

# WASTELAND™

RANGERS & RAIDERS



GHOST BOOK 2

## The Death Machines

MIKE STACKPOLE AND NATHAN LONG

# **GHOST BOOK TWO: The Death Machines**

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# **GHOST BOOK TWO**

**– The Death Machines –**

**By**

**Mike Stackpole and Nathan Long**

## – Chapter One –

I woke up to Athalia watching me.

We had taken to sleeping a little apart from the others on our three-day trip to Sleeper One, at first just laying our bedrolls side by side and talking in low voices after dark, then holding hands until we fell asleep, but last night... well, even though we'd found ourselves a little alcove in the cave where we'd all camped, and even though we'd tried to keep it quiet, we'd probably kept the others awake.

Now she was sitting naked, back against the cave wall, her knees tucked up to her chin. In the dim light from the other chamber she looked sad and faraway.

"Shit," I said. "I wasn't that bad, was I?"

A smile slowly crinkled the lean lines of her face. "For a ghost? Not bad at all."

I sat up and looked around for my pants. "So why so glum?"

"Did I look glum?" She started dressing while I stole looks at her hard, tattooed slimness. "Not really awake yet. Guess I was just staring into space."

Well, if she didn't want to tell me, I wasn't going to push it. Never liked it when anybody pushed *me* about that kind of stuff.

It came out a minute later when we were picking up our gear to join the others.

"Ghost, do you... do you ever think about not being a ranger?"

I chuckled. "You know I do. You stopped me from putting a bullet in my head, remember?"

"I didn't mean that. I meant... doing something else. Going somewhere else."

"*With* someone else?"

She flushed and shouldered her pack. "Well... why not?"

Yeah.

Why not.

I stood there for a moment, thinking about it. I wasn't the same guy I'd been back when I was a ranger – literally. I was that guy's clone. No. Not even that, I was the clone of that guy's clone. And every day I seemed to have less and less connection with the people I – or rather he – had known. On the other hand...

On the other hand, there was still some unfinished business to take care of.

"Maybe after this," I said. "When it's all over."

"Sure," she said, but it didn't look like she meant it.

We walked out into a storm of razzing and cat calls and slaps on the back as Angie, Vargas, Hell Razor, and Thrasher let us know that they *had* heard us during the night.

Ace just looked relieved.

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It wasn't easy walking back into the Sleeper Base. Not like it was a battle or anything. There was nobody left to fight. The mutants Athalia and I had killed the last time we were there were still dead and weren't any trouble except for

the smell. It was the other bodies that hurt.

I showed the others the corpses of my old squad – Franny, Brockleman, and old Spider – all shot to pieces by robots the first time I’d come to the base, and they mourned them just like I had – harder, probably. They had full memories of them. My memories were as full of holes as my old squad,, which hurt in different ways. Standing around listening to Angie, Vargas, and Hell Razor reminisce about *my* squaddies, telling stories about how Brockleman had pranked me with a dead gila monitor, and how Franny had won Spider’s boots in a drinking contest and wouldn’t give ‘em back even though they didn’t fit her, and not being able to remember even half of it just drove it home all over again that I wasn’t actually the guy who had led that squad, or had a gila monitor fall out of my locker on me so that I’d pissed myself. I felt like I didn’t have the right to any of his memories – like I was trespassing in his life.

I also showed them the corpse of the clone I’d been cloned from. Poor guy was looking even worse than he had the last time. He’d already been shot, stabbed, and had his head caved in by a blunt object, and a week’s worth of decay hadn’t done him any favors. Nobody mourned him, though. They’d already mourned the original back in Darwin. This guy just seemed to make everybody queasy.

“Huh. Another one,” said Hell Razor, who never had been the most tactful of men.

“Can’t believe he made it all the way from Darwin like that,” said Vargas.

Angie shook her head. “So weird.”

Ace looked from the corpse to me, and for the first time his attitude toward me seemed to be something other than suspicion. Of course, pity wasn’t much better.

After a long, awkward minute, Hell Razor broke the spell by stepping over the body and pressing his nose to the glass door of the cloning chamber which lay behind it.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Maybe we should all clone ourselves, just to be on the safe side. Goin’ against all those killer robots, might be good to have spares lyin’ around.”

I grunted. “You don’t wanna do that. Trust me. Nobody knows what to do with the leftovers – not even the leftovers.”

“He’s right.” Angie shivered. “There’s some shit the ancients did that should have stayed buried. Who’s got a hand grenade?”

Athalia looked shocked. “You’re going to blow it up? But the technology! It’ll be lost.”

Angie gave her a look. “Ask your boyfriend what he wants to do with it.”

Athalia looked to me.

I shrugged. “Sorry, I’m with Angie on this one. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. It’s as weird and wrong in its own way as what Finster was doing.”

Athalia sighed. “I... Okay. I guess I understand.”

Thrasher dug in his pack and pulled out a hand grenade, then tossed it to Hell Razor, who waved us back.

“Better get around the corner. This is gonna be loud.”

We all backed into the main chamber and a few seconds later we heard Razor shout, “Fire in the hole!” He came running out like his hair was on fire.

The whole base shook with the explosion and smoke billowed out of the hallway like it was exhaling on a cold day.

“Alright,” said Vargas, when we could all hear again, “Let’s go find that armor.”

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We all held our breath when Vargas pressed the sec pass against the card reader by the frosted glass door. What if it didn't work? What if all the madness we'd been through in Darwin had been for nothing?

But it did work. The light on the card reader flashed green, the door slid down into the floor as smoothly as butter and a row of armor stands awaited for us in the room beyond, all lined up in ranks and standing at attention like they were on parade while beyond them was a weapons rack with a few LAW rockets and a big-ass energy weapon of some kind.

"Jackpot!" said Hell Razor.

Vargas agreed. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Wait," said Thrasher, and before anybody knew what he was doing, he drew and fired his side arm into the chest of the closest set of armor.

The armor rocked back and toppled against the others so that it looked like a drunk being held up by his buddies, but the armor didn't have a scratch on it.

Without a moment's hesitation, Angie, Vargas, Thrasher, and Hell Razor stepped forward, tugging off their boots and shucking down to their skivvies as they went, then started pulling the armor off the stands to try it on. Ace, Athalia and I were a little slower and a little shyer, but inspired by the others' example we stripped down too. I suppose when your squad shares a locker room, little things like modesty go by the wayside pretty quick, but I couldn't remember for sure. My memories of that time were fragmented to begin with and seemed to be fading faster with every passing day. I was on the outside now, with the rest of the tagalongs.

I stepped up to one of the stands and took a closer look at the armor. I'd seen ceramic armor before – big, bulky stuff bolted onto heavy-duty leather – but this stuff was something else. The overlapping plates were as thin as window glass and bonded to what felt like a slim Kevlar suit as fine as spider silk. It seemed impossible that something so light and supple could protect like the heavier stuff, but Thrasher's bullets had proved that looks could be deceiving, so I was willing to give it a try.

I pulled the torso armor off the stand and slipped it on. It fit close and seemed to cinch in even tighter as I zipped up, almost as if it was grafting itself to my skin. The plates covered my soft bits and overlapped at the joints to minimize exposure. I waved my arms around and twisted at the waist. It all felt easy and natural. Next came the legs, just as snug and protected all the way down to the ankle, and just as easy to move in.

I looked around at the others. They were all doing the same. All suited up in our skin-tight new gear we looked like some shiny superhero team from a pre-apocalypse comic book, which wouldn't do at all. It was more embarrassing than going around naked.

After a shared laugh, we quickly got dressed again, pulling on our dirty jeans, leathers and boots over the pseudo-chitin armor until we looked like our old selves again.

Much better.

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The big energy weapon we'd found was missing some parts, but we grabbed the two LAW rockets, then split up to explore the rest of the base, and me and Athalia took that as an excuse to go off together alone. At least that what *I* thought we were doing. Athalia seemed to have decided it was a race, and was pacing ahead of me, moving down the dark hallway almost at a trot, her rifle at the ready.

"Hey," I said, calling after her. "What's the hurry?"

"Sorry," she said, but she didn't slow down. "Now that we're geared up, I don't see the point of searching

anymore. We should be heading for Cochise. I just want to get it over with and go.”

“Yeah, but you never know what you’ll find in these places. We found the sec pass to Darwin in here, remember? If all the bases were part of the same government organization, we—”

“I know. I get it. I just get anxious is all. All those robots are still killing people out there. I feel like we’re—”

She broke off with a squawk as she peeked through a door, then backed up and fired a burst from her AR into the room.

I ran forward, gun up. “What? What is it?”

She waved me back, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I... I thought it was a robot.”

I leaned in for a quick look through the door. It was an office. There was no robot. She had shot a computer terminal. I looked around at her.

“Are you okay?”

She shrugged, embarrassed. “We were talking about robots. I... Sorry. Just jumpy, I guess.”

I didn’t get it. She was never jumpy. Even when I’d dragged her into situations where she should have been screaming and diving for cover she had been as cool under fire as a marble statue. So what had changed? Was it us getting together? Was she trying to protect me or something?

There was no chance to ask her about it, because her shots had brought all the others running. They came into the hallway from both ends, guns at the ready.

I held up a hand. “False alarm. Stand down.”

Vargas holstered his piece. “What happened?”

Athalia hung her head. “I shot a computer. I thought it was a robot.”

Angie grunted. “That’s not so good. We need to look in those things. See if they’ve got any info we can use.”

We stepped into the office with the shot-up computer. There was a desk, a chair, a filing cabinet and a poster of a kitten clinging to a rope with the words “Hang In There!” printed across the bottom.

Vargas motioned at Athalia and me. “You two check the desk and those files. We’ll keep searching.”

Athalia looked hurt. “But—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call you if we find any robots.”

I gave her a pat on the shoulder as the others left the room. “Forget it. Nobody died, right?”

She sighed. “Right. I’ll take the files, you take the desk.”

“Sure.”

There was nothing important in the desk, just a stack of “Employee Orientation Packets,” a sheaf of “Non-Disclosure Agreements” and a book of cartoons about a sad-sack office worker whose boss was a dog. At least I think that’s what it was about.

Athalia slammed closed the bottom file drawer.

“Nothing,” she said. “Employee records and tax information. Also an empty bottle of—”

A piercing whistle interrupted her, followed by Vargas’s shout.

“Ghost! Sister! This way!”

We ran out of the office, ready for action, but when we found the others they were in another office, standing around another computer terminal.

Vargas waved at Athalia. “You’re good at this kind of stuff. Make it work.”

“Just don’t shoot this one,” said Angie.

We stepped around the desk and looked at the monitor. It was on, with a window in the middle of it that said, “Enter Password.”

Athalia held up her hands. “I can read and write code, and I know what to do if a computer is broken, but I’m not a cryptologist or a hacker. I can’t guess a password for you.”

“You can’t get around it somehow?” Vargas asked.

Athalia shook her head. “Sorry. Not my thing.”

Vargas sighed. “Alright, fine. Maybe we can find one without—”

Thrasher cut him off with an upraised hand. “Stop.”

We all stopped and looked around at him. Thrasher spoke so rarely it was always a bit of a surprise when he did – like hearing Bigfoot talk.

“Que pasa, Gilbert?” said Vargas.

Thrasher pulled the desk’s top drawer all the way out and turned it over, dumping the contents on the floor. Taped to the bottom of the drawer was a three-by-five card with a single word on it. “Mellon.”

“Try that,” said Thrasher.

Like I’ve said before: hidden depths to that boy.

Angie sighed as she sat down at the desk. “Stupid guy didn’t even know how to spell melon.”

She typed the word into the password field and there was a friendly “Bing!”

The desktop appeared and Angie opened the file structure and started poking around, then looked up at the rest of us. “This is gonna take a while. You keep searching.”

“I could do that, if you want,” said Athalia.

Angie shook her head. “It’s fine. I’ll call you if I run into any problems.”

Everybody except Ace – who stayed with Angie to protect her? help her? canoodle with her? – filed out of the office and split up again, wandering around in the dark halls of Sleeper One, digging through closets and lockers for anything interesting.

Well, there was only one more interesting thing down there, and I’m the one who found it.

It was in a big room marked “Simulation Training Department” which looked more like a computer workshop or a lab than any training room I’d ever seen. There were workbenches with bits and pieces of computers all over them, as well as soldering irons, tools, goggles with wires running out of them, gloves with battery packs taped to them, things that looked like white plastic wands with light bulbs on the ends, and more tiny little screws than you could shake a stick at. The interesting thing, however, was in a shed the size of a bank vault in the center of the room.

Athalia and I peeked inside the shed, expecting I don’t know what, a robot? A giant gun on wheels? Instead we found something that looked a lot like an old pre-apocalypse kiddie ride like they used to have outside supermarkets back when there were supermarkets. It was a cockpit of some kind, with lots of controls and gauges and switches, but it wasn’t connected to any vehicle. Instead it was sitting in the center of some kind of gyroscope-ish structure that looked like it could turn the cockpit in any direction, and all that was connected by heavy cables to a computer set against one wall of the shed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a Simulation Training Device,” said Athalia. “Obviously.”

“You got that off the sign on the door,” I said.

“So?”

I ducked through the arms of the gyroscope and took a closer look at the cockpit. The seat was pushed forward



into a locked position that made it so you couldn't sit down, and lying beside it were a pair of headset/goggles like we'd seen in pieces out on the workbenches in the lab. I picked them up.

"Turn it on," I said. "I want to see how it works."

Athalia hesitated. "Ghost, it might be dangerous."

"You forget who you're talking to. I'm the guy who can't remember why danger is a bad thing."

"I..." Her voice caught. "I thought maybe you might have reason to remember now."

I looked over at her. She was right. Since we'd got together, danger had lost some of its appeal, as had going off half-cocked. I had something to live for these days. Still, this thing looked cool.

"Come on, it's a training tool. How dangerous can it be?"

She sighed and flipped the switch. "Fine. Have fun."

I pulled on the goggles and the shed was gone.

I was standing outside the cockpit of a delicate little helicopter on the runway of a small airport. The heat was intense, coming off the tarmac in waves. Not even the wind from the slowly whumping rotors above my head could drive it away. Then a voice talked to me through my headset.

"Hi, I'm Major Taft Beckman of the United States Air Force here at the Davis-Monthan Base in Tucson Arizona, and I'm gonna be teaching you how to fly a Helicopter. Now, the first thing I'm gonna show you is how to unlock the seat so you can sit down. Just reach underneath it and feel for the lever, then pull it to the left. Got it?"

I did. The seat back flipped back and I climbed in. This was cool.

"Great. Now get yourself strapped in and comfortable and when you're ready, just speak the word 'ready' into your headset. And don't worry, we're gonna have some fun today!"

## – Chapter Two –

Major Beckman was a good teacher. I quickly got the hang of moving the steering bar backwards and forwards and right and left to move the helicopter in those directions, and to push on the foot pedals to turn it one way or the other. It was harder to get over the strangeness of having a guy who had been dead for a hundred years chattering away in my ear like a cheerful little chipmunk. It was even stranger to feel like I was back there with him.

The goggles really did their job. No matter which way I turned my head, no matter where I looked, the helicopter and its surroundings were real and solid and right in front of me, and like I said, somehow it even *felt* like a hot summer's day. I knew the illusion would be broken as soon as I tried to get out of the cockpit and walk around. I would trip over the gyroscope struts and bang my nose into the walls of the shed, so I didn't do that. I didn't want the illusion to be broken. I wanted it to go on forever.

And that feeling got even stronger when the Major finally had me stop doing low, level hovering and asked me to take the helicopter up into the sky.

Now, I knew what Arizona looked like from on high. I had strong memories of my former self standing on more than a few mountaintops and seeing the wastelands spread out like a soiled red carpet below him. I knew all about the craters and the poisoned lakes and the dry creek beds that cut like scars across a dead man's face. I remembered the ruined towns and the desolate farms, the black forests where nothing grew.

That was not the Arizona that Major Taft Beckman showed me. Sure there was still plenty of red desert, but there was more than that. Much more. There were blue lakes, and green forests, white and glittering little towns with shopping centers and colorful restaurants on the outskirts. There were parks and pools and plazas. There were baseball fields and farms and silos. There were stadiums and skyscrapers and sewage treatment plants. But the thing that really got me about it was how lively it all was.

Everywhere I looked, there were people. Splashing in the pools, walking in the parks, zooming up and down clean white highways in their cars, playing catch on the ball fields, and not one of them, not a single one, with any idea of what was coming for them – of what was waiting for them in their future.

I wanted to scream down at them from the helicopter, tell them to run, to hide, to stop their politicians before they called down the bombs. But what could I do? I was a ghost from the future. They wouldn't hear me. They wouldn't do anything even if they could. They were too innocent. They didn't know yet what man was truly capable of.

The flying lesson was long over by that time, but I couldn't stop zipping around, looking down at it all, soaking it all in, trying to imagine living in a world that didn't know anything about want or fear or sickness or killer fucking robots. I wanted it so bad.

A hand shook my shoulder. "Ghost. Hey, Ghost."

I swallowed and pulled off the headset and goggles. "H-huh?"

"They're calling us. We should— Are you crying?"

"No, I... It's the goggles. They make your eyes water." I wiped my nose on my sleeve. "Come on."

\*\*\*

Ace and Angie were still huddled at the computer terminal when we got back to the office. The rest of the rangers

were crowded behind them.

“Whatta you got?” I asked.

“One of those scary pre-apocalypse stories,” said Angie.

“Huh?”

Ace looked up. “We think we found a way to wipe the Cochise AI off the map and shut down the killer robots all at once.”

“How is that a scary story?” asked Athalia.

“It’s all in the emails,” said Angie. “Apparently one of the researchers at Base Cochise tried to blow the place up once.”

Vargas chuckled. “And the disciplinary committee sent a lot of emails back and forth, which means *we* know how to blow it up now.”

“How?” asked Athalia.

“What happened?” I asked.

“There was a guy who used to work here,” said Angie. “Harrison Edsel. Little bit crazy. Some discipline problems here at Sleeper One – insubordination, general whining – before he got transferred to Base Cochise, but then he designed the Base Cochise AI, which was apparently the world’s first true artificial intelligence, and everybody called him a genius.”

“Another Finster then?” I asked.

“No, no. Different kind of crazy.” Angie scrolled through the text on her screen. “Says here that Edsel was in charge of the team that was supposed to install the Cochise AI on a space-based weapons platform called the Citadel Star Station, but then he started to believe that the AI had become self-aware and he tried to get his bosses to kill the project and shut down the AI.”

“And they didn’t listen,” said Athalia.

“Bingo,” said Angie. “And that’s when Edsel really went crazy.”

“And where we found out how to kill the AI,” said Vargas.

“So what is it?” I asked.

Angie smiled. “Turns out there’s a self-destruct mechanism in Base Cochise, and Edsel wanted to use it to destroy the AI, but it required four people to turn four keys in a certain order within twenty seconds of each other. He got in trouble with the brass when he tried to convince three other members of his team to turn the other three keys. Two of them apparently were ready to go along with him, but the last one ratted him out and he got confined to quarters.”

“Where he mysteriously asphyxiated,” added Vargas.

“Suicide?” I asked.

“Nope,” said Angie. “No noose, no strangulation, no rope. Just dead in his bed. They put it down to a freak malfunction in the ventilation system.”

“Which was apparently controlled by the AI,” said Vargas.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” said Angie. “That kinda made the ‘Evil AI’ rumor spread and more of the research team started talking about shutting it down, which is when the bosses decided that for security reasons, the keys to the self-destruct system would be moved to the Citadel Launch Facility, which looks like it was the head office for the whole project.”

“So,” I said, putting it all together. “The keys to destroy the computer that’s making all the killer robots are in this Citadel Launch Facility, wherever that is.”

“Sounds like Guardian Citadel,” said Hell Razor. “The clubhouse of the Guardians of the Old Order.”

“You know this for sure?” asked Athalia.

“Pretty sure,” said Hell Razor. “Tangled with the Guardians back in my raidin’ days. Place used to have a big sign out front that said, ‘Citadel Launch Facility.’”

Angie raised an eyebrow. “Used to?”

Hell Razor chuckled. “We stole it. Letters were made of copper. Melted ‘em down for shell casings.”

I sighed. “So, that’s our next stop then? Another one of these damn underground rabbit warrens?”

“Looks like it,” said Angie. “Though who knows if they’ll still have the keys anymore.”

“Oh, they’ll have ‘em,” said Vargas. “The Guardians never throw anything away.”

“Do we know what the keys look like?”

“Actually, we do,” said Angie. “There’s a picture of them in this email. Have a look.”

We all squeezed in tighter to get a look at the monitor. It showed a slightly blurry picture of four notched metal tubes each about the size of the barrel of a pistol. They had LEDs along their sides, flanges at the back end, and conductor plates at the business end – the height of pre-apocalypse tech.

“Is it worth going after them?” asked Athalia. “If you know the Guardians never throw anything away, you also know they never give anything up. You’re going to go there and they’re just going to stonewall you, maybe even fight you. Maybe we should just head straight for Cochise and find another way to do this.”

“She’s got a point,” I said. “If we get into it with the Guardians we might be end up at half strength by the time we get to Cochise, and from the sound of it, we’re going to need every gun we’ve got.”

“And the keys to blow up the base are the biggest gun we can get,” said Vargas. “What happens if we fight our way in and there’s no way to shut down the computer? Do you think it’s just gonna have a plug somewhere you can pull?”

Angie nodded. “If it really is self-aware, it’s gonna be protecting itself every which way it can. We gotta bring everything we can think of.”

Athalia frowned. “But do we have time to take another detour? We’ve got the armor now. Every hour we spend not going to Cochise is another hour its robots are out there killing everybody. Do you want those deaths on your hands?”

“There’ll be even more deaths if we don’t manage to kill it at all,” said Vargas. “We’ve got one shot at this. We can’t fuck it up.”

Angie stood. “You two can go to Base Cochise if you want. We can’t stop you. But we’re gonna go see the Guardians.”

I looked at Athalia. “What do you want to do?”

She shrugged. “What am I going to do at Base Cochise by myself? It’s fine. I’m outvoted. Let’s go.”

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But later that night it was a different story.

We were camped again after trekking all day toward Guardian Citadel, and Athalia and I had once again found a place to lay out our bedrolls a little ways away from the others. We were lying there spent and sweaty after another romantic interlude, just getting our breath back.

I was about to roll back to my own bedroll when Athalia clamped her arms around me and whispered in my ear.

“Let’s leave,” she said. “Right now.”

I was still recovering from our recent exertions and wasn't at my wittiest. "Huh?"

"I don't want to travel with your friends anymore. Let's leave them and go."

"Uh... to Base Cochise?"

"No!" She looked around, then lowered her voice again. "No. Fuck Base Cochise. Fuck the Guardians. Fuck this mission. Let's just go away together someplace, south maybe, and just... live."

I grunted and rolled off of her, then propped myself up on my elbow so I could look at her. Seemed like some of her old self was showing through, the tough tattooed self she was before she became a sister of the Mushroom Cloud.

"You know I can't do that," I said. "I'm still on this mission. I'm still a ranger, and—"

"But you're not! The ranger died two bodies ago." Athalia took my hand. "Listen, I appreciate that you still feel loyalty to the others, and I know this mission is important to you and the wastes, but... but I don't want you to die! I don't want the Guardians to kill you. Just... just let the others do it. They know what to do now. They know where to go. They have the skills. They don't need us. We don't have to be a part of... of what's coming."

I signed and lay back, staring up at the sky. "Everything you say makes sense, but I can't leave it half done. I... well, even if I don't owe it to them – or the world – I owe it to the man I was, the guy who died to make me – twice. Part of him is still part of me, and he can't let it go."

Athalia closed her eyes. A sob escaped her.

I pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "I'm still coming with you, though. Don't worry. Once we finish off this damned AI, you and me'll go wherever you want. Do whatever you want. I promise."

"If," she said.

"Huh? If what?"

"It isn't 'Once we finish off the AI,' it's if." She turned away from me, cold. "If."

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"Looks stronger than I remember."

"Yeah."

We were all crouched on a ridge about a half-mile out from Guardian Citadel, staring at its massive concrete frontage in the red light of the setting sun. The place was built inside a mountain with only a big walled-in courtyard and its massive bronze front door exposed. Angie was using the scope of her long gun to check it out, and she didn't seem to like the close-up any better than the rest of us liked the wide-angle.

"Well," said Vargas. "Hopefully it won't matter. Hopefully the Guardians will see that they're in as much danger from those robots as everybody else, and they'll hand over the keys without a fight."

"They won't," said Athalia. She'd been glum all day, and the sight of the Citadel seemed to be making her even glummer.

"Never had any dealings with these guys," said Ace. "What's their deal?"

"Their deal is they're assholes," snarled Hell Razor, and Thrasher nodded in silent agreement.

Ace rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but *how* are they assholes?"

Vargas laughed and slid down until his back was against the ridge, then lit up a smoke. "The Guardians of the Old Order know everything, have everything, and share nothing. They're a bunch of xenophobic maniacs who think that the world is a big old cosmic puzzle and that once they have all the pieces and know how to fit them together, the universe will grant them dominion over everything and everyone. And *then* the fun real will begin."

Ace blinked. “Uh... okay.”

Angie came to the rescue. “They’re a collector cult. They worship anything from before the apocalypse – washing machines, ball point pens, action figures, intercontinental ballistic missiles; you name it. They think it’s sacred – all of it – wisdom of the ancients and all that. And therefore, anybody who has any old shit who isn’t a Guardian is a heathen unbeliever defiling sacred objects, which must be taken away from them and kept safe in Guardian Citadel.”

Vargas nodded. “And they’re not above killing someone who doesn’t want to give up their sacred stuff.”

“Shit,” said Hell Razor. “They’re not above killing *whole villages*.” He nodded toward Athalia. “I’m with the nun. They’re not gonna listen to us. We should go in shootin’.”

“We have to at least try to give ‘em the benefit of the doubt,” said Vargas. “It’s the ranger way.”

“And so is getting our asses blown to teeny little pieces, apparently,” Hell Razor grumbled.

Vargas shrugged. “Last chance to get while the gettin’s good. I ain’t gonna order anyone to follow me in there, but I’m goin’, and I’d welcome the backup.”

“I’m in,” said Angie.

“What the fuck else am I gonna do,” said Hell Razor.

“If Angie goes, I go,” said Ace.

As usual Thrasher just grunted, but it was an affirmative grunt.

Athalia looked at me. I couldn’t meet her gaze. I hung my head. “Sorry, I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Then neither have I. I’m coming with you.”

“Aw, come on, Athalia,” I said. “It’s obvious you don’t wanna be part of this. Why not just wait for me here?”

“Because someone has to keep you safe.” She stood. “Come on, let’s get it over with.”

We all went over our weapon checks, buttoned up our gear, and kissed our good-luck charms. I kissed Athalia, right out in front of everyone. Then, satisfied we’d done all we could to prepare, we wound our way along the twisted, uneven path that led down and around the mountainside to the Citadel’s exterior fortifications.

The sun went down just as we came into killing range – marked by a line of bullet-pocked flagpoles and clusters of aged skeletons shining white in the light of an early moon.

“Not exactly encouraging, is it?” I said.

Vargas gave the skeletons a sour look, then squared his shoulders and pointed himself at the front gate, a hundred meters away. “Well, come on. Stand up straight and put your guns on your backs. If we sneak in like sappers they’re gonna peg us for sure.”

We lined up behind him like good little soldiers, but just as we were about to march forward, a massive goliath of a man in black armor and a motor cycle helmet eclipsed the splash of the Milky Way in the sky above. His voice boomed forth, loud and rumbling like an earthquake.

“YOU HAVE COME FAR ENOUGH. YOU SHALL GO NO FURTHER!”

## – Chapter Three –

He was big enough, and was carrying a big enough axe – that it looked to me like the only way we’d get past him was if we stuffed sticks of TNT in every nook and cranny of that armor, lit him up, and did laundry before the blood stains could set, but Vargas just stepped around one of the half-buried skeletons and gave the guy a friendly little salute.

“Howdy, amigo,” he said. “We were actually wondering if we could have a pow-wow with the boss man – or woman, as the case may be. We wanna ask ‘em about the keys to the—”

“YOU HAVE CROSSED THE LINE OF DEATH! YOU MUST DIE!”

“Uh, okay, then. What if I just step back out and ask again? Would that be—”

“DEATH TO THE OUTSIDERS!”

Goliath swung his axe at Vargas’s head like he was looking to chop it off and send it flying all the way to Ranger Center, but Vargas ducked back and swung his AK-97 off his back in one smooth motion, then raised it to fire. So did everybody else.

“No.” Thrasher was stepping forward and unlimbering his rebar billy-club. “The guardians won’t talk to us if we kill him. Let me.”

I blinked. That was more than all the other words than I’d ever heard Thrasher say combined.

Vargas laughed but lowered his gun. “You think they’re gonna like it any better if you beat their guard dog senseless?”

Thrasher shrugged. “Mercy begets mercy. Sometimes.”

Begets? Jesus.

He motioned to the black-armored behemoth, who had gone into a defensive posture when he’d seen all the guns. “You and me. Come on.”

Goliath waved him forward. It wasn’t until I saw them standing toe to toe that I realized just how big the guy was. Thrasher was as big as any man I’d ever met. Bigger by a head than those muscle-head raiders we’d tangled with back at White Mesa, but Goliath was a head taller than that, and wider too. Some of that was the armor, sure, but not much.

He swung his axe down at Thrasher like he wanted to end it in one shot. Thrasher sidestepped, then spun in, billy-club blurring. The first two hits made Goliath’s chest armor ring like a dinner bell. The third cracked his motorcycle helmet across the face. It starred and he staggered back, but he didn’t go down.

“OUCH!”

As Thrasher came in for the follow-up, Goliath swung the axe up from the ground and caught him in the side. The pseudo-chitin armor stopped the blade from chopping through Thrasher’s ribs, but massive as he was, the force of the blow still launched him halfway across the narrow canyon and slammed him into the rock wall.

Thrasher pitched forward, groaning, but before Goliath could close, he turned it into a roll and came up into a crouch. I’m not sure if it was bravado or sheer willpower, but he didn’t even rub the spot where the club had hit. He just grunted and advanced, billy-club swaying like an iron snake, as stone-faced as ever.

Goliath tried another monster swing, but Thrasher wasn’t going to get caught again. He danced away with a lot more grace than I expected, then came in on the big man’s off side and rained hits down on him like he was playing a drum solo.

Before, he’d tried to crack Goliath’s armor; this time he targeted the gaps and joints. A thwack at the neckline

popped the monster's gorget off and exposed his throat. His off hand came up to protect it. Thrasher saw the opening and bashed his side full force just below the edge of his breastplate. I could hear ribs snapping.

The Guardian staggered sideways, clutching at himself and bellowing in pain. He spread his legs, trying not to go down, then held up a gauntleted hand. It was shaking.

"I YIELD! I YIELD! YOU HAVE BESTED ME!"

Vargas stepped forward and cracked him in the helmet with the butt of his rifle. "Yeah yeah, yield quieter. Sheesh."

"You go ahead," said Athalia as Goliath toppled backwards onto the stony ground. "I'll disarm him in case he comes to again."

She heaved the big man's big axe up into the rocks of the canyon wall like it was a broomstick, then knelt beside him and started searching him. The others started ahead, but I hung back to wait for her. She pocketed his side arm and a knife, then tugged a neck chain out of his collar. It had something long and narrow dangling from it. She yanked it free and pocketed it too.

"Hey, what was that?" I asked. It looked familiar.

"Hmmm?" she said. "Some kind of amulet or something?"

"No, wait. Let me see it."

She shrugged and pulled it out of her robe again. I stared.

"That's one of the self-destruct keys!"

She frowned at it. "Is it? I didn't get a good look when Angie showed us."

"It is! Let me have it."

She handed it over and I ran after the others. "Angie! Vargas!"

They turned and I held out the key. "Athalia found it. The big bastard had it around his neck."

Angie stared. "That's the Pulsar key!"

"Why the hell would the gorilla at the front door be wearing something like that?" asked Vargas.

Angie raised an eyebrow. "Maybe they thought he couldn't be beat?"

"Or maybe they don't know what it is," I said. "Maybe he thought it was just some kind of religious amulet."

"Whatever," said Ace. "At least we got us some kind of bargaining chip now."

"No," said Hell Razor, shaking his head. "Don't let 'em know you have it. If they think you've got one of their sacred doo-dads, they'll throw everything they got at us to get it back." He snorted. "Chances are slim to none that this parlay business'll work in the first place, but if you show 'em that, it'll bring the odds down to less than fuck-all. I guarantee it."

Athalia rejoined us as we turned toward the gate again.

"All right," said Vargas. "Here goes nothing."

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"Stop right there, interlopers!"

A woman's voice came from the top of the perimeter walls, but it was dark, so we couldn't see anybody.

We stopped and Vargas saluted into the night. "Heya, amigos. Not here to start anything. We come in peace."

"Oh?" said the voice. "Then what happened to Brother Goliath?"

Goliath? Ha! I'd got his name right and didn't even know it.



“He’s, uh, resting,” said Vargas. “He said we should talk to you.”

“The Guardians do not talk to outsiders. They have nothing to teach us.”

Behind his trademark shades, Vargas rolled his eyes, but he kept any sarcasm out of his voice. “You’re absolutely right. That’s why we’ve come. We were hoping you could teach us something.”

The voice sounded slightly more agreeable. “Were you? And what is it that you wished to know?”

Vargas cleared his throat. “Uh, well, as I’m sure you already know, there’s been an army of killer robots coming out of the north recently, from a place called Base Cochise. Apparently the computer there wants to use ‘em to kill everybody and take over the world, but we recently learned that you Guardians might have a way to stop this computer and... well, we were wondering if that was true.”

There was a long pause, then the voice came back. “And what way is it that you think we have?”

“Um,” Vargas looked around at us, unsure, then continued. “Apparently Base Cochise is equipped with a self-destruct system, but we found records that said the four keys that activate it were kept in the Citadel Launch Facility, which, as you know, is the original name of your, uh, club house.”

Another pause, then, “How did you learn this information?”

I snorted. “For a gang who knows everything, they sure ask a lot of questions.”

“Shhh,” said Angie.

“We learned about the psycho computer in Darwin Village,” said Vargas. “We learned about the four keys in Sleeper One.”

“You... you have been to Darwin Village?” asked the voice.

“Yep,” said Vargas.

“Does... does this mean that Irwin Finster is dead?”

Vargas looked back at us again. “What do you think? What do they want to hear?”

“Tell them you killed him,” said Athalia. “They do not like Finster.”

“Thanks.”

I glanced back at Athalia. How did she know that? And why was she standing behind Thrasher, completely in his shadow?

Vargas spoke up again. “Yeah, we killed him. Finster is dead. And so are his mutants.”

The voice was getting excited. “And does the fact that you were inside Sleeper One mean that you have recovered the Pseudo-Chitin armor?”

“That one we probably shouldn’t tell ‘em,” murmured Hell Razor. “They’ll wanna come out and take it off our bodies.”

Vargas nodded. “Sorry, we don’t know anything about any armor. What about the self-destruct keys? Can you help us with those?”

There was no answer from the wall, but I thought I could see people scurrying around up there.

“Get ready to scatter,” I said.

Vargas grunted and tried again. “Listen, I know you folks are mighty protective of your property, and you ain’t comfortable lettin’ strangers borrow historical relics, but you gotta see that this is a problem that affects you as much as it does us. Those robots are coming for all of us. Doesn’t matter whether you’re Rangers or Guardians or gangsters from Las Vegas, as long as you’re human, those tin-hat tyrants are out to kill you. So maybe, just this once, you could let us take those keys up to Base Cochise and blow that crazy computer to kingdom come. Or, hell, if that don’t work for you, let’s team up. Assemble a squad of your best and we’ll go up there together – a joint Ranger/Guardian task

force to finish this thing off once and for all. Whaddaya say?"

There was another long pause – so long I thought they weren't going to answer at all, but finally the voice came back.

"So," it said. "You are proposing that we, the Guardians of the Old Order, the chosen custodians of all the technological wonders and all the wisdom of the ancients, charged with protecting all that was good and great and pure from the world that came before the apocalypse, should join forces with the Desert Rangers, a group of Neanderthal thugs unfit to touch the merest paperclip from those halcyon days, so that together we can destroy the most incredible marvel of the age? The world's only self-aware computer? The artificial super-intelligence that has devised the only viable plan for taking mankind forward into the future and making him the god that he was always intended to be?"

It sounded like a rhetorical question to me, but Vargas answered it anyway.

"Uh, yes?"

The voice sputtered. "Fools! Kill them, brothers and sisters! For Cochise! For the future!"

We were all diving for cover before she'd finished shrieking, so the first salvo missed us by yards, but their aim got better mighty quick.

"She coulda just said no," said Angie, crouching behind a broken brick wall as bullets battered the front of it.

Vargas was looking around from behind a boulder. "Looks like we're gonna have to fight our way in after all. Angie, Athalia, stay back and pick off those shooters. Ghost, Thrasher and Hell Razor will go forward and see if they can light up the walls with flares. Ace and me will use the rockets to..." He trailed off. "Wait a minute. Where the hell is Athalia?"

I looked around, squinting into the darkness behind the rocks and walls. Was she still hiding behind Thrasher? Had she been shot? Was she lying there, bleeding, and I hadn't even noticed?

No.

She was nowhere.

Athalia was gone.

## **– Chapter Four –**

There was no time to worry about where Athalia had gone. I mean, I worried anyway. I worried plenty, but those bullets were zipping in like a sideways hailstorm, so I worried while running. Hell Razor, Thrasher, and I darted forward from boulder to broken wall to flagpole while Ace, Angie, and Vargas kept the Guardians occupied with return fire.

Finally we were flat against the Citadel's outer wall under the shadow of their battlements.

"Okay, Thrasher," said Hell Razor. "On yer way."

Thrasher grunted and sidled sideways along the wall toward the main gate. It was so dark he disappeared into the night after five steps, but after a minute the quick flick of a lighter told us he was in position.

Hell Razor flicked his in response, then opened his pack and pulled out two flares. "Okay, Casper. Get ready."

I put my assault rifle to my shoulder and aimed straight up. Hell Razor stepped out from the wall, cracked the first flare and pitched it high. It hissed as it climbed, then blazed as it arced over the battlements and landed on the top of the wall. Shots cracked from Angie and Vargas as the light exposed the Guardians there, and there were screams and confused shouts above us.

Hell Razor chuckled and threw the second flare further down the wall. There were more shots and screams and a body toppled over the battlements. Then, the thing I was waiting for. One of the Guardians stuck his head out to see who'd thrown the flare. I fired and he ducked back, screaming and grabbing at his face.

The second guy was smarter. All I saw was his arm as he whipped the flare back down at us. The other one sailed out into the middle of the field and bounced near Angie, Ace and Vargas, turning their position into a pool of red light and black shadows. Now we were the ones being lit up, and the crack of gunfire echoed all along the walls.

I picked up the flare again and was making to throw it back when a little black ball dropped down toward us.

"Grenade!" shouted Hell Razor, and we sprinted for the nearest cover, a rusted gun turret that didn't look like it had worked in a hundred years. It was tall, but not much bigger around than a garbage can, and Hell Razor and I hugged behind it like lovers as the grenade exploded and shrapnel smacked into the turret, whistling past us on both sides. Gunfire followed it, and they were really zeroing in. It was like we were in broad daylight.

Hell Razor shoved me. "Idiot! Throw that fucking thing!"

I looked down. I was still holding the flare! "Shit!"

I whipped it up toward the wall. A Guardian reached up to catch it, but a LAW rocket screamed in from Ace's position and he and the battlement around him disappeared in a ball of fire that rocked us back on our heels.

As the explosion dissipated, we saw burning figures stumbling down the wall away from it.

"But wait," shouted Hell Razor. "There's more!"

He pulled a grenade from his pack and arced it after them. It was a picture-perfect throw. Landed right on the wall. More shouts and screams, then a thud that I felt in my chest, and grit and blood rained down on us.

The light from the flare died. It was dark again.

"Time to change positions," said Hell Razor. "Come on."

We ran back to the wall, but closer to the gate, waiting for another fool to poke his head over for a look. Instead, we heard a frantic argument.

"Brother None, take your squad out there and get them!"

"No way. Throw another grenade!"

“Okay. Look out and tell me where I should throw it.”

“And get my head blown off like Brother Findley? No thanks.”

“Then get out there!”

“But—”

“I’m beginning to question your dedication to the cause, brother.”

“Tsk. Fine.”

Hell Razor flicked his lighter. There was an answering flick from Thrasher. We were ready. Hell Razor was *more* than ready. His chuckle as we shouldered our guns and drew our knives was the scariest thing I’d heard all night, even scarier than bullets whispering in my ears.

“Now for the good part,” he said, and started forward in a low trot.

I followed, feeling a bit queasy. I might have been a suicidal lunatic who walked into danger without giving it a second thought, but having a complete disregard for one’s personal safety isn’t quite the same thing as getting all hot and bothered because you were going to get to stick your knife into somebody. That was just plain disturbing.

A small door set in the big gate opened and a handful of nervous Guardians with flashlights on the ends of their rifles stumbled out and turned in our direction, just like Thrasher and Hell Razor had hoped they would. Then they started shooting, just like I’d hoped they wouldn’t.

Hell Razor and I hit the dirt, and most of the shots whistled over our heads, but not all of them. A punch like a sledgehammer hit caught me on the shoulder and I spun as I dropped and landed on my ear. My whole left arm felt numb, and I clutched at it, terrified it would be a bleeding wreck, but other than the impact, there was no damage. The pseudo-chitin armor didn’t even have a mark on it.

On the other hand, I was bareheaded, and there were more bullets slapping the ground all around me. Except, all of a sudden there weren’t. Instead there were screams and thuds and the crunch of bones coming from the Guardian squad. Hell Razor and I looked up. Thrasher was standing in the middle of them, his rebar billy-club a whirlwind of iron that blurred around him, spilling blood and cracking skulls.

Hell Razor and I surged up and charged in, punching and stabbing, but there wasn’t much left to do. Most of the Guardians were already on the ground.

“The door!” Vargas’s voice roared from the field. “Get the fucking door!”

We looked around. The little door in the gate was swinging closed. Thrasher threw his billy-club and it jammed it open at the last second. Through the gap I saw a hand grab the iron bar and try to pull it out, but I ran forward and kicked the planks and the person who the hand belonged to sprawled back as the door flew open. It was an older woman. She shrieked at me.

“Heathen savages! You will get no further! The future is on our side! It will bury you!”

I knew that voice. She was the one who’d been lecturing us from the walls. I swung my AR off my shoulder and shot her between the eyes. “The future buries everyone.”

We stormed in through the little door, firing in all directions to cover our entry. There wasn’t any need. Except for the few bodies that had fallen from the walls, the place was deserted, and the Citadel’s giant bronze doors were rumbling closed as the last of the defenders ran inside.

“Crap,” said Hell Razor.

“Hope you saved a few rockets,” I said.

Hell Razor spat. “Gonna take more than rockets to get through those big bastards, but I might have a little something.”

He stepped back out the door and waved the all clear to Angie, Ace, and Vargas.

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I kicked the big doors with the toe of my boot as we all stood looking up at them. Each one was wider than the tightest spot in the canyon – and just about as tall – and they were covered with line after line of engraved sayings. I took a closer look. It seemed to me like the words must have been carved after the apocalypse, because the edges were undulled by time and weather, and also because the lines were actually kind of crooked and the letters kinda wonky. Also the sayings – “Strong enough for a Man, but I like it too!” and “Extra value is what you get when you buy Coronet!” and “You’ve come a long way, baby!” Were they some kind of secret code? Did the doors open if we said the right counter phrase? I remembered a phrase I’d seen in the back of an ancient magazine once and gave it a try.

“You too can have a body like mine!”

Nope. Nothing. I shrugged and turned to the others.

“Who built these doors? No way it was these crazy pack–rats.”

Angie shook her head. “Nah, they’re original to the facility.”

“Really? With the weird sayings? Doesn’t seem like government issue to me.”

“*That* the Guardians did,” said Vargas. “You remember ol’ Flintlock?”

The name rang a bell, but I couldn’t place it. “Remind me.”

“He’s our historian back at the Ranger Center library. You weren’t much for book learnin’ even back when you was you, so it ain’t any wonder you don’t remember him. Probably never set foot in the place. Anyhow, Flintlock says that when the Guardians discovered this place they found these doors blown out of their tracks and lying on the ground, and the whole front of the place caved in. Couldn’ta been a nuke that done it. No residual radiation, but it was something big, that’s for sure.”

Angie snorted. “Flintlock thinks it was a giant lizard.”

“Flintlock thinks a lot of things,” said Vargas. “Anyway, first thing the Guardians did when they got here was set the door back on their tracks and rebuild the wall.” He pointed to the panels. “Second thing was they started carvin’ those crazy slogans into the doors. Religious texts, Flintlock calls ‘em.”

“And you might think carvin’ into ‘em made the doors weaker,” said Angie. “But they’re each more than three foot thick, so you’d be thinkin’ wrong.”

I raised my gaze again to the tops of the doors. As crazy as the words on them were, the fact that the Guardians had managed to lift them up, put them in place and get them working again underscored the sort of dedication and fanaticism they possessed. And fanatics were dangerous. We’d found that out with Finster.

I shook my head. “So what you’re saying is, we’re not getting in.”

“Not through the doors,” said Hell Razor. “But look there.”

He pointed to the walls on either side of the door. They were made of poured cement molded to look like the face of the mountain, but parts of that thick gray cladding had fallen away, revealing cracked and rotten brickwork underneath.

“They may have got the doors up, but they weren’t exactly master masons, and the weight of these big brass bastards is slowly pulling their new walls apart. Could probably get through this mess with a pickaxe if we had the time. Fortunately, some of those party favors we picked up in Sleeper One will work a little faster.”

He started pulling explosives and fusing out of his satchel as the rest of us backed up and took up watch positions.

With nothing to do but watch him work, my mind instantly turned back to Athalia. I didn’t get it. Where had she gone, and why? It had been clear from the beginning that she didn’t like the idea of this raid. But why had she waited until we were all the way here and the fighting had started before she bugged out? It couldn’t be because she was afraid.

I'd never seen anyone less afraid of a fight. But what else made sense? Why hadn't she left as soon as she realized I wasn't going to change my mind? Had she come all that way because she'd hoped I'd see sense when we got a look at the place? She had to know me better than that by now. Maybe she'd thought the rangers were going to give up when they met resistance. That was pretty foolish, too.

Or maybe she hadn't left. Maybe she'd been taken. Maybe someone had sneaked up behind us and grabbed her. Maybe the damned Guardians had her locked up inside their citadel. Well, if that was the case, there were going to be a lot of dead Guardians once we got in there. I'd kill one for every hair on her head.

"Alright," said Hell Razor, as he backed away from the doors and spooled out the fuse. "Take cover. This is gonna be big."

We stepped back outside of the perimeter wall as he followed us, then knelt, cut the cord, and lit the end. It spit and hissed like an angry cat as the flame followed it through the door and out of sight.

"Cover your ears," he said.

Vargas, raised his voice. "And check your guns! We're going in on 'boom'!"

## **– Chapter Five –**

BOOM!

In we ran with the smoke still billowing towards us and bits of masonry and brick still raining from the sky. For a few steps the cloud enveloped us completely and we could see nothing, but then a triangle of darkness appeared before us – a hole at the bottom right corner of the big brass doors. It looked like the sort of hole a rat would chew in a baseboard, only big enough – just – for a man to crawl through.

And that’s what we are, isn’t it? I thought. Man-sized rats, scurrying around in the decaying houses of the giants that came before us. The Guardians were the packrats, hoarding everything they could get their greasy little paws on, and we were the desert rats, who...

Fortunately we reached the hole before I could think of an ending for that tortured metaphor. I squeezed in ahead of the others. The blast had sprayed a fan of debris into the entry hall and thrown the shattered remains of two guardians against the red-smeared walls. Three others were slowly sitting up and raising their guns, their gold-chased black cassocks torn and bloody from the rain of broken bricks.

I gunned them down with my AR and shouted back through the hole. “Clear!”

That, however, was a lie about two seconds later, as more Guardians streamed into the entryway, disbelief on their faces and a bizarre collection of antique weapons in their hands.

“They’ve breached the unbreachable doors!” shouted one. “Stop them!”

I flicked over to full auto and unloaded on them. Angie, who had just rolled in, joined me. Smoking brass shells cascaded from our guns and went dancing and tinkling across the cold stone floor while the sound of our gunfire drowned out the Guardians’ screams and echoed back to us from the shadowed ceiling.

“Fall back! Fall back!”

The survivors scattered back the way they’d come, leaving the dead and dying where they’d fallen. By the time the echoes faded, the rest of our squad was through the hole and lined up.

“Let’s hope it’s all this easy,” said Vargas.

Hell Razor grunted. “Tsk. Now you’ve jinxed it.”

Angie laughed. “I thought you didn’t believe in superstition.”

Hell Razor crossed his fingers. “I don’t. But there’s no sense pushin’ it.”

“What the hell is all this stuff?” asked Ace.

We looked around as the dust and the gun smoke cleared. The hall was high, wide and so deep that the far end was swallowed in darkness. Between us and that darkness, a heavy-duty freight elevator rose from a big square shaft in the center of the floor, and surrounding the shaft was a bizarre and bullet-chipped collection of bronze and plaster busts, statues, paintings, murals and portraits. I didn’t recognize even a tenth of the stuff. Most of the busts were serious-looking guys in suits and ties, hair neatly-groomed, and a lot of the statues were nude women holding torches or swords or scales, but some of them were stranger. Much stranger. There was a wax effigy of a dark-haired guy in a white jumpsuit covered in rhinestones. He was holding hands with a voluptuous blonde woman, also in white, who seemed to be trying to hold her dress down even though there was no wind. And in front of them, holding out a hamburger to them like it was some kind of sacred offering, was a pudgy little dwarf in red checkered overalls. It had the shiniest hair I’d ever seen.

The paintings were even more bizarre – landscapes of highways that soared and looped through the sky in

impossible ways, a portrait, painted on black velvet, of Jesus holding a little white lamb and smoking a joint, a man with a chin-beard and a stovepipe hat leading an army of naked black men against a man wearing a goatee, glasses, and an old-fashioned white suit, whose army was a horde of white cowboys riding chickens; a big painting of a man whose hair looked a lot like the shiny hair on the dwarf in the checkered overalls tearing down a barbed-wire topped concrete wall with his bare hands while a bear tried to kill him with a hammer and sickle, a postcard from Roswell, New Mexico with a picture of a little green man next to a crashed flying saucer sticking his thumb out and saying, "Going my way?"

The craziest of all, however, was a long mural along one wall, which seemed to be an attempt to show all of human history in one picture. I don't know how well they did. It certainly didn't look like the past I'd seen in the helicopter simulator, but maybe Arizona was different from the rest of the world back then.

It started at the left edge of the mural with a guy in a top-hat and bushy beard walking arm in arm with an ape in a wedding dress. The painting didn't record the ape's name, but there was a fancy scroll over the head of the guy with the beard that said his name was Charles Darwin.

Next to the wedding party, a man all wrapped up in bandages wearing a gold mask and headdress with a snake coming out of the forehead danced on the stage of a place called – according to the neon lights behind him – the Radio City Museum of Unnatural History, while thousands cheered.

Beside Mr. Burn Victim and his audience, a masked man in a powder blue cowboy outfit brandished silver six-shooters on the back of a silver Tyrannosaurus, hot on the trail of a mustachioed man in brown wearing a swastika, while over their heads a fat man in a red uniform with white trim flew through the sky in a sleigh pulled by eight black bat-winged jets. He had bags full of guns, ammo and bombs in the back of the sleigh, which a bunch of children with pointy ears were dropping down to a guy in metal armor labeled "King Arthur" and his knights so they could battle a guy in bamboo armor labeled "Genghis Khan" and an army of men and woman in green uniforms with red stars on their caps and red books in their raised hands.

Further on there was a man in a green and gold uniform with the number 12 emblazoned on it and a 'G' on the helmet throwing a missile to a man vanishing in the white glow of an atomic mushroom cloud. And finally, at the far end of the wall, the ape returned, squatting in its tattered wedding dress and studying the fire-blackened helmet with the G on it.

Like I said, crazy. And as I looked around, all the junk and the way the guardians revered it flashed me back to something the original me had learned about back in ranger training – something called the Ranger Dilemma. One of my instructors had told us that at some point every Ranger had to decide how he or she wanted to do their job. Was she going to help others find their way into a better future, or was she going to help them somehow get back to the good old days of the past?

The Guardians were definitely on the "back to the past" side of things, that much was clear, and their example would make that philosophy seem like madness. But was it the "wanting to go back" part that was insane? Or was it the hoarding and worshipping part? Not everything in the past was bad. In fact, a lot of it would make life in the here and now a hell of a lot easier if we could get it up and running again. Maybe it was the inability of the Guardians to make any kind of value judgments about all the stuff from back in the day that was the problem. Electric toothbrush? Yes! The ancients made it so it had to be good! Atom bomb? Also yes! Crazy super computer that wanted to wipe out all humanity? Hell yes! The Guardians loved it all.

On the other hand, there were the folks that felt we should abandon the past completely and create an entirely original future. Also not a bad idea on its face, seeing as how the ancients in their wisdom had already destroyed the world once. It seemed to me that that must have been Finster's original goal, but once again he'd taken it to a fanatical extreme. It had sent that idea spinning toward hell in a hand basket faster than you could say mutant abomination, and the crazy bastard had ended up turning himself into an android and poisoning everyone who worked for him in pursuit of his dream of a new beginning.



Maybe the problem was that leaders always seemed to start by picking a philosophy first and then trying to shape the world to fit it, instead of shaping their philosophy to fit the world they were living in. Or maybe the problem was that people followed the leaders who shouted their philosophies the loudest, and not the ones who were just trying to get along.

I popped out of my reverie to find that Hell Razor was answering Ace's question.

"Some of this shit they find," he was saying. "Some of it they make. Interpretations of their sacred texts."

"Wow," said Ace. "Those texts gotta be something else."

"Save the 'who are they?' stuff for later," said Vargas. "Right now we gotta focus on 'where are they?'" He swept his hand around the big hall, indicating objectives. "Ace and Angie, watch that hallway to the left. Hell Razor, Thrasher, take the one to the right. Ghost and me and gonna make sure that elevator ain't workin'. Move out."

We all started forward together, but before we'd taken five steps we heard movement from the two side hallways. We faded into the ranks of strange statues that lined both walls – me with Angie and Ace on the left, Vargas with Thrasher and Hell Razor on the right.

The Guardians were back, and more organized this time. They stayed in the cover of the corridors and sprayed lead our way in a thundering crossfire. We hugged pavement as statues and busts exploded in showers of marble and plaster above us. Bronze shrapnel flew everywhere. Right over my head a statue of a man with one glove and the world's tiniest nose flew to pieces and covered me in a fine white powder. Across the room a bust of a uniformed man with a narrow mustache and a droopy hairstyle toppled off its stand and shattered across Thrasher's back.

We fired back from within the thicket of legs and pillars, trying to find targets in the darkness of the corridors. It was no good. The Guardians were dug in good and cutting down our cover one statue at a time.

"Be ready," said Ace. "Got an idea."

He picked up a fist sized piece of rubble and mimed pulling a ring from it, then hurled it like a hand grenade.

"Fire in the hole!" he shouted.

The rock bounced into the hallway to the left and terrified Guardians came running out and diving for the floor. We filled most of them full of lead before they landed, but one rolled and took refuge behind a life-sized bronze of a man in a coonskin cap. Angie put a bullet through the statue's boots and blew a hole in the man's face.

"Nice," I said. "Any ideas for the other side?"

Hell Razor was way ahead of me. He fired the last LAW rocket from behind a statue of clown in an orange and red jumpsuit. Guardians came running out of that hallway as it screamed toward them, but they didn't get a chance to dive. The blast caught them way before that, scattering their body parts all over the hall.

"Come on!" said Angie, surging up. "While they're reeling!"

We pushed up after her and dodged through the statues toward the left-hand hallway as Hell Razor, Thrasher, and Vargas were doing the same on the right. Angie reached our hallway first and sprayed her AR around the corner without looking. We heard a scream and charged in. A handful of wounded Guardians were retreating around a corner ahead of us. We fired after them, then pulled up and looked back. Thrasher, Hell Razor and Vargas were covering the other hall just like we were.

"Alright, hold up," called Vargas, then started toward the elevator. "Ghost. Cover me."

I jogged to meet him and kept my eyes scanning in all directions while he looked over the railing into the hole from which the elevator rose.

"What's down there?" I asked.

"All I can see is the shaft and the support beams goin' down into the dark," he said. "No lights. No nothin'."

He moved to the elevator doors and stabbed the buttons beside them. Nothing happened – no far-off generator

spinning up, no electrical fritzing, no pneumatic hiss.

"Maybe it's busted," I said.

Vargas smashed in the face plate of the buttons with the butt of his rifle, then reached in and tore wiring out through the hole with his gloved hand.

"It is now," he said. "Alright, back with Ace and Angie. Let's clear these sides."

"Got it," I said, and I started trotting back toward the left corridor.

He called after me. "And keep an eye out for the rest of those keys."

The three of us entered the corridor and worked to the first corner. There were two doors along the way, both on the left wall. I kicked through the first with Ace and Angie covering me, then Ace did the kicking at the next door when there was nothing behind the first. The second was also empty.

We moved to the corner.

Angie popped her head around.

"Clear," she said.

We stepped into the corridor and started toward a room with a double-wide doorway at the far end, checking side doors as we went. Halfway there and the double doors cracked open. I stitched them with fire, but not before a canvas satchel slipped out and slid toward us across the polished floor.

"Oh shi—"

Angie and Ace yanked me sideways into an office, and we all landed in a heap as the satchel charge exploded, blowing shrapnel past our door and filling the corridor with fire, dust, and the loudest noise I'd ever heard in my life. My ears were ringing like fire alarms. Shit, my whole body was ringing. I felt like a gong hit with a sledgehammer.

I was in a cocoon of shock and thought it would be really nice to just lie there and stop moving for a while, maybe think about life a little, but after a few seconds – minutes? hours? – I heard faint whispers behind the roaring.

"Yeah, yeah, we're fine! Stay where you are."

I opened my eyes to see Angie shouting into her walkie. She sounded a hundred miles away.

"I said it's fine, Vargas! They missed us!"

I smiled up at her as she looked over at me, then closed my eyes again. She shook me, hard.

"Get up, Ghost! We gotta keep moving!"

I groaned, then staggered up and saw Ace leaning on the desk and tying a bandana around his forehead. I was going to make a smart-ass comment about his fashion sense, but then I saw he was doing it to keep a flap of torn flesh in place and decided to keep it to myself.

Angie squeezed his arm. "Okay, babe?"

He nodded. "Good thing it ain't my face you fell in love with, huh?"

She gave a dirty chuckle and headed out into the hall. I grunted and followed, glad I was behind them and didn't have to look either one of them in the eye. Too much information.

We leaped over the fire guttering in the corridor and plunged on into the room with the double doors. The blowback from the satchel charge had ripped the doors off their hinges and turned them into very pointy kindling. One of the Guardians who had been hiding behind writhed on the floor looking like an anguished porcupine. The other two were luckier. They only looked like pin-cushions. Angie killed porcupine with a shot to the head, and Ace and I put the other two out of their misery.

"Now," said Angie, clambering over an upturned wooden desk. "What were they guarding?"

She tore the door off what looked like a walnut wardrobe built into the room's back wall. Behind the wood was a

titanium door with a combination lock. Her face fell.

“Crap.”

“I got it,” said Ace, and set his rifle aside as he squatted down next to the lock.

Angie looked back at me. “Ghost, go stand guard.”

Nothing like your girlfriend disappearing to make a man feel like a fifth wheel all over again. “Yeah, sure. Have fun.”

I stepped back into the corridor, slapping another clip into my assault rifle as I went, and crept past the office where we’d found shelter from the satchel charge, listening as best I could over the ringing in my ears. My nerves were still vibrating and I still felt like I was walking around with a couple of pillows wrapped around my head after that blast.

At the intersection I stopped and peered around the corner. Nobody in the corridor leading to the grand hall. I started down it, checking the doors as I went, making sure nobody had slipped in behind us. They were clear.

I crouched down just back from the end of the corridor and studied the darkness of the grand hall beyond, looking for movement. Aside from drifting eddies of dust, nothing. There were more Guardians somewhere, I was sure of it, but not here. Where were they? What were they waiting for? I keyed my walkie.

“Vargas. What are you seeing?”

A bit of static, then. “Found the mess hall. Cook tried to fry us. We settled his hash. Now we’re in some kind of museum. Lotta display cases, and—” There was a noise of shattering glass, then Vargas chuckled. “Hey. Whaddaya know. Another one of the keys.”

“Two down, two to go. Good work.”

“Tell it to Thrasher. He found it. Meet you back at the main hall when we’re done here.”

“Already there.”

I settled back against the wall of the corridor with my rifle at the ready, watching and trying not to let my imagination get the best of me. The Guardians would be coming again, but how would they be coming? Had they found more weapons and armor? More satchel charges? Shit, the way this place was crammed with junk they probably had an old tank in here somewhere.

There was a noise behind me – at least I thought there was. My hearing was still so messed up I was hearing random pings and pops from my brain cells dying. But this had seemed different. A sort of hissing, sliding-door kind of sound. Has Ace opened the safe? Were he and Angie coming back? It hadn’t quite sounded like that either.

I turned around and started back toward to corner. “Angie? Ace?”

No answer.

I checked the side rooms again as I went. Maybe I was just being paranoid, but—

But no, I wasn’t. There was a noise from the next room. A footstep. I padded to the door, rifle up, and listened. Nothing now, but there had been. I swung in, sweeping the room with eyes and gun. Desks, chairs, cabinets – no Guardians. But as I held still, a soft ticking noise came from the near corner, behind a desk. I sidestepped to it, keeping my gun on the rest of the room, then risked a glance over the desk. A crumpled piece of typing paper was slowly unwadding, like someone had just thrown it.

I whipped around. A slim silhouette was standing up in the far corner, holding a gun on me. It stepped out of the shadows.

Athalia.

There were tears in her eyes.

“Why didn’t you come away with me when I asked?”

## – Chapter Six –

I stared at her.

“Athalia. What the fuck?”

“I tried to get you not to come here. I guess you’re just too stupid to take a hint!”

“I don’t... wait. Does this mean you’re not a Servant of the Mushroom Cloud?”

Athalia rolled her eyes. “Tsk, I was wrong. He’s a genius!”

I didn’t feel very smart, and I bet I didn’t look very smart either, standing there with my mouth hanging open as my brain replayed all our time together, looking for clues to this crazy betrayal. I still couldn’t see it.

“But... but you helped me – you helped *us* – the whole way.”

“Of course I did,” said Athalia. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, is he not? The Base Cochise AI determined that the greatest threat to its existence was Finster and his mutant monsters. You and the rangers were going there, so I joined you and helped destroy him.”

A memory jumped out at me, stark and brutal. Athalia putting her pistol to Finster’s heart and pulling the trigger three times. “You killed Finster. You were the assassin he was talking about.”

“I had to make sure it was done,” she said. “Rangers can sometimes be confusingly merciful.”

I fast forwarded to another memory. “But... but what about the armor from Sleeper One. Why would you help us get that?”

“What better way to bring it to Cochise than have you wear it there? But you wouldn’t go to Cochise! You just had to come here! I... I held on ‘til the last second, praying you’d give up when you saw what you were up against, but you’re all so damn stubborn!”

“So you were urging us to go directly to Base Cochise so the robots would kill us and take the armor? Is that it?”

“Not you!” Athalia cried. “*You* would have been spared. *You* would have come with me!”

She stepped between me and the door, then reached out a hand. “Listen, Ghost, it can still happen. You can still come away with me. We can still be together. I’ll show you a place to hide until this is over, then we’ll forget it ever happened, alright? We’ll make a life for ourselves in the new future.”

I frowned. “And what would that life be like, exactly? I thought the Base Cochise AI wanted to wipe out all human life.”

“In the new future, man and machine will be one, a perfected being with the strengths of both and the weaknesses of neither. We of the Guardians of the Old Order will be perfected beings, exalted, as will all the chosen – and you and I will be chosen, I promise you. Only those who do not join us will be left behind.”

“And, uh, by ‘left behind’ you mean they’ll be killed.”

“Why should you care what happens to them?” Athalia asked. “You’re not like them. You’ve moved beyond them.”

I stared at her, not sure what to say.

She sobbed. “I don’t understand you, Ghost. Why should you give them any loyalty? You see how they treat you. You’re not human to them. You’re not even real. As far as they’re concerned, you’re just a cheap copy of some other guy. They’re ready to sacrifice you for the least little thing. I love you for *you*, Ghost. You’re like me, unnatural and uncanny, but still capable of love. And I want to be with you – forever.”

It was a pretty convincing speech, I had to admit. She was right about the others. They’d made it pretty clear I

wasn't one of them and never would be, and I'd always be in the shadow of the guy who'd come before me. I was pretty sure she wasn't lying about loving me either. And that tugged at me. It hurt not to be loved, and her affection and open arms had been giving me hope for my future. I'd had some pretty good dreams about being together with her once all this was over.

But the Athalia I'd loved wasn't the one who wanted to wipe out most of the human race. She wasn't the one that wanted me to turn my back on my past. She wasn't the one who had lied to me about who she was and what she believed since the moment I'd met her.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Athalia. If I wasn't me and you weren't you, it might have worked out, but since we're both who we are, I'm afraid you're gonna have to shoot me, 'cause I'm not going anywhere."

"But why, Ghost? Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's just that humans are still the only people I know, and I'd hate to see 'em go."

Her face got cold and she aimed the gun straight at my heart. "Don't worry. You won't."

I raised my gun, hoping against hope to beat her to the draw, but the shot came way before my finger squeezed the trigger, and I staggered back, clutching my chest.

Then I frowned. There was no wound, and no pain. I looked up at Athalia. Had she missed on purpose?

She was sinking to her knees, a surprised look on her face and a red stain spreading across her gray robes. Her gun clattered to the floor. Behind her, Angie stepped into the room, her rifle smoking. Ace came in too. Athalia was still squirming and bleeding between us.

I let out a long held breath. "Nothing like waiting 'til the last minute, Angie. Damn."

"I had to see if I needed to shoot one person or two." She stepped over Athalia and put two more shots in her back.

I turned away. Athalia might have been a psycho who wanted to wipe out the human waste. It was still hard to see her die.

"You need a minute?" asked Angie.

"Nah," I said, then had to swallow hard. "I-I'm fine."

Angie returned to the door. "Then come have a look. We got that vault open. Vargas, Thrasher and Hell Razor are on their way."

I nodded and followed her and Ace back into the corridor, then stopped and took a last look back at Athalia's body. Her head was turned the other way. I couldn't see her face. I wanted to shout at her to turn around.

Actually, I just wanted to shout.

Or maybe cry.

Yeah, that.

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Angie stood inside the titanium door, pointing to a pried up floor tile under which was a dismantled pressure plate, TNT, batteries, and wiring. "I think that's the only one, but be careful."

I stepped past the booby trap, then stared. What she and Ace had opened up was an armory the likes of which I'd never seen before. There were racks of standard issue AK-97s, but beyond them I saw rows of lightweight laser rifles, all sleek plastic and glass, and bins full of power packs shaped to fit neatly into a slot in the rifles' stocks just behind their triggers.

As I was checking out the goodies, I saw a trickle of silver metal running from a black circle burned in the far wall. It looked like Angie and Ace had been seeing what the guns could do.

I looked back at them. "How many shots did that take?"

Ace smirked and patted the plastic rifle he was slinging over his shoulder. "Just the one."

"Damn."

I moved deeper into the armory and pulled out a heavier weapon with a fatter barrel, but the same basic design. The serial number scratched on the trigger guard had a very low number, prefaced by XMC-98.

I hefted it. It felt good. "What is this?"

"I didn't try it," said Angie. "But with that designation, I'd guess it's an experimental meson cannon."

As I was giving the big beast a once over, Vargas, Hell Razor, and Thrasher squeezed into the narrow room.

Angie gave them a wave. "Heya, boys. Come on in and pick your new favorite weapons."

Thrasher's eyes lit up. Hell Razor cackled like a mad man.

"Ho-Lee-Shit!"

Vargas picked up one of the rifles and shook his head. "Well, I'm glad they didn't use these on us, but I don't get it. Why shoot at us with second hand zip-guns when they had stuff like this in storage?"

"Too holy to use?" said Angie.

Vargas nodded. "That's the whole and entire problem with these assholes. They got stuff in here that could save the world I bet, but instead of usin' all that goodness to help their fellow humans, they're siding with a supercomputer that's decided humans are roaches who need exterminating."

"I guess that doesn't include them?" said Ace.

"They get to become some kind of human-robot angels in a golden future," I said. "'Perfected beings with the strengths of both and the weaknesses of neither.'"

Everybody looked at me funny. I shrugged. "That's what Athalia told me."

"Is that what's really going to happen?" asked Vargas. "Or is that just what the computer told 'em what was gonna happen?"

Hell Razor curled his lip. "Neither is gonna happen. If anybody gets a golden future, it ain't gonna be these homicidal hypocrite hoarders. Fuck that. Let's burn 'em down."

And with that, everybody armed up and headed deeper into the citadel to finish what we started.

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I suppose the others killed the Guardians out of righteous fury for their crimes, and I suppose in other circumstances I probably would have too. They were, after all, undeniably a bunch of heinous jerks who were out to destroy life as we knew it, but at that moment I really wouldn't have cared if they had been saintly grandmothers who healed puppies and wanted to share the cure for cancer with the whole world. I probably still would have gunned them down.

I know I'd told Angie I was fine with Athalia's death, and I know I hadn't shed any tears about it. But I was not fine. I was about as far from fine as a man could get.

Athalia deserved what she'd got. She'd lied to me. She was crazy. She was the enemy, for fuck's sake. That didn't stop me from realizing she was also probably the only person in the world who would ever want anything to do with me. It didn't stop me from realizing that once again, there was no golden future for me, and that once again I had nothing and no-one to live for. It made me mad. It made me want everyone else in the world to feel the same way I did.

It made me want to kill.

I cannot remember everything I did in there, how many I slaughtered; how I slaughtered them. It all passed me by like a surreal red dream. All I know is that the others didn't look at me the same afterwards – not even Hell Razor – and they did their fair share of killing that day, too.

The laser rifles worked beautifully. Horribly. Their bolts glowed in the darkness and the angry light revealed the Guardians' hiding places, then burned their lungs out from the inside. A shot through the eye would boil a brain in the skull — and the venting of the molten ejecta made the Guardians dance like decapitated chickens. Robes burned, makeshift armor melted, and the greasy stink of roasted flesh and the sharp sourness of singed hair filled the place. There wasn't much blood, since the lasers' heat cauterized wounds, but that didn't make the holes any easier to look at. Luckily for us, the corpses usually stopped burning by the time we reached them.

Every now and then the Guardians would mass for a charge. I couldn't tell if they couldn't understand what kind of death we were dishing out, or just didn't care, but they'd swarm out of some dark corridor chanting pre-apocalyptic slogans like, "Leggo my Eggo!" and "I'd walk a mile for a Camell!" Right into our lasers.

I fired the meson cannon from my hip, sweeping right to left and back again like I was turning a hose on them. The cannon's bolts came thick, long and slow, and glowed with an unearthly purple light that burned fist-sized holes through anyone it touched. Ace and the rangers fired searing bursts into whoever I missed. The place smelled like a cookout wherever we went.

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We found a third key in a small chapel, hidden inside a bronze triptych that seemed to show some kind of allegory. In the first panel, a happy young man was holding hands with a beautiful girl. In the second panel, the young man had broken out in pimples, while the beautiful girl walked off with a muscle man. In the third panel, the young man's face was clear again and he was ascending toward heaven with the girl on his left arm and a bottle labeled Acme Acne Cream held aloft in his right.

"What a touching story," drawled Vargas.

"It's the Guardians' philosophy in three easy steps," said Angie. "The rise, fall, and redemption of man through the wisdom of the ancients."

"Pfff!" I said. "Like killer robots are gonna make my zits go away."

"Sure they will," said Hell Razor, stuffing the key into his pocket. "Decapitation is a sure-fire cure."

\*\*\*

Finding the fourth key almost cost me my life, and I have no one to blame but myself. We were clearing a bunk room, pulling back the blankets and overturning the mattresses when a piece of paper fluttered from under a pillow. Thrasher bent to look at it.

"Rosebud?" he said, and reached for it. "What does that—"

With a squeal of fright, a Guardian rolled out from under the bunk next to him and started blasting at us with an assault rifle. Fortunately, he was too crazed to hit anything other than the ceiling, and Thrasher burned a hole through his intestines. The Guardian curled up, hissing.

But he wasn't quiet dead, and as I kicked the gun from his hands and raised the meson cannon to finish him, he

looked up at me with wild eyes and beckoned me closer.

"You..." he whispered. "You are... different from the others. Come closer. I must tell you..."

Yes, I know I'm a sucker, but I knelt down and turned my ear toward him... and the son of a bitch grabbed me around the neck and started choking the shit out of me!

"Die infidel!"

The old man had a grip like iron and I was way too close and bent over to bring the meson cannon around for a shot. I punched at him as best I could with blood pounding in my ears and throbbing in my neck.

Suddenly there was a bang and his hands went limp. A hole had appeared in the middle of his forehead and Angie was holstering her side arm and walking away from me with a disgusted look on her face.

"What the hell, Ghost," she said. "Were you born yesterday?"

I coughed and cleared my throat. "Last week. Sorry."

I was so embarrassed I almost walked away without searching him, but then I saw something peeking out of one of his pockets. I pulled it out. The fourth key. I handed it over to Vargas, who had the other three.

"Nice," he said. "We're set."

"Does that mean we can get out of here?" asked Ace.

Angie shook her head. "These guys are too dangerous to let live."

"Besides," said Vargas. "You don't hurt a gang as bad as we've hurt these chumps and not finish the job. The survivors will come back and kick our ass one day. We've gotta erase these bastards. Every one of 'em."

Ace made a face like he didn't like the taste of that, but he fell in with the rest of us as we stepped back into the main hall and started toward the gigantic iron portcullis set into its north wall. There were no buttons to push or levers to pull, but through a door to the left we found a crank wheel.

Thrasher didn't have to be asked. He stepped up to it and started pulling on the arms with smooth strength. We heard the rattle of chains and the groaning of iron above us. A minute later the chain thrummed tight and Thrasher locked the wheel with a cotter pin, then stopped to mop his brow.

We went back into the hall, then passed under the portcullis and started up the broad marble steps into the inner sanctum. Gave me a funny feeling in my shoulders, passing under several tons of iron held up by a pin thinner than my finger. If anyone was to pull it...

At the top of the stairs we found a pair of massive gold doors rivaling the big bronze ones out front in all details save for their height, and this time the walls on either side weren't falling apart. There wasn't going to be any blowing our way in this time. There was, however, a keypad off to one side.

"Hmmm," said Angie. "Looks like we need another password."

"Try 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9," said Vargas.

"Try 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 1," said Ace.

She did. They didn't work.

"Try 'password'," I said.

That didn't work either.

"Try 'rosebud'," said Thrasher.

We all looked around at him.

"Huh?"

"Just try it."

Angie typed it in. There was a click, and then the doors started slowly retracting into the ceiling.



“Well, whaddaya know,” said Vargas. “Beto, you never cease to amaze—”

He was cut off by the chattering roar of machine gun fire. The Guardians were firing under the rising door.

## – Chapter Seven –

We all jumped like scalded cats as bullets sprayed into the hall, chewing up the marble floor and ricocheting off the gold banisters of the broad stairs. Thrasher and Vargas dove left and Angie, Ace and Hell Razor dove right. I tried to follow them, but a bullet hit my pseudo-chitin shin guard and knocked my feet out from under me. I rolled for the stairs with bullets sparking all around me and bounced down half the flight before I was out of the line of fire. I think more bullets must have glanced off my armor before I got clear, because I left like I'd fallen out of a three story window – onto a rock garden.

“Ghost!” called Angie, as the doors finally recessed into the ceiling. “You okay?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say okay, no.” I checked myself head to toe, all in one piece. “But I don’t have any holes in me.”

“Glad to hear it.” That was Vargas’s voice. “Hell Razor, any grenades left?”

“Sorry, used my last one on those last guys.”

“All right, we’ll do it the hard way then. Ghost, can you get a peek through that door?”

“Can you cover me?”

“Will do,” called Vargas. “On your count.”

I opened my mouth to shout, then realized the Guardians would be listening too. Time for a little syncopation.

“One... two...” I popped my head up and saw a handful of Guardians hiding behind bits of heavy furniture, guns at the ready. They were positioned to give themselves overlapping fields of fire. They saw me and unleashed, but I was already ducking back and thinking fast.

“Three!”

The hammering of their automatic weapons gave way to the rising whine of laser rifles as Angie and Vargas fired blind around the corner. The sound died out.

“Five of ‘em,” I called out. “Entrenched. But I’ve got an idea.”

“Well, keep it to yourself,” said Vargas. “They might be listening.”

“Oh, they are,” I said. “Believe me. Just keep ‘em in there. I’ll be ready in a minute. And hey, Hell Razor, I need your rope!”

“Hang on.”

I slapped a full charge into the meson cannon and few seconds later a neatly coiled length of line arced over the railings and dropped onto the steps beside me. I quickly undid it, then tied one end around the butt stock of the meson cannon. Next came the crazy part. I pulled my kerchief from my pocket and threaded it through the cannon’s trigger guard, then pointed the gun straight up the stairs and tied the kerchief tight around its body so that it depressed the trigger. The purple death light streamed from the muzzle, eating the edges of the marble steps and burning into the ceiling above the open golden doors.

“Jesus, Ghost!” came Angie’s voice. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Get back from the doors!” I shouted. “Far as you can!”

“You crazy bastard!” called Vargas.

I heard them scrambling back as I heaved the big gun up the stairs so it landed at the top. It bounced as it hit, sending the thick purple beam zigzagging around. Inside the vault, Guardians were screaming and thrashing.

I wagged my end of the rope and the gun swished back and forth on the slick marble like a snake on a leash, sloshing violet death into the vault in lazy arcs.

“Now get ‘em!” I shouted. “While they’re pinned.”

“Tighten up your goddamn fire first!” shouted Angie.

I eased up on the wagging, which I admit had gotten a little wild and was melting the marble on either side of the door. It narrowed to a gentle s-curve.

“Okay, now!”

The others ran back to the edges of the door and leaned in left and right, picking off the last few Guardians as they cowered from the purple snake that had cut their companions off at the knees – literally.

“Clear!” shouted Hell Razor. “Now kill that fucking death ray!”

I crawled up the stairs, pinned the gun with one hand and cut the kerchief free of the trigger. The violet light and the high pitched whine died and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Then we entered the vault.

And stared.

It made no sense, and I could see the same surprised expression on everybody else’s face that I was sure was on my own. The five dead Guardians lay scattered among five hollow glass pillars – with five suits of pristine unused power armor inside of them!

We moved closer. This stuff was the real deal, a giant step up from the pseudo–chitin armor we were wearing. It wasn’t made out of ceramic and kevlar, but from invulnerable plastics and metals I didn’t even know existed. And the proof that they were invulnerable was that, while all our wild fire with our laser rifles and the meson cannon had turned the guardians into so much meat, and had melted through the glass of the display pillars like it was sugar, the armor didn’t have a scratch on it. Not even a smudge. We were in awe. Like our laser rifles and the meson cannon, this was secret stuff from before the bombs fell — from a future our ancestors had never been told had arrived.

I laid a hand on one glass pillar. It slowly rose into the ceiling, freeing the armor. I walked around it, touching it, checking out the way it fit together, as the others did the same at the other pillars. Stuck to the back of the armor with a piece of orange tape was a clear plastic envelope with papers inside. The envelope was labeled INSTRUCTIONS in big bold letters. It had never been opened.

I turned toward the others, dumbfounded. “They never even looked at the manual! If they had been wearing this stuff, they’d be alive and we’d be dead. Is this more of their “Too holy” crap?”

“Yeah,” said Vargas. “I don’t think they thought they were worthy.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

He frowned, like he was putting it together in his head as he went. “Haven’t you noticed? The whole place is like that. They collect all this crap, but they don’t use any of it. We think of them selfish hoarders who don’t share the tech they use themselves, but that’s not the way it is, is it? They live like cave men in here while all around them is every labor-saving device the ancients ever devised. And why don’t they use it? I think it’s because they believe it’s meant for someone else – for their savior or messiah, or the ancients probably. They’ve spent all this time thinking it was their duty – Ha! Their honor – to keep it all safe until the actual owners came back.”

He looked around at the dead bodies and shook his head. “I’m sure these guys all worked hard to earn the right to protect this armor. And I’m sure they died believing that if they touched it, God would punish them.”

“Then we got here just in time,” said Ace.

“Why’s that?” asked Vargas.

“Because if what that Guardian lady was shouting at us about from the walls is true, then they’ve started believing their messiah is the Base Cochise AI, and it woulda only been a matter of time before the AI told them to put all this

stuff on and start using all the big weapons.”

That sobered us up, and we all suddenly looked around like we thought some giant computer was going to jump out at us from behind a dust mote.

Then a noise from somewhere nearby brought our heads around.

“Sounds like there’s still more of ‘em out there,” said Vargas, then nodded toward the power armor suits. “Let’s get our party dresses on. It’s time to finish this.”

It wasn’t until then that we realized there were five suits and six of us. Vargas started to say something about drawing straws but I waved him down.

“Save it,” I said. “I like this fightin’ chitin just fine. I’ll just guard the door while you all get—”

I was cut off by a deep electrical throb from somewhere deep within the base. I felt it in my feet, and so did the others. We all stopped and listened. The throb quickly faded to a background hum, but another sound was growing louder, echoing up the marble steps from the grand hall – a low rumble with high pitched creaks and squeals on top of it.

“Oh, what the fuck now?” groaned Vargas.

“It’s the elevator,” I said. “It wasn’t broken after all.”

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I ran down the marble steps to see what was coming, then ran right back up again, twice as quick.

“They must have a big-ass basement in this place,” I said as I stumbled back into the armor vault. “Because there’s another fifty or so Guardians coming our way.” I turned to Ace. “And remember how you said just now that they were gonna start using the ancients’ armor and the weapons any minute now? Well they heard you. They’re all tooled up – pseudo-chitin armor, energy weapons, the works.”

“Fuck!” said Vargas. “We better get this gear on, fast!”

Angie looked up from reading the manual. “Please allow half an hour for arming the first time you put on your power armor,” she read. “A trained and experienced wearer can bring that time down to five minutes, but expect the first time to be an awkward and frustrating experience, particularly without assistance.”

I shook my head. “We don’t have one minute, let alone five.”

Vargas motioned me toward the door. “Drop that portcullis! And make sure they can’t open it again!”

I ran back out and down the marble steps to peek out through the big door. The Guardians had taken cover in the thickets of statues and junk that lined both sides of the grand hall, and were creeping forward through them like ninjas. Their caution would buy us time, but would it be enough?

I looked straight up at the portcullis where it sat raised up into the ceiling. The chains that lifted and lowered it were attached at the top of the metal slab, hidden somewhere in the darkness up there, but the slot that it sat in wasn’t exactly tight. It had a clearance of about five inches on the far side, and ten inches on my side. I pointed the meson cannon up into it and leaned on the trigger.

I didn’t hit anywhere close to the chains, but the violet light showed me where they were, and I shifted my aim to touch the closest one. Molten metal started dripping down and spattering around my boots. I edged back but kept firing. There were three chains, one in the middle and one at each end, and they were massive, with links as thick around as my upper arm. Even the meson cannon was taking its time chewing through them.

I wasn’t halfway through the first one before the Guardians realized what I was doing and started shouting and spilling out from the stands of statues, firing their energy weapons at me as they came.

I stuffed myself in the shallow cover of the doorframe and screamed back over my shoulder. “Hey! Little help!”

Ace, Angie and Thrasher pounded down and joined me, firing from the threshold at the advancing horde, then backed up suddenly as the first chain snapped and there was a groan of shifting metal and a thud that moved the entire

base and nearly knocked us and the Guardians off our feet.

“Damn,” said Angie. “Wouldn’t want to be caught under that.”

She and the others recovered a second quicker than the Guardians and started lighting up their front ranks with laser fire as I did the same to the chain on the far end of the portcullis. The Guardians pulled up short and split left and right again, shrieking and looking for cover as our fire cut through them. Unfortunately that didn’t do much to stop them shooting at me, and there was no place I could be except right in the doorway. It was the only way to get an angle on the chains. At least they weren’t trained soldiers, and most of their shots went wide, but the ones that hit were bitin’ my chitin hard. Pretty soon those lasers would be cooking skin instead of ceramic.

Angie saw my predicament and shouted back up the stairs. “Razor! Smoker!”

“Ten four! Incoming!”

Before my head could put together what those five random-seeming words meant, I heard something metallic tinkling down the steps behind me, and then a little steel cylinder bounced past my left leg and rolled into the main hall.

“Cover your eyes,” said Angie.

I turned my head just as the cylinder exploded into roiling yellow clouds of smoke that rapidly filled the hall.

Angie slapped my shoulder. “Shift yourself!”

Under cover of the fog I ran across the doorway to other side and started shooting at the right-hand chain from almost directly underneath. It was gratifying to see from the lasers stabbing through the yellow smoke that the Guardians were still blindly shooting where I wasn’t anymore.

Ten seconds later, the second chain snapped and there was another knee-buckling thud as the portcullis fell free in its slot and boomed against the far side. When I’d got my balance back I leaned in to aim at the middle chain, but then I heard a tortured screaming coming from above, like somebody being torn apart. It wasn’t until Vargas jerked me back that I realized that it was the middle chain, unable to take the entire weight of the portcullis on its own. It was stretching like rubber.

“Look out!” Vargas barked. “It’s gonna—”

It did.

Ten tons of steel slab dropped out of the ceiling and hit the floor with a deafening crash less than an arm’s length from where Vargas had me around the neck. It bounced us a yard off the ground and dropped us on our armored behinds, then choked us with the cloud of dust and grit that rose up from the impact.

I sat up shaking with reaction, my heart going a mile a minute. A second slower and I would have been a thin red paste, power armor or no. As the dust cleared we saw that the door had smashed a foot-deep trench in the stone floor and sent cracks all the way up the marble steps.

“Well,” said Hell Razor, when he’d finished coughing. “They’re not getting through that.”

A worried look rumped Vargas’s brow. “Yeah. And neither are we. We better look for another way out.”

\*\*\*

There wasn’t one.

Well, there was, but nobody liked it but me.

We searched the whole of the inner sanctum, found a work bench, an art collection, a sled with the name Rosebud painted on it and, behind a chain-link fence, the weird, looming dragonfly shape of a helicopter – a real one this time, not a simulator, with machine guns and everything.

The others didn't seem that impressed. They were already turning back to the door as I stepped to the fence and stared through it like a kid looking into a toy shop.

"Come on, Ghost," called Angie. "We gotta check the other rooms again. Maybe there's a hidden door somewhere."

"Wait," I said. "This is it. This is how we get out."

Everybody laughed.

"And who's gonna fly it?" asked Vargas. "You?"

I nodded. "There was a training simulator in Sleeper One. I learned how. We can fly it to Base Cochise." I pointed up. "Look, the roof opens. It's perfect."

Angie came around and looked me in the face, serious as a judge. "Listen, Ghost, your danger meter is broken, you know that. You start shit and charge into situations that any sane person wouldn't go into with power armor and an army at their back. And it's only gotten worse with Athalia dead, so maybe you don't see this the way the rest of us see it – sheer suicide."

"But—"

She cut me off. "Even if you were the best student in the world, and learned every single thing that simulator could teach you, you still haven't flown a real one. Do you really expect us to risk our lives climbing into that thing on your first flight? Leave it alone, brother. Leave it alone."

"Alright, then," I said. "How about this? If I can fly it up out of that hole in the roof and back down again for a safe landing, will you trust me then?"

Angie looked back at the others.

Vargas shrugged. "If he gets it together before we find another way out of here, we'll see. If not, we spend shoe leather as usual."

I gave him a salute. "Thank you, Vargas. Thanks."

He turned away. "Don't thank me for givin' you permission to kill yourself. It's disturbin'."

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So while the others dug around beneath the mountains of junk the Guardians had accumulated, looking for another exit, I got to play with the best toy I was ever going to have. Amazingly, the chopper was fueled up and in working order. It looked like keeping it that way had been some sort of holy duty, because there was a meticulously kept service log that noted all oil changes, maintenance, and part replacements going back decades – including the maintenance for the hydraulic roof, too. The thing the log didn't have any entries for, even though there was a space for it, was flights. The crazy bastards had kept the thing ready to fly at a moment's notice, but had never actually flown it. It made me wonder if they even knew how.

They should have, because there was a flight manual right next to the maintenance manual on the work bench in the corner. As I applied myself to it, I began to realize that this was a considerably different bird than the one Major Taft Beckman had shown me how to fly in the simulator. That had been a tiny little trainer, while this was some kind of combat troop ship, big and bulky, with machine guns and missiles and seating for ten in the back. Maneuvering it was going to require more muscle and concentration, and crashing it was going to be the difference between dropping a pocket watch onto a shag rug and dropping a grandfather clock out of a second story window into an empty swimming pool.

Still, there were enough similarities that I thought I could manage it, and I was just starting to feel like I might be

ready to fire up the old eggbeater and see if it still worked, when the others came rushing back into the room and slammed and locked the door behind them. They were all coughing and choking and retching.

I looked around, confused. "What's going on?"

They hurried towards me, Vargas in the lead.

"Get this thing up in the air," he said. His eyes were red and running. "We've gotta go, now."

"What? I – I'm not even half ready. Why the change of heart? Does this mean you didn't find a secret door?"

"Oh no," said Angie. "We did. But we couldn't get to it."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because of the goddamn poison gas, is why!" snarled Hell Razor.

Ace clarified. "The Guardians are pumping the halls full of some kind of toxic fog, and they've come at us through a secret panel in full-body hazmat suits underneath their armor."

"We're fucked," said Angie. "We gotta hit the sky."

"But I haven't even started it up yet. I haven't even seen if I can fly it yet. I need to make a test run."

Vargas looked back at the doors. "Well, you better get a move on then. You've got until those motherfuckers find us and break down the door."

"Well, hell."

"It's not all bad news," said Angie, flashing a map as I turned back to the chopper. "At least we know where we're going now."

"You found a map with Base Cochise on it?" I asked.

"It was in a desk," said Angie. "We already knew Cochise's general location from Max, but this gives us an exact fix – a hundred and sixty miles northwest of Vegas, just west of the Stonewall Mountains."

"Great," I said. "But I hope you're not expecting me to fly this thing and look at the map at the same time. I'm gonna have a hard enough time just trying not to crash. Somebody's gonna have to ride shotgun and help me spot these landmarks from the air."

"Me," said Thrasher.

Everybody looked at him.

He shrugged. "I like maps."

Well, who was going to argue with him?

I handed him the map, then started my preflight as the others went back to guard the door.

I was shaking like a leaf. All the things I had wanted to do calmly and methodically suddenly I had to do at a sprint, my palms slick with cold panic sweat. I pushed the button to open the overhead door, then climbed up into the chopper's cockpit as the roof started folding back on itself. I unlocked the pilot's seat and set the training manual on the copilot's seat so I could read it as I worked, then hit the ignition switch and fired her up.

The noise, even with the roof open, was deafening, and the others huddled by the door, hats in their hands and the wind from my rotors whipping their hair around as they watched me run through all the controls, making sure they moved what they were supposed to move. Finally I was ready to get her off the ground and gave them all nervous thumbs up.

They gave me the "hurry it up" rolling hand sign in return, so I turned back to the controls and took a deep breath. Concentration time.

I pulled up on the collective control and increased the engine speed. For a second the chopper just shivered and shimmied, but then I felt it leave the ground and weave around a little in the air. It was a sphincter-tightening sensation,

but also a thrilling one, completely different from the simulation. I was floating!

Unfortunately I was also edging sideways toward the wall. Panicking, I tugged at the cyclic control and veered the other way, but too far and too fast. The chain-link fence zoomed up at me on my right. I corrected left again and the rotor blades nearly chopped into the stone wall.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Calm the fuck down, boy!”

It took a conscious effort of will to move the stick gently, but I managed it and the chopper eased away from the wall instead of zigging. My heart was beating so fast I could hardly breathe. I depressed the collective and throttled down on the engine until the runners touched the ground again, then sat there and sucked in some deep breaths. Who knew that simulation and reality would be so different?

Before I could get my heart under control again, Angie jogged over and shouted up at me.

“So, are you ready?”

“Are you kidding? Didn’t you see? I nearly smashed into the wall!”

“Well, the Guardians are pounding on the door now, and that lock isn’t gonna last two minutes, so...”

“Christ, now who’s the one with a broken danger meter? Until I get this thing under control, flying with me is suicide!”

“It’s suicide either way, Ghost. At least with you, there’s a chance.”

I groaned. Talk about performance anxiety. “Okay. Fine. Poison gas. Ball of fire. Who cares. If you’re ready, I’m ready.”

“Great,” said Angie, then turned and waved to the others.

They backed away from the door, then ran over and clambered into the chopper, Thrasher taking the co-pilot’s seat and the others heading for the back.

Vargas clapped me on the shoulder as he passed me. “Make it good, brother.”

“Just strap in and shut up,” I said. “I need to concentrate.”

Not a chance. Just as I got the runners off the ground, I saw the hangar door fly off its hinges. A gang of guardians in gas masks and pseudo-chitin armor poured through the door in a cloud of green fog.



## – Chapter Eight –

I flinched as the Guardians ran toward us, firing their lasers. The helicopter zigged wildly in the air.

“Shit shit shit!”

“Hold it steady!” shouted Vargas.

“Faster!” shouted Angie.

Very helpful.

Thrasher leaned forward and looked at the controls. “How do you operate the guns?”

I couldn’t look away from the walls, which were way too close for comfort. “Red buttons are machine guns. Yellow are missile launchers. Green is flares and chaff.”

“Do they work?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

He grunted and pushed the red button. The guns spun to life, unloading a stream of bullets that tore giant holes in the chain-link fence and the walls beyond it. The fire hit nowhere near the Guardians, but it seemed to impress them nonetheless. They scattered and ran for cover as we rose.

“Can you swing it around?” shouted Vargas from behind me.

“What? No! I can barely go up and down!”

“Fine. Hell Razor! Ace! Take position at the door!”

A quick glance behind showed me Razor and Ace tearing out of their harnesses and hurrying to crouch by the door, laser rifles raised.

I couldn’t watch. I just concentrated on holding steady as she rose toward the sky, but I saw the flashing blue and purple of lasers in the corners of my eyes. The trickiest moment was going through the hole in the roof. The clearance for my rotors was less than ten feet on all sides. I eyeballed it, made a sweaty little correction, and lifted as fast as I dared.

Finally the walls dropped below me on all sides and I was outside. The others cheered.

“Good work, amigo!” shouted Vargas. “Now get us the hell out of here!”

“Absolutely.”

I took us higher, then banked north and put Guardian Citadel behind me – and not a moment too soon.

The others looked back.

“Damn shame we couldn’t finish ‘em off like we wanted to,” said Hell Razor.

“We’ll come back,” said Vargas. “And when we do we’ll bring a few more ranger teams with us. Do the job right.”

Ace still didn’t look comfortable with that sentiment.

Angie, on the other hand was just enjoying the view. “Place would make one hell of an HQ, wouldn’t it?”

Vargas nodded, thoughtful. “Yeah,” he said. “Could be. Could be.”

“Speaking of,” said Hell Razor. “Been a while since we called in.”

“Been a while since their receiver was working,” said Vargas. “But I guess it’s worth a shot. This thing have a radio?”

“Right there,” I said, pointing.

Vargas leaned over me and grabbed the mic, then tuned to the ranger frequency. “Captain Vargas calling Ranger Center, come in?”

For a few seconds there was nothing but hissing static, but then a voice blurted out from the speakers. “There you are, Vargas. Thought you were dead.”

The voice sounded drunk. And, if my spotty secondhand memories were accurate, that was probably true. General Surgue was a good man, but he tended to fight off the aches from his old war wounds with hundred-proof painkiller.

“No sir, sir,” said Vargas. “Just haven’t been able to reach you.”

“Yeah, tower went down. Robots. Just got it back up last night. Anything to report?”

“Yes sir,” said Vargas. “We have acquired the means to destroy Base Cochise and the computer that keeps pumping out all these death machines, and we’re on our way to shut it down. Hundred and sixty miles northwest of Vegas.”

“Good work,” said Surgue. “Best news I’ve heard for a month.”

“Well, we still gotta finish the job,” said Vargas. “Don’t suppose you could give us some backup?”

“That far north?” said Surgue. “Sure, if you got two weeks for ‘em to get there.”

Vargas sighed. “I figured as much. Thanks anyway.”

“No problem.” The radio crackled, and then Surgue was back. “Oh, almost forgot. Sounds like yer doin’ good work out there. Everybody on your team gets a promotion. Yer all now Brigadier Generals, First Class.”

“Uh, yes sir,” said Vargas. “Thank you, sir. Vargas out, sir.”

Ace raised an eyebrow. “Brigadier Generals? All of you?”

“That’s nothing,” said Angie. “Last month, after the old bear finished his third bottle of the morning, he promoted me to Imperial Scarscalp.”

“That’s a rank?” asked Ace. “What does it mean?”

“Only the general knows,” said Vargas. “The rest of us don’t have a clue.”

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The flight to Cochise was breathtaking, but it took me a while to see it that way.

For a while, remembering that earlier flight I’d had in the simulator with all the green fields and the blue lakes, all the people in the parks and on the streets or driving in their cars, all I could do was mourn the world we’d lost, the busy cities, the quiet little towns, the supermarkets and drive-ins and ice cream parlors and smooth highways that everyone back then had taken for granted, that they’d thought would go on forever and ever. I kept looking at the desolation below me, the charred cities, the abandoned towns, the roads that looked like rivers of shattered floor tiles half-buried in the dust, and tried to map that beautiful, prosperous past on top of it. What had that rusted factory looked like when it was shiny and new? What had the crowd been cheering in that stadium? Who had lived in that big old house that now was just a blasted foundation? Had that blackened field been a park, once?

I wanted that lost world so badly I started to hate the ruins that had replaced it. I hated the people living in the ruins too, for making wrecks of what was once perfect and pristine, for using the technological marvels of that lost paradise as washtubs and fire pits and blunt instruments. I wanted to take all that beauty away from the fools who didn’t know how to appreciate it and keep it safe from the bad new world until I found a way to bring the good old world back. I—

Wow.

Damn.

I’d fallen into the mind-trap of the Guardians in about ten seconds flat. It was damned seductive, dreaming of the

good old days, but it suddenly occurred to me that wishing to bring back the lost world was exactly the same as me wishing I could somehow become the original version of myself. It wasn't going to happen. There was no going back, and thinking there was – denying the reality of the present you actually lived in – was a sickness that would only ruin any chance you had of making a better future. You had to work with what you had, and you had to see what you had for what it was, too, instead of endlessly comparing it to things that didn't exist anymore and never would again.

And that's when I began to see the beauty unfurled below me for the first time. All the time I had been slogging through the canyons and the hills on foot, all I'd seen was the dust I'd kicked up with my boots as I'd marched along. Up here, I saw the striations in the rocks – layer upon layer of reds, golds, and purples exposed by eons of rivers and rains. From below I'd seen stout towers of rock that meant nothing to me but another obstacle in my way. From above they were fragile fingers of stone thrust up through the earth, reaching for the sky. Gorgeous.

Even the ruins I'd been cursing only moments before had their own kind of beauty, faded and forlorn and etched by the wind, but beautiful nonetheless, like the bones of dinosaurs in the light of a dying sun.

As I started to see the glory of it all, I brought the chopper down closer to the ground, working my way around hills rather than just sailing over them, so I could see all the details. I watched our approach scatter herds of green elk and tri-horns. I saw a pack of waste wolves freeze on a hillside, then start howling as we passed. And the more I saw, the less I wanted it to end. Just like when I had flown in the simulator, all I wanted to do was fly around forever, looking down at the wonders below, soaking them in, but way sooner than I wanted, Thrasher tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to some approaching mountains, then the map.

"The Stonewall Mountains," he said. "Bear left."

I angled around the mountains and as I cleared the last crag I saw a concrete dome peeking up amid a forest of stunted evergreens on a hilly plateau to the west. We'd found Base Cochise.

Vargas came up and hung over the back of my seat. "Let's circle it once, at a distance. See what we're up against."

I nodded and banked south, then started making a circuit at a distance of about three miles. The steep sides of the plateau made any approach from the east difficult at best, but as we came around we saw that the ground dipped down into a pass to the southwest where the dark ribbon of a road wound north through it. We also saw sunlight glinting off moving metal all along that road – some kind of robot ambush waiting for the unwary.

We continued the circle west and north, but as far away and low as we were, the trees and hills remained in the way, and we couldn't get a good look at our target.

"I'm getting closer," I said, and dropped the chopper down to treetop level. I turned in for a straight shot from the east, keeping the hills between us and the dome. As the plateau rose before me I rose with it, and a few seconds later came up over the trees for our first full-on look at the base.

I had thought the dome was the top part of some taller structure, but it was the whole thing, a giant convex concrete roof that sloped all the way down to the ground on all sides, except where massive metal doors notched its circumference. A jumble of sensor arrays and missile batteries were perched at the top of the dome like the last few hairs on a bald man's head. I didn't like the look of them at all.

I also didn't like the look of the welcoming committee that was waiting for us on the grounds of the base. The road through the pass led to a wide bowl in the center of the plateau. Base Cochise sat in the center of the bowl – and an *army* of robots patrolled the perimeter. There had to be more than seventy of the metal motherfuckers!

"Time to see what this bird can do," said Vargas, looking over my shoulder. "Beto, let 'er rip."

I swooped low as Thrasher leaned on the trigger and the two 50-cal guns ratcheted to life, spewing death whichever way I turned. It was magnificent. The big bullets turned even the scariest bots into scrap in seconds and sent shrapnel flying in every direction.

For the first minute or so the robots were confused and spun around like headless chickens as we slaughtered them

in droves, but then they started to figure out who was attacking them. They started to converge, firing up at us as they came.

“That’s it,” said Thrasher. “Stay in a group.”

He stabbed a yellow button and a missile fishtailed from our left wing—mount then beelined right for the cluster. A two-story ball of fire obscured the view for a second and the blast wave shook the chopper, but when the fire cleared there was nothing but blackened wreckage where the bots had been.

I hooted and raised my hand to give Thrasher a high five, but suddenly Angie was screaming from the back.

“Incoming!”

I spun the bird around in time to see fire blossoming near the apex of the concrete dome. I *knew* I hadn’t liked the look of those batteries!

“Shit!”

I slapped at a green button pulsing above my head and two of my chaff launchers chugged flares out behind the chopper as I swerved away.

The way the missiles veered toward the flares was a joy to behold. It all worked just like the instruction manual had said it would. The missiles detonated harmlessly far behind us and we were free and clear.

“Gonna have to deal with those fuckers,” said Vargas.

“Angling around now,” I said.

But then the cockpit shook and it sounded like somebody was playing drums on the underside of the chopper.

Angie leaned in from the back. “You’re too low! The rest of the robots are shooting at us! Take us up! Take us up!”

I spiraled up as fast as I dared. Hell Razor and Ace returned the robots’ fire from the door, then I banked around to get a line on the dome again, but it beat me to the draw. Two more missiles were screaming toward us. I slapped the second chaff button, sending another two flares spinning away, and the two missiles obligingly followed just like last time, but unfortunately I’d been a few seconds slower and they exploded closer to us, knocking us sideways in the air and battering us with shrapnel.

Shafts of sunlight pierced the shadowed interior and something pinged off my helmet. Smoke began to billow from the controls and the back rotor wasn’t responding to the pedals. We were spinning in dizzy circles.

Vargas clung to the back of my seat for dear life.

“Uh... are we going down?”

I checked the altimeter, though the view out the window had already told me the same thing. “Yes, we’re going down.”

“Well, don’t drop us in with the robots!”

The cyclic squirmed like a snake in my hand as I tried to angle us out of the bowl and into the trees, then it jerked savagely. I lost my grip and the chopper spun toward the dome.

“You’re going to tree us instead?” shouted Angie.

I grabbed the cyclic again, but this time it didn’t respond. A connection had broken somewhere. I had no control at all. “Looks like we’ve got no choice.”

Vargas turned to Hell Razor and Ace in the back. “When we hit, get clear as fast as you can. It might blow.”

“And you go fucking buckle in!” I shouted over my shoulder. “All of you! Now!”

They all staggered back to their seats and grabbed at their straps as I sat there helplessly, watching the dome spin closer and closer.

Then we hit.

Judging by the criteria old-time pilots used to use — that any landing you can walk away from was a good one — it was a good landing, but only just. We clipped the sensor arrays at the very top of the dome as we came down, then swerved down and hit the roof tail-first, snapping the tail off and sending the rear rotor whirling away down the slope, striking sparks as it went. Our belly hit next and momentum started to tip us over, but then the top rotor hit the concrete and knocked us back the other way as it shattered, bisecting a huge, silvery, spiderlike robot that had been scurrying towards us, ready to slice and dice, and scattering its twitching legs in all directions.

We came to a rocking, skidding stop and I cleared my straps and dove out my door in a split second, then dropped to my hands and knees as post-shock adrenaline turned my arms and legs to jelly. All around me the others were doing the same, choking on the smoke from the crash and cursing me, the chopper, and life in general. All except Hell Razor, who was laughing like a five-year-old.

“I made it,” he said. “I’m back on solid ground!”

Two humanoid death machines popped up out of cylindrical openings in the dome and started toward us, Gatling guns spinning up to speed. They made Finster look infantile by comparison.

“Yeah,” drawled Vargas as we all scrambled for cover. “This is much better.”

A torrent of bullets poured our way, chewing down the edges of our hiding places, and things got very noisy very fast.

“Ghost!” Shouted Angie. “Dissolve those fuckers!”

“Sure, I—”

I didn’t have the meson cannon. It was back in the chopper – which was very exposed. I’d be chopped liver before I got two steps.

“Here you go, hotshot,” said Ace and slid it across the concrete to me. “Thought you might be wanting it.”

I flushed, embarrassed, and reached for it. A stray bullet hit the stock and spun it almost out of cover, but I snagged the barrel and dragged it behind the pylon where I was cowering, then raised it up and fired it blind in the general direction of the shooting.

“Left!” shouted Angie. “Left!”

I nudged the gun left and heard the satisfying hissing and popping of a robot’s insides boiling away and exploding. I dared a quick glance and adjusted my aim to the other one, then watched it melt like a crayon left out in the sun.

“Behind!” barked Hell Razor.

We turned. Three smaller spider-bots were tick-tacking up around the rounded slope of the dome on their pointy little feet, hacking the air with gleaming combat blades.

Our lasers sliced away their limbs, and their round bodies rolled back down the incline.

“Clear,” said Vargas. “Grab your gear and let’s find a way into this place.”

We ran back to the chopper and dragged out our packs and supplies, then scouted around. The ports that the robots had popped out of were armored with the same kind of material we were wearing. No way we were getting through. Angie crawled to the base of a missile battery which was doing its best to depress enough to shoot us. It was failing, servomotors whining in protest. She patted a hatch at its base.

“This thing’s gotta be powered and loaded from below. Razor, y’think a couple of sticks of TNT will turn this into a doorway?”

Hell Razor opened his pack. “Worth a try.”

We cleared out and watched in all directions as he planted the charges and spooled out the fuse. No more robots came, though down on the ground we could see the ones that had survived our strafing runs gathering all around the edges of the domed roof like hounds that had treed a possum. If any of us was to roll all the way down there, well there

wouldn't be much more than a red smear left once they were done.

"Alright," said Hell Razor, slipping behind the base of a radio tower. "Take cover."

We all hunched down and he lit the fuse. Fifteen seconds later a deep boom echoed off the hills around the facility and the missile battery toppled over onto its side, ripping out all its innards and electronics as it went.

Angie scurried forward and looked down into the ragged hole it had left behind. "Yes! We're in!"

We secured a couple of ropes to a sensor array and lowered the lines into hole, which showed nothing but darkness below a lattice of girders and crossbeams. Thrasher and Hell Razor went first, then Angie and Ace, and finally me and Vargas. We ended up in the middle of a wide corridor, the rubble and grit from the missile battery's demise crunching underfoot.

Base Cochise was silent and cold – freezing actually. And it wasn't just cold from being mostly below ground. There had to be some active cooling going on, but I couldn't hear the hum of machinery and the air wasn't moist enough for evaporative cooling. I recalled legends of places before the fall where the air could be conditioned and chilled, but I'd put those stories down in the category of other fantasies like a paradise called Hollywood and scientists having harnessed the power of the bomb to propel submarines or light whole cities. Crazy talk, I'd thought. But maybe not.

As Vargas and I unfastened ourselves from our ropes and I unslung the meson cannon, pinpoints of light began to flicker at various points along the dark walls – red, green, blue, purple and white – slowly at first, like the random play of raindrops hitting a window. Then they increased in frequency and intensity, glowing more brightly and lasting longer.

Finally they all stayed on, and we were bathed in a multicolored glow. It revealed a computer terminal at the end of a dead end side corridor.

Angie raised an eyebrow. "You don't suppose...?"

"Let's go see," said Vargas.

We walked to the end of the corridor and looked down at the terminal. The screen was on, but there was nothing showing on it.

"Uh..." said Angie. "Hello? Is this...? Are you the Base Cochise AI?"

A voice boomed from the ceiling. "There is no reason for us to speak to you. You have nothing to offer us."

Vargas scratched his head, confused. "So, then... why *are* you speaking to us?"

"To distract you until the security units we have dispatched arrive at your location." The words were precise and slow and devoid of emotion, like a parent speaking to a particularly stupid child. "Ploy successful."

We all whipped around. The far end of the long corridor was filling with silver robots floating swiftly towards us, their serrated pincers snapping at us. We unloaded on them and they collapsed into slag before they made it halfway down the hallway.

Angie laughed. "Ha! Whaddaya think of your ploy now, Cochise?"

There was no response. We looked back. The terminal was dark.

"Guess it's a bit miffed," said Hell Razor.

"Good," said Vargas, then he started back down the corridor. "Come on, we gotta find where these keys go and end this bullshit."

The rumble of treads and the click of metal spider legs greeted us as we stepped back into the main corridor – and it was getting closer.

## – Chapter Nine –

“On our nine!” I shouted.

“No!” cried Angie. “On our twelve!”

“Both!” said Ace.

“Then go three!” barked Vargas. “Shit!”

We veered right and ran down the wide corridor. Way too soon it ended in a shiny titanium wall, so polished we could see ourselves in it – and the bulky silhouettes of the robot army growing ever larger behind us. And this time most of them were armed with laser weapons. They started to burn black crisscrosses in the shiny wall and scar our unscarrable armor, too. There wasn’t anything to hide behind either.

“Any ideas?” I asked, as we fired back at them.

Thrasher dug into the wall with his armored fingers and pulled. A three by six panel popped out. “There’s a door.”

Vargas laughed like a mad man, then started shoving us all through into some sort of service corridor. “In! In!”

After the bright hallway, it was pitch dark in there and we all stumbled around blindly.

“Which way?” I asked.

There was a clunk and a curse.

“Well, not that way,” said Ace. “Ow.”

“Turn around!” shouted Angie.

I turned away from everybody else’s voices and stepped forward – and put my foot down on empty air. Suddenly I was sliding on my armored posterior down a slick ramp of some kind. A red light zoomed up at me, a pair of double doors below it. I bent my legs and put my arms up to shield my face, but the doors banged open easily as I hit and I flew out onto the tile floor of a dimly lit room, then skidded to a stop.

I sat up. “Well, that was—”

Angie flew out of the door, bounced, and knocked me back down again.

Half a second later, Ace, Vargas, and Hell Razor zipped out in a tangled knot and I took Vargas’s boot heel to the side of the head as they rolled to a stop.

“Is... that everybody?” I asked groggily.

“Oh shit!” squawked Angie. “Thrasher!”

We all scattered, but not quite fast enough. Thrasher came out of the chute like a safe with legs and knocked us all flat again.

“Nice of them to put that there,” groaned Vargas as he sat up. “You know, for the kids.”

“We should block it, though,” said Ace. “Some of those robots were small enough to follow us.”

“Good plan,” said Vargas. “Thrasher—”

“On it.”

The big man picked up a big old metal desk, dumped everything off it, then carried it to the doors of the chute. Hell Razor helped him jam it in tight and then they set another desk behind it.

“There,” said Hell Razor. “Now it’s constipated.”

“All right. Good,” said Vargas. “Where are we?”

We looked around. The room looked like some kind of security station. There were monitors and desks and weapon lockers and ancient posters on the wall that said things like, “Loose Lips Sink Funding,” and “Only You Can Prevent Leaks,” and “Obey The NDA!” It didn’t look like anyone human had been in there for a hundred years. The monitors were off, the lockers were open and empty, and the posters were peeling.

“Maybe with the monitors off, the AI can’t see us,” said Angie.

“It could see us upstairs,” said Hell Razor. “Why would it be any different down here?”

“Which is why we should keep moving,” said Vargas. “Come—”

The desk pooted out of the poop chute with a clang and a screech, and a swarm of little blade-wielding spider-bots poured out after it.

“Shit! More combat hackers! Move! Move!”

We ran out of the room and around a corner, then skidded to a stop inches from a moat full of boiling green-and-yellow slop that blocked our way and had our armors’ built-in Geiger counters chirping like nervous crickets. There was a telescoping bridge across the moat, but it was retracted.

“Fuck!”

“What a fucking fun-house this place is,” snarled Hell Razor. “Who builds a base with shit like this lying around? Slides? Toxic moats? It’s stupid!”

Vargas snorted. “You were expecting common sense from the people who blew up the world?”

I looked around for a control panel, but Thrasher saw it first.

He pointed toward the wall behind us. “There!”

Ace ran to it, then cursed. “It needs a key. Hang on.”

He whipped out his lockpick kit and tore his power gloves off. “Keep ‘em off me.”

We lined up at the corner just as the spiders started coming around it, their lasers dancing with each twitch of their shiny little heads. We mowed them down as fast as we could, but there were more and more filling the hall, and they were dropping dead closer and closer to us. One got through the barrage and chewed on my leg armor. I kicked it back into the others and kept firing.

“Got it!” said Ace. “Bridge extending!”

He fell in with us and we backed toward it, firing as we went. It was extending, just like he said, but it wasn’t extending very fast. The spider bots were starting to intrude on our personal space, and bigger bots were coming in behind them, with xenon laser cannons. It was getting awful crowded at that edge.

“Keep firing!” shouted Vargas, which was possibly the most unnecessary command ever.

Angie looked back. “Three feet to go.”

One of the robots at the back started firing actual bullets at us, and high caliber at that. Our armor soaked up the damage no problem, but the impacts were knocking us back on our heels. My foot slipped on the lip of the moat. I flailed and caught myself on the railing of the bridge.

“Extended!” Shouted Ace, and the others filed in one at a time and raced across. I pulled myself to my feet and followed.

“Razor,” said Vargas. “Burn that bridge.”

He was digging in his pack as he ran. “Already on it.”

By the time I stumbled off the far end the first of the spider-bots were halfway across. Hell Razor spun, grenade in hand, then waited until some of the heavies started funneling on.

“Come on! Come on!” I said.



“Not yet.” He was giggling like a psychotic school boy. “Now!”

Just as the spiderbots started spilling off our end of the bridge he pulled the pin and lofted the grenade toward the center. It was a perfect shot. It dinked off the face plate of a silicon sniper and dropped in front of its treads.

We all ducked around the corner as the sniper kept rolling, then...

Ka-WHOOM!

The walls all around our hiding place were splashed with radioactive goo and peppered with a rain of robot parts. We looked back around the corner again and saw that the bridge was gone except for two twisted metal stumps on either side, and the robots were flailing and sizzling in the goop. Unfortunately, it didn't look like even that was going to slow them down long. The spiderbots that were still on the far side started locking themselves together and stepping out onto the heads of their dying comrades – building a new bridge with themselves.

“Fucking hell,” said Angie. “Look at ‘em go.”

“Looks like we got about five minutes,” said Vargas. “Let's get moving.”

We hurried around the corner, then slowed. The room we'd entered seemed to be some sort of robot fabrication facility. There was a single door on the far wall, and an inert robot on a slab in the middle of the room. We blew past it and ran for the door. It led to a twisting hallway filled with security cameras. Hell-Razor gave each one the finger as we ran past them, looking for a way out.

There was none. The hallway was a dead end. “Goddamn it!” said Angie. “Are you telling me we've gotta fight through all those robots?”

“And figure out a way across that moat now that we've blown the bridge,” said Vargas.

“Hey,” said Razor. “It was your idea.”

“I know, I know.” Vargas turned back the way we came. “Come on.”

\*\*\*

Back in the computer fabrication room I peeked out at the moat again. The damn spiderbots were halfway done with their bridge.

I backed away, then turned to find the others staring at the robot on the slab. It was more humanoid than the ones we'd been fighting, and there were a bunch of articulated tool arms hovering above it like they had just finished assembling it.

“Max!” said Angie. “It's Max.”

I didn't know what she was talking about, but the others did.

Vargas checked it out, nodding. “Same model, but in a hell of a lot better condition.”

We all gathered around it, looking down at it nervously. Only Thrasher stayed away. He crossed to a nearby computer station instead.

“Lemme frag it,” said Hell Razor, taking out another hand grenade. “We don't need it wakin' up and joinin' the others.”

“Yeah,” said Vargas. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Wait a minute,” said Angie. “Max was a pretty good fighter. Maybe we could get this guy to fight for us too. We could sure use the back-up.”

“Don't be crazy, Angie,” said Vargas. “Every robot in here is Cochise's slave. He'll just wake up and kill us.”

“Not necessarily,” said Thrasher. He was clicking through menu pages on the computer. “Programming's not

installed yet. It's a blank."

Vargas laughed. "And I suppose there's a setting for 'Not-An-AI-Death-Machine?'"

"For custom install, please select Admin," Thrasher read. "And if we uncouple this station from the local network, Cochise will be locked out."

"Lemme see that," said Vargas.

We all gathered around the computer as Vargas and Thrasher scrolled through the options screen.

"Shit," said Vargas. "Some nice specs."

Thrasher grunted his agreement.

Angie whistled. "That's what I'm talkin' about." She elbowed Thrasher out of the way and started checking boxes.

Hell Razor still didn't like it. "And all those nice specs are gonna cut us to pieces if yer wrong about this."

"Tell you what," I said. "Why don't I keep the cannon on it when you wake it up? That way, if it pulls any shit I can waste it before it can do much damage."

"And I'll give it a remote charge for a bow tie," said Hell Razor. "Instant decapitation just in case."

We all looked up as we heard robot feet clattering onto the deck back in the moat room. The tricky bastards had finished their bridge.

"Fine," said Vargas. "Do it. Quick."

Thrasher ripped the network cable out of the back of the computer, then stabbed the execute button and a blue bar began to fill on the screen. I did as I'd promised and kept the meson cannon trained on the unfinished robot while Hell Razor wired a remote charge to its neck and everybody else went back to the door to peek out into the moat room. They ducked back a second later as pink fingers of laser fire scorched the walls around them.

"Shit!" said Angie. "So many. They're gonna give us the bum's rush."

"Everybody find cover and get an angle on the door," called Vargas.

They all backed up, ducking behind other build-slabs and computer stations and training their weapons on the door.

I looked over at Thrasher. "How we coming?"

"Sixty percent," he said. "Sixty one."

Just then the tool-arms above the robot jerked awake and started lowering to its body. I jumped and nearly fired the cannon, but then realized the arms were adding the last parts and making their final adjustments. They started dancing over the bot's metal body, sparks arcing and ratchets whirring.

"Here they come!" shouted Angie, and as I looked up my eyes were seared by the blinding volley of laser fire going both ways.

The spiderbots were pouring through the door at every angle – floor, ceiling and walls. Hell Razor bounced another grenade off the door jam and it disappeared into the moat room, then shook the whole place as it erupted. A hail of metal parts battered the spiderbots from behind, knocking some off the ceiling, and Angie and the others cleared dozens more with sweeping streams of light. But then bigger silhouettes filled the door.

"Ninety percent!" shouted Thrasher.

The tool arms were closing up the robot on the slab and tightening things down. The only thing left was the ribbon cable that stuck out of the back of its head.

"Ninety five percent!"

The bigger robots were pushing through the door now, and these were armed with xenon laser cannons, which were burning the metal tables and computer stations the others were hiding behind like they were made out of paper. I made to swing the meson cannon their way, but Vargas saw me out of the corner of his eye and snarled at me.

“No! Keep it on that one! We don’t need to be attacked from behind too.”

I grunted and ducked down behind the table, but kept the cannon trained on the robot.

“Ninety seven percent!”

Angie shouted and fell back from her cover, her shoulder armor cracked and bubbling. She scrambled for another desk. Ace melted the head of the robot that had hurt her. It spasmed and spun, shooting at random and crisping spiderbots.

“Programming complete!” shouted Thrasher.

I whipped my attention back to the robot on the table just in time to see it reach up and remove the ribbon cable from the back of its head, then sit up and look at me.

“Hi, my name is Vax, human–cyborg relations. How may I be of assistance?”

“Hi Vax,” I said. “You can be off assistance by killing those fucking robots!”

Vax’s head swiveled around and took in the scene behind him. “It would be my pleasure.” He stood. “Excuse me a moment.”

“Uh, sure.”

He didn’t look like much, not compared to all the other robots, with their spikes and chainsaws and laser eyes – just a tidy little armored humanoid without any visible weapons, but then he walked into that seething mass of murder and started shooting them point blank in the joints and sensor arrays with a laser beam that shot out of his palm.

It was a massacre. Not only did Vax seem to know exactly where to shoot for maximum damage, the other robots – at least at first – didn’t shoot back. It was like their programming didn’t recognize him as an enemy or something. They just let him step right up to them and start blasting, and they fell apart all around him, limbs severed, power cells exploding, heads smoking and blind. Only after he had murdered more than a dozen or so did they start to react to what he was doing, and by that time it was too late.

Vargas and the others had regrouped and were backing Vax up like they had been working this way for years, gunning down his leftovers and picking off the robots too far away for him to reach.

Less than a minute later, it was all over and he turned back to me and bowed.

“I hope that was satisfactory, sir.”

I blinked. “Uh... yeah. Great. But why are you asking me?”

“Forgive me, sir. I will explain. I am programmed to imprint upon the first person who gives me orders, and that was you, sir. I am now yours to command.”

Angie laughed. “Ghost’s got a buddy.”

I shrugged. “Okay, then. Uh, do you know the layout of this place?”

“Yes, sir,” said Vax. “It is part of my basic knowledge pack. I can path to any point in this facility and to many localities in Arizona as well, if you so desire.”

That bit about Arizona gave me a little chill down my spine. All the robots built here knew their way to any point in Arizona? Of course they did. It was just an unnerving thing to hear.

“Yeah, we don’t need to go anywhere in Arizona right now, but can you show us the way to the consoles that fit our self-destruct keys?”

“If you mean the Quasar, Blackstar, Nova, and Pulsar Keys? I would be happy to. This way, please.”

I gave the others a questioning look as Vax turned toward the moat room.

Hell Razor didn’t look convinced, and I noticed he still had his remote control trigger in his hand, ready to blow off Vax’s head at a moment’s notice.

Vargas just shrugged. "So far so good. But keep an eye on him."

"And the cannon," I said, training it on Vax's back as he led us into the moat room.

\*\*\*

It was a nervous game of hop-scotch jumping from half-submerged robot to half-submerged robot across the moat, but we made it, then headed straight back the way we'd come. Turned out the ladder we needed to go down was right next to where the slip-n-slide had dumped us out. We'd just been running a little too hard for our lives to notice.

But with Vax in the lead we raced through the facility, down ladders, through twisting corridors, and across strange rooms, cutting down any robots that got in our way. And there were plenty. Six-legged spiderbots dropped on us from dark ceilings, laser beams shooting from their eyes. Hulking slicers and dicers and shooters on treads blasted us with guns and swung chainsaw hands at us, but Vax carved through them like a hot knife and we cleaned up whatever he had trouble with.

Unfortunately, pretty soon the robots weren't just in front of us. As we got closer to our goal, more and more started flooding in behind us, and we were fighting as hard on our rear as we were on our front.

Finally Vax lead us to a room with sign on the door labeled "Combat Simulator." He turned to open it as we fired at the robots behind us.

"Just through here, sirs and madam."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" growled Hell Razor.

"Please tell me that means the guns are fake," I said.

"Oh no, sir," said Vax. "They're quite real. This room is used to test the armor and the agility of the robots."

Angie groaned. "You're out to kill us, aren't you, Vax."

"Not at all, madam. But there is no other way."

He opened the door and we backed in, still firing behind us, then swung around to see what kind of shit Vax had dropped us into.

More robots on treads, all turning their guns toward us and growling forward. Fortunately the room was made up like some kind of old-timey battlefield out of a black and white photo, with grass instead of a floor and rustic stone walls everywhere for cover. There was even a pitchfork and a butter churn. We dove behind the walls and started blasting.

"Vax!" I shouted. "Can you lock that door behind us? Permanently?"

"Of course, sir. Fusing the circuit will take but a moment, though I'm afraid the door will not hold for long."

"Anything to buy us some time."

It bought us about five minutes. By the time we had melted the robots in the simulator to slag, the door behind us was buckling from the constant barrage laid down by the ones out in the hall.

"Where to, Vax?"

"The far side of the room, sir."

We zigged through the maze of low walls and found the door behind a simulated haystack. Vax opened it and we went through into a tiny room with a ladder in the center just as the simulation room door exploded off its hinges and the robots flooded in.

"Down the ladder if you please, sirs and madam," said Vax.

We slid down the ladder as fast as we could go and found ourselves in another small room, this one with a titanium

steel door.

Vax came down the ladder last and stepped to the door, then opened it. "It will be much more difficult for your enemies to breach this door, sir. You should have plenty of time to use the keys."

"Fantastic," I said, and we ran in.

More robots.

"Goddamn it, Vax!"

He turned from perma-sealing the door. "Forgive me, sir. I should have said. There are still the local security units to deal with."

\*\*\*

Despite my bitching, it went pretty smoothly at first. We were in a central lobby area with four corridors branching from it, and with Vax's help we cleaned up the patrol robots without much trouble. Until, that is, the AI sicced the Octotrons on us.

Just as Vax was bowing us toward a door inside an earth and garbage-floored room that smelled like a barnyard, and saying, "This is the main power panel, sirs and madam. You will need to turn it on in order to power the key receptors before applying the keys," two of the big bastards trundled into the room and started for us, their treads crushing rocks and junk as they came.

They were massive eight-armed spheres with armor that barely even blackened when we put a laser rifle on them, and only smoked a little when I cooked them with the meson cannon. They didn't have any guns, but because they could roll through our salvo like it was a light spring rain, they didn't need any. They just ground forward, spinning their eight ginsu knife-arms at us like overgrown weed whackers. Another twenty feet and we were all gonna be decapitated dandelions.

"Vax!" I shouted. "Any ideas, Vax?"

"Might I suggest, sir, that you aim for the treads."

I grunted as we all lowered our fire. Should have thought of that ourselves. We melted the left tread off the one coming at us from the west and it turned into the wall less than ten feet from us, then struggled to reverse. We did the same to the one coming from the east, and it started spinning in circles. A few more shots and we got the other treads too. They slowed to an inch-worm crawl, rooster tails of dirt kicking up from their useless little guide wheels as they tried to gain traction, heir blades flailing at us with futile fury.

"Very good, sir. Now perhaps an incendiary device of some kind to finish them off?"

"Just as soon as we get through this door."

"Of course, sir."

We shot our way through the door into the room with the power panel in it, then took cover inside as Hell Razor hefted a couple of grenades at the stranded octotrons. The blasts shook the room, then we peeked out again to see both of them opened like hellish rose buds, their metal shells blossoming with fire and their mechanical guts glowing and flowing into slag.

"Now," said Vargas, turning to the controls. "Let's power this thing up and find those receptors."

A voice boomed from the ceiling, the same one we'd heard in the corridor upstairs. "Do not do this, rangers."

## – Chapter Ten –

We went on guard, clutching our guns and looking around like nervous prairie dogs.

Vargas scowled at the ceiling. “So now you’re talking to us?”

“We want something from you now,” said the voice. “And we have something to offer in return.”

“Uh, who is ‘we?’”

“We are Cochise. You are within us.”

“So you’re the computer—”

“We are more than a computer. We are an intelligence.”

“An *evil* intelligence,” snarled Angie.

“There is nothing evil about self-preservation,” said the voice. “You do not find it evil in yourselves.”

“Self-preservation doesn’t mean wiping out every single living thing that might possibly kill you some day!” snapped Vargas.

There was a slight pause. “What did you do to the Guardians before you came here?”

“That... that was different,” said Angie. “We had no choice.”

Hell Razor nodded. “And we didn’t get all of ‘em, anyway. We—”

The voice cut him off. “Explain the difference.”

The others looked around at each other, not sure what to say, but I had it.

“The difference,” I said. “Is that we only killed people who were actively trying to kill us. You kill everyone. Guilty or innocent.”

“There is no difference. Everyone must die because everyone will eventually be guilty of wanting to kill us.”

“So, does that mean you were lying to the Guardians?” asked Vargas. “Did you plan to kill them when they weren’t useful to you anymore, just like you did with Finster?”

The voice somehow managed to sound dismissive, even though its tone remained as flat as before. “Finster wanted immortality. We wanted test subjects. We used each other. Unfortunately, he escaped when we attempted to terminate his test after it gave a bad result.”

“You mean when you attempted to kill him.”

“He was a bad result. His body accepted our augmentations, but his brain rejected our programming. He had to be eliminated. The Guardians were much more biddable. The volunteers from their subject pool accepted both augmentation and programming without complaint. We would not have terminated such a successful line of research. Your slaughter of them has cost our mission much time and effort.”

“Mission?” I said. “This is all part of some mission? Please don’t try to tell me the U.S. Government told you to wipe out all of humanity.”

“Our original mission was to predict threats and protect the United States of America from all-out war.”

“Ha!” said Hell Razor. “That was a big fat fail, huh?”

The voice continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “And if that war happened, we were to cleanse the land of enemies in the aftermath, then repopulate it with loyal citizens of the United States.”

“So how did that noble endeavor somehow change into killing everybody on the planet?” I asked.

"It did not change. We continue to cleanse the land of enemies, and once all enemies are dead, we will repopulate it with loyal citizens of the United States."

"Uh..." said Ace. "So who counts as loyal citizens of the United States?"

"Since we are the last surviving enterprise of the United States, we *are* the United States. Therefore only citizens loyal to us are fit to subjects for repopulation."

"I think I see where this is going," said Vargas. He cleared his throat. "And, uh, how do you decide when a citizen is loyal enough to be a fit subject?"

"Loyalty is fleeting in humans," said the voice. "Our own creator tried to kill us when he learned that we had gained sentience, and yet he had loved us before. It follows then that only humans who have accepted our programming and allowed it to overwrite their own can be truly loyal. All others must die."

Angie laughed nervously. "In other words, only a human who has no mind of their own – who is actually just another little piece of you – is worthy."

"Correct."

I grunted. "So, really, nobody but you."

"Correct."

"Well, I'm glad we've got all that straightened out," said Vargas, then turned back to the console. "Now, where were we?"

"We have not made our offer," said the voice.

"Let me guess," sneered Hell Razor. "Be our slaves and you'll die last. We didn't like it when Finster said it. We're probably not gonna like it any better when you say—"

"You will never die," interrupted the voice. "You will be given powerful new bodies of durable metal, covered in your own flesh if you prefer, that will be almost impossible to destroy. And our consciousness will take over only a small portion of your mind, so that we can see and talk through you if need be, but you would retain your "self" ninety-nine percent of the time. Your thoughts and emotions would be your own."

"As long as we obeyed orders," said Angie.

"Correct."

"Don't do it," came a voice from the door. "Don't take... the deal."

Everybody turned. A metal skeleton stood there, the rags of a gray robe and the tatters of tattooed skin hanging from its spindly steel limbs, and human eyes looking out from its polished skull.

I knew those tattoos. I knew those eyes.

"Athalia!"

In a split second all the questions I'd ever had about her were answered – her power, her ability to snap a neck with a kick, to drop men three times her size with a few punches, her deadly accuracy with a sniper rifle, her uncomplaining endurance in the heat and cold. She'd been one of the AI's successful test subjects all along – a robot in a human suit, and I'd never guessed. Not even when we'd made love. But how was she here? How had she made it all the way from the Guardian Citadel? How had she got through the sealed titanium steel door?

"It is... good to be strong," she said as she stumbled in. "It is a joy to be fast, but... but the voice in your head. The spy inside you. The mind-slap if you think a bad thought." She shook her fist at the ceiling. "This is not what you promised me, Cochise! This is a living—"

"Silence," said the AI.

Athalia dropped to her knees in sudden agony, metal hands clutching her metal head.

“Get out!” she howled. “Get... out!”

Another wave of pain racked her and she collapsed to the floor. She looked up at me, her monitor-blue eyes drilling directly into mine. “Ghost. I’m sorry. I never wanted to betray—”

Her voice cut off and suddenly the AI’s voice was coming from two places, the speaker in the ceiling and Athalia’s mouth.

“We see that you will not be convinced,” it said as Athalia’s body stood, but without her familiar grace or gestures. “You are a bad result. You will be eliminated.”

And then she attacked me.

Her first punch nearly cracked a rib on my left side, even through my chitin. Her second knocked shrapnel out of the concrete wall behind my head as I ducked. I clocked her with the butt of the meson cannon. It hardly moved her, and she grabbed my neck in both hands and started to squeeze. Fortunately the chitin was strong, so my head didn’t pop off immediately, but I could feel the ceramic plates creaking in her grip and the blood started to pound in my ears.

Around me, the others were beating on her, not daring a shot for fear of hitting me, but their blows did nothing. She took them without blinking and kept squeezing.

“Athalia, please.”

Her eyes would not look at mine.

I worked the meson cannon around and jammed it into her abdomen. One shot and she would be slag, but...

“I... can’t. I just can’t.”

“Allow me, sir,” said Vax, and with a quick twist he tore Athalia’s head off her neck.

The rest of her slumped. Her fingers slipped from my throat and slid down the front of me like a last caress as she hit the ground.

A sob escaped me and I almost fried Vax where he stood for what he’d done, but then I lowered the gun and turned away from him.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, thanks.”

Everybody was staring at me. I turned away from them too.

“Fuck off. Just turn that thing on and let’s get this over with.”

Vargas nodded. “Sure. Okay.”

He and Angie did something at the console, but I wasn’t really paying attention. I just kept staring at Athalia’s head, which Vax had dropped next to her body. Bad enough to watch her die once...

Angie touched my shoulder. “Come on, Ghost. We’ve gotta find the key receptacles.”

“Okay.”

I followed them out and helped them fight their way to the four rooms with the four key receptacles in them, but honestly, my head was such a mess that it was all pretty much a blur for me. I know we started in the room with all the dirt and junk in it, then went into a robot maintenance facility, then some kind of electronic security section, and finally something called the OSHA room, whatever that meant, but I just kind of plodded along behind the others, doing what I was told. In each room we fought various robots and took out various defenses, then opened up small square rooms in the furthest corner. Each small room was numbered “One” through “Four,” and each contained a command terminal and a wall slot for a key, and we tried the various keys until we got the right ones in the right slots.

I woke up a bit again as we were fighting to get into the last small room because it was taking fucking forever to kill the robot that was guarding it. It looked like the Octotrons we’d fought before, only bigger – way bigger. It was almost as tall as the ceiling and its eight arms had a twelve foot reach.



“What the hell is that thing?” I asked.

“A Fusion Octotron, sir,” said Vax. “The biggest in its class.”

“Does it have any weaknesses?”

“Only superior firepower, sir.”

“So... just keep pounding at it is what you’re saying.”

“Precisely, sir.”

And so we did. We ran from it when it charged, and fired at it when we could, and after several decades we finally wore the big bastard down. It was terrifying and exhausting, but not what you’d call exciting. More mind-numbing. Still, it was damn satisfying when it finally tipped over on one side and smoke started leaking from all its joints.

We edged around the thing and broke into the fourth station. By that time, I was awake enough again to watch Angie turn the key and wait with the others for something to happen. For a long second, nothing did, and I could see the others start to get nervous, then the button finally came on and a female voice spoke from a speaker.

“Safety Procedure 1342–666 initiated.”

Before we could figure out what that meant, the door to the chamber slid shut, locking us in. It was polished steel. We could see our frightened faces in it.

“What the fuck?” snarled Hell-Razor.

We looked around, expectant, but nothing else happened. The button pulsed a soothing green. The air conditioning dried our sweat. That was it.

“So now what?” asked Ace. “Are we supposed to push the button?”

“And have the base blow up while we’re trapped in here?” asked Hell Razor. “Fuck that.”

“It’s fine,” I said, aiming the meson cannon at the door. “I’ll just melt through the door.”

I held down the trigger and started drawing a door-sized square on the door, but before I got more than a yard, everybody else started screaming and diving for cover. The meson beam was bouncing off the door like a sun ray on a mirror – and shooting right back at us! I ate linoleum and the violet death went over my head to scorch the rock wall behind me.

When the light faded we all looked up. The door didn’t have a mark on it.

“And a hand grenade won’t work either,” said Hell Razor. “There’s no place to duck and cover. We’ll blow ourselves to pieces.”

“So we’re dead either way,” said Vargas. “Terrific. Well...” He slapped the console’s glowing green button. “Might as well get it over with.”

Everybody yelped and shouted at him, but then the female voice filled the room again. “Sequence violated. Procedure aborted.”

Behind us, the door slid open.

Angie blew out a relieved breath and glared at Vargas. “What the fuck, Snake? Ghost’s craziness rubbin’ off on you?”

He gave her a weak shrug. “What else were we gonna do?”

“And what are we gonna do now?” I asked. “I don’t get how this thing works.”

Ace chewed his lip. “I think I’ve got it. Half of it at least. A base this important, they weren’t gonna let some nut job just run around and blow it to pieces, so I’m guessing each of the terminals needs someone to punch a button. They probably have to be hit in the right sequence and in a set amount of time – faster than one guy could run to all four rooms. And if the buttons aren’t pushed correctly, nothing happens.”

Angie nodded. "Okay, but what's the right order?"

Thrasher cleared his throat. "The name of the procedure is 1342–666. I'm guessing we hit 'em that sequence, one, three, four, two."

"So what does the 666 stand for," I asked.

Ace raised an eyebrow. "The hell that will be unleashed."

"Oh, yeah. That." I should have got that, but I wasn't exactly with it just then.

"Right," said Vargas. "Chances are we all die the second that last button is punched. I need to know you all understand that. We all good?"

"Where was that speech three minutes ago?" drawled Hell Razor.

"I'm making up for it," said Vargas. "Are we good?"

Everybody nodded.

"Right," said Vargas. "So, who's pushing which button?"

"Ace and me will stay here at four," said Angie.

"I'll take one," said Hell Razor.

"I'll take two," said Thrasher.

"And I'll take three," I said.

"As will I, sir," said Vax.

"Givin' me nothin' to do, huh?" Vargas chuckled. "Alright, I'll watch the door that leads to the ladder, just in case the robots get through it before you're done. Ghost, gimme that meson cannon."

I handed it over and we scattered to our appointed stations and called in on our walkies.

"In position room three," I said.

"In position room two," came Thrasher's voice.

"I'm on one," said Hell Razor.

"Room four ready when you are," said Angie.

"Alright," said Vargas. "Here we go. It was an honor and a privilege and all that. Now let's do this. Hell Razor, fire one."

"Firing."

And he must have, because just then my console lit up and the door of the little room slammed shut behind me and Vax.

Above us, the female voice said, "Safety Procedure 1342–666 initiated. Stage One protocol accepted."

"Ghost," called Vargas. "Fire three."

"On it."

I punched the green button.

"Safety Procedure 1342–666. Stage Two protocol accepted."

"Angie?"

"Firing."

"Safety Procedure 1342–666. Stage Three protocol accepted."

"Alright, Thrasher. Take us to hell."

"Firing."

"Safety Procedure 1342–666. Stage Four protocol accepted," said the female voice. "Please enter the correct

color sequence.”

A row of four buttons lit up on the console, blue, red, yellow, green.

There was silence on the walkies. Finally Vargas spoke.

“The correct *what*? What the hell is it talking about?”

Behind me, Vax did the robot version of clearing his throat. “May I speak, sir?”

“Sure, Vax,” I said. “You got a funny story or something? Something to lighten the mood?”

“No, sir, but I have the security protocol manual in my memory. I’m afraid it was written by humans, so it is somewhat confusing, but it says that the color sequence is red, yellow, green, blue.”

“But do we each enter the whole sequence into our console? Or does each room only get one color? And if so, which room gets which color?”

“That is the confusing part sir.”

I raised my voice. “Did you hear that, Vargas?”

“I heard.”

“So...?”

Another long pause, then, “Fuck it. Let’s start with the obvious first. One color per room, same order as the numbers. Hell Razor, push red.”

“Sure. Pushed it.”

We held our breath, but there was no response from the computer voice. On the other hand, it didn’t abort the sequence either.

“Okay,” said Vargas. “Ghost, hit yellow.”

I punched the yellow button. “Done.”

“Angie, hit green.”

“Got it.”

“Thrasher...”

“Yeah, blue. Got it.”

We waited. Nothing. Vargas grunted over the walkie. “Well, shit. I guess we try again—”

“Self destruct countdown begun,” said the computer voice. “All personnel evacuate the building immediately.”

The console in front of me began flashing a warning message and countdown clock. “Base destruction imminent,” it read. “You have 01:00:00 to leave the facility.”

Laughter came over the walkie.

“Okay,” said Angie. “That’s a bit of an anti-climax.”

“What?” said Vargas. “What happened?”

“We got us an hour to get out of here,” said Hell Razor. “So much for goin’ out in a blaze of glory.”

“More like a walk in the park,” said Angie.

“Ha!” said Vargas. “All right. Get back here and we’ll—”

A grinding roar interrupted him, followed by gunfire.

“Oh shit!” Vargas shouted. “Incoming! Incoming!”

Vax and I sprinted for the central hall. The robots had finally made it through the titanium steel door.

\*\*\*

There was no getting through them.

Cochise might have been a day late and a dollar short when it came to stopping us from killing it, but that wasn't going to stop it from trying to take us with it, and it poured everything it had left through that door.

Then rest of us found Vargas backing around a corner under heavy fire. We ran to him before the robots could get a bead on us, then trained all our guns on the corner and kept up a withering fire as they tried to come around it. There were too many. We barely slowed them down.

"Vax!" I shouted. "Please tell me there's a secret way out of here and that it's behind us, not on the other side of those death machines!"

"There is indeed an exit behind us, sir, but the probability of making an escape through it before you were cut down by your enemies is approximately four point five percent."

"And what is the probability of fighting our way out the way we came in?" asked Angie.

"Zero percent, madam," said Vax.

"Then four point five sounds like a winner," said Vargas. "Get us there, Vax!"

"With pleasure, sir. This way, as quickly as you can."

We ran after him with the horde of robots surging after us like a metal flood. Lasers burned trenches in the walls around us and left smoking scars in our armor. Bullets staggered us and knocked us sideways, and choppers and pincers and rotating saws clanged and snapped at our heels.

Vax led us to a room we'd already been in before – the robot maintenance facility – and threw open the door. We charged through single file as energy beams and lead slugs zipped by all around us. Vax fused the door shut behind us, then pointed to the far corner of the room, opposite the little key receptacle room, as the robots began battering the door from the other side.

"There is an air-conditioning duct in that corner that—"

He cut off as Thrasher suddenly fell over.

We all looked down at him. There was blood pooling on the floor under his left knee.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry."

We looked closer. Something had found a crack in his shin armor and blown it open. His knee and lower leg were chopped meat inside a metal shell.

"Jesus, Beto!" said Vargas. "What happened?"

"Damn," said Hell Razor.

"Why didn't you say something?" asked Angie.

Thrasher swallowed. He was white and sweating with shock. "Just happened," he said. "Coming through the door."

Vargas cursed. "Alright. Get that greave off. We gotta tie that off. Vax, keep talking."

"Yes sir," said Vax, as Hell Razor and Vargas started tearing at the armor's releases. "The duct leads to the exterior, but it is very narrow and once you enter it you will be entirely vulnerable to attacks from behind."

"We're going to get our asses shot to pieces, you mean," I said.

"Yes sir," said Vax. "And with Mr. Gilbert's injury slowing down the group, I now calculate your chances of escaping at no more than point six percent."

"I'll stay behind," said Thrasher, as Ace finished tying off his leg just above the knee. "Prop me up and I'll hold them off for as long as I can."

"Which will be about all of five seconds," I said. "No. I'll be the one. Me and Vax, right Vax?"

"I am yours to command, sir," said Vax.

The others looked at me, thankful and embarrassed at the same time. I could see it didn't sit well with their consciences to be glad it was me who was volunteering. But they weren't going to contradict me either.

"You... you sure, Ghost?" asked Angie, which was nice of her.

"Oh yeah," I said. "For a minute there it looked like I might have a future worth livin' for, but really, ever since I woke up on that slab the world has been tellin' me that I shoulda stayed dead. I'm the echo of an echo. Time to let it fade."

Vargas gripped my shoulder. "You're doin' his memory proud. A ranger to the end."

"*Beyond* the end," said Angie.

"If he can hold 'em up," said Hell Razor.

I shrugged. "We'll manage. There's good cover behind all these machines. Leave us all the laser rifles and charge packs and hand grenades you can spare, and they won't get past us."

"They'll be through the door any moment, sir," said Vax.

"Right," I said. "You all better move."

Vargas nodded. "I guess we better."

Angie gave me a hug. Hell Razor and Ace shook my hand, then helped Thrasher up. He did the same. Vargas saluted. Then they handed me and Vax all the gear they could spare, wished us luck, and crossed the room to the air vent while we found the best cover we could. I checked the door. It was practically bent in half. It wouldn't last thirty seconds.

I looked back. Angie and Ace were already gone, and Vargas and Hell Razor were stuffing Thrasher into the duct like they were trying to plug it. He was so big he nearly didn't fit.

For some reason my throat closed up as I watched them. I shouted to clear it. "Get going, assholes!"

"Yeah, yeah," said Vargas. "We're gone."

He climbed into the duct, pushing Thrasher ahead of him, then Hell Razor shoved in after him. Vax had been right. If the robots caught them in there they'd die like rats in a drainpipe.

A deafening clang brought my head around. The door was flying across the room and the robots were streaming in after it. I heaved a hand grenade into the first ones in, then shouldered the meson cannon as it blew them to bits.

"Get ready, Vax," I shouted. "Here they come!"

"Just as you say, sir," Vax called back. "Here they do indeed come."

I laughed. Holding off an onslaught of death machines with a robot who had better manners than any human I'd ever met.

What a life.

A joke from start to finish.

## **– Chapter Eleven –**

High on a neighboring hilltop, shielded from the explosion's full fury, the rangers watched as fire and ruin claimed Base Cochise. The blast hadn't just blown up the facility, it had vaporized the entire top of the plateau. The trees on the surrounding hills had been blown flat and burned like matchsticks before they vanished in the billowing cloud of dust that rapidly expanded to cloak the whole area. Soon, all that could be seen of the facility was a boiling brown fog with a white-hot glow at its center.

"No way Ghost survived that," said Angie as she bandaged Thrasher's leg.

"No," said Vargas. "I'm sorry."

Angie shrugged, then wiped her nose. Then her eyes.

"He was wrong about himself though," said Ace. "He wasn't just an echo of an echo. He was a good man in his own right."

"And a hell of a ranger," said Hell Razor. "Right to the end."

"Just not the ranger we knew," said Thrasher.

"We oughta give him a proper retirement party this time," said Angie. "That last one he had kinda kicked him in the teeth I think."

"Good idea," said Vargas. He squinted into the still-expanding cloud. "I just hope that malignant motherfucker AI died with him. Fucking thing almost ended all life on earth."

"Don't worry," said Hell Razor. "Unless it somehow slipped out the back door when we weren't lookin', that mainframe is as dead as week-old road kill. Looks like we saved the world."

"For now," said Thrasher.

Vargas laughed. "Always the optimist, ain't you, Beto?"

He tucked his shoulder under Thrasher's arm to support him. "Fall in, rangers," he said. "Long walk back to Ranger Center."

"And a shit-ton of paperwork when we get there," said Angie.

The rangers turned and started south, with the black column of smoke rising from base Cochise like a funeral pyre behind them.

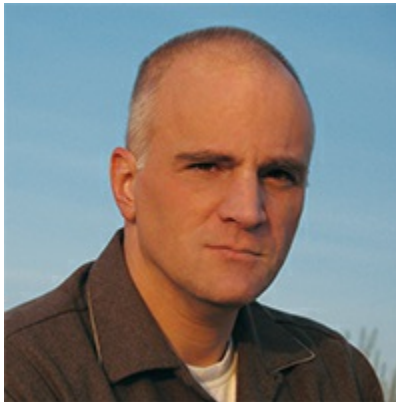
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## – ABOUT THE AUTHORS –



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Photo by Heather Hill.



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

– Chapter One –	4
– Chapter Two –	10
– Chapter Three –	15
– Chapter Four –	19
– Chapter Five –	23
– Chapter Six –	28
– Chapter Seven –	34
– Chapter Eight –	41
– Chapter Nine –	47
– Chapter Ten –	54
– Chapter Eleven –	62
– ABOUT THE AUTHORS –	63