

Escher

Book I from the Tykhe Universe Series

by Glenn Roush

Chapter 1

Escher

Escher lands on the spine of his exosuit.

Wind expels from his lungs in a suffocating embrace. Glass and metal debris confetti around him. He picks himself off the ground long enough for a second orange fireball to return him to the mud.

His vision shows triples. Heavy smoke rolls over him, choking his breath. Red tracers cut through the black haze. The smoke is replenished with an encore of mute explosions—and even in the pandemonium Escher notes the strangeness of utter violence replaced by the ringing of a one-note xylophone.

He presses the com pad implanted under the skin of his left temple. The simple touch has him wincing. He realizes the thick liquid on his fingertips is more than rain. If his lips produced words, he couldn't hear them over the sound of the ringing.

His head isn't the worst of it.

“Fuck...”

Blood pukes from under his vest. He shoves his palm against the wound in a futile attempt to contain his leaking fluids.

A break in the smoke reveals the destruction around him. The behemoth road excavator is a molten fireball. All the other vehicles are also on fire. He watches as his teammates and the civilian workers are cut down in front of him. The ringing in his ears is merciful. *At least he doesn't have to hear them die.*

For a moment Escher debates removing his hand and joining the rest of his squad in Valhalla. Or hell. *Who's he kidding?* Definitely hell.

If *Exo* didn't help him to his feet, he would have died there. *She hasn't given up on him yet.* Escher keeps one hand against his side, the other gripping his rifle, and lets the mechanical appendages carry him off behind the cover of a thick mossy trunk.

He waits to look around the edge of the trunk. Muzzle-flashes continue to dance from the depths of the jungle. He raises his rifle, eager to engage. An electric jolt of pain urges prudence and he decides to flee instead.

The dark skinned Gath lumbers through the saturated underbrush determined to put distance between himself and Ground Zero. *Exo* keeps him upright. The mechanized limbs bear most of the labor of movement. *Although, not without awkwardness*—the left leg hydraulics has a noticeable hitch in a usually smooth operation.

The ringing dissolves. He hears the occasional gunshot chirping over noise of the downpour. Escher checks over his shoulder for pursuers and instead notices all the contents of his day-pack littered in a betraying trail behind him. *His gear took the brunt of the impact.* Probably the only reason he's still alive. Keep moving...

Unfortunately movement stimulates a budding pain in his leg. The pulse in his neck throbs and he can't manage a full breath. Escher grits his teeth for another hundred meters before collapsing behind a mammoth spiral-twisting tree trunk.

None of this is native to Tykhe. Not the trees, the weather, and certainly not his species or the violence they've brought with them. According to some of his now-dead teammates, Tykhe bears a striking resemblance to Africa, both the dry zones and the wet, to also include much of the wildlife.

He wouldn't know. He's never been to Earth. Maybe if he survives, he'll hop a relay back to the mother-world...

Escher applies pressure to the wound while trying to keep his rifle barrel out of the mud. His eyes flutter and he knows that regardless of enemy discovery, his time is limited. Fingers rummage blindly through the trauma kit at the five o'clock position on his pistol belt. Escher's vision constricts to a narrow tunnel of gray light until he jams an epi-pen into the meaty part of his thigh and the blinds are open wide.

"Shiiit!" *He has superpowers!* Now he can focus.

Escher peels through his camouflage layers to expose a mangled exit wound two finger widths above his hip bone. He strains in agony and finds the entry about ten centimeters around the curve of his side. *In-and-out.* At least he doesn't have to worry about extracting anything.

The other significant injury is centered on the back of his left leg—another shard from the explosion. His beefy hamstring muscle swallowed the shrapnel—missing the artery or he'd be dead already. *All those days in the squat-rack paid off!* No exit. He'll have to extract it later.

Escher labors to apply trauma bandages over the wounds. The leg proves much more difficult to attend to than his hip since he can't see the hole. *Success!* The bandages activate to stop the bleeding. *That'll have to do for now.* Before righting his wardrobe, he injects another auto-syringe into his side. The narcotic rounds the edges off his pain. Dullness takes over where the adrenaline was starting to fade.

Rain continues to descend on his shaved head in sheets. *And he thought forgetting to pack a poncho was going to be the worst part of his day!*

Now that Escher has an available hand, he presses the damaged flesh by his ear to try coms. *No response.* Either the com-link is damaged or everyone is dead. Activating the button in this condition is a lot like poking an open wound—so he tries three times before ceasing the self-inflicting pain.

Meanwhile he checks the condition of his Mk-7 Mod 3 battle rifle. He changes out the half-depleted mag of monkey-slayers for a fresh 50 rounds. *The most dangerous thing they'd encountered had been small herbivores.* All his mag pouches, for both rifle and pistol, are still full. As for the rest of his gear...

He lost everything in his day pack, including food, a pop-tent, and his change of dry clothes. Exo's left leg frame is being held together by a thread. The appreciation that it could have been his actual leg and not the machine's is not lost on him. He'll have to buy Exo a drink if they ever get out of this...

Assuming the MSID on his forearm survived two explosions; he still has alternate coms with base. Otherwise he's facing a real motherfucker of a 30km march/crawl back to his people.

He postpones checking the function of the MSID for fear of alerting every night vision equipped bad guy in the area. Even the dimmest screen function would illuminate like a signal flare to the hypersensitivity of NVG's. He's amazed someone with thermals hasn't spotted him already. Did the rain lower his body temperature enough that he's gone invisible? Doubtful. He's not that lucky. *Or is he...???*

Escher pulls himself up using the vertical spindles of the tree's trunk. Exo groans.

"Come on girl, we've got this." He leans out from the protection of the tree trunk and scans. *He can't see shit between the rain and the dense vegetation.* Bright circles burn in the distance. Other than that, even the detection of movement is distorted by the wind and rain. Tree branches and shrubs dance in the storm. *That's good though, if you can't see them, they can't see you.*

Escher debates returning to see if any of his squad survived. *Doubtful.* There must have been a platoon of hostiles

surrounding them. You don't have the means to put up a fight. Retreat. Regroup. Survive. You want to see Africa. *Remember?*

He staggers aimlessly through the thick vegetation with his only objective of putting distance between him and the bad guys. The rain hasn't let up a milliliter. Shelter seems almost senseless at this point, except for the usefulness of concealment.

Escher leans against a tree. He spies a pale figure standing ahead of him fifteen meters. The person is tall and thin in light clothing. No weapons. No gear. *Not one of his men.*

They stare at each other for several long seconds before the figure walks away.

"Hey!" Escher whisper-shouts. By the time he catches up, the figure is gone, and he is standing in outcropping of odd-shaped boulders forming a crude half-circle. Some of the stones are inscribed with foreign symbols predating the first human settlers.

If he weren't dying he might appreciate the ruins. Instead he selects a space between two of the boulders. He deploys a machete length blade out the left arm of his suit and begins hacking away at broad leafy branches. After assembling a reasonable stack, he begins erecting a primitive lean-to, good enough to keep the rain off overhead with a curtain sealing the one open side.

Not the worst, Escher surveys. It's not large enough to accommodate the rigid bulk of Exo, so he cuts enough branches to cover the frame and stows it in a clump of bushes nearby. He's fragile out of his suit. There's no way he could continue moving. He has to rest.

Escher weasels his big body into his little bivouac. He sits upright, his back against the rock, weapon on his lap oriented outboard towards the draping branches. Within his cocoon he feels concealed enough to consult the MSID.

Even on the dimmest setting the screen lights-up the dark chamber. His bionic eyes auto-cycle out of night vision to natural sight in accommodation. He swipes through the various team screens. All his teammates are showing flat vitals. His aren't much stronger. Escher doesn't possess the wits to mourn their losses. Shaky fingers compose a distress signal back to base. *Send.*

He activates the thermals in his shirt and sucks on some water from his hydration system while he waits for a reply. You've only delayed the inevitable...If help doesn't arrive, you'll be dead before morning. He looks at the blank screen of the MSID one more time. Still no response. *What the fuck?*

He imagines medical professionals urging him to stay awake, but he can't. Instead he tips his head against the rock and lets the thermal weave warm him into unconsciousness. Survive until morning...

Chapter 2

Escher

Fuck this jungle. Incessant rain clouds conceal what would otherwise be a spectacular ruby sunrise. Tykhe's sun Cerise is smaller, but closer than Earth's, making it appear larger in the pink sky. It is one of the few things he enjoys about this planet. That and the fragmented moon at night. And yet, he hasn't been able to enjoy any skylines since deploying to the Simbiana continent three weeks ago. The rainy season is scheduled to last a minimum of ten more days. *What a miserable place.* He'll request an immediate transfer if he ever gets out of this place.

At some point in the middle of the night one of the branches of his bivouac collapsed, inviting a steady stream of water inside. He passed out in a puddle that seeped into the tatters on his left leg, pooling in his boot. Even as he drains his boots, he's still thankful for the sleep, and thankful to be alive.

If only Command had answered, his morning would be peachy. Still nothing. Either his MSID is also broken, someone fell asleep in the coms hut, or the same fuck-mooks that attacked his convoy also attacked his outpost and he's absolutely boned because he has no idea where to go if not to his outpost.

Escher crawls out of his shelter to test his fate. He stands upright in the open, waiting to get his head blown off. His head remains intact. *Did those bastards go home?* He's still trying to sort out who hit them. *In the end it doesn't matter. They won.*

Escher considers the logistics of his next steps. According to the stored map in his MSID, his outpost is 60 kilometers north. Given this terrain and his injuries, he might manage 3 km per hour...30km a day...so two days.

Better make it three, he discovers Exo's charge is drained. *Two percent.* Not even worth strapping in. He put in a full day yesterday. The squad did bring a charging station with them. *Is that a reason to go back to the battlefield?* Who are you kidding? Everything was on fire. Raiders would have taken anything valuable.

Escher browses the map again. A few points of civilization sprinkle the sea of enveloping jungle. The largest city is Liberiana, which might as well be marked as a red circle with a line through it. It's the capital of the area and a revolving door for rebel factions and warlords. Even if it weren't a month of hard marching through the wild, that place is a death sentence for an offworlder. The nearest friendly outpost is a thousand kilometers away. There are a couple of small unnamed villages that consist of little more than a thermal reading. *Loyalty*

unknown. Hostility likely. He doubts they'd help him. He's not willing to roll the dice on their reception of a Gath offworlder working for the evil mining corporations.

As far as roads...the only one within a 250 km radius is the path Henrik-Håkansson was clearing before this ambush. The jungle rules here. Unlike Earth, Tykhe hasn't had multiple millennia worth of human expansion to fill in all the isolated cracks of the globe. 150 million homosapiens reside on the entire planet. Most are clustered around mining sites and this one hasn't had enough time to develop. On Tykhe, the middle of nowhere is truly the middle of nowhere.

No one is going to get you out of this mess, Escher's stomach grumbles and his body aches. Go back to the outpost—that's your only viable option. Escher uses the collapsed leaves in his shelter's roof to fill his hydration pack. He downs the remainder of his pain tablets, slings his rifle, and sets out north.

The trek is already much slower without Exo. Load bearing aside, Escher misses the suit's blade the most. It made easy work hacking away at the dense plant life. Without it his pace is cut in half as the dense brush clogs progress.

When he's not backtracking, he's picking himself up off the slippery ground. He finds the most success using some narrow game trails, all the while hoping it wouldn't lead him into the hungry mouth of an apex predator.

Escher bent a leaf to refill his hydration bladder. If there was a bright-side to the torrential rains, he wouldn't die of dehydration. The rain also helped lower his body temperature from both the ambient heat and expended energy—something he appreciated until ten hours later when he was shivering in Night 2's feeble-attempt at a shelter. His first night's rock-and-branch bivouac was a resort compared to the lean-to. Without his exo-saber, he was reduced to hacking away at smaller branches

with a combat knife previously only employed to open MRE's. God what he would give for an MRE right about now! The gathering took twice as long for half the bounty.

Wind crept in on three sides. Rain still dripped on half his body. And since he'd spent the day shrouded under double canopy thickets plus dark overhead cloud cover, the energy collectors on his thermal-regulating shirt hadn't absorbed enough solar rays to replenish even the first night's drain. The warmth stopped radiating after five hours. Tykhe's days are six hours longer than either a Gath or Earth day leaving him with ten more hours of shivering before sunup.

Cold, tired, wet, and hungry, Tykhe's wildlife must have smelled his weakness. He wasn't sure if the shivering, or their noises woke him up, but both prevented him from achieving substantial sleep afterwards. Halfway through the night he found himself hoping that some T-rex would gobble him up. End it quickly. *Did they have T-rex here?* It seemed like the habitat for them. The man-sized Deinonychus roams out on the savannah. Some scientist's pet project. Brilliant fucking idea. They weren't supposed to shoot them, but he has. They're mean fuckers. He wouldn't want to die by them. They'd make you feel death. Injure you just enough before ripping off your limbs one-by-one. No thanks. Make it quick.

Whatever it was skulking around in the bushes forced him to maintain a hold on his rifle for the entire night. The laughing dogs find hilarity red-lining his terror. Escher stays put to deprive them the joy of stocking him.

He heard other creatures killed throughout the night. Screams followed by the ripping of hide and flesh. What an intricate nightmare the man-gods had created.

Escher squeezed off a dozen rounds into the brush to remind everything who was still at the top of the food chain. Then it occurred to him that most of these creatures hadn't ever

encountered a man or his firestick. They wouldn't know what to fear.

Evidently automatic gunfire is a universal attention-getter because everything went quiet for a while. The laughing returned an hour later. Escher was tempted to fire again except he was afraid of attracting two-legged attention.

Escher set out hours before sunrise. *Fuck it.* He couldn't sleep. *What was the point in waiting?*

By mid-day he was a little more than halfway to base. Escher frowns when he calculates he is only averaging 1.6 km/hr. *Damn that was abysmal!* He would have already been there with Exo. His pace will decrease as fatigue, injury, and hunger continue to wage war against him.

Escher considers eating some of the plump berries and fruits taunting him from low hanging branches. *Does he risk it?* He doesn't know what's edible and his MSID doesn't have an Internet connection so he has know way of researching it. As much as he wants to, dying from a berry is such a bitch-way to go.

The pale figure appears several times throughout his journey and Escher is convinced it is a manifestation of his impending insanity. It doesn't make it any saner that he keeps trying to talk to it/him/her. *Whatever they are, at least it's not trying to kill him!*

Escher retracts that thought as he follows the figure through a gauntlet of twisting branches, expecting more of the same in the ever-ending pattern of the jungle. In a push he breaks through a curtain of vines and nearly steps off the edge of a sloped gully.

“Shit!” His eyes pop wide as he steadies his heels on the edge. He calculates a way to traverse the trench. The bottom is pooled with dark water, almost the width of a football field and no-estimate how deep. Anything above waist-high is not worth

attempting. He is not willing to chance an encounter with a killer croc lurking under the black water.

Escher assesses his ability to go around. The right extends further than he can see. The left terminates after two hundred meters, but even more interesting he notices an irregular vertical shape. *More alien ruins*, Escher wonders of the moss covered upright. He zooms in.

No, not runes or a building...looks like a tail or a wing, something belonging to an aircraft, or, judging by the size, a spacecraft. The pale figure is standing atop its back with arms outstretched. Was this hallucination leading him here?

“Okay, I see ya.” Escher becomes so excited to see something other than organic overgrowth that he loses his footing on the embankment and careens down the muddy slope. He grasps at the grass. The slick blades slip through his fingers. His heels fail to bite in the mud and he’s dumped into the murky pond.

The weight of his gear pulls him under water. His boots tangle with the weeds on the bottom. His seven foot height can’t breach the waterline. *Guess it’s deeper than waist high!* He powers to the surface with a single stroke and gasps a desperate breath.

The big Gath treads water for a moment, waiting. Already soaked, and since nothing has eaten him, he commits to swimming towards the tail of the ship instead of trying to find footing on the muddy embankment. He rotates his slung rifle onto his back and avoids thinking about what’s brushing along his legs as he paddles towards the starship. The vertical stabilizer climbs from the rear of an enormous fuselage.

“Wow...” Escher is an ant in the shadow of the looming tail stabilizer. Both the tail and the fuselage’s skin have been overtaken by the jungle so he is able to glean little in terms of

identification. Judging by the vegetative takeover, it has been here a while...maybe a decade or more.

He swims the length of the crashed vessel: over two hundred meters from bow to stern with three levels based on the stack of airlock doors. The front quarter absorbed the brunt of the impact. Its nose is buried in the embankment. Jagged stubs of twisted metal and wires remain where the wings were ripped off. *He's guessing he could find them scattered about the jungle further behind the trench.*

Escher swims past a mostly submerged airlock. It seems to be keeping water at bay. Most of the windows in the upper two levels are covered in moss, but also appear undamaged. Considering the violence of the crash, the starship's remaining framework is remarkably intact.

If he can break inside, he'll be sleeping dry tonight.

Escher swims under the stubby end of the portside wing. Wisps of the metal and wires dangle into the waterline. He tugs at some of it, thinking it might be substantial enough to climb.

It's not. The wires break the instant he applies his weight.

A little higher up is a mass of sturdier material. He tries to reach it but can't. Were he not wounded and laden with weapons, he might be able to surge high enough out of the water to grab a hold. *Why go through all that effort when he can swim a little further and walk across the nose buried in the embankment? Duh.*

Escher does just that. He stands where the earth and machine fuse together. The shredded framework of the fuselage provides a glimpse without offering passage inside. He proceeds to the top and dashes across the broken nose onto the broad flat back of the starship.

Even if he can not break inside, this isn't a bad spot for the night. A moat surrounds him on three sides. If he finds

cover under the tail he would have a long visual approach for any incoming animals. Of course he'd be exposed to any of man's hostilities...*One problem at a time.*

Escher tears away some of the moss to reveal the gray skin of the vessel. He encounters a broad vista roof. After cleaning the glass, he looks inside and discovers dry beds waiting beneath. *Is this another manifestation of crazy?* He expects the ship to disappear like the pale figure.

The starship remains and Escher is left contemplating how to gain access inside. One would be foolish to consider the windows a point of entry. The transparency should not be underestimated. That acrylic is designed to survive the rigors of space flight (and space crashes). It is as hardened as the rest of the shell.

No, he needs an entry hatch. One that isn't sealed from inside...Worst case scenario he slides off either edge onto what remains of the wings. He already spotted an access hatch leading out onto the wings on his swim over. If those doors don't open, he could climb down into one of the mangled wing sockets where there is also another hatch.

Or you could try THIS hatch, Escher encounters a maintenance access on his level near the tail. He pulls away the moss, uncovering the entire hatch and a narrow perimeter around the door before finding the release levers. *Too easy*, he thinks, until neither yield. He pulls and strains and ends up using his rifle to pry against it, hoping he hasn't bent the barrel. Finally the lever pops open. He tries it on the second. It surrenders and he hears a clunk of gears moving internally.

Don't celebrate yet.

Nothing about this is going to come easy, is it? He stomps all around the frame: partly trying to soften the seal, mostly in a tantrum.

It yields.

He rips the door open with his remaining motivation. “Hell yeah!” Escher celebrates before lowering himself inside a dry airlock.

Chapter 3

Escher

As a Gath, most Earther spaces feel cramped. This airlock is no exception. He manually turns wheel latches, sealing the door behind him in order to open the next: three doors total to ensure that space stays outside the delicate equilibrium within the ship.

The rooms are so dark that NV mode on his bionics have no light to amplify. He activates his weapon’s light and toggles to thermals. He pushes into the unknown passages, rifle at the ready. *You don’t know what the hell is inside this thing.*

He shines his light across sealed machinery, generators, and electrical panels. Vents, tubes, and wires abound. Diagnostic computers populate expected intervals. All is as silent as a tomb. Not a hum or a whir. *Yet nothing appears damaged.*

A light skiff of dust veils the horizontal surfaces. He runs his fingers across the keys of a terminal to awaken the unlikely possibility of sleep-mode.

Nothing.

Not surprising. This bird hasn’t had juice in a while. *Was it ever used or did it crash during its maiden voyage?* His wet footprints might be the most outside contaminant this ship has experienced. *What the hell happened here?*

Escher uses his combat knife to pry open a large set of double doors into an arterial halfway system. Signage written in multiple languages provides direction. Still no bodies. No blood. No disturbance. Nothing. Everything is clean. Untouched.

The hallway is wider than his experience on military vessels. Two of his kind could pass each other without one having to turn sideways to make himself skinnier.

The vessel has the layout of an airliner with the supposition that gravity is towards the belly. It is not a constant acceleration starcraft which would orient rooms based off of thrust to simulate gravity while its passengers cruise through the universe. Yet he can not imagine something this size spending the majority of its life within the atmosphere. Especially because it looks like it came from Earth.

His weapon's light illuminates a fancy metal placard on a wall:

ADVANCED ORIGINS SPACE EXPLORATION
TITAN 99

He has never heard of Advanced Origins or Titan.

Escher jams his combat knife between the seam of a door labeled 120-S. His night vision activates, drinking in the muddy light from a single porthole window on the far side of the narrow room.

The small quarters is standard military fare, except the room houses one bed instead of a bunk or the usual gelled racing seats with harnesses. *More evidence that this is not a starship.* Spacecraft would have the ability to buckle in. If the drive failed, passengers wouldn't drift across the room while they slept. And the walls would have handholds and padding.

The bed is nestled amongst polymer wall cabinets on either side and overhead. He stops to browse the laminated

pictographs hanging on the nearest wall-locker. With the pull of a lever the bed converts into a futon to face the flat screen secured on an otherwise bare polymer wall. He tests the bed for function and comfort, relieved to sit in a proper chair.

Even this feels luxurious after the past few days. He stretches his legs and can almost touch the wall under the TV. Not the roomiest, but private quarters aren't anything to scoff at.

Escher runs his hand over the crisp blankets, wondering if he's the first person to ever sit upon them. He snoops through everything. The desk drawers are filled with bags and boxes. Nothing loose. The wall closet is sealed with tape that warns that 'items may have shifted during flight.'

Sure enough. More vacuum sealed bags of personal items and clothing come spilling out onto the floor. They might have stayed put on their shelves had the ship landed properly.

Escher stoops over to inspect one of the dense flat bags. Lots of Titan 99 logoed memorabilia along with personal wear.

"At least you get a commemorative jumpsuit for making the trip," he reads the label on the barcode. *Why did they inventory like this? Weird. Whatever.* He's coming back for socks once he finishes clearing the ship.

The final wall-door reveals a 1/2 bathroom never intended for the size of Gaths. *Damn.* He would have to keep the door open if he wanted to take a shit! Escher crams into the claustrophobic space and tries all knobs and buttons: nothing works. *Why would it?*

Escher skips the remaining steege quarters, assuming they are all the same. The rooms become progressively larger and more accommodating. The *officer's quarters* are double the width of steege, plus an en suite that he can finally maneuver in. It comes complete with a toilet, sink, and private shower tube. *No communal showers for them.*

“Fuck me...” He sinks into plush geometric-patterned carpet. The walls are a color, not that stark inside-a-freezer white paneling. Digital viewing frames are hung about so the occupant can display his or her favorite art. There’s a sitting couch, an executive desk, even a mini-bar. Sadly, no booze in stock.

Escher is most interested in the king sized bed centered underneath the same vista ceiling that originally motivated him to break into the starship. He’s staking his claim here tonight. Escher steps underneath the broad acrylic and watches the rain come down overhead.

You don’t get to enjoy this yet...

Besides the bed, the room isn’t any more useful than any of the others. Lots of vacuum sealed bags and boxes of a stranger’s personal effect. No food. No power. Escher leaves, soon reaching the end of his dormitory exploration.

He finds a wall map. A hydroponics lab runs down the middle, bisecting the domicile blocs on the port and starboard. *Why did they do that?*

“Interesting.” Escher is back to using his weapon’s light as he steps into the black. His beam reveals rows of shelves on mechanical tracks that seem capable of rotating. Overhead, the first ceiling is glass, and beyond it, the raw underside of the hull’s architecture. The whole roof appears to retract to provide light inside. It makes more sense why the designers would sandwich hydroponics between the dormitories. They are trying to utilize the roof.

Escher leaves the greenhouse for a dark food processing lab and more ship’s operations. Alone, there’s a specific eeriness as his boots echo off the metal flooring and hard surfaces. His rifle would be shouldered at the high-ready even if he didn’t need the flashlight. Despite the cold feedback of his thermal vision, he’s convinced something is watching him.

He reaches a blast door that would have remained jammed shut if it weren't for the emergency wheel-crank next to it. Escher deactivates the manual locks and gives the wheel one full rotation.

The next section is visibly compromised with cracks stretching across the floor and ceiling. Escher arrives at a second engineering bay that is severely damaged with dangling wires and broken machinery. *Could this be a clue to what caused the Titan to crash? Or is this an aftereffect of the crash?*

Escher passes by terminals for all the ship's functions: helm, communication deck, weapon systems, etc. The further he travels, the more the damage intensifies until he reaches water leaking inside. He reverses his path and descends to the lower level.

The top floor was a mixture of birthing, greenhouses, and ship functions. The second level is primarily amenities. He consults the diagram of listed establishments: everything from laundry to dining, fitness centers to theaters. There's even a pool! Everything a person could ever need for a marvelous vacation.

Was this a tourist vessel? The Advanced Origins Space Exploration (AOSX) branding is throwing him off. It sounds more official than something designed for fun. Either way, it is not a strictly military vessel. No Space Marine or Galactic Soldier signage anywhere. Besides, it's way too nice! Even for a Kyrios battleship.

Escher snoops through the cantina.

"HELL yeah!" Escher breaks into a cabinet with his combat knife. Inside is a specially engineered crate that requires even more work. Escher peels the soft packaging off the blue glass bottle. *It's the next best thing to a dry bed!*

As much as he wants to test *Earth's finest vodka*, prudence dictates he maintains all his wits. *Fuck it*. Fatalism justifies a moment of pleasure.

Escher finds a secured shot glass under the counter, also packed to prevent in-flight damage. He takes a seat in a bar stool on the patron side of a counter, opposite a lifeless service droid fixed to an overhead track.

“So tell me about yourself?” Escher breaks the seal on the bottle. The waft of crisp fermentation overcomes the smell of aged furniture. He pours himself a glass, noticing a slight tilt in the way the liquid settles in the glass as it rests on the counter--confirming what his equilibrium already suggested--that the ship is not resting perfectly level. *Makes sense*. It did crash.

The tilt isn't quite severe enough that the glass is sliding. A degree or two more might make the difference.

Escher downs the shot. Damn tasty! *Does vodka get better as it ages?* He didn't think so. Earthers must be good at brewing the stuff. Or...perspective...

“OK, I didn't mean to get personal.” Escher talks to the motionless droid. “What about the ship? What were you guys doing out here?” The décor is fashionably civilian. The greenhouse confuses the likelihood of a luxury cruiser. *Were they planning on conducting experiments?* Or sustaining themselves.

“You are zero help, my friend.” Escher drinks another shot before capping the bottle. *Just enough to take the edge off*. If his gear weren't mangled, he'd find a spare pouch for the bottle. At this point it doesn't seem wise to offload magazines for alcohol, so he leaves the bottle on the counter next to the upside down shot glass. *He'll be back*.

Where is everyone? Escher wonders. He hasn't found a single body. No indication of struggle, nothing. Escher

descends the stairwell, hoping the lower level will answer some of his questions...

* * *

Escher holds his breath to make sure he is not imagining sounds. In the depths of the silence is a faint, steady hum.

Could it be? You didn't drink THAT much. That sounds like a fusion generator, Escher keeps his rifle at the high-ready. How is it still running?

Stupid question--those things go forever. *Why* is it still running is a better question.

Escher follows the hum to a set of doors labeled MedBay. The door swooshes open to his presence. That, combined with the searing burst of overhead light spooks him into sighting through the optic of his rifle. If he had organic eyes, he would have been blinded! Thankfully his bionics auto-correct, although his heart is still racing.

The white-wall clinic is motionless. He sweeps every crack and corner for life before snooping through cabinets to discover it fully stocked with supplies. "Finally!" He can make use of this room! Freshen up some of these bandages and tend to other injuries before he sets out.

Escher is excited to see a door marked Surgery. With any luck they will have an AutoDoc!

Whatever this machine is doesn't look like any AutoDoc he's ever seen. It's big and clunky. A modern AutoDoc is a magical thing. Climb onto the operating bed and emerge as good as new in usually under a few hours. *From bandages to brain surgery.* He has no clue how to operate this antique.

“Shit...” He sighs, wandering back into the main room. At the far end is the last remaining door, the most interesting detail he’s encountered so far: Cryostasis.

If the entrance required even as much effort as prying open the door, he would have skipped it but an illuminated keypad currently waits for a single press of the button. What once required an authorization key now reads: Emergency Release. He takes the bait. The auto doors groan open.

The vast room is a portal into the not so distant past when space travel required years to jump between systems. But he never heard of a ship so well accommodated containing a cryo hold. *What’s the point if the passengers were sedated in a frozen coma for the whole journey?* They were hi-tech envelopes: seal the sleeping cargo, ship to the destination, open upon arrival. Impersonal and efficient.

All that changed when the Einstein-Rosen relays came on line. Many starships lost their purpose with the relays. Traveling between the planets became like passing through a door. The majority of the travel time was spent traveling to and from the orbital relay itself. The whole journey usually lasted five days. *No need to put the passengers under.* They could stay awake and enjoy whatever luxuries were on board.

Escher can’t figure out why this ship would have amenities *and* cryo. Then it dawns on him.

This is a colony ship.

The guests were never supposed to interact with the amenities while it was in flight. They were supposed to enjoy them once it landed. This was to be their home. Everything in it, the greenhouse...it all makes sense now! It was designed to sustain them.

Escher’s stomach knots as he makes the connection. Then, just like the clinic, the overhead lights cue to life. He hesitates to step further inside, but curiosity drives him. The

temperature drops a few degrees. Inside smells like air-conditioning and plastic. The whole room is filled with upright cryo-tubes.

They are robotic coffins standing on end with viewing windows for the faces. The coffins click and hum intermittently.

“No fucking way...” Escher approaches the nearest tube. He taps a screen on the front of the door. The passenger’s vitals illuminate. Despite her gray appearance through the frosty window, the systems indicate active vitals.

“She’s still alive...” He breathes, walking down the row in disbelief. “...They all are.”

Chapter 4

Escher

He hasn’t eaten anything in almost 60 hours. He lost a lot of blood.

Tired.

Wet.

Cold.

A little bit of alcohol. All these factors add up to a perfect summation for delusion. You’ve already been seeing ghosts. *Is this another mind trick?*

According to the thin-screens each person’s status reads: normal. Besides the five that died and are truly resting in coffins. Escher starts to consider possibilities beyond the this-is-fucking-impossible denial stage.

One hundred sleeping people and a few dozen animals are aboard this spaceship. Most of them survived. To his

knowledge, all the cryofrozen goats, pigs, chickens, four frozen dogs and a few thousand grasshoppers are still alive. Of the humans that died, it was a result of mechanical failure from their cryotubes. Luck of the draw.

They may have only postponed death. They are either lost or forgotten. You are the first person to set foot on this ship since it crashed. You are the only person that knows they exist. What are you going to do?

For the time being...

Nothing.

They are not your problem. These strangers are cozy in their mechanical cocoons. Death would be painless. *Which is more than most people are offered.* More than was offered to his squad.

They already look dead, eyes closed, gray-blue skin, stiff hair, zero movement. He hasn't had the chance to mourn the people he served with; he can't feel bad for strangers.

Escher abandons cryostasis to continue his exploration of the ship.

Signage indicates the primary functions of the lowest levels are for storage and workshops. He clears a double-door airlock and shines his weapon light into an enormous bay tight from floor to ceiling with hard cased containers, metal drums, lockers, and cold storage chambers. The section must be half the length of the ship!

It smells different than the other rooms. More metallic with hints of motor oil and an underlying chemical smell that he hopes isn't toxic to breath.

Escher strolls past all the barrels of liquids, tools, parts, metal stock and other building material resources. A weapon's cage sparks his interest because...well, guns are always fun. *Were they supposed to establish an outpost?*

Further down, a dozen narrow garage doors house old variants of armored exo-suits. If he can power them up, they could cut his travel time in half—assuming he fits in any of them. Most Earthers are shorter than him.

The furthest end of storage is crammed with several wheeled and aerial transport vehicles. No more walking! He leaps with excitement and is stifled by a reminder from his injuries. You've gotta stop doing that! Escher steadies himself on the wire mesh wheel of an enclosed rover. *He'll cram his ass into the driver's seat of one of these much easier than trying to fit into a tiny power suit.* Then he remembers the ship is resting in a pond of its own creation. If he attempts to lower the back ramp, this whole compartment will flood. "Damnit!"

The rovers are out of the equation until he can figure out a way to lower the ramp, leaving him to celebrate a crate labeled MRE. He didn't even bother cracking the seal on the freezer storage. Unlike the MedBay and cryo, this storage bay is dark. All those long-term freezers have been without power since the crash. No thanks! He'll leave whatever has rotted inside sealed behind closed doors. The ultra-preserved, military grade Meals Ready to Eat will suffice.

Escher rummages through the MRE's for the least-disgusting meal. *Can't go wrong with a chicken breast.* It will expire 40 years from now if he's doing his math right.

"Hell, how old are these things?" *Doesn't matter,* it's food, and he's starving.

Escher props his rifle upright like a torch and takes a seat on a crate to devour all 2000 calories of the packaged meal. It's the most delicious thing he's eaten since the last time he went over 60 hours without food. *Big guys get cranky when they don't eat.*

Now that he's satisfied his hunger...*what are you going to do about those people?*

Do you wake them up?

If so, how many?

All of them?

Some of them?

One of them?

Whatever mission they were on has expired. No one is missing them. Could any of them be useful to you? Could this starship be useful to you? How could you sell it? Salvage? Scrap? Hell, antiques! You could make some money.

—No, you're getting ahead of yourself. You still have shrapnel inside you and those bandages aren't a permanent fix. If you don't return to base soon you'll die from infection.

Speaking of, Escher tries the pad on at his temple. *It still hurts, and no one is answering.* No one is responding to his MSID texts either. He's still banking on his equipment failure because anything else means the outpost has been overrun and he's dead.

Assuming his outpost is still standing, *which one these assholes could assist you back to base?*

Escher returns to cryo and plops down at a desk terminal in the nucleus of the vault. He browses the pod statuses of his frozen guests. In addition to pod integrity, he is granted limited access to passenger files. Each file includes a mug-shot plus the usual country of origin, gender, age, height, weight, eye-color and some resume details.

The personnel logs begin at the top with the Mission Commander. He's a grave looking man that reminds him of every O-5 and up he's ever served under. The man's work history is filled with presumably-impressive Earth acronyms. Former pilot, lots of degrees and leadership experience—none of which are helpful in evading a guerilla army in a jungle without aircraft.

“Sorry buddy.” Unless he’s looking at uncovering the greater purpose of the Titan’s failed mission, Escher has no use for the Commander. Most of the crew are equally unimportant. Lots of scientists and engineers. He’s getting warmer with some of the skilled laborers: welders, machinists, electricians, plumbers. *No he doesn’t plan on staying on this ship long enough to make anything functional.*

Escher pauses on several bridge personnel: a captain, system’s officer, two pilots, and a com chief. Five total. Their pictures are highlighted in green. They are interesting only because they are missing. Missing and not deceased. Status of the pods indicates that they vacated with healthy vitals. *Strange.* Were they supposed to fly this ship in for landing? If so, they did a shit job of it. Escher files the detail away in his mental cabinet with the rest of his what-the-fuck-is-going-on inquiries.

He scrolls down to medical personnel. *Oooh—good, finally someone useful!* He wouldn’t mind having a professional tend to his wounds. Better yet, someone cute. He writes her name down because quite frankly he has no other qualifier than the fact that she’s attractive and looks young enough to handle a 30k hike back to civilization. *That’s simple Darwinian logic that no one can argue with!*

Escher discovers a small detachment of security contractors on the roster. They come from different branches of military service, but all served with a group called Dynamic Defense. He’s never heard of them but he already knows what they were--mercenaries with a polite name.

His type of people.

If he’s going to wake anyone up, then it’s going to be those that can contribute to his survival. Mercenaries are all former soldiers, so they know how to deal with unfavorable circumstances. He can count on the fact that they aren’t going to moan about missing their lobster buffet or foot massages.

Most importantly they will be able to help him fight in case he encounters the same motherfuckers that wiped out his squad on the way back to base.

Their commander is a woman. As is the senior enlisted NCO. Out of the twelve squad members, four are women. Interesting. *Criminals?* If so, that's ok. He can deal with criminals. Criminals know how to survive.

The mercs all fit within that young-enough-and-stupid-enough-to-die-for-money range of 22-34 Sol years. *Yup, that's him too.* The older mercs have the most experience but everyone is at least an E-5 sergeant or above and has served more than two combat tours on their planet plus time with Dynamic Defense. This crew is promising.

Who does he wake up first? He's leaning towards the Gunnery Sergeant because enlisted always know more than officers and they will obey orders instead of insisting on giving them. He clicks on Gunny Jace Riken's picture. She's hot in a muscular, pissed-off sort of way. Bitchy piercing eyes with a haircut to match. The sides of her head are shaved. The remainder of her jet black hair flops to one side and hangs to her jawline. Even though the portrait is shoulder-up, he can see tattoos edging up the base of her neck.

As a big man, he's drawn to her, but worries that she might not be drawn to him. She looks like she can kick some ass. *Definitely a survivor.* Her *I-don't-play-nice-with-strangers* vibe is cause for concern. He needs someone who can adapt quickly and contribute without defiance. Not someone that might be able to beat him in an arm wrestling match.

"Mmm, too risky Gunny...but I hope we can be friends later." He kisses his fingertip and presses it against her pursed lips on-screen.

Passing on Jace means his top contender is Captain Alison Haavik. He remembers that name from before. *That's the girl with the awesome bedroom!*

She looks like a woman used to luxury. Blonde. Pretty face just stern enough to keep subordinates in check. The scars help sell her experience. The tip of her ear is missing and a finger width gash extends onto her cheek. Doctors could have erased any evidence of a wound. She must have elected not to, which he respects.

Okay he's starting to like this crew! They have some bad ass bitches.

Escher decides to wake up the captain and the doctor for now. Fewer to mutiny against him. *Wake up two, see if they survive, then discuss who else—if any—should be woken up.*

“Alright ladies, here goes nothing.” He stares at the gray face as he initiates stasis resuscitation. He hopes he isn't making a mistake. If he is, he has plenty of bullets to correct his miscalculation.

The stasis pod beeps a warning before the pneumatics hiss. The pod lowers from upright to horizontal, laying the passenger flat. It emits more sputtering and whirring noises, indicating it is working. A progress circle with a percentage appears in the middle of the screen along with a warning message that he should not attempt premature opening of the container.

1% flashes in front of him with an estimated thaw of 96 minutes. “Gives me enough time to track down some dry socks...” Escher mumbles to himself.

Chapter 5

Escher

Escher transformed the MedBay into his command center, stocking it with MRE's, water, and a few bottles of just-in-case alcohol. His items are recharging from wall outlets, and he raided someone's personal effects, changing into a poorly fitting pair of shorts and T-shirt while his clothes line-dried. After all his wanderings throughout the ship and not discovering any life beyond cryo, he felt assured in his safety to take a nap.

The Titan's crash landing resulted in the whole ship resting slightly off kilter, starboard and stern. It was annoying more than inconvenient. He should count himself lucky that it wasn't worse--that it hadn't crashed on its side--or even that he could traverse the entire vessel without handholds (especially since the ship didn't have any). Yet, he had the constant feeling that he was on a sea-faring vessel, waiting for the listing of the ship to eventually correct, though it never would.

Escher is able to dial-in enough adjustments to the hospital bed to restore the natural order of right angles where he passes out. Forty minutes later he awakes, dons his pistol belt and returns to cryo, snugly wrapped in a blanket as he engulfs a chair and cozies up to an active terminal.

He scrolls through the ship logs. The latest entries are error messages with every system minus cryo reporting offline. He drags the scroll bar until he encounters actual readouts, almost eight years ago.

"Damn." The ship has been sitting here this long. More than half the systems went offline upon impact. Some kept ticking with reserve generators for a couple of years. None as hardy as cryo's.

He scrolls until he encounters the bold red text of collision reports. *Structural damage to both port and starboard wings...* It appears that the Titan ran into some space debris from Tykhe's shattered moons before entry. *Makes sense*, thousands of moon shards orbit the planet like its own personal defense network. Accidents are still common. Tykhe is a mean bitch.

Before that, the journey was insignificant. The expected automated tedium of atmospheric compositions, fuel consumption rates, electrical readouts...and any corrections the onboard computer made to maintain equilibrium...*boring*. If something damaged the collision sensors prior to arrival, Escher doesn't have the patience to find it. He scrolls all the way down to the first entry.

"Damn!" Titan is even older than he estimated. According to the log, it departed Earth 182 Sol years ago! Up until the Earth-Tykhe relays were completed, the slowest laung-haul freighter could complete that run in six Earth years! This thing was crawling through the void for six GENERATIONS! Shit, it must have been before constant acceleration drives!

Before he can uncover more answers the first pod begins beeping. A vacuum-lock hisses.

Escher falls out of his chair, picks himself up, and dashes over to the pod just as the lid begins opening.

Dr. Emilie Bordeaux is a porcelain angel. Long burgundy hair frames her innocent portrait. The gray tones of death have been replaced by the warmth of smooth milk. Her eyes open, inviting emerald into this new life. She is absolutely divine.

And then in a sudden upward jolt, she wretches a 180 year old stabilization fluid across her life-giver's chest.

“Ahhh!—What the fuck!” Escher backpedals. Oozy yellow bile drips down his shirt. The smell is enough to send him into a counter-vomit.

She pukes again. He sidesteps her second volley, keeping his distance, plugging his nose.

She mutters something incomprehensible. Escher is without a solution. *What the hell did he get himself into?*

Embarrassment afflicts her. She looks at him, vomit still hanging on her chin, and utters “*je suis désolé,*” before passing out again.

“Oh shit! This bitch better not have died on me.” Escher approaches timidly. He works on finding her pulse in her wrist, ready to abort at the first twitch of projectile precariousness. She’s still alive.

“OK.” Escher steps away and peels out of his shirt. He uses the clean portion to wipe away the splatter across his neck. Fucking disgusting.

She starts murmuring something and he isn’t sure if he should try and wake her up. Instead, he wipes the vomit the best he can off her lips. A yellow streak remains down the front of her white scrub top. Good thing the baggy journey-suit was intended to be discarded upon arrival. Each cryotube includes vacuum sealed bags with a change of actual clothes. He’s tempted to change her out of her mess, but he is not sure it would be seen as a favor. Besides, Captain Haavik will be waking up soon. *He should have given himself a longer interval to deal with the first before having to attend to the next.*

He’ll leave Ms. Bordeaux alone until she comes to consciousness on her own.

By the time Captain Alison Haavik’s pod opens, Escher has changed into a fresh hospital shirt from the MedBay and is ready with a garbage bin. The instant that hatch opens he sits

her upright, puts the trash can in her lap and orients her head towards the opening. *Success!* The captain purges her stomach.

“Hey that’s great!” Escher congratulates, holding her steady.

She moans, pukes again and then blinks rapidly to sort her focus.

“Get it all out.” Escher pats her on the back.

She grabs his wrist, still lightheaded. “Who the hell are you?” She opens and closes her jaw, offended by the taste in her mouth.

“My name’s Escher.” He replies, trying to place her Earther accent.

“I don’t remember you.” Haavik slurs.

“You wouldn’t. We’ve never met.”

She doesn’t bother asking him to explain, clutching her head. “Damn. Do you have anything to drink?”

“Yeah.” Escher leaves her holding the trash bin. He returns with a bottle of water and helps her take her first sips. She guzzles the whole thing.

“Whoa, easy! You’re still pretty groggy.” He watches her shield her eyes from the overhead lighting. “You’ve been through a lot.” Escher insists. “How about we start by getting you out of that pod?”

“Yeah.” Haavik agrees. She attempts to climb out on her own but staggers.

“Let me help.” Escher assists her out of the pod onto her feet.

“Damn, you’re a big one, aren’t you?” The top of her blonde head doesn’t reach his collarbone. “*Natural or enhanced?*”

“Excuse me?”

“Are your parents tall, or were you enhanced? Ya know, *genetically?*” She is blunt.

She might be the only person in the universe that can ask that without derogatory implication.

Escher's homeworld of Gath was the third colony planet discovered outside the Sol system. It was habitable to humans so long as they could settle in the right climate zones and tolerate the oppressive gravitational force 20 percent higher than Earth.

Gath's gravity punished the original settlers. Their muscles bulked, bone mass increased to the point where life became bearable. But the rest of their body systems weren't as fast to adapt. They experienced premature joint and cartilage wear. Circulatory and respiratory disorders cascaded into a myriad of other issues. Gath seemed to accelerate the effects of aging and decreased lifespans.

On the other end of the spectrum, procreation also suffered from gestational complications, deformity and increased infant mortality rates. The next generation (if they survived) would be better evolved than their parents, but it would be dozens, if not hundreds of generations before they caught up to the life expectancy and health standards of their Earthborn predecessors.

Powers within the Gath world weren't willing to wait that long. So the greatest medical minds came together to engineer a better *Gath*. All offworld laws were declared void. Ethics ignored. They aggressively manipulate genetic codes, grow embryos in tanks, and accelerate the entire evolutionary process within the span of a single generation.

Many would argue that the engineers overcompensated. Instead of producing a natural evolution of short, stocky humans similar to the planet's flora--everyone ended up coming out looking like black Goliath. They are tall with granite-dense bones and thick muscles (mature males and females Gaths are

all over two meters tall, many males closer to 2.5m) with optimized organs.

Even though every Gath child is a combination of their parent's genetics, they seem to have been treated with a similar biological constant, which has yielded a bevy of unfortunate mockery from the other planets--to include suggestions that they are all clones or the product of repeated scientific incest.

"We were designed to live in high gravity. All of my people are big."

"Damn, and I thought we were enhanced."

Alison Haavik is taller with a stronger and more athletic build than Emilie.

"Why are you armed?" Haavik asks. He notes her eying the pistol on his hip.

He chuckles. "Because this is Tykhe!" A sufficient answer to anyone of this time but he already knows she is going to need a much deeper explanation.

"Should I be concerned?"

He's guessing she's already calculating ways to disarm him. "With me? Or Tykhe?"

"Either."

"Me. No. Not unless you give me reason. Tykhe--ABSOLUTELY!" He grins again. "A lot's changed since you went under." According to the logs she went into cryo at 32 Sol years old. He wouldn't be born for another hundred and fifty years. A wild thought considering they are close to the same biological age.

"How long have I been under?"

Escher debates whether he should tell her except she's giving him that same look that tells him the knowledge isn't optional. "About 180 Sol years."

"What?! No. That's not right."

“According to the ship’s logs.” He shrugs “I’ll fill you in on the details, but before then, how about we get you taken care of? I’m sure you could stand to eat something.”

“Yeah, I’m just really...tired.”

Her legs are wobbling. Escher scoops her up in his arms. She steadies herself on his neck, her eyes struggling to stay open.

“Take it easy for a little while. I’ll bring you some water and something to eat. Rest.” He places her in one of the vacant hospital beds and pulls a sheet up around her.

Haavik doesn’t have the energy to protest.

“Be right back.”

Chapter 6

Alison

Captain Haavik awakens in an infirmary. She has hazy recollections of arriving here. Some big dude escorted her...Escher. His name was Escher.

A woman is lying in the hospital bed next to her, the only other person around. She looks familiar...and at the same time...unfamiliar. Her hair is an intense burgundy which contrasts starkly with the white everything-else. White walls. White floors. White sheets...white lights.

Dr. Bordeaux. If this is a member of the crew, it’s Dr. Emilie Bordeaux. She is the only redhead in the group. Otherwise, she doesn’t know her.

“Emilie?” Alison labors for words. The woman’s complexion is vampire pale and she’s worried that she’s dead. She groans at her again. Still no response.

Nevermind that for now. Why is she in a hospital bed? Oh yeah, *cryo*. The pre-launch team said this would happen. Takes a little while to gain senses. *How long has she been asleep since thawing out?*

She tosses the sheet to the side and throws her legs over the edge of the bed. Still stiff. She wiggles her toes inside her flimsy slip-on shoes. They wouldn't last long outdoors.

Alison Haavik tests her stability, keeping a hand ready on the edge of the bed.

“Come on, get the blood flowing...” She massages will into her reluctant muscles. Everything feels heavy. That was also supposed to happen, right? The extra gravity is nothing to scoff at. She hopes this is residual lethargy.

Haavik labors as far as the lobby of the MedBay before she encounters her giant revival.

The black man startles awake from his nap in the receptionist chair behind the front desk.

“Oh hey! You're awake. How's it going?” He asks.

“Still a little groggy.” Haavik admits.

“It takes some time to wear off.”

He walks around the desk wearing socks, no shoes, shorts, and a hospital gown, resembling an escaped mental patient. The pistol belt adds to her concern.

“You should take a seat.” Escher encourages, holding a gallon size zip-lock baggy with colorful fluids inside.

She just got on her feet, but her legs already welcome the rest. in a fold out chair.

“I found this bag of goodies in your cryotube.” Escher unzips the clear plastic. “I guess I was supposed to give you some of this right when you woke up. Whoops.” He reads the step-by-step instructions. All of the contents are marked with numbers and instructions in multiple languages. “Let's start with this one.”

As the big man hands her a travel-sized-bottle of mouthwash, he's already fetching a garbage can. Alison remembers the training for the wake-up goodie bag. It was the last training she received prior to going under.

She breaks the seal and swishes the blue mouthwash for the prescribed 30 seconds before spitting it into his waste bin. She gargles the remaining half of the bottle for round two. "Coulda used that an hours ago."

"I know. I'm sorry."

She'll forgive him now that the cat-shit taste is out of her mouth. That'll work until she can get her hands on a toothbrush.

"And then this." He hands her a half-liter bag with a built in straw labeled #2, and consume within one hour of awakening.

Alison sucks on the neon green liquid, jam packed with vitamins and electrolytes with the expected tastes. It is faintly sweetened so the consumer doesn't puke it up. She sucks it dry. "Next?"

"It says you are supposed to wait fifteen to thirty minutes after #2." Escher recites from a smaller squeezezy tube.

"Give me that." Alison demands.

Esher hands her the tube. She tears the top at the indicated mark and rolls the contents of the tube to the end like toothpaste. This one is also bland with the consistency of yogurt. It should jump start digestion. Now that her headache is leveling, hunger takes center stage.

Alison doesn't have to ask for water to rinse the gunk down, the big man is ready with a fourth bag.

"Thanks." Now that she can think a little clearer... "*Who are you?*"

"My name's Escher—"

“—No. I remember that.” She cuts him off. “Who *ARE* you? I don’t recognize you from the crew?” Alison sips on the water.

“No ma’am. I’m not part of the crew.” He chuckles.

“Are you from another ship...? We weren’t supposed to be rendezvousing with anyone until after we were established...”

“No. I’m not with another ship. I’m either the luckiest guy alive, or the most unfortunate. I don’t know yet.” He shakes his head. “I uh, work for a company called *Henrik-Håkansson*. H&H.”

“Henrik-Håkansson...” She tests the words and shakes her matted blonde hair. Alison digests each of the new details with her weird space-food. “I don’t remember them...”

“You wouldn’t.” He doesn’t seem surprised. “I’m a mercenary, like you. There’s a lot of us on this planet.” Escher rips open the packaging on smorgasbord of pills labeled #4.

“I’m a security contractor—” Haavik accepts the pills, downing them with a swallow of water.

“Uh huh.” Escher shakes his head. “Spare me the politically-correct bullshit. No one gives a damn about that out here. Trust me.”

Alison folds her arms across her chest. “Ok. So how do you fit into this?”

“I’ve been on this planet for a little more than two Tykhe years...that’s about 9 Sol months. I happened to wander across your starship. Completely random. This bird crashed a while ago, and I’m the first person to find it.”

“Wait—*crashed?*”

“Yup. Looks like you ran into some shit out in space...lucky you didn’t burn up in atmosphere. Somehow this thing crashed and managed to stay fairly well intact. All things

considered.” Escher pulls the final item from the goody bag. The auto-syringe is labeled #6 with pictographs for use.

Alison watches him bumble to decipher it. “Here.” She plucks it from his big hands, removes the cap, loads the spring and shoots it into her thigh through the papery fabric of her journey suit. Escher seems impressed. Or surprised...

Either way he continues. “You and all your fellow passengers are alive because stasis runs on separate generators from the rest of the ship. The only two places on the whole ship with power are here and through that door.” He points.

“Wait, so other people survived? The rest of the crew?” Haavik asks.

Escher tips his head. “Yeah, ninety seven of you fuckers survived.”

“Where are they?”

“In there. I haven’t thawed them out yet.”

“*Why not?*”

“Because I didn’t want to babysit a bunch of pussy-ass Earther civilians all by myself.” Escher tosses the empty baggy over his shoulder for effect.

“You only woke up two people ?” Alison Haavik questions.

“Yeah.”

“Why me? *Why her?*” Alison challenges.

“I woke her up,” he nods to the patient stalls, “because I was hoping she could patch me up.” Escher lifts his shirt and displays the combination of bandages and unattended cuts on his abdomen. “These aren’t the worst, but I have a chunk of shrapnel in my hamstring that is killing me.” He looks past Haavik through the wall. “I’m starting to think I made a bad choice waking her up. She puked all over me. Fucking rude. That’s why I’m wearing this damn thing.” He tugs at the gown.

“Plus I don’t think she speaks Terran. She was mumbling something I couldn’t understand. Glad I can understand you.”

Haavik nods.

“Do you know her?” He asks.

“We trained together for almost a year before departing. But she’s not one of mine.”

“I figured.”

Haavik tests her legs again now that she’s feeling more energized from her goody bag. Still a little nauseous, she hopes walking will help and strolls around the perimeter of the lobby. “So why’d you wake me up?”

“Well...” He scratches his head. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we’re in a bit of shit storm.” Escher works the MSID on his left forearm. He walks over to her and shows her a holographic map. “See this? We’re here. We need to go there...to my base which is 28 kilometers through thick jungle.”

“What do you mean *jungle*?”

“Don’t worry, you’ve slept through a lot. I’ll get to that. Until then, try to keep up.”

She nods and follows his finger along the 3D projected image.

“We are in the middle of goddamn nowhere. The only road is the one that me and my crew were cutting through the jungle. *Seeing as we were ambushed and those fuckers are probably still out there, I’d recommend avoiding that path.* I noticed your people brought some vehicles with you, but I don’t know how we will be able to lower the ramp to get them out...” Escher pauses. “You do have some exo-suits that might fit through one of the bulkheads. I hope they are still functional.”

“They should be. They were designed to last.” Alison says.

“We’ll see. I won’t be able to fit in any of them, but I noticed one of those things has your name on it and you could

pave the way. That's why I chose to wake you up. That, and because you're the leader of your crew and I figured you might have some answers. Besides, you seem like you could handle yourself out there. I wouldn't mind having an extra gun in case more of those fuckers show up again."

"We should wake up the rest of my squad." Cpt. Haavik suggests.

"I planned on consulting you before I went ahead with that. If there is anyone you don't like or you don't think would be useful, I would recommend you leave them dreaming. *Why create unnecessary problems?*"

Nothing like stepping straight into the shit after being asleep for almost two centuries. Strangely, it doesn't feel like 180 years. She remembers going under like it was a foggy yesterday sandwiched with dreams...

"What was your plan for the rest of the crew?"

Escher shakes his head. "I don't know. I am most concerned with getting my ass to treatment." He gestures to some of his injuries. "A lot has changed since you and the others were mailed out here. I've never heard of your Advanced Origins Space Exploration. They aren't on Tykhe, I can tell you that much."

That doesn't make sense. Unless all the Titan shuttles suffered similar catastrophes, there should be hundreds of AOSX colonies here by now.

"Even if they aren't on the planet, I still need to contact them." Haavik insists.

"Good luck. I saw the com room, and the whole front of the ship is fucked up from the crash. Lots of broken computers. Who knows...someone might be able to get that shit to work."

They trained for worst case scenarios, but she is having a hard time grasping it in the real. Alison runs through a mental checklist of protocols.

“Help me get back to my outpost and you can use our coms to make contact with your company...assuming they still exist.” Escher negotiates.

Alison is hopeful. If the company doesn't exist anymore...what other information was lost?

“If you don't mind me asking, *what was your mission?*”

Haavik tries to decide if there is any harm telling him. She doesn't know him. She should be cautious about revealing too much. “Establish a colony.”

“For mining?”

“*Mining?* No. We were supposed to establish permanent settlements and aid in the terraforming process.”

“Hmm.” Escher lets out a puff. “I hate to break it to you, but there are 150 million people living on this planet right now.”

“*150 million?*”

“Yup. Breathing air. Living their lives. There's hot places, cold places, deserts, jungles, rain, snow...the whole works.”

“Are you serious?” When this ship departed, everyone on Tykhe was still living in atmospheric domes. The human population was a few thousand scattered so far apart they would never encounter one another in a lifetime unless they tried.

“Yeah. Unless you plan on unfucking the weather here, I'd say the terraforming process is complete.” Escher divulges. “Minerals and exoticmatter are the only reason anyone gives a shit about this planet, except for the locals, but fuck 'em. Most rich Earthers or Martians head to Kyrios Kosmos. Much nicer. Everyone else is working for KRP hoping to earn their spot there--which usually means coming here first, working twenty, thirty, maybe forty years trying to save up.”

“*Where is this?*”

“Kyrios? It’s about 2 light years away. It’s a paradise...so they say. Never been.”

So her mission and the requirements of it are really over. Regardless of whether or not AOSX went under, they always expected they’d have to colonize for their own survival. It sounds like she was handed a blank slate to start over...

“This must be overwhelming. I will try and make as much sense of it as I can, but until then, you’re a soldier so you know how to deal with unpredictable shit.” Escher tells. “Know that soldiers are still in high demand. If you can’t reach your company, I’m sure my people would be happy to write you a contract. Pays good too—”

His and her conversation is interrupted. “Bonjour. Où diable suis-je?” The red-head staggers out the doorway.

Haavik and Escher turn in her direction.

“Hear that? She doesn’t speak Terran.” Escher rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, it’s French.” Cpt. Haavik identifies.

“I speak your language, too.” Emilie retorts with a foreign accent.

Escher’s eyes grow. “Oh you do? Well then thank you very fucking much for puking on me earlier. That was one hell of a greeting.”

The doctor looks down at the yellow streak of shame dried down the front of her jumpsuit. “Oh my, I’m sorry.”

“I figured you could make up to me?” He shows her the bandage. “You are a doctor, right?”

“Yes, yes I am.” She approaches with an outstretched hand. “Dr. Emilie Bordeaux, at your service.”

Haavik watches Escher’s paw engulf the petite doctor’s. Standing next to the shorter woman, Alison is reassured of her enhancements. She was starting to feel generic juxtaposed to Escher.

“Captain Haavik.” Dr. Bordeaux politely acknowledges her.

Alison tips her head, ready to fend off an emotional hug if the woman decides to crack. She doesn’t. Distracted by Escher’s injury.

“What happened?” Emilie asks, eager to tend to his injuries.

“Frag grenade, close range.” Escher tells. “One here, one here.” He points to the entry wounds.

“Oh my.” She shakes her head. “Please point me in the direction of the operating room and I will examine you. Although, I think this is not sanitary.” She references her puke-stained suit.

“Uh yeah...I was going to change you out of that, but I didn’t think your first experience on Tykhe should be of a guy taking off your clothes.” Escher explains, tossing both of them their vacuum sealed bag of clothes from their cryotube.

“Fair, and thanks.” Cpt. Haavik catches the bag.

Emilie shrugs. “There is no shame in nakedness.”

As a doctor she’s seen enough of it—Haavik thinks—wait, *is she speaking medically???*

“The human body is beautiful and is meant to be celebrated.” She stands in a pose putting a free hand on her popped hip.

So not medically...

“Are all Earth girls like that?”

“Not all.” Alison insists. “I’m going to change.” She excuses herself behind the curtain of her hospital bed.

The journey suit is much easier to remove than her real clothes are to put on. A wave of vertigo hits her and she nearly falls over trying to navigate her feet through the openings of her sporty-cut undies. That’d be exactly what she needs--spilling

through the curtain, ass out to some stranger! The elastic fabric is both a blessing and a curse.

Alison feels only a slight achievement once she has them around her waist. Fastening her bra, looping her belt, and tying her boots tests the limits of her clumsy dexterity. She might as well be wearing mittens! It takes thirty minutes to do what should have taken three, but she emerges victorious, dressed in camo tactical pants and a black T-shirt with AOSX stretched across her bust. For the time being, she forgoes the long-sleeve zip-up from her bag, comfortable in the ambient temperature.

Haavik spills the remainder of the contents on top of the bed. She places the quart sized bag of toiletries aside, drawn to a sealed manilla envelope. Inside are three redundant necklace combinations of holotags plus a physical metal key with her specified authorization. Alison loops one through itself on her rigger's belt, and stuffs the tags and keys into her front pocket for quick access. She puts a second key around her neck, and returns the third to the envelope--confident that it's not useful to either of the other two people here.

The last remaining items of her bag are a watch, a flashlight, and a multitool with foldable pliers, knife, screwdriver, etc. She pockets them. It is a start, until she can get her hands on a real weapon. She never enjoys having the least amount of firepower in the room--especially around a big stranger. Although Escher is already proving himself trustworthy...

While she was dressing, Alison couldn't help eavesdropping on the conversation through the curtain. Escher served Emilie each round of her goody bag. When it came to dressing, she conceded defeat much sooner, and had no shame asking for assistance.

"Um...uh, are you sure?" Escher stuttered with the same hesitant discomfort Alison felt hearing the request.

“Why not? As I said before, there is no shame in the human form.” Emilie said.

Alison heard the shifting of fabric through the curtain. Emilie giggled, teasing him over whatever assistance he provided. Goddamn it, Alison thought, bracing in anticipation for more intimate noises.

It turns out, Escher was a gentleman despite Emilie’s playful banter. *Impressive restraint on that guy.* He could have easily materialized her insinuation.

Cpt. Haavik emerges from behind her stall’s curtain. Emilie never bothered pulling hers, leaving the changeover on display. Not that there’s anything inappropriate at this point. Emilie sits on the edge of her hospital bed, clothed in fitted gray utility pants and a contoured quarter-zip long-sleeve. She’s generous with her cleavage, leaving the zipper down to the sternum.

Meanwhile, Escher is hunched over on one knee, putting the finishing touches on tying Emilie’s shoes. It is an almost a paternal moment, this behemoth man tying rabbit ear laces for his child before sending her off to kindergarten. Alison refrains from making even the slightest comment for fear of polluting any future romances with her insinuation. If Emilie wants to show Escher her gratitude, he’s earned it.

“While you two are finishing, mind if I check on my squad?” Alison asks.

Either he didn’t know she was watching and she surprised him, or he’s embarrassed, but Escher’s face turns a little pink as he looks over his shoulder. She’s glad she didn’t make a comment.

“Uh yeah...right through those doors.”

Chapter 7

Escher

Escher wasn't sure if Emilie's insinuations were authentic or playful. It could have gone either way and he wasn't going to test being wrong.

Besides, the vibe was off. This woman had projectile vomited ON him an hour ago, with evidence still streaked down her shirt. He'll admit, helping her out of that shirt sparked a few tingles. His Darwinian lizard-brain was too far engrained to ignore her narrow waist and nice perky rack. She slinked out of her pants all on her own, and for a moment she was sitting completely in the buff--all of her smooth naked glory available for deep visual inhalations.

Still, something felt wrong. First, Alison was on the other side of the curtain. They could already hear each other's breathing! This was not the place. Furthermore, the depth of his injuries had kept all his excitement and celebrations in check the whole day. This moment was no kinder. Random stabbing pains shot throughout his body with the slightest wrong move. When his head wasn't throbbing, it felt numb. The fact that he was still bleeding killed the remainder of his drive. Escher assumed a medical professionalism when dressing her.

When Alison left him alone with Emilie, he wondered if his lizard-brain might overrule all his rational hesitations.

"Mr. Escher, I wanted to tell you again, thank you for helping us."

"No problem." Escher is still kneeling as he finishes tying her shoe. Before he can rise, Emilie puts a gentle hand on his cheek.

"I am indebted to you..."

The phrase hangs in the air between them. Escher is hypnotized by her deep emerald eyes. *Stop it lizard-brain!*

“I know. That’s why you’re going to take care of these.” Escher stands to full height, and reminds her of his injuries.

“I could take care of more than that?” Emilie hooks a finger around the waistband of his shorts.

Between her gesture and his higher vantage to see down her shirt, she’s tormenting his lizard-brain. Just when he’s about to give in, the dragonslayer arrives by means of another sharp pinch and a flurry of lightheadedness. You don’t have enough blood to operate both bodily functions!

“*Mr. Escher?*” Emilie asks concerned.

“I’m fine--let’s just...I don’t want to leave her alone in there forever.” Escher tosses a thumb in the direction of cryo. Who knows how many people Cpt. Haavik has already woken up!

Emilie is drawn to the row of chilly coffins.

“They look...dead.” Dr. Emilie Bordeaux crosses her arms, passing by the windows of each of the cryo tubes.

“Only three. A miracle you all survived.” Escher needs to sit. He finds a spot on the edge of the terminal desk as the women inspect their colleagues.

Escher provides them with a timeline of everything from the crash to the current situation. Captain Haavik is as stoic as the first time around. She continues down the row of pods, while the doctor tears up. God, she’s not going to make it!

“C'est terrible!” Emilie exclaims, her face turning red.

“It’s not ideal. But hey, you’re still alive.” Escher shrugs. He pats her on the arm. She erupts in awkward restrained sobs.

Escher searches for Haavik to rescue him from this situation. The Captain proves less sympathetic than he! She rolls her eyes and continues walking down the cryotubes.

“It’s going to be—”

Emilie buries her face into his stomach. “Hey, you’re going to be okay.” Escher engulfs her small frame in his arms.

“How do we wake them up?” Cpt. Haavik interrupts from down the row.

“It’s not difficult...but we need to discuss who we are waking up first.” Escher talks over Emilie’s persistent sobs.

“We’re waking up my squad.”

Alison peruses the diagnostic screen on the front of one of the tubes and starts pressing buttons. The whole process requires a few clicks total, all simplified by pictograms over the screen..

“*Hey, can we talk about this?*” Escher objects.

Cpt. Haavik keeps pressing buttons. Escher peels himself away from the doctor, “get over it, you’re alive,” he deposits her in a padded chair and hustles over to Alison’s position. He shoves a hand between her finger and the screen before she can initiate the final command.

“No. We need to talk—”

Without warning Haavik chops at the bandage on his side. He drops him to a knee. *It hurts almost as bad as incurring the injury!*

“AHH! What the fuck!” Escher puts up a paw to block any other incoming strikes.

“Point proven. You’re barely hanging together and you’re going to need my squad if you plan on making it back to your base.”

“I have no issue with your squad. I have ISSUE with the idea of trying to keep anyone besides myself alive for any length of time.” Escher guards himself. “Every person we wake up is a mouth to feed, a body to cloth, and hands to arm. We have supplies—something I was going to FUCKING show you, but

we must remain discrete, mobile, and agile. We don't have time for dead weight. We can't go traipsing through that jungle with a hundred people in tow." Escher rises to his feet.

"Fine, give me a fireteam plus my squad leader." Cpt. Haavik negotiates.

"You want five people?"

"Six. Both fire teams have marksmen."

"Snipers. Not a bad asset." Escher calculates. "That puts us up to nine total..."

"You're going to need some ass in case you encounter whoever destroyed your squad." Cpt. Haavik insists.

"Fine. Wake up your six. But a piece of advice--stagger their thaw for at least fifteen minutes so you don't have to manage five people waking up at the same time. It takes about an hour and a half for a thaw. I will give you a tour while we wait if you promise not to hit me again."

"Deal."

Escher steps out of the way.

"I must wake up my colleagues too." Emilie expels the last of her tears and approaches.

Escher sighs at Haavik. "*See what you started?*" He returns to Emilie. "We are going to wake everyone up eventually, but we need to go back to my base first. We can't wake up all the civilians. Captain Haavik's crew is valuable."

"Doctors are valuable—the most valuable, it would seem, for an injured man."

Escher inhales through his nose. "I'll make you a deal. You fix me up, and I'll let you pick someone to wake up."

"This is fair." Emilie and Escher shake on it.

Haavik initiates thaw on her first choice. The pod goes through its mechanized choreography, transitioning from upright to horizontal.

Escher isn't surprised to see the muscular gunnery sergeant through the window. "I was going to wake her up first, but I was afraid she might hate me."

"She will." Haavik admits. "But she also would have been a good choice. She knows her shit and is as tough as a grizzly bear."

"On this planet you better be as tough as a T-rex if you want to survive."

"I don't know about that. *You're* still with us." She retorts.

Escher smirks. "Someone must be feeling better? I'll remember to jab you when you're bleeding out, Captain."

"I'd expect nothing less." Haavik saunters towards the exit. "What do you say to that tour?"

"Right this way." Escher replies like a sucker, collecting his battle rifle and door opener.

Outside of the MedBay is a more realistic representation of the ship's actual conditions. Dark. No power or utilities. Broken things. And even Emilie notices that the floor doesn't feel level.

Escher's weapon light and the two women's flashlights cut through the enormous storage bay. He provides a run-down of the key attractions of the bay: food, water, and medical supplies. In the end, he realizes Cpt. Haavik is only concerned with one thing...

Alison peers through the mesh fence. Escher doesn't have time to wonder where Alison found the key to the weapon's cage before she is inside. All the weapons are packaged away in hard-cased containers and vacuum sealed bags.

"I'm curious," Escher starts, "when you left Earth, Tykhe was uninhabited except for a few thousand people. You guys sure are packing a lot of hardware to go to a place without any

real opposition..” He touches one of the military-grade power suits.

“I wondered the same thing Mr. Escher.” Emilie voices concern.

“We didn’t know what to expect...” Haavik shines her flashlight to survey the containers.

“Is that why so many of the crew are soldiers?”

“We’re here for peace of mind...and scouting. Besides, we’ve all been cross-trained in other disciplines. If nothing else, we can lift heavy things.”

She’s not wrong about that. The muscles bulge in her arms as she plucks big containers off the shelves and lowers them to the ground. She’s an athlete for sure.

“Uh huh...” Escher mumbles, aware of his weakness for strong women.

Alison opens the container, reunited with her custom-built arsenal. She pulls a full sized pistol from its plastic cocoon.

They’re all conventional firearms that fire a projectile using a solid propellant. No gauss or plasma rifles. Lucky for the Earthers, energy weapons tend to be finicky during the rainy seasons. Mechanical actions are much more reliable than circuitry, which is why his Arisaka GZL hasn’t left his wall locker.

Escher reads the stamps on some of the rifles. A Heckler and Koch GkG-68. Despite being ancient tech, the gun looks damn similar to his Mk-7. It’s chambered in the same 6.8mm cartridge. Hell, even the mags look interchangeable.

He works the action until rust-inhibitor oozes out of the cracks.

“You’ll have to clean all that shit out of there before you do any killing.”

Haavik agrees.

“I do not like guns. They frighten me.” Emilie interjects. “Why must we bring weapons to a planet that is peaceful?”

“This planet isn’t peaceful.” Escher states.

“But it was. *Before man arrived.* There was nothing. Why did we have to bring guns? There was nothing here. Nothing to hurt us. We could have made Tykhe a peaceful planet. It could have been a...a utopia.”

“Some places are peaceful. But overall, this place is a battleground for mining corporations and warring tribes. Exoticmatter is what everyone wants. Blame the companies, blame the locals...Either side will kill for it.”

“This is no better than earth!” Emilie exclaims.

“Guess not.”

“This was supposed to be better. Humanity was supposed to be better.” The doctor is again on the verge of tears.

“I hate to shit on your cupcake, doc, but if you’re looking for better, you’re on the wrong planet. I’d suggest Kyrios if you want to avoid bloodshed. But it’ll cost ya. Time or money. *Not sure you have enough of either at the moment.*”

Emilie frowns.

“Who knows doc, maybe you stick around her and turn it all around.” He tries to redeem his honesty.

Escher fields Emilie’s questions while Alison finishes cleaning her pistol and sets up enough gear to give her peace of mind. That turns out to be a battle belt with six mags, a pistol, trauma kit, utility pouch, spare flashlight, and a big ass knife--that warms his Gath heart-- strapped horizontally across the back for a strongside draw.

Alison hands Dr. Bordeaux a pair of night vision goggles that match her own.

“Here.”

“*Merçi.*” Emilie accepts the gift.

“I assume you don’t need these?” She gestures to his bionic eyes.

“Nope. Thanks though.”

They load a cart with cases of rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition and transport their spoils back to the MedBay.

“Would you like to see the upper decks?” Escher obliges despite the sweat beading on his forehead and the throbbing pain in his side.

He hasn’t fooled Emilie. “Mr. Escher, I believe I should tend to your injuries before you go any further.” Dr. Bordeaux says. “In fact, I insist.”

“I agree. You don’t look so good.” Alison says. “Let the doc patch you up, I’ll clean weapons. Jace should be coming out of hibernation in 40 minutes. Even if Doc isn’t finished with you, I think I can handle her on my own.”

“Be prepared to dodge puke.” Escher reminds. “She’ll wake up for a few minutes, then you can either let her sleep in her cryotube, or put her on the bed. Give her the #1 bottle if you’re feeling REALLY kind. By the time she’s fully awake I can help you.”

Alison nods.

“Alright doc, where do you want me?”

Chapter 8

Escher

“Ouch!” Escher squirms as Dr. Bordeaux picks at the injury on his side.

“Mr. Escher. Please remain still.” She cleans his wounds and begins filling them with a strange purple jelly that smells like pencils and antiseptic.

“What the hell is that shit?”

“It will help you heal.” She covers the wounds with adhesive disks. Colored wires run from the disks to a machine. She inputs commands in the terminal and the pads emit a soothing blue glow.

“Ya know, these days we barely use human doctors. We have AutoDocs. The patient lies down on a table, it scans your injuries and then a bunch of robotic arms patch you up.” He states.

“We have something similar in the next room. I assume it is less sophisticated than you are used to. Me, I prefer a more...physical approach.” She runs a gentle finger up his quad.

Emilie has wasted little time with her flirtatious bantering. *Is this common for Earth girls from her country?*

“Lay on your stomach, please.” She instructs.

Escher repositions, lying face down on the bed.

Without warning, Dr. Bordeaux plunges a pair of pliers into the depths of the reopened wound on his hamstring.

“Fucking A!” Escher strangles the railing of the bed as she plucks out shards of shrapnel. *Were her advancements meant to serve as a distraction?* If so, they have expired. He winces and groans with each extraction.

“*How’s he doing?*” Cpt. Haavik has a gun part in one hand and a rag in the other. She pulled her hair into a ponytail,

exposing the deep scar on her cheek and the chunk missing from her left ear. He ends up staring, deciding that the scar makes her more attractive than she already is.

“He will live.” Emilie announces, breaking Escher from his trance.

Haavik is still wiping down the gun part as she inspects his condition. “Only two percent left on Jace’s thaw. I’ll be in cryo waiting until she wakes up.”

“Let me give you a hand—” Escher turns to move but a sharp pain sends him writhing.

“Stay put! No moving.” Dr. Bordeaux orders.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Don’t bother. I have it handled.” Cpt. Haavik assures.

Escher reminds her about dodging puke before she leaves.

Haavik nods and disappears. He hears the beefier cryo-doors groan open and then close.

“Doc, why’d you decide to leave it all behind and come to Tykhe?” Escher makes conversation while she picks shrapnel out of his haunches. “Wait—let me guess? *Idealist with a longing for adventure?*”

“I suppose this is one reason...” She chuckles, taking a moment to compose a response. “I am not sure I would have chosen this on my own. But I was always fascinated by the stars—about new exciting worlds. I am eager to see something that few people ever will. I think this is worth it.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“I can not say one way or another. I have not even seen this planet yet. Only the inside of this starship. And I must say, it was prettier before.”

“Do they have jungles where you are from?” Escher asks.

“Jungles? In France? Sadly no. Just cities. Houses upon houses, building upon building. Some small forests and fields, but mostly many people.”

“If you wanted to escape people, you still came to the right place. Only 150 million on this whole planet. Most are clustered on three or four continents. The majority of this world is unexplored, mountains, jungles, savannahs and deserts. When you can step outside and you could be the first person to ever step there.”

“Incroyable! I can’t imagine.”

“I suppose if all you knew were cities, then it would seem pretty amazing.” Escher acknowledges. “I have a hard time imagining a whole planet filled with people. My planet has cities, but nothing like what you are describing of Earth.” Escher pauses. “Must be why so many people have emigrated from Earth.”

“You have met people from Earth before?” The doctor is surprised.

“Oh yeah. There are plenty of Earthers around. Some of my platoon mates were from Earth...Africa, Australia, America...”

“How long does it take to reach Earth?”

“Depends if you go the old way or through the relay. The old way, it’s about four to six light years...so a little more than 4 Earth years.”

“Four years!” Emilie’s instruments stop. “It was supposed to take us 150!”

“Four years is slow now. A few years ago they completed the Earth relay. You can make the trip in less than a week.”

“Incroyable! One week?! You are saying I could see Earth again, without stasis?”

“Yup. Might have to save up a bit--it’s not cheap. But people are making the trip all the time. When they finish the other relays, it should bring the cost down.”

Dr. Bordeaux runs a scanner up both of Escher’s legs. In addition to what she has already picked out, she discovers a dozen smaller shards sweeping from the back of his knee up into his left butt cheek. “Pardon me, I need you to remove your shorts, please.”

Escher might have been more receptive to the request before she started digging into his legs with forceps. He remains laying face-down on the bed and lowers his shorts.

“Relax.” Dr. Bordeaux puts a hand on his clenched butt-cheeks.

“I don’t know doc, this is a compromising position...and you’ve got a lot of strange tools that make me a little uneasy.” Escher objects.

“You never know what you might find enjoyable if you don’t experiment.”

Escher squirms. “You’re not reassuring me, Doc!”

“I’m sorry. I promise my care will be strictly medical. We have plenty of time for other things. My immediate concern is your health. Please, relax.”

Escher releases his tension. She fills all the initial wounds with jelly and outfits them with cell restoration pads while she goes to work plucking out all the larger shards.

“*I am worried that you repress your sexuality.*” Dr. Bordeaux comments.

“That’s what you’re worried about?”

“Yes. You need to have more confidence in your form.”

“I feel vulnerable. Especially with you poking around my ass.”

“Vulnerable is good. Vulnerability invites growth.”

“Yeah, well I feel exposed.”

“Exposed is also good. It invites admiration. There is no shame in admiring beauty. I admire beauty every opportunity I receive.” Emilie says. “I admire your beauty now. So powerful. So strong. You should be very proud. Your shape is rewarding.”

“You have an...honest type of flattery.” Escher comments.

“You have given me the gift of your visual form. I am repaying this gift with verbal affirmation. This way both sides feel like they have given and received something pleasant. Besides, you have already seen me. It is only fair.” She giggles.

Escher hears the heavy cryo door groan in the next room. He can tell by the labored shuffling that Alison has elected to carry Jace to one of the hospital beds.

Dr. Bordeaux sets her instruments on a sterile tray. “Pardon me, Mr. Escher. I must check on our latest guest.”

“No worries. I’ll continue hanging out with my ass out.”

The intermission reminds Escher of his fatigue. He’s put in a full day. Hard to believe he woke up in a mud puddle this morning. A lot has happened since then. And yet, he’s still not enjoying that king-sized bed on the upper deck. Doubtful he ever will, since it is technically Captain Haavik’s quarters and she doesn’t seem willing to share a bed with him. He’ll have to find another.

He’s dreaming about that bed when Emilie wakes him.

“Do not worry Mr. Escher, I will finish quickly so you may sleep.”

He nods. “How is she? The new girl.”

“She appears healthy. She is sleeping now.” Dr. Bordeaux reports.

Haavik barges into the room unannounced. “I was—whoa, not expecting that.” Alison is caught off guard by

Escher's bare butt. "Sorry." She maintains eye contact with the doctor.

"No apologies. Mr. Escher is learning to appreciate beauty, isn't that right Mr. Escher?"

"Umm..."

"He is a beautiful, proud man." Dr. Bordeaux pats his right cheek. "He has no shame."

"Right...okay." Alison says.

"*What can I do for you, Captain?*" Emilie focuses.

"I am heading back into cryo for the next one. Would you listen in case Jace wakes up?"

"Oui, of course." The doctor dips her head.

Jace

Her eyelids labor open. All her senses are sluggish. Unfamiliar room...hospital. Yeah, she feels like she should be in a hospital. *Fuuuuck...*

The beds to her right are occupied...with...her squad? Oh yeah, it's starting to come back to her...

"Rise and shine, sweetheart." A familiar scar and smile appears in her vision. The woman squeezes her hand.

"*Ali?*" She returns a tired smile.

"Good to see you, Jace."

Gunnery Sergeant Jace Riken sits up. "I feel like shit."

"Yeah it's an ass kicker. It'll wear off."

Jace notices her commander's attire, already changed over into camo and a gun belt. "How long have you been awake?" She pushes the black shock of hair out of her eyes and scratches the shaved sides of her head.

"Seven hours." Alison offers her green fluid bag #2.

Jace slurps on the straw. "I was hoping this was an apple martini."

“No such luck.” Alison smirks, ready with yogurt squeeze-it #3.

“If they think I’m supposed to be full after that!” Jace gripes. She was consuming over 4200 calories a day during her bulking off-season for competitive bodybuilding. *Fat chance this Go-gurt is going to tide her over!*

“I can scrounge up an MRE in a minute.” Cpt. Haavik hands her the pills before the injector.

“Wait, MRE?” Jace shoots into her muscly thigh. She remembers all of the welcome bags from training. She doesn’t remember the part where they would be eating MREs. *This place has restaurants for fucks sake!* “Did something happen to the food!” That is going to be a major mind fuck on her ability to cope with this desolate rock.

“There’s been some new developments...”

Jace practically sucks the label off the yogurt packet. *So hungry!*

“Well if that’s not a regular ass fucking.” She comments after listening to her commander’s situation report. She leans on Alison for support while she finds her balance. These mark the first steps she’s taken in almost two centuries. Fortunately cryo suspended everyone exactly as they were when they entered the chamber. No aging. No muscle atrophy. No hair growth/loss. Unchanged.

Jace’s eyes take a moment to adjust to the bright overhead lights of the MedBay lobby. She vaguely remembers the room. Didn’t spend a lot of time in here during their workup. They focused on the equipment they would be using outside the ship, as well as some supplemental training in places like the machine shop, and some of the other tech areas.

“Oh you are awake. Splendid!” An overly peppy French accent declares.

“Yeah.” Jace cringes at the woman’s enthusiasm. Her memory is as sluggish as her reflexes, but after seeing the red hair she remembers her name. Dr. Emilie Bordeaux. Their paths crossed a few times during the workup. Their first conversation was odd. Emilie asked her if she was an Amazonian--to which she wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a joke or not--and then made a remark about how “*I think you must be the largest woman I have ever met. By large I mean to say tall—stout, not fat.*” Followed by more verbal diarrhea making everything weird and awkward.

Jace’s assessment: she was equal parts cute and annoying. Cryo suspended even that.

Jace towers over the doctor, reminding her of their first conversation again.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Bordeaux barrages her on tip-toes with a pen-light and half a dozen questions.

“Listen, Red, you’re cute as they come—in fact I’d love to put you in my pocket like a little pet mouse, but your energy level seems to be here,” Jace puts a hand over her head “and mine is right around here.” She lowers the hand to her hip. “You’re going to have to give me a few minutes before I can deal with someone so...vibrant.”

“This is fair. You have undergone a major event. If you have any concerns about your health, will you please come see me?” Dr. Bordeaux stipulates.

“Sure.”

Emilie bows her head.

“There’s a change of clothes in a bag on your bed.” Alison informs.

“*Clothes?* I’d rather eat.” Jace nabs an MRE sitting on top of the reception counter. She rifles through it for the main meal, putting aside her complaints if it’ll satisfy her hunger. “What are we up against?”

“How are you feeling?” Alison avoids.

“Hungover. But fine. Why do people keep asking?”

“Waking up kicked my ass.”

Jace shrugs. “Yeah, but you’re a lightweight.”

“Alright tough guy.” Alison tosses her a battle-belt matching her loadout. “Let’s take a walk.”

“I’m not done eating.” Jace protests after checking the pistol’s chamber for a loaded round.

“Bring it with you.” Alison collects Jace’s bag of clothes off the bed. “*Hey doc, would you mind watching the others?* We are going to take a little walk.” Cpt. Haavik informs.

“Certainly.”

“Red is the only one awake?” Jace clarifies once they are out in a dark hallway. “God help you if she’s been your only company.” Jace asks with a full mouth of crackers.

“She’s a gentle soul.” Haavik excuses.

“Fuck that! The only way I could tolerate her is if I sat on her face.”

“I think she would let you.”

They stroll through the hallway, following Alison’s flashlight since Jace is preoccupied with eating. Alison summarizes the situation.

“Wait, so this planet is...habitable? *Already?*” Meaning everything they were briefed to expect is irrelevant. Tykhe was supposed to be in the middle of a terraforming project that would still require environmental suits outdoors for many decades to come. It was expected to have limited flora, limited atmosphere with inhospitable temperature shifts. A deserted rock that they were supposed to prep for the next wave of settlers.

“What does that mean for us? *For our mission?*” Jace finishes the MRE and discards the empty packaging in the hall.

“Mission’s over.” Alison has had more time to process this.

“What about our *requirement*?”

Alison shrugs again. “Escher has never heard of Advanced Origin. Not saying he’s the ultimate authority...but he seems to believe they might not exist anymore.”

“And if they do?”

“I’m sure a crashed starship thirty years overdue is the least of their priorities.”

“Do you think they still have records? *On us*?”

“Who knows.” Alison leads them upstairs to the middle level.

“I remember it being nicer.” Jace runs her hand across a lightly dusted countertop made of exotic hardwood. “What a shame that everything is broken.”

Haavik nods.

“I doubt they would have served MRE’s.” Jace illuminates a lifeless server-bot outfitted in a tuxedo top and jacket.

“Surely not.” Haavik sweeps her light into the dark crevices of the room. They tour all the amenities: the cafeteria, several restaurants, bars, gym, rec room, movie theater, and the utilitarian services like laundry and the commissary to survey the damage. Everything is unremarkable without power.

They proceed to the top floor where Cpt. Haavik’s room is already open.

“This shit still pisses me off, I don’t know how you got this spread!” Jace circles the perimeter before vaulting onto the enormous bed. Haavik opens up some of the cabinets and begins inventorying her items, all still vacuum sealed in plastic.

Jace sighs bored. She points her weapon-light at the vista-ceiling overhead and watches the raindrops descend from black clouds.

A shadow cuts through the beam of her light.

“What the FUCK!” Jace startles, squeezing the pistol with both hands.

“What?” Alison hurries over to her.

“Something is out there.”

“What do you mean?” She contributes her light to the search but both of the flashlights reflect most of their beams back into the room.

“I saw something fly over.” Jace explains.

“What thing? How big?”

“It looked fucking big. The size of an eagle! Maybe bigger. I don’t know. I didn’t see it, I saw the shadow.”

“Well it’s gone now.”

“Yeah...” Jace rolls off the bed. “Let’s find my room.” Jace exits into the hallway and moves down the row of closed doors. “How did that big dude get these doors open?” She tries to pry them open with her fingers, all the veins bulging in her muscular arms.

“Try this.” Haavik puts the tip of the knife in the crack of the door and drives her palm into the butt of the handle. In a few taps she wedges it into the door and then levers the knife enough for a handhold. Together the girls pry the doors open.

“Jesus!” Jace grunts. “That takes some fucking effort, don’t it?” Jace steps into another room of similar layout to Haavik’s. “He opened all of these doors by himself? That must have taken him forever.”

They inspect the contents of the cabinets to identify residents.

“Hey, isn’t this Red’s room?” Jace displays a cocktail dress with a deep plunging neckline and open back.

Haavik reads the tag on a separate package. Emilie C. Bordeaux. “Yeah, this is hers.”

“This is cute as hell...also kinda slutty as hell...” Jace is still preoccupied with the dress. “Too bad it’s about ten sizes too small.” She holds it up against her body. “I don’t think this could cover my vagina.”

Haavik chuckles.

Four doors later they reach Jace’s quarters. The room splits the difference between Haavik’s room and the smallest quarters. “This is bullshit...you’d think that all things considered, we would have all had the same size fucking room. But no, even in this shit there’s a hierarchy.”

Alison is giggling at her outrage.

“Oh girl, you’re lucky we crash landed, otherwise I would have been shackled up with you every fucking night.” She scoffs at the full-bed and Spartan décor. “I bet you have your own pleasure bot stuffed away in one of your closets, ready to lick your twat at the snap of your fingers, and I’m sharing a shower-room with twenty other smelly cunts! You see this? Two fucking tiny windows.” She points. “Where’s my skylight? What? Enlisted doesn’t deserve to fall asleep to starscape? Goddamn. Some shit doesn’t change no matter what galaxy you’re in.”

“It could be worse...” They visit the futon-bunk rooms that the rest are relegated to.

“Might as well keep them in cryo. That pod is roomier than this.” Haavik fans her face with her hand.

The women clear the rest of the level, keeping pistols at the low-ready in case something terrifying emerges from the shadows. Nothing moves. Without power all the rooms and their amenities might as well be empty chambers. They venture into engineering and make it as far as the second door of the emergency air-lock to outside. Neither is brave enough to pop the final seal until they can verify one more time what conditions await them outside.

On their way back Cpt. Haavik and GySgt. Riken locate every one of their squad mates' quarters, prying the doors open so they are ready. Afterwards, they return to Cpt. Haavik's palace.

That was a workout! Jace can taste the humidity. "I'm ready to get changed."

She shamelessly strips out of her journey suit and uses the papery fabric to dab away the perspiration across her body. Considering they were expecting 160 degrees fahrenheit on the surface during the day, and this ship has no functioning climate control, she's warm but the outside temperatures must be reasonable. No worse than the Southern US!

Alison unzips Jace's bag of packaged clothing, dumping it out on the bed. She fans her face and sits cross legged on the enormous mattress as Jace gets dressed.

"I don't like to get my hopes up, but did we dodge an enormous bullet, Ali?" Jace slips into a skimpy black thong that looks even daintier between her bodybuilder thighs.

"How so?"

"We were supposed to serve twenty years on this fucking rock, prepping it for more unfortunate motherfuckers. And whether we liked it or not, we weren't able to leave. Now, we have a hospitable planet, with an established civilization." Jace can't help her enthusiasm.

"I'm not entirely sure how civilized it is."

"Even better! It means we have a place here." Jace considers a sports bra--but her skin is still tacky and that is way too much work at the moment. *What was she thinking when she prepped this bag?* She settles instead for a cropped AOSX tanktop--with marginally more square inches of fabric than her sports bra, but is a little easier to wrangle over her fake boobs.

"You said our host was a merc? Guarding mining operations? That's the sort of shit we're used to, Ali!" She

finally gets the shirt over her chest, leaving most of her rigged six-pack on display.

“It is.”

“If this place is as raw as you say it is, details like our records shouldn’t matter--if they exist at all. The question is, do you trust our host?”

“You know I don’t trust people...” Alison starts, “although I think he might be a respectable dude.” She then supports her rationale with evidence.

“So he’s not a rapist. That’s a plus...” Jace pulls on EMU trousers turned yoga pants after she’s stuffed her muscles inside.

“Regardless of our career path, I say we help him back to his base. We kinda owe him. He woke us up. Without him we would still be on ice. And once the generators failed...” Haavik makes a slashing gesture across the throat. “Plus, if we are going to start fresh, we need contacts. We need help.”

“Yeah. OK.” Jace is making calculations and she puts on socks and boots. “Thoughts about the others?” She references the non-military portion the crew.

“The objective remains the same. Make contact with this mining corporation, and see if they have options for everyone.”

“In the end, we aren’t obligated to the others, Ali. Every woman for herself.” Now that Jace is changed over, she strolls over to Alison still sitting atop her bed. “Or...at least me and you.” She puts a finger under her chin and gives her a kiss.

Chapter 9

Escher

How long was he out? The windowless MedBay was timeless. According to his clock, he slept through the night into the following morning. *He needed it.* It was one of those hard, blackout sleeps. Dreamless. He wouldn't have been surprised if the doctor had given him a sedative.

Dr. Bordeaux's purple goo complemented the rejuvenating sleep. The stabbing pains were reduced to mild dullness. He peeled back one of the wired pads and revealed purple scars against his dark skin. The wounds are completely sealed over.

Given enough time, the medical gizmos could erase the remaining semblance of pain. *This would be the doc's argument.* But she wasn't around to protest, so he ripped off the adhesive pads, and untangled himself from the wires. *Besides, he had to piss.*

Escher lumbered out of the operating room into the bright MedBay lobby, blindsided by one of the most intense don't-fuck-with-me faces he'd ever seen.

"Jesus! *You're a big motherfucker!*"

This woman is clearly used to being the most imposing presence in a room.

She is a glorious cross between an MMA fighter, bodybuilder, and a porn star. If she were a slightly taller and dark skinned, the muscular woman could pass for a svelte Gath female.

"I was going to say the same thing about you--*for an Earther.*" Escher deflects, unable to absorb all her details in a single pass.

--Military modesty be damned! She cropped the lower half of her black AOSX tanktop, flaunting big boobs and a bulletproof midriff. Her powerful arms layered in sleeve tattoos and her legs are of matching proportions to the rest of her. The camo print of her trousers is nearly liquid as it shifts and flows with the flex of her quads.

“Done eye fucking me yet, asshole?” She scowls, hand lingering next to a knife on her gun belt with promised implication.

“I wasn’t—” Escher stammers.

“Uh huh, my eyes are up here, Pal.” She’s already taken the time to frame them in dark mascara. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I’m not into dudes.” Jace is impatient.

“I figured.” Escher tries to mask his sorrow.

Her tattoos are a montage of military pride and ideology, most prominently, a Marine Corps Eagle Globe and Anchor where the Eagle has been replaced with a nearly naked pinup girl with angel wings that seems indicative enough of her preference. Jace is big, strong, bitchy, arrogant, abrasive, hostile, and absolutely amazing! Everything in his genetically engineered coding is screaming, SHE IS THE ONE! *Fuck.*

He’s afraid she’s read his mind and remains silent.

“What do they call you? Goliath?” Jace suggests.

“*Huh?*” He plays dumb.

She cants her head to the side. “What? The Catholic missionaries haven’t made it out here yet? Nevermind.” Jace says. “You’re Escher, right?”

“Yeah.” They test each other’s grip strength, neither willing to yield first.

“I hear you woke us up to bail your ass out.”

“I hear your company didn’t think you were worth searching for.” Escher retorts, willing to banter to cover his nervousness. “Hopefully those muscles aren’t just for show.”

Based on the slight deviation of her nose alignment, he's guessing they aren't. Regardless, he squeezes her hand tighter.

"Care to find out?" She also increases her grip.

He smiles. "Now you're just teasing me—"

Haavik must notice their knuckles turning white. "Enough you two. You can compare dick size later." Cpt. Haavik interjects. "Escher, do you know if the rest of my people are up?"

Escher gives a final bone crushing squeeze to right Jace's attitude. He coaxes the slightest grimace onto her face and then releases. "I don't know. I just woke up." He shrugs. "That being said...I need to take a leak." He leaves Jace massaging feeling back into her hand.

Escher drains his fluids in a special tube that reminds him of the urinals on space stations that will collect and process pee back into drinking water.

Escher returns to the lobby to discover five new faces standing around fresh in their white journey suits with a heap of empty goodie bags in the trash.

"This is your crew?" Escher interrupts whatever briefing Cpt. Haavik had started. They all stare attentively at him, he's not sure if it's for his size, or his foolish patient gown.

Haavik nods. "This is 1st Fireteam." She begins introductions.

One chick and four dudes, Escher is relieved by the male company. He's been feeling a little outnumbered.

Like their leadership, all five mercenaries are enhanced Earthers.

The other girl, Sergeant Natalia 'Tali' Tereshkova is smaller than Cpt. Haavik, but could be her sister with blonde hair and a light complexion. Three of the men are average sized. Staff Sergeant Davis is a fortress of a man, barely shorter than he, and piled wide in mass and bulking muscle. If nothing

else he'll be useful for loading down with extra ammo or fireman carrying broken bodies.

"Are you from Africa?" Escher asks the dark fortress.

The man pauses, and turns his head. "Naw man, I'm from Cincinnati." The two test each other's might.

"I had a squad-mate from Africa. He said it was the birthplace of humanity." Escher releases his hand.

"Yeah, it was." SSgt. Davis nods.

"I would like to see Africa...if I ever visit Earth."

"You've never been to Earth?"

"No." Escher shakes his head.

"Where were you born?"

"On Gath."

"Gath? I didn't think it was inhabited?" The five new teammates look at each other.

Cpt. Haavik interrupts. "There's a lot we need to discuss." She meets their inquisitive faces and turns to Escher.

He sighs. "Alright, but this is my last class. From here forward, one of you will have to explain this world to the infants. I'm not a goddamn tour guide."

Cpt. Haavik nods. "Everyone grab chow, the head is that way. Meet back here in ten minutes for class." She hits the chronograph on her watch.

"Better set that to Tykhe time—we have 30 hours here." Escher advises. It will take them a while to adjust to the day difference.

"Thanks." Haavik reprograms her watch.

"After class, we need to prep gear and function-check everything. We step-off at dusk tomorrow morning." Escher recommends.

"Okay."

Escher walks off. In the background he hears grumbling about the menu.

“Asleep for two centuries and we’re still eating MRE’s...”

“The army must have scheduled our flight.” Followed by chuckles.

Ah, some things never change, do they? Escher muses, feeling the plight of the Earthers.

Cryo doors open and he practically collides with Dr. Bordeaux.

“Oh! Mr. Escher, good morning.” A pale stranger is following her.

“Morning, Emilie.” Escher stares-down the *icecube* next to her. The man looks frail compared to Haavik’s meatheads.

“Mr. Escher, I would like you to meet Dr. Nakamura.” Emilie presents.

“Pleased to meet you, sir.” The doctor bows his head.

“This is who you woke up?” Escher realizes he must sound annoyed.

“He is a brilliant doctor and an essential addition to our little family.” Dr. Bordeaux defends.

“Family huh?”

“Oui.” Emilie smiles.

“Mr. Escher, I must thank you for what you did.” The small man clasps the mercenary’s hand and shakes it emphatically. “Bringing us out of stasis—”

“Yeah whatever. Don’t worry about it.” Escher slips the man’s grasp. “Emilie, show him where the food is. I’m giving a little history lesson in 8 minutes.”

The nine survivors assemble seating in the middle of the MedBay and listen as Escher bluntly narrates their circumstances. The soldiers take the news in stride. *Another battlefield.* Dr. Nakamura remains stoic, leaving Escher with a good feeling about the current team.

An hour after the survivors disband from their Q&A session, the preservative smell of MRE's is replaced with the aroma of rust inhibitors and solvents. Escher sits across the countertop from Cpt. Haavik and GySgt. Riken plotting their course of movement based on the details from Escher's MSID. The rest of the team has already changed over, and now preps gear recently hauled in from storage.

"I must insist that the medical bay is not intended to serve as an armory." Dr. Bordeaux weaves around the heaps of arms and ammunition scattered around the lobby. Two soldiers are cleaning weapons while two more are checking coms.

"Don't worry doc, we'll be out of your hair shortly." One of the newly awakened corporals says.

"Mr. Escher, this is a medical ward—" The French doctor interrupts.

"Hey Red, don't worry, it's not like we were in the middle of something." Gunny Riken glares.

"It's the only room with light. You'll have to learn to share." Escher shrugs. "Besides, you don't have any patients."

"Yes but—"

"It's temporary. We'll be out of here early tomorrow morning. How's your packing going by the way?"

"That is another issue we should discuss."

Escher interlocks his fingers behind his head and leans back in the chair. "Go on then."

Emilie clears her throat and erects her posture. "Mr. Escher, Dr. Nakamura and I have been discussing the upcoming expedition and we believe it best if we remain at the ship until you have returned with a rescue party."

"What's wrong, doc? *Afraid of the jungle?*" Gunny Riken goads.

"We would stay back to keep an eye on the other passengers."

Fucking civilians. “If that’s what you want to do, I’m not going to stop you. Know that if something happens to us or we can’t make it back for you, you and your fellow ice cubes will be out here on your own.” Escher tries to impart reason.

Emilie cocks her head to the side like a confused bird. “Perhaps we could wake up more soldiers,” she turns to Cpt. Haavik, “for protection?”

Alison exchanges looks with Jace. “I’m not sure how they’d feel about that, doc.”

“It would be for a noble cause.” Emilie smiles.

“Don’t look at me to volunteer.” GySgt. Jace Riken dismisses.

Emilie is on the verge of tears.

“I can stay back if you need someone.” The smaller blonde woman offers.

“Tali you sure?” Cpt. Haavik confirms.

“Yeah. Why not?” She shrugs.

“Yay! *Je vous remercie, Je vous remercie.*” Emilie runs over and wraps her arms around her.

Jace rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. Now get off of me.” The merc peels the doctor away.

“Alright, Tali,” Haavik starts. “You’ll stay back, brief the team when they wake up. Let them know that we will be back as soon as we outfit. Should be a day, two max, right Escher?”

“Yeah, assuming we make good time tomorrow.”

“Perhaps we can wake up some of the others too?” Dr. Bordeaux suggests. “They will have to be woken up at some point anyway, no?”

Escher shakes his head. “Every person you wake up is someone you have to care for.”

“I love taking care of people. This is what I do.” Dr. Bordeaux replies.

“See if you like caring for people when you start running out of food. Or when those toilets start backing up. Or when that generator decides to take a shit and you no longer have power.”

“I will consider all these things.” Emilie dips her chin, spins around and scampers off.

“You know we’re going to return to ninety people sitting around a campfire, holding hands, and singing kumbaya, right?” Jace chews on a hangnail.

“I wish I still had that carefree optimism.” Cpt. Haavik adds.

“We’ve seen too much death to be anything but pessimistic, Ali.” Jace reminds.

“We have to wake up the other team. That chick’s not going to survive without them.” Haavik says.

Chapter 10

Escher

Escher watches the team prep their powersuits in the supply bay.

The Advanced Origins crew were expecting to arrive on a planet marginally more hospitable than the pre-human expansion of Mars. The atmosphere was still developing, resulting in extreme temperature shifts, high winds, solar radiation, and of course, limited oxygen. Any outdoor activity would require an Extravehicular Mobility Unit (space suit). The

soldiers received a mechanically enhanced variant with thick plate armor.

Walking-house Staff Sergeant Gerrard Davis loads heavy batteries into a rear hatch of the C-EMU powersuit.

“Moment of truth...” He turns several knobs and closes the panel.

Escher waits. *“How do you know if it’s working?”* He’s expecting a grand gesture like the cryo pods reorienting, releasing air locks and humming.

“It’ll open.” Cpt. Haavik says.

SSgt. Davis pulls down on a lever and the entire back of the suit opens as freely as if it were fresh out of the factory. The team celebrates and the enormous black man climbs into his unit. The suit reseals with some internal input and lets out a single air burst. Otherwise it operates silently until he begins moving.

“How’s it feel?” Cpt. Haavik asks, pointing her flashlight at him.

“Running a system check now.” A synthesized voice replies through a body speaker. He turns around, facing the eight foot powersuit towards his teammates.

“Motherfucker! Point that in another direction!” Jace shields her eyes from the intensity of his helmet lamp.

“Sorry.”

Besides the wide dome visor of the helmet, the suit is a blend of the anatomical and mechanical. Once the Staff Sergeant kills the headlights, Escher notices Davis labeled across the right pectoralis and an AOSX graphic across the left. Gun barrels are built into both forearms. A rocket pod is mounted on his left shoulder. Escher assumes this was all state-of-the-art at the time. It looks clunky now.

Gerrard’s teammates wait for a full system update before loading the weapons.

“I hope that thing can fit through the stairwell, otherwise we aren’t getting out of this place.” Escher comments as SSgt. Davis lumbers around the supply bay. The floor quakes with each step.

“We can always shoot our way out.” Davis’ robo-voice volunteers.

“Yeah. Not unless you want to flood the entire level. There’s water on the other side of that ramp.” Escher remembers that none of them have been outside yet.

“Alright. My turn.” Jace declares. She preps her suit in half the time, powers it on, and enters.

“Those powersuits were custom molded for each of you?” Escher notes the padded molding on the inside before Jace seals herself away. Which also explains their skin-tight outerwear.

“Yeah. They are fitted specifically to the user.”

Once she turns the suit around, Escher notices that the shape has a female contour, the pectoralis is moderately rounded instead of the broad flat slabs on Davis’ bot. *She wouldn’t have fit inside otherwise!* And Jace wouldn’t be Jace without her personal touch: both deltoids are adorned with airbrushed bikini girls posing in front of a red heart.

“I’m ready for my gun.” She articulates the robotic fingers.

Two teammates mount the six barreled minigun to her arm. They then buddy-carry the 6000 round canister of 6.8mm ammo, sliding it into a cradle centered on her back before then connecting the feed tube to the weapon.

Escher sees Jace grinning through the iridium lens of her helmet.

“Back in business now.”

Jace loads her secondary weapon without assistance—the same arm-mount rifle configuration as everyone

else in case her minigun goes down. With a cyclic rate of 3000 rounds per minute, the General Electric XM-200C minigun must be operated in short bursts to preserve the two minutes of total sustained trigger time. *Although he'd love to see Jace unleash unrestricted hell on those assholes that killed his squad.*

One by one each of the teammates loads into their mechanized armor.

Escher notes one of the team members in a streamlined variant from everyone else's bulky suit. The operator is also wielding an enormous scoped rifle.

"You're the sniper?" Escher reads the name tape on the kid's armored chest: Wyatt. He's one of the youngest members of the team, all of 23 Sol years old. *Hell of an age to be cast out on a one-way mission.*

"Yes sir." He says wide eyed with that junior-enlisted respectfulness.

"You any good?"

The youth flips the stock of his rifle over and displays the line of tally marks for every confirmed kill. "If you need something taken care of, let me know."

"Good to know." Might actually make it out of this one alive. Hopefully. He's too young to die.

Escher leaves the youth.

"Now that all of you are dressed up, *what's the plan?*" Escher asks the collective.

The floor trembles under their powersuits.

"We need to conduct a test fire."

"That could be a bit of a problem." He leads them to a blast door on the second floor. The corridors are plenty wide enough to accommodate them. The stairwell is a little tricky, but each large-body eventually squeezes through.

Escher opens the door with the emergency hand crank, giving some of them the first glimpse of the rainy outside.

“These are the only doors you’ll be able to fit through. Unfortunately, as you can see, it’s a three meter drop below into the water.”

Jace verifies for herself, standing on the ragged edge of what was once the inside of the port-side wing.

“Given the weight of your suits, plus the soft soil beneath the water--you aren’t going to be able to climb back into the ship once you leave, unless your suits are equipped with some sort of propulsion boosters...?”

“No, they’re not.” Haavik tells.

“You don’t have any ladders or anything?” The young Sgt. Wyatt asks.

“I don’t foresee any of them supporting this weight.” Escher raps his knuckles on SSgt. Davis’ mammoth arm.

“We could wake up some welders and have them build something?” Someone suggests.

Escher shakes his head. “I’d prefer we avoid waking anyone else up.”

“I would say we could exit, walk a few kilometers and test fire—but I don’t like the idea of leaving the suits outdoors overnight.” Haavik says.

“If you want to testfire right here, you can shoot into the bank.” Escher simplifies. “But know the sound might invite unwanted guests if anyone is nearby.”

“*What do you suggest?*” Haavik is waiting.

“I recommend we wait to test fire until after we step off tomorrow—”

“Send us out into your Jurassic Park hell not knowing if our weapons are going to go boom? I’m not a fan of that.” Jace disagrees. Some of her teammates nod in support.

“Listen, you guys are all in armored suits—I’m the one that should be worried about getting eaten.” Escher retorts.

“The wildlife isn’t the issue—it’s the guys with guns. Better to be as discreet as possible.”

“I agree. Leading them back here could be disastrous.” Haavik says. “Besides, I don’t think anyone wants to stand fire-watch tonight. Tomorrow we put two or three clicks between us and this place, run a quick test fire if we need. Any issues, we come back. If not, push forward.”

“That’s about as good as it’s gonna get.” Escher agrees.

“Fine, but I’m not figuring my way back down the stairs.” SSgt. Davis parks his powersuit against the wall. The others line up next to his in a neat row.

“Can I at least go outside already?” Jace is the last to shed her EMU.

“You want to go out in *that*?” Escher points to the rain.

“Hell yeah!”

A minute topside and everyone is drenched in rain. They don’t seem to mind. *The first time on a new planet.* He gets it. That’s an exciting moment even in a cloud-locked downpour on the roof of a broken starship. Considering they were planning on spending the rest of their outdoor lives in a space suit—this must be amazing.

The Earthers explore all edges of the top of the fuselage. A few new species of birds fly past. They are giddy children, pointing and making jokes about all their new discoveries. He can’t figure out what’s so interesting. *It’s a bunch of fucking trees!* He crosses his arms and tries to find cover under the vertical stabilizer.

“What’s in that water?” Jace calls out, flirting with the edge.

Escher shrugs. “I don’t know. I swam it to get up here.”

“How deep is it?” Jace is already undoing her gun belt.

“Two to three meters—WAIT, you’re not going to swim in that are you? Voluntarily?”

“*Why not?*” Jace places her belt of weaponry on the deck along with her rifle.

“It’s murky.”

“Puh.” Jace swats the air. “Bro, that’s clear compared to what we have on Earth! I betcha that water is clean enough to drink.”

“I don’t know...” Escher approaches cautiously.

“This planet is brand-new. It’s been habitable for what? 100 years, max?” She gestures to the dense jungle around them, “Trust me, whatever lives on this planet, hasn’t been here long enough to fuck it up like we have Earth.”

Escher stands near her and looks over into the gray pool. The surface is a rapid staccato, concealing anything that could be beneath. He surveys the tree line around them. All animal life remains hidden except the occasional bird.

Jace pulls off her combat boots and her socks. “Come on, join me.”

The rain has softened some of Jace’s sharp edges. Her dark hair is plastered flat, her makeup is running black streaks down her cheeks, and her icy blue eyes have a hint of warmth.

It must be a trap.

“I don’t know...” He hesitates.

“Well you owe me.” She puts hands on her hips.

“How’s that?”

“For staring at my tits.”

“Wha—*when?*” Escher stutters.

“Earlier...” She peels out of her drenched crop-top. Jace winds it up and snaps him with the end. “Now.” She punctuates.

“Hey—that’s entrapment!” Escher isn’t fast enough to dodge the attack and catches the sting on his forearm.

She chuckles.

Until this moment Escher made a conscious effort to keep his observations discrete. Left to a sport's bra, the soaked single-layer clings like body-paint. *Her ears and belly button aren't her only piercings.* He also notes a few more tattoos slithering up her rigid abdomen.

"Whatever, man. They're tits." She squeezes them indifferently.

He doesn't trust her mood and waits for her to retaliate with a lethal strike for his staring. The fact that she doesn't has him more perplexed.

"Come on."

Escher wiggles his finger back and forth, "Nah, nah, nah...I know where this is going. I agree to go swimming, then at the last second you push me in and have your laugh from up here."

"We can go in together." Jace shimmies out of her trousers.

"I don't know...." Escher takes a step back, in case she decides to weaponize this article of clothing like her top.

"You think I'd go through all of this work just to dupe you into a practical joke?" Jace springs to her feet, stripped down to a sporty black thong that matches her sports bra. "Trust me, I don't take my clothes off for a laugh."

He's still not convinced. It seems like the perfect distraction, but his fortitude is cracking. He knows she's been genetically and surgically modified, but she would make the Nikkis back on Kyrios envious! Every centimeter of her body is an articulation of beautiful muscle.

Jace gives him a smile, cocks her hip sideways and stretches her arms out above her head in a bodybuilder's pose.

Escher's tongue rolls out of his mouth. "Damn..."

“Glad you approve. I’ve worked hard for this shit.” She turns to provide him with a few more angles to include her thong-bisected cheeks.

“Come on, I let you eye-fuck me. Now we can go for a swim.” She outstretches a hand.

“Alright.” Escher caves, adding his gun belt and rifle to her pile, he sluffs out of his shirt, retaining only his ill-fitting shorts.

“Hey, not bad.” Jace compliments.

This is the first time she has seen him without a shirt. Escher is more dense, practical strength than Jace’s beautiful carved muscles. But he has a competitive structure, with broad shoulders and a trim waist. A slight shift in his diet and weight training and he could achieve her level.

She snatches his hand. “Let’s go.”

Escher doesn’t have time to consider the three story fall into the water before Jace drags him off the edge.

Once again the Gath is underwater in the crash-made pond. He opens his bionic eyes--no mode helpful for penetrating the murky darkness. An arm’s length away, Jace’s shape is a shadow next to him. He pushes off the weed-dense bottom to the surface.

Jace surfaces at the same time. She laughs and slicks hair out of her eyes.

“Cool.” She swims in carefree circles.

Jace’s teammates appear at the top of the fuselage.

“*What the hell are you doing?*” They call over the edge.

“Swimming! Join us. The water is nice.” Jace entices.

After brief deliberation about the conditions, four Earthers are persuaded to leap. They ditch weaponry and excess clothing before each soldier makes a unique entrance into the water.

“Jimmy, you’re such an asshole!” Two victims caught in the splash radius of his cannon-ball heave water at the big grin just now surfacing.

“Hey-hey, alright!” He defends against their attacks, but sufficient retaliation hasn’t been served and the blonde Tali pursues him for the dunk. He swims to flee in the opposite direction.

“Cpt. Haavik, we’re waiting for you!” Jace calls up.

“No thanks.” Alison remains top side with the heavyweight Gerrard Davis.

Meanwhile Tali Tereshkova has conscripted the young sniper, Wyatt, into her retaliatory campaign against Jimmy.

“Come on, we’ll make it fun down here.” Jace assures.

Escher is too distracted watching her float on her back that he doesn’t notice the laughing game go silent behind him. He turns to the direction of the others only after Jace is back to treading water. She’s staring at something behind him. Before he can figure out what, Cpt. Haavik pierces the silence--

“GET OUT OF THE WATER!”

Chapter 11

Alison

Alison Haavik watched Jimmy disappear under water. She assumed it was part of his game. While Jimmy’s teammates were sorting out how long was *too* long for a single breath, Haavik’s heightened vantage on top of the starship provided her the angle to see the long narrow shadow lurking under the rippling surface. It wasn’t until she saw the gray spine of a

second creature darting in towards the pack that she shouted her warning.

“GET OUT OF THE WATER!” Cpt. Haavik shoulders her battle rifle, steadying her position on the edge of the fuselage. She disengages the safety and fires three quick shots at the visible beast, mindful of the proximity next to her teammates.

At least one 6.8mm round impacts, interrupting the creature’s smooth glide through the water. It thrashes upwards, giving a glimpse of a toothy alligator snout.

“What the fuck!” Gerrard Davis announces before joining the assault from the top of the ship.

The water erupts in a frenzy of splashes as all of the swimmers fight desperately to put distance between them and the thrashing horror. The creature is still thrashing when another point of chaos erupts out of the water.

Haavik snaps her sights left and spots Jimmy fighting for breath, still caught in the clutches of the creature. Pink froth builds around the epicenter of his screams for help.

“Fuck!” Haavik barks, trying to line up a safe shot to aid her teammate. Nothing presents. His screams become silent. She grinds her teeth and then feels a hand nudge her.

“Captain, *look!*” Davis redirects her attention up the bank.

The bushes tremble. A platoon of alligator-like reinforcements emerges eager to feast. They let out a shrill squeal as a collective, then growl and hiss before throwing themselves down the mud slope, cruising in on their bellies towards the water.

“Fuck! Protect the team.” Alison dashes to the port side of the slick fuselage for a better angle on the incoming horde. *Where does she start?* She aims at the creatures on the

shoreline, ripping off the rest of her magazine, hoping to injure a few before they hit the water.

She and Davis barely slow the assault. A dozen creatures slither into the water, honing in on the four remaining humans channeled down the narrow waterway between the steep bank and the fuselage. The beasts are electricity in the water and quickly overcome the swimmers.

Haavik watches in horror as her team is shredded apart one by one. Two creatures chomp onto Jimmy and take him under the surface. Tali Tereshkova is nowhere to be seen. Young Wyatt's limbs are pulled apart and dispersed to the hungry mouths of at least four separate beasts. The black water turns red.

All of Haavik's past battlefields revisit her. *Machine gun fire and explosions*. The smell of hot metal and burning flesh. So much noise that all the sounds blurred into blankness. She remembers teammates ripped apart in a storm of bullets. Others vaporized into red mist. Broken human bodies contorted into the inhuman. Now she would catalog new horrors...

Haavik blinks rainwater out of her eyes, searching for Jace. She and Escher were the furthest from the initial attack. Alison finds her paddling fiercely. Still alive. Except a big bull is coming in fast.

Despite her anxiety, Alison's trigger press is perfect and she kills the creature almost instantly with a well-placed headshot.

But the defense is squandered.

Three seconds later and another beast drags Jace under.

"NOOOO!" Alison loses sight of her in the violent splashes. She flips her selector into full-auto, screaming as she dumps the mag. A few creatures halt their advance as they learn the deadly connotation of the barking thunder. *They've never*

been shot at before. They don't know to fear gunshots—or they do, and they are fearless.

“Captain! Captain?” A voice calls from below.

Escher treads water directly below her.

“A knife! Throw me a knife!”

She leaves her post for the pile. “Keep shooting!” She orders, sprinting past Gerrard Davis to the heap of discarded weapons. She grabs two gunbelts, praying Escher is still alive by the time she returns.

Davis is in the middle of a mag transition as she reaches the side. Alison fears she is too late.

Miraculously, Escher is still alive. She drops the entire belt over the edge. He catches it, but immediately sinks underwater.

Alison holds her breath. Every second is a passing hour. The weight of her rifle grows in her hands.

—And then the big man erupts out of the water, a knife in one hand, a pistol in the other. Escher begins slashing and firing at the incoming creatures.

His appearance rejuvenates her hope. Haavik jams her rifle back into her shoulder and begins clearing the waters around him.

A second later Jace surfaces. Haavik's heart nearly stops. Escher is already swimming out to her.

“Protect Escher!” Cpt. Haavik shouts to Davis.

The Gath giant dives head first into the torrent. Haavik can't make sense of the battle except for the occasional glint from his knife rising and falling into the swell. No shots present without risking Escher or Jace so she settles for keeping everything else at bay.

Jace breaks free from the flurry. She paddles for the fuselage. A tail of blood follows her. The sides of the ship are too slick to climb, and the craft too tall for either Haavik or

Davis to lean over and hoist her up. Jace is in agony. Alison mirrors her expression.

Haavik turns to the front for a solution where the fuselage meets the embankment. But it is over 100 meters and the beasts are too fast. They will catch Jace before then.

Alison searches for alternatives. Tali Tereshkova--*presumed dead minutes before*--is climbing the mangled framework of metal and wires dangling from what remains of the wing. Tali pulls herself up the crude handholds. *It's Jace's best chance.*

“Over there! I will cover you!” Haavik directs Jace towards Tereshkova. Two monsters are chomping at Tali's heels. Haavik dispatches them before sliding down the curve of the fuselage onto the stubby wing. Jace swims desperately towards the jagged ladder.

Meanwhile Escher continues to wrestle the beast. He has climbed on top of its spine and drives his knife at the back of its skull. Three powerful stabs leave the monster motionless.

Haavik doesn't have time to sigh with relief. She leans over the edge and hoists Tali the remaining meter on top of the wing.

“Don't worry about me! Cover them.” Tali insists between breaths, blood oozing from many cuts. The instant her feet find footing, Tali is already climbing the maintenance ladder onto the topmost portion of the ship. She grabs a gun to contribute to the fight.

Not a moment too soon. Cpt. Haavik clicks empty on her final rifle mag and transitions to her pistol. Jace arrives under the twisted framework. Escher is swimming towards them with a pack of beasts nipping in pursuit.

Jace reaches for the nearest shards of tubing and metal. Inches out of reach.

“Damn.” Alison cringes at her friends' desperate attempts.

Jace doesn't give up. Somehow she musters the energy to surge out of the water and grab a hold of a mess of tubes.

“Hell YEAH!” Alison cheers her on. “Climb Jace! CLIMB!”

Jace uses her powerful upper body to pull herself out of the water. Her right leg is a limp shredded mess.

“Come on!” Haavik yells again, dumping six and seven rounds into the monster-lizards before deterring their progress--much less effective than her rifle.

The rain hasn't let up and Cpt. Haavik is constantly pushing loose wet hair out of her face. The framework is equally slick, adding to the difficulty of the climb as Jace attempts to ascend using only her arms and one good leg. *This is nothing.* Haavik has seen Jace hand-over-hand a 10 meter climbing rope in a matter of seconds, no feet, with nothing but pure brute strength and athleticism. When her friend loses both hand-holds, she knows it's worse than the climb.

Jace falls off of her progress, hits the water and slips under without protest.

“NO!” Cpt. Haavik is about to jump in after her.

Escher is already there. He dives under.

Alison holds her breath.

The big Gath comes up in a gasp. Jace is lifeless in his arms. He secures one arm around her waist, half floating on his back to keep both of their mouths above water.

Escher calls up to Haavik. “Captain, open—” he is unable to complete the request before his head goes under water. He reemerges and ends up gripping a piece of jutting metal for stabilization, “—open the airlock!”

Alison surveys the slaughter. The water is polluted with bodies. Thirty dead creatures float on the surface.

Gerrard and Tali heroically defend the injured. Their shots are an orchestra, coordinated and timed, text-book talking-guns, uninterrupted with reloads.

Yet more monsters continue to advance, weaving in and out between their dead, hell bent on revenge. This is a nightmare, Haavik shudders. *Can the other shooters fend them off without her? Can they afford that lull in firing?*

“Captain...hurry!” Escher sputters.

She doesn’t have a choice. If Jace is still alive, she won’t be for long. She’s never seen that girl knocked out. She must have lost a shit-ton of blood...

“Okay. Hold on!” Cpt. Haavik climbs up to the top of the fuselage. She relays her intention to Tali Tereshkova, yelling in her ear so she doesn’t have to pause her shooting.

“Go. We’ve got this!” Tali nods.

Before Alison leaves, she tosses two more gun belts of ammo towards Tali and Gerrard and then sprints for the emergency hatch. She tears it open, bypasses the ladder and leaps inside the airlock, damning all the space-travel redundancies.

Alison sprints throughout the ship, retracing the path that led them to the top. She arrives on the lowest level. Her heart is racing. Up ahead the MedBay casts its glow down the dark hallway. *Almost there.*

—Until Dr. Bordeaux steps out into the hallway, ready to intercept.

“Cpt. Haavik, I wanted to speak to you about—”

“Not now!” Alison jukes around her, continuing her sprint. She checks her watch, not sure how long it has been. A minute? Two?

Haavik skids to make the turn around the last corner, finally reaching the first blast door to the airlock chamber. She shines her weapon light around the metal slab door, searching

for the manual wheel. Got it! Alison rips open the panel and tries the lever. It sticks. Unmovable.

“No-no-no...” Alison shines her light in the cavity and reads the pictograph that accompanies it. “Okay.” She deciphers, disengaging the safety levers. She tries the wheel again and it turns. Every revolution amounts to a finger width of slow progress. She spins it as fast as possible. *She just needs a gap big enough to squeeze through.*

“Cpt. Haavik, what is going on?” Emilie has caught up.

She doesn’t have time for this. “We are under attack!” She tries to formulate words.

“*Attack?* By whom?” Emilie asked in her usual confused voice.

“By a bunch of fucking ALLIGATORS—I don’t know, some fucking creatures!” She realizes how it sounds. And it would be funny if she hadn’t seen her teammates chewed to pieces.

“Alligators—?”

“--Listen, I don’t have time to explain. We have a bunch of injured people out there, and if I don’t open that door, they are going to die.” Alison worms through the gap in the door. “Go warn the other doc, tell him we have incoming trauma.”

Emilie clenches her jaw. “Yes ma’am.”

Alison seals herself in the square chamber. She stares at the second blast door to the outside and formulates her plan. The water level hits half a meter below the top of the door. As soon as she cracks the outer door the whole chamber will flood.

That’s not the problem.

The problem is having to open the outer door, then close it again before she can open the inner door. Otherwise the entire lower portion of the ship will flood and they will be worse off than before.

She hears gunshots, hoping that means Escher and Jace are still alive.

“Okay...” Alison grips the crank and takes a deep breath.

Water gushes inside the instance the seal breaks. Before she’s made two revolutions Alison is standing in ankle deep water. Another two revolutions and it’s up to her shins.

“Escher! I’m opening the door! Get ready!” She yells through the crack before the water overtakes her.

Escher arrives at the entrance still too narrow to fit through. Alison’s progress has slowed as she transitions between turning the wheel and coming up for air in the dark water.

The gap yields. Escher pushes Jace’s body through first. Alison accepts the exchange.

“I have her!” Alison wraps her arms around Jace’s ribs, back floating, trying to keep both their heads above water. “Close the door!” She labors against Jace’s dead weight, hoping it isn’t actually.

Escher dives under the water for the turn-crank.

The door closes in millimeters. Not before one of the beasts darts through the opening.

“Fuck!” Alison sideslips the creature’s mouth of hungry teeth. She abandons Jace and draws her pistol. The creature gnashes at her. She fires blindly under water. Puffs of pink clouds blossom in the beam of the weapon’s light, but the creature keeps coming. Alison barely avoids its teeth, continuing to battle until Escher dives into the fight, slashing and sticking the creature again and again with his knife.

Haavik closes on the creature, pressing the barrel of her pistol against its body, firing until it stops moving.

Both warriors surface desperate for air, neither able to so much as smile. They suck three breaths and then return to their original tasks, Alison collecting Jace; Escher turning the wheel.

Only a palm width remains to seal the door when another creature stuffs its snout through the gap. Escher cleaves chunks of the nose clean off. The animal lets out a dragon's screech, retreats and Escher is finally able to shut the door.

"One to go!" Alison gestures.

Escher dives in again on the opposite side of the airlock. He turns the crank a few revolutions. The water in the small chamber quickly lowers. Within 30 seconds the airlock is empty. Flashlights penetrate the cracks and someone on the other side is already working to open the door fully.

"Don't worry, we are here to help." Emilie announces.

Alison is cradling Jace on the floor, too exhausted to stand. As the flashlights bounce inside the chamber she sees Escher sprawled out, completely naked—except for his gun belt. Scores of gashes and bite marks are scattered across his body. Without water to wash it away, blood begins oozing from his injuries.

"*Escher?*" Alison asks.

He grumbles. "Hmm?"

"You still alive?"

He coughs. "I think..."

The two doctors push a gurney into the cramped airlock. "*My god, what is that?!*" The doctors run into the enormous reptile corpse.

"Nevermind. It's dead." Alison barks. "We have wounded here!"

"Take her first." Escher insists.

"Okay. Captain, are you injured?" Emilie's green eyes glow in the shadowy darkness.

“I’m fine.” Alison ignores a sharp sting in her forearm. *Inconsequential compared to everyone else’s.* “Jace first.” Cpt. Haavik helps Emilie heft Jace’s lifeless body onto the gurney. Neither woman dares to say anything.

“We must hurry.” Dr. Nakamura replies. He hits a paddle and the gurney rises to waist height. Alison squeezes Jace’s hand and lets them wheel her out of the cramped airlock.

The chamber is swallowed by darkness again. Alison reaches for her holster, empty. She doesn’t remember dropping her pistol. She finds a flashlight in her belt, and twists for lamp mode. It illuminates the dead creature next to her. Alison gives it a disgusted kick. It barely moves. *She’s already planning on returning to carve this motherfucker up into a thousand pieces.*

Alison bear-crawls over to Escher. “You’ve gotta stay with me, okay? They’ll be right back.”

She rolls him over and he groans. The injuries are too numerous to count.

“Is she...?” He sputters.

“I don’t know.” Alison stammers putting a sympathetic hand to his forehead—one of the only places not seeping blood.

He struggles to keep his eyes open. “Hey Haavik?”

“Yeah?”

“Did those bastards bite my dick off?”

Glad he still has his sense of humor, although it is a reasonable concern considering the proximity of his injuries. “No Escher, your dick is fully intact. A good thing too, it would have been a shame to lose such a fine specimen.”

“Ha!” His chuckles punish him and he grabs his ribs in pain. “I’m glad you...approve...”

“You might get a few hand jobs out of this.”

“Then it was all...worth...it...”

His broken, shredded body brings tears to her eyes. She starts processing all the loss. “You’re one tough son-of-a-bitch, you know that?” Alison squeezes his hand.

“Yeah, we’ll see...” His eyes begin to flutter.

“Escher?” Alison asks after feeling his grip loosen around hers. “Escher?” She shakes him, unresponsive. “Escher, stay with me, man.” She slaps his cheeks. “Stay with me!” Still nothing.

Dr. Bordeaux appears.

“I don’t think he’s breathing.” She pulls at her sopping hair. “HE IS NOT BREATHING!” Cpt. Haavik screams.

Emilie checks Escher for a pulse and frowns.

Alison doesn’t remember loading his body onto a gurney. She doesn’t remember wheeling him down to the MedBay or leaving him in the hands of the professionals. *But it must have happened, right?* She sits, alone, her back against the wall, breathing labored, covered from head to toe in blood. A thousand chunks of meat scattered about the room—all that remains of the abominable creature.

Author’s Note: Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the story so far. Visit tykheuniverse.com for the full E-book launching soon.