Prologue: Mei

"Mei?" Miss Carrie said. “Please put your painting work away now. Your mother is here.”

It took her a few seconds to understand what the teacher was saying, not because Mei didn’t know the words—she was four now, and not a toddler anymore—but because they didn’t fit with the world as she knew it. Her mother couldn’t come get her. Mommy had left Ganymede and gone to live on Ceres Station, because, as her daddy put it, she needed some mommy-alone-time. Then, her heart starting to race, Mei thought, She came back.

“Mommy?”

From where Mei sat at her scaled-down easel, Miss Carrie’s knee blocked her view of the coatroom door. Mei’s hands were sticky with finger paints, red and blue and green swirling on her palms. She shifted forward and grabbed for Miss Carrie’s leg as much to move it as to help her stand up.

“Mei!” Miss Carrie shouted.

Mei looked at the smear of paint on Miss Carrie’s pants and the controlled anger on the woman’s broad, dark face.
“I’m sorry, Miss Carrie.”

“It’s okay,” the teacher said in a tight voice that meant it wasn’t, really, but Mei wasn’t going to be punished. “Please go wash your hands and then come put away your painting work. I’ll get this down and you can give it to your mother. It is a doggie?”

“It’s a space monster.”

“It’s a very nice space monster. Now go wash your hands, please, sweetheart.”

Mei nodded, turned, and ran for the bathroom, her smock flapping around her like a rag caught in an air duct.

“And don’t touch the wall!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Carrie.”

“It’s okay. Just clean it off after you’ve washed your hands.”

She turned the water on full blast, the colors and swirls rushing off her skin. She went through the motions of drying her hands without caring whether she was dripping water or not. It felt like gravity had shifted, pulling her toward the doorway and the anteroom instead of down toward the ground. The other children watched, excited because she was excited, as Mei scrubbed the finger marks mostly off the wall and slammed the paint pots back into their box and the box onto its shelf. She pulled the
smock up over her head rather than wait for Miss Carrie to help her, and stuffed it into the recycling bin.

In the anteroom, Miss Carrie was standing with two other grown-ups, neither of them Mommy. One was a woman Mei didn’t know, space monster painting held gently in her hand and a polite smile on her face. The other was Doctor Strickland.

“No, she’s been very good about getting to the toilet,” Miss Carrie was saying. “There are accidents now and then, of course.”

“Of course,” the woman said.

“Mei!” Doctor Strickland said, bending down so that he was hardly taller than she was. “How is my favorite girl?”

“Where’s—” she began, but before she could say Mommy, Doctor Strickland scooped her up into his arms. He was bigger than Daddy, and he smelled like salt. He tipped her backward, tickling her sides, and she laughed hard enough that she couldn’t talk anymore.

“Thank you so much,” the woman said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Miss Carrie said, shaking the woman’s hand. “We really love having Mei in the classroom.”

Doctor Strickland kept tickling Mei until the door to the Montessori cycled closed behind them. Then Mei caught her breath.
“Where’s Mommy?”

“She’s waiting for us,” Doctor Strickland said. “We’re taking you to her right now.”

The newer hallways of Ganymede were wide and lush and the air recyclers barely ran. The knife-thin blades of areca palm fronds spilled up and out from dozens of hydroponic planters. The broad yellow-green striated leaves of devil’s ivy spilled down the walls. The dark green primitive leaves of Mother-in-Law’s Tongue thrust up beneath them both. Full-spectrum LEDs glowed white-gold. Daddy said it was just what sunlight looked like on Earth, and Mei pictured that planet as a huge complicated network of plants and hallways with the sun running in lines above them in a bright blue ceiling-sky, and you could climb over the walls and end up anywhere.

Mei leaned her head on Doctor Strickland’s shoulder, looking over his back and naming each plant as they passed. Sansevieria trifasciata. Epipremnum aureum. Getting the names right always made Daddy grin. When she did it by herself, it made her body feel calmer.

“More?” the woman asked. She was pretty, but Mei didn’t like her voice.

“No,” Doctor Strickland said. “Mei here is the last one.”

“Chysalidocarpus lutenscens,” Mei said.

“All right,” the woman said, and then again, more softly: “All right.”
The closer to the surface they got, the narrower the corridors became. The older hallways seemed dirtier even though there really wasn’t any dirt on them. It was just that they were more used up. The quarters and labs near the surface were where Mei’s grandparents had lived when they’d come to Ganymede. Back then, there hadn’t been anything deeper. The air up there smelled funny, and the recyclers always had to run, humming and thumping.

The grown-ups didn’t talk to each other, but every now and then Doctor Strickland would remember Mei was there and ask her questions: What was her favorite cartoon on the station feed? Who was her best friend in school? What kinds of food did she eat for lunch that day? Mei expected him to start asking the other questions, the ones he always asked next, and she had her answers ready.

Does your throat feel scratchy? No.
Did you wake up sweaty? No.
Was there any blood in your poop this week? No.
Did you get your medicine both times every day? Yes.

But this time, Doctor Strickland didn’t ask any of that. The corridors they went down got older and thinner until the woman had to walk behind them so that the men coming the other direction could pass. The woman still had Mei’s painting in her hand, rolled up in a tube so the paper wouldn’t get wrinkles.
Doctor Strickland stopped at an unmarked door, shifted Mei to his other hip, and took his hand terminal out of his pants pocket. He keyed something into a program Mei had never seen before, and the door cycled open, seals making a rough popping sound like something out of an old movie. The hallway they walked into was full of junk and old metal boxes.

“This isn’t the hospital,” Mei said.

“This is a special hospital,” Doctor Strickland said. “I don’t think you’ve ever been here, have you?”

It didn’t look like a hospital to Mei. It looked like one of the abandoned tubes that Daddy talked about sometimes. Leftover spaces from when Ganymede had first been built that no one used anymore except as storage. This one had a kind of airlock at the end, though, and when they passed through it, things looked a little more like a hospital. They were cleaner, anyway, and there was the smell of ozone, like in the decontamination cells.

“Mei! Hi, Mei!”

It was one of the big boys. Sandro. He was almost five. Mei waved at him as Doctor Strickland walked past. Mei felt better knowing the big boys were here too. If they were, then it was probably okay, even if the woman walking with Doctor Strickland wasn’t her mommy. Which reminded her …

“Where’s Mommy?”
“We’re going to go see Mommy in just a few minutes,” Doctor Strickland said. “We just have a couple more little things we need to do first.”

“No,” Mei said. “I don’t want that.”

He carried her into a room that looked a little like an examination room, only there weren’t any cartoon lions on the walls, and the tables weren’t shaped like grinning hippos. Doctor Strickland put her onto a steel examination table and rubbed her head. Mei crossed her arms and scowled.

“I want Mommy,” Mei said, and made the same impatient grunt that Daddy would.

“Well, you just wait right here, and I’ll see what I can do about that,” Doctor Strickland said with a smile. “Umea?”

“I think we’re good to go. Check with ops, load up, and let’s release it.”

“I’ll go let them know. You stay here.”

The woman nodded, and Doctor Strickland walked back out the door. The woman looked down at her, the pretty face not smiling at all. Mei didn’t like her.


The woman looked at the painting in her hand as if she’d forgotten it was there. She unrolled it.
“It’s Mommy’s space monster,” Mei said. This time, the woman smiled. She held out the painting, and Mei snatched it away. She made some wrinkles in the paper when she did, but she didn’t care. She crossed her arms again and scowled and grunted.

“You like space monsters, kid?” the woman asked.

“I want my mommy.”

The woman stepped close. She smelled like fake flowers and her fingers were skinny. She lifted Mei down to the floor.

“C’mon, kid,” she said. “I’ll show you something.”

The woman walked away and for a moment Mei hesitated. She didn’t like the woman, but she liked being alone even less. She followed. The woman walked down a short hallway, punched a key-code into a big metal door, like an old-fashioned airlock, and walked through when the door swung open. Mei followed her. The new room was cold. Mei didn’t like it. There wasn’t an examination table here, just a big glass box like they kept fish in at the aquarium, only it was dry inside, and the thing sitting there wasn’t a fish. The woman motioned Mei closer and, when Mei came near, knocked sharply on the glass.

The thing inside looked up at the sound. It was a man, but he was naked and his skin didn’t look like skin. His eyes glowed blue like there was a fire in his head. And something was wrong with his hands.
He reached toward the glass, and Mei started screaming.

Chapter One: Bobbie

Snoopy’s out again,” Private Hillman said. “I think his CO must be pissed at him.”

Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the Martian Marine Corps upped the magnification on her armor’s heads-up display and looked in the direction Hillman was pointing. Twenty-five hundred meters away, a squad of four United Nations Marines were tromping around their outpost, backlit by the giant greenhouse dome they were guarding. A greenhouse dome identical in nearly all respects to the dome her own squad was currently guarding.

One of the four UN Marines had black smudges on the sides of his helmet that looked like beagle ears.

“Yes, that’s Snoopy,” Bobbie said. “Been on every patrol detail so far today. Wonder what he did.”

Guard duty around the greenhouses on Ganymede meant doing what you could to keep your mind occupied. Including speculating on the lives of the Marines on the other side.

The other side. Eighteen months before, there hadn’t been sides. The inner planets had all been one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family. Then Eros, and now the two superpowers were dividing up the solar system between them, and the one moon neither side was willing to give up was Ganymede, breadbasket of the Jovian system.
As the only moon with any magnetosphere, it was the only place where dome-grown crops stood a chance in Jupiter’s harsh radiation belt, and even then the domes and habitats still had to be shielded to protect civilians from the eight rems a day burning off Jupiter and onto the moon’s surface.

Bobbie’s armor had been designed to let a soldier walk through a nuclear bomb crater minutes after the blast. It also worked well at keeping Jupiter from frying Martian Marines.

Behind the Earth soldiers on patrol, their dome glowed in a shaft of weak sunlight captured by enormous orbital mirrors. Even with the mirrors, most terrestrial plants would have died, starved of sunlight. Only the heavily modified versions the Ganymede scientists cranked out could hope to survive in the trickle of light the mirrors fed them.

“Be sunset soon,” Bobbie said, still watching the Earth Marines outside their little guard hut, knowing they were watching her too. In addition to Snoopy, she spotted the one they called Stumpy because he or she couldn’t be much over a meter and a quarter tall. She wondered what their nickname for her was. Maybe Big Red. Her armor still had the Martian surface camouflage on it. She hadn’t been on Ganymede long enough to get it resurfaced with mottled gray and white.

One by one over the course of five minutes, the orbital mirrors winked out as Ganymede passed behind Jupiter
for a few hours. The glow from the greenhouse behind her changed to actinic blue as the artificial lights came on. While the overall light level didn’t go down much, the shadows shifted in strange and subtle ways. Above, the sun—not even a disk from here as much as the brightest star—flashed as it passed behind Jupiter’s limb, and for a moment the planet’s faint ring system was visible.

“They’re going back in,” Corporal Travis said. “Snoop’s bringing up the rear. Poor guy. Can we bail too?”

Bobbie looked around at the featureless dirty ice of Ganymede. Even in her high-tech armor she could feel the moon’s chill.

“Nope.”

Her squad grumbled but fell in line as she led them on a slow low-gravity shuffle around the dome. In addition to Hillman and Travis, she had a green private named Gourab on this particular patrol. And even though he’d been in the Marines all of about a minute and a half, he grumbled just as loud as the other two in his Mariner Valley drawl.

She couldn’t blame them. It was make-work. Something for the Martian soldiers on Ganymede to do to keep them busy. If Earth decided it needed Ganymede all to itself, four grunts walking around the greenhouse dome wouldn’t stop them. With dozens of Earth and Mars warships in a tense standoff in orbit, if hostilities broke out the ground
pounders would probably find out only when the surface bombardment began.

To her left, the dome rose to almost half a kilometer: triangular glass panels separated by gleaming copper-colored struts that turned the entire structure into a massive Faraday cage. Bobbie had never been inside one of the greenhouse domes. She’d been sent out from Mars as part of a surge in troops to the outer planets and had been walking patrols on the surface almost since day one. Ganymede to her was a spaceport, a small Marine base, and the even smaller guard outpost she currently called home.

As they shuffled around the dome, Bobbie watched the unremarkable landscape. Ganymede didn’t change much without a catastrophic event. The surface was mostly silicate rock and water ice a few degrees warmer than space. The atmosphere was oxygen so thin it could pass as an industrial vacuum. Ganymede didn’t erode or weather. It changed when rocks fell on it from space, or when warm water from the liquid core forced itself onto the surface and created short-lived lakes. Neither thing happened all that often. At home on Mars, wind and dust changed the landscape hourly. Here, she was walking through the footsteps of the day before and the day before and the day before. And if she never came back, those footprints would outlive her. Privately, she thought it was sort of creepy.

A rhythmic squeaking started to cut through the normally smooth hiss and thump sounds her powered armor made.
She usually kept the suit’s HUD minimized. It got so crowded with information that a marine knew everything except what was actually in front of her. Now she pulled it up, using blinks and eye movements to page over to the suit diagnostic screen. A yellow telltale warned her that the suit’s left knee actuator was low on hydraulic fluid. Must be a leak somewhere, but a slow one, because the suit couldn’t find it.

“Hey, guys, hold up a minute,” Bobbie said. “Hilly, you have any extra hydraulic fluid in your pack?”

“Yes,” said Hillman, already pulling it out.

“Give my left knee a squirt, would you?”

While Hillman crouched in front of her, working on her suit, Gourab and Travis began an argument that seemed to be about sports. Bobbie tuned it out.

“This suit is ancient,” Hillman said. “You really oughta upgrade. This sort of thing is just going to happen more and more often, you know.”

“Yeah, I should,” Bobbie said. But the truth was that was easier said than done. Bobbie was not the right shape to fit into one of the standard suits, and the Marines made her jump through a series of flaming hoops every time she requisitioned a new custom one. At a bit over two meters tall, she was only slightly above average height for a Martian male, but thanks in part to her Polynesian ancestry, she weighed in at over a hundred kilos at one g. None of it was fat, but her muscles seemed to get bigger
every time she even walked through a weight room. As a marine, she trained all the time.

The suit she had now was the first one in twelve years of active duty that actually fit well. And even though it was beginning to show its age, it was just easier to try to keep it running than beg and plead for a new one.

Hillman was starting to put his tools away when Bobbie’s radio crackled to life.

“Outpost four to stickman. Come in, stickman.”

“Roger four,” Bobbie replied. “This is stickman one. Go ahead.”

“Stickman one, where are you guys? You’re half an hour late and some shit is going down over here.”

“Sorry, four, equipment trouble,” Bobbie said, wondering what sort of shit might be going down, but not enough to ask about it over an open frequency.

“Return to the outpost immediately. We have shots fired at the UN outpost. We’re going into lockdown.”

It took Bobbie a moment to parse that. She could see her men staring at her, their faces a mix of puzzlement and fear.

“Uh, the Earth guys are shooting at you?” she finally asked.

“Not yet, but they’re shooting. Get your asses back here.”
Hillman pushed to his feet. Bobbie flexed her knee once and got greens on her diagnostic. She gave Hilly a nod of thanks, then said, “Double-time it back to the outpost. Go.”

Bobbie and her squad were still half a kilometer from the outpost when the general alert went out. Her suit’s HUD came up on its own, switching to combat mode. The sensor package went to work looking for hostiles and linked up to one of the satellites for a top-down view. She felt the click as the gun built into the suit’s right arm switched to free-fire mode.

A thousand alarms would be sounding if an orbital bombardment had begun, but she couldn’t help looking up at the sky anyway. No flashes or missile trails. Nothing but Jupiter’s bulk.

Bobbie took off for the outpost in a long, loping run. Her squad followed without a word. A person trained in the use of a strength-augmenting suit running in low gravity could cover a lot of ground quickly. The outpost came into view around the curve of the dome in just a few seconds, and a few seconds after that, the cause of the alarm.

UN Marines were charging the Martian outpost. The yearlong cold war was going hot. Somewhere deep behind the cool mental habits of training and discipline, she was surprised. She hadn’t really thought this day would come.

The rest of her platoon were out of the outpost and arranged in a firing line facing the UN position. Someone had driven Yojimbo out onto the line, and the four-meter-
tall combat mech towered over the other marines, looking like a headless giant in power armor, its massive cannon moving slowly as it tracked the incoming Earth troops. The UN soldiers were covering the 2,500 meters between the two outposts at a dead run.

Why isn’t anyone talking? she wondered. The silence coming from her platoon was eerie.

And then, just as her squad got to the firing line, her suit squealed a jamming warning at her. The top-down vanished as she lost contact with the satellite. Her team’s life signs and equipment status reports went dead as her link to their suits was cut off. The faint static of the open comm channel disappeared, leaving an even more unsettling silence.

She used hand motions to place her team at the right flank, then moved up the line to find Lieutenant Givens, her CO. She spotted his suit right at the center of the line, standing almost directly under Yojimbo. She ran up and placed her helmet against his.

“What the f**k is going on, El Tee?” she shouted.

He gave her an irritated look and yelled, “Your guess is as good as mine. We can’t tell them to back off because of the jamming, and visual warnings are being ignored. Before the radio cut out, I got authorization to fire if they come within half a klick of our position.”

Bobbie had a couple hundred more questions, but the UN troops would cross the five-hundred-meter mark in just a
few more seconds, so she ran back to anchor the right flank with her squad. Along the way, she had her suit count the incoming forces and mark them all as hostiles. The suit reported seven targets. Less than a third of the UN troops at their outpost.

This makes no sense.

She had her suit draw a line on the HUD at the five-hundred-meter mark. She didn’t tell her boys that was the free-fire zone. She didn’t need to. They’d open fire when she did without needing to know why.

The UN soldiers had crossed the one-kilometer mark, still without firing a shot. They were coming in a scattered formation, with six out front in a ragged line and a seventh bringing up the rear about seventy meters behind. Her suit HUD selected the figure on the far left of the enemy line as her target, picking the one closest to her by default. Something itched at the back of her brain, and she overrode the suit and selected the target at the rear and told it to magnify.

The small figure suddenly enlarged in her targeting reticule. She felt a chill move down her back, and magnified again.

The figure chasing the six UN Marines wasn’t wearing an environment suit. Nor was it, properly speaking, human. Its skin was covered in chitinous plates, like large black scales. Its head was a massive horror, easily twice as
large as it should have been and covered in strange protruding growths.

But most disturbing of all were its hands. Far too large for its body, and too long for their width, they were a childhood nightmare version of hands. The hands of the troll under the bed or the witch sneaking in through the window. They flexed and grasped at nothing with a constant manic energy.

The Earth forces weren’t attacking. They were retreating.

“Shoot the thing chasing them,” Bobbie yelled to no one.

Before the UN soldiers could cross the half-kilometer line that would cause the Martians to open fire, the thing caught them.

“Oh, holy shit,” Bobbie whispered. “Holy shit.”

It grabbed one UN Marine in its huge hands and tore him in half like paper. Titanium-and-ceramic armor ripped as easily as the flesh inside, spilling broken bits of technology and wet human viscera indiscriminately onto the ice. The remaining five soldiers ran even harder, but the monster chasing them barely slowed as it killed.

“Shoot it shoot it shoot it,” Bobbie yelled, and opened fire. Her training and the technology of her combat suit combined to make her an extremely efficient killing machine. As soon as her finger pulled the trigger on her suit’s gun, a stream of two-millimeter armor-piercing rounds streaked out at the creature at more than a
thousand meters per second. In just under a second she’d fired fifty rounds at it. The creature was a relatively slow-moving human-sized target, running in a straight line. Her targeting computer could do ballistic corrections that would let her hit a softball-sized object moving at supersonic speeds. Every bullet she fired at the monster hit.

It didn’t matter.

The rounds went through it, probably not slowing appreciably before they exited. Each exit wound sprouted a spray of black filaments that fell onto the snow instead of blood. It was like shooting water. The wounds closed almost faster than they were created; the only sign the thing had even been hit was the trail of black fibers in its wake.

And then it caught a second UN Marine. Instead of tearing him to pieces like it had the last one, it spun and hurled the fully armored Earther—probably massing more than five hundred kilos total—toward Bobbie. Her HUD tracked the UN soldier on his upward arc and helpfully informed her that the monster had thrown him not toward her but at her. In a very flat trajectory. Which meant fast.

She dove to the side as quickly as her bulky suit would let her. The hapless UN Marine swiped Hillman, who’d been standing next to her, and then both of them were gone, bouncing down the ice at lethal speeds.

By the time she’d turned back to the monster, it had killed two more UN soldiers.
The entire Martian line opened fire on it, including Yojimbo’s big cannon. The two remaining Earth soldiers diverged and ran at angles away from the thing, trying to give their Martian counterparts an open firing lane. The creature was hit hundreds, thousands of times. It stitched itself back together while remaining at a full run, never more than slowing when one of Yojimbo’s cannon shots detonated nearby.

Bobbie, back on her feet, joined in the barrage of fire but it didn’t make any difference. The creature slammed into the Martian line, killing two marines faster than the eye could follow. Yojimbo slid to one side, far more nimble than a machine of its size should be. Bobbie thought Sa’id must be driving it. He bragged he could make the big mech dance the tango when he wanted to. That didn’t matter either. Even before Sa’id could bring the mech’s cannon around for a point-blank shot, the creature ran right up its side, gripped the pilot hatch, and tore the door off its hinges. Sa’id was snatched from his cockpit harness and hurled sixty meters straight up.

The other marines had begun to fall back, firing as they went. Without radio, there was no way to coordinate the retreat. Bobbie found herself running toward the dome with the rest. The small and distant part of her mind that wasn’t panicking knew that the dome’s glass and metal would offer no protection against something that could tear an armored man in half or rip a nine-ton mech to pieces. That part of her mind recognized the futility in attempting to override her terror.
By the time she found the external door into the dome, there was only one other marine left with her. Gourab. Up close, she could see his face through the armored glass of his helmet. He screamed something at her she couldn’t hear. She started to lean forward to touch helmets with him when he shoved her backward onto the ice. He was hammering on the door controls with one metal fist, trying to smash his way in, when the creature caught him and peeled the helmet off his suit with one casual swipe. Gourab stood for a moment, face in vacuum, eyes blinking and mouth open in a soundless scream; then the creature tore off his head as easily as it had his helmet.

It turned and looked at Bobbie, still flat on her back.

Up close, she could see that it had bright blue eyes. A glowing, electric blue. They were beautiful. She raised her gun and held down the trigger for half a second before she realized she’d run out of ammo long before. The creature looked at her gun with what she would have sworn was curiosity, then looked into her eyes and cocked its head to one side.

This is it, she thought. This is how I go out, and I’m not going to know what did it, or why. Dying she could handle. Dying without any answers seemed terribly cruel.

The creature took one step toward her, then stopped and shuddered. A new pair of limbs burst out of its midsection and writhed in the air like tentacles. Its head, already grotesque, seemed to swell up. The blue eyes flashed as bright as the lights in the domes.
And then it exploded in a ball of fire that hurled her away across the ice and slammed her into a low ridge hard enough for the impact-absorbing gel in her suit to go rigid, freezing her in place.

She lay on her back, fading toward unconsciousness. The night sky above her began to flash with light. The ships in orbit, shooting each other.

Cease fire, she thought, pressing it out into the blackness. They were retreating. Cease fire. Her radio was still out, her suit dead. She couldn’t tell anyone that the UN Marines hadn’t been attacking.

Or that something else had.

Chapter Two: Holden

The coffeemaker was broken again.

Again.

Jim Holden clicked the red brew button in and out several more times, knowing it wouldn’t matter, but helpless to stop himself. The massive and gleaming coffeemaker, designed to brew enough to keep a Martian naval crew happy, refused to make a single cup. Or even a noise. It wasn’t just refusing to brew; it was refusing to try. Holden closed his eyes against the caffeine headache that threatened in his temples and hit the button on the nearest wall panel to open the shipwide comm.

“Amos,” he said.
The comm wasn’t working.

Feeling increasingly ridiculous, he pushed the button for the 1MC channel several more times. Nothing. He opened his eyes and saw that all the lights on the panel were out. Then he turned around and saw that the lights on the refrigerator and the ovens were out. It wasn’t just the coffeemaker; the entire galley was in open revolt. Holden looked at the ship name, Rocinante, newly stenciled onto the galley wall, and said, “Baby, why do you hurt me when I love you so much?”

He pulled out his hand terminal and called Naomi.

After several moments, she finally answered, “Uh, hello?”

“The galley doesn’t work, where’s Amos?”

A pause. “You called me from the galley? While we are on the same ship? The wall panel just one step too far away?”

“The wall panel in the galley doesn’t work either. When I said, ‘The galley doesn’t work,’ it wasn’t clever hyperbole. It literally means that not one thing in the galley works. I called you because you carry your terminal and Amos almost never does. And also because he never tells me what he’s working on, but he always tells you. So, where is Amos?”

Naomi laughed. It was a lovely sound, and it never failed to put a smile on Holden’s face. “He told me he was going to be doing some rewiring.”
“Do you have power up there? Are we hurtling out of control and you guys were trying to figure out how to break the news to me?”

Holden could hear tapping from Naomi’s end. She hummed to herself as she worked.

“Nope,” she said. “Only area without power seems to be the galley. Also, Alex says we’re less than an hour from fighting with space pirates. Want to come up to ops and fight pirates?”

“I can’t fight pirates without coffee. I’m going to find Amos,” Holden said, then hung up and put his terminal back in his pocket.

Holden moved to the ladder that ran down the keel of the ship, and called up the lift. The fleeing pirate ship could only sustain about 1 g for extended flight, so Holden’s pilot, Alex Kamal, had them flying at 1.3 g to intercept. Anything over 1 g made the ladder dangerous to use.

A few seconds later, the deck hatch clanged open, and the lift whined to a stop at his feet. He stepped on and tapped the button for the engineering deck. The lift began its slow crawl down the shaft, deck hatches opening at its approach, then slamming shut once he had passed.

Amos Burton was in the machine shop, one deck above engineering. He had a complex-looking device half disassembled on the workbench in front of him and was working on it with a solder gun. He wore a gray jumpsuit several sizes too small for him, which strained to contain
his broad shoulders when he moved, the old ship name Tachi still embroidered on the back.

Holden stopped the lift and said, “Amos, the galley doesn’t work.”

Amos waved one thick arm in an impatient gesture without stopping his work. Holden waited. After another couple seconds of soldering, Amos finally put down the tool and turned around.

“Yep, it doesn’t work because I got this little f**ker yanked out of it,” he said, pointing at the device he’d been soldering.

“Can you put it back?”

“Nope, at least not yet. Not done working on it.”

Holden sighed. “Is it important that we disable the galley to fix this thing just before confronting a bloodthirsty band of space pirates? Because my head is really starting to ache, and I’d love to get a cup of coffee before, you know, doing battle.”

“Yep, it was important,” Amos said. “Should I explain why? Or you want to take my word for it?”

Holden nodded. While he didn’t miss much about his days in the Earth Navy, he did find that he occasionally got nostalgic for the absolute respect for the chain of command. On the Rocinante the title “captain” was much more nebulously defined. Rewiring things was Amos’ job,
and he would resist the idea that he had to inform Holden anytime he was doing it.

Holden let it drop.

“Okay,” he said. “But I wish you’d warned me ahead of time. I’m going to be cranky without my coffee.”

Amos grinned at him and pushed his cap back on his mostly bald head.

“Shit, Cap, I can cover you on that,” he said, then reached back and grabbed a massive metal thermos off the bench. “I made some emergency supplies before I shut the galley down.”

“Amos, I apologize for all the mean things I was thinking about you just now.”

Amos waved it off and turned back to his work. “Take it. I already had a cup.”

Holden climbed back onto the lift and rode it up to the operations deck, the thermos clutched in both hands like a life preserver.

Naomi was seated at the sensor and communications panel, tracking their progress in pursuit of the fleeing pirates. Holden could see at a glance that they were much closer than the last estimate he’d received. He strapped himself into the combat operations couch. He opened a nearby cabinet and, guessing they might be at low g or in
free fall in the near future, pulled out a drinking bulb for his coffee.

As he filled it from the thermos’s nipple, he said, “We’re closing awful fast. What’s up?”

“Pirate ship has slowed down quite a bit from its initial one g acceleration. They dropped to half a g for a couple minutes, then stopped accelerating altogether a minute ago. The computer tracked some fluctuations in drive output just before they slowed, so I think we chased them too hard.”

“They broke their ship?”

“They broke their ship.”

Holden took a long drink out of the bulb, scalding his tongue in the process and not caring.

“How long to intercept now?”

“Five minutes, tops. Alex was waiting to do the final decel burn until you were up here and belted in.”

Holden tapped the comm panel’s 1MC button and said, “Amos, buckle up. Five minutes to badguys.” Then he switched to the cockpit channel and said, “Alex, what’s the word?”

“I do believe they broke their ship,” Alex replied in his Martian Mariner Valley drawl.

“That seems to be the consensus,” Holden said.
“Makes runnin’ away a bit harder.”

The Mariner Valley had originally been settled by Chinese, East Indians, and Texans. Alex had the dark complexion and jet-black hair of an East Indian. Coming as he did from Earth, Holden always found it strangely disconcerting when an exaggerated Texas drawl came from someone his brain said should be speaking with Punjabi accents.

“And it makes our day easier,” Holden replied, warming up the combat ops panel. “Bring us to relative stop at ten thousand klicks. I’m going to paint them with the targeting laser and turn on the point defense cannons. Open the outer doors to the tubes, too. No reason not to look as threatening as possible.”

“Roger that, boss,” Alex replied.

Naomi swiveled in her chair and gave Holden a grin. “Fighting space pirates. Very romantic.”

Holden couldn’t help smiling back. Even wearing a Martian naval officer’s jumpsuit that was three sizes too short and five sizes too big around for her long and thin Belter frame, she looked beautiful to him. Her long and curly black hair was pulled into an unruly tail behind her head. Her features were a striking mix of Asian, South American, and African that was unusual even in the melting pot of the Belt. He glanced at his brown-haired Montana farm boy reflection in a darkened panel and felt very generic by comparison.
“You know how much I like anything that gets you to say the word ‘romantic,’” he said. “But I’m afraid I lack your enthusiasm. We started out saving the solar system from a horrific alien menace. Now this?”

Holden had only known one cop well, and him briefly. During the massive and unpleasant series of clusterfucks that now went under the shorthand “the Eros incident,” Holden had teamed up for a time with a thin, gray, broken man called Miller. By the time they’d met, Miller had already walked away from his official job to obsessively follow a missing persons case.

They’d never precisely been friends, but they’d managed to stop the human race from being wiped out by a corporation’s self-induced sociopathy and a recovered alien weapon that everyone in human history had mistaken for a moon of Saturn. By that standard, at least, the partnership had been a success.

Holden had been a naval officer for six years. He’d seen people die, but only from the vantage of a radar screen. On Eros, he’d seen thousands of people die, up close and in horrific ways. He’d killed a couple of them himself. The radiation dose he’d received there meant he had to take constant medications to stop the cancers that kept blooming in his tissues. He’d still gotten off lighter than Miller.

Because of Miller, the alien infection had landed on Venus instead of Earth. But that hadn’t killed it. Whatever the alien’s hijacked, confused programming was, it was still
going on under that planet’s thick cloud cover, and no one had so far been able to offer any scientific conclusions more compelling than Hmm. Weird.

Saving humanity had cost the old, tired Belter detective his life.

Saving humanity had turned Holden into an employee of the Outer Planets Alliance tracking down pirates. Even on the bad days, he had to think he’d gotten the better end of that deal.

“Thirty seconds to intercept,” Alex said.

Holden pulled his mind back to the present and called down to engineering. “You all strapped in down there, Amos?”

“Roger, Cap. Ready to go. Try not to get my girl all shot up.”

“No one’s shooting anyone today,” Holden said after he shut the comm link off. Naomi heard him and raised an eyebrow in question. “Naomi, give me comms. I want to call our friends out there.”

A second later, the comm controls appeared on his panel. He aimed a tightbeam at the pirate ship and waited for the link light to go green. When it did, he said, “Undesignated light freighter, this is Captain James Holden of the Outer Planets Alliance missile frigate Rocinante. Please respond.”
His headset was silent except for the faint static of background radiation.

“Look, guys, let’s not play games. I know you know who I am. I also know that five days ago, you attacked the food freighter Somnambulist, disabled its engines, and stole six thousand kilos of protein and all of their air. Which is pretty much all I need to know about you.”

More staticky silence.

“So here’s the deal. I’m tired of following you, and I’m not going to let you stall me while you fix your broken ship and then lead me on another merry chase. If you don’t signal your full and complete surrender in the next sixty seconds, I am going to fire a pair of torpedoes with high-yield plasma warheads and melt your ship into glowing slag. Then I’m going to fly back home and sleep really well tonight.”

The static was finally broken by a boy who sounded way too young to have already decided on a life of piracy.

“You can’t do that. The OPA isn’t a real government. You can’t legally do shit to me, so back the f**k off,” the voice said, sounding like it was on the verge of a pubescent squeak the entire time.

“Seriously? That’s the best you’ve got?” Holden replied. “Look, forget the debate about legality and what constitutes actual governmental authority for a minute. Look at the ladar returns you’re getting from my ship. While you are in a cobbled-together light freighter that
someone welded a homemade gauss cannon onto, I’m in a state-of-the-art Martian torpedo bomber with enough firepower to slag a small moon.”

The voice on the other end didn’t reply.

“Guys, even if you don’t recognize me as the appropriate legal authority, can we at least agree that I can blow you up anytime I want to?”

The comm remained silent.

Holden sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. In spite of the caffeine, his headache was refusing to go away. Leaving the channel open to the pirate ship, he opened another channel to the cockpit.

“Alex, put a short burst from the forward point defense cannons through that freighter. Aim for midships.”

“Wait!” yelled the kid on the other ship. “We surrender! Jesus Christ!”

Holden stretched out in the zero g, enjoying it after the days of acceleration, and grinned to himself. No one gets shot today indeed.

“Naomi, tell our new friends how to give remote control of their ship to you, and let’s take them back to Tycho Station for the OPA tribunals to figure out. Alex, once they have their engines back up, plot us a return trip at a nice comfortable half g. I’ll be down in sick bay trying to find aspirin.”
Holden unbuckled his crash couch harness and pushed off to the deck ladder. Along the way, his hand terminal started beeping. It was Fred Johnson, the nominal leader of the OPA and their personal patron on the Tycho corporation’s manufacturing station, which was also now doubling as the de facto OPA headquarters.

“Yo, Fred, caught our naughty pirates. Bringing them back for trial.”

Fred’s large dark face crinkled into a grin. “That’s a switch. Got tired of blowing them up?”

“Nope, just finally found some who believed me when I said I would.”

Fred’s grin turned into a frown. “Listen, Jim, that’s not why I called. I need you back at Tycho on the double. Something’s happening on Ganymede …”

Chapter Three: Prax

Praxidike Meng stood in the doorway of the staging barn, looking out at the fields of softly waving leaves so utterly green they were almost black, and panicked. The dome arched above him, darker than it should have been. Power to the grow lights had been cut, and the mirrors … He couldn’t think about the mirrors.

The flickers of fighting ships looked like glitches on a cheap screen, colors and movements that shouldn’t have been there. The sign that something was very wrong. He
licked his lips. There had to be a way. There had to be some way to save them.

“Prax,” Doris said. “We have to go. Now.”

The cutting edge of low-resource agricultural botany, the Glycine kenon, a type of soybean so heavily modified it was an entirely new species, represented the last eight years of his life. They were the reason his parents still hadn’t seen their only granddaughter in the flesh. They, and a few other things, had ended his marriage. He could see the eight subtly different strains of engineered chloroplasts in the fields, each one trying to spin out the most protein per photon. His hands were trembling. He was going to vomit.

“We have maybe five more minutes to impact,” Doris said. “We have to evacuate.”

“I don’t see it,” Prax said.

“It’s coming fast enough, by the time you see it, you won’t see it. Everyone else has already gone. We’re the last ones. Now get in the lift.”

The great orbital mirrors had always been his allies, shining down on his fields like a hundred pale suns. He couldn’t believe that they’d betray him. It was an insane thought. The mirror plummeting toward the surface of Ganymede—toward his greenhouse, his soybeans, his life’s work—hadn’t chosen anything. It was a victim of cause and effect, the same as everything else.
“I’m about to leave,” Doris said. “If you’re here in four minutes, you’ll die.”

“Wait,” Prax said. He ran out into the dome. At the edge of the nearest field, he fell to his knees and dug into the rich black soil. The smell of it was like a good patchouli. He pushed his fingers in as deep as he could, cupping a root ball. The small, fragile plant came up in his hands.

Doris was in the industrial lift, ready to descend into the caves and tunnels of the station. Prax sprinted for her. With the plant to save, the dome suddenly felt horribly dangerous. He threw himself through the door and Doris pressed the control display. The wide metal room of the lift lurched, shifted, and began its descent. Normally, it would have carried heavy equipment: the tiller, the tractor, the tons of humus taken from the station recycling processors. Now it was only the three of them: Prax sitting cross-legged on the floor, the soybean seedling nodding in his lap, Doris chewing her lower lip and watching her hand terminal. The lift felt too big.

“The mirror could miss,” Prax said.

“It could. But it’s thirteen hundred tons of glass and metal. The shock wave will be fairly large.”

“The dome might hold.”

“No,” she said, and Prax stopped talking to her.

The cart hummed and clanked, falling deeper under the surface ice, sliding into the network of tunnels that made
up the bulk of the station. The air smelled like heating elements and industrial lubricant. Even now, he couldn’t believe they’d done it. He couldn’t believe the military bastards had actually started shooting each other. No one, anywhere, could really be that shortsighted. Except that it seemed they could.

In the months since the Earth-Mars alliance had shattered, he’d gone from constant and gnawing fear to cautious hope to complacency. Every day that the United Nations and the Martians hadn’t started something had been another bit of evidence that they wouldn’t. He’d let himself think that everything was more stable than it looked. Even if things got bad and there was a shooting war, it wouldn’t be here. Ganymede was where the food came from. With its magnetosphere, it was the safest place for pregnant women to gestate, claiming the lowest incidence of birth defects and stillbirth in the outer planets. It was the center of everything that made human expansion into the solar system possible. Their work was as precious as it was fragile, and the people in charge would never let the war come here.

Doris said something obscene. Prax looked up at her. She ran a hand through her thin white hair, turned, and spat.

“Lost connectivity,” she said, holding up the hand terminal. “Whole network’s locked down.”

“By who?”
“Station security. United Nations. Mars. How would I know?”

“But if they—”

The concussion was like a giant fist coming down on the cart’s roof. The emergency brakes kicked in with a bone-shaking clang. The lights went out, darkness swallowing them for two hummingbird-fast heartbeats. Four battery-powered emergency LEDs popped on, then off again as the cart’s power came back. The critical failure diagnostics started to run: motors humming, lifts clicking, the tracking interface spooling through checksums like an athlete stretching before a run. Prax stood up and walked to the control panel. The shaft sensors reported minimal atmospheric pressure and falling. He felt a shudder as containment doors closed somewhere above them and the exterior pressure started to rise. The air in the shaft had been blown out into space before the emergency systems could lock down. His dome was compromised.

His dome was gone.

He put his hand to his mouth, not realizing he was smearing soil across his chin until he’d already done it. Part of his mind was skittering over the things that needed to be done to save the project—contact his project manager at RMD-Southern, refile the supplemental grant applications, get the data backups to rebuild the viral insertion samples—while another part had gone still and eerily calm. The sense of being two men—one bent on
desperate measures, the other already in the numb of mourning—felt like the last weeks of his marriage.

Doris turned to him, a weary amusement plucking at her wide lips. She put out her hand.

“It was a pleasure working with you, Dr. Meng.”

The cart shuddered as the emergency brakes retracted. Another impact came from much farther off. A mirror or a ship falling. Soldiers shelling each other on the surface. Maybe even fighting deeper in the station. There was no way to know. He shook her hand.

“Dr. Bourne,” he said. “It has been an honor.”

They took a long, silent moment at the graveside of their previous lives. Doris sighed.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Mei’s day care was deep in the body of the moon, but the tube station was only a few hundred yards from the cart’s loading dock, and the express trip down to her was no more than ten minutes. Or would have been if they were running. In three decades of living on Ganymede, Prax had never even noticed that the tube stations had security doors.

The four soldiers standing in front of the closed station wore thick plated armor painted in shifting camouflage lines the same shades of beige and steel as the corridor.
They carried intimidatingly large assault rifles and scowled at the crowd of a dozen or more pressing in around them.

I am on the transportation board,” a tall, thin, dark-skinned woman was saying, punctuating each word by tapping her finger on one soldier’s chest plate. “If you don’t let us past, then you’re in trouble. Serious trouble.”

“How long is it going to be down?” a man asked. “I need to get home. How long is it going to be down?”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the soldier on the left shouted. She had a powerful voice. It cut through the rumble and murmur of the crowd like a teacher speaking to restless schoolchildren. “This settlement is in security lockdown. Until the military action is resolved, there is no movement between levels except by official personnel.”

“Whose side are you on?” someone shouted. “Are you Martians? Whose side are you on?”

“In the meantime,” the soldier went on, ignoring the question, “we are going to ask you all to be patient. As soon as it’s safe to travel, the tube system will be opened. Until that time, we’re going to ask you to remain calm for your own safety.”

Prax didn’t know he was going to speak until he heard his own voice. He sounded whiny.

“My daughter’s in the eighth level. Her school’s down there.”
“Every level is in lockdown, sir,” the soldier said. “She’ll be just fine. You just have to be patient.”

The dark-skinned woman from the transportation board crossed her arms. Prax saw two men abandon the press, walking back down the narrow, dirty hall, talking to each other. In the old tunnels this far up, the air smelled of recyclers—plastic and heat and artificial scents. And now also of fear.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the soldier shouted. “For your own safety, you need to remain calm and stay where you are until the military situation has been resolved.”

“What exactly is the military situation?” a woman at Prax’s elbow said, her voice making the words a demand.

“It’s rapidly evolving,” the soldier said. Prax thought there was a dangerous buzz in her voice. She was as scared as anyone. Only she had a gun. So this wasn’t going to work. He had to find something else. His one remaining Glycine kenon still in his hand, Prax walked away from the tube station.

He’d been eight years old when his father had transferred from the high-population centers of Europa to help build a research lab on Ganymede. The construction had taken ten years, during which Prax had gone through a rocky adolescence. When his parents had packed up to move the family to a new contract on an asteroid in eccentric orbit near Neptune, Prax had stayed behind. He’d gotten a botany internship thinking that he could use it to grow
illicit, untaxed marijuana only to discover that every third botany intern had come in with the same plan. The four years he’d spent trying to find a forgotten closet or an abandoned tunnel that wasn’t already occupied by an illegal hydroponics experiment left him with a good sense of the tunnel architecture.

He walked through the old, narrow hallways of the first-generation construction. Men and women sat along the walls or in the bars and restaurants, their faces blank or angry or frightened. The display screens were set on old entertainment loops of music or theater or abstract art instead of the usual newsfeeds. No hand terminals chimed with incoming messages.

By the central-air ducts, he found what he’d been looking for. The maintenance transport always had a few old electric scooters lying around. No one used them anymore. Because Prax was a senior researcher, his hand terminal would let him through the rusting chain-link fencing. He found one scooter with a sidecar and half a charge still in the batteries. It had been seven years since he’d been on a scooter. He put the Glycine kenon in the sidecar, ran through the diagnostic sequence, and wheeled himself out to the hall.

The first three ramps had soldiers just like the ones he’d seen at the tube station. Prax didn’t bother stopping. At the fourth, a supply tunnel that led from the surface warehouses down toward the reactors, there was nobody. He paused, the scooter silent beneath him. There was a bright acid smell in the air that he couldn’t quite place.
Slowly, other details registered. The scorch marks at the wall panel, a smear of something dark along the floor. He heard a distant popping sound that it took three or four long breaths to recognize as gunfire.

Rapidly evolving apparently meant fighting in the tunnels. The image of Mei’s classroom stippled with bullet holes and soaked in children’s blood popped into his mind, as vivid as something he was remembering instead of imagining. The panic he’d felt in the dome came down on him again, but a hundred times worse.

“She’s fine,” he told the plant beside him. “They wouldn’t have a firefight in a day care. There’re kids there.”

The green-black leaves were already starting to wilt. They wouldn’t have a war around children. Or food supplies. Or fragile agricultural domes. His hands were trembling again, but not so badly he couldn’t steer.

The first explosion came just as he was heading down the ramp from seven to level eight along the side of one of the cathedral-huge unfinished caverns where the raw ice of the moon had been left to weep and refreeze, something between a massive green space and a work of art. There was a flash, then a concussion, and the scooter was fishtailing. The wall loomed up fast, and Prax wrenched his leg out of the way before the impact. Above him, he heard voices shouting. Combat troops would be in armor, talking through their radios. At least, he thought they would. The people screaming up there had to be just people. A second explosion gouged the cavern wall, a
section of blue-white ice the size of a tractor calving off the roof and falling slowly and inexorably down to the floor, grinding into it. Prax scrambled to keep the scooter upright. His heart felt like it was trying to break out of his rib cage.

On the upper edge of the curving ramp, he saw figures in armor. He didn’t know if they were UN or Mars. One of them turned toward him, lifting a rifle. Prax gunned the scooter, sliding fast down the ramp. The chatter of automatic weapons and the smell of smoke and steam melt followed him.

The school’s doors were closed. He didn’t know if that was ominous or hopeful. He brought the wobbling scooter to a halt, jumped off. His legs felt weak and unsteady. He meant to knock gently on the steel drop door, but his first try split the skin over his knuckle.

“Open up! My daughter’s in there!” He sounded like a madman, but someone inside heard him or saw him on the security monitor. The articulated steel plates of the door shuddered and began to rise. Prax dropped to the ground and scrambled through.

He hadn’t met the new teacher, Miss Carrie, more than a few times, when dropping Mei off or picking her up. She couldn’t have been more than twenty years old and was Belter-tall and thin. He didn’t remember her face being so gray.
The schoolroom was intact, though. The children were in a circle, singing a song about an ant traveling through the solar system, with rhymes for all the major asteroid bodies. There was no blood, no bullet holes, but the smell of burning plastic was seeping through the vents. He had to get Mei someplace safe. He wasn’t sure where that would be. He looked at the circle of children, trying to pick out her face, her hair.

“Mei’s not here, sir,” Miss Carrie said, her voice tight and breathy at the same time. “Her mother got her this morning.”

“This morning?” Prax said, but his mind fastened on her mother. What was Nicola doing on Ganymede? He’d had a message from her two days earlier about the child support judgment; she couldn’t have gotten from Ceres to Ganymede in two days …

“Just after snack,” the teacher said.

“You mean she was evacuated. Someone came and evacuated Mei.”

Another explosion came, shaking the ice. One of the children made a high, frightened sound. The teacher looked from him to the children, then back. When she spoke again, her voice was lower.

“Her mother came just after snack. She took Mei with her. She hasn’t been here all day.”
Prax pulled up his hand terminal. The connection was still dead, but his wallpaper was a picture from Mei’s first birthday, back when things were still good. Lifetimes ago. He held up the picture and pointed at Nicola, laughing and dangling the doughy, delighted bundle that had been Mei.

“Her?” Prax said. “She was here?”

The confusion in the teacher’s face answered him. There’d been a mistake. Someone—a new nanny or a social worker or something—had come to pick up a kid and gotten the wrong one.

“She was on the computer,” the teacher said. “She was in the system. It showed her.”

The lights flickered. The smell of smoke was getting stronger, and the air recyclers were humming loudly, popping and crackling as they struggled to suck out the volatile particulates. A boy whose name Prax should have known whimpered, and the teacher reflexively tried to turn toward him. Prax took her elbow and wrenched her back.

“No, you made a mistake,” he said. “Who did you give Mei to?”

“The system said it was her mother! She had identification. It cleared her.”

A stutter of muted gunfire came from the hallway. Someone was screaming outside, and then the kids started to shriek. The teacher pulled her arm away. Something banged against the drop door.
“She was about thirty. Dark hair, dark eyes. She had a doctor with her, she was in the system, and Mei didn’t make any kind of fuss about it.”

“Did they take her medicine?” he asked. “Did they take her medicine?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Without meaning to, Prax shook the woman. Only once, but hard. If Mei didn’t have her medicine, she’d already missed her midday dose. She might make it as long as morning before her immune system started shutting down.

“Show me,” Prax said. “Show me the picture. The woman who took her.”

“I can’t! The system’s down!” the teacher shouted. “They’re killing people in the hallway!”

The circle of children dissolved, screams riding on the backs of screams. The teacher was crying, her hands pressed to her face. Her skin had an almost blue cast to it. He could feel the raw animal panic leaping through his brain. The calm that fell on him didn’t take away from it.

“Is there an evacuation tunnel?” he asked.

“They told us to stay here,” the teacher said.

“I’m telling you to evacuate,” Prax said, but what he thought was I have to find Mei.

Chapter Four: Bobbie
Consciousness returned as an angry buzzing noise and pain. Bobbie blinked once, trying to clear her head, trying to see where she was. Her vision was maddeningly blurry. The buzzing sound resolved into an alarm from her suit. Colored lights flashed in her face as the suit’s HUD sent her data she couldn’t read. It was in the middle of rebooting and alarms were coming on one by one. She tried to move her arms and found that although weak, she wasn’t paralyzed or frozen in place. The impact gel in her suit had returned to a liquid state.

Something moved across the window of faint light that was her helmet’s face shield. A head, bobbing in and out of view. Then a click as someone plugged a hardline into her suit’s external port. A corpsman, then, downloading her injury data.

A voice, male and young, in her suit’s internal speakers said, “Gotcha, Gunny. We gotcha. Gonna be okay. Gonna be all right. Just hang in there.”

He hadn’t quite finished saying there when she blacked out again.

She woke bouncing down a long white tunnel on a stretcher. She wasn’t wearing her suit anymore. Bobbie was afraid that the battlefield med-techs hadn’t wasted time taking her out of it the normal way, that they’d just hit the override that blew all the seams and joints apart. It was a fast way to get a wounded soldier out of four hundred kilos of armored exoskeleton, but the suit was
destroyed in the process. Bobbie felt a pang of remorse for the loss of her faithful old suit.

A moment later, she remembered that her entire platoon had been ripped to pieces before her eyes, and her sadness about the lost suit seemed trivial and demeaning.

A hard bump on the stretcher sent a jolt of lightning up her spine and hurled her back into darkness.

“Sergeant Draper,” a voice said.

Bobbie tried to open her eyes and found it impossible to do. Each eyelid weighed a thousand kilos, and even the attempt left her exhausted. So she tried to answer the voice and was surprised and a little ashamed of the drunken mumble that came out instead.

“She’s conscious, but just barely,” the voice said. It was a deep, mellow male voice. It seemed filled with warmth and concern. Bobbie hoped that the voice would keep talking until she fell back asleep.

A second voice, female and sharp, replied, “Let her rest. Trying to bring her fully awake right now is dangerous.”

The kind voice said, “I don’t care if it kills her, Doctor. I need to speak to this soldier, and I need to do it now. So you give her whatever you need to give her to make that happen.”

Bobbie smiled to herself, not parsing the words the nice voice said, just the kindly, warm tone. It was good to have
someone like that to take care of you. She started to fall back asleep, the coming blackness a welcome friend.

White fire shot up Bobbie’s spine, and she sat bolt upright in bed, as awake as she’d ever been. It felt like going on the juice, the chemical cocktail they gave sailors to keep them conscious and alert during high-g maneuvers. Bobbie opened her eyes and then slammed them shut again when the room’s bright white light nearly burned them out of her sockets.

“Turn off the lights,” she mumbled, the words coming out of her dry throat in a whisper.

The red light seeping in through her closed eyelids dimmed, but when she tried to open them again, it was still too bright. Someone took her hand and held it while a cup was put into it.

“Can you hold that?” the nice voice said.

Bobbie didn’t answer; she just brought the cup to her mouth and drank the water in two greedy swallows.

“More,” she said, this time in something resembling her old voice.

She heard the sounds of someone scooting a chair and then footsteps away from her on a tile floor. Her brief look at the room had told her she was in a hospital. She could hear the electric hum of medical machines nearby, and the smells of antiseptic and urine competed for dominance. Disheartened, she realized she was the source of the
urine smell. A faucet ran for a moment, and then the footsteps came toward her. The cup was put back into her hand. She sipped at it this time, letting the water stay in her mouth awhile before swallowing. It was cool and delicious.

When she was finished, the voice asked, “More?”

She shook her head.

“Maybe later,” she said. Then, after a moment: “Am I blind?”

“No. You’ve been given a combination of focus drugs and powerful amphetamines. Which means your eyes are fully dilated. Sorry, I didn’t think to lower the lights before you woke up.”

The voice was still filled with kindness and warmth. Bobbie wanted to see the face behind that voice, so she risked squinting through one eye. The light didn’t burn into her like it had before, but it was still uncomfortable. The owner of the nice voice turned out to be a very tall, thin man in a naval intelligence uniform. His face was narrow and tight, the skull beneath it pressing to get out. He gave her a frightening smile that didn’t extend past a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth.

“Gunnery Sergeant Roberta W. Draper, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force,” he said, his voice so at odds with his appearance that Bobbie felt like she was watching a movie dubbed from a foreign language.
After several seconds, he still hadn’t continued, so Bobbie said, “Yes, sir,” then glanced at his bars and added, “Captain.”

She could open both eyes now without pain, but a strange tingling sensation was moving up her limbs, making them feel numb and shaky at the same time. She resisted an urge to fidget.

“Sergeant Draper, my name is Captain Thorsson, and I am here to debrief you. We’ve lost your entire platoon. There’s been a two-day pitched battle between the United Nations and Martian Congressional Republic forces on Ganymede. Which, at most recent tally, has resulted in over five billion MCR dollars of infrastructure damage, and the deaths of nearly three thousand military and civilian personnel.”

He paused again, staring at her through narrowed eyes that glittered like a snake’s. Not sure what response he was looking for, Bobbie just said, “Yes, sir.”

“Sergeant Draper, why did your platoon fire on and destroy the UN military outpost at dome fourteen?”

This question was so nonsensical that Bobbie’s mind spent several seconds trying to figure out what it really meant.

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