were some mad scientist's invention. He didn't care that they wouldn't fear their own destruction or feel pain when they blew up. They had to go.

Volts said, "You go. I'll stay and get the others ready."

Zero smiled. He was glad Volts chose to let him fight. He wanted to do some damage.

Volts slapped him on the back. "Get some payback for what they did to Creaker, Stomper, and Twitch. I'll be right behind you. Save some for me."

He liked Volts' enthusiasm. The blue drones had killed his friends too. He felt the same outrage Zero felt. This was going to be fun.

He put his boots against the hull of the ship

and kicked off with everything he had.

He was faster than he'd anticipated which took some getting used to. He followed the line of fire coming from the turret cluster on top of the warship and found the little blue ship it was tracking. He thrust his body towards it. It must have been too preoccupied with the turret to see him coming because it didn't react until he started shooting. Each round missed, which pissed him off, but his aim was getting truer when it suddenly twisted in place and then shot off at an incredible speed he'd never match.

He looked all around in the black trying to lock in on anything blue. He saw Piss-pants and Volts speeding towards another drone so he gave chase too.

He had to avoid the turret fire as he neared.

Volts was letting the blue ship have it as Piss-pants kept it contained. When he arrived the ship was boxed in between them and the turret fire so instead

of trying to escape, it started to fight back.

Zero was hit but he didn't sustain any damage. He fired his guns, only remembering at the last second that his ammo was upgraded. Each hit exploded noiselessly, knocking the blue ship around like a piñata. Volts and Piss-pants both stared at him as he fired round after round into the drone. The ship tried to bull-rush him but he unloaded on it, tearing it in half before it reached him.

Gasses rushed from it into the vacuum. He got out of the way of the escaping debris.

And then he saw something that confused him. A body floated from the ship, nearly concealed by the large chunks of metal, but it was undeniably human. A human being suffocated right before his eyes. He didn't understand. He thought the ships created by Henshaw were drones but there were human pilots flying them. He'd just killed a man. It made no sense.

He tried to turn but found his motion

sluggish. His system fluids were freezing in the cold of space. His body tumbled end over end out of control as he seized up.

Volts and Piss-pants grabbed him and started to take him back to the Beetar ship. He wasn't so sure he appreciated it though. He wanted to be left to die at that moment. He was so confused. They shoved him into the outer hatch. A moment later and Stacey was dragging him into the ship.

She stared at him as she laid him down at her feet. "What happened?"

He stammered, "I got one."

She cocked her head to the side, waiting to see if he'd elaborate.

He said, "Human beings are inside those ships. I thought they were drones."

She looked at him with pity. "They're not drones. You're lucky to be alive."

"I don't think the Beetars would've cared

much if I froze solid out there.”

“You’re right. I need to get the others back inside before they freeze over. While I do that, I’m going to activate Henshaw’s recording so you know everything. It’s time. You need to be ready for this.”

She reached inside the nape of his neck and fiddled around. He knew immediately when she activated the recording.

Part 6:

Henshaw's Deceit

His vision shut down. Then, a split second later, everything changed. He was staring at Doctor Henshaw's face. He assumed it would just be a voice recording but the doctor had gone all out with it. It was some type of virtual reality. He was standing in his lab on the space station.

Henshaw stared at him and said, "Hello Jack.

This is Doctor Henshaw. I assume you've come to the same conclusion that I have; that the Beetars are evil and need to be stopped. That's where you come in. You will be the instrument that takes them down. Let me start from the beginning."

He knew that Stacey was pulling Volts and Piss-pants inside the ship right beside him but he couldn't see it happen or feel or hear it. He was completely immersed in the experience.

Henshaw said, "They've forced me to help them for decades and I've had enough. You may not

know this yet, but your body was not dying. That's a trick the Beetars use to gain your subservience. In fact, your body isn't inside a machine, being healed on this space station. You are alive and well. This next part might blow your mind: your body is not immobile and unconscious here. The consciousness I transferred to your unit was a copy. Your human alter ego is working for the resistance that I created. In fact, at some point in the future, you may meet your real self."

His mind was doing back flips. This changed everything. If he was just a copy then there was no way to give him his body back because his body was already whole. He was a floating consciousness with nothing to link him to a life he could understand.

He didn't have time to cry or mourn his loss.

Henshaw was too busy filling the void with words.

"Now normally, the Beetars make me kill

new arrivals right after I transfer a copy of their

minds, but I set up a base on the moon I'm orbiting by uploading my own consciousness into a mech. Years ago I put that mech to work setting up the base behind the Beetar's backs. Ever since it became habitable I started saving recruits rather than killing them. I send them down there to live and hide and train. I've created a fleet of ships, one of which you'll end up piloting, as a human of course."

It took him a second to wrap his head around that.

"But my most prized creation was you, Jack.

When a mech has been in service for a couple of years, the Beetars shut it off and ship it back to me to upload another consciousness into. They do that because recruits start to question everything after a couple years. I managed to put your unit aside instead of putting it back into the field and I spent nearly three years tinkering with it and perfecting it. The Beetars no longer have the ability to control

you. You are the only mech who has free will and can act upon it. And I hope you will.”

Henshaw reached towards him, and at the last second, he realized he was really reaching for the camera. He grabbed it and pivoted it to the right.

He pointed it down at a sleeping man on a table.

Zero was looking at himself, but in human form.

“I’ve already uploaded a copy of your consciousness into your mech. This is the real you lying on this table. Instead of flushing your unconscious body out into the void of space like the Beetars have instructed, I’m going to revive you and send you to the moon with the others. I hope you can appreciate that. I understand you must be conflicted now. I understand how saddened you must be to know you’ll never be reunited with your flesh. But understand that the alternative was supposed to be far worse than this. The Beetars use your minds to control their mechs, then they have me destroy your bodies behind your backs and then,

when they're done with you, they turn you off like a light switch. I think I've given you a better option than that. I hope you can find a way to see it too.

“If you decide to go up against them, know that you are not alone. I am poised to strike at a moments notice. The Beetars think we're their pets. They've underestimated our ingenuity and courage. That will be their downfall. Good luck to you, Jack. If at any time, you need to hear this message again, there's a switch concealed in the nape of your neck. Activate it and the message will start over. Good bye.”

The image flickered and vanished and his eyesight returned.

The Beetar Quiss was standing in front of him when his vision returned. “What happened to you? You were unresponsive.”

Stacey stood behind him with Piss-pants and Volts. “His system fluids froze over from being in space too long,” she lied. “They just now thawed

out. He's fine."

Quiss seemed to buy it. He said to all of them, "You will no longer be needed out there. In the time it took you to destroy one ship, we've taken out a dozen. The turret gunners were complaining that you kept getting in the way anyway. Return to your quarters until you're called upon." Then he turned with a flourish and walked away briskly. He seemed more animated than ever. Zero wondered if his spirits were raised because of the war happening outside. Beetars were a warlike species so this was probably fun to them.

Stacey whispered to everyone, "Let's go somewhere private. Zero has something he needs to explain to the rest of you."

Volts and Piss-pants gawked at him suspiciously. He shook his head and started walking. How could he explain everything to them? He barely understood it himself. And he didn't want to see the looks on their faces when they found out

they had no hope of ever being human again.

Outside the big bay window was utter mayhem. Bullets whizzed and debris tumbled, but his mind was too numb for the magnitude of it to sink in. Humans were dying out there but his addled brain didn't understand how that was even possible.

Eve was gone when they got back. He could only guess that she'd woken up and wandered off when she couldn't find any of them.

He sat down at the table and the others joined him there.

Stacey looked at him with concern in her eyes. She mouthed the words, "I'm sorry," silently.

He didn't blame her though. She was as doomed as the rest of them were.

He said, "It turns out that we won't get to go back to our bodies."

Piss-pants stood up and said, "Did they die? What happened?"

"Believe it or not, our bodies are out there in

those blue ships attacking this ship.”

None of them believed him, which struck him as odd since they were there when he blew up that blue ship. Maybe they didn't see the dead human emerge from the wreckage, or maybe they chalked it up to a trick of the imagination.

Volts said, “Tell us exactly what you're talking about.”

Zero watched the looks of disbelief turn to horror as he explained everything the doctor had just relayed to him in his message. A couple of times they felt the ship shudder as he spoke but the chaos didn't sidetrack them. They were too mesmerized by his story and he was too caught up in it himself to be distracted. But a sliver of a thought slid its way into his brain: while they sat around trying to figure this all out, humans were dying out there and some of them might be their own alter egos.

When he was done, Stacey said, “Back on

Epigog, when Zero insisted that the doctor revive me after my mech was destroyed in training, Henshaw contacted me with a proposition. I was in his hidden base on the moon, training to battle Beetars. He asked me if I was willing to let him copy my consciousness again to have it transferred back into a mech. I didn't like the idea. It's risky copying a mind. The original has a good chance at survival the first time but it drops to ten percent if it's attempted again. My human form would be lucky to survive it."

That explained why the Beetars didn't just find the perfect soldier and copy him or her endlessly. It was a question that had bugged him from the beginning, but he was too stupid to put into words.

She continued, "But if I agreed to do it my copied consciousness would know too much. I would know the trickery of the Beetars. I would know that I had no chance of ever being reunited

with my flesh. So I refused. I thought it would be too much for my copied consciousness to bear. But the doctor convinced me in the end. I don't know what story he gave you guys, but that's what he did."

The doctor had told them an elaborate lie about how he'd managed to obtain another copy of Stacey's consciousness, but Zero hadn't questioned it because he was just so overjoyed to have her back.

Stacey said, "The pain and anguish you feel now is the pain I've been carrying around since the moment I awoke. He made me swear to keep it to myself, so I've been suffering in silence ever since."

He could only imagine the loneliness she must have felt. He asked, "Did your human body survive the second transfer?" He hoped the answer was yes. If not, then his actions killed her human form.

"It did."

Thank God.

To everyone she said, “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you any of this sooner.”

Piss-pants stomped to the other end of the room. “Maybe you shouldn’t have told us at all then.”

Volts yelled at him. “She didn’t do this to us.

The doctor isn’t to blame either. The Beetars did this.”

Stacey whispered, “I don’t know what kind of life we can even have like this, but it’s better than the alternative.”

Piss-pants came back and sat down. He started to sob, even though no tears came out. He blubbered, “All I am is an operating system. That’s no kind of life I can understand.”

Stacey put her arm over his shoulder. “With time you’ll get used to it.”

He asked, “Can’t we be inserted into our bodies anyway? Can’t they just be uploaded over the top of our alternate consciousnesses?”

It was a desperate question.

Stacey said, "It doesn't work like that. Even if your human body was willing, you'd have to instantly grow synapses to accommodate all of your new memories. That's impossible."

Zero asked, "So what now?"

"Are you ready to fulfill your destiny?"

"Nope."

"Then we'll wait until you are. But if the Beetars find out that those ships out there are being flown by human beings, it'll be too late for us to act."

Volts said, "So why are we here? Are we Zero's sidekicks or something? Or are we just fodder?" There was genuine, deep resentment in his voice.

Stacey said angrily, "None of you are supposed to even be here. The only reason Henshaw spared you was because of your close proximity to Zero on Epigog. If it wasn't for that, your mechs

would be in a scrap pile in the desert of an alien planet.”

He hated to hear her explain it like that so he could only imagine how much it must have hurt Volts to hear the truth.

Just then, a Beetar voice came over the loudspeakers. “Humans, report to the command hub immediately.”

Stacey said, “Shit. This might be it. Be ready.”

Damn it. This was not going to end well.

When they entered the Beetar section of the ship, they knew something was wrong. Three Beetars appeared behind them, pointing guns at their backs.

Stacey whispered to Zero, “Are you ready yet?”

He didn’t know the answer. He wasn’t ready to do this, but he might not have a choice.

By the time they made it to the command

hub, there were ten Beetars behind them. Twenty or more Beetars formed a wall in front of them, and standing in front of the Beetars was Eve. She was trembling. At first Zero thought she was trembling with fear but on second glance it was obvious she was shaking with anger.

Behind them, Beetars still manned their stations, caught up in the battle raging outside.

A large fellow pointed at Eve. He must have been Captain Flimfor. He said, "This unit acted towards my men with aggression. When they tried to subdue it, it pulled a gun on them."

Sure enough, Eve's empty holster was slung over her shoulder.

Flimfor continued. "It is regretful that you all must be shut down. We can not fight on while we worry about the mental state of our servants."

So that was the gist of it; they saw them as slaves who were no longer useful to them so they were going to shut them all off.

Flimfor held a device out at them, paused,
and then he pushed a button. He looked at them in
confusion and then he pressed it again. Then he hit
the side of it with his hand and pressed one last time.

Urgently Flimfor said to the other Beetars,
“The kill switch isn’t working. Something’s wrong.
Take them down.”

Luckily for them, they’d tampered with their
kill switches or else they would’ve been disabled
and their minds would've shut down forever.

Zero heard the first shot and he felt it hit his
body in the same moment. He whirled around and
lashed out, knocking the shooter into the wall. He
heard Eve scuffle with the group that held her and
he turned in time to see her wrench her gun away
from them. She fired into the crowd as they rushed
her.

Stacey yelled, “Get them,” and they moved
out as a unit.

He concentrated on helping Eve. He pulled

his gun and killed four Beetars before they knew what was happening.

The concussions from his illegal bullets dazed them senseless.

He heard one of them yell, “He’s accessed his guns. That’s not possible. What’s happening?”

He killed that guy before he could scream any more.

Flimfor ran off like a coward before any of them could stop him. Zero aimed at his back when a Beetar’s body hit him in the chest, knocking him back. Volts had thrown him. He said, “Sorry, man.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He fired at the guy coming up behind Volts, blowing him to pieces.

He saw Eve pulling the trigger on her gun, but she’d unloaded it already. She threw it on the floor disgustedly and grabbed the nearest Beetar.

She hit it so hard that it died on impact.

Piss-pants had two of them cornered. Zero shoved past him and fired two shots center mass.

Stacey left the fight to secure the Beetars at their consoles before they decided to join in. She yelled over the commotion, "Watch out. He has an EMP weapon."

EMP's knock out electronics. He could only guess that the weapon was able to somehow direct the electro magnetic pulse so as not to affect the ship, otherwise it would be suicide to use it around their own tech. Either way, they were safe. They'd already shielded themselves against EMP's.

They all stopped and turned to see the Beetar with the EMP. He had a wicked grin as he walked towards them with the weapon. It looked like a fat rifle.

But Zero wasn't intimidated. He pointed his gun at the Beetar and pulled the trigger. The Beetar pulled the trigger on his EMP weapon right before he exploded into splattery chunks.

Zero was dazed from the pulse but he was already regaining his composure. Then the mechs

sustained volley after volley of gunfire from the surrounding Beetars as they stood there dazed and unable to move. He saw his friends all twitching in place, but he was happy none of them had died yet. He was the first to snap out of it, probably because he had the better cable shielding. He fired successive shots, hitting a line of Beetars, killing them on contact.

His fellow mechs shook it off and got back to work beside him.

Stacey hit a Beetar so hard that its head caved in. The horror of it should have shocked him but he was too busy fighting for his life to dwell on it for more than a fraction of a second. She picked up the EMP weapon and broke it in half over her knee.

He wheeled around to see Piss-pants on the floor. Three Beetars stood over him unloading their weapons into him. His body shuddered with each impact. Zero lifted his gun and blew them apart in a

matter of seconds, but he was too late. Piss-pants was already dead.

Volts and Eve rushed to their fallen friend.

When he didn't respond they went nuts and flew into a blood rage like he'd never seen before.

Eve rushed away and ripped a Beetar's head clean off. He'd never seen anything so brutal. Volts used his thrusters to burn two others to death.

Zero slipped on Beetar blood, throwing his aim off as he fired, causing him to accidentally kill a Beetar who was peacefully sitting at his console.

The console sparked and the lights flickered.

Then Beetars started to try and escape. He shot them as they ran, with no remorse, spraying their blood across the room in a fine mist that soon covered everything.

A Beetar yelled out, "We surrender," so they stopped killing them, although Eve and Volts looked like they didn't want to.

The Beetar who'd surrendered was none

other than Captain Flimfor himself. He'd been hiding back behind a console the entire time. He heard guns clatter as the Beetars dropped them at their feet.

Stacey rounded up the survivors against the wall just as a flood of Beetars rushed in through the door from their living quarters. When the new arrivals saw that just seven Beetars were left standing they threw their guns down and their hands up. Volts herded them over to the others.

One of the Beetars said condescendingly, "If you don't let us get back to our workstations, those ships will destroy us all."

Stacey said, "Those ships are piloted by humans."

The Beetar opened its mouth and then closed it again. Its surprise was obvious.

Eve asked Stacey, "What do you mean?"

"We'll fill you in as soon as we're sure this ship is ours."

Zero went to the turret control bubble in the center of the room and dragged out the two Beetars hiding inside. Then Stacey sent Volts and Eve out to make sure no others were hiding around the ship.

To his surprise they brought back dozens more. All of them were equal parts confused and outraged. But they were compliant and that was all that mattered.

One of the new arrivals snarled, “You fight for nothing. All of you are already dead. That creepy human doctor flushed your bodies into space the moment he uploaded your minds.”

Stacey smiled with mock sweetness. “He didn’t. None of you know the truth.”

It smiled back and said, “It doesn’t matter.

Before I was captured, I destroyed your charging ports. You’ll all fade away before the end of the day and then we’ll take our ship back.”

Stacey shook her head. “Be careful, Beetar.

We’re smarter than you give us credit for.” She

looked at Zero and winked.

So from now on, it was his job to power every mech. He was fine with that, so long as his battery did what it was supposed to do.

Eve said sheepishly, “Why does it feel like we just caused a galactic war?”

Volts said jokingly, “What do you mean?”

We didn’t do it. You started all of this.”

Before she could retort, Stacey said, “This was inevitable. I’m just glad it’s over.”

As if on cue, the ship rocked from the attack occurring outside.

Stacey turned her attentions to the large, bullet riddled monitor. “We need to get word to them that we’re in control of the ship.”

Volts threatened the Beetars. “Send a message or we’ll start executing you, one by one.”

A volunteer Beetar was led to her console.

She said, “All I can do is send the message. I can’t guarantee they’ll get it.”

“Do it.”

“Speak here,” she said, pointing at the microphone.

They took fire for another half an hour before a human voice issued over the speakers. “We just received your message. Let us board you.”

Stacey said into the microphone, “We’ll open the dock.”

Stacey and Volts went to greet their guests while Eve helped Zero watch over the prisoners.

He was almost as nervous about meeting the new arrivals as he had been fighting the Beetars.

Eve leaned towards him and said, “Thank God for you. Without you, we would have all died.”

“Everyone did their fair share.”

“No they didn’t. I killed a few of them before my ammo ran out, but after that, I was at a disadvantage. If you hadn’t done the bulk of the work, we’d be in their position, or worse.” She pointed at the Beetars.

He was baffled. Maybe in all the commotion he underestimated his contribution.

She asked, “Where the hell did you get your ammo from?”

“I got it on Dosia.”

She nodded and then added, “You know, if we hadn’t copied your shielding we’d all be dead.”

He shrugged. He took no pride in the compliment because he hadn’t installed it, the doctor had.

It started to sink in that he was important to their victory. Without his gun access, his specialty ammo, and his shielding, they’d have succumbed to Beetar might. And without his never-ending battery, they’d all die, having no charging ports to recharge.

The doctor had made him especially to beat the Beetars and circumstances had supplied the rest.

Stacey and Volts walked in with three dozen small humans in tow.

He spotted Stacey, the human version, right

away. He thought he recognized a couple of other faces but he couldn't be sure.

The human Stacey walked up to him and punched him in the abdomen. It didn't hurt physically.

He reflexively took a step back. "Why did you do that?"

"You killed Dan, you asshole."

Volts stepped forward and said, "Did you say Dan is dead? Dan Stevenson?"

"Yeah, three of you killed him. I saw it myself so don't deny it."

There was deep anguish to his voice as Volts said, "His mech died too." He pointed at Piss-pants' mech body on the floor. "We didn't know who we were fighting when we killed him."

He barely remembered that Piss-pants' real name was Dan. That meant that when he blew up Dan's ship, with Piss-pants' help, Piss-pants had technically helped to kill himself. It was a strange

irony that saddened him.

Human Stacey pursed her lips and punched him again. She was clearly the leader of her group. Mech Stacey stepped forward and grabbed the other Stacey by the arm. “If you do that again, you’ll regret it.”

Human Stacey shrugged her off and said to the whole room, “We lost many but in the end we succeeded.”

Eve said over the top of her, “You didn’t do shit. Without Zero, you’d still be out there getting picked apart by turret fire. Zero won this battle.”

She pointed at him and he noticed Volts and mech-Stacey nodding in agreement.

Human Stacey took a close look at him.

“You’re Jack, aren’t you? I’m not surprised you prevailed. You were designed with victory in mind.”

He nodded. “Where’s the other me?” He hadn’t seen his handsome human face in the crowd.

She looked at her feet, saying sadly, “He died out there. I’m so sorry.” He saw her eyes mist up.

Mech Stacey put her arm around the human Stacey. “I’m so sorry to hear that. How are you holding up?”

Human Stacey shook her head, but she said nothing. She was clearly close to his dead doppelganger.

Then Mech Stacey saw him standing there looking confused. She said reassuringly, “If you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.”

He nodded because he didn’t know what to say. It’s not every day you find out you’re already dead. But the truth was that it didn’t change anything. That body was no longer his own anyway.

Human Stacey said to them, “Tell the Beetars that they have a choice. They can help us pilot this ship to Epigog or they can die horribly.”

Eve asked, “Why are we going to Epigog?”

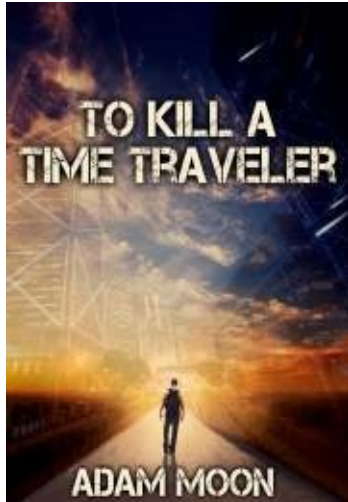
“To pick up the doctor.”

“Why?”

“Because he found out where planet Beetar is located. We’re going to take the fight to them.”







The End

More by Adam Moon:

Book #2 is coming soon.

If you'd like to be notified of upcoming projects

or if you just want to say hi, drop me a line at:

(noommada@hotmail.com)

Thank you for taking time to read Zero. If you

enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends

or posting a short review. Word of mouth is an

author's best friend and much appreciated.

ZERO

(Mech. chronicles, Book #1 - Revelation)

ADAM MOON

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Part 1:

Jack's Journey

Jack Peterson put his work boots on because he wasn't thinking. He wasn't going to be working anymore. He wasn't ever going back because dead men don't need money. He kicked them off and put on his comfortable shoes. It was scorching hot outside, so he went shirtless to avoid succumbing to heat exhaustion. He ate a protein bar for breakfast and looked around the apartment.

Knowing he was going to die soon gave him a new perspective. The apartment looked foreign to him now.

Empty booze bottles littered the coffee table from the night before. His dad would get over his hangover quick in the heat, though. It would ooze out of his pores under the unforgiving sun as he worked his long shift.

He felt bad for his poor dad. He was a good man. A note on the fridge from him said simply:

*Jack, take plenty of water today and wear a shirt,
for God's sake. You'll get skin cancer walking
around shirtless all day.*

That put a wry smile on his face. *Sorry, Dad,*
he thought, *but bone cancer got to me first.*

He knew he needed to tell his dad before it
ate him alive, and it was going to break his dad's
already fragile heart. He lost Jack's mom to cancer
right after Jack was born, and they'd both watched
in vain as his older brother died of leukemia. With a
family history like his, he should've expected the
worst. He could only hope his dad didn't eat a gun
after he was gone

Then again, worse things could happen, like
continuing to suffer when all hope was lost.

He took the bus to the doctor's office. He'd
be getting medication today. But not the good kind
that'd fix him—the other kind, that would lube his
transition into the afterlife.

He got off the bus at the next stop. Luckily,

it was downtown Milwaukee, so there was plenty to do for a young man running out of life. He could get high or drunk all day. He could make new friends or help the downtrodden. It felt so odd for him to know he had such little time left but not to know what to do with it. He'd have to weigh his options after seeing the doctor.

He pulled his water bottle out and gulped down half of it. It was a hot one today.

An old homeless lady, leaning against a storefront, watched him from the corner of her eye. She licked her lips and turned from him, too thirsty to witness his enjoyment. He walked over and gave her the bottle. She tried to thank him but he just walked away, leaving his bottle with her. She smelled like a landfill and it made him want to chuck up his own water.

He checked his funds even though he always knew exactly how much cash he had on him at all times—enough for a sandwich, a fistful of beers,

and a ticket back home.

He stuffed the cash away before anyone saw it. He'd heard of people getting murdered for less.

One guy last year lost his life because some vagrant wanted his shoes. Apparently, the shoes didn't even fit the murderer, and when he couldn't sell them he just threw them away. Life was cheap, but Jack still put a high value on his own, even though it had become a rapidly perishable commodity.

He took the steps two at a time up to the doctor's office. The building was covered in graffiti. He had to sidestep a bunch of homeless people on the way up. He was almost certain some of them were dead, lying on those steps, but he wasn't about to check.

He got buzzed through the doors, and after following a winding hallway, took a seat in the waiting area. When the receptionist returned to her desk, she nodded and he told her who he was. That bummed him out because just two days ago he had

been flirting with that same receptionist, and now she didn't even recognize him. Or maybe she did, but now that she knew he was about to die, he no longer mattered to her.

He was the only person in the waiting room, so it kind of pissed him off that he was made to wait for an hour. Dying people should not have to wait around for anything.

When the door opened, the doctor had the phoniest smile he had at his disposal pasted on his face. Jack followed him through to his office, where the doctor took a seat and beckoned for him to sit in the chair opposite. He didn't see any pill bottles around and that made him mad too. He'd better not tell him that he had to go somewhere else to have a prescription filled. His time was valuable these days.

His name was Doctor Jacobs, and he asked,

“How are you feeling, Jack?”

“I'm dying.”

“I know, son. But how do you feel today?”

“I don’t feel any different yet. I actually feel pretty good.”

Jacobs nodded and scribbled on a sheet of paper, clipped to a clipboard. “Do you have any family?”

“Just my dad. I haven’t told him about the cancer yet.”

“Are you close to your dad?”

That question threw him, but he answered it anyway, if only to keep moving things along. “Not really. I mean, he’s a great guy, but he’s always had to work so much just to keep a roof over our heads and food in our mouths. I hardly ever saw him as I was growing up. And now that I have a job too, we never see each other.”

Absently, the doctor mumbled, “That’s good.”

He knew right then that this guy didn’t see him as a human being. He didn’t care that he was about to die.

Jacobs put his clipboard down and rested his elbows on his knees in a conspiratorial fashion. He looked Jack in the eye, and that made him a little uncomfortable.

He asked, “What would you do to defeat the cancer growing inside of you?”

Jack sighed. “You told me I only have a few weeks left. I’m pretty sure that means the cancer is too widespread to stop.”

Jacobs smiled and said, “Answer the question.”

“I’d do anything, of course.” He was starting to get angry. Was he trying to sell him something?

He wouldn’t be the first doctor to profit from someone’s death. Maybe he’d try to send him to some expensive retreat where they’d give him acupuncture and bathe him in incense as his life and his life-savings slowly trickled away. Snake oil, dressed up as a miracle cure.

Jacobs said, “You can survive this, but it

will require more of you than I think you can give.”

Now he had Jack’s attention. This suddenly sounded legit.

“What would I have to do?”

Jacobs sat back and took in a breath. “It can’t be done on Earth, son. We don’t have the equipment here to eradicate your cancer. But it can be done off-world.”

Jack sat up straighter. He’d never been off-world. No one had except for scientists and rich people. Maybe he’d get to go to the moon or even Mars. He’d heard of a potential colony being looked into on one of the moons around Jupiter or Saturn, but that was a long way from becoming a reality. More likely, he was referring to a space station in orbit around one of the planets. It looked like his bucket list was about to get another checkmark if he played his cards right.

“There’s a machine that can regenerate your cells, but it’s on planet Epigog 31 out near the edge

of the galaxy. It's run by the Securacell Corporation."

"Okay." He was telling him things he knew weren't possible. No one had managed to travel any further than the Centauri system, the nearest star system, which was basically in Earth's backyard in regards to the vastness of space. He'd never even heard of Epigog 31.

"It is not cheap to send someone that far out. It's not cheap to use that machine."

"How is it possible to send me to an alien planet? Technology hasn't even come close to that yet."

"The Securacell Corporation has technology that they do not have here on Earth."

Jack shook his head. Why would a corporation keep technology hidden that would make them money if they announced it to the world? It made no sense, but he kept his doubts to himself. He didn't want the doctor to think he was more

trouble than he was worth.

“What would I have to do?”

“You’d have to give yourself to the corporation.”

“So I’d be some kind of indentured servant?”

I could do that. How long before my contract runs out?” He was starting to get excited. This was an escape route that wasn’t there just moments ago.

He’d get to live.

“It wouldn’t. If they saved your life, you’d be expected to do their bidding for the rest of your life.”

Jack nodded, waiting for him to say more, but he didn’t. Could he become a slave? Was it worth it?

“What would they require of me?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. But I need an answer now. The transport leaves in two hours.”

“Are you kidding me? I need more time to think about this. I need to ask what my dad thinks.”

“No time for that. It’s now or never, kid. I can’t tell you how fortuitous it was that you chose me as your oncologist. I can’t begin to tell you how lucky you are that you weren’t late for our appointment today. The stars have aligned in such a way as to save your young life. Will you let fate save you?”

“I guess so.”

“Good. Sign these waivers and let’s get you to that transport.”

The doctor drove him across town in his car.

Cars were a luxury, but the man was a doctor, so he was probably used to such luxuries.

Jack tried to call his dad to say goodbye and tell him he loved him, but he couldn’t get a signal.

By the time the car came to a stop beside a large aircraft hangar, he gave up and wrote a quick note explaining everything. He scribbled his own address on it and told the doctor to make sure it got to his dad. Jacobs promised he’d get it there.

Jack stepped from the car and took a deep breath. He regretted it right away. The air was hot and putrid and burned his lungs when he exhaled. He wondered if he'd ever breathe Earth air again.

“Will I ever be allowed to return home?”

“If Securacell wants you to, then yes.”

There were things he'd miss about Earth, but not many. He missed his dad already, but when his dad got the note, he'd understand that this was his only option. He was pretty sure his dad would rather have an absent son than a dead son.

As they walked towards the big hangar doors, the doctor asked, “Have you ever heard of stasis?”

Oh shit. Stasis was bad. Unruly technology with mixed results. When it went wrong, death was imminent and horrible. But if he didn't go through with this, he'd be dead in a few weeks anyway.

He said, “I've heard of it. I know it has faults, but they don't worry me at this point.”

The last part was a lie, told more to himself than the doctor.

“Good. There’s no other way to get to Epigog 31. It’s too far out to live through the journey, so you’ll have to be put on ice. I’ll need you to sign another waiver for it, though.”

You didn’t really get *put on ice* as the doctor put it. But it was a popular euphemism and those things die hard. In reality, stasis was achieved by a cocktail of chemicals that induced rapid hibernation inside a perfect vacuum. The temperature did drop inside the stasis pods, but there was no ice involved. In this way, you could travel for years and only age by a few minutes or less.

And the entire process was supposed to hurt like hell.

Inside the hangar, Jack saw the ship that was to be his savior. It was big, about the size of a jumbo jet. But the doctor was right, the ship looked like nothing he’d ever seen before, technology far

more advanced than the typical Mars or moon shuttles. He could only imagine why the corporation was keeping its interstellar technology to itself.

To his surprise, there were other people milling around, signing forms and talking excitedly.

Doctor Jacobs whispered to him, “They’re all terminally ill too. They’re all going for the same treatment you are.”

Jack hadn’t even considered the possibility.

In his imagination, he’d be going alone. This made him feel a little safer in his decision.

He filled out the stasis waiver without reading it. What did he have to lose? He was about to ask Jacobs how long the journey would take when a girl around his age put her hand on his back and asked, “What do you have, then?”

He turned around. She was cute as a button, with fluffy blond hair and dark eyes.

He said, “Huh?” and felt his chest tighten.

He was a good looking eighteen year old, but he

wasn't yet used to the attentions of the opposite sex.

“What is it that's killing you?”

“Um, I have cancer.”

She smiled and said excitedly, “Me too.”

Then she held her hand up for a high-five. It was too surreal. You shouldn't congratulate someone for having cancer. He gave her a weak high-five just because it would have been rude not to.

She said, “Look around this place. I bet no one in here is over twenty-five. I think Securacell likes 'em young.”

He searched the surrounding faces. She was right.

“I'm Stacey. What's your name?”

“I'm Jack.”

She gave him a quick hug and walked away.

Over her shoulder she said, “Good to meet you, Jack. I'll see you again on Epigog 31, I hope.”

He awkwardly replied, “Okay then. Um, thanks.”

Doctor Jacobs shook his head at him. Jack got the meaning: he was no Casanova.

When the big door to the ship descended, the hangar went silent.

Doctor Jacobs barely said, “Bye,” before leaving him to his fate. The rest of the patients started boarding the ship in single file, until half the hangar emptied out and he could only assume the people being left behind were all doctors or sponsors of some kind.

To his horror, he saw Jacobs pull the folded note to his dad from his pocket, crumple it into a ball, and let it fall from his fist. He’d only met his doctor a few days ago, but nothing from their meetings would’ve suggested that he was so cold-hearted.

He considered getting out of line to chase the bastard down for an explanation, but he was being shoved in the back and there was no way to get out of the huddle. The dread grew in his heart

until he got inside the ship. Then his focus changed in a heartbeat. The stasis pods looked old and in various stages of disrepair. How could they survive stasis in pods so filthy and overused? In fact, he had no idea how long they'd even be in stasis.

How far away did he say Epigog 31 was?

A handful of uniformed men and women awaited them inside the ship and assigned each of them their own pod. Jack's was a piece of shit. The glass faceplate had cobwebs across it and the metal body was rusting in spots. He quickly checked behind it just to be sure all the hoses were connected.

The uniformed guy who'd led him to it got agitated with him and shoved him inside the pod.

Jack would've struggled, but it caught him by surprise. The guy slammed the door shut and then fiddled with some switches.

Jack pushed against the door to test it, and sure enough, it was locked. The air smelled of farts

and raw sewage. A wrapper rustled around beneath his feet, but there wasn't enough room in the pod for him to bend over to pick it up. It looked like a food wrapper of some kind.

He watched as all of the terminally ill were ushered to their pods. He couldn't see Stacey. If he had seen her it might've made him feel better about his predicament. For all he knew, the trip could take anywhere from a few weeks to several years. Any more than a few weeks outside of stasis would lead to his death from cancer, so the trip was probably at least that long, or else why put them under in the first place?

But years in stasis would be equally dangerous. The corporation had better have advanced stasis technology too. To get them to a star system he'd never even heard of could take thousands or millions of years using current technology, and that long in stasis was a frightening proposition.

Why hadn't he asked the doctor about the duration of the trip before now? Maybe he'd avoided asking because stasis was his only option and he didn't want it to be a poor one. He didn't know. He usually wasn't so careless.

He yelled out when something sharp punctured his neck. A syringe. He tried to claw at it, but his arms were already going dead. He felt sluggish. His breathing slowed and he slumped against the wall. The back wall moved forward and held him up. A headrest pushed down on his head from above, holding it still. He felt the side walls cinch against him. Then his thoughts went out like a light.

He was lying on a gurney when his eyes fluttered open. The bright light was obnoxious, so he closed his eyes again as tight as he could.

Someone laid a hand on his chest and said something, but the words were all jumbled together, impossible to decipher. He drifted away lazily.

He woke up with a start. His heart was racing and he was already sitting bolt upright. He looked around the room. It was small, white, and it was empty except for him and his gurney. The only door was closed. There was something ominous about that door being closed.

Only then did his memories come flooding back. He had been revived from his journey across the stars. He was a bonafide space traveler now.

The kindly face of an old man swam into view. He asked, “How do you feel?”

“I’m starting to feel better.”

“I’m Doctor Henshaw. Do you know how long you were out?”

“No.”

“You were in stasis for a little over eight hundred years.”

“Oh shit!” He wanted to ask about his dad, but he was dead already if he’d been asleep for that long. He wanted to ask about the state of the Earth,

but couldn't formulate the appropriate question. It had been 2229 when he left, so now it was the new millennium; the notion made him queasy. He wanted to ask if they'd already removed his cancer. Instead he asked, "How is that girl Stacey doing? Did she make it too?"

Doctor Henshaw looked at him quizzically.

No doubt he'd expected a more thoughtful question.

"I don't know who you're talking about, but if she came here with you, she's fine."

He tried to sit up, but Henshaw put a hand on his chest. "You need to relax. We still need to get you prepped for the operation." Henshaw was weak, but Jack lay back down.

"I thought you'd cured us already."

"You're still recovering from stasis. We'll get to work on your cancer once we're sure all of the chemicals are out of your system."

"Is this Epigog 31? I can't wait to see it."

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait to see the

planet. We're in orbit around one of its moons."

"Then why did you wake me? I was supposed to stay in stasis until I got to the machine that'll cure me. What's going on?"

"The machine you speak of is here, on board this space station. It's a delicate piece of equipment that works optimally in low to zero gravity, so we can't use it on Epigog. Don't worry, you'll see it soon. Then you'll get to see the mother planet."

He had no idea what Henshaw was talking about, but his mind was too foggy to dwell on it.

Henshaw continued: "If you ever get back up here, you'll have to tell me about it. I've heard so many wonderful stories about the surface, but I always have time to hear one more."

Jack stared at him, trying to figure out if he was kidding. He wasn't. "Why have you never been to the surface?"

"Oh, I've been in space too long."

His bones must be too brittle or his heart too

weak from zero-G's. But that couldn't be right.

There was some kind of artificial gravity in the space station. Or at least there was in the part of it they were in. He could feel it.

Henshaw must've seen the confusion on his face. He said, "I have no immune system. My body hasn't been subjected to the same illnesses and contagions that affect others living near one another. If my white blood cells ever had to get into a fight against a foreign contaminant they'd just roll over and give up. If I went to Epigog 31 I'd need to wear a space suit to survive. Weird, huh?"

Jack wanted to tell him how awful he thought it was that he'd never get the chance to breathe natural air or see a sunset over a mountain or swim in an ocean, but he thought it might upset him so he kept his mouth shut.

"How long have you been here?"

Henshaw ignored the question. He acted like he had work to do, but Jack suspected he just didn't

want to talk about it.

Henshaw said, “I’m going to administer a sedative to help you sleep. You should be fully recovered from stasis by the time you wake up. I’ll check in on you from time to time and then we can talk some more.”

Jack felt a tightening in his veins, then his eyelids felt like they were made of lead...

He was pretty groggy when he woke up the next time. His head hurt and he felt light and discombobulated. The sedative must’ve still been coursing through his veins.

His eyes opened mechanically, like they were being forced open by an invisible hand. He was in a different room than the last one, this one darker, with weird contraptions lining the walls all around him. His body was being held in a standing position, his head stuck in some kind of brace; he couldn’t pivot it up or down. For a second he wondered if he was back in stasis, but that was

stupid, because he was awake.

He couldn't feel his toes, and when he tried to wriggle them he found he couldn't. Worried that he was paralyzed, he moved his fingers. The sound of a dozen miniature electric drills came to his ears.

He didn't know what that meant, but he was relieved to feel his fingers moving.

He tried to loosen whatever restraints had him fastened so tight to his upright moorings, but they held despite his struggles.

He cried out for help, but the voice was odd.

It was his voice, just more strangled and monotone than he was used to.

He started to panic. He heard another voice cry out in the darkened room, from very far away.

He turned his head as much as he could, but the darkness was too pervasive to make out who or what had made the sound.

He heard a soft click and then his eyes slammed shut like a vise. He had only a second to

ponder what had happened. A moment later his brain followed suit and shut down like an appliance.

He awoke in a brightly lit room, all alone.

This room was small, like a hospital room, with gadgets and medical crap all over the place. He was still anchored in an upright position, but he felt a little better about it this time. Maybe that was because he was getting used to it, or, more likely, because the lights were up.

He heard a pneumatic door slide away and soft footfalls approach. Doctor Henshaw's kindly old face swam in front of his view. "How do you feel?"

He said, "I feel like we already had this conversation," but his voice had that odd quality to it like before.

Henshaw said sadly, "You must be confused. I need to debrief you before I can let you down from there, okay?"

Jack nodded lazily. He had no clue what he

was talking about.

“Your body is being treated as we speak, in the other room.”

Jack had to take a moment to make sure he’d heard him correctly. “What the hell are you talking about? I’m right here.”

“Your mind is here, Jack. Your body is undergoing treatment elsewhere.”

He wriggled his fingers again. Sure enough, he felt them move. “Bullshit. I can feel my body. I just can’t see it because you’ve got me latched in tight as a drum.”

“That’s not your body, son.”

Angrily he blurted out, “Then whose body would you have me believe I’m inside?”

“Not who. What.”

“What?”

“I’ve uploaded your consciousness into a robotic unit. You can control it with just your thoughts. It has already been calibrated to your

unique thought patterns. We call them mechs.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, let me down.”

“I’ll release your head restraints so you may see for yourself that I’m speaking the truth.”

Henshaw reached behind him and yanked on a cord. His head felt suddenly lighter. He was able to move it around now. Immediately he looked down, and to his horror he saw mechanical legs, feet, and a metal torso. He shook his head out of sheer confusion. The body was bulky, like it belonged to a giant.

Henshaw said, “Turn your head.”

Jack was staring off into space, disbelievingly. His mind wasn’t ready for any of this.

“Do it. Try it for me.”

He turned his head because it was far easier to take directions than it was to try and unscramble the myriad confusing thoughts riffling through his tired mind.

To his surprise, his head kept turning. He had to make a conscious decision to make it stop once it had made a full panoramic circuit of the room. It spun all the way around, like an owl's head, except he didn't need to spin it back. He knew he could've let it spin and spin like a helicopter rotor.

Doctor Henshaw clapped like a child.

Jack wanted to smack him in his kindly, eager face just to make himself feel better.

“Why did you do this to me?”

“You belong to the corporation, mind and body and soul. Why let your mind fester inside a body that's undergoing treatment when they can evict your mind and put it to work?”

“Because that's the sane thing to do. How long does the damn treatment take?”

“In your case, it'll take a while.”

“How long?”

“Maybe ten months, but if there are complications it could take as long as two years. So

get used to your new body. You're not going anywhere any time soon."

"I didn't agree to any of this crap! Put me back in my own body. Screw the procedure."

"Many patients say the same thing. It cost a fortune to ship your dying ass out here. No one's going to just fly you back to Earth because you suddenly had a change of heart. If you want out, we'll stop all treatment and allow you to live out your final days on this space station."

Jack shook his head angrily. At least he thought he was conveying anger through his robotic features. He wasn't really sure.

Henshaw said, "This is part of the deal.

When your body is cured, you're free to go. It's actually a good deal if you think about it. The corporation could have enslaved you for life and you would have probably signed on the dotted line anyway. In this way, you just have to do their bidding until your body is ready."

Jack nodded absently. He was right. He had considered giving his entire life away in exchange for an extension. “What do you think they’ll make me do?”

“I’m just the technician, son. That’s way above my pay grade.”

“I thought you were a doctor.”

“I’m both. But a mere doctor doesn’t have the skills I do to extract and repurpose consciousness. I consider myself a technician first and foremost.”

“Can I get down from here? If I’m going to be stuck in this robot, I’d at least like to test it out.”

He was amazed by how quickly he had attuned to his new predicament. But that was his nature. He wasn’t exactly happy with the situation, but what choice did he have?

“Sure. Make it quick, though. The reprogramming session starts soon and you can’t miss it.”

“What the hell is that?” It sounded bad enough to unnerve him. He didn’t like the sound of “reprogramming.”

“Son, your world is about to expand exponentially. Your understanding of our place in the cosmos is about to grow tenfold.

Reprogramming is just an academic way of saying you need to be educated in the worst way.”

Now Jack was even more nervous.

Henshaw reached behind him and a moment later Jack’s body dropped a couple of inches, his immense metal feet hitting the floor with a loud clang.

He took a tentative step forward and heard those weird little sounds again, like a dozen miniscule power tools being used nearby.

The sounds irritated Henshaw. “This damn thing is too new to be making God-awful noises like that. Give me a minute.”

Jack stood still as Henshaw injected

lubrication all over his metal body at various points, paying particular attention to his knees and hands.

He then got to work with a set of tiny screwdrivers, tightening here and loosening there. Within a few minutes, he said, "Give it a shot."

He took another step forward, but silently this time, besides the thud the footfall made. He flexed his fingers noiselessly too.

Henshaw smiled and said, "Wander around.

If anything feels strange to you, let me know. I had some problems with the gyroscopes a couple of times, so let me know how your balance feels, okay?"

Jack walked back and forth from one end of the room to the next. He spun around quickly and paid close attention to his balance. The gyroscopes were working fine.

Finally, Henshaw said, "Time to get you to the session. Everyone else is waiting for you." As an aside, he said, "Hey, that girl Stacey is there too.

She's a cute little thing. Now I know why you were so interested to find out about her."

If Jack wasn't a robotic mech he might have blushed. But the embarrassment was fleeting, replaced by a steely dread that would've seeped into his bones if he had any.

He had to live the next several months to two years as an appliance, albeit a pretty cool-looking one. He didn't know how to process such bizarre information, so he just followed Henshaw's lead and pushed his concerns to the darkest, most hidden recesses of his mind. He walked out from the little hospital room/mechanic shop and stomped along after the doctor.

As they walked, he said, "I thought you said I'd be going to Epigog 31. Am I still going to go there?" He was starting to think everything he'd been told was a lie. He knew there was little he could do about it, but he wanted the doctor to be clear.

“That’s where your training will take place.

As soon as we deem you fit to move on to the next stage, you’ll be taking a shuttle down to the surface.”

“How will you know if I’m fit to move on to that stage?”

“You’ll see. There’s always one who can’t take it.”

That was an ominous thing to say, but it had him excited to see what was next.

Around the corner, and at the end of the corridor, they halted at a doorway. Henshaw looked back at him, smiled, and then he opened it.

Inside the large room was a sight right out of a horror movie. There were about two dozen massive robots in there. Jack jumped backwards with fright until he realized he was one of them. In fact, they all looked identical to him, besides a single variation in color. Some of them were silver and black, like him, while the other half were silver

and blue.

For the first time, he got to see Henshaw standing next to one, and he realized just how big they all were in comparison to flesh and blood people. They were massive, with feet the size of shoe boxes and hands as big as toilet seats.

The mechs were all standing, facing the front of the room. Each one of them turned and watched as Henshaw waved Jack to a spot where he was expected to stand. He wanted to ask around and see how everyone was doing, but he got the sense they were all equally as mortified as he was, and therefore in no mood to make small talk.

Henshaw walked to the front of the room and addressed them all. “A representative of the corporation you all now work for will be with us shortly to debrief you.”

Jack nodded, as did most of the other mechs, but one solitary voice cried out in a monotone: “I can’t do this. I just can’t. Someone has to get me

out of this thing. I'm freaking out in here."

Henshaw shook his head sadly and pulled out a contraption. He scrolled around with his finger on a screen none of them could see, and then, right in the middle of his freak-out, the mech stopped and his head hung low.

Henshaw said, "He isn't the first and he won't be the last. He will be reconditioned. He won't like how that feels, and neither will any of the rest of you should you decide you just can't handle your new situation. I hope the rest of this group deals with this with a bit more composure. You are all super soldiers. Act like it."

A few heads nodded, but Jack was flabbergasted. What exactly did Henshaw mean when he said "reconditioned?" Had all of them already been conditioned for this before they were woken up?

A woman in a pants suit walked in and all metal heads turned her way. She clearly enjoyed the

attention, as she lit up with a big, phony, yet infectious smile. She waved the doctor off with a flick of her wrist and he obediently took one of two seats that were off to the side while she took up residence, front and center.

“Welcome, recruits. Your lives are about to change forever, and—I hope—for the better. While we work on getting each and every one of your bodies back up to optimal health, we require your services. As you can see, you’ve been supplied with top of the line technology to enable you to flourish in your new roles as agents of the corporation. The corporation I speak of is Securacell, but since it’s the only corporation within several hundred light years, we all just call it the corporation. Feel free to do the same.”

A few heads nodded as she broke out that fake smile again.

“Once you’re trained up, you’ll each be stationed throughout the quadrant. Some of you will

pick up security details for various diplomats.

Others will be required to maintain order on our penal colony. A few lucky fellows will even be given access to corporate headquarters to act as security.”

Heads nodded again, so Jack knew she’d smile again, but this time she just looked them over carefully and continued.

“I am about to divulge information to you that few humans in the galaxy know. I’m about to blow your little minds.”

Henshaw apparently took that as his cue. He stood up and walked past her, right out the door. She waited until he left, then she said, “We humans are not alone in the universe. There are at least a dozen known intelligent alien civilizations in this quadrant of the galaxy alone.”

Now Jack was intrigued. He’d expected to one day hear about the discovery of intelligent alien life, but so far every probe and human excursion

had only ever discovered sea foam and sludge and moss-like crap. All mundane and passé. Yet humanity still held out hope that one day they'd find something more advanced, with a real brain. Apparently that day had come.

She said, "The best of all is this: we have made contact with one such alien civilization and it is friendly. In fact, we found that we have more in common with one another than any of our brightest scientists could've ever imagined possible. They are bipedal, reproduce sexually, have a head with two eyes and a mouth, and their language is so structurally similar to human languages that they were able to construct translators so that we could communicate with them."

A mech stepped forward and said, "I might need to be reconditioned. I'm freaking out here.

Where's Henshaw?"

She smiled ruefully and pulled her very own contraption out. She swirled her finger across its

surface and the excitable robot shut off like its plug had been yanked.

She said, “Before I introduce the alien ambassador ... does anyone else feel like panicking?”

A female voice called out, “One of them is coming here? Is he dangerous? Will he kill us?”

She stared at the mech offender and then she shut her off too.

“Are you done? Can the rest of you handle this?”

They all nodded, even though Jack wasn't sure he felt altogether safe anymore. But what choice did he have? If he said he couldn't handle it, they'd recondition him and he'd probably have to go through all of it again anyway.

Plus, he had to admit, he was super excited to see what the hell this thing was going to look like.

Loudly, she said, “We're ready, Doctor.

Bring in the ambassador.”

Only then did Jack realize she'd never introduced herself, like they were somehow beneath her. Maybe they were. Apparently, there was a lot he still had to learn. That realization faded away when Henshaw came back and the beast followed him through the doorway.

It was just familiar enough to be relatable, but weird enough to evoke a couple of gasps from the room. It was tall and bulky, and to Jack's surprise was wearing clothing, but not like any he'd ever seen before. Its head was large and didn't seem to suit its body. Its skin was the milky blue color of a cloudy sky, and its eyes were far too big. The eyes were what most of the mechs were staring at in fear and shock. They were as big as footballs and so black it looked like someone could reach right into them. Its mouth was a mess. It opened and closed like a butt hole, widening and then shrinking to nothing. Inside was nothing that made much sense: no teeth, but a cluster of colorful bumps jutted from

within where he expected to see only shadow and darkness.

It had two legs just like the lady in the pants suit had said, but they weren't exactly like those of a human. They were thick with musculature and segmented by way too many knees that made it look like it was bobbing along on a lazy river as it walked. She'd said they reproduced sexually, so Jack had to wonder if there was a weird alien dick where the legs met.

It took her place at the front of the room and she joined Henshaw where he'd sat down off to the side, placing her hands in her lap like a good little girl.

The alien spoke and a part of Jack's mind opened up. Its language was a cacophony of hisses and grunts, whistles and squawks. Somehow it managed to make all of those ragged sounds seem melodious, but they were absolutely foreign to Jack's ears until his robotic programming opened a

hole in his mind and translated for him. The guttural alien din soon coalesced into words he was starting to understand.

It said, "Can you all understand me?"

It was a stupid question, because how could they respond if they couldn't?

It repeated, "Do you understand me yet?"

Jack nodded because he didn't know what else to do. Others soon followed suit until the entire room was full of nodding mechs.

"Good. I'm the ambassador for my people on this space station. We call ourselves Beetars. My name is Quiss. Welcome, recruits. Let's get all of you up to speed." The mechs all nodded again, completely dumbfounded, and it continued.

"My race controls this quadrant of space.

We are a peaceful species and we've been working hand in hand with humanity for years. We have a harmonious, symbiotic relationship with your people which has only grown stronger the longer it

lasts.”

The lady in the pants suit smiled like a lunatic, which could've made Jack uncomfortable, but it did the opposite. It put him at ease, because she adored the damn alien. If she adored it, maybe it was okay.

“We Beetars maintain peace even when warlike races rear up in our galaxy, hell bent on conquest and destruction. We bring order to chaos. Ultimately, it's our goal to further our knowledge by exchanging ideas and philosophies with all species we come into contact with. Humanity approached us with similar ideals, so here we are, working together for the betterment of all.”

A mech yelled out, “Which planet are you from?”

Quiss smiled, which would've made Jack puke if he had a stomach or the contents to puke up. It wasn't gross; it was just too odd for his still stunned brain to accept.

Quiss said, “We do not divulge our planet’s location to anyone for fear of reprisals. We often have no choice but to maintain peace by force. There are terrorists who would attack my planet if they knew where to find it.”

“But we’re not terrorists.”

“I know that. You’re the closest thing we have to like-minded allies. But we also have a long tradition of secrecy that has served us well. Perhaps in time we’ll divulge the location of our home world to mankind, but today is not that day.”

That made sense to Jack. If all the jerks in the galaxy wanted to take a potshot at you, it was probably best if they couldn’t find you in their sights.

Quiss said, “You are here so that we can heal your broken bodies. While our machinery works its magic, we ask that you repay us in kind with your service. I believe that’s a small price to pay for an extension of life. The mechanical units

you are inside right now were designed by my people and then tweaked to perfection by your own scientists. You are in control of the most formidable war machines in the known galaxy. I hope you appreciate the gravity of that.”

Jack wasn't sure he did, but he nodded anyway.

Quiss continued, “Most of you will repay your debt with menial guard duty or a few high profile security details. A few of you will qualify for corporate privileges, whereby you'll be allowed to serve out your terms under the protective umbrella of your Securacell corporation, guarding sensitive areas and protecting high ranking corporate officers.” It paused and looked at each of them in turn. “Two of you lucky humans will be stationed on my warship to act as hired help.”

The pants suit bitch stood up and clapped.

The alien regarded her quizzically until she retook her seat.

It turned back to them and said, “We’ve never before entrusted such a unique privilege to your people. No alien creature has ever stepped foot on a Beetar warship. The two who get selected are truly blessed individuals.”

The mention of a warship confused Jack. If these aliens were peace-loving, why did they have warships? Of course he was just being naïve. Peace couldn’t be forced upon others without backing it up with a threat of some kind.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to get warship duty or not. He still didn’t know if it was preferable to the other available duties. The idea of being surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of aliens like Quiss made him nervous.

Quiss said, “Now that you know the state of this section of the galaxy, let’s get your training underway. You’ll be transported to Epigog 31 for testing. Good luck to each of you. I look forward to working with you in the future.”

With that, Quiss nodded awkwardly to pants suit and then waited for Henshaw to escort him from the room.

The pants suit lady was giddy when she addressed the room. “This is a turning point in history. I hope you understand the significance of what just transpired here today. Two of you lucky bastards will get to board a bonafide Beetar warship. Let’s hope there are two recruits here who are up to the task. Let’s get you prepped to go landside.”

Hopeful she wouldn’t shut him down for interrupting, Jack asked, “How long does training last?”

“Some of you will make it through training faster than others. I heard of one recruit who made it through in less than two weeks, Earth-time, but most need at least a month. A few washouts fail to make the cut at all, but that’s very rare. I doubt anyone in this room will fail training. Otherwise, training will help us place you in a vocation for the

duration of your physical therapy. But be ready to be tested to your limits. Just remember what the rewards are and you'll do fine."

Jack couldn't for the life of him figure out what those rewards were unless she was still referring to the warship duty. Then again, the ultimate reward for him was getting a perfectly healthy body back at some point in the future. That must've been what she meant, but he was so overwhelmed by what had transpired that he'd lost sight of it.

He wanted nothing more than to gaze upon his human body, because he had a feeling he wouldn't be seeing it again for a long time. And when he finally did get reunited with it, he suspected he'd be changed in fundamental ways.

He cursed Doctor Jacobs under his breath.

Jacobs must've known about the Beetars. He must have known that he'd be interred inside a robot while his body healed. Jack understood why he'd

kept that information to himself, because if he'd been told, he might not have agreed to participate.

When Pants suit was done with her speech, she left them without saying goodbye. The room felt empty without her. Technically, she had been the only human being in the room, so that made sense.

Jack turned around to face the other mechs.

“Is one of you Stacey?” It hardly mattered in the grand scheme of things, but he suddenly had a growing urge to connect with someone else.

A blue and silver mech waved its hand in the air and split the crowd to stand beside him.

She said, “This is a total mind-job, huh?”

He nodded, thankful she wasn't one of the robots that had got shut off. “An hour ago I had no idea aliens existed or that they were our longtime friends.”

“It seems like a one-sided friendship to me.

They order and we obey.”

He looked at her with genuine concern. “We have no choice in any of this, so it’ll probably be better if you get used to it.”

She nodded her mammoth head and said, “You’re probably right. I don’t know enough about any of this to judge them yet.”

He noticed a few other mechs cozying together, no doubt trying to make one last connection before their world got flipped on its head.

Only then did he notice Doctor Henshaw standing before them. He must have slipped back inside silently. He said, “A transport is being prepped just now. Follow me.”

If Jack had a heart it would have been tripping along at a mile a minute. If he had bones they would’ve quaked. He wanted to tell Henshaw he wasn’t going. He wanted to curl up in a comfortable bed and shut his eyes to this new, strange, reality he suddenly found himself in.

Instead he followed the crowd as it surged after Henshaw towards the transport to Epigog 31.

Henshaw fastened each of them to the wall inside the transport ship. In reality, the thing looked more like a cargo crate than a ship, but Jack assumed there was no need for frills when the payload was technically non-organic.

Henshaw gave a short speech about how lucky they were, and about all the weird and wonderful things they'd see that few humans had seen before. Then he left the transport, closing it up behind him.

Jack started to worry, but that was fleeting, because as soon as the interior lights dimmed from the power gulp necessary to start the ship, he felt a pressure in the middle of his back and his consciousness turned off.

He awoke to a human face. The face belonged to a man in his mid-fifties. He had many wrinkles and deep-set blue eyes. Older women

would have found him handsome.

He backed up and said, “This is Epigog 31, son. Take as much time as you need to adjust, then I’ll uncouple you from your restraints.”

Jack nodded his big stupid metal head and the guy moved on to the mammoth mech beside him, saying the exact same thing.

He could see sunlight streaming through the hatch in the back of the ship, and he could smell the hot air wafting inside. He had no idea why he needed a sense of smell, but he appreciated it at that moment.

The guy who’d woken him stood in the center of the ship. He addressed the opposite wall.

“Who’s ready to come down?”

When heads nodded, he unlatched them from their secured mounts and pointed towards the back hatch. They obediently traipsed off in that direction, no doubt nervous or even petrified. None of them knew what training would involve. Would

it be dangerous? Could they die?

A few scared mechs remained on that wall when he turned around and asked Jack's wall who was ready to get started. Jack nodded first, so he got unhooked. He looked around for Stacey, but it was impossible to tell which one she was. Then the old dude impatiently put a hand on him and pointed towards the back of the ship. Jack nodded again and walked that way.

A man and a woman were outside the hatch.

They beckoned to him, so he walked down the steel ramp and right up to them. They were ankle deep in a desert, brown and tan and dry as a bone. The moon he'd been orbiting was in full view in the bright sunny sky. The air smelled sterile. It had been a long time since he'd felt the sun on him without worrying about cancer or heat stroke, but this time the sun was gentle and he had no skin for it to attack.

The woman said, "Get out of the damn way,

recruit. You're not the only one getting off of this transport."

The guy said, "Get in line with the rest, stupid."

Jack had been so preoccupied with the sky and the weather that he'd barely noticed the cluster of confused mechs huddled behind the two humans. He walked towards them, partly for companionship but mainly so the dickheads would stop berating him.

He approached the mechs and then turned around to watch the rest depart the transport ship.

A masculine voice whispered from behind.

"How are we supposed to train in the damn desert?"

It was a question directed at no one in general, so no one answered.

A blue robot emerged from the ship and walked right past the two agitated greeters. It took up a place beside him and said, "It's me, Stacey.

Are you Jack?"

“How’d you know?”

“I guessed.” She pointed her metal finger at her chest plate and then ripped a deep scratch in the surface of the metal with astonishing ease. “Now you’ll know me when you see me.” Then she put the same finger on his metal chest plate and etched a similar groove into it. “Now I’ll be able to tell you from the rest.”

The human greeters must have heard the screeching of metal on metal, and scolded her in front of everyone. “Do not damage Securacell property. This is a final warning to all of you. Those units are prototypes, and as such they’re considered priceless. Do I make myself clear?”

Stacey’s mouth transformed into a smile which, to that point, Jack didn’t know they could do. She said, “It won’t happen again. I’m sorry.”

When the guy turned his attentions back to the hatch of the ship, she elbowed him in the side and smirked.

The faces of the robotic units were strangely malleable and human-like; at least in that they had a mouth right around where a human mouth should be, and eyes and ears that closely resembled those of a human. He had no idea why that was important.

Maybe it was so they didn't freak out. Maybe it was so they'd never forget their humanity. Or maybe the designers just thought it was a nice aesthetic touch.

He was getting bored by the time the final reluctant mech exited the transport ship. It joined them, then the two human greeters parted so the guy who'd woken them could face them all. He had a cold detachment to him that wasn't out of place in the sterile desert of an alien planet.

He said, "I'm Commander Delacourt.

Welcome to Epigog 31, recruits. You've already been debriefed about the nature of mankind's place in the universe. I understand how stressful that must have been. But we're here to show you your unique place in that universe. This is where it gets serious.

This training will test all of you, separating the wheat from the chaff. Training is the only way we'll know what you're capable of and which assignments to grant each of you."

He pointed to his left and said, "A lift is coming for us. It will take us a thousand feet below the surface to your new home."

A mech to Jack's right asked, "Why do we need to go underground? I'm kind of claustrophobic."

"Son, no one here cares about your fears.

You will do as you're told and keep your mouth shut. These fine sands on the surface wreak havoc on your bodies. Training up here would cause most of you to shut down after enough time. I trust that this will be the last time I am questioned. From now on you will all do as I say. Do you understand?"

Delacourt was a dick, but the mech nodded because there was no doubt that he was in control.

A rumble in the ground made its way up

Jack's thick metal legs. The sound that accompanied it was faint, like a distant engine. Then the sand to their right rose up slowly like a hill growing before their eyes. It fell away in waves, revealing the lift that had disturbed it. The lift was about forty feet long on each side and twenty feet tall. Delacourt and his two minions led the way inside when the big double doors split open. Jack entered first and was immediately jammed into the corner by the other mechs filing in afterwards. He noticed that his head had no clearance from the ceiling of the lift. The human instructors, or whatever they were, got inside a steel cage and it didn't take too long for Jack to figure out why. As the lift filled to capacity, metal scraped on metal and mechs started to shove one another for more space. The steel cage was knocked into twice by lumbering mechs before Delacourt yelled, "If everyone's in, stop moving. We'll be beneath the

surface in less than a minute.”

Then he pressed a button on a handheld device and the sun dimmed as the doors jammed shut.

Jack felt the lift descending through the sand.

He'd been through a lot in a very short amount of time, but this was the worst. It felt like they were going into the bowels of hell and there was no way out.

Only then did he realize why they'd woken them up for this when it would've been so much easier to take them below ground and then turn them on: they wanted them to see how secluded they actually were. It wasn't enough that they technically weren't even human anymore. They wanted to make sure they knew there was no escape, even as a mind in a machine. The beauty about volunteering for something was that it was easy to back out of it, but now they were finding out that wasn't the case for them. They were in this until

they were told otherwise. It was a dark certainty.

The doors slid open when they bottomed out, and before them was nothing but black, pocked here and there with inadequate strings of lights that seemed to only emphasize how dark the cavern was.

Delacourt yelled at them to exit the elevator when they dawdled too long. He and his two companions filed out after them and then led the way down the labyrinthine corridors. The rough hewn rock walls were damp, which surprised Jack, since they were under a desert, but he understood his surprise was rooted in an inadequate understanding of geology. Just because all was barren above didn't mean it had always been that way. For all he knew the dampness could've come from a monsoon that had happened on the surface a million years ago.

They reached a heavy blast door at the end of the corridor and Delacourt made a show of slowly opening it. He walked through and waited

for the rest of them to join him. Through that door was another world.

There was gunfire all around them.

Explosions lit up the room, echoing off the walls.

There was a war between robots going on behind the blast doors, in a huge room as big as a sports stadium, with bright lights illuminating it.

Three of his fellow mechs hit the dirt defensively. Stacey was one of them. Jack noticed that the others had crouched reflexively. So he wouldn't be left out, he bent his knees and took up a defensive position too.

Delacourt smiled and yelled over the commotion, "Good. You've all passed the preliminary test."

The warfare slowed to a halt and the din became silence. Then the mechs that had just been attacking one another simply wandered off through three sets of doors set into the walls of the stadium-sized room.

Delacourt waited for the last of them to go and then continued, “We test interface compatibility down here. We want to find out how well your minds have integrated with the bodies they gave you. The robotic bodies are set to go on the defensive when an attack is perceived, so we have the graduating class conduct a virtual attack to test the newly arrived for compatibility issues. At the end of your training, you’ll be the ones administering this test on a new group.”

Jack stood fully erect and the others either got back to their feet or stood to attention. At least the air was far less harsh in here. Jack didn’t need to breathe, but his mech body could taste its superior quality through whichever sensors did that for him.

Delacourt explained further, “Your human minds could have overridden the built-in command to defend yourselves. Had you done so, you would’ve been reconditioned. You need to be able to work with the superior tech we supplied you, but

that is not always the case. You see, sometimes a user fights the basic commands of the body and in the field that can lead to his or her death. There must be a perfect balance between programming and rational decision making. Because each of you reacted appropriately to the perceived danger, you all pass to the next stage.”

The whole thing seemed childish to Jack.

Surely there was an easier way to see if they had integrated fully with their mechanical bodies than to blast a bunch of guns around them. But he'd learned something useful too: his new body had a whole set of basic commands that he had little control over.

The realization unnerved him. Could he trust the subcommands with his life when the time came? He didn't even know if he could trust them to get him through training.

Worse, his body hadn't commanded him to take up a defensive posture like Delacourt thought.

He had consciously decided to bend his knees and

join the others in their defensive stances; his programming hadn't forced it upon him. If he wanted to avoid reconditioning, he knew he'd have to fake the appropriate responses if or when his mechanical body failed him again.

Delacourt pointed right at him and said to one of his helpers, "That one had the slowest reaction time. Make a note of it."

The others looked at Jack like he was the puny kid in gym class or the dumb one at a spelling bee. But did his lack of a reaction mean they were any better than he was? Did it mean his mech was weak or that his mind was too powerful to be subverted? He already knew the answer: his body was defective.

If he could hide that from everyone he might just make it through training.

One of the guys next to him asked a question that Jack was ashamed to admit he hadn't thought about: "Why do human minds need to be

inside of these things if they're already programmed?"

Delacourt took a deep breath. Jack could've sworn he was silently counting to ten to avoid losing his temper.

"They work optimally with our consciousnesses running them. Alone, they are lumbering mindless hunks of crap, but with human minds driving them they are capable of extraordinary feats. As you saw, each of you reacted differently under duress. The mechs would have all done the exact same things as each other had your minds not been controlling them. Predictability is our enemy. A foe could second-guess a mindless robot and defeat him."

The guy nodded, but Jack wasn't sure he got the answer he wanted. Jack thought he wanted Delacourt to say something like: *Huh. I never thought of it that way. We don't need you after all. You're free to go.*

Delacourt motioned to his two companions beside him. “These are your new training officers. They are Sergeants Davis and Hildebrandt.” Davis was the male and Hildebrandt his female counterpart. Both of them looked like assholes, but Jack was hopeful that was all for show.

Davis stepped forward and screamed at one of the mechs, “What’s your name, recruit?”

The mech said, “Stephen Simpson, sir,” in a trembling synthesized voice.

Davis got right in his face and yelled,

“Wrong! You have no name down in the pit. Down here you go by a number only. You’ll be assigned numbers and answer only to your number. Do you get me?”

“Yes sir. What’s my number then?”

“Hildebrandt stepped up to join Davis. She yelled, “You are a big fat zero until we assign you a more appropriate number.”

Jack was hating the goddamn place more

and more.

Davis and Hildebrandt puffed their chests out and screamed some more until they were reasonably certain they were all appropriately terrified, then they calmed down as if on cue.

It was a dog and pony show and they all knew it, but none of them wanted to step out and confront them with it because they'd probably just escalate their verbal abuse to drive their point home.

Or worse than that, it might escalate into violence.

Of course, any one of the mechs could probably kill either of them with a well-placed bonk to the top of the head, but none of them wanted to test that theory. They weren't murderers.

When he caught his breath, Davis said serenely, "Follow us to your new quarters."

Their quarters turned out to be a communal barracks with no amenities. No beds or bathrooms.

No entertainment either except for a few board games. Jack knew they didn't need much, like a

toilet or a bed, but to see their absence struck him—
he was a robot with no needs.

Hildebrandt said, “Today you should take
some time to grieve for those you’ve lost. Get it out
of your system because tomorrow is a new chapter
in each of your lives.”

Jack hadn’t spent any time grieving for his
long dead dad. His bones would’ve already
crumbled by now, being eight hundred years since
the last time he saw him. His only hope was that his
dad had figured out what happened to him and
decided to go into stasis until he returned, but that
was an idiotic thought. Not only was stasis
dangerous, it was pricey too. Folks of their station
didn’t even bother daydreaming about frivolities
like stasis or off-world transport. Jack had achieved
both, but in the process had had to lose his freedom.
Davis and Hildebrandt showed them their
docking stations set into the walls, personally
assigned to each mech. They were round ports as

big as dinner plates about ten feet up, jutting out a few inches. There, they'd hook up at the end of the day to recharge. Jack wondered what would happen if there was a power surge. He wondered if they'd dream.

Once they were given the nickel tour, they were left alone.

Jack didn't want to dwell on his dad. As far as he was concerned, he'd seen him just yesterday. He was pretty sure most of the others felt the same way about those they'd lost, because no one moped around morosely or broke into oil-filled robot tears.

Stacey grabbed a box of checkers before anyone else could get to it and laid it down in front of him. She sat down and tried to cross her legs, but they were too thick. She nearly tipped over in her seat, which made him smile.

She asked, "Do you wanna play? I can't grieve when I'm nervous."

Jack sat down in front of her and opened the

lid. The box and the board and all the pieces were built for their huge hands. The set was three times bigger than normal and made of steel, probably so they didn't accidentally crush any of it. Jack set the pieces on the board and she went first. It was weird for them to suddenly feel so normal when their worlds had become so surreal, but the game grounded them to reality.

A fight broke out at the other end of the room that had them spellbound for a few minutes, but it devolved from a shoving match into a battle of name calling until it eventually fizzled out altogether. Jack wondered what would've happened had it escalated. Their bodies were formidable and terrifying. They weren't adept at controlling them yet, but that might just mean they were even more dangerous.

He wondered, too, what would happen if they'd both damaged each others' mechs. Would they be reprimanded? Would they be reconditioned,

or simply turned off?

A male and a female sat beside them, watching their game. At first Jack was annoyed by their presence, but that was because he was a bit antisocial. He knew he had to change his habits, though. He was pretty sure he'd need friends here.

The guy's name was Alex. He'd had an inoperable brain tumor. Jack wasn't surprised to find out that he was as young as he was. Everyone he'd seen at the hangar back on Earth had been around his age.

The girl's name was Jackie, and her story was eerily similar to his own. She had bone cancer; she had a mom, but she'd never met her dad; and her brother had died when she was young.

It started to dawn on him that they were all young and they wouldn't be missed when they suddenly vanished back on Earth. He was starting to wonder about the legality of what they'd agreed to.

He couldn't get the image out of his head of his

oncologist crumpling up and tossing away the note he wrote to his dad. Why had he done that?

Stacey was far more gregarious with their new friends than he was, so they ended up bonding with her and merely putting up with him.

They'd barely had time to talk or grieve when Davis popped his head around the corner and said, "Lights out. I'll help anyone who needs it, but after today you're expected to know how to hook up on your own."

Jack watched as Davis helped a mech hook up to his power port. It looked easy enough. He just had to back into it right. As soon as the mech was hooked up, its robot eyes closed and its mouth drooped open. Jack considered putting something inside his mouth as a joke, like all the checkers pieces or a bunch of books, but Davis lingered too long, watching them get acclimated to their new and improved version of sleep.

Jack helped Stacey zero in on her port and

then he went to his own across the room. He got it right on his first try. His consciousness went black. He dreamt of home and of his oncologist and traveling the stars. He dreamt of Henshaw and Quiss the Beetar alien, and of robots. Thousands of robots. They were armed to the teeth and they were coming after him, covered in wet blood and rough gouges from ancient battles won long ago and far away. They were angry that he was alive. They shot him and torched his skin and clothes as he tried in vain to escape. Every time he thought he'd gotten away, there were more of them, each new wave coming after him with a ferocious vigor that he barely understood. He wanted to cry but he didn't have the time. He wanted to ask them why they hated him, but he already knew the answer. He would die because they deemed him unworthy of life. He ran and ran but they never stopped chasing. They hunted him down with such passion that even he started to doubt whether he deserved to live.

His eyes fluttered open when the dream became too intense. The room was dark. He had no way to tell how long he'd been out, but he was the only one to wake from their induced slumber. The other mechs were still standing upright in place against the walls, eyes closed and heads hung low, charging for tomorrow's adventures.

He tried to detach from the wall, but it was too hard so he gave up.

He waited for the fear to dump from his system, but it didn't work like that. His body used no hormones anymore, so there was no adrenaline dump like he was used to. He just had to wait until he got over the dream.

Slowly, his eyes slid shut once more. This time the robots left him alone.

The next time his eyes opened, Davis and Hildebrandt were in the barracks with them, and their demeanor had changed. They looked focused and energetic. It made him nervous.

He fell from his docking station by an inch and hit the floor with a clang. He wanted to rub his eyes out of habit, but he caught himself in time.

The other mechs fell one after the other.

They stood and watched Davis and Hildebrandt pacing back and forth, glaring at them like they'd done something wrong.

Hildebrandt said, "The motion sensors picked up movement in here last night. Did one of you malfunction and power up?"

Jack held his breath—not really his breath, he had no breath, but he tried anyway. He wasn't about to out himself and be put through reconditioning. He had no idea how long that even took or what it did to the psyche, and he didn't want to know. The truth was he didn't want to be separated from Stacey. She was the only person he even knew.

Davis added, "Sergeant Hildebrandt and I will be taking shifts at night for the next few days.

If the motion sensors trip again, we'll know right away. You might as well fess up now. You're in no trouble. Glitches happen, especially in new units."

Jack stared across at Stacey for strength, but he couldn't see the identifying chest gouge from so far across the room and he had no idea if it was her or some other female robot.

Davis waited an uncomfortably long time in silence and then pointed at the door and said, "File out, you goddamn maggots. Welcome to hell!"

Jack wanted to smirk, but he didn't yet have that kind of control over his facial movements. The place was a joke and so were its residents.

Then again, when he walked from the room, he started to reevaluate his recent conclusion.

Before them was a line of busted and battered mechs. There must've been thirty of them and they looked pissed. It reminded him of his dream.

Davis stood between them and said to Jack's group, "The first to draw his or her weapon to

defend themselves moves on to the next stage. You will all be timed and graded.”

One of the evil robots stepped forward and nodded over his shoulder at the open cavern. “We’ll use the training course. We’re using rubber bullets and beanbags, but don’t think that means this will be easy. This is going to hurt a lot.”

The other mechs across from them parted in the middle and the leader pointed through the gap. “Run for your lives, cadets!”

None of them had a clue what Davis meant when he said they had to defend themselves. They didn’t have the weapons he thought they had, and Jack didn’t see a cache of them just sitting around in a crate in the middle of the training course. But none of that mattered. They were about to be assaulted and they had no choice but to run for cover.

Jack was the second one through the gap. He ran towards a dilapidated building, set up

specifically for training. There were some rusted shuttle parts, a makeshift area with fabricated walls, and a few big natural boulders, but the buildings offered the most cover. He wasn't the only one of them who thought so either, and soon enough he was joined by others.

Stacey was with him. She asked the group in a hushed whisper, "Where the hell are the weapons Davis mentioned?"

A few mammoth shoulders shrugged and Jack said, "Maybe they hid them or maybe they don't exist. This is a test. But who knows what they're testing for?"

Stacey shook her head. "They explained the rules. We defend ourselves with weapons and we'll pass. I can't work with theories; I can only work with the information I have."

She was right, of course. Jack was overthinking it.

The walls of the building started to come

apart in front of them as the evil mechs took it down with round after round of fire. Jack doubted the walls were made of wood or bamboo or anything else natural, as the world above them looked mostly barren and it was hardly cost effective to transport such material from another planet. But whatever it was made of, it stood no chance against the constant firepower.

They knew then that they would've been better off taking cover behind a boulder. They'd effectively cornered themselves between the wall of the cavern and a quickly evaporating wall.

A shadow loomed over them. When he looked up he saw one of the evil robots balancing precariously on the wall. It aimed down at them with an oversized shotgun and pulled the trigger.

Jack took a blast of rubber to the top of the head. It hurt worse than he'd imagined, like getting hit on the head with a hammer.

Stacey yelled, "Run! Take cover!"

A couple of the other guys started to shove against the wall to knock it over, or at least unbalance the mech standing on it. Before they had any success, they got boxed in. One of the bad mechs appeared at one end of their escape route. It used a beanbag shotgun that stung like a bitch as it unloaded on them. The victimized mechs started to scream out in pain and fear. Jack couldn't be sure if he was one of the screamers or not, because panic had already started to set in.

As one, they turned to the only available escape route, in the opposite direction, and they started to rush that way. Before they were free of their self imposed trap, two enemy mechs blocked the exit and blasted them with beanbags and rubber bullets.

Jack thought they were going to be killed.

Maybe if he raised his hands and surrendered, or just started to cry, they'd take pity on him. But the notion was foreign now that he was a battle-bot

from space. He should've been able to fight back, or at the very least, escape.

Just as his knees started to buckle, his entire vision lit up and his ears rang from increased firepower. But this time it came from his fellow recruits. Somehow they'd all armed themselves. He searched around for the crate or hiding spot where they'd found the weapons, but he couldn't find it.

When he stared at Stacey, he noticed her body had changed slightly. A hatch had opened on her hip exactly the size of the pistol in her hand. He cocked his head to the side and saw an even larger hatch had popped out on her other side, running the length of her entire thigh. In her other hand was a rifle.

Jack stood in the center of his fellow recruits like a damsel in distress as they protected him with their acquired firearms.

Just then, a horn blared that cut through the gunfire. The enemy mechs lowered their weapons and retreated, but the recruits continued to fire just

in case. Slowly they eased up on their triggers.

Stacey finally holstered her pistol when it was obvious the threat had passed, and said to Jack, “Just will your body to give you the means to defend yourself. It’s easy if you try.”

He concentrated with all of his might. He checked his hip, but nothing changed. He really wanted to see his guns and feel their weight in his hands, but he couldn’t make it happen.

The other recruits started to stare at him. He was the failure. He was the guy holding them back.

A few of them gave him advice.

One guy said, “Just imagine that you already have the gun in your hand.” He tried that but nothing changed.

A girl said seriously, “Pretend you’re not a wimp. Just imagine you have the means to help protect us the way we all just protected you.”

That made him feel like shit.

Stacey told her to shut up. She looked at him

with concern in her robotic features. He wanted to run away and hide, but he had a feeling that might make him look even more worthless in their eyes.

A small figure appeared before them. It was Hildebrandt. “The test is over. Follow me.”

Jack was the only one of their group to fail the test. He could only hope that at least one other recruit had failed, too, so he’d have company.

They were led away from the crumbling wall of the building to the center of the cavern.

Davis was already there with a group of recruits who’d found cover elsewhere. They all looked pleased, so Jack was reasonably certain he was the only one of them to fail.

Davis had a thick marker in his hand. He went up to Stacey and wrote the number one on her chest plate. “You were the first to react to the threat. Your new name is Number One.” The look on her face was priceless. She was giddy beyond belief.

Davis went from robot to robot, with

Hildebrandt helping to direct him with whatever she had written on the clipboard in her hands. He wrote the number two on the next guy, and three on the girl after him. He was up to number twenty-two when he got to Jack. He'd come in last. To Jack's utter horror, Davis put the cap back on the marker and walked away without scrawling a number on his chest.

Hildebrandt whispered to Jack, "You failed to even draw your weapon. You'll progress when we find out why you malfunctioned."

Some of his group overheard her. As soon as she walked away, they smirked derisively at him. It was the third lowest point in his life. The first was being diagnosed with inoperable cancer; the second was finding out his dad was dust.

Stacey smiled as she sidled over to him. She whispered, "None of them know how they did it, really, so don't beat yourself up because you couldn't figure it out."

He appreciated her comforting words, but they didn't alleviate the dread in his heart. He might have to go for reconditioning now.

Davis said to the group, "You'll find that now that combat simulations are over, you will not be able to access your weapons, so don't even try to become gunslingers when we're out of sight. You'll be wasting your time. Good work, everyone."

Hildebrandt added, "We need you to recharge for the next test, so head back to your barracks and get a power nap in. We'll fetch you when it's time to begin."

Jack started to follow after his fellow recruits when Davis tapped him on the back.

He turned around and Davis asked, "Where the hell do you think you're going? You don't get to move on to the next test. Come with me. We need to find out what's wrong with you."

Stacey looked back as Davis led him in the opposite direction.

As he lumbered along after Davis he couldn't help but wonder if this was all worth it. When he got through training and finished up his tour for the corporation and the Beetars, and finally got his newly-healed body back, what kind of world would he find himself in? Everything he knew was dead and buried eight hundred years ago. If he went back to Earth, it would be another eight hundred years before he could get there. It seemed like a lot of work to earn a life that might not be worth living. Of course, if they'd put number one on his chest, he would probably feel very different about his situation. He was pretty sure Stacey wasn't having the same doubts he was having. He was happy for her, but he couldn't help but believe a gulf had just emerged between them in the aftermath of the test. She was the best and he was the worst. He had to duck through a doorway when Davis led him into an office. Delacourt was sitting

behind a desk. The man looked up and his face first showed puzzlement and finally anger.

“What’s the meaning of this? These things are not pets, Davis.”

“I know that, sir. This one is malfunctioning.

I need authorization to link up to Henshaw for a diagnostics test.”

Delacourt cocked his head to the side. “Are you sure it’s that serious? Why not just recondition it and start over?”

“We’ve never had a unit fail the weapons test, sir. You can’t recondition for that. This thing is busted beyond my understanding.”

“Henshaw won’t be happy. He’s as busy as ever, so don’t expect him to jump right into it.”

Davis nodded. “If we need to shut it down until he has time, that’s okay. This thing hasn’t shown any promise anyway.” He tapped the back of his hand against Jack’s torso.

Jack hated to be referred to as a *thing* or an

it, but it hardly made him feel any lower than he already felt.

Delacourt said, "Permission granted. But if Henshaw can't get to it immediately, don't shut it down. Find it some menial labor up top."

Jack sure hoped Henshaw had the Midas touch and could help him reunite with the other recruits. But the way things had gone for him, he just knew his luck wasn't about to get any better.

Davis knocked on his chest plate like he was an oak door and said, "Follow me."

Jack walked after him.

He sort of hoped Delacourt would say goodbye, or at least ask to know his name, but he simply went back to perusing his paperwork.

Jack looked down at his bare metal chest and realized why Delacourt didn't give a shit about him. He didn't even warrant a number down here, let alone a name and a back-story.

He ducked through a few more doorways

until they arrived at a large, well lit room with gizmos and devices and display screens that made no sense to him. But it was obvious that it was some type of lab or R&D department or something. A room to tinker with robots.

Davis pointed to a circular port nestled into the far wall. “Plug yourself in over there.”

He did as instructed.

Davis hit a few buttons on one of the consoles and Henshaw’s face appeared on one of the screens.

The doctor looked perplexed. “What has happened?” The concern was evident in his constricted voice.

“We’ve had a malfunction with this unit.”

Davis gestured Jack’s way.

Henshaw stared at him hard, like he couldn’t believe for a second that one of his precious units had had the audacity to fail.

Jack thought about nodding or waving, but

he just hung his head in embarrassment instead.

Henshaw guffawed. “Impossible! The last batch I sent was pristine. What did you oafs do to it?”

“Nothing. It wouldn’t activate during weapons testing. We’ve never had a washout so early in training, so I thought I’d ask if you could take a look at it.”

“I’ll take a look, but if its files are too corrupted to fix quickly, you’ll have to send it back up here for further diagnostics.”

“We both know Delacourt won’t let us waste the fuel for that. Let’s just hope it’s an easy fix.”

Henshaw shook his head. “That man is a buffoon. He ruins more units than he trains.”

Davis smiled, but he said, “I disagree with you, but that’s beside the point. I have the unit plugged in and ready.”

Henshaw let out a deep, disapproving breath,

and started to tap his fingers on a console just out of view.

Jack felt his mind flicker and then it switched off.

He awoke to a pounding headache. He could overhear Davis and Henshaw talking.

Henshaw said, "I don't know what to tell you. All of its systems are fully operational. I saw nothing that gave me any concern."

"Well, then we can't allow it to move on in training."

"I'd prefer you send it my way so I can get my hands inside of it, but you're right about Delacourt. He'll never allow it. I have another shipment of units coming your way in a few weeks. You could send that one back after they offload. Just shut it down until then."

Davis sucked air between his teeth and said, "Delacourt wants to put it to work if it can't be used for traditional combat. I doubt he'll put too much

stock in rehabilitating one single unit and allocating so many resources to it when we have so many more constantly coming our way.”

Henshaw sighed. “These units cost a small fortune each. Just because Delacourt receives dozens of units a month doesn’t diminish their value, just their perceived value in his eyes. Like I said, he’s a buffoon.”

“Well, he’s the guy giving us our orders, so until you talk the ambassador into coming down into the trenches to deal with him, you’re stuck doing it his way.”

“Hey, I’m just griping. I’m an old man. Permit me the occasional grumbling session.”

“I’ll probably put this guy to work on the surface. He can offload freight when it arrives and help man the defensive positions.” Davis paused for a second and then asked Henshaw, “Have any of the rebels managed to zero in on your location yet?”

“Don’t worry about me. Even if they could

detect me so far out from Epigog, they'd have to get through the motion sensing defenses I'm surrounded by. I don't like their chances. Worry about yourselves."

"We're not too worried really. They've all been inept fools so far."

Jack interrupted them both. "What are you talking about? Who are you talking about?" He had to know. If he was going to be used in defense, he wanted to know who the enemy was that he'd be defending against.

Davis cut him with his eyes. "We supply troops and protection to the Beetars. They're the apex species in this quadrant of the galaxy. Because of that, they have jealous enemies who would like nothing more than to see them fall from grace."

Henshaw added, "Every now and then a species will discover where we train the troops that will eventually go on to suppress them or keep them civilized. You'd be surprised by how many life

forms in the galaxy do not want to be civilized by any means. They'll then launch a few raids on Epigog until they realize there's no way they'll get through our defenses. After that, we never see them again. Then another race figures out where we are and the cycle repeats itself. It's futile, but it's a part of the deal here."

Davis said to Jack, "That's enough questions.

You're lucky we even found a purpose for your sorry ass. You might not be able to draw your own weapon, but you can still mount a turret."

Davis stared at him for too long and Jack realized he was waiting for confirmation from him.

He said, "Of course."

"Good. Then that is your assignment. You won't be going off-world. You won't protect dignitaries or stifle rebellions or guard penal colonies. You'll protect us for the duration of your term. You're lucky that's even an option. Otherwise you'd be worthless to the program."

This was even worse than reconditioning.

They were giving up on him and forcing menial labor down his throat because he was good for nothing else. And now it seemed they were trying to convince him to thank them for the privilege.

He knew then that he'd never see Stacey again. He'd never visit strange planets and work as an enforcer for the Beetars.

They might even reconsider giving him his body back. They could deem his reduced service to them unworthy of rewards.

Jack wasn't even allowed to say goodbye to his fellow cadets.

Davis led him back towards the lift. He waited for him to enter and then he pressed the button that ushered the lift upwards towards the surface.

Jack was more frightened about this than he was about the training. He was all alone in this, whereas he'd had a support group for training.

He asked, “Can’t I practice or something? I just know I can deploy my weapons if you give me more time.”

Davis looked at him like he was an idiot.

“Your weapons deploy during a threat. There’s no greater threat than a bunch of battle mechs bearing down on you with weapons firing all around. If that didn’t activate your weapons, nothing will. I’d have to use a cutting torch to get those guns back from you. I’m sorry, son. It’s not your fault. You got a shoddy unit.”

That didn’t make him feel any better.

The lift shuddered to a halt and Davis led him outside. It was daytime on the surface. A little sand kicked up at his feet, but otherwise the weather was calm and quiet. The transport that had delivered him was gone.

Before he asked the question, Davis explained, “A shuttle is coming for you. It should be here in a few minutes. You’re going to be alright.”

It's not so bad up here."

"I thought I heard it's dangerous for mechs on the surface. Didn't Delacourt say that the sand would deteriorate our bodies or something?"

"It does if you don't practice proper maintenance. We can't expect new recruits to spend an hour every night to clean their joints out. But it's not as big of a deal as Delacourt would have you believe. We don't train below ground because of the sand; we train down there because we come under attack from time to time. Delacourt insists we keep that info from the new recruits so we don't worry them unnecessarily."

That made sense now that Jack had more information to go on. The sand didn't feel particularly corrosive to him, although he had no idea what the cumulative effects would be over time. He looked into the sky, trying to find the moon the space station orbited, but the sky was empty. He wondered how his body was doing. He

wondered how much longer before it would be healed.

Davis said, “Look on the bright side. At least you don’t have to keep training. You have no idea how hard it gets later on.”

A distant dark blotch appeared on the horizon, growing larger as it closed in on them.

Davis said, “Ah, good. That’s your ride.

Good luck to you, son.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked back into the lift. A moment later the sand swallowed it up greedily and Jack felt very alone.

The transport gently set down a dozen feet from him. It was much smaller than the one that had dropped him off on Epigog, but it was far more maneuverable and sleek, despite the scuffed surfaces and rust spots.

A robotic pilot sat in the cockpit and a lone mech hung from an opening in the side. The passenger was filthy and rusted, but that just added

to its menace. It yelled at Jack, "Hurry up, man. We don't have all day."

Jack ambled towards the ship. He wondered what would happen if he took off running for his life, but he knew it wouldn't bode well for him.

The rusty man held his arm out, and Jack grabbed it. The transport started to take to the air as the mech swung him up and into the ship.

The strange mech shoved him into a seat beside him and said, "Hold on. The ride can be bumpy and Dan is a shitty pilot."

The pilot said jokingly, "I'm not a bad pilot. I purposely try to make you fall out." Then he looked at Jack and said, "Welcome to hell. I'm Dan. That's Carlos."

Jack said, "You're not the first to welcome me to hell."

"Yeah, but I'm the first to mean it."

"I'm Jack."

Carlos roughly jostled his shoulder. "Good

to meet you, dude.”

The transport turned all the way around and took off quickly, pushing him back into his seat.

Carlos smiled and said, “I told you he sucked.”

Jack wanted to smile back, but he couldn’t force it. He was terrified.

Carlos tapped his chest. “Where’s your number?”

“I didn’t get one.”

Carlos stared at him confusedly. “You mean you failed the weapons deployment test? I didn’t think that was possible.”

Jack looked at Carlos’ chest and saw the number twenty-one written on it, faint but still legible.

He already knew he was going to be the bottom feeder again, even amongst rejects.

The ship touched down in a dune-pocked area of desert. Some of the sand dunes were larger

than any he'd yet seen on the surface.

It wasn't until he disembarked that he realized the hills were sand-covered structures. He couldn't tell if they'd been covered intentionally or if sandstorms had covered them naturally. They weren't exactly inviting.

Carlos helped him down from the open hatch and waved for Jack to follow. Dan stayed behind to put a huge tan-colored tarp over the ship.

Carlos led him to the largest dune and kicked enough sand away to reveal a thick steel door. He swiped his palm across a reader off to the side and the door clicked. He shoved and it strained against him, metal grinding against metal as he bullied his way inside.

The inside was well lit, but that was about the only redeeming quality about it. Several steel chairs were stacked against the walls. A gathering of four mechs sat in a circle around a big steel table, playing cards, ignoring him as though he wasn't

their first new arrival in a very long time. Each of them had a faint number drawn on their chest plates. They were all in the twenties, meaning they were all at the bottom of their various classes. Jack was in good company.

The far wall had a dozen recharging ports, but they hung out loosely, dangling by thick, brittle cables. The place was the opposite of what he had seen below ground in his old barracks. It was a dump.

Carlos went up to the group playing cards and kicked one of their chairs. “This is Jack. He’s new.”

They all turned and stared. One of them said in a female voice, “What’s your malfunction?”

“I couldn’t get to my guns.”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t make my guns deploy.”

“I’ve never heard of that. You must be the worst reject we’ve ever had here.”

Carlos laughed, but he said, “Leave him be.

You all remember how frightening it was your first day here. Have a little compassion for a change.”

One of them punched him in the abdomen good naturedly and said in a baritone voice, “Did you pick out a nickname for him yet? He couldn’t get to his guns. We could call him ‘Gunner.’”

Carlos shook his head disapprovingly. He looked at Jack’s chest. “He didn’t get a number. We should call him ‘Zero.’”

The table erupted in sophomoric laughter.

Part 2:

Jack becomes Zero

Jack/Zero hung his head in shame. He had lost everything and now, it seemed, he'd also lost his own name.

Carlos came over to him and kicked him in the shin. "Buck up, dude. We all have nicknames and most of them are as bad, or worse, than yours.

From now on, Jack is dead. Long live Zero."

Zero asked, "What's yours then?"

"My nickname is Volts. These dicks call me that because I don't hold a charge as well as everyone else. I need to recharge twice a day instead of just once."

That did bring a smile to his face. "So everyone here is defective somehow?"

Carlos/Volts said, "Yes sir. But at least we have a purpose. Not everyone is so lucky. I've heard of recruits who keep churning in and out of

training, never passing but never fully washing out.

They are worse rejects than we are, if you ask me.

They'll never have a purpose."

Zero nodded, unsure whether he agreed with

Volts or not. The mechs before him hardly appeared

to be purpose driven, but what did he know.

"So what should I do now?"

"Make yourself comfortable. We have a

shipment of food coming in a few days for those

bastard training officers, and a few other supplies,

but I can handle that alone. Since you can't deploy

your guns we should probably get you acquainted

with the ship-mounted turrets."

One of the mechs at the table whooped and

stood up. He bowed low at the waist and said,

"Thank God. I thought I'd be stuck with turret duty

forever." He said to Volts, "I want to pilot a ship."

Volts shrugged. His metal shoulders made a

creaking sound as they moved up and down. "You

can take mine for now, at least until I get Zero up to

speed.”

Zero was already starting to like the nickname despite its obvious negative connotations. But he was nervous about manning a turret. That other mech sure seemed pleased to have him as his replacement.

Volts said to him, “I’ll give you a quick tour.” He pointed to the far wall and said, “Those are our recharging ports. They’re old and crappy but most of them still work just fine. This is our living quarters. Come on, I’ll show you the rest of the buildings. If you get bored later you can come with me while I do a sweep for insurgents.”

“Does this place come under attack often?”

“Not really. But when it does we’re much better off if we see it coming. We’ve lost some good men and women because they got caught off guard. I won’t let that ever happen while I’m in charge.”

A female voice at the table said, “You aren’t

in charge, Volts. That douchebag Davis is.”

“Davis hasn’t been out here in months and I could probably pinch his little head off between my thumb and forefinger.”

“Yeah, but he could press a button and shut your mind off forever.”

Carlos shrugged again. Zero was getting the impression it was his favorite gesture.

“C’mon, Zero. If you let them, these jerks will waste so much of your time you’ll get nothing done.”

Zero smiled to the table, but they just turned from him and resumed their game.

Zero followed Volts back out through the door.

Volts said, “We average an attack a month here, more or less. I’ve seen two species since I’ve been in charge. The first type only attacked for a few months before they decided to give it a rest.

They were little orange dudes with triangular heads

and no feet. I nearly freaked out the first time I saw one. The newest group hasn't given up yet, but they will. They're these spider-looking things with huge heads and hairy backs. They're multicolored, like butterflies. We wipe them out each time they send a new wave. They haven't been around in a while, so we're probably due for another attack. But don't worry, they're easy to defeat."

"Have you ever lost a battle to any of them?"

He chuckled. "If we had, no one would be here right now. Like I said, they're a mild nuisance at best nowadays."

That was a relief.

The wind had kicked up, sandblasting them as they squinted to see. Volts approached the closest sandy hill and dug out the door. He shoved it open with his shoulder and said to Zero, "This is the armory, but it also doubles as a hangar. It sucks, because every time we open the roof for launch we

have to shovel all the sand out that falls in.”

The space was big, holding a dozen crates of mean-looking weapons, and four attack ships. Zero could only assume they were designed for battle.

They were fitted with scores of guns each. Two of them housed a domed turret at the top. He would be working from within one of those turrets if they ever came under attack.

Volts pulled two identical pistols from one of the weapons crates and handed them to him. “We have no use for these things, so it’s a good thing you’re here or they’d just go to waste.” Zero’s spirits fell again to be reminded he was the only one of them who couldn’t access his own guns.

But he was surprised to find that he already had a pretty good idea how to use them. He checked the chambers and the magazines for rounds. He held one up and aimed down the sights.

Volts looked at him quizzically. Then he must have come to a realization, because he said,

“Oh, I see. You’re just finding out that you have built-in weapons training. Most of us found that out the first time we deployed our guns. You’ll find there are a few things like that. It’s like your body has a bunch of subroutines that only kick in when you need them to.”

Zero nodded. It made sense now that he thought about it.

Volts handed him a shoulder holster vest.

Zero assumed it was supplied to supplement a mech’s built-in holsters, but in his case, it was all he would get. He struggled to put it on, so Volts helped him and then he took the guns from his hands and slipped them into their new holsters near his armpits.

Zero felt like a fool even though Volts pretended it made him look like a badass.

Dan peeked his head through the door and said, “The scout ship’s all covered up. I’m going to settle in for the night.”

Volts nodded. He gestured towards Zero.

“We’re calling this guy Zero from now on.”

Dan shrugged. “You know I hate the nicknames, dude.”

“That’s because you got a bad one.” He looked at Zero conspiratorially and said, “His nickname is Piss-pants.”

If Zero thought his new name was bad, this guy’s was worse. “Why?”

Dan interrupted, “My hydraulics used to leak. They sent me a new hose system and it hasn’t leaked since, but that doesn’t mean anything to these assholes around here. If they find a nickname that hurts your feelings they’ll use it forever.”

Volts said, “Ah, you’re too sensitive, man.

We only nickname the people we love.”

“Sure,” said Dan, AKA Piss-pants, before he slipped out of sight again, presumably to join the others in their card game.

Zero asked incredulously, “They didn’t wash him out for something as silly as a hydraulic

leak, did they?”

“No. He struggled with problem solving during gunplay. His software would override his own mind every time he was put in a battle simulation, even to his detriment. In combat, that can get you killed if the enemy were to figure out the programming installed in these mechs. That’s why he flies. If we put a gun in his hand, he’d become an automaton and get himself killed.”

“So he’s not much different than me?”

Volts paused for so long that Zero knew he was trying to find the right wording to avoid hurting his feelings. “He got quite a bit further in training than you did, but in regards to being worthless with a gun, you’re right.”

If that was Volts letting him down gently, he was underwhelmed.

Zero crossed his arms and tapped the pistols under his armpits. “Now that I have these, I’m back in business.” He sure hoped he was right. He hoped

he was now considered an equal.

“You have a lot of catching up to do, Zero.

You didn’t make it through even the most rudimentary training, but that’s okay. That’s what you’ve got me for. I’ll show you the ropes.”

He had lost a friend in Stacey, but he was starting to think he’d gained one in Volts, and for that he was eternally grateful.

“You can join me in a quick scouting mission. Piss-pants will be mad that we’re uncovering the scout ship that he only just got covered, but he’ll get over it. He’s been here almost as long as me, so it’s understandable when he gets all huffy.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A little over a year.”

Zero didn’t really want to ask the next question because he was afraid of the answer, but he had to know what he thought. “Do you think they’re going to give you your body back?”

“Of course I do. They have no reason not to give it back when it has been fixed. There will always be burn-outs like you to take my place down here.”

Zero nodded, hopeful that Volts wasn't just deluding himself.

The scouting mission was dull as hell.

Everything was tan from the overabundance of sand.

They only knew where the entrance to the training center was because it pinged on the ship's tracker.

Otherwise they'd have missed it.

They overshot it by a few hundred miles and searched for heat signatures and some other

invisible trace signatures that Volts didn't make

Zero privy to, probably to save time. They found nothing out of the ordinary. No alien invaders were camped anywhere near the training entrance.

Volts explained to him that orbital trackers caught most intruders before they ever breached the atmosphere, but on a few occasions infiltrators

managed to sneak past them. That was why they had to sweep the surface.

Zero didn't care. If he'd known it was going to be so dull he would've asked to stay behind with the others. Volts re-swept the area and finally called it a day when the sun started to dip below the horizon.

He touched down outside of camp and Zero helped him put the tarp back over the scout ship.

“This is Piss-pants' job, but I'd feel like a dick if I made him do it again.”

Zero nodded, though he didn't care. His mind had slowed to a stop during the sweep and it would take more than conversation to wake it back up.

Luckily, Volts did not disappoint. Just as they were finishing up, he heard a dull thud. At first he thought nothing of it, but as he walked around the ship he saw Volts' body lying face down in the sand.

He ran to him and flipped him over. Volts' eyes were shut. He tried to jostle him into wakefulness, but he wouldn't stir. He grabbed him under the arms and dragged him towards the living quarters. Zero barged through the door dragging Volts and several heads turned their way.

A female voice said, "Shit. We need to hook him up quick or we'll lose him." She joined him and helped heft Volts' huge overweight body to one of the dangling ports. She plugged him in and they rested him on the floor on his side. She asked, "When did he conk out?"

"Just now. We were putting the tarp on the ship."

"Good. He'll be alright then. There's just enough juice in the back-up to last an hour or so. If that ran out, his mind would evaporate into the ether and we'd never get him back."

"Holy shit! That's a pretty significant design flaw. I'm surprised they didn't give him a different

unit.”

“They don’t do that. We’re all expendable, despite what they’d have you believe.”

Zero stared down at Volts and his heart nearly broke. He could die at any time doing a thankless job for a faceless corporation that was in cahoots with strange aliens none of them knew anything about, but he did his duty with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. Zero knew right then that he wanted him as a friend. He’d mature as a human being with Volts in his life.

When he stood rooted to the spot for too long, she said, “Don’t sweat it, Zero. He does this all the time. We’re all screwed up. You’ll get used to it.”

He took a seat at the table. No one had invited him, but no one objected either.

The cards were shuffled and he was dealt in without asking. “What are we playing?”

The previous turret operator he’d replaced

said gruffly, “Texas hold ‘em.”

The cards were as large as cutting boards
and made of thick corrugated cardboard.

“What are we playing for?”

Piss-pants sat down with them and passed
him a handful of steel rods. “Bet with these. If you
win you get to opt out of tomorrow’s sweeps with
Volts.”

“So I’m not the only one that thinks the
sweeps suck?”

The girl who’d helped him hook Volts up to
his port said, “We all hate them. He volunteers
every day, which is nice, but he needs a copilot to
act as a spotter. If you win tonight, you don’t have
to worry about being picked tomorrow.”

“How many sweeps does he do each day?”

“It depends, but never less than half a
dozen.”

“Ugh. I’m playing to win then.”

“We all are.”

It had been a long time since he'd played poker, but it came back to him after a few hands.

The stakes were high. He wanted to win in the worst way.

He didn't win at poker, so that meant he was in the mix to be chosen as Volts' spotter.

The girl who'd helped him plug Volts in was nicknamed Eve, as she was the first female of their current group of rejects to wash out of training. Eve was nice, but he noticed a few melancholic moments from her during the game where she just stared off into space like her mind was miles away.

The guy he replaced as turret gunner was nicknamed Twitch because every once in a while his limbs twitched uncontrollably. He was visibly flustered by it, but there was nothing he could do to stop it from happening. At one point he kicked the table over by accident. No one made a big deal out of it. They just flipped the table back over and dealt the cards all over again. It sucked, as Zero had had a

decent hand, but he didn't want to be the jerk to overreact.

It surprised him to find out that Twitch was their previous gunner. It was even more surprising that they were going to let him pilot a ship now that Zero had arrived. He had a lot to learn about their ways.

The only other girl was nicknamed Creaker because her joints weren't well manufactured. They ground together with a creaky metal on metal noise whenever she moved. She spent a lot of time filing at her body with a metal file and applying oil to her joints during the game. None of it made a difference.

The last guy was Stomper. Wherever he walked he stomped the ground like a madman. At first Zero thought he was being an impetuous baby, until he noticed he did it even when no one was paying attention to him. Stomper was the conspiracy theorist of the bunch. He'd ramble on and on, putting Zero on edge but merely annoying

the others. As Eve shuffled, he mused at length, “If Earth is eight hundred years from here, and I left in 2227, then the corporation that sent for me must have already been set up for sixteen hundred years before I left Earth. You see, they had to have sent for me around the year 1427 for the ship to travel the eight hundred year journey to arrive on Earth in 2227. But that means they left Earth around 627AD to travel eight hundred years to get here by 1427 to send for me. That’s sixteen hundred years they were active before I ever laid eyes on a Beetar ship. That means they came from the dark ages. It makes no sense, if we’re to believe what Quiss told us. He said we’ve been working with the Beetars for years, but the truth is that we must have been working with them for millennia. Either that, or the trip isn’t as long as we’ve been led to believe.”

Twitch angrily told him to stop scaring the new guy. Then he added, “Your theories get more asinine every day. Give it a rest, dude. The Earth

you called home is dead and gone. All the phony equations and theories in the world can't undo that basic truth. Maybe you're just too stupid to make sense of it."

Stomper stomped away in a huff, or maybe it just seemed like he was in a huff because of the stomping.

Zero couldn't keep track of the elapsed times so he didn't even try, but he was more inclined to agree with Twitch since despite his constant twitching, he seemed to be the more level headed of the two.

The game resumed as though nothing had happened.

None of the rest of them offered up their true names. They went by the nicknames only.

Besides the initial introduction, he would always go by Zero while he was with them.

It could've been worse. They could've nicknamed him Piss-pants.

Eve showed him how they recharged every night. It wasn't like at the barracks; they didn't stand against a wall. All of the ports here had wriggled free of their moorings with overuse and general negligence. He propped himself up in a sitting position against the wall with enough room behind him for the port. He picked out the best cable, but even that one looked like a piece of crap. He slid it into place in the center of his back and his thoughts disappeared in a flash of black.

He woke up once during the night, but he decided there wasn't much point in exploring his surroundings. Everyone worth knowing was asleep beside him and the world was covered in dusty sand. It sucked, so there was no use learning any more about it.

He sat still and recalled memories of Earth.

That made him sad, but it must've helped, because before he knew it he'd fallen into a blissful sleep.

Volts woke him up. "Thanks for saving my

ass, dude. I owe you one. Come on. Since you're the new guy, you can sweep with me today."

He wanted to refuse, but it seemed pointless, and it might even upset Volts.

"But first we need to get cleaned up. The sand out there can wear out your joints if you let it build up."

He nodded; he'd already heard as much.

Volts helped him to his feet and said to everyone in the room, "Come on. Today's sand blast day."

Zero followed him out of the living quarters.

The wind had died off since last night and the sun was beating down oppressively, although he only sensed it rather than felt it. Volts led them to the smallest sand dune, kicked and swiped the sand away from the entrance, and walked inside. The building held nothing but a compressor and a coil of air hose. The mechs all filed in and the lights came on. Volts turned the compressor on. He made

Stomper go first.

Stomper slowly flexed his limbs and moved his joints while Volts air-blasted the sand granules away. Stomper slowly spun on the spot as Volts worked. Then Stomper took over the air hose and it was Zero's turn to get clean. It went quicker for him, as he was apparently still very clean from lack of exposure. Then he had to man the hose and blast Eve. It went like that until Piss-pants made it a complete circuit, hosing Volts down. Then Volts went around and applied oil to all of their joints. Eve followed behind him and covered the oiled spots with a transparent film to keep the fine sand from collecting and sticking later.

Zero felt very low at that moment. This was his life and it was mind numbingly dull. He was a space robot from the future and he was bored out of his skull.

The sweeps weren't going to improve his spirits either.

The first sweep was actually alright. They took one of the fighter ships instead of the scout ship. Volts let him fly for a few minutes. He was surprised to find how naturally it came to him, but then again, it was probably just programming. Then Volts showed him how to operate the roof-mounted turret. He even got to let off a couple dozen rounds. His entire metal body shuddered with each successive round. It made the trip worthwhile.

When they got back, he found out what Volts had meant about all of the sand having to be removed from the hangar. A ton of the stuff spilled inside when the roof opened to let them in. It took them an hour or so to remove it.

They'd barely made it through the door of the living quarters when a shrill siren clawed at their ears. A bright red light flashed and all the defense mechs tensed.

Eve said, "It's those damn spiders again.

How many times do we need to kill those guys?"

Volts grabbed Zero by the shoulder and said,
“The sensors have picked up an incoming threat.
You’re with me. Don’t be nervous. It’s like
shooting fish in a barrel. Come on.”

Volts tugged him back towards the door and
they went back to the ship they’d just landed.

Volts said, “You’re lucky, you know. I spent
my first week here worried half to death about
combat. It wasn’t until after the first skirmish that I
realized there’s nothing to worry about. You’ll see
just what I mean.”

“So should I shoot to kill?”

Volts smiled. “Yes. Shoot to kill. They’ll be
trying to kill us, so we might as well return the
favor.”

The ceiling opened and they took off. Two
other attack ships joined them, with Eve, Creaker,
and Twitch in one, and Stomper and Piss-pants in
the other.

Volts pointed upwards and ahead. “There

they are. We'll intercept them before they ever get anywhere near the training camp. It's the spiders again. You can tell by their ships."

He saw about ten small black ships descending towards the surface of Epigog. They were orbs, about twenty feet in diameter, studded with dozens of guns. They were fast little things, but the mechs' ships were clearly faster. They were closing the distance rapidly.

He was already settled into the turret when Volts said, "We're in range. You can start to pick them off whenever you're ready."

As if on cue, the other two ships with him started to fire. He focused on the closest ship and fired a quick three round burst. The ship evaporated in a puff of black smoke. A second later the boom of the explosion reached his ears.

He was operating on some kind of autopilot.

He was no killer. He'd never killed anything before, especially an alien advanced enough to pilot a

spaceship. But here he was, blasting away at them like it was his sole purpose in life. It came naturally, like instinct, so he knew it was mostly built-in programming driving his actions.

But the regrets were his own.

He saw one of the orbs coming at them directly, so he pivoted the turret and let off a hail of bullets until the thing blew apart. Volts whooped like a teenager. For all he knew, maybe he was that young. He hollered up at Zero: “Good job, dude. You’re better at that than I am.”

He was pretty sure Volts was just bolstering his confidence, but he appreciated the gesture.

Two more black orbs disintegrated and fell from the sky from the barrage of bullets loosed by his companion ships.

The five remaining alien ships split up and came right at them from different angles.

He aimed at the one heading directly for them and fired. It fired back, but its bullets, or

whatever it was shooting, pinged off the outside of their ship harmlessly. When Volts said, "I'm gonna ram it," Zero panicked. He held the trigger and filled the sky with bullets until the little ship exploded in a fine mist of shrapnel.

The other four ships fell out of the air around the same time. Some blew apart while others lost control from damage and plummeted to the surface.

The threat was over. Volts was right. It was a cinch.

The other two mech ships broke away and headed down.

"Where are they going?"

"They're going to make sure there are no survivors."

"Shouldn't we join them?"

"We're going to cover them while they work."

They descended and Volts said, "Keep an

eye on the skies.”

He did at first, but he had a morbid curiosity about the landside destruction. Even from so high up, he was able to see just what an unfair advantage they had. The five mechs running around on the ground with their guns drawn were each larger than any of the intact alien ships. He saw one of his comrades tear a ship in half with its bare hands and fire off a silent round inside the cockpit. Besides that, it looked like the spiders were all dead. He double-checked the skies, but they were devoid of reinforcements.

The mechs on the ground got back in their ships.

Eve’s voice came over the comm. “It’s all clear. Who’s going to stay behind to make sure no others show up?”

He just knew Volts would volunteer them and he was right. Volts said, “You guys can head back. We’ll scout and keep you posted.”

The two ships on the ground lifted off, turned about, and headed away. Zero came down from the turret to join Volts in the cockpit.

Volts smiled when he saw him. “That was some good shooting. You’re a natural.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s all clear, but we have to hang back for a bit just to make sure.”

“I understand.”

“That’s how those damn spiders operate.

They’re small enough and sneaky enough to get past the orbital defenses, but too weak to put up a fight once they do.”

“They hardly seemed like much of a threat.”

“To us, nothing is a threat. Remember, the Beetars are the mightiest species around and we’re their enforcers. We’re basically unstoppable.”

“Do you think any more will come?”

“Probably not. They send everything they have at us to try and overwhelm us. I’ve never seen

them hold back. We're just being overly cautious."

They circled the crash sites of the spiders' ships and then did a wide circuit around the entrance to the training camp. Zero manned the turret once more just so he wasn't caught off guard, but there was nothing to fire at. Volts was right; the spiders had sent everything they had all at once. It was eerie how easily they'd been taken out. They hadn't stood a chance. They must have known how futile their attack would be, so why did they do it? Did they really hate them so much they'd risk certain doom for the chance to kill them?

Volts, satisfied that the threat was past, radioed camp. "It's all clear. We're coming home."

Eve answered. "It took you long enough."

Hurry back. Stomper thinks he's found something."

"We're on our way."

They landed and cleaned away the sand that had fallen into the hangar. The ship was spotless. If there were dents or bullet holes from the fight, they

were too small to see.

When they got back to the living quarters, there was an eerie quality to the collection of pensive mechs. The others stared at them as they closed the door.

Eve whispered, "Volts, we found it," with a reverence that confused Zero. What was so important?

Volts said incredulously, "No way. Are you sure?"

Zero chimed in: "What did you find?"

Eve looked at him suspiciously for a moment and then said, "We found the kill switches in the suits."

Volts added for clarification, "We've been searching for them for a long time. If we can circumvent the kill switches, then Delacourt can't threaten to deactivate us."

"Why do you care? They're not threatening to shut us all down, are they?"

“It’s not that they will do it, it’s that they *can* do it that bothers us. Who needs that kind of pressure? Who wants their lives in the hands of people who barely even care that they exist?”

He still didn’t see what the big deal was, but he paid attention anyway out of respect.

Eve stepped aside and they saw Stomper sitting on the floor with Piss-pants in front of him with his back opened up. A metal plate, four inches thick and as big as the surface of a coffee table, was propped against the wall nearby. Stomper was pointing inside Piss-pants’ back to show them what had him so excited.

Volts moved closer, so Zero followed suit.

Stomper pointed to a large strike plate with a thick contactor touching it. He tapped Piss-pants on the shoulder and asked, “You ready?”

Piss-pants nodded, so Stomper gingerly pinched the contactor between thumb and forefinger and moved it away from the plate. An electric arc

ripped from the contactor to the plate and then vanished when the contactor was moved too far away. Piss-pants immediately shut down.

Stomper saw Zero clench up, so he said, “The back-up unit will keep his consciousness stored for an hour or so before shutting down too.

As long as we restore power before then, he’ll be right as rain.” He allowed the contactor to slip from his grasp, and as soon as it hit home against the plate, Piss-pants came back to life.

Volts asked, “What can we do to make sure that contactor never stops making contact?”

Stomper smiled like a lunatic. “That’s the easy part. We could use a fat rubber band or a tiny weld spot or a piece of tubing tied in a tight knot. If we had any paper clips they’d work perfectly.”

Volts said, “A weld is too risky. It’s electromagnetic, so a weld could interfere with the current and interrupt the magnetic attraction. I’ll find some rubber sleeves or something in storage.

Get everyone opened up and I'll be back in a minute."

Zero wanted to opt out. He didn't want these dumbasses fussing around inside his body. But he thought it prudent to go with the flow. Going against the group so early was out of the question if he wanted their acceptance, and he did, in the worst way.

They all sat in a circle with their backs facing inwards while Volts went rummaging for something that might work.

Funnily enough, Zero actually felt Stomper removing his back plate. But when he started rummaging around inside of him he felt nothing.

Stomper gasped and stood up. Zero heard him whisper to someone, then two bulky shadows fell over him. He looked back and up at Stomper and Eve and asked, "What's up?"

Eve said, "You don't have a kill switch."

"That's good, right?"

“Yeah. But why don’t you have one?”

“I don’t know.” Then he remembered

Doctor Henshaw saying something about his group being prototypes. “Henshaw might have decided to forego them in my group.”

“He couldn’t. The kill switches are their failsafe in case we go nuts and try to kill everyone. No one says it out loud, but we all know that’s why they’re there.”

“Then I have no idea why I don’t have one.

Maybe he put it in a different spot in me.”

Stomper said, “You have a contactor and strike plate right where we do, except yours is a single unit instead of two. Yours couldn’t separate if we tried to turn you off. We’d have to use a cutting torch back here to shut you down.”

Zero shook his head. Wasn’t that a good thing? Wasn’t he exactly what they were aspiring to be? If so, why were they acting so suspicious?

Eve said, “I wonder what the hell Henshaw

was thinking. If Delacourt finds out about this he'll have him executed."

Stomper shook his head. "This makes no sense. I might as well close him back up."

That was music to his ears.

Volts barged in with a fistful of rubber sleeves. He said, "What's wrong?" when he saw the look on Eve's face.

"Zero can't be turned off. He's a new model or something."

"No way. He has to have a kill switch. It's a safety precaution. Henshaw would never omit such an important detail."

"He didn't. It looks like he designed it specifically so Zero could never be turned off."

Volts adjusted quickly. "We'll worry about the ramifications of that later. For now, let's disable our own." He handed Stomper the bundle of rubber sleeves and Stomper went around the room securing the contactors against the strike plates inside each

mech. With that done, Volts removed Stomper's back plate and worked on him.

Then the back plates went back on and the mood lightened considerably. These mechs must have lived in constant fear of being shut down, and now that threat was no more.

Zero wished he could've joined in their jubilation, but it turned out that, technically speaking, he was not the same as they were. He was a freak among freaks. The reject of the rejects.

Before they started jumping up and down for joy, Volts dampened the mood by shutting down and falling over onto his side. Zero helped drag him to the nearest port and Creaker plugged him in.

Eve said, "He must've overexerted himself.

He usually holds out until later in the afternoon."

Twitch's head jerked to the side uncontrollably. He asked, "Did you guys hear that?"

Zero strained to listen. Sure enough, he heard a distant supersonic boom outside, followed

by another.

Twitch said, “We’re being invaded. Why aren’t the warning sirens blaring?”

Eve yelled, “Man your ships! Zero, you’re with me.”

If he could have, he’d have shit his pants.

Stomper, Twitch, and Creaker took one ship while Zero, Eve, and Piss-pants took the other.

Eve piloted while Piss-pants handled the readouts and Zero tried to get comfortable in the turret.

Eve said to him over the intercom, “Don’t get us killed, Zero.”

That didn’t instill him with an overwhelming sense of confidence, but he didn’t blame her for not yet trusting him.

She veered off course and said, “Fire off a few rounds to loosen up.”

He didn’t waste any time. It irked him that they’d left the other ship alone because of his lack

of experience. He knew that if Volts was here they wouldn't be doing this nonsense. He trusted him.

He let off about a hundred rounds before

Piss-pants said urgently, "He's got it. Get back on course."

Just then a distress message came from the

other ship. Stomper yelled in a panic-stricken tone,

"Fall back, Eve. We're going down. There are too many of them and they have superior firepower.

The training center has already been compromised.

There's nothing left. Fall back. Do you hear me?"

Eve punched the throttle and replied, "We'll

be there in a few seconds. Hold on."

Just then, at least twenty small blue alien

ships whizzed over and around them. The blue ships didn't fire on them or even pay them much attention.

They were too fast for Zero to respond to in time.

He tried to get them in his sights, but he couldn't.

They shrunk from view as they left the atmosphere.

He was glad they ignored them, as there was no

way they could have matched their speed or maneuverability.

He left his post to get a better handle on what was happening. Then a light started blinking on the dashboard that made Eve yell out in anger.

He asked what the light was and Piss-pants said, "It means the other ship went down. It means the homing beacon has been activated.

They saw the smoke first, black and ominous. Then they saw the source of the smoke; coupled with a huge dark crater where the entrance to the training center was located. About half a mile away a thin tendril of faint smoke marked the crash site of the other ship.

They zipped right past the training center, through the billowing smoke, to get to the crash site.

Zero wanted to jump ship and rush into the bunker to check on Stacey, but he knew better than to interfere with Eve and Piss-pants. They were already pretty upset about their fallen comrades and,

to be honest, he was too. He was sure Stacey was fine anyway. She was a battle mech surrounded by other formidable robots just like her. That crater looked mean, but it was only about twenty feet deep. He doubted they'd even heard the explosion from a thousand feet down in the training center.

They landed, but it was already clear they wouldn't find survivors in the crash. The ship was in a hundred pieces, scattered across a thousand yards of desert. The largest section was smoldering, but besides the flickering flames there was no other movement.

Eve and Piss-pants were out of the ship the moment it landed, leaving him aboard to man the turret in case there was a follow-up attack. After half an hour of dragging wreckage around in the sand to try to uncover their fallen comrades, they gave up once it was certain there were no survivors. At one point Zero saw the entire trunk of a robot jutting from the ground, upside-down.

Eve was on edge and Piss-pants was despondent.

Eve said, “None of them made it. This hasn’t happened before. We’ve never been overrun like that. We need to let Davis know what’s happened.”

Piss-pants fiddled with some buttons on the dashboard console. He was getting increasingly frustrated. Then he slammed his fist down on it, putting a spider web crack across its surface.

“There’s no answer from training camp.”

“Shit. There’s no way they infiltrated it so soon, is there?”

Piss-pants stared out of his window and said,

“We need to check it out.”

Eve lifted off as Zero worried whether Stacey was alright.

The crater at the entrance to training camp was larger from close up.

They jumped ship the second it settled. Zero

refused to stand guard again. “I know someone down there and I need to make sure she’s okay.”

Eve looked at Piss-pants to see what he thought, but Zero didn’t care what his answer was going to be. They weren’t keeping him from checking on her.

Once inside the crater, everything became clear. The gaping maw that was the lift chamber was littered with rappel ropes and a handful of contraptions that Eve explained were alien jet-packs, abandoned after their mission down below.

So they had invaded training camp. He could only assume everyone within was dead, but he had to be sure.

He bent down and grabbed two ropes. He tugged on them to see how strong they were, and then dropped over the ledge.

Eve and Piss-pants tried to stop him, but they were wasting their breath.

A thousand feet didn’t sound like much, but

it was a long way down when all he had to work with was a rope. Luckily he didn't need to worry about fatigue or whether he'd have the strength to make it back up. Only about what he'd find at the bottom.

He felt ground beneath his feet, then lights erupted from his own body, pivoting around, illuminating the darkness. He had no idea he could even do that, but apparently his body knew it was dark and decided to light the place up. He could only assume it hadn't done so before because this was the first time he'd found himself in the dark in a potential combat zone. It gave him a sort of half-hearted relief. It was good to know his mech body wasn't completely useless.

Some of the walls looked as though they were ready to crumble. Parts of the strutted ceiling had fallen away. He ran to the doorway up ahead. It was opened up to the training arena that, to his horror, was littered with mech bodies.

His huge foot splashed in a puddle of red alien blood. He had a quick glance around for its source, but the aliens must have recovered all of their wounded and dead. Then he remembered there were three humans down here who might've been responsible for gushing that blood. He would check for them, but he had to find Stacey first.

There was a grouping of four mechs, all felled within ten feet of one another, metal limbs draped over other limbs, floating in a pool of hydraulic fluids.

He checked them over for signs of life, but they were all fully shut down. None of them had the chest plate etching that would identify them as Stacey. His hopes weren't altogether dashed until he ran to the barracks and found Stacey within. Her body was pocked with bullet holes and her metal frame was buckled in places, most likely from an explosion. She wasn't moving. She was gone.

He hefted her body over his shoulder and

carried her to the doorway, exiting the arena, and propped her against the wall. Then he went searching for any human survivors. But his heart was no longer in it. He truly only cared about Stacey and she was already dead.

Davis and Hildebrandt were in pieces right next to each other. Davis' arm had been blown off, leaving a ragged stump that had bled out.

Hildebrandt had been shot in the chest. The hole was so big that an antitank gun or something must've been used to make it. Zero could've reached his arm right through it. It was overkill, but then again, the aliens must have used some serious firepower to take down dozens of super soldier robots. Hildebrandt had taken a round meant for one of them.

He heard a scuffling and ran past the bodies of the trainers to find Delacourt on the floor in his office. He was trying to crawl to the door, but his knees kept slipping in his own blood. He saw Zero's

shadow looming over him and he looked up. His voice was constricted and he gargled, coughing out a fat glob of blood, then his arms gave way, dropping him face down on the floor.

Zero flipped him over and he screamed from the pain, so he propped him on his side. Delacourt was faint and dying rapidly. He gasped and tried to speak again, but he was too far gone. Zero had never watched as a person died. It terrified him. He wished there was something he could do, but Delacourt would never survive the thousand foot ascent up the lift shaft. It would take him too long to drag him up, and he was guessing he only had minutes to live.

Delacourt laid his finger in the growing puddle of blood, then used it to scrawl on the floor in front of him. He had to dip it back in every time the blood thinned out. Zero was enthralled.

Delacourt wrote two barely legible words.

But they were useless, selfish words. Zero was

hoping he would write down who'd done this to the camp, or let him know if there were any survivors. Instead he wrote *Get Henshaw*. Zero hadn't taken a liking to Delacourt, and in his dying moments he hadn't redeemed himself to him. Delacourt didn't want to die. He wanted a doctor above all else. It was understandable given the circumstances, but he expected more from the commander.

Zero nodded as though he even thought it was a possibility, which it wasn't as Henshaw was in space and Delacourt was already slipping into the afterlife.

He considered putting him out of his misery.

He even fidgeted with his holstered guns for a second, but he didn't have to act. Delacourt died right before his eyes.

Zero shook his head sadly and then used his foot to erase the bloody words. A commander should be remembered for his accomplishments in life, not his final selfish act. He'd hate for anyone

else to know how terrified Delacourt was in his waning moments. Then again, he didn't really know the guy. Maybe he wasn't the heroic badass he assumed he was.

He left the horrific scene, walked back past Davis and Hildebrandt, and picked up Stacey's body. He had to at least try and see if there was a way to bring her back to life.

He used one of the dropped rappel ropes at the base of the elevator shaft and tied it around Stacey's torso. He tied the other end around his own and then he climbed up with her dead body in tow, dangling beneath him.

Eve and Piss-pants were waiting for him up top. They helped him out, and then pulled Stacey up and over the top.

Eve looked at her and then looked at him like he was an idiot. "She's gone, Zero."

"I know that. I couldn't leave her down there. Maybe there's something we can do to wake

her up.”

“It has been too long. Her back-up unit won’t be operational anymore. Even if it were, that body isn’t fit to inhabit. The body itself is destroyed.”

He nodded grimly. He knew she was right, But maybe he was just too stupid to hear her logic, because he said, “I don’t care,” and hefted Stacey’s body towards the ship. He laid it gently down on the floor and then sat beside her.

He knew how idiotic he was being. He hardly knew Stacey in life, but she was the last person he remembered from Earth and he did not want to let go of that connection, despite the fact that it had already been severed.

Eve and Piss-pants looked at each other forlornly and then joined him in the ship. They lifted off and headed back to camp in silence.

Piss-pants helped him carry Stacey’s body into the living quarters. He even humored him when

Zero insisted they plug her in, just in case it helped.

Eve unplugged Volts to tell him the bad

news.

He hung his head. “I can’t believe they’re dead. How did the invaders get past our orbital defenses? How did they destroy camp before you got there?”

There was implied blame in his last question.

Piss-pants said, “You wouldn’t believe how fast their ships were. They shot Stomper’s ship out of the sky the second it arrived. We’re only alive right now because we got there too late.”

“Did anyone check out the training camp?

Did any of you see it with your own eyes?”

Zero said, “I went down there. That’s why she’s here.” He pointed to Stacey’s lifeless body.

“So they’re all gone?”

“Every single one of them.”

“I wish I could have helped.”

Eve said, “It wouldn’t have done any good.

There were a lot of them and they buzzed around like hornets. They were so fast the motion sensors didn't pick them up—the warning siren didn't go off. We responded immediately when we heard their supersonic booms, but we were too late.”

Volts checked over the warning siren. He hit a button and it sounded. He hit the button again and it turned off. He shook his head in confusion.

“There's just no way they were too fast to trigger the sensors.”

“Well, the sensors didn't see them.”

“This is worse than any of you realize.

We're only alive because we served a purpose. If we didn't have training camp to protect we would've been shut down as soon as our defects were discovered.”

Zero hadn't thought of that. He was too caught up in the moment to consider what might happen next. Those in charge might decide they were now redundant.

Volts said, “We need to get back to the training camp and try and open up a link to Doctor Henshaw. He’ll know what to do.”

Zero said, “You’re not going to like what you see down there. It’s a mess.”

Volts stared at Stacey’s broken body and said, “I can only imagine.”

When they approached the crater that marked the entrance to the training camp, they saw the transport ship that brought supplies and new recruits. They put their ship down beside it and surveyed the area to make sure it wasn’t some sort of trap. The transport wasn’t due to arrive until tomorrow.

Once they were sure it was safe, they all boarded the ship. The dock door closed on them automatically. Volts went to the command console to override the autopilot to get the doors back open, but he yelled for them. “I got Henshaw on the horn. Get up here.”

Zero was the last to arrive up front. Sure enough, Henshaw's kindly old face hovered holographically over the console like an apparition.

Henshaw asked, "What's the situation?"

Volts did the talking even though he hadn't been there to witness any of the destruction. "We were attacked by an unknown enemy. They were lightning fast and didn't trigger any of our sensors. They'd already destroyed the training camp before anyone got there. Then they blew one of our ships out of the sky, and vanished."

Henshaw looked at each of them in turn. He paused a moment too long when he saw Zero. He said, "I'm just glad you are all okay."

Volts said, "What do you think the ambassador will do with us when she finds out?"

"Someone at the training camp activated a beacon when they came under attack. That's why I sent this ship as a precaution, in case an evacuation was necessary. The ambassador would have been

notified at the same time that I was. I'm actually surprised I haven't heard from her yet."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Son, I'm sure you know how this works.

You folks are rejects. You had a purpose, but that purpose is now gone."

"I'm not going to let her shut us down."

"Neither am I. But we need to concoct a cover story for you. If she thinks you are the last survivors from training camp she might consider keeping you around. But the moment she discovers you're defective, you'll probably be decommissioned."

"So what should we do now?"

"I need you to make sure the camp is obliterated. If she decides to see it for herself and discovers anything that might indicate you guys aren't what we tell her you are, she'll shut you all down. Demolish your own camp too, just in case she decides to check on the status of security. We'll

tell her they're all dead, so we'd better make sure it looks that way. Then you need to come back to this transport and come to me. You need to hurry. I don't know how much time we have."

Zero chimed in, "I found one of the units down there. She's charging back at our living quarters, but she's unresponsive. I'd like to bring her back to see if there's anything you can do to fix her."

The others stared at him like he'd just lost his mind.

Henshaw said, "I'm sorry, but if she's unresponsive, she's gone. There's nothing I can do for her."

"Well, you're going to try."

Henshaw shook his head, but he relented.

"Go and fetch her unit while the others cave in the training camp."

"Can you save her?" His virtual heart was racing.

“Probably not, but I also don’t want to waste any more precious time arguing about trivialities like this. Now get moving, people. The clock’s ticking.”

“Promise me that you’ll save her.”

Henshaw sighed. “I promise.”

Zero didn’t care that it was a long shot. He had hope again. He was the first to leave the transport.

Volts said to everyone, “I’ll take Zero back to get his friend. You two need to make sure the elevator shaft is caved in by the time we get back.”

Eve glared at Zero. He knew she was worried about getting to the space station before the ambassador got there. If they didn’t, he would be blamed, because he had put his own selfish desires ahead of their mission. But he didn’t care.

After retrieving Stacey’s robotic body and setting about a dozen charges he’d retrieved from the armory all around the camp, Volts got back

behind the controls of the ship and they set out to rendezvous with the others.

Little faint pops announced that the charges had worked. Volts brought a couple with him to blow the ship they were in after they no longer needed it.

Zero asked, “Who do you think did this?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t the spiders. I don’t know of any race that’s capable of this. The Beetars have plenty of enemies, but none powerful enough to take out an entire training camp of robotic cadets. Remember, Zero, we’re their muscle. The mechs that graduate go on to guard penal colonies and end armed skirmishes. We put down rebellions and take a bullet for whomsoever they deem worthy. One of us is enough to instill dread in the hearts of the enemy. There were dozens of cadets at camp. I can’t imagine what could be mighty enough to wipe them all out so quickly.”

“Should we be worried about them

returning?”

“Yes, we should. We need to get to the transport and get as far away from here as possible, or else we might be next.”

They touched down and Volts helped him heft Stacey inside the transport. He fastened her to the wall, then they went back outside to see what progress the other two had made.

Luckily, they had just finished up. Zero noticed new numbers on their chest plates. Eve had the number seven written on hers and Piss-pants had “two” scrawled across his.

Volts asked Eve, “What’s up with that?” pointing to the numbers.

“Henshaw said we have to make it appear like we were cadets in training. He said if we make it look like we did well at camp, the ambassador will be more inclined to let us live, and put us to work. Zero’s friend Stacey already has number one, so just pick a number under ten that hasn’t been

used.” She handed Volts the same marker the trainers used on the cadets.

Volts wrote the number four on Zero’s chest and told him to write nine on his. Zero tried to convince him to go lower, but Volts said that would seem too obvious. He was right, but Zero wrote the number six before he could stop him.

Volts was mad, but he didn’t make a big deal of it.

Eve said, “The shaft is caved in. We need to go.”

Volts set the two charges inside the scout ship so there’d be nothing left of it if the ambassador came looking, then they boarded the transport. Volts put the autopilot back on because they had no idea how to pilot the damn thing or how to find the space station.

The lights dimmed as the ship gulped up the power to lift off. It rose above the surface and they hurriedly strapped in for the ride. Zero made a

conscious decision to avoid plugging into the power port at his back right away.

He didn't know how the others felt about this turn of events. Maybe they were ecstatic that they would finally get off-world. Maybe they were excited about the new possibilities they now had in their newly acquired personas as phony recruits. But he was overwhelmed.

In the past couple of days he'd had his mind inserted into a robot, found out that aliens were real, and had washed out of training camp. He'd just barely acclimated to his role as security on Epigog and now that role was gone in a flash too. What did the immediate future hold for him? He had no idea and the implications frightened him half to death.

He felt the G-forces pulling on him as they accelerated through the atmosphere of Epigog. For the first time he wondered if the shuttle was even fit for transporting human beings. He couldn't tell if there was oxygen pumping into the ship. He didn't

know if the warmth he felt was too hot or too cold for a flesh and blood human. He didn't see a way to eject biological waste or any type of food stored anywhere. Most likely it was only good for transporting non-organics like him and his friends.

The G's lessened and then he saw Epigog through the little circular porthole across from him.

From orbit, it was a brown hell-hole with a few swirls of black and white here and there, sandstorms and rocky areas devoid of even the sand that had so plagued them on the surface. He wasn't going to miss it, probably because he hadn't been there long enough to get attached.

He was looking forward to seeing Henshaw again. He hoped they would have time to get their stories straight before the ambassador arrived for a situation report. He prayed Stacey could be saved.

Volts and Eve had aligned themselves with the recharging ports, so they were already out like lights.

Piss-pants turned from staring out through the window and said, "I'm plugging in. I have no idea how long the journey to the space station is, but I'm guessing it's long enough to bore the shit out of me. I'll see you when we arrive." He looked over his immense shoulder to see exactly where his recharging port was, then he nestled against it. The moment he did, his eyes closed and his head drooped.

Zero looked over at Stacey. He sure hoped Henshaw could do something with her, but the clock was ticking and had probably already run out for her. But he couldn't let despondency settle in. A few very serious questions took up residence in his mind. If Henshaw could transfer their thoughts, then why wouldn't he create a back-up or something and keep them stored in a hard drive of some sort? Maybe they wouldn't have to worry so much about Volts powering down if there was a back-up of his mind stored somewhere safe.

Maybe Stacey would still have a shot at life if Henshaw had had the forethought to keep another version of her tucked away on a disc or something. Then he could just upload her consciousness again into a new mech.

He realized right then that he didn't have enough knowledge to make such assumptions. After all, if copies could be made, then there would be no need for so many different minds to run the mechs. Henshaw could just find the perfect mind and put copies of it into every single unit.

He rubbed his metal temples and immediately realized how stupid that was. It was an instinctive motion he no longer needed.

He decided against grilling Henshaw about his methods. He began to realize how stupid his questions would be perceived, especially since the doctor was trying his best to save their lives. The doctor wasn't incompetent. In fact, he was the only decent flesh and blood human he'd met since

leaving Earth. And their lives were in his hands. If he pissed him off, he might decide he wasn't worth saving. He had to go with the flow. He had to stop questioning everything and just give himself over to Henshaw's wisdom.

It was an epiphany that he wished he'd had at the beginning. It was so much easier to trust that others knew what was best for you than to doubt everything everyone told you.

He rolled his shoulders as he tried to zero in on his power port. He knew he'd found it when his vision turned black.

He awoke to a familiar face. Henshaw had a wry smile as he looked him over. Zero stepped away from the wall and saw that the others were waking too. Stacey's body had already been taken out of the ship by the doctor.

"How do you feel, Jack?"

"They call me Zero nowadays. I'm alright, all things considered."

“I was surprised to hear about your weapons malfunction. I thought I’d programmed you better than that.”

Zero nodded, wondering why the hell he cared. They had to get their shit together before the ambassador arrived, and Henshaw was wasting valuable time on trivialities.

“Is Stacey going to make it?”

“She’s fine. I was able to retrieve her data.”

“I knew you probably kept a back-up just in case.”

“I’m ashamed to admit that we can’t do that.

We can’t store so much information indefinitely.

But I was able to retrieve her data from the transfer unit. Normally all of that info gets wiped clean when I transfer the next recruit to its robotic unit, but she was lucky enough to be the last recruit from your batch that I transferred. I still had a ghosted copy of her data. We got really lucky, son.”

It was serendipitous to say the very least.

“Is she doing alright?”

“She seems fine, but you have to remember that she has no memories of Epigog or training. To her mind, she only just arrived from Earth.”

“Can I see her?”

“No. She still needs to be debriefed. You’ll be pleased to know that I was able to give her a new body. That other one was damaged beyond repair. I already jettisoned it from the ship. I wouldn’t want the ambassador to start asking questions.”

Zero was glad to hear that. Her original robotic body definitely was a mess, unfit for combat or much else.

Volts and Eve watched impatiently as Henshaw wasted time blathering to Zero. Piss-pants was pacing irritably. He said to the doctor: “We should get ready for the ambassador, right?”

“Of course, yes. Follow me.”

The others looked at Zero curiously, and he

knew why. They were wondering why Henshaw was concentrating solely on him.

He had no answers for them, so he shrugged his shoulders as he joined them in pursuit of the small old man.

Henshaw led them through the space station and to the large room his group had had their reprogramming session in a couple of days ago.

They faced the front of the room and the doctor pulled a chair out and sat down.

He said, "I've tried to find out how the invaders got through our defenses, but the sensors picked up nothing. Did any of you actually see them?"

Volts said, "They were quick little blue ships. I've never seen them before."

The doctor stood up. "That doesn't ring a bell. Okay then, let's move past it. Now we need to make sure you each have a good cover story. With no training center you can't be reprocessed, and if

anyone finds out you were rejected, who knows what they'll do to you. I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to just shut you all down until a new training camp can be built."

Volts said, "What's so wrong with that idea?"

They can turn our minds off and wake them when the camp is suitable for training. Maybe some of us will make it through this time around."

Henshaw shook his head slowly. "That's an option if they decide to exercise it. They might decide to scrap the lot of you and pin their hopes on the next batch of recruits. The robotics arrive the day after tomorrow, and the recruits will be here in three weeks."

Zero asked, "Would they do that?"

"I hope not, but you never know. Is it worth the risk?"

They all mumbled amongst themselves. Of course it wasn't worth it to trust a stranger to decide if they should live or die.

Henshaw said, “The ambassador will arrive shortly, so let’s get things straight. You’ll tell her you were just days into training when the camp was attacked. You didn’t see the attackers because you were recharging at the time. Through some stroke of luck the enemy didn’t find you while you charged. You’ll tell her that when you woke up everyone was dead and the invaders had already left. Then I’ll recommend to her that because you were all at the head of your class you’re ready for the field. I don’t know if she’ll go for it, but it’s worth a shot.”

Eve said, “They’ll find us out the second we malfunction in the field.”

Henshaw smiled devilishly. “We still have some time to work out your various bugs. If I’m lucky I’ll be able to fix all of them before she gets here.”

That was music to their ears. But they knew their bugs weren’t the only way to identify them as

rejects. That they had almost no experience training would be a dead giveaway if anyone pried deeply enough. But what choice did they have? This seemed like the only way to survive their new, shitty predicament.

Zero saw Piss-pants slap Volts on the back and clap Eve on the shoulder, and knew he was the only one of them to have reservations about any of this. It wasn't the first time he'd felt alone in a group and he doubted it would be the last.

Henshaw asked, "Do you think you can all remember your cover story?"

Zero nodded, hoping the ambassador was dumb enough to buy it.

Henshaw said, "Jack, I'll look at you first. It should be easy enough to figure out why your weapons won't deploy. Take those ridiculous holsters off and hide them and follow me." To the rest he said, "I'll be back for the next as soon as Jack's done." Then he walked from the room.

Eve and Volts helped him wrestle the holsters off. Volts said, “We’ll take care of these.

You’d better hurry up before you lose the doc.”

Zero nodded a thank you and rushed from the room.

He caught up to the spry old man and was led inside a room that looked like a workshop.

Strapped against the wall was a single shiny new mech.

Henshaw said, “That’s your friend. I’ll wake her and get her up to speed as soon as I’m done with you guys.”

Zero didn’t know enough about how any of this worked, but he had a question that needed to be asked before it ate away at him. “What will happen to the human bodies of the training camp victims? Their data can’t be retrieved, so does that mean they’ll be mindless zombies when you fix their bodies?”

Henshaw swallowed hard. “There’s no hope

for them. Stacey's was the only mind stored and that was only by chance, seeing she was the last transfer. The others died without a back-up. Their bodies just didn't know it at the time."

"So what will happen to them?"

"Protocol demanded that I flush them."

"What does that mean?"

"They're no longer useful to the Beetars.

The Beetars need only their minds to control the robotic units, and their minds are gone. As humans, they're technically brain dead, so treatment had to be stopped. Once they're taken from treatment, they die immediately without a mind to drive them. I can't have a pile of corpses rotting up here with me so I had to jettison them off of the space station."

Zero almost gasped.

Henshaw's eyes misted, so Zero didn't try to make him feel any guiltier than he already did. But he was starting to see the other side of the wise old kindly doctor that he didn't like. He pushed the

horror from his thoughts because there were more immediate concerns that required his undivided attention.

He wanted to get a closer look at Stacey. He wanted to make sure the doc wasn't lying to him, but he didn't get the chance.

“Stand against that wall and we'll figure out what happened to your software.”

He did so and Henshaw used a pneumatic wrench to remove his chest plate. He plugged three wires inside of his chest. Zero was afraid to look down at the open cavity. He felt like if he did and saw the mechanical workings, he'd have no choice but to accept that he had lost his humanity.

The doctor picked up a handheld tablet and started to play around with the numbers scrolling across the screen.

Zero tried to make small talk, but it became immediately obvious that Henshaw wasn't listening.

He was too focused on the task at hand.

Henshaw tapped the screen with his index finger and Zero felt a weird twitch in his legs. Then he heard a mechanical squeal and looked down to see two hatches open on each of his thighs. Inside were two handguns. Henshaw hit the screen again and a larger hatch opened lower down on his right leg. Inside was a rifle of some sort. He hadn't even known he had that in him.

Henshaw hit the screen again and all three hatches slammed shut. He unplugged the three leads from his chest and finally said, "Try to get to your guns now."

He didn't know how.

Henshaw must've seen the confusion on his face. "Pretend you need them to protect yourself.

You need to need them to make them deploy."

He imagined a couple of scenarios, but nothing happened.

The doc said, "Imagine that you were at the training camp when it was infiltrated. Imagine that

you were the only one there who could save everyone.”

He'd barely formed the thought when all three hatches opened and his hands shot down to retrieve the two handguns. He held them up menacingly before he realized how inappropriate the gesture was.

The doctor said, “Good. I think we got it.”

Slowly, Zero put the guns away, then the doc closed his chest cavity with the wrench.

Henshaw looked him in the eyes and said conspiratorially, “I’m sorry for your malfunction. I think it was my fault. I tweaked your settings away from their factory presets and I must’ve done something wrong. It’s all fixed now.”

“Is that what happened to the others?”

“Oh no. They simply malfunctioned. It happens.”

So his malfunction was a direct result of whatever Henshaw had done to him. “Why did you

change my presets?”

Henshaw avoided eye contact now. “I was just tinkering around, is all. You’re all better now.”

He knew the doc was hiding something, but before Zero could grill him, the doc waved him off, saying, “Send in the next one. Be quick. We’re running out of time.”

He took one last look at Stacey and went to fetch the next patient.

Eve volunteered to go next. He wasn’t really sure what her malfunction was, but she was eager to get rid of it. She came back a few minutes later, beaming. Her body was shiny and new-looking. She said excitedly, “He knocked all the rust off these old bones and gave me a spit shine. I feel like a brand new girl.”

It was a smart move, otherwise the ambassador would suspect they were lying about being new recruits based on their decayed bodies alone. The only thing that remained of the old Eve

was the number on her chest.

Piss-pants went after her and he too returned within minutes, shiny and new.

Volts went last. He was gone almost as long as Zero. Probably because his malfunction was so severe. Maybe he needed an entire systems overhaul.

Yet he returned with a spring in his step, his metal plates buffed and reflective.

He whispered, “The doctor had to go in through my back plate. I was scared to death that he’d mention the hack job we did to bypass the kill switch back there, but he didn’t say a word about it and he didn’t undo the work.”

Zero screwed his face up. It was great that the doctor was suddenly on their side and wanted the best for them, but there was something off about his behavior.

“Wouldn’t you think he’d remove the bypass if he wanted us to pass as recruits? If someone else finds out what we’ve done, they’ll

know there's something different about us.”

Volts shrugged his shoulders. “I'm just glad he didn't fix it.”

Eve whispered, “I agree with Zero. There's no reason for the doctor to go to such lengths to help us. He has an ulterior motive he's not telling us about.”

Piss-pants said, “Maybe he's helping us because he's a good person.”

Eve shook her head. “He tore our minds out of our bodies and stuffed them inside robots. Good people don't do things like that.”

Zero didn't know what to believe, but he knew suspicious behavior when he saw it, and the doctor was hiding something from them.

Before they could go any further, Stacey walked into the room, followed by Henshaw.

Zero stepped forward and she said, “Is that you, Jack?”

He nodded and added, “It's me, but they call

me Zero nowadays. We all have nicknames.”

She smiled weakly. “This is all so weird.”

She looked around the room at the identical mechs that stared back at her.

She dug her finger into her chest plate and ran a deep groove down its length. “You’ll know me by this mark,” she said. Then she put her finger against his chest and froze when she saw the etched groove already present.

The moment was awkward, so he spoke up.

“We did this already, a couple days ago. Plus, I have this number four to identify me.”

She smiled, but there was a hint of sorrow in it that nearly broke his heart.

She said, “I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t miss anything worth remembering. Epigog sucked. Training sucked. At least you get a second chance.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m lucky,” she said with a total lack of conviction.

It was odd. He was ecstatic that she was alive, but she didn't seem to share his enthusiasm. He wrote the number one on her chest plate with the marker and explained that she was the only one of them to actually earn her number. She waited for him to explain further, but before they had a chance to talk more, Henshaw spoke to them from the front of the room again. "I just overheard Jack tell Stacey that you are all using nicknames now." To him and Stacey he said, "I apologize for eavesdropping." Zero shrugged. A little eavesdropping was hardly a breach of trust compared to ripping his mind out of his head and putting it inside a robot. Henshaw continued, "We can't have any confusion. You need to either go by your nicknames or your birth names from this moment onwards." It made sense to keep things as simple as possible. The best lies were the clean ones with little elaboration, or back-stories to muddle them up.

Henshaw said, “Who among you vote to go by your nicknames?”

Every hand went up except for Piss-pants’ and Stacey’s.

Henshaw said, “Majority rules. You’ll go by your nicknames from now on.”

Piss-pants said, “That’s bullshit! My nickname is Piss-pants.”

Henshaw snorted and the room erupted in laughter. Even Stacey managed a chuckle.

Henshaw said, “That’s unfortunate, but standards must be maintained. If most of you refuse to go by your birth names, then none of you should use them. If anyone asks, just tell them that your parents had a weird sense of humor.”

Piss-pants pointed at Stacey and said, “She didn’t even get a nickname. She gets to use her birth name, so I will too.”

Henshaw looked around at the rest of them.

“Is it possible for each of you to never again use

this young man's nickname?"

Volts said jokingly, "I don't know. I'm too worried I'd screw that up."

Piss-pants yelled at him, "You always call me Dan in private. Stop making this more difficult than it already is."

Volts smiled and said, "I'm just kidding. Of course none of us will refer to him by his nickname."

Henshaw sucked air between his teeth in agitation. He was clearly flustered by the back and forth banter. Maybe he was too old to understand that Volts was just messing with him. "No, no. I think we need to stick to parameters. I'm sorry, son, but you'll just have to live with it. You'll be called Piss-pants until your assignment is over."

Piss-pants punched Volts in the shoulder.

"You're a dick."

"I was just kidding. I'm sorry."

Henshaw cleared his throat loudly to get

them to shut up. “The ambassador will be here in less than an hour. With any luck she’ll believe our story. Fill Stacey in on details about training so she can at least pretend she’s been there.” Then he left the room.

Piss-pants shoved Volts aside and skulked off to the far end of the room. Zero didn’t blame him for being upset, but a silly nickname was the least of their problems.

He walked over to him and said as gently as he could, “Get over yourself and get your ass over here with the rest of us. We have more important things to consider than stupid nicknames.”

His aggression caught him off guard. He was normally pretty docile and understanding, but the situation required more of him than that.

Piss-pants stared at him as though he’d just punched him in the dick. Then he smiled and shrugged. “I knew I was going to like you. You’re right. I can be a bit of a baby sometimes.”

He put an arm over Zero's shoulder and they joined the others.

Zero was glad he understood.

They each gave Stacey specific details about training. Zero didn't have much to offer since he wasn't there for long. She seemed perplexed, but she kept her mouth shut and her ears open. The doctor must have told her how important the cover story was to their survival, because she treated it with the gravity it deserved.

By the time the pant-suited ambassador arrived, they were fairly confident they had their stories straight. Her ship docked and Henshaw looked like he was about to keel over from a heart attack. They waited patiently while he scurried around frantically to get squared away. Henshaw finally returned to the room with her taking up the rear.

She regarded them coolly, like she barely knew what to make of the situation or of the wide-

eyed mechs staring back at her. Henshaw took a seat as she stood front and center of the room.

“The doctor filled me in on what happened to you. We’ll find out which species did that to the camp and punish them accordingly. Luckily, you all led your class, so I’m going to recommend that you be given assignments rather than wait until the camp can be rebuilt.”

Henshaw looked like he wanted to jump up and run around the room, but he contained his enthusiasm.

The ambassador looked at them seriously.

“The Beetar ambassador has been informed of the situation, and he agrees. In fact, he wants us to stick to our original plan and send two recruits out to his warship. He wanted me to send him two of the more qualified candidates, but he’s confident that two of you will be sufficient.” She stared at the numbers on their chest plates and pointed to Piss-pants and Stacey. “You two led your class, so both of you will

be stationed on the warship. You'll travel with me when I leave here."

Henshaw stood up slowly. He looked upset.

With a quavering voice he said, "Zero showed some promise in training too. Would it be possible to station him there instead?"

The ambassador's brow wrinkled. Her voice raised an octave. "I've made my damn decision. I didn't ask for your opinions. Sit down."

Stacey looked at Zero out of the corner of her eye. He couldn't tell if she was happy he'd written the number one on her chest or not, but there was no doubt that his actions had gotten her the post onboard the warship.

The ambassador said, "As for the rest of you, we're prepared to station you on a Beetar controlled planet not far from here. You'll act as enforcers to put down rebellions and maintain civility among its alien residents. Don't worry about your lack of training. You'll be taught by the others already

stationed there.”

That didn't sound too bad, but his enthusiasm was short lived when she added, “You will be launched from this space station and take up orbit around the planet in about a month. There, you'll be picked up and brought to the surface. But here's the part you won't like: you won't be in a ship. Your bodies can withstand the rigors of space on their own. The good doctor will prep you and then launch you bodily.” She smiled when they were rendered speechless.

Zero was the first to break the silence.

“Screw you. I won't do that.”

She looked over at the doctor and Henshaw turned to him. “You'll do what's asked of you. I will empty your fluid systems prior to launch and your consciousness will be turned off for the duration of the trip. We've done it plenty of times. It is nearly risk free. The planet isn't far from here. It's in this very star system, so you don't have very

far to travel.” To the ambassador, he said, “It’ll be done. Don’t worry about it.”

She nodded and then pointed at Stacey and Piss-pants. “Follow me. We’ll launch in a moment.”

She walked from the room, but neither Stacey nor Piss-pants made a move to follow her.

Henshaw rushed forward and said in agitation, “Hurry up. We got very lucky just now. Don’t blow it.”

Stacey gave Zero a hug. She was trembling, even though she was a mech and trembling was not part of her programming.

She whispered, “I’ll see you when our assignment is over.” It was part statement and part question.

He said, “We’ll meet again soon. Go on now.”

She followed after Piss-pants, and Zero’s heart went still.

Volts said to Henshaw, “You’d better have a

plan, because I'm not about to let you shoot me into space without a ship."

Henshaw shook his head. "You don't understand. This is a best case scenario. She didn't even double-check to see if our story was true. The alternative might have been scrapping the lot of you. Please be grateful for such good fortune."

Zero felt no gratitude. The doctor was nuts if he thought they should kiss his ass for this.

The doctor was supercharging them to make sure they had enough juice to last almost a month in a hibernation state while they ripped through space.

When they were fully charged, he fitted each of them with an array of jets that could correct their trajectory should something knock them off course.

He said, "If even the smallest asteroid or rogue body was to interfere with your linear course, you could end up floating through space forever."

If he was trying to alleviate their fears, he sure had an odd way of doing it.

Henshaw picked up on their apprehension and added, “The chances of any of you crossing paths with anything larger than stardust are infinitesimally small, but why take the chance.”

Volts stared at the floor the entire time the doctor was speaking, and Eve kept shaking her head.

Henshaw whispered to Zero, “Should the opportunity arise, I’ll make sure you get posted aboard the warship. It’s a great honor and I wish you’d been picked for it.”

“Why do you care about me more than the others? Stacey and Piss-pants are way more qualified to serve on the warship than I’ll ever be.”

The doctor looked away, which Zero was starting to realize was his tell—he was about to lie.

“Your body was modified. It’s superior to the others. I just wanted to show it off.”

Maybe that was the truth, but Zero doubted it. He had yet to show any signs of performing better than his fellow mechs, and in some cases he

significantly underperformed.

Volts shouted to Henshaw, “I want to see my real body before you launch us. I want to be reminded of what I’m doing this crazy shit for.”

Henshaw stared at Eve and Volts and said, “Your bodies are six months from being ready. If I interrupt the sequence for even a moment to show you your bodies, the program will have to start all over again. It’s against protocol to let you near them and I just won’t allow it.”

Zero spoke up. “How long before mine is done?”

“Your body has only been here for days. You’ll be in the program for a substantially longer amount of time than your friends, because they’re almost done. My best estimate is ten months, but that’s because I’m an optimist. Don’t be surprised if you’re here for as long as a year and a half to two years.”

“Shit.”

“Sorry.”

He asked a question he should've asked before he ever agreed to any of this: “Can I go back to Earth when I'm cured?”

“Of course you can. But do you really want to? There's a whole big, mysterious galaxy out here tailor-made for a young man with a new lease on life.”

Zero would have to consider his options.

The Earth had probably changed in major ways since the last time he'd seen it eight hundred years ago. And if he decided to go back, he'd have to go back into stasis for another eight hundred years. The Earth might not even be fit for life by the time he got there.

He'd have a better idea of his options after his assignment was over and he'd seen another planet or two. Maybe there was a paradise out here perfectly suited to him. Maybe Stacey would decide it suited her too.

But that was a wistful dream he had to make sure didn't rule his thoughts. He liked Stacey. He wanted to get to know more about her. However, he had no idea if the feeling was mutual, so it was stupid to dream up a phony scenario based on no facts whatsoever. He held out hope that their shared experiences would draw them closer over time ... if he ever saw her again.

Henshaw unhooked them from their chargers and said, "It's time. The planet you'll arrive at is called Cogmore. It's temperate and fairly pleasant considering how hostile its inhabitants are. And lucky for you, it's in this very star system. Try to catch up to the other mechs already stationed there—make sure to stick to your cover stories—and you'll be alright. Come with me to the launch bay so we can drain your system fluids and put you in sleep mode. Don't worry. I've done this dozens of times before."

Volts looked like he wanted to run and hide.

Eve looked pissed that she'd been forced into this predicament. Zero was just really apprehensive.

They followed the doctor to the launch bay, where one by one he shut them down. Zero was the last to go dark. Right as the doctor was making the final adjustments, he heard the doctor say to him, "You might be our only chance."

Then everything turned black.

Zero asked, "What does that mean?"

But he was already in orbit above a green and blue planet and the doctor and the space station were nowhere in sight.

His question evaporated in a heartbeat as he stared at the slowly tumbling orb of a planet beneath him. He was space debris. He was helpless.

He hoped someone would come and get him like the doctor had said they would.

Part 3:

Cogmore

He saw the ship approaching from behind. A jet on his left side loosed a burst to adjust his trajectory so his orbit wouldn't decay. If Cogmore was as large as the Earth, then he was probably traveling in orbit at around seventeen thousand miles an hour just to keep from falling inward. The ship was closing on him, so it was traveling even faster than that.

A large door opened when it was near enough for him to make out details. A mech was inside, fiddling with something he couldn't quite make out.

Then he saw it toss something his way like he was throwing a dart. A steel cable. It got close enough to grab, so he got hold of it as tightly as he could and waited to see what would happen next.

The cable went taut. His grip was loose and

weak, but it was enough. He started moving towards the ship, and when he got close he saw that the other mech was none other than his buddy Volts. Eve was standing behind him, coiling up the cable as he fed it back to her.

Volts smiled when he took his hand and pulled him all the way in. He tried to shake his hand, but he couldn't move. He fell over as though he'd been shut off. Volts pulled him along the floor enough to allow the door to shut. The atmosphere hissed, filling the room.

Eve said, "Hold on. I'll refill your system fluids. Then you'll be able to move a little better." She fetched a thick hose and hooked it beneath his chest plate. He felt the liquid filling his robotic veins and his body began to feel normal once more. He slowly stood up, careful not to do too much too soon.

Volts clapped him on the shoulder and Eve gave him a hug.

Volts said, "You're late, dude. We thought you were a goner."

"How late am I?"

"You should've arrived yesterday, when we both got here."

"Maybe I went off course like the doctor worried we might."

"Isn't that just about the scariest thought imaginable?"

He was right. The notion sent a phantom shiver through him. He had been on a space adventure that he would never know about. But at least he'd made it to his destination.

Eve said, "We need to strap in. The ship is already tipping landward."

Volts said, "We received a transmission from down there just a few hours ago that if you didn't arrive in another day we would be brought landside without you."

"I guess I made it here just in time."

“Come on. We’ll be grinding against the atmosphere in a few minutes.”

He followed Eve and Volts to a small chamber with a dozen spots along the walls to strap in. He watched Eve slip her harnesses over her body and he did the same. Then the turbulence hit and he was glad to be secured to the ship. There were no windows or monitors to watch their descent, and for that he was thankful. It was violent. He wondered how well built he really was. Would his components vibrate loose with enough turbulence? The ship started to slow down, and then listed to its side as it corrected to take them to their eventual destination. Several loud bangs startled them. It sounded like the ship was being fired upon. The ship shuddered when it finally touched down. They released their straps and walked back to the door Volts and Eve had pulled him through. They waited there to see what would happen next. When the door finally opened, he stepped

backwards in reaction to the absurd sight before him.

A human wearing a gasmask was standing beside a severe-looking Beetar and a mech that towered over them both.

The mech was the scariest thing any of them had ever seen. It had rust spots all over and dents all across its body. But worse, its entire left side was coated in fresh, sticky blood, and the rest of it was stained a dull, faded brown, no doubt from blood that couldn't be washed off entirely. Several plates covering it looked to be newer than the rest, meaning it had sustained enough damage to need repair. Everything about it inspired awe, as well as a healthy dose of fear.

Behind those three was the weirdest little alien imaginable, gray, with black and white mottling on its skin. It had a single circular, lidless eye in the center of its flat face, with an iris as green as an emerald. If it had a nose or ears, they weren't immediately evident. It had a tiny mouth that was

nothing more than a thin slit below its big green eye, and was wearing a colorful robe that covered its entire body, so they had no idea what it looked like underneath. It was about five feet tall and it sort of bobbed up and down as it watched them. They assumed it was one of the indigenous inhabitants of Cogmore.

The Beetar stared at them disapprovingly, or so Zero thought, and then turned and walked away. They were in a large aircraft hangar with an open roof. Besides their landing ship, the hangar was empty.

The human lifted his gasmask and wheezed, "Follow me inside. I can't breathe this filthy air."

The mech bowed to them and said with an air of authority born of experience, "Hurry up. The ship's automatic. It'll take off with you on it if you stay there."

The gray alien stared at them. It was impossible to tell from its face what it was thinking.

They stepped from the ship and followed after the human in the gasmask and his alien companion. The mech stayed put as the ship lifted off. As soon as the ship rose through the roof opening, they heard several pops. Zero turned around and saw projectiles bouncing off the exterior of the ship as it rose.

He was right. When they'd descended into the atmosphere, the ship had been fired upon.

The mech crouched down and then leapt high into the air. Before it started to fall, its metal feet lit up like the sun and it lifted into the sky.

Before it vanished through the roof opening, it reached for its guns. Zero had never seen anything so impressive in his entire life. It was a robot built for battle, and eager for it too.

It swerved out of view and then he heard its hand cannons blasting away relentlessly. It was killing the Cogmores who had attacked the ship.

Volts said, "I wonder when we'll get cool

rocket boosters like that.”

The human removed his gasmask and his expression was full of confusion. “What do you mean? They’re already built in to your unit. Don’t you know that?”

They didn’t, but it was exciting to find it out.

The mech appeared at the roof opening once more, and was about to descend when it was hit with a shot. It spun around lightning fast and whooshed from sight again. They didn’t wait around for it to return.

Once they left the hangar, the guy in the gasmask waved off his alien counterpart and it scurried off through a doorway like a pet. He then removed his mask and they walked down one long hallway after another until they came to an office.

The guy took a seat behind the only desk in the room and they stood before him, waiting to see what he had to say.

He laid the gasmask on his desk beside two

others just like it. “My name is General Parsons and I’m in command. I used to be just like you. I had an inoperable brain tumor on Earth, but our humble benefactors fixed me up and gave me a new chance at life. After my commitment to them was up, I decided to stay on and help in any way I could.”

It sounded empty, like a speech he’d reiterated a thousand times. On closer inspection the general wasn’t much older than Zero. He was in his mid-twenties, prematurely balding, with faint crow’s feet wrinkles that painted a picture of a man who’d lived too fast too soon.

He picked up a coffee cup, sipped from it, scrunched up his face, and spat the contents back into the cup. “This place is a hellhole. That’s why you’re here. I have to admit how disappointed I am that there are just three of you. I was expecting eight trained soldiers, not three untrained bozos.”

He glared at them like it was their fault.

Eve said sarcastically: “Well, it’s nice to be

appreciated.”

“Shut up. You have so little time to prepare for this place that I’ll be surprised if all of you survive long enough to get any good at your job. But I also understand that this is not your fault, so I’m going to invest some time getting you trained up. It would be murder if I set you loose without the basic essentials to defend yourselves. I have four soldiers at my disposal here, which means I’m desperately undermanned already, but I’m going to dedicate one of them to training you three. It’ll be accelerated training that’ll focus only on combat and survival.”

Zero was starting to get excited. If he could do half of what that mech in the hangar could, he was about to become a veritable superhero.

Parsons keyed a desk-mounted radio and said into it, “Jackson, come to my office. The new arrivals are here.”

A moment went by before a masculine voice

returned over the speaker: “Shit. I was kind of hoping the Cogmores would blow their ship out of the sky so I wouldn’t have to do this.”

Parsons chuckled. “I hear you. Get your ass in here.”

Jackson had char marks on his torso and several dents from bullet hits across his metal frame.

He said, “Come on, troops. I’ve got something special set up for you.”

Parsons stared into his coffee mug with a disgusted look on his face, now ignoring them completely. Jackson smirked at his commander and then ushered them from the office with an impatient wave of his hand.

The same Beetar who’d greeted them when they landed walked past. Jackson bowed his head low but they were caught unprepared, so they didn’t get a chance to follow suit. The Beetar regarded them coolly, but it said nothing.

As soon as it was out of earshot, Jackson

turned on them. “Didn’t they teach you etiquette? You bow when your saviors pass you by. Do you understand me?”

They nodded. It wasn’t their fault they didn’t know that yet.

He shook his head angrily. “We’re here. It’s time to prove your mettle.”

Inside the room was a gathering of those little gray aliens. They were naked, which caused Eve to gasp and Volts to mumble something under his breath.

They had upper bodies similar to humans in that they had two arms and a flat torso with few distinguishing features. But the lower half of their bodies was a tangled mess of thin tendrils, gray and semi-opaque. There were thousands or maybe millions of them, pencil thin and three feet long. Some of them moved while others stayed rooted to the spot. There was nothing on Earth Zero could compare them to except maybe a box jellyfish, but

even that was a weak comparison. He couldn't help but wonder if their many skinny tentacles were poisonous too.

Jackson said, "These are Cogmore criminals.

The Beetar garrison has sentenced them all to death for various crimes. I want you three to carry out the executions."

Zero gasped and shook his head.

Volts said, "No way."

Eve whispered, "That's murder. I won't."

Jackson sneered. "You will do it, whether you want to or not. It seems barbaric now, but give this place a few months and you'll wish you could kill all of these sons of bitches."

The gray aliens stared at them like they were devils. Their single eyes watered, but Zero couldn't tell if they were tears or if they just did that all the time.

In an act of desperation, Eve asked, "Don't you want to give us a tour of the facility first, or

show us our living quarters?”

Jackson laughed, but there was little humor in it. He pulled a handgun out and tossed it to the crowd of naked Cogmores. At first the aliens just stared after the firearm suspiciously, but then they all made a dive for it at once. One of them came up with it and aimed it at Zero.

Automatically, the hatches in his thighs opened, giving him access to his weapons—his programming, fixed by Henshaw, doing what it was supposed to do. Volts and Eve were ready to defend themselves as well.

The alien seemed to be in two minds about what he or she should do next. It stared at the gun and then flung it at its feet as if it were electrified. It understood enough about them to know that they would respond in ways detrimental to its health if it continued threatening them with bodily harm. It was a smart little guy.

Zero sighed with relief when his hatches

slammed shut.

Jackson looked disgusted by both the aliens and the mechs. He took a giant step towards the aliens and nudged the gun nearer to them with his mammoth foot. When no one picked it up, he pulled his other handgun and shot the alien who'd thrown it down in the center of its chest. It fell over slowly as the others tried to move out of the way.

Then Jackson stepped back and waited for them to take the hint: they could go out fighting a futile battle against them or they could give themselves over to their fate. Either way they were going to die.

One of them would take a step forward only to hesitate and step back again. Some of them were shaking.

Jackson tired of their indecisiveness, so he shot another one.

The newly arrived mechs watched in utter horror as he loomed over the little creatures,

carrying out his sadistic tortures.

Zero looked at Volts, who had an expression of confusion and terror. They were way outside their comfort zone. Eve looked to be in a fugue state. Her mind couldn't handle what she was seeing.

Zero just couldn't stand it anymore. The Cogmores were terrified and there was no escape for them. They could die immediately without all of the suspense, or they could play Jackson's game and let him get his kicks out of their fear and reluctance. In the end, they'd die anyway.

His hatches slid open and he grabbed his guns. He started to fire into the crowd. His aim was perfect, hitting each Cogmore center mass, killing them instantly.

When the last one fell, he put his guns away, walked up to Jackson, and punched him in his face. "Is that what you wanted, you piece of shit? Well, there you go. They're all dead. Let's move on."

Jackson slapped him on the back good-

naturedly. “Good job.”

When he turned to face them, Volts and Eve were casting awkward glances back and forth.

He said, “I’m sorry. That asshole would have toyed with them and basked in their terror until we killed them. I figured why should I give him the pleasure?”

Volts said, “You did the right thing under the circumstances, but it’s a bit of a shock. I’ve killed too, but never defenseless creatures like that.”

Eve added, “It had to be done,” but Zero thought she was just trying to convince herself of it.

He holstered his guns and the hatches clicked shut. He hung his head in shame. He was no killer. But they had no choice in the matter. Had he stalled, they would’ve had to watch as Jackson humiliated and tortured every last one of them.

The reasoning did little to alleviate his guilt.

Jackson laughed. “You’re all so glum. You passed the first and hardest part of your combat

training. Cheer up. Come on, I'll show you to your living quarters."

Zero wanted to put a bullet in the back of his head as he led the way.

As they walked, Jackson said, "One day you'll be asked to take new troops to execute Cogmore criminals like I just did with you. When that day comes, you'll be ready. I know you can barely imagine it, but it's true. You'll hate them with all of your hearts."

Eve cleared her throat and asked, "What did those criminals do?"

Zero thought she was hoping to hear they were all serial killers or rapists. That would make her feel better about what he'd done.

Jackson shrugged nonchalantly. "The Beetars judge them. We just carry out the sentencing."

The living quarters were even shoddier than their topside base back at Epigog. Recharge ports

hung from the walls; the floor was littered with trash and broken objects that looked like lighting fixtures. He looked up and saw there was only one working light on the ceiling, the two that sandwiched it burnt out or otherwise unlit.

A voice issued from speakers somewhere nearby. It was Parsons' voice. "Jackson, the unit named Zero may rest, but the other two need to prove themselves immediately. Bring them back to the execution chamber."

Eve said, "What the hell does that mean?"

Jackson smirked. "It means you're not off the hook yet."

She said, "I won't do it. You can't make me."

Jackson sighed. "Every new arrival must prove themselves. I assumed Parsons would give you guys a break because you've been through so much already, and because your training was cut way short, but I guess I was wrong. Come on. I'll

fetch us some more victims.”

Eve and Volts looked to Zero to help them, but there was nothing he could do. In fact, they were more advanced than he was, so they should really be guiding him, not vice versa. He had never proven himself. He had made it through just one day of training before washing out. Then the only time the defenses on Epigog had ever been overrun by an invader had happened during his tenure. He hadn't even made it into orbit around Cogmore on time. He was a reject in every way imaginable, and in his book he'd failed the last test too, because he'd slaughtered unarmed civilians.

As they left him alone, he felt the loneliness seeping through his circuits. He wasn't sure what kind of man he would be when it was time to upload back into his human body, but he was sure he would be far more jaded and heartless than the man he started out as. They would fix his body but they would break his mind.

He stood against the wall and waited for Volts and Eve to return. He considered etching a hash mark into the wall to start his countdown to freedom, but he'd been given no specific end date, so that was futile.

The mean-looking mech that had greeted them upon arrival walked into the room. He said, "I'm Mike. I heard you passed the first test but those other rejects failed out. Good work, soldier. You'll do just fine here."

"Thanks. When will we begin our assignments?"

"I don't know. We've never received a bunch of unproven cadets before, so I don't know if or when you'll be ready. That's for Parsons to decide."

That hurt his feelings. "Did you kill those aliens that shot at the ship?"

Mike smiled wickedly. There was genuine joy in his voice when he said, "Those dirty little

bastards keep it up even though they know I'll turn them into spaghetti. They're the dumbest bunch of backwoods aliens you could ever hope to kill. I got about two dozen of them, but that doesn't mean it's over. Others will seek retribution for those deaths, so they'll keep sending meat into my grinder." He paused and looked him up and down as though he was evaluating him on the spot. "I can't blame them for trying to take down the ship, though. They know reinforcements come in that ship, so it only makes sense for them to try and destroy it."

Mike pulled a huge box away from the wall and flipped the lid open. Inside was enough ammo to take down God and all his angels. He grabbed his left forearm with his right hand and jiggled it around. His forearm opened like a door. He started to insert the ammo into the opening, then did the same to the other arm. He gestured for Zero to come closer. He stepped forward and Mike asked, "Did they show you how to reload?"

“No. We didn’t get far enough in training.”

Mike snorted and said, “Try it yourself.

You’re already programmed to know what to do.”

He was right. As soon as Zero grabbed his forearm, he knew how it all worked. The ammo fed up through his arm, into the palms of his hands, and then directly into the guns. He filled both arms until he could fit no more in.

Mike said, “You’ll be refilling a lot on this planet. Those Cogmores are relentless.”

“Why do they hate you so much?”

“Who cares? This is our assignment and there’s no point second-guessing its merits. The Beetars are trying to civilize the Cogmores, and the only way to do that is to force civility down their throats. That’s where we come in. If we do our job we get our bodies back better than they were when we left them. It’s a good gig that benefits everyone.”

Zero nodded, even though he was pretty sure

the Cogmores weren't getting much benefit from it.

Then again, there were numerous instances in human history where a more advanced civilization forced its values and practices upon a backwards one and both sides gained in the end, so maybe this would work out for all involved.

But getting to that eventuality could be bloody. History books tended to omit or gloss over how many of the conquered had to die before their people embraced the foreign ideals of their conquerors. It took some of the polish off of the boots that marched towards progress.

Then again, history wasn't his forte so maybe he had it all wrong. He just didn't have enough information to form an opinion yet. And maybe Mike was right, maybe it was better to just do what was expected than to question everything.

“My name's Zero. The other guy is Volts and the girl's name is Eve.”

Mike cocked his head to the side, probably

trying to figure out if he was pulling his leg. Then he said, “You’ll do well here, Zero. I’m going to charge up while there’s some downtime. I’ll see you when I wake up.”

He said, “Okay,” and watched Mike go to the furthest port and plug in. His body slumped against the wall and his head hung low.

Once again, he was alone.

Jackson returned an hour later with Eve and Volts in tow. As if they were lifelong buddies, he said to Zero, “These two cowards got it done eventually. I thought I was going to have to execute the entire lot and bring in a fresh crop, but they got the hint and did their part before I ran through them all.”

He clapped Zero on the shoulder, and when he saw Mike charging said, “I see you met Mike. He’s great. It’s our down day so you’ll be seeing us around all day today. Tomorrow you’ll meet Kathy and Winthrop. Winthrop’s a tool, but watch out if

he gets angry. You'll see what I mean soon enough, I'm sure. I'm going to charge up since there's nothing going on. If Parsons calls for me, could you unplug me?"

Zero nodded, wondering why the training had ended so abruptly. He thought it was supposed to be an accelerated crash course.

Jackson plugged in and his body wilted.

Volts said, "We ought to kill him where he stands."

Eve nodded.

Jackson's head shot up and he turned on Volts. Only then did they notice he hadn't actually plugged himself all the way in. "If you think you can take me, come on!"

Volts took a step towards him, but Zero shoved him back. "He's doing his job. Let it go. If you kill one of our own, you'll be punished."

Jackson laughed heartily. "That coward could never kill me. These suits are awesome, but

only when they're being piloted by warriors. That wimp is a waste of a suit."

Volts' hand went down to his thigh, searching for his gun. But the hatch wouldn't open. Jackson laughed again. "You idiots truly are untrained fools, aren't you? You can't deploy your weapons against friendlies. We learned that in our first week of training. Apparently I have my work cut out for me with you guys."

Zero still had a hand on Volts' chest. "Just let it go, dude. Let him charge and we'll talk."

Volts slapped his arm away like he was the bad guy. He walked over to the other end of the room and sat down against the wall.

Jackson smirked and plugged into the port, all the way this time.

When they were sure Jackson was offline, Eve said, "He gunned them down, one after the other, saying he'd keep bringing in new fodder until we did our duty. It was awful, Zero. Volts and I

killed more of them than you did, and Jackson told us afterwards that our victims weren't even criminals. We killed innocents because we didn't have what it took to do what had to be done the first time around."

He put an arm around her waist and walked her toward Volts. She sat down and Zero sat between them both.

Volts wouldn't look them in the eyes. He was a shell of his former, confident self, and it broke Zero's heart to see such a rapid decline in him.

Eve picked up one of the fallen ports and handed it to him. "You'll need to charge up soon."

Volts said viciously, "No I don't! I'm fixed now, remember? I'm no different than anyone else."

Eve put the port down gently and stared at the filthy floor. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

Zero picked the port up and jammed it into Volts' back before he could stop him. He instantly went limp.

He explained to Eve, “He’s always in better spirits after a charge.”

She tried to smile, but she couldn’t manage it. She said sheepishly, “I’m going to plug in too, then, if that’s okay with you?”

He hated to be left alone again, but there was no way he could deny her when it was so clear she needed to get out of her own head for a while.

She plugged in before he responded, so it was probably for the best that he was about to tell her to go ahead and do it.

Misery loves company, but so does failure, and they had all failed their humanity by executing innocent strangers. He’d been a very sad and lonely robot lately, but it was worse this time.

He stood up and took one last look around before leaving the inanimate mechs to go explore the facility. With no one to talk to, he had to change his perspective and get out of his own mind for a little while.

He wandered the corridors, peering inside rooms as he went. Some of the rooms held Cogmore prisoners while others were completely empty.

He saw an opulent room with large ornate doors. The doors were open so he had a look inside.

The Beetar who'd met them when they landed was standing at an alien console in the center of the room. It saw him staring at it, so he averted his gaze and bowed his head. He turned to walk away when he heard a squelching sound that coalesced into words.

“What are you doing?”

He turned back and sheepishly said, “I'm new here. I was just taking in my surroundings. I'm sorry for disturbing you.”

“You humans are so curious. I understand you were one of the survivors of the training camp attack on Epigog.”

“Yes.” He felt like the Beetar wanted him to elaborate, but he was worried he'd dig himself a

hole he wouldn't be able to pull himself out of if he said more.

"We're still looking for the perpetrators of the attack. They've gone dark, but they'll surface eventually."

Again, he wanted to interject, but according to his cover story he'd been charging when the attack occurred, so he kept his mouth shut to avoid putting his foot in it.

The Beetar said, "My name is Thrimmel.

I'm in charge of this facility."

"I'm Zero. It's good to meet you."

"Yes. You may go."

He walked away unsure of whether he liked the Beetar or not. He had the feeling that he'd annoyed him with his mere presence.

After another couple minutes of walking he saw a room packed wall to wall with Cogmores. It was a holding cell of some kind. He wanted to let them out, but his presence had them scrambling

away from the door in fear.

Parsons' voice came from a nearby speaker.

“Mike, bring the new meat to my office. You'd better not be sleeping, you lazy sack of shit.”

Zero was the only one of them who could hear the message, so he quickly walked back to the living quarters and unplugged everyone except Jackson.

He told Mike that Parsons wanted him to bring them to his office.

On the way there, Volts grabbed his arm.

“Thanks for plugging me in. I feel a bit better now.”

Eve added, “Me too. I'm still a little shaky, but I'll get over it.”

He said, “Next time I get to charge and one of you guys can stay awake.” He was mad they'd gotten over what they'd done so easily while he was still despondent.

Parsons was standing when they arrived. He said to Mike, “Next time I call, you'd better move

faster than this.”

Mike smiled as if he didn't give a damn.

Parsons asked, “Were you asleep?”

“Nope.”

“Liar.” He cleared his throat. “I need you to take these guys out on patrol.”

“That's not safe.”

“Nothing's safe here.”

“Fine. But I'll choose the location.”

“Fine.”

They followed Mike out to the hangar, where he stopped them. “When you arrived, I noticed you were surprised by my boosters. Do you know how to operate yours?”

Volts said, “We didn't get that far in our training.”

“It's easy. Do what I do.” Then Mike jumped high into the air and the bottom of his feet sparked to life. He hovered for a second and then fell back to the floor with a clang.

Zero jumped, but his heart wasn't in it and it showed. Nothing happened. Volts leapt higher than he did and his feet lit up, but he lost his balance right before his boosters gave out and he fell over onto his side.

Eve smirked at Mike when he turned to her, but she complied and succeeded. She hovered five feet above the floor until Mike said, "Good job. Now turn it off."

She did and she hit the ground with a loud thud.

Mike said, "If you use it too long you'll run out of propulsion and fall out of the sky like a stone. It's happened to me before and it's not pretty. You have about ten minutes of constant use. When you run out, you need to wait for your internal systems to create more from the air around you."

Zero assumed they had something within their bodies that separated oxygen out of the air, or maybe something even more flammable, and stored

it.

Mike said, “Try again until you have it down. The boosters give us a tactical advantage over the Cogmores, so they are our most useful tool.”

He jumped as high as he could, and as if on cue, the bottoms of his feet opened up and shot out thick streams of fire. He hovered there and asked, “Why are the boosters flammable? Don’t concentrated jets of air work just as well or better?”

Mike chuckled. “It’s a toss-up. But flaming boosters can be used as weapons where jets can not.”

Zero imagined burning a frightened Cogmore’s face off with his feet, and the mental image broke his concentration. His boosters flickered and he fell awkwardly to the ground.

Not to be outdone, Volts jumped up and stayed there. Then he rose higher and started to bank this way and that, showing off.

Mike said, "That's good, man. We're ready to go and put some fear into these scurrying insects. Let's go."

Mike went over to the closest wall and hit a big red button. The overhead doors slid open. Then he jumped up and his boosters lit, taking him higher. He zipped from view once he'd cleared the hangar doors.

Volts looked at Zero and then Eve. He shrugged and jumped, his boosters carrying him through the doors too.

Zero waited for Eve to go next. He thought it was the chivalrous thing to do, although he was not sure why he thought that. Sure, she was a girl, but she was piloting a mech that could tear a tank in half. She jumped, and after a brief hiccup where she listed too far to the right, she vanished too.

He leapt up and felt himself rising. Once above the hangar, he took in the scene. The planet wasn't much more hospitable than Epigog 31,

although this planet at least had indigenous life. He could see smoke from a few fires off in the distance, and smelled rotten produce in the air. No building was higher than a single story, and most of them looked like lean-tos. A shanty town as far as the eye could see. Most of it looked to be abandoned.

He must've hovered in one spot for too long because he was hit with gunfire. Before he could react, he saw Mike zoom past him, and then he heard his guns go off. A moment later Mike was beside him yelling, "Move it, asshole! These guys are the enemy and you're giving them a stationary target."

He felt like a fool. He followed after Mike as he swerved through the air. As he flew behind him he saw blood spatters running down Mike's back and legs.

He landed in a flat area devoid of vegetation or life of any type. Volts and Eve were waiting for them. His boosters kicked up little dust devils as he

landed. Flying was fun despite the hazards associated with it.

He thought they would regroup, but Mike wasted no time. “Move it. Follow me. If you see anything suspicious, fire on it.”

“How will we know if something is suspicious?”

“Everything’s dangerous on Cogmore. Let’s go.” He took off at a jog and they followed after him the best they could. Mike had his guns out, so they made the conscious decision to open their weapon hatches. Zero felt like a badass.

They ran down an alleyway, possibly the only alley in the city—or town, or hovel, or whatever this place was. Most of the buildings were too rickety or small to have walls big or sturdy enough to hide behind. As soon as they emerged, they came under fire from small arms. The bullets pinged harmlessly off of Mike and he took to the fight like he’d been looking forward to it all day. He

whooshed into the air and swooped up and down, in and out, taking out the handful of attackers.

They stood rooted to the spot and watched him work. He fired each time he was close enough to the assailants, blowing them apart into splattery, sludgy messes.

Some of the Cogmores hid behind plywood boards and piles of trash while others hugged walls, taking potshots around corners.

The three of them had nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. An RPG exploded in front of them, knocking them back and slamming Eve into the wall.

Volts shot into the air and went straight towards the lone attacker, his guns out and firing as he descended. The Cogmore flew apart like a burst water balloon and Volts hovered above his corpse to make certain he would never move again. Mike fired a quick burst at a target in the distance and then flew back to join them. Volts turned and came

back too.

They set down, Mike plastered in thick blood and gore and Volts hyperventilating even though he had no lungs or adrenaline.

The coast was clear, but Mike didn't let his guard down for a second. "Hurry up. More of them will show up soon."

As they ran, Zero said to Mike, "These people don't seem conquered to me. In fact, they act like they're at war."

"This is a big planet. The rest of the world has learned to do what's expected of them, but all the revolutionaries come here because this is where we are, and where the Beetars operate from. The attackers actually make up a fraction of a percent of the Cogmore population. The rest of these insects have bowed to their superiors."

Mike fired his gun and a single Cogmore ahead of them fell over dead. Sure enough, it had a rifle clutched in its tiny hands.

He turned back towards them and pointed at the alleyway they'd come from. "That's Beetar headquarters. They call it a garrison, but we do all the soldiering for them. It's mostly filled with diplomats and strategists and such."

That explained why the buildings stood out from the neighborhood.

A shadow fell over them and Mike reacted like a coiled spring. When he saw what cast the shadow, he relaxed. He put his gun down by his thigh and said, "That's Kathy up there. Winthrop's bound to be flying around here somewhere too. They're a good team. It's their watch, that's why we're just dicking around today. You'll be with them all day tomorrow."

If this was dicking around, Zero was scared to death to find out what the real job entailed. Kathy waved down at them, and in that split second she was fired upon.

Mike ran off, shouting, "Hurry up!" over his

shoulder.

They didn't see any more Cogmores, but they were hit from behind a couple of times.

Mike stopped and beckoned for them to turn around. They were on a barren patch of land.

Beyond were three buildings. Two were identical, side by side. Beetars headquarters. Towering above them from behind was a fat lump of a building. That one was their building. Besides that, as far as they could see was a barren wasteland dotted with makeshift huts.

He said, "You'd be surprised by how civilized the Cogmores are around the rest of the planet. The assholes all congregate here."

Eve asked, "What's the rest of the world like?"

"They farm for the Beetars. They grow this seed or something that the Beetars enjoy grinding up and drinking in their water. I'd compare it to coffee, but it would be a terrible comparison.

Parsons says it's like sludge with a hint of diarrhea and cigar smoke. He keeps trying to learn to like it, but he can't."

Volts asked, "Where's all the wildlife and vegetation?"

"From what I've been told, the Beetars killed everything off that didn't aide the Cogmores in growing their cash crops. It was a smart move if you think about it. They took away their infrastructure. The Cogmores now serve one purpose, and that's to grow the crops. In return, they're fed and kept safe."

Zero said, "That doesn't sound like a good deal. It sounds like the Cogmores are slaves."

"I don't have all the answers. The Beetars work in mysterious ways. We had a guy here who thought the Beetars had to intervene to stop the Cogmores from ruining their own planet the same way we humans ruined Earth. If that's right, then the Beetars saved the Cogmores from themselves."

Zero sighed, unsure if he was playing for the good guys anymore.

Mike said, “It’s best to obey orders. You can question everything later, when you get your bodies back. Until then, we serve a purpose. Once you go on patrol you won’t give a damn about motives or reason, you’ll just want to kill as many Cogmores as possible, because they’ll be trying to kill you.”

Zero looked at the three buildings in the distance. It was ridiculous that so much blood was being shed over three simple nondescript structures.

“If all the bad Cogmores convene on those three buildings, then why not evacuate them and nuke the shit out of the entire area? We could then set up base somewhere else.”

Mike nodded as though he was considering the merits of Zero’s idea. Then he shook his head abruptly and said, “We don’t make those types of decisions. Like I said, just keep your questions to yourselves and do your duty and maybe you’ll

survive long enough to get reunited with your flesh.”

A mech flew their way from the direction of the buildings and landed a few feet in front of them.

It had blood dripping from its metal surfaces and little char marks here and there. It said to Mike, “Kathy told me the new meat is here.” To them it said, “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Winthrop.”

He went around and shook each of their hands as they told him who they were.

Winthrop turned to Mike. “If you’re heading back to base now, I can cut a path for you.”

Mike looked them over and seemed to judge them on the spot. “Yeah, that might be a good idea. We’ll be right behind you.”

Winthrop leapt up and then shot off through the air.

Mike started to jog. “Hurry up.”

They got through the alleyway between the two identical buildings without being ambushed,

and flew up and in through the opening at the top of their base without taking fire.

Meanwhile, Winthrop whooshed about like an angry hornet, letting loose burst after burst of small arms fire wherever he saw a potential threat.

Mike set down between them and said, “Good job, soldiers. What do you think of the place?”

Zero said, “It’s a nightmare. Has anyone ever been taken down out there?”

He laughed. “Oh yeah. It happens all the time. That’s why we were in such desperate need of replacements.”

Volts said, “But we were the last of them. Does that mean there’ll be no more troops coming through here?”

“No way. They’ve probably rebuilt the training center back on Epigog already. A fresh batch of recruits is probably being processed as we speak.”

That was a good thing. Zero could already tell they were woefully undermanned here.

Mike added, “Give it a couple months and we’ll see some new meat come through here again.”

Zero hoped he was right. He hoped they would survive long enough to see them too.

They met with Jackson even though none of them had yet forgiven him for what he’d made them do to the captive Cogmores. Mike went off to meet with Parsons.

Jackson led them to a filthy room with dented walls, peeling paint, and light fixtures that hung from the ceiling like they’d been yanked out.

There was a bank of monitors against one wall, and nothing else besides a single table in the middle of the room.

Jackson said, “The reason most of this place looks like a bomb hit it is because one did. We were infiltrated last year and the Cogmores hit us hard.

They killed three units before we wiped them all

out.”

Eve asked, “How many Cogmores were there?”

“Thousands. It was a concerted effort to get rid of us once and for all. That’s why we run round-the-clock sweeps now and eliminate threats on sight.”

Jackson waved towards the monitors. “And it’s why we have those things. Now we can see everything within a twenty mile radius of this building. Once we get a few more soldiers based here, we’ll make someone a dedicated surveillance officer who can stay with the cameras and keep a constant vigil of our surroundings. Until then, we only use this room at night when our patrols are less effective.” He pointed at Zero. “You go and get recharged just now. You’ll take the watch with me tonight.”

Zero hated the notion of staying up all night with Jackson the jerk, but if manning the monitors

was part of the job then he'd do what had to be done.

He said, "Goodnight, then," and left them.

He walked back to the living quarters and plugged in for a quick charge.

He awoke from his charge. Mike was in the room with him, and locked him in a stare and said incredulously, "You've only been charging for twenty minutes. There's no way you're fully charged."

He knew he was right. He felt drowsy still.

He said, "Sometimes I pop awake in the middle of a charge. I don't know why."

"That's impossible. Charging shuts you down until it's over."

"Well, then there's something wrong with my unit, because it happens all the time."

Mike stared at him as though he didn't quite believe it. He changed the subject. "I relayed your idea to Parsons and he said he'll think about approaching the Beetars with it."

“What idea?”

“Your idea to evacuate the buildings and nuke this area.”

“Oh.”

“I doubt they’ll consider it though. As long as they have the situation contained, they won’t change a thing.”

“Thank you anyway.”

“Hey, if they go for it and it gets rid of most of the attackers, I’ll be thanking you.”

He felt weary. He said, “I’ll see you when I wake up.”

Mike watched as he closed his eyes. Right before he fell back to sleep he heard Mike mutter, “That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.”

He awoke to Jackson’s mechanical face. He was holding his charge port in his fist. “Rise and shine, sleepy head.”

Zero stepped away from the wall and counted three mechs, inanimate as they charged. He

also noticed two big blocky objects dangling from power ports. He'd never seen anything like that before.

Eve, Volts, and Mike were down for the night while Winthrop and Kathy stayed on duty.

Jackson walked away, so he followed after him. They came to the monitor room and he stood three feet from the bank of screens. He said, "It gets boring, but it has to be done. I've personally saved lives by paying attention in this room. I've had my own life saved too."

Zero asked, "How is it that Winthrop and Kathy can hold a charge for so long?" They were operating all day long without a charge.

Jackson looked at his feet. "We've lost so many troops here that we have spare parts readily available. We keep four back-up power packs rummaged from dead units that can be interchanged in the middle of a shift so that we can stay on duty for twice as long as usual. Mike swapped Kathy and

Winthrop's out an hour ago. Their used power packs are charging as we speak, to be used later, probably on me and Mike sometime tomorrow."

So that's what those blocky things were dangling from the charging ports back in the living quarters. If only Volts had known it was possible to swap out power packs, he wouldn't have powered off so often in the middle of a shift back on Epigog. Then again, that would have required there being an extra pack to work with, and he wasn't sure he'd had one at his disposal on Epigog.

He asked about the oversized paper map that covered the entire surface of the table behind them.

"What is that thing and why isn't it digital?"

"You know what it is, dumbass. It's a map of the area. It's paper because Parsons likes paper.

He draws a new one up every few days. I think he likes to see the progress we've made."

"But digitizing it would make changes so much quicker."

“Listen, man. Parsons has nothing to do while he’s here. It’s not his fault either. He’s limited by his flesh and lungs. He can’t breathe the air so he’s a prisoner in this facility. He keeps his sanity by doing busy-work, and that’s okay by me.”

They double-checked the monitors for movement, but all was still outside.

Jackson told him a story. Zero thought it was to help clear the air about the executions he’d had them perform earlier.

“There was a unit here named Jennifer Hastings. We went through training together and formed a bond, and wouldn’t you know it, she got stationed here with me. I had no idea what she looked like in real life, but our personalities clicked.

We made a vow to stay together after we got our bodies back. It would be like a blind date except that I already knew everything about her. It was perfect. We were fish out of water in this part of the galaxy, in this timeframe, but at least we’d have

each other. Well, two months ago, during a routine patrol of the perimeter, she was ambushed by around a hundred Cogmores. I was in here watching the monitors. I saw them coming, but they were too fast. By the time I alerted her she'd already started to take fire. She put up one hell of a fight, but they brought her down. When her teammate arrived, the Cogmores took him out too. I watched as those little bastards tore parts off of her. Saw them drag her head away into the desert. By the time we reacted, they were long gone."

Zero wanted to put an arm over his shoulder, but he was too despondent already. Physical contact would probably make him jump out of his metal skin.

"That's why I enjoy killing Cogmores. I had one chance at real happiness and they stole it from me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"You hate me now for what I made you do,

but you'll learn to loathe everything about them.

Mike told me about your idea to lure them all in here and then bomb them off the face of the planet, so I know you're starting to see them for what they really are, too."

"No, I don't hate them yet. I just thought you guys were spilling a lot of blood in these small skirmishes and not making a difference. A large scale attack with an exclamation point behind it would make an impact. Think Hiroshima or Nagasaki."

"What does that mean?"

"The first atomic bombs ever dropped as an act of warfare were dropped there, and they caused so much devastation all at once that the enemy had no choice but to surrender."

"I see. It's a good idea, but don't be surprised if Parsons doesn't bring your suggestion to the Beetars. They tend to look at us like we're rabid dogs or something."

“It wasn’t much of an idea anyway. It just came off the top of my head.”

“I think it’s a great idea. There’s nothing here worth preserving anyway. If we took out most or all of the hostile Cogmores and peace was finally achieved, we might even get stationed somewhere else.”

“Are there better places than this?”

“Everywhere is better than this place. We once had a guy come here from Ishca, the penal planet. Ishca is widely known as the worst place to get stationed. Well, this guy had been on Ishca for a whole year, and within a week on Cogmore he was dead. The dangers here are underreported and not nearly as glamorous as the dangers elsewhere. Here, they take your head out to the desert and you’re never heard from again.”

Zero shook his head and said incredulously,

“All of this death and mayhem is so the Beetars can have a nice cup of coffee made from Cogmore

seeds? What a joke.”

Jackson looked at him like he wanted to punch him in the head. “I don’t fight for the seeds. I fight for Jennifer Hastings. Give it time and you’ll be fighting for something similar. You’ll make a friend for life only to have them fail to return from a patrol, or you’ll watch as the facility is overrun and half of the people you know die in front of your eyes...”

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to diminish your motives like that.”

“I get it, dude. I was an overzealous idealist when I first got here too. Most new arrivals look at those cute little Cogmores and wonder why we hate them so much. Everyone comes around sooner or later. You will too.”

“I sure hope not.”

“Me too, but you will.”

Jackson spotted some movement on the monitor and radioed Kathy and Winthrop. In less

than ten seconds the monitors lit up with strobing flashes of fire. Seconds later they got a thank you from the patrollers. It was quick, deadly, and efficient, but sadly it did nothing to give the Cogmores pause, as only moments later they saw additional movement on the monitors, Cogmores converging on their fallen comrades.

Zero saw a shadow fall on him from behind, and turned to see the same little Cogmore who'd met them when they first landed. It must've been the same one, because it was freely walking about.

Jackson tapped him on the shoulder and said,

“Ignore him. He's a mild irritant at best. He's

actually one of the good ones. We call him Hobbs.

Don't ask me why. He was already here when I got

here. He keeps his feelers out in the community for

any whispers concerning Cogmore attacks, and lets

us know when they're coming. He's also

responsible for bringing in most of the prisoners.

Cogmores would consider him a traitor if they ever

found out, but he's one of our best assets."

Hobbs the Cogmore bowed before them and scurried away. Zero could've sworn he heard it mutter something under its breath as it retreated. He didn't trust it. For all he knew it was a double agent, working for the Cogmore resistance as it pretended to aid them.

Jackson must've read his mind. "The Beetars have his entire family in custody. If he's caught playing both sides, they'll be executed."

"That's pretty harsh, don't you think?"

"That's life out here. Nothing's fair and nothing is off limits. In matters of life and death, nothing's sacred."

He spotted movement on the monitors as soon as they turned back around. Jackson let him call it in, and with the help of the hand-drawn map, he gave accurate coordinates.

Seconds later, there were dozens of smoldering Cogmore corpses twitching on the

ground.

Before he had a chance to feel guilty for what he'd done, Jackson put a hand on his shoulder and shook him excitedly. "Good job. You just saved lives. You're a natural at this."

Jackson's math was skewed though. He'd saved two lives, potentially, but ended dozens to do so.

Winthrop and Kathy whizzed through the skies all night long as they supplied them with targets. It was exhausting from his end, so he couldn't imagine how they felt about it.

It was harsh on Cogmore. Zero could only hope to become numb to it or he'd lose his mind.

As soon as the sun came up, they went out to the hangar to greet Kathy and Winthrop.

Kathy set down and said jovially, "That was fun. Thanks for the intel."

Winthrop added, "That was one for the books. It was one of the best nights we've had in a

long time.”

Zero wanted to ask them if they'd lost their goddamn minds, but thought it prudent to hold his tongue.

To his utter horror, Kathy and Winthrop helped change out his power pack. They changed Jackson's too. Apparently they would patrol the skies until Mike was fully charged to relieve them.

Zero's mind went black and then switched back on as soon as the new power pack was slotted into him. As soon as his eyes opened, he saw his power pack lying at his feet and every mech there staring at his gaping chest cavity.

Winthrop was feeling around inside his chest. “This is weird. How'd you do this? It looks like you've got extra shielding or something that covers your entire battery compartment.”

He shrugged. “I know Doctor Henshaw said he spent a little extra time with our units. Maybe that's a modification.”

He could only hope they didn't look into his make-up any further or they'd find his kill switch disabled too, and really start asking questions.

Winthrop stood up and smiled. "That doctor's a genius. I'm going to rig up the rest of us like you when I get a chance."

Kathy asked him what was so special about the shielding.

"The extra shielding will withstand an EMP burst. Electronics can become disabled after an EMP burst, but a battery shrouded in this additional protection would remain working. It acts like a Faraday cage, protecting the battery from damage."

Jackson said, "Hook me up with one too.

I've always worried what a close quarters nuke would do to our circuits."

Winthrop looked at Zero like he was a specimen under a microscope. "I'd like to root around inside your body later to see what else the good doctor improved upon."

He said, “Henshaw wanted his modifications to be a secret. He was worried he’d get into trouble if the Beetars found out what he’d done.”

Winthrop chuckled. “I’m no snitch. No one is going to run off and tattletale to the Beetars.”

Kathy clapped him on the back. “You’ve just contributed more to our cause than any new arrival ever has. We’re not about to throw you under the bus for it.”

He stared up through the opened roof of the hangar with trepidation in his heart. He wanted to tell them about the disabled kill switch, but resisted the urge. He liked their enthusiasm, and he did trust them, but he hardly knew them well enough to trust them with the doctor’s life.

Jackson said reassuringly, “You’re ready for this. Cogmores vanish like cockroaches when the sun comes up. It should be pretty calm out there.”

Kathy added, “It’s a ghost town out there.

You’ll be fine. If Mike’s not up in ten minutes I’ll

unplug him myself.” Then she banged his chest plate back into place and slapped him on the ass.

Luckily, they didn’t see much activity.

Jackson swooped down on one poor Cogmore and ripped it in half with concentrated fire. At first Zero thought it was barbaric, as the Cogmore just looked like a lost nomad in a dirty cloak, but when it fell to the ground and its cloak draped open, he saw an array of weaponry dangling from various holsters all over its body.

He heard a cacophony of rapid gunfire and followed the noise to its source. On top of the east Beetar building, an unmanned turret was shooting wildly. He got out of its way and looked to see what it was firing at. A turret on the west building came to life and started to fire too. Then he saw it. A camouflaged wall, about twenty feet long and six feet high, was slowly moving towards them, being pushed by Cogmores. It was obviously made of metal or stone or some other type of hardy material.

The turrets took minute chunks out of it until it broke to pieces and there was nothing left of it, and no one left alive to push it.

The Cogmores were truly relentless in their attacks.

Just then Mike appeared beside him.

“Thanks, Zero. Go on and get inside.”

He didn’t need to be told twice.

Before he left he told Mike about the camouflaged shield wall.

“I’ve never seen that before. They were probably trying to get close enough to plant charges on the buildings. I’ll keep an eye out for it.”

After seeing the turrets working so well, it dawned on him that the Beetars had some seriously misguided ideas about security. The turrets worked more efficiently than they did. Drones could patrol the skies, taking out any sign of advancing Cogmores. Satellites from space could pick up heat signatures and light the place up. Why were mechs

controlled by human minds necessary when better means of defense could be employed? He didn't know, but he was getting the feeling it had to do with them being cheaper and more expendable.

He swooped towards base and slipped in through the open roof. He went over to the big red button and hit it, closing the roof. He felt like he was starting to get the hang of things.

Then everything took a turn for the worse.

A loud boom shook the building, followed by an eerie silence almost as frightening as the explosion. Zero looked around frantically to try to see what was happening.

He saw a single Cogmore rush him with a handheld device clutched in its spindly little fist. It aimed it and fired. An electrode hit him in the chest and his systems went haywire. He froze to the spot. He watched helplessly as several more Cogmores joined their comrade. They pushed him over onto his back and hefted him up like a trophy.

As a unit, they ran to the north end of the hangar, where Zero saw a gaping hole that hadn't been there before. Once through, they rushed into a dark tunnel that had been dug in the ground underneath the building just as mech reinforcements arrived, firing intensely.

Zero's heart filled with hope. These little rats didn't stand a chance once his teammates gave chase. That hope was dashed, though, when another explosion caved in the tunnel entrance behind them. Every twenty feet they'd plant another device, just in case his fellow mechs had found a way through the last cave in. Dirt hit his eyes as the ceiling slowly collapsed on them. But the Cogmores stayed ahead of it.

Ten minutes of running through roughly hewn tunnels, they finally came to an opening. The sun blinded him as they emerged. He was surrounded by thousands of chanting and cheering Cogmores. His captives lifted him higher for all to

see. He was hit with a stone and some disgusting pig rubbed shit on him. He was spat on and hit with more stones before their delirium finally subsided. A Cogmore split the crowd and everyone quieted down. It said, "Shackle the mechanical man. We can learn much from it."

Another, a timid voice, called out, "Aren't you worried they'll come looking for it?"

The leader said authoritatively, "They're cowards. They fight for nothing. They'll assume we destroyed this one, because it's easier to assume it's lost and do nothing than accept that it might be salvageable and try and find it."

As he was moved along through the crowd, the leader said, "Once it's secured tightly, mobilize it so I can see its power flow. We'll take it apart piece by piece to figure out how to destroy them all."

That didn't sound fun. Zero hoped the Cogmore was wrong about his side. He hoped

they'd come looking for him, and sooner rather than later.

He was taken inside a camouflaged tent, where his arms and legs were latched to a huge boulder sticking out of the ground. When they mobilized him he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to break that boulder to bits with strength alone.

They used chains and ropes and nylon straps.

When they were finally satisfied he wouldn't get loose, he looked like he was trapped inside a cocoon.

Then they hit him with that handheld Taser thingy and his circuits popped to life like an appliance. He wanted to test the restraints, but thought it would look bad to do that so soon and right in front of so many of them.

They left him alone for a few seconds and then the leader came inside the tent. It wore a long cloak with colorful beads sewn into it. He could just barely see its myriad tentacled legs jutting out from the base of it, squirming and moving over each

other. It also carried several hand tools that no doubt were going to be used on his metal frame. It placed the tools on a wooden table beside him and walked all the way around the boulder, taking him in.

It stood before him and said, “All you machines know is death. I wonder if you even have the capacity to fear what’s about to happen to you.”

It shook its head sadly and picked up a chisel.

Zero yelled out, “Wait,” but the word came out odd. Only then did it occur to him that the Cogmore were speaking an alien language that his translator had deciphered into English, so when he spoke back the words were foreign to his ears for just a split second.

The Cogmore jumped back. “Machines don’t know our language. We captured units like you and all they did was drone on indecipherably.

Why did they program you like this?”

“I’m not just a machine. The Beetars put my

mind into this robotic unit. I'm a human from another world."

The Cogmore's huge eyelid slid from out of nowhere and made a sucking sound as it slipped across the surface of its oversized eye. It almost made Zero want to scream.

"This is trickery," said the Cogmore.

"It's not. I'm a modified unit, so my translator has your language stored in its database."

As he said it he realized that was probably true.

"The other units you captured did not have that function."

It regarded him with suspicion. "Perhaps this is fortuitous. We may get more information from you than from the others we've examined."

So the Cogmore wasn't touched by the fact he wasn't just a machine. It didn't care that he was a living creature. It just saw it as advantageous. But it meant he'd bought himself some time to find a way out of his predicament. It was too bad for the

Cogmore that he knew nothing at all about operations on its planet. It was only his second day on the job. The Cogmore would probably assume he was lying to it. Then the torture would begin.

It stood in front of him and began to interrogate him. “You say you are a living creature inside of this machine. So if I cut you open, I could question you directly?”

“No, no. Only my mind is in here. My thoughts control it, not my body. My body was dying, so the Beetars promised to heal me. In exchange, I would do their bidding until my body was ready to inhabit again. It wasn’t laid out so clearly at first, but that’s what happened in the end.”

The Cogmore rubbed its rounded temples.

“Why do you trust the Beetars will give you what they promised?”

“I signed a contract.”

The Cogmore snorted derisively. “It seems you know less about them than we do. The Beetars

can not be trusted. Have you even seen what they've done to my planet? They did all of this just so we wouldn't cut off their Chee supply."

Chee must've been their name for the seeds the Cogmore's grew.

"Chee was a worthless crop to us, but the Beetars developed a taste for it. When we told them we had to stave the supply so we could grow food for our citizens, they took over our world and enslaved us to make sure we did exactly what they wanted. When we resisted, they brought in killing machines like you to enforce our servitude. We believed all of the lies the Beetars told us about galactic cooperation and sharing knowledge, but now we know the truth. I think you've been swindled just like we were, but you don't know it yet."

He nodded. He'd worried about that exact thing ever since they'd put his mind inside the mech. But this Cogmore couldn't be trusted either. It was

the leader of a faction that brought death and destruction to Beetars and humans alike. He only had one side of the story. The Beetars hadn't told him anything about Cogmore, so the little alien could've been lying through its teeth for all he knew.

Before the Cogmore leader worked itself into a lather, he confessed, "I've only been on this planet for two days. I know almost nothing about how things work here."

The alien regarded him closely. "How can I trust you?"

"You can't. But you should know that when my power supply dwindles, I'll die. So if you need information, you need to question me soon." He didn't know why he divulged that piece of info. He thought if it hurried up and got all the intel it needed from him, maybe it would let him go before his batteries drained, killing his consciousness. But he had no reason to believe this Cogmore had any compassion, or would ever consider letting him go.

The Cogmore smiled sickly. It looked him over, saying, "Trust the Beetars to build you haphazardly. I might have a solution for that." It stood up and walked from the tent.

Zero strained to hear the roar of his friends swooping in to rescue him, but the skies outside were silent.

A moment later the Cogmore came back with a wheeled dolly that had a large rectangular apparatus on it. "We use these to power our weapons. These chargers recharge themselves. It's a simple design that the Beetars know about, so there's no excuse for them to not employ one in each of you machines. With this I can interrogate you for an eternity."

He should've kept his mouth shut. He'd never been held hostage before, but he should have known better than to divulge so much information to the enemy. Now even death couldn't save him.

The Cogmore asked, "Where's your power

cell located?”

He told it the truth. Otherwise, it might take him apart looking for it. “It’s under my chest plate.” It got to work removing just enough of his restraints to get at his plate. It was weak, but it had tools and alien technology to aid it. His chest plate clanged on the dirt floor, and the Cogmore called outside the tent for assistance in removing his battery. Three others joined it, yanking his battery free. As soon as they disconnected it, his mind went blank.

When he awoke, he felt like he’d been supercharged. His mind was sharp and he felt physically stronger. The chest plate was still on the ground and the Cogmore was standing beside it, staring at him.

The Cogmore said, “You’ll never have to charge again. My men are looking at your old battery pack to see what it’s made of. Until they unlock its secrets, I want you to tell me the layout of

the Beetar buildings.”

“I’ve only ever been inside the building we humans use as a base of operations. The twin structures are for Beetars only.” He wasn’t sure if that was true, but he’d never once been formally invited inside the Beetar buildings, so it felt true.

It stared at him, trying to ascertain if it could trust him. “Tell me about the layout of that building then.”

He didn’t want to, but he also didn’t want to refuse. He wasn’t a real soldier. He hadn’t been trained for any of this.

“There’s the main hangar. They use it when supplies come in and to leave the building for patrols. There’s a monitor room so they can scan the perimeter remotely. There’s a living quarters where they recharge each night. The general has an office. That’s all I’ve seen of it so far.”

“How many of you are there?”

“I was one of seven robots stationed there.

Besides that, there's a human in the flesh and a Beetar liaison." He didn't mention the little creepy Cogmore who wandered the halls, because he didn't want to out him as a traitor."

"I believe you. We have a man on the inside and that's the intel he's supplied us too."

So the creepy Cogmore named Hobbs was a double agent. Now he wished he'd mentioned him; the Cogmore leader would think he was lying by omission.

He said, "I didn't mention him because I didn't know he was working for you."

"That's the point. But if you've never been inside the Beetar buildings, then you have no fresh intel for me. I need to know more."

"I don't know much. I've told you all of it."

"That's a pity." It reached down and picked up his chest plate. Before putting it back on him it reached inside his chest cavity and fiddled with something he couldn't see. His mind went out like a

light.

Zero's senses came back in a flash. Two Cogmores were staring at him when he looked up. The leader said, "There's been a development and we need to know what you know about it."

"How long was I out?"

"Several days. We were going to power you back up a couple of times, but we didn't have a good enough reason."

So he'd been out of commission for days.

He had no idea what had happened in that time, but he was furious that he was still in Cogmore custody.

His friends really had abandoned him to his fate.

He tried to move, but he was still secured to the big boulder. "What do you want?"

"They've left the planet. The Beetars and the killing machines like you all left this morning in several shuttles. Our inside man hasn't been heard from, so we don't know what happened. We want to go into their empty buildings, but we don't know if

it's worth the risk. It smells like a trap."

He wondered if the Beetars had taken his suggestion to leave the buildings in order to draw out the rebels and then bomb the crap out of them. If that was the case, then it was a trap. He said, "I know nothing. I'd check it out while you have the chance."

The Cogmore rubbed its head, deep in thought. It looked at the other one and they both blinked to each other. It said to Zero, "You're right. We might not have much time to ponder this. If they come back we'll have squandered the perfect opportunity. If you're lying, we'll kill you."

That didn't bother him as much as it should have. He already felt like he was doomed.

The Cogmore said to its companion, "Get your brothers and sisters together. Tell your mother I've made my decision. If we succeed, we'll be free once more."

So the other Cogmore was the leader's son

or daughter, and he was sending in all of his children to infiltrate the Beetar base. The thought of a mother and father losing their children made him think about his own long-dead father losing him. He knew how devastated he must have been, and it tore him up inside.

“Wait!” he said. “It’s a trap. Once they think enough rebels are in close enough proximity to the buildings they’re going to nuke them and kill you all.”

The Cogmore looked at the ground. Then he looked back to his child and put a hand on its shoulder. “We came very close to losing everything. We’ll hang back and wait to see what they do next. Spread the word that no one is to go near those buildings.”

His child blinked once and nodded before leaving the tent.

The leader said to Zero, “You could have let us all stumble into the trap. Why did you stop us?”

“I’ve lost loved ones. My father died thinking I had preceded him in death. You don’t deserve that kind of sorrow. I don’t know much about you or your people, but it seems clear that none of you deserve to die when all you’re doing is fighting for freedom.”

“That’s an odd stance for you to take. Machines like you have killed thousands of us.”

“We thought you were the enemy. You attacked us so we fought back. My people are just doing their duty.”

“Well, thank you anyway.” He looked at him for an uncomfortably long time and finally seemed to make a decision. “I’m going to release you from your restraints. I trust you won’t take advantage of my generosity and attempt to kill me or any of my people.”

“I won’t. Even if I did, I have nowhere to go now that my people have left the planet.”

“So we’re your only friends,” he said as he

went around unlatching him from the boulder. He patted him on the head when he was done and stood back with the handheld device that could render Zero immobile. He said, "I'll be carrying this around as a safety precaution until I'm positive you pose no threat."

"I understand. Thank you."

"No, thank you. If we would've rushed the Beetar headquarters we would've been massacred. My entire civilization would be doomed to eternal slavery. As long as we can rebel, we can hope for a brighter tomorrow. Now I just need to find a way to trick the Beetars into thinking we are raiding their base so they'll launch their attack. When they think we're all dead, they'll let their guard down and we can catch them by surprise the moment they return to the surface." He looked at Zero for confirmation, like he would know how good or bad his idea was. Zero shrugged. "I have no idea what they plan to do after they fire their nukes."

He could only hope the Beetars wouldn't fall like the Cogmore leader wanted. The Beetars had to survive; they were his ticket off of this rock and only chance at a future worth living.

Once again, he had only a thin sliver of hope to hang on to. He was very confused about who he was and what he stood for. He hoped he'd made the right decision by telling the Cogmore about the trap, but he couldn't be sure. He felt like a traitor.

The Cogmore leader told him his name was Damonesterpastor, but he let him just call him Damon.

He lied and said his name was Zero for the sake of continuity. Damon led him around his camp as the Cogmores stared at him as if he were the antichrist. But at least no one threw rocks at him this time, probably because he was in Damon's presence. After a while, Cogmores started to follow in their wake, whispering as they tried to catch up.

Damon pointed out things that he found

fascinating but had little meaning to Zero. He pointed out a tent, saying, “That one is mine. As the chief of this clan I get the biggest and brightest abode made of the finest materials.”

Zero couldn’t care less, but he acted like he was spellbound.

Damon showed him a mean-looking squirrel-like creature with thick and sharp fangs and six legs, telling him it was his pet and also an endangered species because of the Beetars’ penchant for eliminating anything the Cogmores cared for.

He introduced him to his sons and daughters, and their significant others, as well as those not directly related to him.

Each time Zero said, “Hello,” to the passing Cogmores, they looked like they wanted to run and hide from him.

He finally met Damon’s wife. That was uncomfortable. She wasn’t as willing to let bygones

be bygones. He and his kind had slaughtered her sons and daughters and she wasn't about to forgive and forget because the circumstances had changed.

He apologized, but he was wasting his breath.

They went back to Damon's tent. He had to duck down to enter. Inside was a war room with maps and little figurines that represented each side. There were three severe-looking Cogmores huddled around the map table, staring at it like it held a secret. Behind them was a modest bed and a lamp with little moldy old pamphlets scattered around it.

When they saw him, they stood rooted to the spot like their muscles had seized, but because Damon had walked him in they didn't move to draw their weapons.

Damon nodded to them, which must have meant that he was no threat. Then he said to the entire room: "Before the Beetars arrived I had all kinds of luxuries. I had information at my fingertips via handheld devices. I had virtual reality games

that would make your head spin. You'd forget who you were in those games within seconds. I had a nice home in a nice neighborhood, with kind neighbors and friends who would come over to laugh and play. That was a long time ago. I was just a boy when the Beetars arrived and took everything from us. They leveled anything higher than a single story, claiming we were congregating in higher buildings and using their size as a vantage point to spy on them and launch attacks. My house was one of the first to be razed to the ground. My own people did that to me and my family. We stood back and watched as fellow Cogmores destroyed our lives out of sheer cowardice and blind obedience to a higher power that could not be trusted. Now they don't even let us erect stone walls in fear that we're scheming behind them. My dad was turned in as a traitor by his best friend and executed. My mom died of pneumonia, which would have never killed her before the Beetars had us living on the streets

and starving to death. Most of my brothers and sisters were rounded up and sent off to work camps to farm. I never saw them again. I'm the last of that clan, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give up without a fight."

It was quite an unnecessary speech, but Zero thought it was meant more for the other Cogmores in the room than it was meant for him. They were pumped up by the time he was done.

One of them jabbed its finger at the map and said, "We have to be careful. They could be watching from the skies."

Damon said calmly, "We won't be raiding their base. Zero here has told me it's a trap."

One of the others yelled, "How can you trust one of those machines?"

Damon said, "I thought it might be a trap, but Zero confirmed it. He says the Beetars plan to nuke it once they're sure they'll get enough casualties. It makes sense."

They mumbled to one another, but they soon came around. One guy said, “If that’s the case, what should we do?”

“We need to force their hand. We need to stage a fake invasion so that they attack. Then they’ll set up base somewhere else and we can ambush them.”

“How can we stage an invasion?”

“Zero knows where the cameras are mounted. He knows their surveillance limitations, so we can use them against them.”

Zero had not once offered the Cogmore his services. He did not know the surveillance weaknesses. But here he was, aiding the enemy.

He wanted to say, “No,” and fly off into the sky, but he didn’t. He was starting to think he was finally fighting for the side of righteousness.

The Beetars would kill him if they caught him helping the Cogmores. They’d probably have Henshaw flush his human husk out into space. But

he had finally found a purpose that made sense to him. These people were fighting oppression and for the right to freedom. Just because he'd been recruited to the other side didn't mean he personally stood against the Cogmores or what they fought for. He wondered if the others from base would feel the same way if they had all the information, or if they'd been so jaded by the constant attacks that there would never be peace.

He was of two minds. The Beetars had never done anything to him to make him doubt their motives, but the Cogmores had. They'd attacked him and kidnapped him. Maybe he had Stockholm syndrome. Or maybe he was finally learning about his place in the universe.

It didn't matter how he felt, though, because more and more it seemed like he didn't have much choice in the matter.

He asked if they were far enough away from the Beetar base to survive it being hit by a nuke, and

everyone stopped chattering. They hadn't thought of that.

Damon said, "We could tunnel underground until the fallout dissipates."

All Cogmore heads nodded. One of them said, "It'll be easier if we dig up the tunnel we used to abduct him." He was pointing at Zero.

Another added, "It would go quicker if we asked him to do it—nicely of course."

Damon looked up at him and said sheepishly, "It would go much faster if you did it."

He sighed. "Take me there and I'll get to work." He hadn't been expecting to be put to work, but it would seem that he was now an integral part of the Cogmore resistance.

They'd caved in the entire tunnel, but the rock and dirt were loose enough to easily move aside. Damon made an attempt to help him, but it was pathetic in comparison.

Zero said to him, "You have some

strategizing to take care of. I've got this."

He expected Damon to hesitate because he didn't yet trust him, but he clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Thank goodness you came into our lives, Zero. I'll be back soon. Let me know when you start getting tired."

Zero smiled and then turned back around and dug like a machine as Damon walked away.

He'd made it three hundred feet by the time Damon came back. The sun was going down and the outside of the tunnel was a mess of rocks and mountains of dirt.

Damon looked weary from his time in the makeshift war room as he shouted Zero's name down the newly dug tunnel. He traipsed inside and looked around in amazement. "Another hundred feet or so and this will do nicely."

Zero propped against the wall and said, "I could finish it up tonight."

"No. You need to rest. The sun will be down

soon.”

“If that battery you put in me really recharges itself, then I can work indefinitely.”

He looked at him sadly. “You didn’t have to help us. I know we didn’t meet under the best of circumstances, and for that I’m eternally sorry. Just know that I’m very glad you’re here.”

Zero opened his mouth to speak when a flash of light blinded him and a deafening boom reached his ears. A moment later the ground shook like an earthquake had hit. Then they felt the heat. That was when he knew what was happening. A nuclear device had been detonated, but closer to the Cogmore camp than to the Beetar base. It made no sense.

Damon started to scream in agony as the heat blistered his skin. Luckily, they were enclosed in the tunnel, or the blast would have shredded them both. Zero grabbed Damon and shoved him to the ground. He covered him in a four foot high mound

of loose dirt, then he stood between him and the mouth of the tunnel to try to deflect some of the intense heat. For Damon's part, he didn't fight back as Zero buried him alive.

The heat subsided, but before it was gone completely, another blinding flash and another boom occurred, this time closer. He felt his senses flicker, but his extra shielding kept his new battery and circuitry safe from the EMP bursts.

One final blast caved the tunnel in. Zero stood in the dark until the ground stopped rumbling, then he dug a peephole to see if the attacks had subsided. After half an hour of silence and uninterrupted darkness, he dug a hole large enough to get out, and dug up Damon from where he'd buried him alive. As he removed the dirt from his frail body, he worried what state he'd find him in, but Damon was mostly fine besides some bleeding and blistering. Damon coughed and dark streams ran down his face from dirty tears. "I need to go. I

need to help the survivors.”

Zero led him from the tunnel. He walked ahead of him into camp. Already it was clear there were no survivors. There was nothing discernible where the campsite used to be.

Damon wandered around anyway. He was a man lost. He stumbled and fell, stayed down and sobbed. His single eye twitched and the lid fluttered as fat streams of tears ran down his muddy face.

If Zero had the ability to cry, he would have joined him. All the Cogmores he'd met were now dead except for the wrecked old man at his feet.

Damon had lost everything, a wife and countless daughters and sons, as well as his closest friends.

Everything had been taken from him in a matter of a few minutes, including his cause.

Zero hefted him up and said, “We need to get you as far away from here as possible. The radiation is already killing you.”

“I don't care. Your people did this. Are you

a mole? Did they plant a homing beacon on you?

How did this happen?"

He shook his head. "This wasn't the plan. I don't know how they found you, but if they knew where I was, why didn't they rescue me before dropping the nukes?"

"Because they have no decency or compassion. They probably looked at you as collateral damage."

He was wrong. Volts and Eve would've intervened on his behalf. He had to believe they wouldn't let him get nuked without trying to help. He picked Damon up like a ragdoll and chucked him over his shoulder as he kicked and screamed to be let go. He wanted to stay and slowly die where his family had died, but Zero didn't have it in him to allow that.

He started to jog away from the mushroom clouds. He had no idea what to do about Damon's radiation poisoning. All he had were a smattering of

memories of his dad talking about it when he was a boy and those memories were cloudy. He thought he remembered him mentioning baking soda, but he didn't have any. Damon probably needed to be put on an IV drip soon or he'd puke and shit out all of the water in his system. He wasn't a doctor, so he was no help in that regard.

But he knew if they stayed, Damon's chances of survival would drop dramatically. That was his sole impetus in running as fast as he could away from the source of the radiation.

The sun had risen with a vengeance. The day was hotter than the last, and that did not bode well for Damon. He had gone still as Zero walked through the desert. He needed to find him water or he'd die before the day was over.

Even with ample water, Zero didn't think he'd make it. He'd received massive doses of radiation. With a body so small it was only a matter of time before he succumbed.

Zero jumped and let his boosters carry him high into the sky, Damon clutched in a death grip so he wouldn't fall. He saw a shimmer in the distance and decided to investigate it. It looked like a pool of water, but as he closed in on it, it became clear that it was only a mirage.

He slowly turned in the air, checking the horizon for any sign of liquid water. He saw a dark object fall from the clouds back where he'd come from. It looked like a ship, and if so, there was still hope for him and for Damon. If his people came back for him, he had to make sure they found him. He pivoted in the direction of the camp and ripped through the air as fast as he could.

The ship wasn't hard to find. The rest of the area had been bulldozed by multiple nuclear blasts. As he got close, he saw several flying objects zipping through the air. It took a full minute for him to realize they were his friends scouting the area.

He sure hoped the ship had life support, or Damon wouldn't survive the flight. Then again, he wasn't even sure if they would be going up into space to join the Beetars or if they'd look for another place to set up base camp on the surface. The old camp would be condemned because of the radiation. The Beetars and Parsons would get sick there.

Zero yelled, "Hey!" as loud as he could, and a mech swooped into view. It saw him and came at him fast, like it was going to attack, but when it got close it slowed down and dropped gently to its feet. It was Eve, and she had a puzzled look on her face.

"Is that you, Zero?"

He nodded.

"That's impossible. The Cogmores abducted you almost a whole week ago. There's no way your battery could hold out for so long. It's a miracle you're alive."

"They gave me a new battery."

“How did you survive the attack?”

“I got lucky.” That was very true. If he’d been above ground during the strike he’d be a pile of molten metal sizzling in the sun.

“Why are you carrying a dead Cogmore?”

He shook his head. “He’s not dead. I saved him.” He put Damon down gently. Damon’s mouth flopped open and his eyelid slid halfway shut. He checked for a pulse, checked for signs he was breathing. But Damon was already dead.

Eve stared at him like he’d lost his mind.

He wanted to cry. He wanted to shout at the sky and shake his fist at God. He wanted to slap that look right off of Eve’s face. Instead he stood there and stared at his dead friend.

He whispered, “What are you doing here, then, if you thought I was already dead?”

“Zero, we didn’t know you were still here. If we had we would’ve tried to get you out before they dropped the nukes. We’re the clean-up crew. We’re

here to eliminate any stragglers, but it looks like the bombs took care of them all.”

He stared off into space. “They were good people.”

She moved closer to look into his eyes.

“They were not. They attacked us mercilessly. You saw it with your own two eyes. Get a hold of yourself, man. And make sure you keep your newfound opinions to yourself. No one wants to hear that shit.”

She was right. He’d had a change of heart, but that didn’t mean he could convince the others that his opposing opinion was the truth. “What happens next? What’s the plan?”

She looked him up and down. “First of all, you need to come up with a cover story. If you tell Parsons or the Beetars that the Cogmores messed with your battery and that’s how you survived for so long without a charge, they’ll assume they rigged you to blow up. In fact, I’ll have Winthrop give you

a once-over before we head back up, just in case they planted explosives in you.”

He nodded. It was a fair assumption from her point of view. “What happens after we head up?”

“No one has told us yet. I think the Beetars will build a new base of operations, but so far they haven’t told us if that’s the case or not.”

Just then, another mech appeared above them. It was Jackson. He swooped down and landed. He walked right up and looked at him incredulously.

“Zero, is that you? How the hell did you survive?”

Eve said, “Give him some space. He just survived a nuclear holocaust.”

Jackson ignored her. He smiled when he saw Damon dead at his feet. “How many of these little bastards did you kill?”

He sighed. He wanted to tell him the truth, but he was too far gone to reason with. The

Cogmores had broken him beyond repair. He deflected by asking a question of his own. “How did you guys know where to drop the nukes? I thought the plan was to evacuate the base and lure them in, and it looked like that had started to happen when their camp was targeted instead.”

“That was the plan at first. It was a good plan. It was your plan, remember? But then when we evacuated base, we noticed a change in Hobbs. He started to get shifty. It looked like he wanted to jump ship. The little traitor was hiding something. So we got suspicious and interrogated him with violence until he broke. He told us he was working with the Cogmore resistance, and where they were camped. He was fidgety because we didn’t give him enough warning before evacuating for him to get word back to the Cogmore base about our attack.”

“What did the Beetars do to him when you told them he was a traitor?”

“They sentenced him and his family to death.

We'll probably have to carry out their execution as soon as we get back."

Zero had almost forgotten that the Beetars had Hobbs' family in custody as a safety precaution. Their threats clearly hadn't worked.

He made his mind up that he would have nothing to do with their executions.

Eve said to Jackson, "Zero needs a cover story. Apparently the Cogmores replaced his battery.

That's why he's still functional. We can't let the Beetars find out he was tampered with or they might not let him rejoin us."

Jackson looked at him with barely hidden contempt. "Why did you let them tamper with you?"

"I didn't have a choice."

"Well, Eve's right. We need to come up with a lie or the Beetars will leave you behind or shut you down. They'll think the Cogmores booby-trapped you."

Eve added, “We don’t need to worry about getting caught in the lie. They’ll just have one of us open you up to confirm whatever story we concoct and we can lie about our findings.”

He felt like a child trying to hide a secret from a parent. “Fine. I’ll say whatever needs to be said.”

Winthrop and Kathy appeared together to the south. They hovered their way. Volts dropped down right next to him. “Is that you, Zero? What the hell happened to you?”

Zero hugged him, partly because he’d missed him, but also to shut him up. He was weary. He didn’t need to keep answering the same questions over and over again.

Winthrop landed and said, “They’re all dead.

We wiped out the entire resistance.” He cocked his head to the side. “Is that Zero?”

He sighed and nodded.

Winthrop checked him over to be sure the

Cogmores hadn't rigged him to blow. He marveled at the new battery. Then Kathy came up with a cover story. It was weak, but it was the only one that seemed plausible. They would say the Cogmores discovered how to shut him down and they only reawakened him when they needed to interrogate him.

He knew they could be shut down without losing their lives because Henshaw had done it to them before he shot them into orbit above Cogmore. He just didn't know how to do it, but he didn't have to know how in order to tell a convincing lie.

Then they got aboard the ship and left the once inhabited nuclear wasteland. He wondered if the nuclear fallout would spread far enough to affect the crops. That would be an embarrassing backfire.

Volts kept staring at him as they ascended through the cloud layer. He said, "It's good to have you back, man."

"It's good to be back," he lied. He was glad

to be reunited with Volts and Eve, but he wasn't happy to be working for the Beetars again. At least he had hope once more. He'd come full circle, but with a new, tarnished perspective.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember his humanity. The best he could come up with was recalling Stacey's face, but he couldn't do it. He'd only seen her human form once, and that was so fleeting and seemed so long ago that he just couldn't do it. He wondered how she was doing. He wondered if Piss-pants was driving her nuts. He wondered if he'd ever see her again.

Jackson yelled, "We'll rendezvous with the orbiter in twenty-two minutes. I'm going to get some shut-eye until then.

Volts eagerly said, "Me too."

Zero wanted to go offline too, but now that he was using a new power source, he didn't think he could anymore. He plugged the charging port into his back and nothing happened.

Eve smiled. “I guess you don’t need that anymore.”

She thought that would make him happy, but she was wrong. He yearned to shut down. He needed the peace.

He smiled back anyway. It’s a lonely feeling to be the only sad person in a group, but it’s even lonelier when the group finds out you’re sad and tries to jolly you out of it.

He rested his head against the wall and tried his best to acclimate to his new surroundings.

The vision of Damon’s tiny blistered body crept into his thoughts. He had inadvertently led to his demise and the demise of everyone he loved. He was a monster among monsters.

He tried to shake the thoughts from his head, but they were too fresh to be sloughed off so easily.

He avoided eye contact as he fought his internal demons. He had to get a grip before he met with Parsons or he’d start to ask questions that he did not

want to answer. He had to put on a convincing act for the Beetars too.

They docked with the Beetar ship and he helped unplug the charging mechs. They filed out into a large open ship with alien markings and alien interior design. The walls and floors were shiny and black, which made it nearly impossible to judge depth. He stumbled twice before getting his bearings. Lights illuminated the area from sources unknown.

Parsons met them wearing a radiation suit.

“No way! Is that Zero?”

He stepped forward. “Yep. I survived.”

He looked him up and down. To the others he said severely, “You should have told me about him before bringing him aboard the ship. For all we know he’s been stuffed full of explosives.”

Winthrop said, “We’re not stupid. We checked him over. He’s clean.”

Zero said sarcastically, “Well, I’m happy to

be here too.”

Parsons smirked. “Come with me. I need you to debrief me on what happened to you down there. If I don’t like your story, you can’t stay.”

Parsons led him to an oversized office with odd furnishings and even stranger technology. By way of an explanation he said, “This was designed for Beetars. I don’t know what any of this crap does and the chair hurts my ass.” He pointed at a huge chair and said, “Take a seat but don’t break it.”

He sat down and Parsons ran a Geiger counter up and down his body. It beeped continuously, meaning Parsons had to keep the suit on while in his presence. He didn’t ask how Zero had survived the EMP so Zero didn’t offer an explanation.

Parsons sat down and asked, “What happened to you?”

Zero told him the entire story, with the little twists necessary to keep him from kicking him off

the ship. He left out that he'd started to change his mind about the Cogmores. He left out that he had sort of befriended their leader, their sworn enemy. He also failed to mention that he was now more energy efficient since he was running on Cogmore batteries that somehow recharged themselves. It took all of his will to refrain from asking him why no one had come looking for him.

When he was done, Parsons paused for a minute to gather his thoughts and finally said, "You're very lucky. Let's go join the others. I have some exciting news. I'll have Winthrop check you over again just to be sure you're safe." He stood up and said, "Follow me."

He walked behind as Parsons led the way down one black, oily-looking corridor after another. Parsons said, "This is an observation ship, but it doubles as a failsafe in case the Beetars ever get overrun on the ground. They can escape up here and wait for reinforcements to arrive. It's in

geostationary orbit above their ground base.”

Zero didn't really care. He was more interested in this news he'd mentioned.

He turned a corner and the others were there standing around inside a cavernous room with poor lighting. He took a place among them and Parsons faced them all.

“The Beetars are running sweeps right now, but they think the resistance on Cogmore is no more. If they're right, then some of you may get reassigned. That's good news, because anywhere is better than here.”

It was good news. The thought of going back to Cogmore put a weight in his heart.

To Winthrop he said, “Check Zero over with a fine-toothed comb. I want to know if a single wire is out of place.”

Winthrop said, “Yes, sir.” To him he said, “Follow me, Zero.”

He followed Winthrop down corridors with

thick atmosphere and poor lighting until they got to a room that was just full of tools and various gadgets. “I’m not really going to do a thorough check. I’ll give you a once-over to satisfy Parsons. I already know how different you really are.”

That last line made him feel like a weirdo, but Winthrop was right. He was different.

Winthrop took him apart, stared at his components, and then fastened his plates back up.

They went back to the cavernous common area when enough time had passed.

Eve had yanked two recharging ports from the walls and was busy wiring them together.

Winthrop asked, “What are you doing?

You’ll get in trouble.”

“I’ll say it was an accident. I’m wiring these together so one end can go into Zero and the other can plug into one of us. That way we can use Zero as a mobile charger.”

Zero said, “We don’t need that, though. We

have chargers.”

She looked at Volts and said, “While you were gone, Volts had a panic attack when they wouldn’t let him plug in two or three times a day. I kept telling him he can hold a charge just fine now, but old habits die hard. This is more of a security blanket for that big baby.”

Volts glared at her, but he didn’t stop her from doing it, or from mocking him.

Zero asked if that would work.

“I don’t see why not.” She finished up, then coiled the wires in a loop, and with Winthrop’s help stuffed them inside her chest cavity so Parsons wouldn’t find out what she’d done.

Volts smoothed over the walls where the ports had been pulled so that it was only obvious they’d been removed if someone knew what they were looking for.

He finished up when Parsons and three Beetars appeared before them. The Beetars looked

concerned, but Parsons looked like he wanted to jump for joy. That must've meant they were going to be stationed somewhere more hospitable.

The largest Beetar was also the bluest of the bunch. Its eyes took them all in as it stepped forward with a handheld tablet in its hand. It read from the screen. "The oldest units here are David Jackson, Michael Freeman, Winthrop Jones, and Katherine Jasper. You will be stationed on the human corporation planet. This is an easy assignment, granted to you as a thank you from us for all of your hard work and diligent service."

Kathy whooped with joy and hugged Winthrop. Jackson said to Mike, "We made it. It's time to take it easy for a while."

The din died down and the blue Beetar continued, "Eve, Zero, and Volts are the newest units. You will be given a special privilege that few have ever been granted. It's a harder assignment, but not by much. You'll be stationed on one of our

warships that has been coming under increasing fire from an unknown enemy. The ship needs reinforcements, and I thought you three would do nicely. I understand two other units from your training class are already there, so you'll be in good company."

Volts said to Eve, "We're going to see Piss-pants again."

Jackson looked like he wanted to comment on the name, but he refrained.

Zero would get to see Stacey again. He didn't know how he got so lucky, but despite all he'd been through, things were starting to work out.

The Beetar put its device away and said, "The resistance has been eliminated thanks to your suggestion." He pointed at Zero. "We've detected no more movement from that area, and all other Cogmore citizens are accounted for. You have won us a reprieve from their attacks, quite possibly forever. Parsons will stay behind with us to train the

new arrivals coming in the next month, but as far as we can tell, they won't be necessary. We have finally civilized those people after all this time."

Zero couldn't help himself. "You mean subdued, right? You've finally subdued them into blind servitude. There's a difference between civilizing a race and subjecting them to your rule."

Parsons stepped forward and yelled, "Hold your tongue, soldier."

The Beetar waved Parsons off and calmly said, "I don't know what you've been told about the Cogmores, but your version of reality is wrong.

They were destroying themselves and their planet when we intervened. We managed to revive one of the few crops that will even grow down there anymore, and in exchange for a percentage of their harvest we provide sustenance, medical aide, and a structure they can build upon."

Now he was confused. The Beetar seemed sure of its story, and it made some sense. Maybe

Damon had lied to him, or maybe he had his facts skewed.

Then again, the Beetar might just be a convincing liar. Or more likely: both stories were partially true. Maybe the Beetars did intervene, but without being asked to do so. And in exchange maybe they expected some of the harvests, whether the Cogmores liked it or not. Maybe both sides were in the dark about how events had unfolded.

Because he didn't know what else to say, he said, "I understand. I'm sorry for speaking out of turn."

"It's understandable. You were there for just a short amount of time and you saw many terrible things. And worse than that, none of my people walked any of you through the history of our struggles on Cogmore."

Parsons seemed to relax.

The Beetar stared at Zero with its overlarge black eyes and said, "We should have eased you

into things on Cogmore. We should have been more transparent, and for that we are sorry. But that's in the past now. Just know that we have your best interests at heart."

Now that sounded like a lie, but he kept quiet because he'd already caused too much turmoil with his mouth. He nodded so he didn't have to speak.

The Beetar said, "General Parsons will get you all ready for your new assignments. It was an honor working with each and every one of you." It turned and walked away with the other two Beetars following in its wake.

Parsons waited for a full minute before hissing, "You almost ruined it for everyone, Zero.

The Beetars are a benevolent race, but there's a limit to how much shit they'll take."

"I'm sorry I spoke."

"Shut up. Mike, Jackson, Kathy and Winthrop, you guys can follow me. The corporate

planet is located at the next nearest star system.

There's a ship waiting for you. It'll get you there in a few weeks."

Jackson said, "Good. I can catch up on my beauty sleep."

Mike slapped him and said, "You'll need about three weeks of it before my eyes stop burning every time I look at you."

Parsons said to the rest of them, "I'll get your ship prepped to rendezvous with the warship. Stay put until then." Then he walked from the room.

Jackson hugged Eve and Volts and then he shook Zero's hand. Apparently they'd all become good friends while he was in Cogmore custody.

Kathy gave him a hug, but the others just said "Goodbye," before chasing after Parsons.

Volts waited until they were all gone before saying to Zero, "I doubted your story about the Cogmores, but after hearing that stream of bullshit come out of that Beetar's ugly mouth, I think I

believe you now.”

That had him confused, because the Beetar’s speech had had the opposite effect on him, actually convincing him of Beetar righteousness.

Eve said, “It doesn’t matter what we think.

We just need to do our time and get through this for the payoff at the end.”

Volts nodded. She was right. They had to move forward to their eventual destiny—getting their minds back inside their bodies.

Zero almost bought into his own denials, but then he heard a Cogmore voice call out for help from down the corridor.

He excused himself from his friends, saying he needed to stretch his legs, which was silly, but they didn’t argue.

He followed the sound of the distressed Cogmore’s voice until he came to a door. When he opened it he saw five little Cogmores huddled together, crying behind bars.

A Cogmore stood up and approached the bars. The double agent. Hobbs.

He spat at Zero.

Zero said in his weird Cogmore voice, “I’m so sorry for what has happened to you.”

Hobbs stepped back suspiciously. “What is this? Is this another twisted trick? How do you know my language?”

“It’s in my database. It was programmed into me. I’m a living creature inside this mechanical body and my body was upgraded.”

Hobbs looked him over. “I did not know you things were alive.”

“The rebellion has been thwarted. Your leader and his clan are dead.”

“I know. They made me watch the explosions from up here.”

That was awful. Hobb’s family would be executed for his betrayal. At least he would not be required to carry out their sentences, since no one

had mentioned it since they arrived. The Beetars probably wanted to do it personally.

Zero asked, “Why do your people hate Beetars so much?” The curiosity had him by the tail and would not let go. He was starting to understand that the situation between the Cogmores and the Beetars was not black and white by any means, and he was curious about the nuances involved. Buying into both diametrically opposed ideals had his head spinning. A straight answer would set his mind at ease. But Hobbs did not supply it.

Hobbs sighed. “They were our friends and now they are not. Just because they are allies with you doesn’t mean that alliance will last forever. Be careful with them. They can’t be trusted. As soon as they can’t exploit you with your willing participation, they will subject their rule upon you like they did to my people.”

Zero nodded, still wondering who to trust.

Hobbs said, “Let me out.”

Zero gasped. It hadn't even crossed his mind.

How could they escape from orbit aboard an enemy vessel?

"I can't. They'll kill me."

"You have to. You've killed innocents. Now you will purge your guilt by releasing us."

The way he said it, so forcefully and direct, had Zero convinced. He did have to do something to help. He couldn't just let them die.

"What would you do if I sprung you free?"

"We'd grab a shuttle and get back to our people. We'd start a new uprising."

He pondered his options. His mind screamed for him to turn on his heels and close the door behind him, to forget the entire conversation, but he couldn't do that now that Hobbs had confronted him.

He had to help, if he could do so discreetly. He didn't want to get caught and he certainly didn't want Volts and Eve to get punished along with him, so he had to formulate a plan to free Hobbs that

ensured his involvement would never be discovered.

Because he was no sleuthing genius, he came up with the simplest plan that struck him. “I’ll bust the lock on this cage, but you have to assure me that you’ll wait to escape. Me and my friends are leaving this ship soon. Wait until after we’ve left to make your move. That way it’ll look like you broke free on your own.”

Hobbs nodded. “It’s the least I can do.”

He wanted to trust him, because he had to trust him. His life depended on Hobbs doing what he asked.

He grabbed the door and pulled. The lock crackled and finally snapped loose as the door opened. He pushed the door back into place and said, “Wait until you hear our ship take off. Promise me.”

“I promise. Thank you.”

He walked from that holding cell with a heavy heart, but also with a hefty dose of fear

coursing through him. He was not normally the trusting type, but he had to trust Hobbs to do the right thing.

He felt a cathartic wave wash over him. He had executed Cogmores in cold blood, and it was his plan that had destroyed their only rebellion. But by helping Hobbs, that single act could be the start of a rebellion that would break the shackles of Beetar tyranny for good. At least that was his hope. Or Hobbs could get impatient and doom them all. He just had to wait and see how it played out.

He returned to his friends and played it cool.

Luckily, they didn't ask him any questions.

Eve said, "I wonder who's been attacking the warship we're going to?"

Volts snorted. "They can't be any worse than those damn Cogmores."

Zero wanted to speak up for the Cogmores, but considering what he'd just done, he thought it

prudent to keep quiet.

Before the conversation could gain strength, the floor shuddered, meaning the ship carrying Jackson, Mike, Kathy, and Winthrop had just left. He was going to miss them despite their flaws, or perhaps because of them.

Parsons came jogging into the room and said breathlessly, “Your ship is ready. The journey will only take two days because the warship’s going to meet you halfway. I stowed all the ammo you’ll need on board. Come on.” His eyes were red and puffy like he’d been crying, which Zero realized was probably the case. He’d wept as he launched the others towards the corporation-run planet.

Zero’s virtual heart was fluttering in his metal chest for various reasons. It was only a matter of time before the prisoners escaped, and he could only hope they did so silently and peacefully. He didn’t want Parsons to get caught in the crossfire. But also he was going to board a genuine

warship in space captained by an alien race. And he was about to be reunited with Stacey. He sure hoped she was as excited at the prospect as he was.

He could barely contain himself as he followed Parsons through the corridors.

They bowed as they passed a Beetar. He acted like they didn't even exist despite the fact that any one of them could have squeezed the juice out of him like a tube of toothpaste. Even Parsons could've taken him. His arrogance did worry him, though. What if the warship was teeming with guys like that?

The shuttle was small, but large enough to fit them all in snugly. This was it. If Hobbs could wait just another minute, he'd be in the clear for the escape.

Parsons teared up as he bade them farewell.

Zero impatiently hissed, "Hurry up, man.

This ship isn't going to launch itself."

Parsons wiped his eyes with the back of his

hand and exited without saying another word. A second later the ship came to life as a hatch in the Beetar ship opened up. They floated towards the black, and once they were far enough away, they shot off.

Volts said, “That was too harsh. He’s a good guy.”

“I know that.” He studied the concerned look Volts was giving him, so he decided to come clean. “I released the Cogmores they’re holding prisoner, and I wanted to get away before they made a break for it so I don’t get fingered for the crime.”

Volts paused for a very long time. Then he said, “You’re a damn idiot.”

Eve shook her head. “You are, Zero. You’re an idiot.”

He didn’t expect anything less from them, but it did hurt being called an idiot by his two closest friends.

Eve said, “I’m plugging in for the duration

of the journey.”

Volts added, “Me too.”

Desperately, Zero said, “I don’t need to charge, though. You’re going to leave me by myself?”

Eve grabbed him by the shoulders and said severely, “You might need the time to get your head straight. We’re about to board a Beetar warship as hired muscle and you’ve gone and convinced yourself that they’re the bad guys.”

Volts said, “They probably are the bad guys, but who cares? We just need to keep our noses clean. Setting enemy prisoners free is hardly that.”

He plugged in before Zero could retort.

Eve said, “They’re saving our lives. We literally owe them our existence. Let that sink into your thick skull before we rendezvous with them.”

Zero nodded. She was right. He had made a soap opera out of something pretty cut and dry.

When someone saves your life, you should do

anything to repay them.

She went to the opposite wall and plugged in.

Her head drooped and her eyes slid shut.

This was going to be a long and boring trek
with only his own twisted thoughts to keep him
company.

Part 4:

Warship

A faint warning siren sounded that startled him out of his daydreams. He checked the monitors to see the biggest, meanest warship he could've ever imagined. With a shudder, they docked with it and he unplugged Volts and Eve.

The doorway opened and Stacey and Piss-pants were there waiting for them.

Stacey rushed inside and wrapped Zero up in a hug. It was the best thing that had happened to him in a long time.

She said, "We got word that the orbital station over Cogmore went silent. After some investigation, it appears some Cogmore prisoners overtook it, killed everyone off, and then destroyed the ship. We know the Cogmores got off before it blew, but we couldn't be sure you guys had until now."

Volts gave him a look that could kill, and Eve bumped his shoulder as she walked past. She said to him, “Good plan, genius. You killed Parsons.”

Stacey stepped back and asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Eve softened. “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

Piss-pants asked, “Which one of you dambasses turned off the communication console? We’ve been trying to get through to you all damn day.”

Zero shrugged. He hadn’t messed with any of the controls, but that didn’t stop Volts from glaring at him like he had.

He had Stacey back in his life, but it seemed he’d lost two friends in the process.

Stacey led them from the ship and said, “Make sure to bow when a Beetar comes near. They’re sticklers for that crap. And don’t strike up a conversation with any of them either. They hate that.

Steer clear of the captain. His name is Flimfor and he's an asshole. Otherwise, they're easy enough to get along with."

The corridors were coated in a shiny black substance that reflected the lights above in disorienting ways. It took a few seconds to get used to it. The black that covered the walls seemed to move like it was an organic material, or somehow intelligent, but Zero chalked that up to his overactive imagination coupled with its disorienting effects. He ran a finger across a wall, and when he inspected it, it was unmarked and his finger was clean. Every few feet, they passed a closed steel door.

They walked past a huge window to the outside that ran the entire length of the section of corridor they were in. It must have been thirty feet long.

As they ogled it in sheer awe, Stacey said, "It's not really glass. It's some type of material that

projects what it sees from the opposite side. It's technically just an image."

That took the splendor out of it. But then a little blue alien craft zipped past outside and fired on their ship.

They didn't feel any of the direct hits, so

Zero could only assume the Beetar ship had some sort of force field or super thick hull capable of absorbing impacts. Return fire came from above, but none of it hit the jittery little ship. It took evasive maneuvers which took it out of their view.

Eve gasped, "That's one of those bastards that killed Creaker, Twitch, and Stomper. That type of ship took out the training center on Epigog."

Stacey put a hand on her hip. "Piss-pants told me that too. Whatever took out the training center was advanced and gutsy, and these little ships are definitely that. Thirteen of them followed us all the way out here, taking little potshots at us whenever they get the chance. There are just seven

of those thirteen left, but their lack of success hasn't slowed them down or given them pause for concern.

Volts was mesmerized by the window, watching intently for the ship to return. "Have any of them gotten through your defenses?"

"The damage they do is minimal, but it's cumulative. That's why you're here. We're going to take the fight to them."

Zero stammered, "But we're not warriors, we're all washouts."

"The Beetars don't know that. They think we're the cream of our batch, that we were unlucky enough to have our training cut short. They need to keep believing that.

He wondered what type of weird-looking aliens piloted those little blue ships. "Which planet do they come from?"

"We haven't found their home world yet.

The Beetars have their feelers out, but so far no one has any answers. All we know is the quadrant of

space where their ships seem to congregate. That's where we'll be heading."

Eve asked, "How long until we get to them?"

"We'll be there in a couple of days. Don't worry about them just yet. We have a lot of catching up to do. Follow me and I'll show you our living quarters."

Piss-pants had remained mainly in the background as Stacey led them. It was clear she had taken the lead since boarding the Beetar ship.

They walked past a few Beetars as they stomped down the halls, careful to bow their heads as they passed. These Beetars looked far more regal than the ones they were used to. They looked bigger, too, like they could take a punch and give one back.

That thought sent a shiver through Zero's spine.

Until then he'd always assumed Beetars dealt out their justice from a safe distance, using humans as their muscle, but these guys looked like they were

bred for war.

Stacey led them into a huge brightly lit room with white walls that clashed with the black oily walls they'd walked past. There were two communal tables set in the middle of the room, with board games laid out on each. Twenty charging ports lined the walls.

Eve winked at him and whispered, "We won't be using those things anymore."

Stacey overheard and cocked her brow. Eve explained. "Zero was abducted by enemy aliens, but instead of killing him, they enhanced him with a never-ending battery. If we find ourselves in a pickle, we can all just charge from him now."

Stacey looked him up and down like it was the first time they'd met. "A lot has happened to you three since we last saw each other. I'm eager to hear your stories. But I have to meet with my liaison officer first. Then we'll catch up."

Piss-pants stood beside her and said to them,

“Don’t go anywhere. We’ll be right back. We just have to check in.”

Volts didn’t waste any time. He rushed over to the nearest wall and plugged in.

Eve shrugged. Zero looked at her for an explanation. “He’s been that way lately. He freaks out if he goes too long without a boost. Best to ignore it until it passes.”

Zero sat in one of the mammoth chairs at the table and Eve sat opposite him. In a serious tone she said, “When you released those Cogmore prisoners, you could have gotten all of us killed. What the hell were you thinking? Why did you do it?”

He rested his chin on the table. “I helped them because I think we’re the bad guys.”

Eve slapped him on the top of the head like he was her kid brother and he’d just said something idiotic. “We’re robots designed to kill. What in the world made you think we’d be planting flowers and petting bunnies? You have to get with the program

or you'll take us all down with you.”

“I know. It won't happen again.”

“Good. I missed you, Zero. It's good to have you back, even if you were returned a little broken.”

He smiled up at her and she reached across the table and patted him on the shoulder.

When Piss-pants and Stacey returned, they were solemn. Piss-pants unplugged Volts and told him to take a seat. This new attitude of theirs had them spooked.

Stacey said, “Apparently when the Cogmore prisoners escaped and destroyed the ship you guys just left, it sent shockwaves across the empire.

There are new uprisings on Beetar-controlled planets erupting by the minute as word spreads that the Beetars can be taken out. My liaison just instructed me to ship out two of you to help quell these uprisings and to protect high-ranking Beetar citizens. Captain Flimfor apparently blames you three for failing to suppress the Cogmores. That's

why he's chosen to send two of you back out, as a sort of punishment."

Eve and Volts bored holes through Zero with their eyes.

Stacey added, "Just be content that he didn't decide to kill all three of you instead. He's not one to be trifled with, so there will be no discussion about his decision. It must be done."

He hadn't met Captain Flimfor, but he already disliked him.

Volts asked in a quavering voice, "Who gets to stay?" Zero didn't understand why there was fear in his tone. Maybe it was because he understood more than he did. It wouldn't be the first time.

Stacey said, "It's my choice who gets to stay and who has to go. This was a hard decision, but Volts and Eve will be sent out to help establish order. In the meantime, we'll stay out of harm's way until you return. Then we can go back and take on the mysterious blue ships that have plagued us."

Volts stood up suddenly and looked back at the ports on the walls. He was shivering with unbridled fear. Zero finally realized why he was so afraid of leaving; his phobia of powering off was growing by the second.

Eve said, "Volts needs a rest. He's overexerted himself in the past few days. Zero can leave with me."

Zero wanted to refuse, but he was the person responsible for this mess. He'd be a worthless coward if he let his frightened friend go off to fight his battles while he stayed behind in relative safety.

Desperate, he said, "Aren't there other mechs out there that can handle this? What about Mike, Jackson, Kathy and Winthrop?"

"I don't know who those people are."

"They were stationed with us on Cogmore.

They were reassigned to a corporate planet."

"Then they already have assignments that have nothing to do with this. And like I said, you

were hand-picked by the captain as a punishment. I know it's not fair or even justified, but there's nothing I can do about it."

She was wrong though. It was justified. In fact, they were getting off light. If Captain Flimfor found out what he'd done, he'd do far worse than this.

He looked Stacey over to see if this was some kind of elaborate joke, but she was deadly serious.

She said to him, "It's a big empire out there, and it's being tested because of what happened in orbit around Cogmore. You have no choice in the matter. Two of you need to go, although I'd prefer for you to stay behind and let the other two go instead. If you have an enemy-built power source inside of you, I'd hate for you to be questioned out in the field and fingered as an enemy collaborator or something."

He appreciated that she was pulling excuses

out of her ass to keep him close, but Eve and Volts knew what he'd done. He'd never be able to look them in the eye again if he bowed out and let them go in his stead.

"I need to go. Volts needs to stay behind."

Stacey looked disgusted. "I just got you back, Jack. I don't want to lose you again."

His heart skipped a beat. She did care. It wasn't just him who felt that way. But he couldn't let it influence him. He had to be one of the two who got sent off-ship. "My name is Zero and I have to go. I'm sorry."

Volts put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, pal. I appreciate this. I promise I'll get over this psychosis by the time you return."

It was a shame to see Volts deteriorated like that, but Cogmore had changed them all. It had made Eve stronger, Volts jittery, and it had literally changed Zero physically and mentally. He just didn't know if he had changed like Eve, for the

better, or like Volts, for the worst.

Piss-pants looked overjoyed that his best buddy was going to get to stay, but he was holding back his enthusiasm so he wouldn't upset the rest of them.

Stacey said to Eve, "You'll be going to the penal planet called Ishca. It's hell on Ishca, but you'll be in good company. Some of the best soldiers are stationed there already."

She looked at Zero and sighed. "You'll be personal security for a Beetar diplomat who is working with a new alien race the Beetars are trying to bring into the fold. Advancement is not always greeted with open arms, so this Beetar has become the target of attacks, especially now that news has spread about Cogmore."

He desperately wanted to switch with Eve.

She'd drawn the short straw. Or more realistically, Stacey had given it to her to keep him safe. He opened his mouth to voice his objection when Eve

cut him off with, “That’s perfect. I’ve been itching for more action. From what I’ve heard the horrors on the penal planet are grossly over-exaggerated anyway.”

Stacey said evenly, “They are not, but I appreciate your enthusiasm. Come with me. You ship out right away. It’s not far from here, so you’ll arrive shortly.” To Zero she said, “I’ll be back for you.”

When Stacey left with Piss-pants and Eve, Volts whispered, “You shouldn’t have saved those Cogmores. They’re bad news, dude.”

He was about to correct him when Volts walked away and plugged into the nearest port, shutting down completely. Apparently the implications of his new battery and the cable that might allow him to recharge anyone at a moment’s notice had yet to sink into Volts’ fevered mind.

That was okay, though. He’d protect this diplomatic Beetar dork until the heat was off and

then he'd be back aboard the warship in no time.

Perhaps he was deluding himself. The galaxy was far more dangerous than he would have ever imagined, and lately his actions were a big reason why it was so dangerous.

If he died, he probably deserved it.

He went to the big bay window hoping to see Eve's ship take off. He watched as faint mist issued from somewhere outside and below. Then a black and yellow ship shot away from the Beetar warship.

One of the little blue alien ships gave chase, but guns from the Beetar warship scared it off, giving Eve's ship a clean getaway.

As soon as he saw the blue ship circle back, his limbs loosened. Then he realized he was about to go through the exact same thing when he took off, and his joints tensed up again.

Stacey approached him and said angrily:

"You can't wander the halls by yourself, Jack."

“You need to stop calling me Jack.”

“I forgot. Sorry, Zero.”

“I just wanted to make sure Eve got away safely.”

“You three have formed a bond together, then?”

He understood what she was getting at.

“We’ve been through a lot together, but you have to remember that I was a prisoner for most of my time on Cogmore. Eve and Volts have history together, I’m still a bit of an outcast.”

She smiled. “You are different, that’s for sure.”

“When do I ship out?”

“Soon. Piss-pants is prepping your ship.

He’ll come and get us when it’s ready.”

“If it was so important to bring us here, why don’t any of the Beetars on this ship object to our reassignment elsewhere?”

“The Beetars on this ship are the ones who

reassigned you, remember? Those blue ships out there pose no real danger to us. But they became such an annoyance that it was decided to bring in reinforcements to take them out for good.”

“So I guess taking out the blues is no longer as important as my new assignment.”

“Nope. They’ll live with the annoyance for a little while longer to make sure other corners of the empire are secure. I’m not supposed to know this, but I think this ship is like their hub of operations or something. It’s built to withstand just about anything. I’ll be safe while you’re gone.”

“My head is spinning. I wish I could just get an assignment and stick to it.”

“You’ll do fine. The more experiences you have, the better prepared you’ll be for what’s coming.”

There was an ominous quality to her voice that disturbed him. “What are you talking about?”

“Shit. Nothing. Worry about the Beetar

diplomat for now. If you lose focus, you'll just make yourself an easier target."

"Don't change the subject. Tell me what you meant."

"I can't. I promised. Just come back here in one piece, okay?" She moved forward and embraced him. She pulled her head away, and for a horrifying moment he worried she would try to kiss him with her big metal mouth.

But she looked into his eyes and said, "You need to survive. Make sure you do."

"That's the plan. When I get back here I expect you to tell me what you know."

"I'll try. It's way more complicated than you think, and you're not going to like what you hear."

He already didn't like what he was hearing.

Wasn't his reality complicated enough? Hadn't he been through the meat grinder already? How much more bullshit could he take?

He asked a question that sounded silly as it

left his mouth. “Are we the bad guys?”

She pulled away and smiled. “I’m glad you’re concerned about that. No, we are not. We’re the good guys. But that’s all I can say just now.”

Thankfully Piss-pants came rushing towards them at that moment or Stacey might have felt the need to tell him more than his fragile psyche could handle. “The ship’s ready to go.”

To Zero he said, “You’ll be there in about a week. I’d catch up on my beauty sleep if I were you.”

He sighed. “I can’t power down or recharge anymore because of the stupid Cogmore battery inside of me.”

Stacey shushed him and looked up and down the corridor to make sure no Beetars had overheard him mention the Cogmore modification.

She whispered, “If you can’t go offline, then just relax and enjoy the solitude. You deserve a little downtime.”

She was wrong though. Solitude was the last thing he needed. He'd spent two days alone on the shuttle to the Beetar ship while Eve and Volts went offline, and before that he'd spent days as a prisoner, and then as a willing collaborator to an inhuman enemy. He needed a human connection in the worst way.

He took solace in the knowledge that he had no choice in the matter. He just had to do what was required of him and keep his complaints to a minimum. As long as he looked at it that way, it was easier to accept his role.

Piss-pants said, "Our launch window's closing. Hurry the hell up."

He followed after him, bowing rapidly each time he passed a Beetar. Some of them were decent enough, and a couple even bowed back, which was weird. He had to wonder though: were they their saviors, benefactors, or their masters? He wondered how they saw their own role in their lives. He was

pretty sure it wasn't the same way they saw themselves.

The shuttle was small and the inside was cramped. Piss-pants slapped him on the ass, his hand making a loud clang. "Good luck, man. See you when you get back."

Stacey hugged him quickly and then shoved him inside the shuttle. "It leaves in less than a minute. Hurry up and strap in or you'll bounce around on takeoff like a pinball."

He didn't need to be told twice. He found the harnesses and secured himself as they closed the ship up.

Stacey yelled over the intercom, "The planet is called Dosia and its inhabitants are called Dosians. From what I've been told they're mostly peaceful. I don't know much else beyond that. The Beetar you'll be protecting is named Frad."

He laughed, and she must have heard him because she giggled back. "Frad is supposed to be

smart and capable. My liaison didn't have any intel beyond that. Good luck."

He was about to say thank you, but he was suddenly pushed against the wall as his shuttle blasted away from the Beetar ship.

The shuttle was fired upon. He saw the little blue ship strafe him, but his ship didn't sustain any damage. He saw several lines of fire erupt from the Beetar ship and the blue ship zipped around and away from him. After that scare, the trip became uneventful and remained that way.

It became immediately apparent his ship either didn't have an artificial gravity generator, or it did but it hadn't been turned on. Because he didn't like floating around without control, he stayed strapped in for most of the trip.

The journey was dull. He spent most of it in a maelstrom of self-pity and doubt. It occurred to him that he was quite possibly the worst creature the universe had ever shat out. He had failed as a

human being. Had his cancer not led him here, he would have toiled away in the quarries until the day he drank himself to death.

Even as a mechanical monster, he had failed.

He was the only recruit to not make it past the firearms deployment part of training. Then, under his watch, the training camp had been obliterated.

On Cogmore, he'd annihilated both sides, Cogmore and Beetar, with his mere presence. And as if that wasn't enough, he'd released those Cogmore prisoners, which was having a ripple effect that could possibly topple an empire. He was his own worst enemy, and if anyone knew what he had done during his short stint away from Earth, he'd probably be executed for gross incompetence.

Towards the end of the trip, the ship came very close to a huge star. He knew stars were big, but to see one up close was something else. It filled his entire monitor, even when he zoomed out.

Luckily he didn't fall into it, which was a serious

concern for a few minutes. The planet came into view ten minutes later. He didn't know what kind of propulsion system his shuttle was using, but it was way beyond anything humans had ever invented.

Dosia was light blue with green swirls here and there and a few dark patches where land muddied the cloud color from below. He wondered how long he'd be in orbit before another ship came to pick him up. But that didn't happen like last time. His shuttle came at Dosia at an entry angle and descended towards its surface.

After a few horrific moments of bone shattering terror, the turbulence subsided and the ship leveled off. It settled down gently and the door opened a minute later. He released himself from the harnesses and walked to the open doorway.

He was in a concrete jungle of white and gray buildings. His ship had set down in a courtyard with a fountain and small neatly manicured patches of blue grasses. All around him were benches and

each one had a creature on it. A big Beetar with flowing robes approached and ushered him from the ship. “You’re ruining the view, human. Get off the ship so I can send it away.”

He walked from the ship with trepidation in each step. Everyone was staring at him like he was about to level the city or set them all on fire. If only they knew how frightened he was, they’d laugh at him.

As soon as both feet hit the ground, the Beetar punched a code into a hidden keypad on the outside of the ship and it closed up. He walked twenty feet away, and when Zero didn’t make a move to follow him he yelled, “Get over here or it’ll melt you into a puddle.”

He felt the heat from the thrusters of the ship and jogged over to the aggressive Beetar. He turned in time to see it lift off, and watched as it quickly and silently vanished through the cloud layer.

“Where did you send it?”

The Beetar looked at him bemusedly. It looked like it was going to tell him he needed to learn his place or to stop asking questions, but instead it said, “It’s going into orbit for now, unless the mother ship calls it back.”

“Are you Frad?”

“Yes I am. You must be my protection.”

“Yep. My name’s Zero.”

“Forgive me for being so honest, but I was expecting someone a little more formidable.”

“We’re all built the same, sir.”

“I know that. I wasn’t talking about your external machinery.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay. Come with me and I’ll get you up to speed on what I expect of you. Hopefully you’re up for the challenge.”

The other creatures on the benches were Dosians. As he walked past one of them, he looked it over. It was tall and spindly, in a humanoid way.

It looked like a prototypical Gray alien from the movies except it wasn't gray and its eyes had far more intelligence in them. Its skin was yellow with brown mottling. Its head was too big for its skinny body, but it had a mouth and two green eyes, little ears on both sides, and a thin nose. The nose had just one nostril though, so maybe it wasn't a nose at all. A shiny stream of translucent slime ran from its single nostril down its face. The more he stared at the sticky stream the more revolted he was.

It winked at him and he almost jumped. The eyelid was transparent. Then its other lid closed. Each lid opened back up a split second apart. He gave it a wide berth when it did that, and its mouth curled into a cruel smile. It was amused by his cowardice. It stood up and turned his way, winking and blinking rapidly.

Frad turned around and yelled at the Dosian, "Knock that shit off. He's new here. You bastards scare the shit out of everyone with that eye blinking

crap.”

The Dosian smirked and said in a rough, crackly, Beetar-inflected voice, “I was just saying hello.”

“That’s not how you say hi. Stop being a dick.”

The Dosian laughed in a high-pitched, whiny voice, and turned from them to retake his or her seat.

Frad said, “Don’t mind them. They’re actually pretty funny when you get used to them.”

He liked Frad already. Maybe he’d misjudged the Beetars. Frad seemed like a gutter-mouthed Beetar with a happy-go-lucky nature that was infectious. He reminded him of a fisherman he’d met once when he was a kid. That fisherman looked like he ate bullets for breakfast and punched people for fun, but when he spoke there was genuine joy in his voice. He was a man who enjoyed his own existence with an almost detached

bemusement, like he just couldn't believe he'd gotten lucky enough to live his life the way he did. Frad had that same quality about him. He was an everyman sort, except that he wasn't a man, he was a Beetar.

Zero caught up to him and asked, "What the hell is that slime running down their faces and why don't they clean it up? It's disgusting."

"They have overactive mucous membranes.

And why should they clean it up just because it bothers you? The problem is yours. You're the one that needs to adjust, not them. Variety is the spice of life. Embrace it."

Zero's attempt at making small talk had backfired. Frad was right, of course. He was the newcomer. It was he who had to change his outlook. He had to duck down to get through the entryway of the building Frad led him into.

Frad said, "I'll get that widened. Let me know if this place needs to be modified and I'll get

it done. I'd hate for your fat ass to get stuck in a doorway just as gunmen come for me."

He nodded, aware of how much he stood out in this place.

The foyer of the building was open and elaborately decorated with alien plants and grasses dotting the concrete landscape. Some of the plants swayed and moved on their own. Statues loomed over them as they walked. He had no idea what the hell they depicted though. The planet was truly alien to him in every sense. A plant nipped at his arm as he passed it.

Frad slapped it hard. "Watch out for the plants on Dosia. They're assholes."

He smiled, even though he felt nothing akin to humor. He wondered if his dread shone through his smile.

Frad said, "Lucky for you, I'm stationed on the ground floor of the building." He was alluding to the fact that the stairs going up were too narrow

for him, and the elevators were far too small for him to fit inside.

They walked into a large room devoid of the plant life he'd seen along the way.

“This is my office and domicile. I'm almost always in here, so get acquainted with the layout.

When I have to attend a meeting or a function, you'll be the first to know. Have a seat at my desk and we'll chat.”

He sat down and broke the chair.

Frad laughed and said, “On second thought, just stand. I'll have a steel chair built to your specifications by tomorrow.”

Zero apologized and moved the wreckage aside with his foot.

Frad said, “You don't talk much, do you?”

“I do. I'm just nervous.”

“Good. I want you to be on edge around here. I've already had two attempts on my life in the past week. Ever since that debacle at Cogmore, the

Dosians have rallied together in an attempt to shuck off Beetar influence. It's a shame. We're only here to help, but suddenly they're looking at us like we're the enemy."

"I was on Cogmore. I saw the way Beetars treated the Cogmores with my own eyes."

He should not have said that.

Frad's smile wavered. "My people are not always so kind when we are resisted. The Cogmores certainly presented a challenge. But that has nothing to do with why I'm here. Dosia is being invited into a union with my people. We're not trying to subdue them or manipulate them to our own ends. Quite the contrary, we're trying to help them advance to our level."

He resisted the urge to ask if the Dosians were as eager about the union as the Beetars were.

Frad continued, "The empire is huge. One end of it doesn't behave exactly like the other. For the Dosians to equate Beetar/Cogmore relations the

same as Beetar/Dosian relations is absurd. It's completely different. You see that, don't you?"

He was starting to. "I can understand the difference."

"What you have to understand is that if I'm killed down here, my people will treat it like an act of war. Everything I've worked toward will be toppled with my death. I can't allow that."

Zero pulled his guns out to show Frad exactly what was protecting him. "I wouldn't worry about attacks. I've got your back." He thought about turning his thrusters on too, but he knew that would probably burn the office to the ground.

He expected Frad to clap or smile or something, but instead he stood up fearfully and said, "How are you able to pull your weapons in my presence?"

"I don't understand the question." He put the guns away and the hatches in his thighs cinched shut.

“Your programming shouldn’t allow you to deploy your weapons around my people except in extreme cases where we need protection from an attacker.”

He had to think fast. “I’ve been through a lot, sir. Maybe my programming is wonky from all the battles I’ve survived.” He knew that was a lie, but he had to calm Frad down before he got worried enough to have him checked out.

Frad sat again and said, “They sent me a robot with buggy programming, huh? That sounds like something high command would do. Oh well, you’ll have to do. Just don’t pull your guns out around me, okay?”

“Yes sir.”

“Stop calling me ‘sir.’ Call me Frad.”

He nodded. He felt like a fool. “Where will I be staying?”

Frad looked over his shoulder. “You’ll be staying here, in this room, with me. There are three

chargers on the far wall back there.”

“Oh.”

“I know it’s unusual, but I can’t risk you not being by my side if an attack occurs.”

“I understand. I’ll try to keep to myself.”

“Nonsense. Do whatever you want, as long as you stand between me and the bullets.”

A smile crept across his face. He was liking Frad more and more.

He stood up and said, “I need to urinate.”

Zero nodded and waited for him to leave.

He started to walk from the office. “You have to come with me.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’ll get used to this.”

He followed him back out into the foyer and then through a door. He went inside and told him to take his post outside the doorway until he was done.

He wasn’t sure what to do, so he blocked it from anyone who might have wanted to go in.

Passing Dosians ogled him fearfully and took a wide berth around him. One foolish Dosian tried to squeeze past him, until it felt a hand on its chest gently shoving it backwards. It hissed an indecipherable language at Zero, but eventually left.

After a few minutes, Frad returned. “Good job, Zero. I was using Dosian security before you got here, but those assholes would just wander off whenever they got bored. We’re going to get along just fine.”

He thought so too.

He stood guard outside the office door for an hour and then, when it was clear no threats were imminent, wandered inside and took up a post at the back of the room. He saw a pantry tucked away in the corner and a makeshift bed along the wall towards the back. Frad carried himself well, but he was living like a college freshman. There was a little steel door set into the floor that he assumed was a panic room in case he was ever overrun by

enemies.

Frad sat at his desk and conducted teleconference calls all day, sometimes speaking to Dosians in their language and sometimes in Beetar. When he spoke in Beetar, Zero could understand what he said.

He was explaining to various groups of Dosians how mutually beneficial an alliance with the Beetars could be, both financially and intellectually. He also spent some time explaining that threats on his life were no longer an issue. He tilted his camera Zero's way to show them he was there to protect him. He explained that since he was here, talks could resume and must resume quickly. He heard him mention high command on more than one occasion, and each time his voice strained, like he hated to bring it up.

Zero started to daydream a couple of times, but he caught himself before his mind wandered too far. He had to be ready for anything. He had to stay

alert. Frad's life depended on it.

Frad stood from his chair and approached, saying, "I think you should recharge."

"But ... what if you come under attack?"

"It's getting dark outside, and Dosians, being cold blooded, don't operate well at night. Plus, I want you at your best, and if your battery is depleted you're not going to perform optimally."

Zero nodded and went to the back wall where the charging ports were mounted. He backed into one of them and heard it hiss as it connected with his body. He felt nothing, but he knew Frad probably expected him to shut down as he charged, so he let his head droop and he closed his eyes, mimicking the offline pose.

Frad sighed and whispered, "Why did they have to send me a dumbass?"

It took every ounce of Zero's willpower to keep still as Frad criticized him.

He knocked on his hip, which was probably

as high as Frad could reach on his mammoth body. Then he felt him pull on his gun hatch. He assumed he was checking to see if he'd rigged his hatches so they'd open at any time, regardless of whose company he was in.

Frad seemed satisfied when the hatches stayed in place. Then he heard him shuffle off, rustle around for a few minutes, and then he was silent. He must have gone to bed.

The hatch issue almost became a problem.

He could only guess it was another software modification Henshaw had installed in him. Or maybe he had malfunctioned, like he'd told Frad.

He'd been modified by Henshaw and by the Cogmores, so it stood to reason that those alterations could play havoc with the rest of his systems. He was glad Frad hadn't overreacted and insisted on shutting him down.

As he stood there, hooked to the wall, immobile, he fell asleep. He didn't know he could

still do that, but it felt great to give his confused mind a rest.

He awoke to Frad unplugging him from the wall. He had a handheld tablet that he was hooking up to the port Zero had been hooked to.

Frad explained, “I can extrapolate data from the power source. None of you know this, but data is relayed back to the ports as you charge so we can monitor your progress. We only ever do this in extreme cases, though.”

“So why are you doing it to my port?”

He paused and looked up at him. “I need to find out if your database has been intentionally corrupted. I need to find out if you’ve been sent to kill me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“It’s not a stretch of the imagination to think high command might have sent you to kill me and then pin my death on the Dosians to instigate war.”

“No way. I thought Beetars wanted to

coexist with the Dosians?”

“You don’t know my people. They want this alliance whether the Dosians want in on it or not. We’re going the diplomatic route now, but if that fails we’ll get what we want through force.”

Frad stared at the screen, tapped a few buttons, and then threw the tablet at his feet in disgust. “Nothing works around here. Your port didn’t record any info.”

Thank God for that. The last thing he wanted was for Frad’s paranoia to have any basis in reality. He was glad his battery didn’t actually connect to the charger, or else Frad would know everything he’d done, and probably trust him even less than if he found out he was an assassin. He was worse than a hit man: he was so incompetent that he got those around him killed.

Frad said, “I guess we’re just going to have to trust one another, then.”

“No one screwed with my programming

before I came here. I'm here to save your life, not end it."

"I hope that's right. I'd hate to die for the Beetar cause."

"It doesn't sound to me like you're behind your people or their agenda."

Frad shrugged, his weird shoulders making a slurping sound as they moved. "My people don't know what they want. But they always want more. Their greed is their bane, but also their one saving grace. Greed has led them to the forefront of discovery. It has opened up whole new worlds and made the galaxy a smaller, more organized place. But greed is selfish and headstrong. Greed for its own sake is chaos. My people step on either side of that line all the time. I'm just waiting and watching to see which side they eventually fall on."

He didn't know what the hell he was talking about specifically, but he had the gist of it figured out. "What will you do if the Beetars end up

disappointing you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll cut ties with them.

Maybe I’ll work to right the wrongs they cause. But more likely I’ll take the coward’s way out and just go on living my life and adjusting my morals to suit my needs.”

Frad rolled his shiny black eyes and said in a hushed whisper, “You’re not recording this, are you?”

“I wouldn’t know how, even if I could.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. In a few days, either Dosia will be ours or I’ll be dead. Either way, no one will care that an old fart like me had second thoughts.”

Zero was suddenly losing interest in all of the Beetar intrigue. He wanted easy answers, but he knew that was because he was young and idealistic. The universe was far more nuanced and complicated than he could appreciate. He had no horse in this race. He just had to do his duty. And if

it was all going to be over in only a few days, like Frad said, then he wanted to get on with it to get back to Stacey as soon as possible. If that meant he had to kill a bunch of Dosians and save Frad's life to get there, then so be it.

He said, "I need ammo."

"Of course. I have just the thing. How much do you need?"

"As much as you can get."

Frad smiled wickedly. "I like the way you think. Come with me. You're gonna like this."

He walked through the foyer and down a flight of stairs. Zero's feet were too big for the steps so he asked if Frad would mind if he used his rocket boosters. Frad told him to go ahead, and Zero floated down the length of the stairs into a basement with a huge reinforced door blocking their path. The stairs were afire behind him, but they were made of some type of stone, so the little tongues of flame went out on their own.

Frad ran his hand from the top of the door to the bottom and it hissed open. “This is for Beetars only. Even the Dosian high priest isn’t allowed through here.”

He thought Frad expected him to be honored, so he lied. “I’m honored.”

He ducked down, nearly folding himself in half to follow Frad through the door. Inside was a vault. It was no bigger than Frad’s office, but it had crates upon crates of ammo and firearms along one wall, with the other wall lined with food.

Frad waved at the wall of canned and bottled food. “Dosian food would probably kill me in a week, so I get care packages once a month. Some of it is pretty good. I haven’t had to go through the stockpiles of weapons yet, so I’m just as excited as you are to see what’s in here.”

Zero wasn’t excited about weapons. He was excited to know that a few days from now he would get to leave, but to leave he had to survive, and to

survive, he might just need some more ammo.

At that very moment the entire building shuddered. Dust fell from the ceiling, and one of the bottles of food fell to the floor and cracked, spilling a black sludge everywhere that smelled like day-old farts to his mechanical olfactory senses.

The building rumbled again, but this time it was accompanied by weird alien screaming.

Frad said, "They're here for me, Zero!"

"I got this," he said, as he tore box after box open, looking for ammo for his guns.

Frad pointed at a crate and said, "The ammo in there should be compatible, but it's illegal for me to supply you with it. Your kind is not allowed to possess it. But under these circumstances, load up."

He popped the crate open and started filling his forearms with as much of it as would fit. He closed the doors on his arms and said, "Stay here."

Frad was already holding a mean-looking rifle, so he knew he was ready for the worst, and

with Zero protecting him he'd probably get it.

He took a deep breath, pulled his guns, and rushed from the vault.

Frad's office had been reduced to a smoldering cavity. It was quickly filling with armed Dosians wearing protective gear that was plated in armor, but also somewhat mechanized. One of the Dosians picked up a huge chunk of outer wall and thrust it aside like it was nothing. Zero could do the same, but Dosians were slight and brittle-looking. There was no way any of them had that kind of strength without technological help.

He didn't wait for them to spot him. He fired first. He was as surprised as they were when the bullets hit, exploding like grenades upon contact. Not only that, but they released a concussive boom that knocked everyone within twenty feet down and disoriented the rest of them. He took advantage of the only opportunity he would get to surprise them by unleashing everything he had.

When they spotted him, some of them ran, while others fired back. He floated in the air, dodging the occasional round but taking the bulk of their volley. They had advanced mechanized armor, but their bullets were ineffective, causing him minimal damage.

He ran a line of sustained fire the entire length of the room and then moved in to finish off the stragglers.

He emerged out into the open space that had been a fully furnished office mere minutes ago. He watched as Dosians scurried away, some running, others crawling for their lives. No one fired upon him. The threat was over.

He floated through the opening, to the outside, and watched as hundreds, maybe thousands, of Dosians ran away. Some of them were bleeding thick yellow streams of blood. Others were dragging their damaged armor like it was a burden now rather than a benefit. A handful of armored

vehicles drove off quickly, fanning in every direction. He didn't know which group to follow or even if he should follow them. If he left, maybe a second strike would come and finish off Frad in his absence.

He flew upwards to watch from a higher vantage point. A round hit him and he tilted around, saw the gunman and killed him on the spot. Then two alien jets strafed him, hitting him with a few rounds as they retreated too. He took one down with concentrated fire, but the other got away. Other than that last futile attempt, no one fought back.

They were cowards, which was good.

Otherwise he wouldn't have stood much of a chance against so many of them at once. If that was the best the Dosian resistance had to offer, Frad had nothing to worry about.

He waited for the screaming of the wounded to die down, then he floated back down to the ground. He stepped over writhing bodies of those

who'd survived his onslaught. He didn't know much about Dosian anatomy, but he seriously doubted they'd survive much longer. As if on cue, several of them stopped moving.

He stomped through the wreckage and then the foyer. He floated down the steps and announced himself so Frad wouldn't shoot him in his confusion.

"It's all clear, sir. But you won't like how they decorated your office."

Frad peeked his head around the doorway and smiled. "Who gives a shit about an office? I'm just happy to be alive. You saved me."

For once, he wasn't an abysmal failure. And he respected Frad enough already to puff up with pride at his appreciation of his skills.

On the other hand, he deflated when he was tasked with cleaning up the mess. Apparently none of the Dosians wanted to help, and Frad was too busy setting up a new base of operations, so that left him alone in cleaning up blood and guts.

When he found a severed Dosian head that had the entire left side caved in, he started to have second thoughts about the way he'd conducted himself.

He filled a rolling dumpster lined with plastic with body parts and Dosian gore. After the sludge of death had been mopped up, he refused to help clear away the rubble, and in that Frad had his back, insisting the Dosians clean up the rubble themselves.

Frad showed him into his new office, which was just across the way from his old one. It was just as big, but obviously hurriedly thrown together.

A Dosian technician was busy mounting a single recharging port in the wall when they walked in. Another was sealing the windows with metallic blocks, while a third was installing a blast-proof door. None of them looked thrilled to be there.

Frad said, "I need to handle some damage control for the rest of the afternoon, so make

yourself comfortable.”

Zero stood at the back of the room as the Dosians avoided eye contact. Each time he looked at one of them he noticed a visible shudder overcome their limbs. They thought he was a monster, which, from their point of view, probably was not wrong.

One after another, they left over the course of ten minutes, then he had a chance to overhear Frad speaking to the Dosian diplomats about the attacks.

He was at his desk saying, “My people will look at my death as an act of war. I need more help from your end to ensure my safety so that an alliance can be properly forged between our peoples.”

A Dosian diplomat replied in Beetar, “Images of that protector who defended you have been circulating across the globe. My people are scared witless. If you wish to form an alliance, now

is the time while we are still in awe of your might.”

Frad settled back in his seat. “I see. What are the odds of a follow-up attack?”

“There will be no more attacks. The rebels expected to handle you easily after word of what happened on Cogmore, but they now know that will not be the case.”

Frad looked over his shoulder at Zero and smiled. He turned back and said, “Good. Let’s proceed immediately.”

He signed off and walked to the back of the room to join Zero. “I had no idea your presence would inspire so much fear and awe in the Dosians. If I had, I’d have sent for you sooner.”

He mumbled, “It’s too bad people had to die to get to this point.”

“People die all the time. At least they died on their feet fighting for something they believed in.”

Zero nodded, even though he wasn’t sure

why he'd just said that. "So you admire the Dosians who tried to kill you because they died for their cause?"

"I don't admire them, but I respect their commitment. Of course, I'd prefer to succeed without bloodshed, but their sacrifice wasn't my idea. Anyway, as soon as the Dosian high priest signs off on the trade agreement, you're free to go."

He almost jumped up in the air with excitement, but then his rocket boosters would've probably ignited and scorched Frad, so he was glad he kept his enthusiasm stuffed down.

Frad grabbed his hand and tried to shake it, but it was too big and probably weighed as much as his entire body. Zero moved his hand up and down, making sure not to grip too tight.

Frad let go and said, "I'll be right behind you once this is finalized. I can't wait to get off of this forsaken rock."

"I thought you liked it here. You're the first

Beetar I've ever met who seemed kind of happy.”

“How many of us have you met?”

“Just a few. Mostly I've only passed them in corridors or listened to short speeches from them.”

He paused, realizing he had never actually interacted with his kind until now. “I guess you're the first Beetar I've ever actually known.”

“We come in all varieties. I've met some assholes, too, but that doesn't mean we're all assholes.”

Frad was right. For some reason he'd painted them all with the same brush, based on none of his own experiences. He'd listened to the Cogmore rebel Damon and let his personal experiences seep so far into his psyche that they'd become his own. He'd looked upon the Beetars' treatment of Cogmore with disgust even though he had none of the facts. For all he knew, the Cogmores deserved such brutal treatment. Damon had kidnapped him and would have killed him.

He'd helped Hobbs escape, but instead of quietly retreating he'd killed everyone, including one of the only flesh and blood humans Zero had met out here so far, before escaping to the surface. From that perspective, the Cogmores were the evil ones.

His own experiences with the Beetars were limited, and the only one he'd ever actually spent any time with turned out to be a good guy.

Frad added, "Maybe you think I'm different because I'm a female."

He almost did a double-take. Frad was a woman Beetar? It blew his mind, but it affirmed to him that he was operating on preconceived notions that could easily be wrong.

He said, "I did not know that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm proud of it and I'm sure we all look the same to you."

He didn't want to tell her that was true. He worried it would sound bigoted.

He waited for her to continue, but she just

smiled impishly and walked away.

His time on Dosia was coming to a close. He couldn't be happier. Sure, he'd just killed scores of aliens, but that was part of the deal, and as long as he maintained that perspective, he could hold his head high and continue on.

Frad spoke to several more Dosian diplomats over the course of the next two days. No follow through attacks occurred, but Zero was ready if they did.

He spent his evenings standing still for hours on end with his eyes closed, trying his best to mimic the charge-up stance Frad expected to see. It was lonely and gave him way too much time to think about himself. It was funny, but when he'd had a real body on Earth, all he ever thought about was where to get his next meal and who he could trick into getting into his bed. Now he had no need for those desires, and instead of that coming as a relief, it made him ache inside. He'd do just about

anything to eat a mouthful of seasoned rice or taste a woman's skin.

That thought made him wonder how Stacey was doing. He'd be seeing her again soon, and, hopefully, once they both fulfilled their commitment to the Beetars and were cured of their cancers, they'd get to spend some time together in the flesh. He could hardly wait. He was starting to worry if the desire would be there anymore when he got his body back. Maybe he'd spend too much time as a robot and forget how to act as a man. The notion made him sick.

He wondered about Earth. He didn't even know where it was in the night sky. Was it worth going back there? If he did, would it take eight hundred years to get there, or had technology advanced enough to get him there more quickly? How would his people view him if he told them the truth? He wondered where the rest of the cured went. There must be hundreds or thousands of

humans out there who'd been in his position at one time and now were out in the galaxy with freshly cured bodies. But if so, where were they? He'd only met a few flesh and bone humans so far. He assumed the rest went back to Earth, but that was an assumption with no proof to back it.

He thought about all the cadets from his class who'd died. He was one of the few lucky ones. Just as his thoughts started to irritate him with their perpetual recurrence, he'd drift off to sleep for a while. It was nice to sleep and to dream, because his dreams bore no resemblance to reality.

He escorted Frad out to the very same courtyard he'd arrived at in the ship. She was going to sign the alliance publicly.

He noticed that the destroyed section of building was nearly reconstructed. In a matter of two days, the Dosians had erased any signs of the attack.

Frad stood before a smattering of important-

looking Dosians at a podium and spoke to them in their native tongue. Zero didn't know what she was saying, and he didn't care. He was too focused on making sure she was safe from potential dangers.

She bowed when she was done, and the Dosians surrounded her. He tensed, but it turned out they were embracing one another, as was their custom.

Frad smiled pleasantly and spoke intermittently to anyone who approached her. Then she returned to Zero. "I'm glad to have had you at my side. They recorded the whole speech. Every time a Dosian watches the signing of the alliance, they'll see you standing in the background and they'll be reminded of Beetar might."

He smiled and followed her into the building as the sun went down.

They'd spent the past two days packing up her office in anticipation of her leaving Dosia. All that remained was her desk, bed, and his charging

port.

She sighed. "Get a charge while you can.

You ship out tomorrow."

"When are you leaving? More importantly, where are you going?"

"I'm heading to Ishca. Ishca is a penal planet. A hellhole. In a way, if I'd known high command was going to reward me like this, I might have tried to fail just to stay here."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I've heard horror stories about Ishca. Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine. My station among my people is elevated enough to ensure my safety on Ishca."

He asked, "Can you get word to someone on Ishca for me?"

"Who do you know that's stationed there?"

"She's a mech unit like me. Her name is Eve.

Let her know I made it back to the Beetar warship in one piece."

"I might be able to do better than that. I'll do

my best to have her stationed aboard the warship with you.”

“She was already stationed there for an hour or so before they sent her off to Ishca as extra muscle. They probably won’t just let her go back.”

“That won’t matter. I just brokered an alliance with an entire species. I’ll get whatever I ask for, within reason.”

“Then why don’t you ask to get posted somewhere safer?”

“Because I serve wherever I’m needed. If I can help restore peace and order on Ishca, then it’s my duty to do so.”

Frad was a complicated Beetar. Maybe that was why he liked her. “I understand. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Zero.”

Frad personally escorted him to his shuttle, which would have felt like an honor until he saw that her ship was beside his, ready for departure as well. It still made him feel good that she wanted his

protection right up to the very end.

She said, “Just strap in and the ship will do the rest. Thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

He yelled, “It was a pleasure,” but his voice was drowned out by the sound of the hatch on her ship opening up. She bowed at him from the doorway and then disappeared inside. Her ship started to lift off, so he got settled in and waited for his ship to do its thing.

It closed up and lifted off without incident.

He had scared the pride right out of the Dosians.

They didn’t even have the will to attack them when they were vulnerable, just in case he retaliated.

He couldn’t wait to brag about his adventure when he got back to the warship.

Part 5:

Reunion

By the time he heard the warning buzzers and saw it, he nearly leapt from his skin. His shuttle had no defenses that he knew of, and according to the readouts on the screen, he was still about two hours from docking with the warship.

One of those zippy blue ships was in front of his shuttle, matching his pace, and facing him almost nose to nose, flying backwards.

He considered abandoning ship, with hopes that the Beetars would come and pick him up later, but that was beyond risky, and for all he knew the blue ship would notice him sneaking off and shoot him down anyway.

Then he thought about going on the offensive. He had guns. He could open the door, reach out and blow that bastard apart. But by the time he'd wasted valuable action-time formulating

various plans, the blue ship zipped away from him at baffling speed.

He waited for it to return with back-up or something, but that didn't happen. He had no idea why it had spared him, and he didn't trust his luck enough to really believe it had. Maybe it had planted a bomb under his ship. Maybe it put a tracker on it, or maybe it was trying to scare him right before it swooped in to finish him off. Only when the Beetar warship appeared on screen, and his ship didn't start ticking, did he know he'd be alright.

He docked noisily and he eagerly waited to see Stacey, Volts, and Piss-pants.

Because he'd gotten so lucky on Dosia, he suddenly worried the universe would seek balance and devastate him now. Good fortune was not something he deserved, according to his recent history. He wondered what new bad luck would greet him to balance the ledger. So he was surprised

to see three smiling mechs when the door opened.

Stacey rushed in, saying, “Good work on Dosia, Zero.”

Volts waited until she took a step back and then said, “You finally got something right then, huh?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it turns out I’m a badass.”

Piss-pants smiled and nodded. Zero thought because they’d spent so much time apart, and he’d never really gotten to know him as well as the others, each time they met up it unnerved him a bit. He could understand that. He wouldn’t have cared much if only Volts and Stacey were there to greet him.

Stacey asked, “Are you charged? Do you need to juice up?”

“I don’t need to do that anymore, remember?”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.”

Volts said, “This place is awesome. I haven’t had to kill anyone yet. As long as you bow your head when you’re supposed to and you cater to the occasional demand of our benefactors, everything is plain sailing here. I even helped Stacey and Piss-pants install shielding around their battery compartments. I don’t know if we’ll ever need it, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

He remembered how giddy Winthrop had been to discover the shielding inside Zero’s battery compartment. He’d said he would install it in the others and apparently he’d done just that. It was the only way to explain how Volts even knew about it.

Volts sure was chatty. Zero looked him in the eye to try to ascertain his mental health. Volts must have figured out what he was up to.

“I’m fine. I had a breakdown or something, but I’m over it now. I only charge once a day now, twice on boring days.”

Stacey took him by the hand. “Come on. I

didn't get the chance to give you a tour of the ship the last time you were here. I think you'll be impressed."

"Do you think they'll let me stay this time?"

He said it half jokingly, but she replied anyway.

"You're not going anywhere."

Volts followed behind them and said, "Eve is headed back to us too. We just got word. She should be here soon."

He was going to tell them that he had put a good word in for her, but that seemed too much like bragging. "I'm happy to hear that. I'm sure she's got tons of exciting stories." He was just glad to hear she'd survived.

He realized then that Piss-pants had wandered off to take care of something or other.

Volts matched their pace. "So, what was your experience with the Beetar on Dosia?"

He knew what he was getting at. They were worried he had come back even more bitter and

twisted than before.

Volts seemed relieved when he said, "I've had a change of heart about Beetars. The one I worked with was awesome."

"Most of them are okay here too."

Stacey stopped at the huge bay window so they could see the magnificence of space. It was as spellbinding as the first time he'd seen it.

He asked, "Have there been any more attacks from those little blue guys?"

"There have been a few, but nothing to worry about."

"One of them found my shuttle a couple of hours ago. It matched my speed for about a minute and then it flew off."

Stacey looked at him like he had just told a lie. "Why didn't it attack your ship?"

"I thought you might know that."

"I don't. That's interesting."

"I thought maybe it had used the time to

place a bomb on my ship or a tracker or something, but I didn't see it do anything like that."

She looked at Volts. "You'd better go and check it out just in case."

Volts started to walk backwards, saying, "I'm on it." Then he took off down the corridor at a sprint.

When she saw the look of horror on his face, she said reassuringly, "It's just a precaution. I'm sure it's fine." She squeezed his hand and said, "Come on. I'll show you the rest."

He didn't know why but she thought every little thing about the ship would interest him. After the fourth supply closet, and the third pantry, he said, "You don't need to show me any more of those. Where's the bridge or whatever they call it?"

"They call it the command hub. We're working our way there. The Beetar quarters are just up ahead."

Once they entered the hallway that

connected to the Beetar living quarters, everything changed. The ship was alive with color. The walls were green and the floors pink, and then around the next corner they'd be yellow and red. Each door was brightly colored too, some having depictions on them that he couldn't quite decipher.

Stacey let go of his hand, probably because it would freak the Beetars out to see them that way. Beetars passed them, smiling and yapping to one another. Zero and Stacey bowed their heads each time, but most Beetars ignored them. The few who bowed did so more for their benefit than anything else.

It was the opposite of what he expected. It was pleasant. He tried to make out conversations, but it was too busy to make out any single sentence. By the time they made it through the living area, his head was spinning.

When they walked through the next door, everything changed again. The control hub was

enormous. It was peppered with work station consoles, and sitting at each console was a severe-looking Beetar, hard at work. None of them looked up at them when they entered. A huge screen at the front of the room showed various images of the ship. One view showed the front, another the rear, and one tracked the zippy blue ships, losing them momentarily only to catch up to them again a second later.

In the center of the room was an orb, twice as big as his mechanical body. Stacey saw him staring at it. “That’s where the gunners work from. If the automated guns aren’t enough to get the job done, Beetars can control them from in there. If you ever get a chance to go inside it, it’ll blow your mind. The inside walls show a panoramic view of the space around the ship. When you go in there, it feels like you are the ship.”

A Beetar approached Stacey. It said angrily, “We need more food and drink in here. Please fetch

it when you're done doing whatever it is you're doing."

Stacey nodded and then bowed. Zero wanted to bring his fist down on the top of the little bastard's head, but he maintained control.

When the Beetar turned on him and glared, he reconsidered his self control, until Stacey whispered, "Bow, dumbass."

He bowed in as disrespectful a manner as he could muster, but the subtleties were lost on the Beetar. It just walked away, satisfied.

As Stacey led him from the room, she said, "Some of them are better than others, but you'll get used to it. Just make sure to bow from now on."

He had just started to think Beetars were alright. "When I get a chance, I'm going to put my metal foot up that guy's ass."

"That guy is a girl and she's the first mate of this ship. Don't act out of line, especially here."

He nodded slowly. She was right, even

though from his perspective it was the Beetar who was out of line. He'd been through too much to risk it all now. These Beetars were the real deal. They commanded a warship. They were not to be trifled with. He just had to get that through his thick skull before he smacked one of them upside the head and risked losing his life because he was too impulsive to control himself.

Stacey led him to a pantry just two doors down from the command hub. Inside, it was stacked with fancy trays and eating utensils, as well as carts and crates of food. She lifted a cart filled with exotic flowers. She pointed her toe at another cart filled with wriggling alien fruits, still planted in soil. "Pick that up. Don't try to wheel it out or you'll snap the wheels off with your weight."

He hefted the cart as it writhed with alien plant life. A fruit that resembled a banana except that it was black and oozed blood-red liquid from its tip touched his hand as he carried the cart. It moved

up and down against his metallic skin rhythmically.

It creeped him out at first, but there was something soothing and mesmerizing about it.

Stacey quietly entered the command hub and placed her cart gently on the floor just to the right side of the entrance. She nodded to the left side.

“Put yours over there.”

He put it down gently and the black banana moved away from his hand, leaving behind a red trail that was sticky to the touch and damn near impossible to wipe off. He felt bad for the banana. It was about to be killed and eaten by one of those blue slug monsters.

Stacey walked out of the hub, so he followed after her. Outside, she stumbled against the wall. He rushed over and put an arm around her waist.

She said, “I must have overexerted myself. I need a charge. Can you help me?”

Holding her weight as she leaned against

him, he asked, “Why didn’t you make sure you were charged up all the way?”

“I can’t charge all the way up. I can only charge for ten minutes at a time. Any longer and my databanks start to upload into the ports, and I can’t have the Beetars knowing what I know.”

He wanted to ask what she was referring to, but time was of the essence.

They made it past the Beetar quarters and into their cold, bland section of the ship. He picked up the pace as her body slumped into him even more.

Piss-pants saw him coming. He ran over and took her under the other arm. Together, they rushed her into the living quarters and hooked her up to a port. Her head flopped down and her eyes fluttered shut.

Piss-pants whispered, “She can’t charge for more than ten minutes or her battery starts to overheat.” Then he patted him on the back and left

him alone in the room with her.

To his surprise, her eyes opened, and she was alert and awake. She whispered, “I had to lie to him about it before he got suspicious.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The ports we use to charge also relay information about us back to the Beetars. They don’t check it that often, but if they did and they found out what I know, they’d kill me in a heartbeat. That’s why I can only charge in ten minute increments. If I charge any longer, the ports open a link.”

“What are you hiding? What’s your secret?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be my secret. I’m not even supposed to be here. You were supposed to do this alone, but events unfolded in ways that couldn’t be predicted and you allied yourself with me and Volts, Piss-pants, and Eve. Now we’re all involved.”

He had no idea what the hell she was talking about. He thought it might be some form of delirium brought on by her lack of charge, but she seemed lucid enough. “Charge up and then tell me everything.”

“Give me ten minutes. I’ll tell you what I can.”

As he walked out of the room, he wondered why she was even conscious. Then again, he’d always had the ability to regain consciousness as he charged, while others couldn’t. She was no different than he was. But that alone meant she was different.

He was unusual and now he knew she was too.

Stacey met him by the bay window. “You’re not supposed to just stand around, getting in the Beetars’ way. Come on. Let’s go somewhere quiet and talk.”

Volts walked up on them, happy and chatty.

He couldn’t have come at a worse time.

To Zero he asked, “How did you like the

tour?”

“It was an eye opener.”

“Wait until I show you the bowels of the ship. We don’t get to go down there unless we’re called for, but the next time I get called, I’ll try and bring you along too.”

“Sounds good.”

“It’s like we’re in two different ships. This part is clean and fancy and organized, but below us is utter chaos. I barely understand most of what I’ve seen down there.”

“Okay.” He was starting to get irritated, but he didn’t want to be rude, so he let Volts talk. He was his friend, after all, and he probably missed him during his absence. He could hardly begrudge him his enthusiasm.

“Eve’s going to be here soon. I’ll let you guys know when she arrives. I can’t wait to see her.”

Stacey said, “I want to hear all about her

travels.”

Volts had a jaunty step as he walked away down the corridor.

Zero hissed, “No more distractions. You need to tell me everything.”

She looked at him like he’d just slapped her across the face. “Settle down. When I tell you what I know, you’ll wish I hadn’t.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Lead the way.”

She turned and walked towards the docking bay. “We can talk by the dock doors, and if anyone gets suspicious, we can say we’re waiting for Eve to arrive.”

He didn’t reply. He didn’t want anything, even small talk, to get in the way of finding out her secrets. He followed closely behind her, his mind racing.

She stopped by the docks and looked around.

Then she went to the corner and sat down, and he sat beside her.

“First of all, you don’t have cancer. None of us do.”

“Are our bodies healed already? That’s good news!”

“No. They were never broken in the first place. The Beetars and their human accomplices tricked us into willful servitude.”

“That makes no sense. I saw the x-rays. My family has a history of cancer.”

“You do not have it. Neither do I. We were duped.”

“But why?”

“The Beetars needed us to pilot their mechs. They’ve tried various ways to get humans to do their bidding, but they’ve found that fear works best as a motivator with our race. Fear of imminent death coupled with a promise to rid us of the very danger they concocted has worked wonders for them in manipulating us over the decades.”

“I don’t believe it. The Beetar I worked with

on Dusia was kind and honest. She would have told me.”

“Maybe she didn’t know the truth. This is a huge empire with too many moving parts to keep track of.”

“Do the Beetars on this ship know we don’t have cancer?”

“They do. This ship is their hub of operations. They know everything.”

“So will we ever get our bodies back?”

She hung her head. “Henshaw told me not to tell you.”

“Tell me what? What does Henshaw have to do with all of this?”

She stood up and said, “He’s right. If you know, it’ll alter your outlook.”

“Tell me right now!”

As if the universe were conspiring against him, the proximity siren sounded, meaning a ship was about to dock.

“It must be Eve.” Stacey seemed to relax at the momentary reprieve, but she wouldn’t be getting off the hook that easily.

“You’ll tell me the rest at the first opportunity.”

“I will.”

A Beetar appeared out of nowhere. Stacey saw him and bowed, so he did the same. It said, “I am your liaison officer, Zero. My name is Quiss. I’m here to greet Eve.”

“It’s good to see you again,” he lied. He barely remembered Quiss from Epigog, and he wasn’t happy to see him.

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask someone else or keep it to yourself.”

He knew his expression must have been priceless. Stacey elbowed him in the side. “He’s joking.”

Zero smiled awkwardly. This was the worst time for humor. Luckily, the weirdness was

interrupted when the dock door opened onto the inside of Eve's ship.

She marched out, looked the Beetar over with obvious contempt, and said to them, "I need to rest. I've been through a lot."

Quiss tried to introduce himself, but Eve cut him off. "Can it wait? I'm very weary."

Quiss looked upset, but he was gracious enough to relent.

He walked away as Stacey glared angrily at Eve. "What's wrong with you? You can't talk to them like that."

"I hate those pieces of shit. I'll talk to them any damn way I want."

"Come on, then. Let's get you that rest you asked for," Stacey said impatiently.

Zero's curiosity about Stacey's secrets waned ever so slightly, shoved aside by his newfound curiosity. What the hell had changed Eve's mind about the Beetars so abruptly? The last

time he'd seen her she was scolding him about his distrust of them. It appeared their attitudes had flip-flopped.

As they made their way to the living quarters, Volts ran towards them. He hugged Eve, but she stiffened uncomfortably. She slowly pushed him back and said as evenly as she could, "Give me some time to get used to being here, okay?"

Volts was visibly deflated. "Sure. Let me know if you need someone to talk to."

"Okay. I'll see you soon."

Zero noticed several dents and pockmarks in Eve's armor as they walked. Char marks covered her left side. Her left gun hatch was buckled. It was then that he noticed a holster over her left shoulder with a gun tucked in it.

She saw him staring. "My gun's jammed in there so I have this thing," she said, pointing at her holster.

Stacey looked at it with concern in her eyes.

“You need to give that to me.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“You will if you want to stay on this ship.

The Beetars will not allow weaponry in their presence.”

Eve shucked the holster off, letting it hit the floor with a thud.

Stacey glared at her when she didn't pick it up. “Do we have a problem here?”

Eve sneered. “Don't test me, bitch. You asked for the gun. There it is.”

“Pick it up and hand it to me.”

Eve turned and walked away, leaving Stacey exasperated and confused by the unnecessary aggression. She bent down and grabbed it up angrily, saying to Zero, “What the hell happened to her? Has she always been so angry?”

He remembered that Stacey had spent almost no time at all with Eve. “I don't know what happened, but she has definitely changed. I'm

curious to find out why.”

“We need to contain her. If she acts this way around the Beetars they’ll put an end to her one way or another.”

He ran with Stacey to the living quarters.

They were both relieved to find Eve already there, sitting at a table, fussing with her gun hatch.

Stacey hid the holster at the back of the room behind a stack of board games and then took a seat opposite Eve.

Zero sat down because he felt odd being the only one of them standing. He asked, “What was it like on Ishca?”

Eve reached across and put her hand on his.

“I forgot to thank you, Zero. That Beetar you helped on Dosia told me you requested for me to be reassigned to this ship. If you hadn’t done that, I’d probably be dead by now.”

He smiled, glad that his limited influence had made a difference.

“She was the only Beetar I met there that I didn’t wish a terrible death upon. She was sweet. The rest of them treated us like cannon fodder.” She leaned back in her chair and pried at her chest hatch. It opened and she reached in, pulling out the coil of cables that connected the two ports that she’d made in orbit above Cogmore. She dropped the tangle on the table. “Those things have been driving me nuts. They rattle around every time I move.”

Stacey picked the cables up, fingering them thoughtfully. “I remember you talking about this. You said we could recharge from Zero using this cable, right?”

“Theoretically, yes, it should work.”

Stacey plugged one end into her back and handed him the other end. It was the perfect solution to her predicament, but he was nervous. He had no idea if it would work or if it would cause them both damage. He plugged it in anyway. It

caused him no ill effects.

Stacey leaned towards Eve. “I can’t charge for more than a few minutes at a time with the mounted ports here.”

If she thought Eve would be intrigued, she was wrong. Eve said, “Whatever.” She didn’t even ask why Stacey was still conscious.

Zero asked, “Does it feel like it’s working?”

“Yeah. I can feel it.”

He wanted to make a sexual joke, but the timing was all wrong.

Eve started a monologue to no one but herself. It seemed like she was exorcizing her demons or something.

“As soon as I got to Ishca, I came under attack. They keep all kinds of aliens there. It’s like a Petri dish planet, with all kinds of swill mingled in one place. It’s worthless besides being used to punish life forms. My landing shuttle went down from gunfire near the garrison, and it took them half

a day to get through to me. Luckily, the prisoners didn't find me first, or else I'd be in pieces right now. The convoy that brought me in was reduced from a dozen armored trucks to just two. I was lucky enough to be in one of those two.

“Air support is nonexistent on Ishca. The prisoners take particular delight in taking aircraft down, and they're good at it too.

“We drove through a shanty town made up of various aliens. Some were Cogmores; some of them looked like these weird spiders with orange heads and little pink feet. Some were so small the others ate them. There were a bunch of green guys and gray dudes. They all looked pissed or tired. None of them looked that happy to be alive. And I found out why pretty quickly. The Beetars tormented them and then, just as they reached their breaking point, we would get sent in to quell the violence. As soon as we had a situation under control, the Beetars would instigate another uprising.

It was orchestrated murder with the Beetars pulling the strings. It gave them plausible deniability if anyone cared to ask why so many prisoners were dying every single day.

“My ass was put on the line several times a day needlessly. I felt like my life was worthless. That’s why I’ve come to hate them.”

She let out a long sigh. “I need a charge.

Wake me if you need me.” Then she stood up and shuffled off.

As soon as she hooked up to the port and her head drooped, he said to Stacey, “You’re going to finish telling me what’s going on.”

“I don’t have the energy. Can it wait?”

“Are you kidding? Of course it can’t.”

Stacey sat back, making sure not to damage the cable jutting from her back. “Henshaw wanted to explain this to you, but he wanted you to experience the empire for yourself first.

“The Beetars are evil, Zero, just like you

suspected. And Henshaw is one of their human collaborators. But he's been left alone for decades doing their bidding, and in that time he's been conspiring against them. He set up a base of operations on the moon his space station orbits, and he's repurposed tons of the Beetars' supplies for his own use. But you are his life's work. You are the beginning of the end of the Beetars' supremacy as far as he's concerned. That's why you are so different from the rest of us. He built you to be able to defend yourself in any situation, which is why your gun hatches don't work like everyone else's. It's why you never truly go offline when you charge. He didn't want you to be vulnerable. It's also why he took out your kill switch. He built your body to stand up to the Beetars. But he couldn't convince you to fight for him with mere words. He knew how worthless that would be. He wanted you to experience the atrocities firsthand. He wanted you to be fueled with the same hatred that fuels him."

Zero shook his head. This was bullshit. But he must have believed some of it, because he didn't stand up and walk away. "What's so important about me, then?"

"Technically, nothing is special about you.

But your body has been modified; it's the body that's unique. That's why you arrived late in orbit around Cogmore. When Henshaw learned you'd be stationed there, he told me he was going to hold you back to install their language in you so you could communicate with them."

He nodded. Just because he didn't remember it didn't mean the doctor hadn't installed the language while he was shut down. It made some sense too. He could communicate with Cogmores when no one else could.

She continued, "But when he built you, he couldn't replicate all the tests you'd experience on Epigog 31. That's why you washed out of training. The gun hatches he rigged to open even in the

company of Beetars failed to open during training.

When he found out you wouldn't get to advance through training, he got desperate. You see, he had to make sure you got out in the galaxy. He had to ensure you fulfilled your role, and you would never get that chance if you were stuck guarding the training center for years."

Zero recalled the destruction of the training camp. He remembered finding all of the mechs dead and their human trainers in bloody pieces. He remembered Commander Delacourt writing in his own blood moments before he died. He wrote, *Get Henshaw*, as Zero loomed over him. He'd assumed he wanted a doctor, but he had misunderstood.

Delacourt was telling him to go after Henshaw. He was letting him know Henshaw was responsible for his death.

As if to confirm his suspicions, Stacey said, "Henshaw had no choice. He had to wipe out all records of you failing. He had to use his secret fleet

to destroy the camp and everyone inside. That way he could make up a lie to get you stationed elsewhere in the empire.”

“I can’t believe he’d go to all of that effort just for me,” he said.

“You have to understand that your body was the culmination of years of study and experimentation. He worked on your unit for too long to just watch it wither on Epigog without fulfilling its destiny.”

“He doesn’t have the option of telling me what my destiny is. I’m not his puppet.”

“He knew that. That’s why he set you loose in the empire, to find out for yourself just what needed to be done to right the wrongs of the Beetars.”

His head hurt. It was too much information to take in all at once. Stacey had been right when she warned him he wouldn’t want to know her secrets.

He sat forward. “If those blue alien ships that destroyed camp were built by Henshaw, then what the hell are they doing swarming this warship now?”

“They’re tracking its position and getting ready for you to make your move.”

A question was on the very tip of his tongue when an earth-shattering siren blared. A Beetar voice issued over the speakers. “We’ve arrived among the hostile alien fleet. Humans, get ready to fight.”

Stacey gave him a fearful look. “It’s too soon. You don’t know enough. You need to hear from Henshaw.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“He has a prerecorded message he built into you. It’s supposed to activate the moment your outrage becomes unbearable. In it he’ll explain everything.”

“Is there a way to manually turn it on?”

“There is, but we don’t have the time. We need to attack those ships.”

“But those ships are Henshaw’s, right?”

“They are. They’re on our side. But we need to go through the motions or the Beetars will find out we’re conspiring against them before you’re ready.”

He huffed. “I’m still not on board with that.

I only just started to see them in a different light.”

“You met one decent Beetar. That doesn’t mean they’re all good.”

He shook his head. He couldn’t take down more than a few Beetars on this warship before they took him out anyway. If this was Henshaw’s plan, it had some serious flaws.

In a way, he hated Stacey for telling him.

But he’d barely had time to dwell on it when Piss-pants and Volts came rushing into the room.

Piss-pants looked at the cable connecting them and said, “Unplug and come with me. We’re

going out there whether we like it or not.”

Volts looked scared. “We’re going out just like this. They’re sending us out without a ship.”

Zero stood up and unplugged the cable from his back. “Can they do that? Can we maneuver in space?” He genuinely did not know the answer to that.

“I don’t know. They just said to do it. I’ll go first, but if nothing happens and I drift away helplessly, you guys need to refuse to go out there.”

Piss-pants started to move towards Eve, but they stopped him. “She’s low on juice. Let her charge up.”

“I don’t know if they’ll let me do that. They said all of us had to fight.”

Stacey said, “I’m still our personal liaison with the Beetars. If they want to blame someone for it, they can blame me. She’s not fit to be among us or them in the state she’s in.”

Piss-pants turned about and ran out of the

room. "Hurry up, then. They're expecting us to join the fight."

Zero felt the first impact as it rocked the ship.

Stacey put a hand on his shoulder when they were the last ones left in the room. "Don't hold back. The Beetars need to believe we can be trusted."

He smirked. "I wasn't going to hold back.

Those drones killed some of my friends, including you. They're going to pay for it. I don't care if Henshaw built them for that very purpose."

Stacey said, "There's more to it than that..."

but he was already running down the corridor away

from her. There was a lot he did not know. He

didn't know if he was one of the good guys, he

didn't know if he'd ever get put back inside his

body, and he didn't know if he could believe a word

Stacey said. But he did know that those drones had

killed people he knew, and he wanted to exact

revenge on them. He had a singular purpose, which felt good considering everything Stacey had just dumped on him.

He got to the docking bay just in time to see Volts crawling inside a small hatch. Piss-pants shut the hatch behind him and they waited. A clicking meant the outside hatch had been opened and Volts had been sucked out into space. He had no idea how to tell if Volts was alright. They waited with bated breath until they heard a very faint tapping coming from outside. To get through the hull of the ship he must've been hammering with all of his might.

Piss-pants said, "That's him. He's okay.

Who's next?"

Zero stepped forward just as Stacey put her hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it off and waited for the hatch to open again. It did, and he crawled inside the cramped space, feeling more like a torpedo than a living creature. He was afraid, but he was just as afraid to stay behind and listen to Stacey

explain his destiny to him, or the twisted, convoluted plans Henshaw had for the Beetars. He couldn't take any more intrigue. He had to be alone and it didn't get much lonelier than being in the vacuum of space.

His gun hatches opened and he got ready to fight. The outside door opened and he and all the gasses surrounding him were sucked toward the hatch, into space. He saw only black, with faint grey trace gasses shooting past him. He felt something grasp his leg and saw Volts with his boosters lit up, holding him steady. Volts' entire body was issuing gasses and flames. He moved towards Zero and put his lips against his ears. "Try and move around. We have more than just boot boosters. They're all over us." His voice was faint and distant, like he was talking through tin cans connected by a string. Volts had to send the vibrations directly to his ears, as sound doesn't travel in a vacuum.

Zero concentrated on trying to move about,

and immediately little jets slid out from small doors all over his body and started to spew gasses, jostling him around like a buoy.

Just then, the hatch in the ship closed and behind them a tiny blue object zipped past. He doubted they could match the drones' speed, but they had to try.

Turrets somewhere above them fired at the blue ship, but it was just too fast. He could only guess, but if the mechs had any value in this battle, it was probably to lure or distract the blue ships long enough for the turrets to zero in. He hated to be used as bait, but in this instance he was fine with it. Those drones needed to be destroyed. He didn't care that they were some mad scientist's invention. He didn't care that they wouldn't fear their own destruction or feel pain when they blew up. They had to go.

Volts said, "You go. I'll stay and get the others ready."

Zero smiled. He was glad Volts had chose to let him fight. He wanted to do some damage.

Volts slapped him on the back. “Get some payback for what they did to Creaker, Stomper, and Twitch. I’ll be right behind you. Save some for me.”

He liked Volts’ enthusiasm. The blue drones had killed his friends too. He felt the same outrage Zero felt. This was going to be fun.

He put his boots against the hull of the ship and kicked off with everything he had.

He was faster than he’d anticipated, which took some getting used to. He followed the line of fire coming from the turret cluster on top of the warship and found the little blue ship it was tracking. He thrust his body towards it. It must have been too preoccupied with the turret to see him coming because it didn’t react until he started shooting. Each round missed, which pissed him off, but his aim was getting truer when it suddenly twisted in place and then shot off at an incredible

speed he'd never match.

He looked all around in the black, trying to lock in on anything blue. He saw Piss-pants and Volts speeding towards another drone, so he gave chase too.

He had to avoid the turret fire as he neared.

Volts was letting the blue ship have it as Piss-pants kept it contained. When he arrived, the ship was boxed in between them and the turret fire, so instead of trying to escape it started fighting back.

Zero was hit, but he didn't sustain any damage. He fired his guns, only remembering at the last second that his ammo was upgraded. Each hit exploded noiselessly, knocking the blue ship around like a piñata. Volts and Piss-pants both stared at him as he fired round after round into the drone. The ship tried to bull-rush him, but he unloaded on it, tearing it in half before it reached him.

Gasses rushed from it into the vacuum. He got out of the way of the escaping debris.

Then he saw something that confused him.

A body floated from the ship, nearly concealed by the large chunks of metal, but it was undeniably human. A human being suffocating right before his eyes. He didn't understand. He thought the ships created by Henshaw were drones ... but there were human pilots flying them. He'd just killed a man. It made no sense.

He tried to turn, but found his motion sluggish. His system fluids were freezing in the cold of space. His body started to tumble end over end, out of control as he seized up.

Volts and Piss-pants grabbed him and started to take him back to the Beetar ship. He wasn't so sure he appreciated it. At that moment, he wanted to be left to die. He was so confused.

They shoved him into the outer hatch. A moment later Stacey was dragging him into the ship. She stared at him as she laid him down at her feet. "What happened?"

He stammered, "I got one."

She cocked her head to the side, waiting to see if he'd elaborate.

He said, "Human beings are inside those ships. I thought they were drones."

She looked at him with pity. "They're not drones. You're lucky to be alive."

"I don't think the Beetars would've cared much if I froze solid out there."

"You're right. I need to get the others back inside before they freeze over. While I do that, I'm going to activate Henshaw's recording so you know everything. It's time. You need to be ready for this."

She reached inside the nape of his neck and fiddled around. He knew immediately when she activated the recording.

Part 6:

Henshaw's Deceit

His vision shut down. A split second later, everything changed. He was staring at Doctor Henshaw's face. He'd assumed it would just be a voice recording, but the doctor had gone all out with it. It was some type of virtual reality. He was standing in the doctor's lab on the space station.

Henshaw stared at him and said, "Hello, Jack. This is Doctor Henshaw. I assume you've come to the same conclusion that I have: that the Beetars are evil and need to be stopped. That's where you come in. You will be the instrument that takes them down. Let me start from the beginning."

He knew that Stacey was pulling Volts and Piss-pants inside the ship right beside him, but he couldn't see it or feel or hear it. He was completely immersed in the experience.

Henshaw said, "They've forced me to help them for decades ... and I've had enough. You may

not know this yet, but your body was not dying.

That's a trick the Beetars used to gain your subservience. In fact, your body isn't inside a machine, being healed on this space station. You are alive and well. This next part might blow your mind: your body is not immobile and unconscious here.

The consciousness I transferred to your unit was a copy. Your human alter ego is working for the resistance that I created. In fact, at some point in the future, you may meet your real self."

Zero's mind was doing back-flips. This changed everything. If he was just a copy, there was no way to get his body back, because his body was already whole. He was a floating consciousness with nothing to link him to a life he could understand.

He didn't have time to cry or mourn his loss.

Henshaw was too busy filling the void with words.

"Now, normally, the Beetars make me kill new arrivals right after I transfer a copy of their

minds, but I set up a base on the moon I'm orbiting by uploading my own consciousness into a mech. Years ago I put that mech to work setting up the base behind the Beetars' backs. Ever since it became habitable, I started saving recruits rather than killing them. I send them down there to live and hide and train. I've created a fleet of ships, one of which you'll end up piloting—as a human of course.”

It took him a second to wrap his head around that.

“But my most prized creation was you, Jack.

When a mech has been in service for a couple of years, the Beetars shut it off and ship it back to me to upload another consciousness into it. They do that because recruits start to question everything eventually. I managed to put your unit aside instead of putting it back into the field and I spent nearly three years tinkering with it and perfecting it. The Beetars no longer have the ability to control you.

You are the only mech who has free will and can act upon it. And I hope you will.”

Henshaw reached towards him, and at the last second Zero realized he was really reaching for the camera. The doctor grabbed it and pivoted it to the right, pointing it down at a sleeping man on a table. Zero was looking at himself, in human form.

“I’ve already uploaded a copy of your consciousness into your mech. This is the real you lying on this table. Instead of flushing your unconscious body out into the void of space like the Beetars have instructed, I’m going to revive you and send you to the moon with the others. I hope you can appreciate that. I understand you must be conflicted now. I understand how saddened you must be to know you’ll never be reunited with your flesh. Please try to understand that the alternative was supposed to be far worse than this. The Beetars use your minds to control their mechs, then they have me destroy your bodies—and then, when

they're done with you, they turn you off like a light.

I think I've given you a better option than that. I

hope you can find a way to see it too.

“If you decide to go up against them, know

that you are not alone. I am poised to strike at a

moment's notice. The Beetars think we're their pets.

They've underestimated our ingenuity and courage.

That will be their downfall. Good luck to you, Jack.

If at any time, you need to hear this message again,

there's a switch concealed in the nape of your neck.

Activate it and the message will start over.

Goodbye.”

The image flickered and vanished and his

eyesight returned.

The Beetar Quiss was standing in front of

him when his vision returned. “What happened to

you? You were unresponsive.”

Stacey stood behind him with Piss-pants and

Volts. “His system fluids froze over from being in

space too long,” she lied. “They just now thawed

out. He's fine."

Quiss seemed to buy it. He said to all of them, "You will no longer be needed out there. In the time it took you to destroy one ship, we've taken out a dozen. The turret gunners were complaining that you kept getting in the way anyway. Return to your quarters until you're called upon." He turned with a flourish and walked away briskly. He seemed more animated than ever. Zero wondered if his spirits were raised because of the war happening outside. Beetars were a warlike species, so this was probably fun to them.

Stacey whispered to everyone, "Let's go somewhere private. Zero has something he needs to explain to the rest of you."

Volts and Piss-pants gawked at him suspiciously. He shook his head and started walking. How could he explain everything to them? He barely understood it himself. He didn't want to see the looks on their faces when they found out they

had no hope of ever being human again.

Outside the big bay window was utter mayhem. Bullets whizzed and debris tumbled, but his mind was too numb for the magnitude of it to sink in. Humans were dying out there, but his addled brain didn't understand how that was even possible.

Eve was gone when they got back. He could only guess that she'd woken up and wandered off when she couldn't find any of them.

He sat down at the table and the others joined him there.

Stacey looked at him with concern in her eyes. She mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

He didn't blame her though. She was as doomed as the rest of them.

He said, "It turns out that we won't ... won't get to go back to our bodies."

Piss-pants stood up and said, "Did they die?"

What happened?"

“Believe it or not, our bodies are out there in those blue ships attacking this ship.”

None of them believed him, which struck him as odd since they had been out there when he'd blown up that blue ship. Maybe they didn't see the dead human emerge from the wreckage, or maybe they chalked it up to a trick of the imagination.

Volts said, “Tell us exactly what you're talking about.”

Zero watched the looks of disbelief turn to horror as he explained everything the doctor had just relayed to him in his message. A couple of times they felt the ship shudder as he spoke, but the chaos didn't sidetrack them. They were too mesmerized by his story and he was too caught up in it himself to be distracted.

But a sliver of a thought slid into his brain: while they were sitting around trying to figure this all out, humans were dying out there. Some of them might even be their own alter egos.

When he was done, Stacey said, “Back on Epigog, when Zero insisted that the doctor revive me after my mech was destroyed in training, Henshaw contacted me with a proposition. I was in his hidden base on the moon, training to battle Beetars. He asked me if I was willing to let him copy my consciousness again to have it transferred back into a mech. I didn’t like the idea. It’s risky copying a mind. The original has a good chance at survival the first time, but it drops to ten percent if it’s attempted again. My human form would be lucky to survive it.”

That explained why the Beetars didn’t just find the perfect soldier and copy him or her endlessly. It was a question that had bugged him from the beginning, but he had been too stupid to put into words.

She continued, “But if I agreed to do it, my copied consciousness would know too much. I would know the trickery of the Beetars. I would

know that I had no chance of ever being reunited with my flesh. So at first I refused. I thought it would be too much for my copied consciousness to bear. But the doctor convinced me in the end. I don't know what story he gave you guys, but that's what he did."

At the time, Zero hadn't questioned the doctor's elaborate lie. He had been just so overjoyed to have her back.

Stacey said, "The pain and anguish you feel now is the pain I've been carrying around since the moment I awoke. He made me swear to keep it to myself. I've been suffering in silence ever since."

He could only imagine the loneliness she must have felt. He asked, "Did your human body survive the second transfer?" He hoped the answer was yes. If not, then his actions killed her human form.

"It did."

Thank God.

To everyone, she said, “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you any of this sooner.”

Piss-pants stomped to the other end of the room. “Maybe you shouldn’t have told us at all, then.”

Volts yelled at him. “She didn’t do this to us!

The doctor isn’t to blame either. The Beetars did this.”

Stacey whispered, “I don’t know what kind of life we can even have like this, but it’s better than the alternative.”

Piss-pants came back and sat down. He started to sob, even though no tears came out. He blubbered, “All I am is an operating system. That’s no kind of life I can understand.”

Stacey put her arm over his shoulder. “With time you’ll get used to it.”

He asked, “Can’t we be inserted into our bodies anyway? Can’t they just be uploaded over the top of our alternate consciousnesses?”

It was a desperate question.

Stacey said, "It doesn't work like that. Even if your human body was willing, you'd have to instantly grow synapses to accommodate all of your new memories. That's impossible."

Zero asked, "So what now?"

"Are you ready to fulfill your destiny?"

"Nope."

"Then we'll wait until you are. But if the Beetars find out those ships out there are being flown by humans, it'll be too late for us to act."

Volts said, "So why are we here? Are we Zero's sidekicks or something? Or are we just fodder?" There was genuine, deep resentment in his voice.

Stacey said angrily, "None of you are supposed to even be here. The only reason Henshaw spared you was because of your close proximity to Zero on Epigog. If it wasn't for that, your mechs would be in a scrap pile in the desert of an alien

planet.”

He hated to hear her explain it like that, so he could only imagine how much it must have hurt Volts to hear the truth.

Just then, a Beetar voice came over the loudspeakers. “Humans, report to the command hub immediately.”

Stacey said, “Shit. This might be it. Be ready.”

Damn it. This was not going to end well.

When they entered the Beetar section of the ship, they knew something was wrong. Three Beetars appeared behind them, pointing guns at their backs.

Stacey whispered to Zero, “Are you ready yet?”

He didn’t know the answer. He wasn’t ready to do this, but he might not have a choice.

By the time they made it to the command hub, there were ten Beetars behind them. Twenty or

more Beetars formed a wall in front of them, and standing in front of the Beetars was Eve. She was trembling. At first Zero thought she was trembling with fear, but on second glance it was obvious she was shaking with anger.

Behind them, Beetars still manned their stations, caught up in the battle raging outside.

A large fellow pointed at Eve. Had to be Captain Flimfor. He said, "This unit acted towards my men with aggression. When they tried to subdue it, it pulled a gun on them."

Sure enough, Eve's empty holster was slung over her shoulder.

Flimfor continued. "It is regretful that you all must be shut down. We can not fight on while we worry about the mental state of our servants."

So that was the gist of it. They saw them as slaves who were no longer useful to them, so they were going to shut them all off.

Flimfor held a device out at them, paused,

and then he pushed a button. He looked at them in confusion and then he pressed it again. Then he hit the side of it with his hand and pressed one last time.

Urgently Flimfor said to the other Beetars,
“The kill switch isn’t working. Something’s wrong.
Take them down.”

Zero heard and felt the first shot hit his body in the same moment. He whirled around and lashed out, knocking the shooter into the wall. He heard Eve scuffling with the group that held her, and turned in time to see her wrench her gun away from them. She fired into the crowd as they rushed her.

Stacey yelled, “Get them,” and they moved as a unit.

He concentrated on helping Eve. He pulled his gun and killed four Beetars before they knew what was happening.

The concussions from his illegal bullets dazed them senseless.

He heard one of them yell, “He’s accessed

his guns. That's not possible. What's happening?"

He killed that guy before he could scream
any more.

Flimfor ran off like a coward before any of
them could stop him. Zero aimed at his back when a
Beetar's body hit him in the chest, knocking him
back. Volts had thrown him. He said, "Sorry, man."

"Don't worry about it." He fired at the guy
coming up behind Volts, blowing him to pieces.

He saw Eve pulling the trigger on her gun,
but she'd unloaded it already. She threw it on the
floor disgustedly and grabbed the nearest Beetar.

She hit it so hard that it died on impact.

Piss-pants had two of them cornered. Zero
shoved past him and fired two shots center mass.

Stacey left the fight to secure the Beetars at
their consoles before they decided to join in.

She yelled over the commotion, "Watch out!
He has an EMP weapon."

Zero was shocked to see it. EMP's knock

out electronics. Maybe the weapon somehow directed the electromagnetic pulse so as not to affect the ship; otherwise it would be suicide to use it around their own tech. Either way, they were safe. They'd already shielded themselves against EMP's. They all stopped and turned to see the Beetar with the EMP. He had a wicked grin as he walked towards them, the weapon raised. It looked like a fat rifle.

Zero wasn't intimidated. He pointed his gun at the Beetar and pulled the trigger. The Beetar pulled the trigger on his EMP weapon right before he exploded into splattery chunks.

Zero was dazed from the pulse, but was regaining his composure quickly. The mechs sustained volley after volley of gunfire from the surrounding Beetars as they stood there dazed and unable to move. He saw his friends all twitching in place, but he was happy none of them had died yet. He was the first to snap out of it, probably

because he had the better cable shielding. He fired successive shots, hitting a line of Beetars, killing them on contact.

His fellow mechs shook it off and got back to work beside him.

Stacey hit a Beetar so hard that its head caved in. The horror of it should have shocked him, but he was too busy fighting for his life to dwell on it for more than a fraction of a second. She picked up the EMP weapon and broke it in half over her knee.

He wheeled around to see Piss-pants on the floor. Three Beetars stood over him, unloading their weapons into him, his body shuddering with each impact. Zero lifted his gun and blew them apart in a matter of seconds, but he was too late. Piss-pants was already dead.

Volts and Eve rushed to their fallen friend.

When he didn't respond, they went nuts and flew into a blood-rage like he'd never seen before.

Eve rushed away and ripped a Beetar's head clean off. He'd never seen anything so brutal. Volts used his thrusters to burn two others to death.

Zero slipped on Beetar blood, throwing his aim off as he fired, causing him to accidentally kill a Beetar who was peacefully sitting at his console.

The console sparked and the lights flickered.

The remaining Beetars then tried to escape.

With no remorse, he shot them as they ran, spraying their blood across the room in a fine mist that soon covered everything.

A Beetar yelled out, "We surrender," so they stopped killing them, although Eve and Volts looked like they didn't want to.

The Beetar who'd surrendered was none other than Captain Flimfor himself. He'd been hiding back behind a console the entire time.

He heard guns clatter as the Beetars dropped them at their feet.

Stacey rounded up the survivors against the

wall just as a flood of Beetars rushed in through the door from their living quarters. When the new arrivals saw that just seven Beetars were left standing, they threw their guns down and put their hands up. Volts herded them over to the others.

One of the Beetars said condescendingly, “If you don’t let us get back to our workstations, those ships will destroy us all.”

Stacey said, “Those ships are piloted by humans.”

The Beetar opened its mouth and then closed it again. Its surprise was obvious.

Eve asked Stacey, “What do you mean?”

“We’ll fill you in as soon as we’re sure this ship is ours.”

Zero went to the turret control bubble in the center of the room and dragged out the two Beetars hiding inside. Then Stacey sent Volts and Eve out to make sure no others were hiding around the ship.

To his surprise, they brought back dozens

more. All of them were equal parts confused and outraged. But they were compliant, and that was all that mattered.

One of the new arrivals snarled, “You fight for nothing. All of you are already dead. That creepy human doctor flushed your bodies into space the moment he uploaded your minds.”

Stacey smiled with mock sweetness. “He didn’t. None of you know the truth.”

It smiled back and said, “It doesn’t matter.

Before I was captured, I destroyed your charging ports. You’ll all fade away before the end of the day and then we’ll take our ship back.”

Stacey shook her head. “Be careful, Beetar.

We’re smarter than you give us credit for.” She looked at Zero and winked.

So from now on, it was his job to power every mech. He was fine with that, so long as his battery did what it was supposed to do.

Eve said sheepishly, “Why does it feel like

we just caused a galactic war?”

Volts said jokingly, “What do you mean?”

We didn’t do it. You started all of this.”

Before she could retort, Stacey said, “This was inevitable. I’m just glad it’s over.”

As if on cue, the ship rocked from the attack occurring outside.

Stacey turned her attentions to the large, bullet-riddled monitor. “We need to get word to them that we’re in control of the ship.”

Volts threatened the Beetars. “Send a message or we’ll start executing you, one by one.”

A volunteer Beetar was led to her console.

She said, “All I can do is send the message. I can’t guarantee they’ll get it.”

“Do it.”

“Speak here,” she said, pointing at the microphone.

They took fire for another half an hour before a human voice issued over the speakers. “We

just received your message. Let us board you.”

Stacey said into the microphone, “We’ll open the dock.”

Stacey and Volts went to greet their guests while Eve helped Zero watch over the prisoners.

He was almost as nervous about meeting the new arrivals as he had been fighting the Beetars.

Eve leaned towards him and said, “Thank God for you. Without you, we would have all died.”

“Everyone did their fair share.”

“No they didn’t. I killed a few of them before my ammo ran out, but after that I was at a disadvantage. If you hadn’t done the bulk of the work, we’d be in their position, or worse.” She pointed at the Beetars.

He was baffled. Maybe in all the commotion he’d underestimated his contribution.

She asked, “Where the hell did you get your ammo from?”

“I got it on Dosia.”

She nodded and then added, “You know, if we hadn’t copied your shielding we’d all be dead.”

He shrugged. He took no pride in the compliment because he hadn’t installed it, the doctor had.

It started to sink in that he was important to their victory. Without his gun access, his specialty ammo, and his shielding, they’d have succumbed to Beetar might. And without his never-ending battery, they’d all die, having no charging ports to recharge.

The doctor had made him especially to beat the Beetars, and circumstances had supplied the rest.

Stacey and Volts walked in with three dozen small humans in tow.

He spotted Stacey, the human version, right away. He thought he recognized a couple of other faces, but he couldn’t be sure.

The human Stacey walked up to him and punched him in the abdomen. It didn’t hurt physically.

He reflexively took a step back. “Why did you do that?”

“You killed Dan, you asshole.”

Volts stepped forward and said, “Did you say Dan is dead? Dan Stevenson?”

“Yeah, three of you killed him. I saw it myself, so don’t deny it.”

There was deep anguish to his voice as Volts said, “His mech died too.” He pointed at Piss-pants’ mech body on the floor. “We didn’t know who we were fighting when we killed him.”

He barely remembered that Piss-pants’ real name was Dan. That meant that when he blew up Dan’s ship, with Piss-pants’ help, Piss-pants had technically helped to kill himself. It was a strange irony that saddened him.

Human Stacey pursed her lips and punched him again. She was clearly the leader of her group.

Mech Stacey stepped forward and grabbed the other Stacey by the arm. “If you do that again,

you'll regret it."

Human Stacey shrugged her off and said to the whole room, "We lost many, but in the end we succeeded."

Eve said over the top of her, "You didn't do shit. Without Zero, you'd still be out there getting picked apart by turret fire. Zero won this battle."

She pointed at him and he noticed Volts and mech-Stacey nodding in agreement.

Human Stacey took a close look at him.

"You're Jack, aren't you? I'm not surprised you prevailed. You were designed with victory in mind."

He nodded. "Where's the other me?" He didn't see his handsome human face in the crowd.

She looked at her feet. "He died out there.

I'm so sorry." He saw her eyes mist up.

Mech Stacey put her arm around the human

Stacey. "I'm so sorry to hear that. How are you holding up?"

Human Stacey shook her head, but she said nothing. She was clearly close to his dead doppelganger.

Then Mech Stacey saw him standing there looking confused. She said reassuringly, “If you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.”

He nodded, because he didn’t know what to say. It’s not every day you find out you’re already dead. But the truth was that it didn’t change anything. That body was no longer his own anyway.

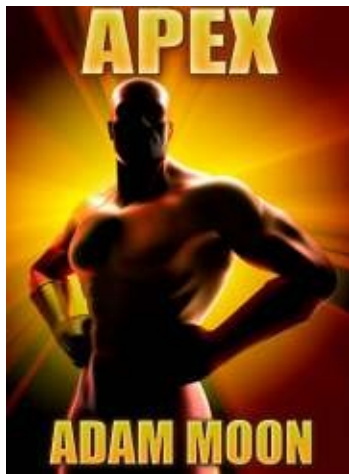
Human Stacey said to them, “Tell the Beetars they have a choice. They can help us pilot this ship to Epigog, or they can die horribly.”

Eve asked, “Why are we going to Epigog?”

“To pick up the doctor.”

“Why?”

“Because he found out where planet Beetar is located. We’re going to take the fight to them.”





The End

More by Adam Moon:

Zero 2.0 is here:

Thank you for taking time to read Zero. If you enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends or posting a short review. Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated.

If you'd like to be notified of upcoming projects or if you just want to say hi, drop me a line at:

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