



Hale grabbed a lever on the side of the turret and pulled. His seat came loose and he dropped down onto the Mule's deck. Two of the Iron Hearts were still bolted to the deck in their compact travel forms; four of his Marines dragged the third down the ramp and onto the tunnel floor. Hale ran down the ramp and found Stacey and Malal near the Mule's nose.

"Malal, what is with this place?" Hale asked. "How far does this thing go?" The end of the tunnel seemed to fade away into the distant light. Malal stood still, eyes closed.

"He's...thinking," Stacey said. "Trying to communicate with the vault."

"Is this in line with what he told you we'd find here?" Hale asked.

"We certainly didn't expect a Xaros Crucible. Or slightly less than Earth standard gravity and a breathable atmosphere waiting for us," she said.

Hale tapped his forearm screen. The air was thin, equivalent to almost eight thousand feet above sea level on Earth, with a higher percentage of oxygen.

"Yarrow?" Hale asked.

"Should be good to breath, sir. Might take us a bit to acclimatize, but it'll take the strain off our life support for sure," Yarrow said.

Elias rose to his full height behind the Mule. His new armor had a more ascetic character than the old blocky armor he'd worn at the beginning of the war. The cut of optics into the helm, shoulder pauldrons and molded breastplate almost made it look like Elias had come from a medieval battlefield, if the knights of old carried twin barreled gauss cannons and a rail gun that could destroy a star ship with a single hit.

How far we've come since the day I got Ibarra out of Euskal Tower, he thought.

"Stay on internal air until we've got a better read on the rest of this vault," Hale said. "Stacey..." The lieutenant turned around and found Stacey with her helmet off and tucked into the crook of her arm.

"Was I supposed to wait?" she asked. "Yes, I see that vein on your forehead twitching. Should have waited."

Malal's head jerked up. "I found what we seek. Follow me."

"Why did you have to look?" Hale asked. "Isn't everything just where you left it?"

Malal walked down the hallway, his bare feet slapping against the lit squares.

"Echelon formation," Hale said. "Two armor lead, one rear."

Elias and Bodel stomped ahead of Malal, the hum of their gauss cannons heavy in the air as they passed. Cortaro, Bailey and Standish fell in a few steps behind the armor, weapons ready.

"This is foolish," Malal said. "You think we're at risk in here? In my vault?"

"Why don't you worry about getting us to the codex and I'll handle security," Hale said. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the hallway meld together beyond the Mule, the twisting bulkheads snapped apart, and the opening they'd come from was gone, replaced by a hallway that extended to a distant point of light.

"Ugh, sir?" Egan asked.

"I saw. Malal...how're we supposed to—"

"You don't understand, human. Your mind cannot even grasp how this vault functions. Tell your walking machines to stop, they passed the door," Malal said.

"What door?" There was nothing but an endless hallway ahead of them.

Malal stopped and turned to his right. He snapped his fingers, and a sealed doorway twice the height of the armor appeared without a sound embedded against the bulkhead.

"You use pocket dimensions," Stacey said. "The Qa'Resh have the same technology."

“They have a feeble imitation of my technology. Cribbed from the decayed remnants of my civilization. Did they ever tell you where they came across the ruins? One of my brethren must have been sloppy before the ascension,” Malal touched the door and it slid aside, revealing a pitch-black wall.

“Who wants to go first?” Malal asked.

“Into what? There’s nothing there,” Hale said.

“What do you mean?” Stacey asked. “You don’t see the garden?”

Malal tilted his head to Stacey; the flush of a dark colored rash spread over his face then faded away.

“Your mind can’t grasp a multi-dimensional space, perhaps like explaining color to the blind. One of my labs is beyond this door. Go on,” Malal said.

“Then why can she see something?” Hale asked.

“Perhaps she is not entirely human,” Malal said.

Stacey shrugged her shoulders slightly, “It’s complicated.”

“To hell with this,” Hale stepped toward the doorway. His reflection appeared, like he was staring into polished obsidian. He stopped a foot away from the doorway...and his reflection did the same with a slight delay.

Hale stepped into the doorway. His limbs tingled as he passed through. His lead foot found nothing but air and he stumbled forward. He splashed into water up to his knees, and found himself surrounded by wide leafed plants that came up to his shoulders. The plants, thick stalks ran from lumps of mossy soil that just barely broke the surface of ice blue water, stretched out for dozens of yards in a haze filled enclosure. The water lapped at a patch of ground covered in silver grass. Hale made for the solid ground, sloshing water around him as he moved.

Elias came through the doorway, his cannons up and ready.

“What is this?” Elias asked. His helm swung from side to side. “My thermal lenses must be malfunctioning. Everything in here is the same temperature.”

Hale got onto the patch of ground. The haze thickened until he couldn’t see more than a dozen yards away from him. The sound of more Marines and armor splashing in the water carried through the air.

“Up here,” Hale waved a hand in the air. Cortaro directed the team into a hasty perimeter on the silver knoll.

Malal and Stacey stayed in the water, the ancient entity touched one of the plants, motes of light ran up and down the stalk and filled the leaf with streaks of light. Hale jumped into the water and stopped next to the pair.

“This is your lab?” Hale asked.

“No,” Malal cracked the stalk with his hand and ripped the leaf away. The plant withered instantly, leaving him holding a blackened mass.

“I don’t know what this is.”

Malal’s feet shifted through the silver grass. He bent over and plucked a blade free, then tossed it in his mouth.

“Did he leave the water running, or something?” Standish asked Stacey from the edge of the security perimeter. She’d kept her eye on Malal, waiting for him to ‘reorient himself.’ “Maybe these plants some sort of ancient alien mold that just got out of hand.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said.

“I would hope yours would be better,” Standish said. “On account of you being his chaperone and hobnobbing with all that crazy stuff on Bastion.”

Malal walked off into the haze.

“Follow him,” Hale said.

Stacey ran over to Malal and matched his pace. The grass grew longer, covering their ankles as they progressed through the haze.

“Care to explain what all this is?” she asked. “Some experiment of yours gone out of control?”

“I’ve located my lab. Some...thing managed to break into my vault and alter the landscape,” Malal said. “Not Xaros. Not anything I recognize.”

The haze faded away. Neat rows of white trees with tall, arched branches reached twenty feet into the air. The trees glowed from within,; the light diffused into darkness not much further into the air. There was something very familiar about these trees...

“They altered the landscape? Can you even find your way around anymore?” she asked.

“The intruders locked everything into place beyond the first dimensional door. The compartments are now linked together, whereas I’d had them all within their own domains. Whatever did this violated my vision, my plan,” Malal said.

“How can you tell?” she asked.

“I feel the energy from the power grid,” Malal put his hand on a glowing tree, the bark darkened and cracked beneath his touch. “Feel the growth polluting every corner of my sanctum. Feel it linked to each and every project that I spent millennia perfecting.”

“What about the codex? Is it still here?”

“There are voids,” the tree dimmed, leaves fell from branches and shriveled before they hit the ground, “voids in the pollution where my more sensitive projects were kept. My wards and ciphers hold true.”

The trunk cracked in half, one side fell to the ground crumbling into dust.

“If you two are done wasting time,” Hale motioned into the bands of trees with the muzzle of his rifle.

“Movement,” Bodel said, “on foot, two o’clock from our direction of travel. I can’t make out the distance in this fog...but it’s coming in fast.”

“Shield the principal, take cover behind the trees,” Hale said.

Elias and Kallen stepped over to Malal and protecting him with their armored bulk.

A clipped staccato noise came from the distance, dozens of high, oscillating yelps.

“That sound like barking to anyone else?” Egan asked.

Stacey took her gauss carbine off of her back and got closer to Malal behind the armor’s legs. The entity was her responsibility, and she wasn’t entirely sure how vulnerable he was while he had the Qa’Resh governor inside of him. She keyed off the safety and felt it hum in her hands.

Kallen glanced down at her. “You shoot me and I will be upset,” she said.

“What? Why do you think I’d do that?”

Elias turned his helm to her, and then looked back into the fog.

“Oh, right, I did shoot him in the face...that one time,” she said, the panicked memory of Elias ripping open her stricken elevator and bouncing a bullet off the soldier’s helm coming back to her. “You’re still mad about that?”

“Incoming!” the snap of gauss rifles erupted around her. The ground shook as Elias’s as the double clap of his twin cannons spat bullets that blew a tree into splinters. Stacey struggled to

even see what the Marines were shooting at. She glanced at Malal, a serene expression on his face.

A streak of orange and white, shot into the air over the forest. It reached an apex then dove onto Kallen. A clang of metal on metal broke in the air and the armor stumbled backwards, Stacey watched in shock as Kallen tipped over and came down on her like a felled tree.

Malal yanked Stacey out of the way. She bounced off of Elias' leg and nearly dropped her carbine.

A leonine form with gleaming tusks savaged Kallen's armor, teeth and claws drew sparks as they ripped across her helm and shoulders.

Stacey swung her carbine up and fired from the hip. Bullets hit the ground next to Kallen then stitched a line up her flank and into the attacker. There was pained yelp as the beast curled up; it's fanged snout biting at a smoking crater on its rear haunches.

Kallen massive hand grabbed the beast and swung it into a tree. The beast shattered like a dropped wine glass. Smoke poured out of the half still in the armor's grasp, the stench of ozone and invaded Stacey's helmet.

She gagged and doubled over. Malal touched a button on the side of her helmet, and a blast of fresh air blew across her face as her armor sealed itself off from her surroundings. She went to her knees, fighting her body's desire to vomit.

"You ok?" Yarrow patted her on the shoulder.

"Hate...that smell..." she said. Kallen's shadow loomed over her. The armor had the rear half of the beast held by a whip thin tail. Two divots of cobalt blue marred Kallen's side armor.

"No hard feelings," Kallen dropped the remains at Stacey's feet. Clear liquid seeped out of a mess of shorn wires and sparking power lines.

A high pitched screech filled the air, a sound she remembered from her childhood when a dog had been hit by a car, breaking the poor animal's spine and legs.

"Come," Malal said.

Stacey followed him to the source of the noise. Hale and Cortaro stood near a tree, hunks of bark blown free from the Marine's gauss weapons. Their weapons trained on one of the injured beasts.

It looked like a saber-toothed tiger made out of white and orange glass, streams of light raced over its surface, swirling around the ends of its missing front legs. It tried to crawl through hunks of broken glass, the remains of the rest of the beasts that attacked.

“What the hell is it?” Cortaro asked. “Is it...alive?”

“I can tell you,” Malal said. “May I?” he asked Hale.

“Be my guest,” Hale said.

Malal grabbed the beast at the base of its skull; screams of fear filled the air as he lifted it onto the air. His other hand wrapped around the neck. Stacey’s stomach went into knots, as the thing seemed to beg for mercy as it shivered in Malal’s grip.

Malal tore the head free from the rest of the body, silence returned to the grove. Malal dug a finger into the exposed skull and removed a glowing cube. He wrapped his hand around the cube, fingers morphing into a solid mass.

“This is unexpected,” he said.

“Care to share the details?” Hale asked.

Malal tossed the cube over his shoulder.

“They are an echo. Android approximations from a dead world,” Malal said. “These things mimic the tusk-cats from the eastern hemisphere, not the planet’s sapient species that called itself the Jinn.”

“What about the Jinn?” Stacey asked. “Are they here too?”

“No,” Malal said. “The Jinn are extinct. Extinct by my hand.”

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