



Illustrated by Tomislav Tikulin

Poison

Frank Wu & Jay Werkheiser

You're recording this, right?

Good. I would too if I were like you, young and eager to make a name for yourself. I'm supposed to take this to the grave, but it's something someone needs to know.

For the record, I'm Lieutenant Colonel Rodrigo Alvarez, Unified Nouvelle Terre Armed Forces, retired.

Yes, I fought in the Skolopendran war. But this isn't about the war; it's about the peace that followed and how I helped engineer it. How truth isn't just a casualty of war; it's a bloody sacrifice on the altar of peace—which I didn't realize until too late.

Now everyone's celebrating 75 years of peace. Did you see the cavalcade of laser tanks last night, firing fusillades of ... confetti? The flashes overhead were only fireworks, not massive explosions, not troopships cracking open, spilling bodies into space like sugar from a bag.

They don't know what they're celebrating! I could tell them ... But my gag order's still on the books. If you publish on this, I'll live out the rest of my days in a military prison bab. So will you.

There's a good reason to keep my story quiet. It could destroy everything we swore to defend, everything we fought for, everything we love that we haven't lost already.

You'll have to decide if making a name for yourself is worth the risk, or if these secrets remain buried forever.

Listen. Then decide.

* * *

I. Planet Aine, Leshenski Delta

A few hours before the ceasefire was scheduled to start, Captain Jarrell Dresdin and I dropped from low orbit on Aine's night side, tasked with the final double-check.

An armored dropsuit wasn't enough to quell the terror of atmospheric entry, with only a layer of Keiretsu ChitinTech between me and flaming pressurized death. My suit's autopilot slammed me back and forth, dodging decoys and flak, but smacking my body around inside the shell. If Keiretsu Corp. had cheaped out on these new suits, I'd find out in the afterlife. But who was I to question orders? *What they say I will do; where they send I will go; never fear; only trust and obey.*

Intel pics showed the Skolopendrans building something on Aine. Something big. The greasy centipedes said it was a habitat bubble to house a human peace delegation.

Really? After decades of war? Out of nowhere, they wanted peace?

It seemed too good to be true. Maybe it was. Maybe they were just buying time to regroup and rearm. Maybe this "Peace Bubble" was really a forward operating base or lodgment. A shipyard or weapons cache. We were the last-minute double-check.

If the centipedes were lying, the ceasefire would be over before it began. The draft peace treaty—along with ships and habs—would go up in smoke, kinetic impactors would fall, and millions more would flash out in a moment. *Millions of Jovitas.*

Planet Aine was nothing to us. Scant resources under hot carbon dioxide spiked with sulfur suboxide. But the Skolopendrans actually liked this air. This was the only place in the Nouvelle Terre system where they felt at home. We'd made them for a world like this. Now they'd come back to kill their creators.

Encased in our selenotanium dropsuits, we picked our way across Aine's broad Leshenski Delta, full of hot mud bubbling with carbonic acid. On the horizon was a landscape like broken limbs, and crater walls like mountain ribs. Around us were longsword blades of waist-high lashleaf, their razor-sharp edges charred and hardened.

Nearby one of our APCs had duked it out with a razormech—a lobster-monster-thing that centipedes grew to the size of a bus, eating it from the inside out, leaving just enough living tissue lining the shell for the crew to control it. The razormech's claws had ripped a tread and several hatches off the armored personnel carrier, but the APC's heavy flasher turret had blasted a hole clean through it. They'd killed each other.

Captain Dresdin saw me looking at them. "Stay focused on the primary objective, Lieutenant."

"Understood, ma'am," I said. "Looks like the APC jettisoned its escape pods. Probably no survivors to rescue."

"Good. We'll swing around and check it later. Stay on this designate. Half a click to go."

We approached the Peace Bubble, concealed by darkness and lashleaf.

Dresdin covered me, as an instrument rig unfolded from my pack, launching skeeter-scanners.

My optics zoomed in, looking for seams and giveaways my naked eye might miss. The Skolopendrans' brand-new structure was, in fact, bubble-shaped. But it had no obvious gun emplacements, no warheads sticking out, no hangar doors for launching fighters or razormech hordes. It was a dome, smooth and featureless, except for a few strings of blackened windows here and there, like segmented centipedes crawling around a melon.

"What do your instruments show, Lieutenant?" Captain Dresdin asked. "Has to be something!"

"I know, ma'am, but . . . Nothing on infrared. Radiologic sig is dark, no signs of nitrates or other explosives. X-dar shows nothing inside big enough to be a ship or a missile . . ."

"Did you try the Weicholz?"

Sometimes that revealed things the others missed. "Checking now and . . . nope."

"What's that motion on the multi-wave?"

"Groups of bugs, ma'am. Maybe construction crews? I'm getting oxygen lines on the spec! They're putting breathable atmosphere in there. . . . Breathable for us, I mean."

"Could they be hiding something from our sensors?"

"They've figured out how to make false positives, ma'am . . . but not false negatives."

"Maybe they weren't lying after all. Maybe the centipedes do want peace." Dresdin sounded disappointed. We'd all lost people in the war. I had. Dresdin had lost two young sons, Jourdin and Devin, when the centipedes hit a civilian transport. We never talked about our personal losses, though they were behind every conscious thought. I didn't think she'd ever forgive those greasy green guts.

I think she wanted the war to go on forever, or at least until she got enough payback.

"I've radioed it in," she said. "Good job, Lieutenant. Let's swing around, inspect the APC and razormech, then back to the evac zone."

Unlike the Peace Bubble, which was clear, fake signals in the surrounding fields lit up my scanners like a Christmas tree. The Weicholz detected a centipede at my feet! But there was none. Maybe they wanted to show their good intentions with the Bubble, but didn't trust us not to hunt them down in the lashleaf?

We cautiously made our way forward.

The APC looked burned out. With little oxygen here, they must have auto-destructed. Not much left for the centipedes to reverse-engineer.

The razormech carcass draped over the front of the APC's shell, its legs still entangled in the twisted metal, death-gripping the wreckage. Even destroyed, we might gain useful intel about the razormech—which we'd need if the peace talks fell through.

Yeah, even before the ceasefire had started and this war had ended, we were already plotting out the sequel.

As we approached the wreckage, centipedes suddenly streamed from the lashleaf, moving impossibly fast, on an impossible number of legs.

"Found the razormech's crew!" Dresdin shouted.

Unbelievable! Less than half an hour before the ceasefire, in the shadow of the Peace Bubble, the bugs were actually attacking, maybe trying to get a last-minute taste of human blood.

Within seconds, killer centipedes as long as my leg were wrapped around my dropsuited arms, double-wrapped around my neck.

I could hear waves of pointy little feet, a glissando against my armor. Clicketty click click.

Now, because of the suit's filter settings, I could really smell them. The burning funk of a struck match—sulfur dioxide. The stench of rotting eggs—hydrogen sulfide. The smells kept me on my toes.

I'd fought centipedes before in CQC. Some had ranged weapons affixed to their heads, or armor plates, elaborately carved and fused to body segments. Apparently the Skolopendrants were now running low on resources, as these bugs had nothing, neither arms nor armor. Nothing except the biological weapons that accelerated evolution had given them, especially the poison claws slung under their heads. Hardened, chitinous, and crescent-shaped bayonets, ready to stab and tear human flesh and stuff it into their insatiable little maws, but not before injecting us with a cocktail of poisons.

I had to trust the integrity of my new, untested dropsuit armor and hope the bugs couldn't bite through.

Centipede attacks weren't coordinated, but relied on numbers and overwhelming savagery. I was surrounded, had to be dialed in. Concentrate, pay attention to details.

My flasher rifle was set to fan blade, just like they taught us. The power level was toggled so nothing was wasted, high enough to cut through centipede but not dropsuit. We were largely

in the open, so I turned slowly to my right after every kill. Always the same direction, nothing getting behind me, always my front toward the enemy.

Dresdin's not like that at all. She's good, though, probably the best I've seen, the most creative at close-quarters combat.

Unorthodox.

At first glance, you'd think she was panicked, with six or seven shots to five of mine. Flailing, thrashing. Lots of unnecessary movement. But there was a method to her madness—enough of her shots were landing, not killing centipedes but maiming. This was better, because unlike the dead, the dying still thrashed in pain and panic, drawing the attention of others.

We had learned the hard way that they were always hungry. Made them fierce but distractible. When one of them was wounded, the others would stop attacking us and swarm their injured compatriot, devouring it alive, incorporating the victim's poisons into their own arsenals, along with the genes encoding them.

They couldn't help themselves; way back when we created these horrible things, the gene jockeys had hard-linked octopamine and other arthropod aggression neurohormones to their hunger pangs, back when we still thought we could create new life forms without consequences.

So the centipedes couldn't separate the desire to kill from the desire to eat. Everything was conflict to them, and the winner always ate the loser. I didn't want to be the loser.

Now I was all a-crawl with these little monsters, but I didn't blast the ones on me. I flashed their friends near me and some jumped off to eat them. But others decided that those prizes were already taken, so I flashed some fresh meals for them, too.

That worked for a while.

But a firefight can be like a bad marriage. Everything's fine until one bump, and then it becomes a locomotive diving off a cliff, pulling the other cars with it.

Dresdin's tactic of wild-firing suddenly became a liability, when her battery ran out.

I was distracted, watching her smack her rifle with open palm over and over. You should never do that; it can discharge everything left in one go. I waited to see if she needed an assist, so I didn't pay enough attention to one centipede spiraling up my leg. Figured my suit would protect me.

Big mistake. They can't bite through the hard armor plates, but the joints between them are softer, accordioned flexidinium. The knee-joint is protected by little spikes—an idea we took from them—but maybe the lashleaf had nicked it, and now the centipedes were expanding the hole? I felt something poking through, against the skin of my knee, like squares of silk, brushing gently back and forth.

Then just a pinprick. And another.

When the horrible thing bit me, I felt a slight chill, and I thought, oh, it's not so bad. Maybe this thing was stupid and had already attacked my equipment, injected poisons harmlessly into my backpack. I figured I got lucky.

Then the burning started. Ever douse your leg in gasoline and light it on fire? Me neither, but that's how it felt.

Centipede venom is genetic buckshot, dozens of compounds. With your particular gene mods, maybe their neurotoxins didn't work on you, but maybe their myotoxins might still melt your bulging biceps into creamed chipped beef.

I felt thousands of nerve endings shriveling and dying. I tried to stay in the fight, but my hands were shaking—I couldn't pull the trigger, couldn't even form a grip. I felt useless letting Dresdin down, as I dropped my flasher. Now I was crashing sideways to the ground, unable to hit my meds, screaming for Dresdin, hoping I'd be out before they started eating me.

As centipedes dogpiled me, Dresdin made a move I'd never seen before.

She'd been swinging her rifle, the buttstock a club. Now she flipped it around. The muzzle was plugged, melted, so I expected her to pick up my rifle, but she didn't. She whacked her flasher hard with her fist. The battery discharged and the beam slammed into the blockage at the end of the barrel. The melted slag of the collimator assembly glowed red hot.

She touched the tip of the hot muzzle to one of the bugs. It exploded, a segment bursting like popcorn, blowing the monster into two pieces.

She tagged more, consistently hitting the fourth or fifth segment. That way both pieces retained some brain nodes, wriggling and attracting the attention of conspecific cannibals.

Centipedes now burst all around me, like gooey green fireworks. A smorgasbord for the ones she'd missed.

Suddenly she was on top of me, opening the ports in my dropsuit, injecting the anti-toxins: an expeditionary force of antibodies, hunting through my body, killing poisonous proteins. Now my bloodstream was a battlefield, their toxins duking it out with our anti-toxins.

"It's okay, you'll be fine," Dresdin said, as she often did just before someone died. "The bulkheads in your suit are sealing against your skin, compartmentalizing you into sterile sections. It'll make the grafts easier."

I wanted to thank her, but I could barely move my mouth.

I must have passed out, because the next thing I remember was waking to my alarm going off, followed by buzzing from my earphone and wristbreaker. A unique pattern of buzzing informed us that humans and Skolopendrans had officially entered into the ceasefire, and that we were ordered to immediately discontinue any offensive actions and break any contact with the enemy.

The war was over! At least for now.

Timing is a problem, though, when wars span planets. Our report from here on Aine couldn't have reached planet Nouvelle Terre yet; General McCracken must've authorized the fleet admiral here to go ahead with the ceasefire if our last-minute report—and those of other scouts—held up. The intel we had gathered was now heading to Nouvelle Terre and the other colonies, peace spreading at the speed of light.

The centipedes must have somehow been informed, too, as they suddenly pricked up their heads and turned and dashed away. They disappeared into the lashleaf, some dragging bits of their fallen comrades. They all ran—except one. I wanted to scream for Dresdin to give me a soporific, maybe a morphine derivative—I wanted nothing but sleep, blissful sleep—but she hopped off me and took a couple strides toward that last centipede, the same one that bit me.

The way it paused to study us, I think it was the razormech commander. But it darted when it saw Dresdin coming. It was so fast it took her a while to catch it. She crushed it mid-body under one boot, grinding, twisting her foot, pressing hard enough to hold it down but not break it in two. The centipede thrashed and tried to grab her boot, to bite her leg. Then she slowly, carefully positioned her other foot over its head and ferociously stomped.

The war had now been over for several minutes. Contrary to an order, Dresdin had just killed an enemy combatant during a ceasefire. That's a war crime, but who was going to rat her out? Not me.

She returned to me and said, "Fifty." She nodded her head slowly and proudly. "Fifty."

Lying in the mud, slowing turning into gray goo, I was angry but mildly amused.

Dresdin now had fifty verified kills, even if the recording of the last would have to be backdated.

Fifty. Enough for a second meritorious combat badge. Another cherry for the fruit salad on her chest.

"And congratulations to you, too, Lieutenant," Dresdin said.

"For what?"

"You made it to the end of the war alive!"

My teeth were falling out of the gums. I couldn't move my hands. My skin was swelling, filling my metal gloves, cutting against the inner seams, splitting like grapeskins. But hurrah. I was alive.

Tato, sweet Tato, I thought to myself through tears, as I passed out and Dresdin called for med-evac, *You finally got your wish*.

* * *

II. Planet Aine, Peace Bubble

113 days later:

Peace talks were going as well as I'd expected: Dresdin and I were running for our lives.

As we raced through the Peace Bubble, red lights flashed in a silent, insistent pattern on the electronic wristbreaker wrapped around my forearm. *Hostilities imminent. Take shelter immediately.* That meant the hardened bunker in the Bubble's basement.

"If they wanted to kill us," Dresdin said, panting, "Why didn't they just do it in the conference room?" Pant. "Save us the running."

After our recon mission, I'd been taken in for service, with various fluids drained, refilled and topped off, and some parts replaced, including my right leg and left hand. When I was fit to return to duty, they assigned Dresdin and me to the same place we'd just scanned: the Peace Bubble.

We were part of the peace delegation, spending our days in itchy dress uniforms, on our side of a big conference table. We were flag and field officers, arrayed like ships of the line, a silent show of force flanking High Commissioner Staroscik. He was a white-haired civilian, a Shakespeare lover, our chosen champion who alone banded with the enemy, trading volleys of words words.

The Commissioner had forbidden anyone else to speak, so I tried staring the bugs down from across the table. Bad idea. I got a better look than I did when they were swarming me and found myself both loathing and fascinated by them. Despite waves of revulsion, I couldn't look away. A centipede is the sum of my greatest fears—long creepy body coiled like a rattlesnake, jointed pointy legs like a daisy chain of black widows, claws like hypodermic needles. Their faces glistened with poison, a tetanus junkyard, a chitinous car wreck of stiletto claws and jagged plates and serrated edges. Looking at them gave me thoughts of my good fist being shredded in an industrial blender.

The only thing worse than being attacked was waiting to be attacked, beautifully coiffed in my dress uniform, unarmed and unarmored, essentially naked, silently watching High Commissioner Staroscik plot joint ventures with these monsters, while peace teetered on a knife edge.

A historian had told me that most ceasefires fail—almost 80 percent. Back on Old Earth, one war took decades to end, with multiple broken ceasefires, and the assassinations of a presidential candidate and several supreme court justices. Could we do better?

Then, on day 113, in the middle of a break—

Red lights flashed as we ran through the innards of the Peace Bubble, and Dresdin led me down the glassy gray syncrete stairs. She stopped short, and I nearly ran her over. People ahead of us bunched up on the staircase, half a flight above the bunker.

Junior officers and janitors, experts and inspectors, lawyers and linguists, medics and more all drained here, a wall of traffic-jammed uniforms. The red lights kept blinking, the idiot machines reminding us that we weren't actually inside the safe room. They'd keep blinking long after the bugs attacked and we were all dead.

"So, Lieutenant," Dresdin said to me, "What do you think? The flasher tech they stole from us? Or just breach the bubble, and we gasp down our last breath of toxic atmosphere?"

"Ma'am?"

"This is the perfect time for them to decapitate our military. So I'm starting a betting pool! How do you think they'll hit us? Poison gas? A razormech let loose on the crowd?"

An insane way to think. Very Dresdin.

"C'mon! Only one hundred creds to buy in!"

It wasn't a direct and lawful order, but you could worry or you could laugh. And I needed to learn to laugh again.

"Sure, I'm in, Captain," I said. "I'll take poison claws."

"Lieutenant Alvarez, one hundred on poison claws!" On her face a wicked smile bloomed like an atom bomb. "You sure have some experience with those things, don't you?"

Indeed. My teeth were still a little loose, and though my right leg was no longer blood and bone, it hurt like it was.

I didn't relish the idea of fighting them anew.

Like everyone in the peace delegation, I'd been gifted the special box set of gene mods. Some of my olfactory receptors were knocked back—so I wouldn't be distracted by their stench, like

rotting garbage and trash juice. Also meant that when they attacked, I wouldn't smell them coming.

Escape hoods were being passed around. Not enough for everyone, but Dresdin handed me one. "Don't put it on yet. It only has oxygen for twenty-five minutes. Just enough to run across an open field to a transport."

A young medtech near me was shaking, like he was going to spew. I handed him my hood and started to say, "Don't put it on yet . . ." but he ripped open the package and pulled the hood over his head, starting the airflow. Well, if the centipedes breached the dome, when his oxygen ran out twenty-five minutes from now, he'd be just as dead as the rest of us.

I didn't want an escape hood. I wanted a flasher rifle and body armor, to get out of my dress uniform. What was I supposed to do if centipedes attacked? Throw medals at them?

"What are our orders, Captain?" I asked.

"Hurry up and wait," she said. "You know everything I know."

Waiting made me jittery. No reports to write, no invoices to approve. Please, someone, please give me a preventative maintenance schedule to review. I had too much time to think.

My mind went back to buying my first house with Jovita in New Vizag. Jovita had talked about moving to one of the newer settlements, but my closest family lived in Vizag, so we stayed. Then the centipedes attacked Gardien Station, and *wboosb* I was off to war. I'd thought about moving everyone before I shipped out, but the brass assured us that the particle beam launchers in synchronous orbit over New Vizag could double as defense cannons. And besides, soldiers moving their families to the mountains wouldn't look good. It was practically an order to stay.

The centipede's impactor had been a suicide ship, accelerated to a third the speed of light. Our beamers had been built way-way-way back in my bis-bis-bis-abuelo's day, during the previous war, the one against the octopoids. They used to lob slow-moving asteroids, and the particle beams could ablate their surfaces, deflecting their paths. No one expected anything as fast as what the centipedes threw. New enemies, new tactics. We'd dropped our share of high-speed impactors on them, and they were fast learners.

New Visakhapatnam was a huge sprawl, and that one impactor took out a third of it.

In Jovita's case, there wasn't anything left to bury.

They gave me two weeks off for bereavement, then it was back to following orders. All I had left was work, and I threw everything into it.

We had a war to fight, and no time to grieve. Concentrate, pay attention to details. If I okayed a shipment of flashers to the Dagda moons, but they needed rations, or shipped ammo to Badb Catha when they needed power supplies, more people would die, and the cycle would continue. More survivors would hurt as much as I did.

I gutted it out, just like I did at basic. Keep your head down, do what you're told. Try not to get noticed, but brace yourself for yelling. Go on missions. Deliver secret messages, but God forbid you ask what they say. Remember details, write reports no one will read. Then write more reports. Let people like Dresdin screw around and catch the flak. She always got promoted a little ahead of me, but I did just fine. Got commendations, leveled up to First Lieutenant.

I had been assigned to the peace delegation partly because of my experience fighting the bugs, but mostly they needed someone to remember details and write reports. Commissioner Staroscik liked me because I got his Shakespeare references.

So now I stood in that crowd, everyone in their dress uniforms, trying to cram into a bunker too small for us all. I had no orders to distract me, nothing but grief to keep me company, waiting for an attack from enemies I couldn't smell coming or defend against when they did.

* * *

After hours of waiting, the High Commissioner's aide-de-camp pushed through the crowd, dragging me out of my thoughts.

"Lieutenant Alvarez," he said, "Commissioner Staroscik wants to see you right away in the bunker. Captain Dresdin, sorry, I didn't see you there. You, too, ma'am."

We elbowed our way forward. This was easier now, as some of the crowd had been evacuated. Armed guards opened the blast doors and then closed them as soon as we were through. Inside

the bunker was a map table that took up more space than much of the crowd outside. Around the table was a little room, confining mighty warriors.

From the proxemics—the arrangement of officers around the table—I could tell that High Commissioner Staroscik was on the hot seat. But why?

“Commissioner, this disaster is your fault!” Admiral Ed Helinsky shouted. He was a full admiral, a four-star with a jawline like a gun carriage and eyes that blasted through you like a heavy flasher. His voice boomed like explosives, though it occasionally seemed to blow up the wrong target. He could have been an actor—instead of leading active troops, leading an acting troupe, convincingly playing either Patton or Rommel. “Commissioner, you’ve wasted enough of our time with your ludicrous Unity flags, Unity games, Unity songs, joint infrastructure projects—”

What had I walked into?

“Some of these moves, which now seem arcane and pointless, will yield dividends of peace in the fullness of time,” the high commissioner said, standing, his enormous shock of white hair towering over the admiral. “Peace is not a baseless fabric of a vision. Peace is a complex machine, requiring complicated and time-consuming engineering. Peace—if that *is* what you want—can only be achieved by an intimate comingling of interests—cultural, economic . . .”

The commissioner and the admiral had been engaged in a running battle since the peace talks had begun. The commissioner had once said: “Helinsky’s a fool, a prodigious fool with a fool-hardy tongue, prattling to himself like a soldier to a fool.” Now Staroscik shouted: “Admiral, I am not convinced that you really want peace!”

“Of course I do! Everyone does, wants to hold hands and sing songs and give it a chance. But you can forget that! *You* killed our last chance at peace. That’s why they shouldn’t put civilians in charge of these things. We should be preparing the military response, sending a task force.”

“A fleet for engaging *whom?*” the commissioner asked. “We still don’t even know who did this!”

“Do we even need to ask?” the admiral demanded.

Jacinta McCracken cut in: a full general, a four-star standing like a basalt cliff, her eyes a hardened pillbox, impervious and unwavering in the face of sustained naval bombardment.

In my younger days, I naively thought that everyone on our side would automatically pull together. Not so, and Commissioner Staroscik was given a nigh-impossible job. He was a civilian, a political appointee, tasked with weighing options from two military experts and making a recommendation to the Unified Council, fully aware that each expert considered the other temperamentally unsuited for command.

Admiral Helinsky saw himself as bold, fearless, and decisive, but General McCracken thought him impulsive, ill-prepared, too reliant on dumb luck. In return, Helinsky thought McCracken a plodding, overly-cautious pussyfooter, all while she considered herself a tactician supreme, master of the operational arts, one who—like Commissioner Staroscik—excelled at elaborate and secret plans that took years to unfold.

“I’m not convinced it was the centipedes,” McCracken told Helinsky. “I think most of us in this room aren’t convinced one way or the other, either.”

“We need to tone down the rhetoric, look at the facts calmly,” the commissioner said, “and work together as teammates and friends, for we have centipede quarrels enough.”

That phrasing sounded familiar. I mumbled, “*Henry V*,” chuffed for recognizing the commissioner’s favorite play. I immediately regretted it when all eyes turned on me.

“Excellent! Alvarez is here,” the commissioner said, ushering me into the arena. “He can be the tiebreaker. General, show him what’s going on. Show him everything.”

General McCracken gave Staroscik a chance to change his mind. When he didn’t, she tapped some buttons on her tablet, and the projectors displayed an image of our star system with the current positions of Nouvelle Terre, Aine, Badb Catha, and other planets. Further out was our companion star, orbited by the centipedes’ homeworld, which we called Hades. Even further out was the dim red dwarf paradoxically called Proxima, only loosely bound to the rest of the system. Circling Proxima was a rocky world, with shades of brown and deep blue beneath thick bands of white clouds, an orange haze of tholins at the poles. Plymouth. Lightly populated,

mostly descendants of an early colonization mission from Old Earth, before anyone even landed on Nouvelle Terre.

But the way they were all staring at that planet . . . “Did something happen on Plymouth?”

“Good eye, Lieutenant,” the general said. “Due to the distance, we’re just receiving word now, about two and a half months after the fact, as must be the centipedes. We assume they’ll follow this hit with others, perhaps even this building. We’re a pretty juicy target here.”

“What do you mean by ‘This hit,’ sir?”

In a moment I had my answer.

Pale violet beams lit out from the southern pole of the planet: computer-enhanced, otherwise-invisible hydrogen emission lines, launched from a gigantic orbital particle beam launcher, doubling as a planetary defense cannon.

“You’d think they would have put up a better show,” Admiral Helinsky said, “What with the two defense units.”

“One, sir,” I said, hesitant to correct a much-superior officer.

“We sent them two, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir, but only one of the emitters is operational,” I said. “The one in equatorial orbit has a locked up training gear assembly. The centipedes killed the transport carrying the replacement parts.”

“How do you know all that?” the commissioner asked.

“It was in various daily bulletins, sir,” I said, trying not to sound insubordinate.

“Commissioner, you may be looking at the only soldier in this whole outfit who actually reads those bulletins,” the general said. “That right, Lieutenant?”

“I wouldn’t know, ma’am.”

Thicker lines flashed out. Something small and fast came into view, bleeding vapor where the beams touched it. Its path curved, but not enough.

A bright pinpoint flared on the planet’s southern hemisphere. That blast of light was the last thing those people saw. Like the last thing Jovita saw.

Jovita—who, when I arrived home at midnight on leave, woke everyone up and took me out for churros y chocolate. All their sleepy faces laughing. Mi gran tío, mi bis-abuela. Umberto el payaso. Nalia la tontorróna. Tato el profesorcito. Mi Jovita, mi cariñita, mi cariñita.

All gone, everyone I’d ever truly loved, everyone who really knew me, because I followed what was practically an order.

Gone like a million other people on Nouvelle Terre. Now how many more on Plymouth?

“Lieutenant, are you all right?”

I swallowed, hard. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Your military appraisal, Lieutenant?”

“The explosion, uh, the explosion on the surface was shaped like that from a slower, larger impactor, like the octopoids used a long time ago in the last war, not like a faster, smaller impactor, the kind the Skolopendrans use now.”

“Are you sure it was a kinetic weapon?” the commissioner said. “Could it have been a nuclear strike?”

General McCracken shook her head at the idiocy of the question.

I spoke up quickly, hoping to contain *this* explosion. “No, sir,” I said, studying the data stream. “There was no double flash, no gamma ray burst. Besides, with the rate of ablation we saw, and the degree of deflection, it had a fairly large mass. Most likely a solid body impactor.”

“If they hit *us* there,” General McCracken said, “We need to send a task force to hit *them* there, so they’re not encouraged to attack us closer to home.”

The commissioner said, “Again I ask. *Who* is them? Are we counterattacking against the wrong enemy?”

The general tapped on her screen. “Command is sending me updates as new intelligence comes in. Take a look.”

The planet was replaced by a telescopic view of the impactor: a smooth dirty iceball, low albedo, hard to see, hard to detect. Clever.

I was pleased to be proven right, but I said nothing.

“Plymouth’s satellites also picked this up just before impact.” She zoomed the view into a splotch next to the iceball. The slightly fuzzy image of an alien spaceship.

Centipedes build ships that mimic their body plan, segments linked like strung pearls. This ship was different, a multi-outrigger with hulls like elongated diamonds.

The hulls slowly rotated around each other, floating as if in water. Each hull—eight in all—had weapons and engines, the mechanical details hidden by a splotchy, speckled paintjob. They were like octopoid arms, each able to independently attack or defend, splayed in different directions, making it hard to tell where the ship was going or aiming.

The ship was as tricky and deceptive as its occupants.

“Are you saying it was the octopoids?” Helinsky demanded. “After a century of nothing?”

“One hundred and twenty-seven years, sir,” I said, “It’s been 127 years, NT calendar, since the octopoids last hit us, and we routed them in the counter-attack.”

“They ran away and haven’t been heard from since,” Helinsky said.

“Not here, anyway,” I said. “I’ve seen reports of possible attacks at Haven and New Hope, but at that distance, the information is unconfirmed and years out of date.”

“So why would they come back now?”

“I can only tell you what the evidence tells me,” McCracken said.

“General,” Admiral Helinsky said, “I have a different idea. I think the centipedes scavenged an old spacewreck from the octopoid wars, or re-jiggered one of their ships to look like an octopoid. I think the octopoids are done, kaput, and this is a sneak attack—*from the centipedes!*”

“Why would the centipedes open a new front all the way over there, at Plymouth?” McCracken countered. “They don’t have high-c accelerators—it would take them over a year to get there.”

“Which means they launched the attack before they sued for peace,” Admiral Helinsky said. “This Peace Bubble nonsense was a diversion, and the commissioner fell right into their trap.”

“If they’re reigniting the war,” Dresdin whispered to me, “Then we can finish what they started!”

“If it *was* the centipedes,” the commissioner interjected, “If it *wasn’t* them, then we can still make peace with the bugs, even as we engage the new enemy at Plymouth. One war at a time, my friends. One war at a time.”

“Sir, how many people are dead?” I asked.

Plymouth had a population of two and a half million, with communities scattered across inhospitable terrain. But with the cloud cover, I couldn’t see how many were near the impact site.

“We don’t know, Lieutenant,” the commissioner said. “Transmissions from Plymouth cut out a couple hours after the strike. Local interference maybe.”

“Could be tens or hundreds of thousands,” the admiral added.

Tens or hundreds of thousands of Jovitas.

“General,” a Comms officer said, “an incoming transmission from the Unified Council.”

“Patch it in.”

The image of the President of the Unified Council appeared—Heidi Salgado. A relief, as she was always calm and collected during a crisis.

“High Commissioner Staroscik,” the president began, “the situation could not be more serious. Our forces are now on heightened alert, and intelligence shows the Skolopendrans doing the same. Their leadership has agreed to a parlay, but they insist on only two participants per side. Commissioner Staroscik, we thank you for your service, particularly the joint infrastructure projects, and we have enjoyed watching the Unity Games, but we believe that a military perspective is required now. We would appreciate your continued wise counsel, but in light of the current crisis, we of the Council have elected General Jacinta McCracken to represent humanity in further negotiations. General, you are authorized to deploy your assets in any way you see fit, but you are *not* to engage in combat *against* the Skolopendrans without our specific authorization. I personally trust you, Jacinta, to make every effort to reestablish and maintain a bilateral cessation of conflict. Salgado, President of the Unified Council, out.”

As soon as the dust settled from *that*, McCracken looked me in the eye. “Lieutenant, I want you as my adjutant.”

“Ma’am?”

“You know the situation better than anyone.”

“Yes, ma’am.” My combat experience didn’t hurt, either. “I’ll stop at the arms locker for a flasher—”

“You don’t go into peace talks armed, Lieutenant,” she told me.

“Well they sure as hell still have their poison claws,” Dresdin said. “Ma’am.”

“This also comes from the top.”

I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“He’ll be a good boy, ma’am,” Dresdin said. “He won’t even scream when they eat him alive.”

“Dresdin,” the general said, “Knock it off.” Then she turned to me and said, “Lieutenant, do you want peace?”

“More than anything else in this universe, ma’am,” I said in complete sincerity.

“Then you’ll have to be brave, Lieutenant,” she said. “Braver than you ever were in combat.”

“But, General, take heed not to awake the sleeping sword of war,” the commissioner said. “In the name of God, take heed! For never two such races did contend without much fall of blood.”

* * *

“Tell me to my face,” General McCracken said, rising from the vast conference table, empty except for the general and me, and the two centipedes across from us. “What is the meaning of your attack on our colony? We will not sit idly by while you violate the ceasefire.”

I hadn’t realized how much human body language mattered in negotiations. High Commissioner Staroscik, although a large man, sat demurely, maintaining an even strain in his voice, even when telling the centipedes things they didn’t want to hear. Only occasionally would he yell or slam a fist on the table, and then mostly to keep up *our* morale.

McCracken, like the rest of us, had been forbidden from saying anything or making any sudden moves that might trigger the centipedes.

Now, with the commissioner gone, she was free to be theatrical, so she rose from her seat. McCracken was very tall, as were the tales told about her. One rumor: when she was a frosh at the academy, an upperclassman kept razzing her about her cornrows, insisting that they were not regulation, even though they were. Eventually she picked him up and sat him on top of a freezer. And that was that.

She didn’t take anything from anyone, certainly not the centipedes.

The chief centipede facing McCracken called herself Kaduro Durobakka. Centipede warriors do not decorate themselves with medals and ribbons. Rather, they carry the splattered blood of their vanquished enemies. This centipede was bespattered everywhere—her head, her segments, the tank that fed their preferred air into the spiracles in her sides. Yes, this centipede had come to peace talks with humans slathered in human blood.

Yet McCracken was not afraid but boldly waving her right fist in the air. The centipedes had an ancient racial memory: what they called the Stones of Narlaninta—terrifying boulders we’d rained down while terraforming their world. Now McCracken was holding her trembling fist on high like a Stone of Narlaninta, ready to crash it down, in fierce tempest, in thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove.

Indeed, the commissioner’s absence had unleashed the McCracken.

“Why did you attack our colony?” she shouted.

While centipedes breathe through their sides, they had evolved air sacs in their faces, and with these, Durobakka hissed and spat and snarled.

A football-sized translation bot floated at eye level. The end facing us had a screen displaying a cartoon human, now shrugging. In an annoyingly literal translation, the cartoon asked, “Why do you threaten hostility and threaten?”

“I grow impatient,” the general growled.

On the other end of the translation bot, facing the bugs, jagged metal plates rearranged themselves, hissing and spitting, cracking and clacking.

Durobakka held her tail high, the tail legs splayed but not wiggling, demanding that McCracken shut up. The general did not comply.

“Why did you attack our colony?”

I looked at the other centipede in the room, my counterpart, wondering what it would do. Even as its boss and mine gesticulated at each other, it remained absolutely still. I had no idea how to read that.

Durobakka said, “We have done no such thing no.”

Now the air stunk like burnt rubber: Angerscent. A centipede’s nonverbal preassault indicator, like a dog growling and barking before biting. How long before they tired of McCracken’s interrogation and leapt across the table, their claws and clacking faceplates ripping into our soft, fleshy human faces? Security watched from the next room, but before they arrived, we’d be piles of shredded meat.

The high commissioner’s voice rang in our ears. *General, choose your next words carefully.*

McCracken was quiet for several long, stressful moments.

Then she spoke slowly and clearly, so there would be no mistake in the translation.

“I am still awaiting an answer to a simple question,” she said.

Durobakka hissed and clacked. “We have not broken the ceasefire not broken. We have made no attack no. You are deceitful you. We detect no evidence of damage to your worlds no.”

Be vague. They may be fishing for deployment information.

“The colony is on a planet orbiting a different star.”

“It was not us not.”

Durobakka’s second reached over and rapped her with an antenna. A coded message. Durobakka lowered her tail. Maybe she was being reminded that killing us would trigger an enormous slaughter. Maybe some centipedes didn’t want more fighting any more than I did? They’d seen what we could do. We didn’t need poison claws to wipe out armies.

Whoever attacked Plymouth knew that, too.

General McCracken silently stared over her interlaced fingers.

Commissioner Staroscik’s words came through our earpiece. *Don’t do it, General. Don’t do it.*

After a few minutes, the general turned to me and said, “Show them.”

I projected a holographic image of the star Proxima, then zoomed in on the planet Plymouth. The particle beam cannon fired in futility, and the impactor struck the planet. We also showed the weird-looking spaceship.

“You say you are not the attackers, so prove it.” McCracken said, looking back and forth at both centipedes. “Perhaps *with your own blood.*” She paused, looking again at both centipedes for a long beat. “With your own blood.”

I knew the bugs had hemolymph and not blood, but if McCracken was calling it blood, so was I.

Durobakka and her second batted each other with antennae, rapid-fire.

Then she said: “Since we are at disagreements we are, let us recess for twelve hours twelve. We shall now duel with ideas duel.”

Twelve hours. But to do what? Continue stumbling blindly toward peace, or prepare to resume the war?

* * *

“Do you think the centipedes were lying, Lieutenant?” McCracken asked as soon as we were back with our delegation and the doors closed.

“Well, ma’am,” I said, “I’ve seen Durobakka lie before. She once discounted their overall troop strength, by at least 25 percent. Once she said that their largest battleship was laid up, but our spybots saw it leave space dock under its own power. Whenever she lies, she wiggles the longest legs on her tail segment, which doesn’t attack, to distract us from her head, which does. That’s Durobakka’s tell.”

“Was she twitching about the attack on Plymouth?”

“Not at all, ma’am,” I said. “None of the times you asked her.”

“That’s a clincher, then?” Commissioner Staroscik said.

“I was speaking to the Unified Council during your secluded rendezvous,” Admiral Helinsky said. “I’m not betting the future of humanity on whether or not some stinky bug wiggled its posterior. They authorized me to redeploy our forces for better offensive and defensive stances.” He waved at red and black markers moving around the map table.

I wondered who’d given Helinsky clearance. He was a master of forum shopping—asking anyone, everyone until someone approved his schemes. Sometimes he’d think of something and just go do it, claiming he had permission when he didn’t.

“I’ve got people on Plymouth, and there will be blood,” he growled.

As part of the peace effort, Keiretsu Corp. had been working jointly with the garbage bugs, building food processors and oxygen scrubbers and other infrastructure on Aine. The scrubbers would collect the oxygen the centipedes exhaled and sell it to passing ships. These were older oxygen accumulators with passive diffusers—we weren’t giving them another chance to steal our newer tech—but still it was humans and Skolopendrans working together to turn a desolate planet into a centipede garden spot.

Helinsky had ordered ships to threaten those installations and other hardpoints. It would take time to get the battleships and dreadnoughts there, but some of the faster patrols and light cruisers were already in pre-assault positions.

If Durobakka didn’t tell us what we wanted to hear in a few hours, we’d be hitting them fast.

Staroscik had tried to train Durobakka and the rest of the centipedes to consider everything in the peace process a joint effort. Would our next joint venture be mutual destruction?

* * *

At exactly twelve hours, General McCracken and I walked into the conference room. I could barely breathe. But there was now only one centipede there, and it wasn’t splattered in human blood. Had Durobakka washed herself, as a token of friendship?

I noted the centipede’s length, scars and asymmetries, the eye clusters on either side of its head, and which legs had been damaged and partially regenerated.

This wasn’t Durobakka.

No, this was her assistant—the one with the job corresponding to mine. As I looked further, I noticed some small blotches of glistening green. “My name is Joto Jotonurra my name. Now I am Chief Victor Priest I am. I speak for the Skolopendrans now I speak.”

“Very well,” McCracken said, unfazed that this centipede had probably just killed Durobakka and many others to become the highest-ranked.

Before McCracken could say anything else, the bug said, “Grieve and I grieve for your loss. Vengeance you will seek and vengeance?”

Again the commissioner’s voice rang in our ears. *Be cagey. They may be fishing for secrets about our current operations.*

“Yes, we will,” the general said. “You have undoubtedly noticed that we are preparing a military response on *whomever* it was that struck us at Plymouth.”

Now neither side was playing coy. How many would be killed by the next words?

“Of course, General, of course,” the centipede said. “To prove our desire for peace is our desire, I authorize myself to offer our assistance offer.”

Help? How? I wondered. Lighten our load by eating wounded humans?

What the Skolopendran said next could not have surprised me more.

“As requested, we will prove our good intentions with our own blood, with blood.” Then it did something I’d never seen a centipede do before. It slowly laid its tail flat on the table, splaying the tail legs. Then it laid its head down, parallel to the tail, folding poison claws and serrated mouthparts neatly underneath. Quietly, it clicked and hissed. “With you we go to war against a new enemy, we war. Will one thousand of our warriors suffice one thousand?”

* * *

III. Outbound: From Planet Aine to Badb Catha’s L5 point

A thousand centipede soldiers? And a warship to carry them? In the middle of *our* fleet?

Yeah, there were debates. But the Council had made its decision to accept their offer, and that should have been that. But it wasn't.

"Yes, yes, the Skolopendrants' offer could, potentially, *could* seal the peace," Admiral Helinsky told General McCracken. "Unless, of course, they're lying and tricking you."

"Why would they, Admiral?"

I hunkered down behind holos on McCracken's desk of Dorie Miller and James Armistead, as verbal artillery began to fire.

"Tactical advantage!" Helinsky said. "They could just blow up their own ship. High speed fragments cutting through the L5 point would do us a lot of damage."

"You think they'd sacrifice an entire ship's complement to—"

"Cripple your task force? Or take out a beamer, and make it harder for us to move assets from star to star?" Helinsky's hands moved up-and-down like scales. "Depending on the ship, yeah, I'd make that trade."

Oh? What other sacrifices would he make? Gardien Station? Touchdown City? Jovita?

"I know you would, Admiral."

"Did you see the centipedes dancing in the streets?" Helinsky asked. "The war ended without a decisive victory—they think *they* won! Unless we put them in their place, we can't dictate the terms of the peace treaty. They'll never stop trying to squirm out of it, to get back at us. This war will never end!"

"Thank you for your input. But the Council has placed me in charge, and the decision has been made."

"Why?"

"The 'why' is not your concern. Time is short. I need to be preparing and leading the fleet, including the centipede ship. That's the plan, Admiral. Stick to it. *Do we understand each other?*"

Say what you want about McCracken; she's earned every bit of her reputation. But at that moment, she won my loyalty.

* * *

We had to hurry if we wanted to save Plymouth. Putting a fleet together would normally take months, and we were allotted weeks. To do this, McCracken recruited most of the peace delegation, including me and Dresdin, commandeering the team assembled to make peace, to make war, to make peace.

McCracken put Dresdin on "special assignment," running her ragged, racing between calls with a dozen ships, all heading toward the task force assembly area. "She's been watching me for years," Dresdin said. "And you, too."

Yup. McCracken was grooming Dresdin for greatness, and I was only a little jealous.

As for me? McCracken assigned me to her flagship—*Lexington*, a Khutulun-class dreadnought—handling requisitions . . . which were desperately important. We'd have two years of round-trip travel time, plus who knows how long planetside. With comms out, we couldn't count on our friends at Plymouth—if any were left—for anything, not even a cup o' joe. To fire our Wittsteins or Weinsteins, we'd have to bring tens of thousands of railgun slugs with us—there would be no resupply.

Logistics won't necessarily win battles, but they can lose them. In five years, if the mission failed and peace died because *Lexington* ran out of food, fuel, ammo, or equipment, that would be on me. The responsibility was terrifying. Yet I was happy to be busy and distracted by rapid-fire requisitions rocketing in from every department.

I had no idea why people wanted the things they wanted, and half the things seemed stupid and nonsensical, but I did what I was told.

Some people hate filling orders and following orders, but I don't mind.

My personal hero isn't Wellington or Hannibal or Kothari, but a lowly radioman on an island during Old Earth's first atomic war. The enemy was planning a massive attack, but no one knew where. Our hero was ordered to signal that their water purifier was out. That made no sense—the equipment was fine. But he sent the message anyway. Unbeknownst to him, that message

helped break the enemy's code, identifying his island—Midway—as the target for their attack. There the enemy was met and destroyed, and the tide of war turned. He didn't learn until years later that following a seemingly stupid and nonsensical order played a tiny but critical role in winning the war.

Stories are written about people like Dresdin who won't paint within the lines. But wars—and peace—are won by folks like me.

* * *

I did my logistical work aboard *Lexington* as we steamed from planet Aine to the assembly area. This was by the beam array at Badb Catha's L5 Lagrange point, an invisible anchorage in the middle of empty space.

With great trepidation, I watched our approach through a tiny porthole. We would be berthed at a spacedock attached to a chunk of asteroidal ice. When we came around the ice, I was terrified that I wouldn't see the supplies I'd ordered—huge piles of them—waiting for us on the pier and ready to be loaded onto *Lexington*. I alone couldn't guarantee mission success, but my mistakes could cause its failure, and doom the prospects of peace with the centipedes.

As I watched, waiting to see if my supplies had arrived, my mind started to wander . . . and I thought about everything this war had done to us.

Tato and I had been the serious ones in a family of *payasos*, who made faces at each other when dinner conversation petered out. My happy, drama-free childhood left me ill-prepared for the traumas war delivered.

Dresdin had been the clown in her family, repeatedly kicked out of her childhood home for "contrariness." None of that had prepared her for losing her kids, either. After the centipedes murdered Jourdin and Devin, then only ten and seven, she drifted away from her husband Armando. She said they were in deep dark holes, but separate holes, each unable to dig out or reach the other. She barely talked about this, and kept joking and screwing around, but I saw the sadness in her eyes, watched her struggle against her inner darkness, and fail.

Every order I followed was in the hopes that humans and centipedes could fight and work together, cementing a peace wherein Dresdin and I could finally find inner peace.

As I thought about all this, we came around the final corner, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief when I saw huge piles of supplies, waiting to be loaded onto *Lexington*. I hadn't screwed up the mission!

But when I saw what was in the berth next to ours, I reluctantly found myself feeling something completely different: Astonishment, an exhilarating expansion of the mind, of the boundaries of the possible.

In the next berth was the centipede ship.

I tried to stretch my mind around a bizarre concept, long rumored but yet unproven. Their ship wasn't just a string of segments, designed to look like a centipede. It *was* a centipede, one of unbelievable size.

We'd already seen the centipedes grow large creatures and then eat their insides and convert the shells into razormechs as long as a bus.

This ship was ten times bigger.

Later, I dug into biology reports just deep enough to find out how they did it. A bug's body size isn't controlled by a single master hormone. Rather, size is regulated by a plethora of proteins, a variety pack of tissue-specific negative feedback loops, with assorted genes controlling cell proliferation, chitin production, and molting. They had to carefully orchestrate the growth rates of the exoskeleton and internal organs—it wouldn't do to have a body the size of a cargo hauler and something like a kidney the size of a kidney bean.

But a centipede's exoskeleton isn't strong enough to hold up an animal that heavy. They solved that problem by growing them in space—deep space gigantism, they called it—and adding external bracing. The centipedes got around the square-cube law, where an animal's volume increases faster than its surface area, in a clever but grisly way. To minimize the volume of cells they had to feed, they slowly and carefully hollowed it out as it grew, eating the giant centipede from the inside, but leaving just enough biomass to keep it alive.

The final product—a ship they called *Pelasso Pelagossa*—was enormous, about ninety meters long, bigger than our minesweepers or missile cruisers, a quarter as long as a dreadnought like *Lexington*.

Now as we approached this giant centipede ship, I found myself overwhelmed by its audacious engineering, its expansive beauty. What other wonders could be achieved by working together, harnessing the power of engineering, biology, chemistry—and peace?

Then, as I studied the centipede ship more, I became very worried. Attached to the legs were railguns and ion engines. Relativistic ion engines.

My mind focused on those engines, as I realized that all their mighty tech—and ours—had created a new, exceedingly dangerous situation.

* * *

Our launch system used the Mason Memorial beam array. This was the first of the coherent field beamers, the kind that uses nuclear state population inversions to kick out relativistic helium-ion beams. They consume more fissionables than a city, but produce ion beams that don't spread because their wave functions are coherent.

Our beamer was perfect for moving a convoy from the Nouvelle Terre system to Proxima because the beam pushes against a ship's magsail, producing days of acceleration, getting us quickly to interstellar speed.

But what of ships without magsails? Like the centipede ship? They couldn't use our launch system! Maybe they could go on their own, using the old tech they'd copied from us—their relativistic ion engines.

"No they can't," General McCracken insisted. "The whole point is to cement the peace with humans and Skolopendrans fighting side by side. But their ship is too slow getting to a high fraction of cee. We need to get to Plymouth fast, while we can still do some good. We can't have the centipedes lollygagging, arriving months after we're done fighting the octopoids."

In order to arrive at the same time, the centipede ship had to travel in our convoy, but not under its own power. We considered giving them our mag field tech, but the Unified Council said *no way in hell*, leaving us one bad solution.

The centipede ship wouldn't be positioned *way over there*, maybe by the extra cargo ships, but in the very heart of the convoy, smack up against our flagship. Only *Lexington* could generate a mag field powerful enough to cover both ships. In order to do *that*, we'd have to physically connect them. To get agreement to do that, both sides had to feel equally safe and unsafe, with both ships retaining their rail guns.

When we left the assembly area, our ships would be like two trained killers on the run, handcuffed together, each pointing a gun at the other.

* * *

And so, even before we launched, McCracken's task force was nearly self-destructing. The beamers were already accelerating the robotic Vanguard and the first crewed ships, but *Lexington* still needed to finish the physical link to *Pelasso*.

The devil is in the details, right? And the devil you deal with while dealing with those details.

The champion the bugs chose for those talks wasn't their ship's captain, but a warrior named Kiraki Kirakanuui. She came with a reputation for being wild, licentious, cruel, and barbaric—even for a centipede.

The talks were audio only—we preferred not to have to look at their faces. So we never actually saw Kiraki, and Lisa Montoya and some of the other NCOs joked that she might not even exist. But I believed she did, because fierceness resounded in her voice, in horrid scrapes and clicks and pops.

Hours of parlay between their devil and *Lex*'s captain boiled down to repeated cycles of:

"I won't risk you firing on *Lexington* from point-blank range."

"Your demands are unacceptable demands. We will not remove *Pelasso's* weapons not remove."

"You'll keep your weapons over my dead body."

"You'll disarm my ship over my dead body disarm."

I was starting to worry there might be a lot of dead bodies very soon.

* * *

I had just climbed into my bunk on *Lex*, when horns blared and lights flashed overhead and on my wristbreaker. The ship lurched, and bulkheads groaned.

“General quarters! General quarters! All hands to battle stations! This is not a drill!”

I ran to the CIC, the Combat Information Center buried in the middle of the ship.

Next to General McCracken was *Lex*'s captain, Emilio Sugawara. “Status!”

“It's *Pelasso Pelagossa*, Captain,” Nav answered. “Someone blew up the bridge between us!”—the bridge that had been hell to negotiate and build—“Now she's free of her mooring.”

“What's her heading?”

“She's . . . drifting, sir.”

“What the hell?”

“Comms, ping her now. *Now!* Let's see if she has an explanation!”

“She's actually pinging us.”

“*Pelasso Pelagossa*, this is *Lexington*, Captain Emilio Sugawara commanding. What is your status?”

Over the comm Kiraki Kirakanuui wailed a horrible screech. “Your treachery and treachery!” Kiraki and Sugawara's argument continued, in overlapping voices: human, bug, robotranslator.

“Enough!” General McCracken shouted. “Audio off!” With more conviction than some show on the battlefield, she slashed a finger across her throat and stabbed it at Captain Sugawara.

“For the moment at least, whether you like it or not, Captain,” McCracken said, “These centipedes are our allies, and honored guests in our space. They will be treated as such.”

“As you wish, ma'am,” Sugawara said through clenched teeth. As *Lexington* maneuvered out of dock, the Captain said, “Nav, watch your yaw.”

“Aye-aye, Skipper.”

“Status of *Pelasso*'s weapons?”

“Still cold, sir.”

“And ours?”

“Wittstein 1 is loaded and ready, sir, locked onto *Pelasso*,” Fire Control replied. “Others are still down for refit. But we can't fire until we clear the cranes and quays.”

“Damn it!” Sugawara said. “Nav, how much longer?”

“About . . . 15 . . . 18 . . . seconds . . .”

McCracken said, “Captain, there will be *no* firing of weapons without my specific authorization. Is that understood?” When Sugawara hesitated, McCracken repeated: “Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma'am, of course. Understood.”

The tactical showed *Lexington* sliding ponderously away from its moorings, *Pelasso Pelagossa* tumbling, moving further away from the station, and the picket ships in their halo orbits through L5. The one best positioned for shooting without fragging the dock: *Nandaka*, a medium cruiser.

“Now we're clear, sir.”

“Ma'am,” I said to McCracken, studying the tactical. “*Pelasso* looks helpless, tumbling, engines cold.”

“A trick?”

“We have a firing solution, sir!” Fire Control shouted.

“Hold fire. Externals, what about their Wittsteins?”

“Checking. Their rail guns still show no charge, sir.”

The Captain turned to McCracken. “General?”

“Hmph.” McCracken stared at the display. “*Nandaka* is moving into firing position.” With gimballed engines at each corner and bristling with guns, *Nandaka* was nothing if not a highly mobile weapons platform.

“Captain,” I said. “If I may?”

“What is it, Lieutenant?”

"I don't think this is a trick. If the bugs were going to attack, they could have done more damage without leaving dock—"

"I have a signal from the centipede ship!" Comms said.

Captain Sugawara started to say, "If that warrior wants to—"

"Put it on. Audio only."

"Channel is open. Audio only."

McCracken said: "I'll take it." Then: "This is NTMS *Lexington*. General McCracken, Fleet Commander speaking."

"This is *Pelasso Pelagossa*, Captain Wah Chula Chula commanding Wah."

"Please state your intentions, Captain Wah."

"The our intentions ours?" Wah said indignantly. "The ours and ours? *Pelasso* has been *poisoned and poisoned!*"

Pelasso had attendant tankers, feeding it through exterior arteries. The station had offered new nutrients, developed by our scientists. In the interest of peace, the centipedes had foolishly accepted.

McCracken turned to Sugawara. "Captain, if that ship twitches a leg, I want to know."

Nandaka was moving onto an attack vector.

Captain Wah said, "The your station is to feeding the our ship food and food, but instead the you gave toxins and toxins! The we came in good faith—"

Comms said, "Skipper, I have *Nandaka* on the line."

Sugawara huffed at the interruption.

"One moment, Captain Wah." McCracken signaled Comms to cut off. "Put *Nandaka* on."

"You're live, ma'am."

"This is *Lexington*, General McCracken, Fleet Commander."

Admiral Helinsky said, "Do you need assistance, General?" What was he doing aboard *Nandaka*?

"We're evaluating the situation, Admiral."

"The situation, General," Admiral Helinsky began, "is that we have an enemy vessel spying on and threatening a crucial installation."

"I've never seen evidence of that, ma'am," I whispered to the General.

Until that moment, McCracken's voice had been cool, steady, in command. You could hear her tone shift. "*Nandaka*, we will handle this on our own."

"You are authorized to fire, General."

"I know the rules of engagement."

"Then do it."

McCracken's eyes narrowed. "What's your game, Admiral?"

"This is no game, General. If those centipedes—"

"You orchestrated this, didn't you?" McCracken's voice grew more sure. "You fabricate evidence, then have your people poison *Pelasso* and cut it loose. You set us up to do your dirty work."

"You have an opportunity for the kill shot, General. Don't waste it."

"Admiral, be advised that *Lexington* is not firing, repeat, *not* firing on the centipede ship."

"Understood," the admiral said. "Like everything else in this war, I will do it myself."

"What is your plan, Helinsky, if you have one this time?"

"Once *Pelasso* is destroyed, the centipedes will have to retaliate. Then we can completely crush them, ending this war with an indisputable victory."

Maybe Helinsky wasn't completely insane.

One lesson history teaches is that wars that end without a decisive battle sometimes never really end, the combatants stumbling forth in moral uncertainty and economic ennui, unable to resist taking more potshots. Only complete domination would put the bugs in their place, affirm our moral superiority and free us both to chase other, non-deadly pursuits.

And yet . . . *Pelasso*'s cannons remained frozen, and I hated the idea of executing soldiers unable to defend themselves.

ANALOG

McCracken signaled Comms to mute. "Plans are barely in motion, and that damned fool is going to ruin everything. External, status of *Nandaka's* Wittsteins?"

"Their rails are charged, ma'am."

"Nav, can you put me between *Nandaka* and *Pelasso*?"

"Ma'am?"

"How long will it take?"

Were we really going to take a bit for the centipedes?

"Our main thrust loop isn't fully deployed yet, ma'am, though our maneuvering loops are."

Engineers were frantically injecting nitrogen plasma into the loops to pump up their field strength. Now we were pushing against solar and planetary mag fields, but considering that *Pelasso* was tumbling erratically and we'd need to steer around her . . .

"How long, damn it!" The General demanded.

"About 93 seconds."

"Too long, much too long." McCracken looked like she was going to punch something. "Suggestions?"

"There's another way to achieve what you want, General," Sugawara said.

Were we considering firing on *Nandaka*?

Sugawara continued. "We don't have to be *between* the ships to keep *Nandaka* from firing. Nav, how long to get us to 250 meters of *Pelasso*?"

"Sir?"

"In a straight line, Nav, from here to the closest point about 250 meters away."

"Uh . . . about twenty seconds."

The general nodded.

"Do it. *Now!*" the captain ordered. Sugawara didn't agree with his superior, but he'd follow her lead, as the consummate professional soldier.

"Good thinking, Captain," General McCracken said.

"Let's hope that Helinsky sees us moving before he pushes the button," Sugawara said.

"Two hundred and fifty meters from *Pelasso*, sir. Should we keep approaching?"

"Negative, Nav," Sugawara said. "This is close enough. But maintain this distance as she keeps drifting."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"I don't understand, sir," I said. "When Helinsky blows up *Pelasso*, we'll be perforated by flying debris . . ."

"If," McCracken explained. "I'm betting he won't risk the fleet's biggest dreadnought."

We were now the only ship sure to be hit if *Nandaka* blew up *Pelasso*. Everything else was far enough away to deflect or dodge incoming debris.

The very idea that an admiral might destroy one of our own dreadnoughts was mind-boggling. Apparently, the Nouvelle Terre Unified Armed Forces weren't quite as unified as advertised.

McCracken was counting on a thousand centipede warriors getting to Plymouth. To do that, she'd risk her own life. An impressive dedication to the peace plan.

The *Nandaka* kept approaching *Pelasso*. Ten thousand meters, eight thousand. Could she position herself, finding a firing solution angled to decrease the chance of damage to us?

We waited more.

The Combat Information Center was deep in the heart of *Lexington*, the most well-protected part of the ship. But an exploding missile had once reached *Daniel Cohen's*.

I looked around and counted noses. Twenty-three. Escape pods? Enough for sixteen.

Still we waited.

This was even worse than the Peace Bubble.

On the tactical display: *Nandaka* bobbed, probing for a firing solution. If they were going to shoot, it was now or never.

Finally:

Comms said, "Ma'am, I have *Nandaka* actual on the line."

"Put him through!"

“Mic is live.”

“This is *Lexington*,” McCracken said.

“This is Lieutenant Oderwald, First Officer of *Nandaka*. *Lexington*, be advised that we are powering down weapons and standing down.”

An enormous cheer erupted around me.

“Oderwald, this is McCracken. What’s going on there? Where’s Rob Nelson?”

“The captain’s gone,” Oderwald said, with stiff upper lip. “He’s gone, ma’am. He will be missed. Per his last orders, Admiral Helinsky was relieved of command duties and escorted to the brig.”

But all this gave me pause. How close had we come to oblivion? Had Helinsky actually given the order to fire? Been countermanded by *Nandaka*’s captain? I felt sorry for the weapons officer in *that* CIC. Obey orders, sure, but whose? It must have been chaos there, with the captain dead. How many other officers and crew, too?

How long until I was in that position? McCracken had been on the right side today, but there were more factions within this fleet than I cared to think about, each convinced its way was the only one forward. Plus whatever factions might exist on Plymouth. We couldn’t even make peace with ourselves; how could we do so with centipedes?

What the Helinsky incident taught me could be summed up in a Bible verse I’d once taught Tato in escuela bíblica de vacaciones:

We fight not against blood and flesh, but against principalities, against the powers and rulers of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly regions.

If my goal was peace, my true enemy was not the centipedes, but anyone on either side who wanted war, even if they pretended otherwise.

* * *

Now other things changed.

After the Helinsky incident—which had injured six others, including *Nandaka*’s primary Helm and Fire Control—I started to worry about things that hadn’t bothered me before.

Like the exact composition of McCracken’s fleet . . .

A task force isn’t just a ragtag grab bag of ships. Each ship is carefully chosen for its abilities and to compensate for other ships’ deficiencies, making the fleet a cohesive fighting unit. The problem? We didn’t know what kind of fight we were rushing toward.

If we found ourselves up against an invading armada, we’d fight ship-to-ship. If it was a land grab, we’d soften them up with orbital bombardment, then follow with troopships and close support fighters. If a humanitarian crisis, we’d need hospital ships and relief supplies. The brass had agreed on octopoids as the likely belligerent, but with what? Terraformers, surface-raiding parties, robot surrogates, or impactors dropped from the asteroid disk?

Nor could the fleet include a gazillion ships covering all the possibilities. We needed assets at home, in case of a sneak attack.

The final fleet config seemed stupid and nonsensical, like a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none. Before we even left, depending on what we found on Plymouth, we might have already set ourselves up for a very bad day.

And what was this weird little blocky ship, *Del Vecchio*, held close-by in our mag field? It was strangely configured—like a dozen crates and cylinders jumbled together, without windows. Not a command ship, nor cargo or comm. I asked Dresdin about it, and she actually snapped at me. “We’re not paid enough to ask questions like that!”

I tried not to think about it. No one had taken an hour to explain to the radioman on Midway *why* he had to send that message. No one would bother explaining the task force design to me.

I certainly didn’t ask.

And yet . . . Helinsky was sure that blasting the bug ship would best promote peace. And McCracken—with access to the same intelligence—had decided the opposite. I still didn’t know who was right.

Would a time come when I received competing orders?

Given the option, would I listen to the correct superior officer, perhaps following seemingly

stupid and nonsensical orders, or would I become the wickedness in the heavenly realms?

* * *

Eventually enough of the Helinsky mess was cleaned up and it was our turn to launch, along with *Pelasso* and her thousand centipede warriors and that blocky mystery ship, *Del Vecchio*.

We'd miss the preliminary hearings for Helinsky's court-martial, but we had a planet to rescue.

The actual launch was controlled by *Lexington's* AI, coordinating with the beamer's crew—yet another thing that could possibly kill me but was completely beyond my control. But you didn't want to be awake when the coherent particle beam slammed into your ship's magfield, into you. Not just folks with brittle bones would crumple into a pile of matchsticks, but normies too. We all had genmods, gravity-induced gene expression to stiffen and steel the sinews. Sheets of woven steviflex were wrapped around my aorta and inner organs. Without that, acceleration would turn my chest into a grav cannon, with my heart bursting out of it.

But even those mods weren't enough. We'd have two days of hyper-acceleration, during which we'd be in hypothermic hibernation in a fluid-filled g-suit, robots pumping us with chemicals, and nanobots policing us for blood pooling in our artery walls.

The problem was that warrior Kiraki and the other centipedes didn't need any of that. High-g was uncomfortable and inconvenient but, with their fancy exoskeletons, it wouldn't kill or incapacitate them. Yes, they were now our allies, but if they changed their minds during hyper-acceleration, we'd be too asleep to do anything about it. It was mildly terrifying that we'd have to depend on *Lexington's* AI and robots to fight them off.

Just before I went under, I got a ping out of the blue from Dresden. I missed working closely with her. I was already in my hibernaculum, attended by a robotic sleeper-tech, hooked to a debubbler, lest bubbles in my blood cause a stroke. Soon dozens of compounds would be injected into me: anesthetics, antimicrobials, anticonvulsives, neuroprotectants. Plus chronotropic and inotropic agents to lower and regulate my heart's rate, rhythm, and power output. My core body temperature would be so low that I'd need ice-binding proteins to keep my blood from freezing.

As the sleeper-tech was about to insert a tube in my mouth, lights flashed. Dresden.

"Hold on," I said to the robot, and it waited.

"Lieutenant," Dresden said. "Do you want the good news first or the bad news?"

"The good news."

"Well . . . I have a confession to make," she said. I could hear the devious smile curl around her mouth. "You know how gene expression is different in high gravity? I decided to do a fun little 'science experiment' while we're boosting."

"A science experiment, Captain?"

Dresden had given new orders to two bots that were supposed to be guarding us. Instead they'd be steeping, boiling, fermenting, and measuring acceleration-simmered gravity with a gravitometer, and specific gravity with a hydrometer. Hopefully a combo of culture conditions, gene mods, and gravity-altered yeast gene expression would produce something palatable. Bitter, but not too bitter, maybe with a hint of isoamyl acetate for banana flavor, and 2-methylbutanal for almond, and enough ethanol for a good buzz. Very Dresden. Only she would think of using acceleration to brew beer.

"Maybe if we survive," I said, "We can slam back a couple to celebrate."

"Oh no!" Dresden said. "You're my war buddy so you can have all you want, but I never touch the stuff. Never liked the taste. These are for bartering!"

"Oh, I see. So, what's the bad news?"

"After launch, we're getting new assignments . . ." she said, playfully drawing out the tension.

"Which are . . . ?"

"General McCracken told me that the two of us . . . will . . . be . . . reassigned . . . to . . ." She paused and waited.

"Oh no no no!" I said. "Not the centipede ship!"

"That's right!" she said. "Rubba dub dub, that's the rub, you and me and a thousand bugs in a

tub.”

I started to protest, struggling to get out of the hibernaculum. But that imitelligent bot, lacking any bedside manner, held me down and without warning stabbed me with needles and shoved tubes down my throat and up my butt.

“G’night, Lieutenant, sleep tight.”

* * *

IV. Aboard *Lexington* and *Pelasso Pelagossa*, 281 NT Days to Plymouth

Sleeping meant nightmares of being suffocated, alternating with nightmares of humans and centipedes writhing in hand-to-claw combat while impactors rained down.

Waking up from high-g was just a different nightmare.

Without asking permission, sleeper-techs had pumped a shopping list of fluids in and out of me.

Pumped in were protein kinase C inhibitors—Reperfusion protectants, protecting my tissues from damage when flooded with oxygen anew.

Pumped out were perfluorocarbons, drawn from my lungs before I was conscious. But they didn’t get it all. Felt like I was drowning until I could cough up the rest. And the fluid in my digestive tract. That had to go, too. Oh, and I was still chilled to the bone, so that was fun.

I spent hours in a mess deck in a hab ring converted into a make-shift medbay, along with Dresdin and 1,237 other waking sleepers, barf bags ready.

Just as my stomach finally settled down, they kindly spun up the ring. As the gut spasms started again, General McCracken pinged us—had she actually gained muscle mass during acceleration?—and ordered Dresdin and me to immediately inspect the centipede ship.

“Sensational!” Dresdin exclaimed. “We finally get to meet the centipede crew and the warriors, and find out if this Kiraki Kirakanuui really exists. Any bets?”

A Gun Captain overheard Dresdin and said, “Ma’am, scuttlebutt is that she was responsible for *Peter Rivera*.”

“Really?”

“Really, ma’am.”

Rivera was a high-speed patrol ship that dropped off the grid and was later found adrift, undamaged, but the entire crew torn apart and eaten. She’d never fired a shot, never sent a distress signal.

Yes, in our dilapidated state, we were about to meet and greet *that* centipede, and a thousand more, all aboard their ship.

* * *

The bugs told us their ship’s air was mostly carbon dioxide, but the temp and pressure—28 Celsius, 195 kPa—were okay for humans. Scanners showed no evidence of lying. So, technically, we could move around *Pelasso* with only rebreather masks and CO₂ scrubbers. We could just go in the unarmored service uniforms. Essentially defenseless.

That wouldn’t matter . . . *if* enough of them wanted peace *and* they held the leashes of those that didn’t, at least until we could fight side-by-side on Plymouth. *If*.

So there I found myself, next to Dresdin as she slipped into her armor.

“Did the general specify dropsuits?” I asked.

“No, but she also didn’t forbid it, and I don’t trust them.”

“McCracken told us to be brave, braver than in combat.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dresdin said. “We also need to put up a united front.” She pointed at my drop-suit, so I started stepping into it.

Then I tried to draw a line at weapons.

“Yeah, if they do want peace . . .” she said, holding a snub-nose flasher. “Then they could see this as escalating. That said . . .” Her flasher snapped magnetically into a hidden compartment in her thigh armor.

I turned my own flasher in my hands and quoted McCracken again. “You don’t go into peace talks armed.”

Dresdin took my flasher and snapped it into my armor. “We do.”

She then asked me to help her check the seal on her helmet's collar ring. As I did, I noticed tiny pictures of Jourdin and Devon, taped inside her helmet, visible only to her. I'd never seen them before, and they made me wonder. In combat it's absolutely critical to be able to rely on your teammates. But would her anger at the bugs bias her decisions, leading us into unnecessary danger? Or, in her despair, would she make a split-second decision to join her sons?

* * *

When we boarded our shuttlecraft *Rubenstein*, two marines in dropsuits were already aboard, acting as security and doubling as pilots.

After we took off, Dresdin pointed through the wraparound viewport, just like a tour guide. "Please enjoy the lovely view of our magnificent war machine!"

Magnificent, indeed! Lest I forget, this view of the dreadnought *Lexington* reminded me how mighty and muscular she was, a mobile weapons platform I was proud to serve on. Her body was a hardened fasces, a nigh-unbreakable bundle of parallel hulls, capable of absorbing gutpunches and *planchas*, then counterattacking with Hreka point defense cannons. Her primary offense came from a great sponson emerging from one side, like a lucha libre luchador stiff-arming an opponent. She bristled with heavy Wittstein X and Weinstein VII railguns, plus six-packs of medium rotary-mounted guns top-side and aft, all together capable of delivering, at will, an exceso de rudezas on any enemy strongpoint or warship. Indeed, battle forces she led had pulverized three centipede battleships, including the legendary *Kunaro Kunagossa*, plus six heavy cruisers and too many smaller ships to list. For all her might, she was even a trickster, asymmetrically decorated with coatings and weirdly shaped panels morphing to deceive enemy sensors and homing missiles. Anyone setting foot on *Lexington* walked tall and proud, knowing she was the most awesome weapon we humans had ever constructed.

When we finally cleared *Lex*, and I had caught my breath, I noticed that her running lights illuminated a crate in the back of our shuttle's passenger compartment. When I asked, Dresdin said: "Oh, that's a gift."

"For the centipedes?"

"Oh no!" She commed the pilots. "Sergeant, don't forget to make that pitstop."

"No, ma'am, not forgotten."

We veered from a direct path to *Pelasso*, and toward that mystery ship, that weird boxy thing, *Del Vecchio*. I would momentarily find out what it was, but I was impatient. When I asked again, Dresdin said: "Oh, that's a Keiretsu science ship."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Wanted to, but 'need to know,' ya know?"

I was still a little miffed. I'd known Dresdin since the academy, and we'd been stationed together several times. She was a couple years older than me and, as we came up through the ranks, usually one rung ahead. But she always, always told me everything she knew, even when she wasn't supposed to. This new secrecy irked me. What else was she holding out on?

When we docked to *Del Vecchio*, Keiretsu freight robots loaded unlabeled crates into the shuttle's cargo bay. I wondered about them, but Dresdin wasn't going to tell me what was in them, so why bother asking? A marine handed off Dresdin's crate to a man in a white dropsuit, the civilian model. He opened the crate, and inside were a couple dozen homebrew beers.

"Thanks for the help, Dr. Li," Dresdin said.

"We'll see how well you followed my recipe," Li said with a laugh. Then he saw the label. "DresdinBrau? DresdinBrau? My recipe!" He laughed again. "Thanks for letting me tag along, Captain."

"Like Keiretsu Corp. gave me a choice!"

Li strapped himself into the seat behind me. "Are my supplies aboard?"

Oh? He was coming with us? I was *really* out of the loop.

"Total mass matches the manifest," the marine pilot said.

"No one's ever been aboard a centipede ship before," Li said, as our shuttle moved on. "I mean a *centipede* centipede ship. Looking forward to studying all their weapons up close . . ."

"So we can . . ." I asked, ". . . coordinate our attack with theirs when we fight the octopoids,

right?"

"Yeah, exactly, that too."

The centipede ship—constructed out of a still-living centipede ninety meters long—was truly frightening, and intentionally so. Jagged red stripes—the specific red of wet human blood—loudly, proudly, aposematically declared her violent potential. Under her head were slung poison claws, each thrice as long as our shuttle, the claws big enough to wrap around any of *Lexington's* parallel hulls, crushing it and ripping it from the rest of the ship before moving on to the next. On some of her legs were mounted Wittstein IV railguns—a few generations old, but still capable of knifing open a ship like a gutted deer, leaving its carcass spinning in space as she raced away—if someone on the giant centipede warship decided to pick a fight with our mighty fleet, or vice versa. If *Lex* had to fight this thing, would we kill each other?

"Oh, wow! Look at those!" Dr. Li was pointing at some large hair-like structures projecting from the centipede's skin. They must have been five or six meters long.

The shuttle moved toward them, and Li shouted, "Back off! Back off!"

"I thought you wanted a closer look, sir," one of the marines said.

"Oh no no!"

The shuttle veered off. I'd never heard a marine take orders from a scientist before.

"What are those?" I asked. "Sensing hairs?"

"I was thinking they might be like cnidocils. You know, trigger hairs? Jellyfish have those. You brush up too close and—*wham!*—a miniature poison barb comes flying out at you. But look at the tip."

I looked at the tip.

"Do you see the hole? It's hollow like a straw, probably connected to a gland deep down inside."

"So it'll shoot poison at us?" I asked.

"Who knows? Proteases? Potassium channel blockers? Nothing you want to get on your engines or guns."

How many weapons did this centipede ship have?

We carefully negotiated toward *Pelasso's* hangar, steering clear of the hairs. The hangar was a pre-fab box, slid into a hole surgically cut into the side of the giant centipede, like a fistulated cow.

When we finally arrived, I mentally braced myself, expecting to be greeted by a thousand centipedes.

We met four.

As we disembarked, slipping into the ship's null gravity, Dr. Li released a small droid. It floated in the air, as four centipedes eyeballed it suspiciously, while we eyeballed them. "This is a translation bot," Li said, though it had more cameras and sensors around its equator than any translator I'd ever seen. But when it clacked its mechanical faceplates and popped and purred, the centipedes accepted the message, then turned their ugly faces away from it—and toward us.

"You glad you still have your flasher?" Dresdin asked on a private channel. I was.

"The my pleasure is the meeting the you all the my," the translator translated literally. "The my name is Wah Chula Chula the my. I am Captain of *Pelasso Pelagossa* Captain." Wah had intricately carved metal plates fused to his segments, and a metal harness around his head. When I'd fought centipedes on Dagda 5b, this is where they carried their flashers, but Wah's harness was now empty.

We traded introductions, and when Wah introduced his three shipmates, I listened carefully to their names. None sounded like "Kiraki Kirakanuui."

As we toured his ship, I began to relax a little, especially when Wah turned his horrid face and poison claws away from us. The ship was a series of cavernous spaces, mostly empty except for some catwalks and piles of supplies and equipment, like the inside of a blimp, held together by enormous cuticular arches and inflexions. The walls themselves were like meat slabs, pulsing and glistening with hemolymph. Dr. Li was in bliss, a proverbial kid in a candy store, flitting

around excitedly in zero gee, his hands occasionally disappearing behind stacks of supplies. Yes, if I were a scientist, I'd probably hide tiny sensors all around their ship, too. His movements were so subtle that the bugs probably didn't see through his sleight of hand.

As interesting as the tour was, mostly I concentrated on our hosts, making sure they didn't sucker punch us. I was glad when the marines interposed themselves between us and the bugs.

"Oh, look at that!" Dresdin pointed Dr. Li's attention toward a strangely configured controller rod. Maybe it controlled the railguns or engines, but instead of being a panel, it was a pipe, with stripes wound around it like a barber pole. The stripes were lined with holes, and the centipedes spiraled their bodies around the poles, inserting pointy legs to reach buttons deep inside.

On a channel excluding the bugs, Dresdin said, "Good security. We couldn't use those controls if we tried." Indeed—the holes were too numerous and small for human fingers.

But why would *we* need to, unless Dresdin was planning something awful?

"Captain Wah Chula Chula," Dresdin said on the comm, "Will we be seeing the warriors we will be fighting alongside of?"

"Yes the yes," he said, "But the they are several segments away the several. First the I will showing the you my bridge crew showing."

When we reached the bridge, Dr. Li shouted—on a private channel—"Oh the biodiversity!"

Indeed. The centipede rank-and-file I'd seen—in person or in reports—varied in size, but had the same body plan: head on one end, tail on the other, with leggy segments in between.

But this crew was a menagerie of monsters, variations on a horrid theme. One had pointed horns around its throat, like a dog collar with huge spikes. Another had mouthparts with combs of curved daggers, like buzzsaws mounted in its face.

As for their legs . . . A centipede leg isn't fleshy like a human's, ending in a padded foot with cute little toes. Oh no no. A Skolopendran leg is gaunt and skeletal, terminating in a deadly point. The legs on one bug made it look like a pit viper with trench knives thrusting from the sides.

"Oh wow! Look at that!" Li exclaimed, almost giddy. The ship's Navigator had three heads: Three pairs of poison claws, three times the poison power.

"A pteranipede! How delightful!" Li clapped and pointed when we finally met Wah's executive officer, the legendary Kiraki Kirakanuui. She was unlike any I'd encountered. This one could *fly*. Her legs were long, slender and fragile—they likely couldn't support her weight in a grav field. But sections of papery, iridescent membranes—maybe natural, maybe not—stretched between legs like wing panels. In zero gee, she floated majestically, legs folded, until she needed to move. Then she rippled like a gossamer fan, maneuvering with the precision of a hummingbird.

I'd never read reports of free-fall warriors, so either they were rare or no one had survived encounters with them. I would bet the latter.

Alone among the Skolopendrans, she was adorned with splotches of red blood. I wondered if she was the centipedes' wickedness in high places.

"Well, Captain Wah," Dresdin said, "This tour has been very . . . interesting. But we hesitate to take too much of your time. But before we go, we really would like to be able to see your army of centipede warriors."

"Yes the yes," Wah said, "*Pelasso Pelagossa* is officially the a troop carrier troop, but I consider him a treasure ship treasure. The I will now showing the our treasure showing."

Dresdin said, "Yes, Captain Wah, thank you. We would be honored to—"

Someone was shouting.

On the other side of the bridge—how did she get over there that fast?—Kiraki was scuffling with a marine. One of her coiled front legs whipped out from a socket in her body, slapping him across the visor. From a pocket hidden in his right thigh tasset, the marine pulled a snub-nosed flasher.

Kiraki snapped a heavy claw, knocking the pistol away and crushing the marine's hand. He grunted in pain and pulled out a knife with the other hand, but tentacular legs shot out and

grabbed it.

The other marine aimed a flasher, and so did Dresdin. The centipedes closed in around us, raising their heads and opening their poison claws. Yes, we were in dropsuits, but they'd penetrated my armor before . . .

Who started it? McCracken shouted in our ears, reminding me that she'd been listening the entire time.

Dresdin said, "I don't know, ma'am! It happened so fast!"

The marine gurgled, "They did!"

What should I do? Attack? Blast a hole in the wall and jump into space? Without thinking, I'd pulled a snub-nose from my own armored tasset. I aimed at the three-headed centipede. If I flashed one head, would the others attack it?

Remember your mission! We're here to end a war, to deliver one thousand centipede warriors to Plymouth and fight side-by-side with them. Not kill each other here. Dresdin! Stand down—de-escalate now!

"Yes, ma'am. De-escalating!" She snapped her flasher toward Captain Wah, the muzzle centimeters from his horrid face. "You tell your garbage bug friends to stand down right now! Or I'll blow your goddamn head off!"

Dresdin was good at many things, but diplomacy was not one of them.

Lieutenant Alvarez, listen carefully. This is General McCracken on a private channel. No one else can hear.

"Yes, ma'am! What do I do?"

A centipede snapped a flasher onto Captain Wah's head, pointing it at Dresdin. It was the high powered variety, able to cut through a dropsuit.

Find the magic words that will make the centipedes—and Dresdin—stand down. Right now!

"I don't know any magic words!"

Yes, you do. You sat at a table with Commissioner Staroscik for a hundred days—

"One hundred and thirteen days . . ."

Exactly. You remember details. Recall what Staroscik said. Use his words. Everything depends on you. A thousand centipedes die, peace dies. Improvise. That's an order.

"Friends, humans, centi—" *Unlike Staroscik, bugs don't appreciate Shakespeare—*"Uh, um, everyone! Listen to me, everybody . . . We, uh, all need to stand down. We *could* fight . . ."

"I'll start by killing these monstrosities!" a marine shouted.

"No, no, no!" I shouted. "If we fight . . . what happens next? More centipede warriors come rushing through those hatches? Captain Sugawara has railguns pointed at us right now, and I'm sure you—*Don't call them garbage bugs, don't call them garbage bugs—*Skolopendrans have guns pointed at *Lexington*. We fight, we die, maybe both ships die, too. But then what?"

I had no idea *what*.

A marine on a private channel: "Lieutenant, thanks for stalling for time, but—"

"Shut up, Sergeant!"

I looked around the room, at the humans and Skolopendrans with weapons pointed at each other. *Did Staroscik ever say something about flashers. Did Shakespeare? No? Then improvise.*

"Then what? I . . . I . . . The heaviest thing I lug around is a giant hole inside me. You can't see it, but it's there, and always will be. I've lost my wife, my children, my crazy uncle Umberto, my whole family . . . Captain Dresdin, you've lost two sons. Captain Wah, I read your file. I know you lost your mate. This war has sent our families to slaughter, our souls into desolation, our hearts into the servitude of hate. If we die here, what of those who survive us? Those we love we haven't lost already? They too will be destroyed by our deaths. Every day they will struggle, as I do now, not to let their hurt turn into hate, into more killing and more. Do you want that to be your parting gift to them?"

I had no more words, but my words had to struggle on. . . .

"I don't know how to forgive, how to trust after what you've done. I don't know if I will ever love again and feel that feeling of love so deeply you hurt inside . . . But if any of us, or those who

follow us, ever will . . . it can only happen if we . . . if we . . .”

I didn't know about anyone else, but I'd made my choice. I whispered, “For Jovita, for Tato, for Nalia, for Umberto . . . for all my family . . .” Then I lifted my flasher, flicked it off, and snapped it into its pocket in my tasset. I blacked out my visor so no one would see me crying. If they all started fighting, it wouldn't matter a lick if I participated. Not at all.

For several long moments, I saw nothing, I heard nothing.

Then Wah emitted a pained groan, like a heart imploding under crush depth.

“For Tora Toranurra for.”

I unblacked my visor to see Captain Wah, his tail flat on the deck, tail legs splayed, gripping tightly, his head parallel, clicking and hissing. His flasher was gone.

“For Laureen Lustig,” one of the marines said.

More centipedes put away their weapons. Kiraki said nothing, but she released her grip on the other marine.

After nearly everyone else had gone, Dresdin slowly studied the room, then waved her flasher around, as if she might take advantage of the centipedes laying down their weapons. Finally she said, “For Jourdin and Devin,” and holstered her gun.

* * *

After that, we took a break. Caffeinated. Got some dinner. Calmed the hell down.

Then, the tour of *Pelasso* concluded.

We would finally see the thousand centipede warriors.

Wah said, “Now the we thank you for the beautiful the words the beautiful of peace. Now the we will show you the our treasure the greatest the treasure.” He wrapped himself around a pipe-shaped mechanism, unlocking a hatch.

Hoping for peace but braced for battle, I slid into the next chamber and saw hundreds and hundreds of . . . little canisters, the size of small trash cans, arrayed in neatly stacked arrays.

“Are these hibernation pods?” I asked Dr. Li.

“Something like that. Look at them all!”

“Can you please count them?”

“The bot already has. One thousand and twelve.”

The canisters were topped with a small clear window, but when I looked into one, I saw . . . nothing. Same for the next and the next. They were all empty.

“The these are for the return trip return,” Captain Wah explained. “The treasure is on the other side of this partition the treasure. The three the thousand warriors the three the thousand.”

“Three thousand?” Dresdin said. “I thought you were providing only one thousand!”

“Yes, yes,” Wah said, “The three the thousand the three, to provide the one the thousand the one.”

“We gotta get this translation bot fixed! Are there a thousand or three thousand?”

“First the I will let the you with the beautiful the words the beautiful enter the first.” Wah pulled open the hatch.

“Are you ready, Lieutenant?” Dresdin asked on a private channel.

I took a deep breath.

One of the marines said, “Lieutenant, don't forget your snub-nose only carries a small charge. You can plug it into the suit—”

“Thanks, Sergeant!”

“—but that also runs life support, so watch the battery level.”

“Lieutenant Alvarez, are you ready?”

“Ready, ma'am.” I wasn't ready.

“The warriors will prove themselves mightily the warriors,” Wah said, “As the many are the progeny of the our the crew the our.” Did that include Kiraki? “The all are descendants of the victor priest-slayers and god-rippers the all.”

With me in the lead, we moved cautiously into the next chamber, ready to pull more weapons hidden in our dropsuits, checking the corners and everything above and below us, only to see various bins, their myriad contents unsecured and unlabeled, spilling out of open

tops and drifting casually in the air: yellowish balls, slightly fuzzy, like tennis balls.

Surrounded. Yes, we were surrounded by maybe three thousand centipede warriors—all eggs. Eggs!

Captain Wah Chula Chula drank in our shocked expressions, antennae flicking back and forth rapidly. Unrestrained centipede laughter.

* * *

V. Aboard *Pelasso Pelagossa*, 246 NT Days to Plymouth

I didn't think McCracken had known that the centipede horde were eggs, either.

Suddenly she and Dresdin disappeared into a raft of meetings, remote and in person, with senior officers. Though the bugs were the topic of conversation, they were not invited.

Neither was I. Instead I settled into a different routine. One shuttlecraft was permanently stationed in *Pelasso's* main hangar, supplied with decent rations and plenty of Dresdin's illicit home brew. My quarters until we reached Plymouth. In a gesture of good will, Dr. Li was given free reign to explore the centipede ship and talk to the crew, as were the linguist Lt. Anyenini and a couple cultural specialists. In return, the marines were sent back to *Lexington*.

Wah and I met regularly to discuss supply needs, the logistics of running the ship, and the eggs. Carrying them cut down on the food and water the ship required. They'd hatch en route, with plenty of time to grow into adult soldiers before we hit Plymouth.

After our work sessions, Wah regularly invited me to friendly chats in his quarters, which were conveniently located next to the hangar. I was hesitant at first, but General McCracken reminded me that my job was to get to know them. So we chatted off-duty, Wah snarfing up nitrogen oxides, while I—with Dresdin's permission—siphoned DresdinBrau through a tube inserted through my face mask. I was authorized to stop wearing the full armored dropsuit, but only an unarmored service uniform, with a rebreather supplying me oxygen and a scrubber to remove CO₂. Yes, we all relaxed and let down our guard a little. I even stopped carrying a flasher rifle—you don't go into peace negotiations armed. But once McCracken found out about that, she insisted I carry. We compromised on an ankle-holstered snub-nose. Week by week, I got to know Wah, perhaps better than anyone ever knew a centipede.

It helped when we convinced Lt. Anyenini to re-do the translator program to be less literal and to use more natural speech, with new earbuds supplementing the translation bots. This was a welcome change, eliminating an unnecessary and annoying barrier between us and the bugs.

Wah told me about legendary Skolos, mostly warriors. I told him about a legendary superman who came down the chimney to bring us presents.

One day I noticed a small metal box in his quarters. When I asked him about it, he opened it to reveal a set of a dozen little rings of varying sizes, the smallest the size of a wedding band.

"Do you mind if I turn off the light to show you something?"

Break out of this funk and take some risks, I told myself. "Sure."

Once it was mostly dark, he snatched the box between his poison claws. He clung to the bulkhead, as centipedes do in zero gee, and held the box overhead. A gentle shake sent the rings tumbling out, and his legs bent upward—which I'd never seen bug legs do before—and caught the rings, which began to shimmer and shine in a rainbow of sparkling colors. Four rings moved backward from his head, rising and falling on waves of legs. When they returned, they did so at different speeds, flitting back and forth in delightful, magical patterns.

"These are exercise rings, to teach the young to move their legs individually."

"Very impressive. Your control is mesmerizing."

"You were correct when you said that I'd lost my forever heartmate. These rings had belonged to her."

Wah drew his splayed legs closer to his body.

"Her name was Tora Toranurra."

"I am really sorry."

"She was on a ship that tried to take your giant space station."

Whoa. Gardien Station? Oh? *That* had been a bloodbath. The first hits had ruptured D-ring,

and the whole station was destabilized. By the time they'd bled off spin, C-ring was buckling. The centipedes had sent boarding parties, and a few actually made it to the engineering section, but some heroics by the railgunners took out most of the ships before they landed. There had been no centipede survivors.

"I am sorry to hear it." Was I really?

"My forever heartmate could disembowel a mallet-tail with three smooth motions. I grieve for her. What of yours?"

"Her name was Jovita." I wasn't sure what to say next. "She wasn't much of a killer, but boy could she get kids to do math."

"I would like you to tell more stories about her, about your children."

I just shook my head. Not this moment, no.

"When you are ready," he said.

"I don't think I'll ever be ready."

If he were human, he might have nodded. "Dying in combat is expected. Eventually even welcomed. But not so soon. Not so many. We Skolopendrans kill one at a time; you humans kill en masse."

"Your impactors killed pretty damned effectively!" Not the diplomatic thing to say, but the words could not be stopped. I felt my hurt turning to hate, but I couldn't stop it.

"It was your tactic. We had no choice but to copy it or perish."

"You had a choice," I said, heat seeping into my voice now. "You could have come to us peacefully. But no, you came seeking blood."

"After what your kind did to us? How could we do anything but fight back?"

"What we did we do to you? You wouldn't exist without humanity."

"Yes, we know why you made us." The translator added a growl to his voice. "And how."

I'd heard the story . . . Eleven hundred years before, we'd wanted planet Hades for its resources. But its atmosphere was mostly carbon dioxide, and it was all a-crawl with horrible little monsters. So we engineered the Skolopendrans from the larger Amazonian centipedes, the ones as long as your foot, adding genes from Euglena and various plastids. The centipedes would exhale oxygen and kill all the little monsters. But the planet would then be full of killer centipedes. So we built an auto-destruct into their genome: once they made enough oxygen for us to breathe, that same oxygen level would kill them. We could then take the planet, their entire race having been destroyed for our convenience. Yes, to our great shame, all of this was true.

Over the span of more than two thousand generations—as many as separated me from a Neanderthal—evolution, accelerated by radiation on the planet, had made these centipedes into intelligent, efficient killing machines.

"We recently rediscovered the account of Asha Ashalooloo the Theologist," Wah said. "We were lucky that she discovered the secrets of our origin before oxygen levels were high enough to annihilate us. Her forever heartmate Kailo Kailokuma led the exodus from our homeworld to your colonies."

"*Exodus*?" You mean "*invasion fleet*," I thought silently.

"We wanted revenge on you, our gods, our creators. What would you have done?"

I had no answer. Was vengeance a good enough reason to go to war? To slaughter millions? For Jovita, I might. And where would that lead? An equal and opposite revengeance? It had to stop somewhere.

For an alien, Wah Chula Chula pulled off a pretty good imitation of mind reading. "But it was all for nothing. We achieved no vengeance, only more death at the hands of our gods." His antennae waved lazily, introspectively. "In millions we abandoned our entire polluted world, every vessel a warship. You arm a tiny fraction of your population, and you have no horns or spikes or spines. You don't even have proper mouthparts. Yet you fed us defeat at every turn. For every ship we destroyed, you built two more. Every station was replaced before we could exploit its loss. You adapt to environments that should destroy your soft, armor-less bodies. There's no beating that. We were dying, and our souls . . . Our souls were starving on a diet of vengeance."

"Ours, too."

“Peace will allow us to grow as a race, to explore, to create—to celebrate anything, anything beyond our wrath toward you, and yours toward us.”

“So why sue for peace now, not years ago?”

“Though many among us wanted peace, our leaders always wanted war. Only recently have we been able to replace them.”

“You replace your leaders by killing them?”

“Yes, how do you humans do it?”

“It’s quite easy,” I said. “Keiretsu Corp. picks our candidates for us. I mean, back when we still bothered to have elections.”

“Does your Keiretsu want peace or war?” Wah asked.

I sang a ditty Nalia had loved: “In everything, in war and peace, Keiretsu profits never cease! Peace-time, war-time, space-time, war crime, Kieretsu always makes a dime!”

At that moment, Kiraki interrupted my performance, calling on the Captain’s quarters. “It’s time for your scheduled inspection of the eggs.”

I was always excited to see the eggs—Li’s most accurate count was 3,105, more than three times the promised number of warriors. Wah told me that there would be a “competition” to winnow that to the thousand that would actually fight. When I asked him details of the competition, he laughed as if it were obvious.

As Wah, Kiraki, and I floated through the ship toward the egg chamber, Kiraki kept interposing herself between me and Wah, and I suddenly regretted choosing to only wear a rebreather.

Without warning, the ship lurched!

A yellow light began flashing on my wristbreaker. Radiation alert. “What the hell?” *Get to shelter in the shuttle. Fast!* The hangar was in the next chamber.

Chula said something to Kiraki that didn’t translate.

The lights went out as the ship shuddered again. Air rushed by me. I was falling!

My back slammed into a bulkhead, which felt like a side of beef, snapping my jaw shut. The muscular wall flexed, springboarding me back into the darkness.

“Dresdin! Dresdin!” I tried my personal comm and the translation bot. Both were as dark as the air. “Dresdin! Come in! Anyone human on *Pelasso*, come in!”

A hissing wind carried my voice away and diffused it into silence. “Wah, where are you?” What if he was incapacitated? Or dead?

My shoulder struck something soft, pliable tubing. Instinctively, I grabbed onto it.

The air pressure was dropping.

I called to Wah again and got no response.

My eyes searched the darkness, while my gloved fingers fumbled with the electronics in my new service uniform, finally activating the built-in flashlight. A circle of muscle lit up, the wall of the ship. Droplets of bug circulatory fluid drifted past, toward the air leak.

Whose fluid?

I panned the light in the direction it came from. There, a centipede tube-pump leaked like a sieve, spurting spasmodically. How long could *Pelasso* live without repairs? Was the ship already dying?

“Treachery and more treachery!” the translator cried in my ear.

“What?” I swung the light desperately, catching a graceful wing before it shot back into the darkness. Kiraki.

“Your kind talks of peace, and not wanting the destruction of your souls, but now you destroy us!”

I centered her in my light. “Hold on a sec—”

“You’ve attacked us, and killed *Pelasso*!”

“What? How?”

With a thrust of her wings, she launched herself at me, ripping at the air with forelegs and poison claws.

I couldn’t help myself. Yes, I desperately wanted peace, but I lost my mind when she attacked. Suddenly I was back on Aine, back on Dagda 5b, flashing bugs in the lashleaf, fighting

in low-g.

Kiraki was faster than me and gave no indication that a pretty speech would dissuade her. There was no choice but kill or be killed.

I cashed in all the zero gee combat training. Muscle memory kicked in, and I pushed off a wall with both feet, hard, at an angle oblique to her trajectory. Tucking my head and legs in tight, I completed half a turn, splayed myself out while reaching for my sidearm.

I came out of it facing her, light aimed at the wall, inverted from my original orientation, my velocity vector still moving me away. She hit the wall hard.

If I had still been there, I'd be dead.

I pulled the snub-nose from my ankle holster. Instead of firing, I was trying to reset the power—enough to maim a bug but not puncture the ship's walls, but the pistol flew from my hands, as sledgehammer claws knocked the wind out of me, hit me in the back of the head and rattled my teeth. My suit's tablet threatened to tumble away, too. I tightened my grip on it. Panic rose like bile in my throat, fight or flight, kill or be killed.

I had come to promote peace, not duel to the death.

Kiraki now clung to a glandular sack. "I will enjoy eating your—"

My light shone on the space not far ahead of me—a sealed hatch. Escape!

But another centipede was there, working at the control of the hatch to the hangar. Wah.

I rotated my body so I'd hit the hatch feet first, hoping to push off before Kiraki could grab hold of me. Fat chance.

My feet hit the hatch—and something hard and fast hit me from above, slammed me on my back. It wrapped needle-like legs around my neck. Instinctively, I brought the light to bear. Writhing mouth parts, just in front of my face. Glistening arthropod eyes. And poison claws, poised to shred. That ugly face would be the last thing I ever saw.

Suddenly I was free. Wah had slammed into Kiraki.

"You said you wanted peace, when you joined my crew!" Wah clicked and hissed.

"I became hungry again, and this was my last chance," Kiraki snarled and spit. "You knew I was lying, what I wanted to do with this ship."

"I thought I could convince you, to convince others!"

Kiraki howled and snapped her heaviest claws, and Wah steamrolled into her, slamming his armored backplates into her, partially crushing her wings, and the two tumbled away, intertwined in battle.

I swept my light through the air until I found them. The hatch to the hangar was unlocked, but blocking it was a knotted mass of legs and claws. My fate depended on the outcome of this fight.

To his advantage, Wah had caught Kiraki in the back, whereas most of her claws unfolded from the bottom. However, his teeth had snagged her in the seventh or eighth segment, a little further back than the most efficient killing blow. But he did not relent, did not stop ripping, even as she twisted and flailed, he kept tearing out mouthfuls of flesh. A clump of centipede legs spun away in a graceful arc.

The bugs slammed into *Pelasso's* muscular wall, the impact finally breaking Kiraki's back. She drifted away, half of her to the left, half to the right, her tissue paper wings shredded. Because a bug's brain nodes extend to the twelfth segment or so, both halves still had enough brains to keep punching—but not enough to know they were already dead.

Wah clung to the bulkhead, unsteady. Circulatory fluid bubbled and oozed from deep slashes along his left side. Half the legs on that side were gone. He coiled awkwardly, favoring the injured side, and assumed a strike posture.

"Do not force me to kill you, too," Wah said to me, splotted with Kiraki's blood.

"I, uh, I don't want that, either."

"If we are at war anew, you will be the next to die." But even as he thrashed and threatened me, he was retreating, as if I might try to eat him in his injured state. I wasn't sure if I should be flattered or horrified that he saw me as an honorary Skolopendran.

"Damn it, Wah, we're not at war. We were just talking peace—"

"And then someone attacked my ship—again—and murdered my crew!"

“How bad is it?”

“The vacuum of space is on the other side of this bulkhead,” he said. “No one forward of this section is alive—”

He convulsed twice and then went rigid as he drifted in the air.

Growling uselessly into my comm, I swam desperately through the air. In the dark I was smashing into things. Desperate, I spit out my rebreather tube and dragged the unconscious Wah behind me, one of his legs clenched in my teeth. My lips grew numb, as tiny hollow hairs in the legs shot my mouth full of toxin.

Trying not to panic, and trailing his blood and mine, I crashed him through the hatch, into the hangar, onto my shuttle, and then I went back to *Lexington*, still unsure what had happened.

As I dropped him off at the nearest medbay, I shouted at an astonished Dr. Li: “Keep him alive! Show them how kind humans can be!”

Marines, combat engineers, and scientists raced past me, toward the centipede ship.

McCracken, Dresdin, and I gathered with a few other officers, in person and remotely.

What we knew: The forward third of *Pelasso* was heavily damaged, the hull multiply perforated. The entire Skolopendran crew was dead, just as Kiraki had said. Everyone except Captain Wah Chula Chula, because I had saved him. Luckily the egg chamber was undamaged. On *Lexington*, the central shaft had taken torsional stress when the docking bridge was hit, but damage was minimal.

What we didn’t know: What had actually happened? Everyone was calling it an accident, but . . . Was this Sugawara’s doing? We were supposed to be on radio silence, but what if Admiral Helinsky was sneaking orders from his brig? Or was it . . . an octopoid attack? Maybe hyper-v smart missiles, like ours? If so, then both ships would have been clouds of debris, right? Nothing made sense.

But we skipped right over “What happened?” to . . . “What are we going to do about it?”

“We are not abandoning *Pelasso*,” McCracken said. “Her reaction control system is still intact. Chief Engineer Bishop believes he can repair her and shore up the hull so she can still handle deceleration at Plymouth.” I had never heard McCracken speak so quickly. “I’m re-assigning some of *Lexington*’s crew to *Pelagossa*. Captain Dresdin will command.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Dresdin said. Her first command. I’d never seen her so proud. “I won’t let you down.”

“Bishop is also designing adapters so we can work the controls to steer the bug ship and fire her weapons. Chief Bishop will also dock *Del Vecchio* to the forward-most surviving segment of *Pelagossa*. They’ll be able to provide logistical support, navigation and power if needed.”

Events were moving awfully fast in response to *an accident*. “Wait—what about Wah?” I asked.

General McCracken said, “Medical informed me that Wah is seriously injured. Even if he lives, he won’t be up to command duties for a long time.”

This all sounded too convenient for us humans. Was this all part of McCracken’s master plan? Was McCracken part of the spiritual darkness?

I tried to ask Dresdin, but she snapped, “Major Falis is working on it. Just wait!”

I kept asking and getting no answers.

A week later I was invited to a two-hour-long presentation, broadcast to all ships.

“The cause of this accident,” Falis said, “is the Skolopendran ship hitting a micrometeoroid. At point three cee, much of the head and the first segment of the ship were vapor before the flash of the impact reached our instruments. That sent a shower of subatomic particles and gamma rays sleeting through the rest of the ship. If *Pelasso* had had its own magfield, it might have survived. Chalk it up to bad luck and shoddy centipede construction . . . As it is, everything forward of the main cargo bays got a dose high enough to kill even a centipede. Those that survived died when the hull was punctured. We’ve calculated the size of the rock, and the fleet was lucky, even though the Skolopendrants weren’t. The rock happened to be sized so that, when partially ablated by the particle plume, it was large enough

to do the damage we see to *Pelasso*, but too small to damage any of the other ships, including *Lexington*.”

When Major Falis asked for questions, I mentioned that I'd gotten the radiation alert before I felt the impact. Shouldn't they have been nearly simultaneous? Falis strongly implied that I had misremembered in all the excitement.

I didn't ask any more questions.

I also had more pressing matters.

McCracken told me, “The eggs will be hatched and raised and trained to fight like humans, alongside humans, sealing the peace treaty, just like we planned all along.”

I did *not* like where this was going.

“That's what you want, isn't it, Lieutenant? Peace?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Is that all, Lieutenant?”

With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I sheepishly asked, “Who do you have in mind to train them, ma'am?”

The general replied with a smile that a shark would have been proud to wear.

* * *

VI. Aboard *Lexington*, 233 NT Days to Plymouth

I visited Wah every few days in Medbay 3, where he'd been moved. It was the only one with airlocks.

The air inside was fit for a centipede, and all the medics wore rebreathers.

“Lieutenant Alvarez, come in!” Dr. Li was draining data from a translator bot. “Come in! But stay outside the circle!”

A bright red circle about two meters in radius was painted on the floor around Wah's med bed.

“He's still in a coma,” Dr. Li explained, “But even without waking, he could grab you with a leg, then another and another, until you're covered in bug legs. We call it dream-smothering.”

“He wouldn't do that, would he?”

“Who knows? But anywhere outside the red circle is probably safe. Probably!”

I said, “The air feels . . .”

“Icky? Yeah, that! If the exoskeleton dries out, it can harden and shrink. That can be lethal if the dead skin does that during a molt—they can't escape their past! But, really, we have to be careful. Too moist and you get black spots—mycosis!—fungus growing on the antennae.”

“How is he?”

“Since he lost some of his legs, we're going to induce a series of forced molts to regrow them. But first . . . centipedes have an open circulatory system, as opposed to the closed one in people. They have to have incredibly efficient clotting systems to prevent bacteria from getting in, or hemolymph leaking out. So I need to develop new meds to control the plasmatocytes that mediate coagulation, and modulate the levels of innexins, particular nuclear receptors, and other centipede proteins not found in humans . . .”

“You're using him as a guinea pig?”

“For this peace mission to succeed, we must learn some new centipede medical procedures.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“Sure, but don't expect him to talk back!” Dr. Li said with a laugh. “Now or any time soon.”

I stepped inside the red circle and sat down next to Wah, then touched a square of his skin that wasn't covered by bandages or patches. His skin looked like soft vinyl, but felt like fine-grit sandpaper, with armored sclerites underneath. For the first time I noticed some of his body's defects—one segment had three legs coming out of it, instead of the usual two, and his body kinked slightly two-thirds of the way down to the tail, where one misshapen segment was trapezoidal instead of rectangular. Did he always have these imperfections, and I just never noticed?

“I've been told humans in comas, even medically-induced ones like yours, can hear people talk to them. Can you hear me?”

The only answer was machines bleeping and humming.

“Well, Captain Wah, we’re repairing the damage to your ship, but we’re a few weeks out until the eggs hatch. Is there anything special we need to do? Particular nutrients we need to give them? Any favorite lullabies?”

More awkward silence. I took a deep breath.

“Remember when we were in your quarters . . . and you were talking about losing your forever heartmate? You said you wanted to hear more about mine, about my family. I wanted to tell you then but . . .”

Deep breath. Here we go.

“I remember my little boy, Tato, sitting on the edge of the bed in his pajamas. Christmas eve. Tato was crying inconsolably. ‘All I want for Christmas . . . All I want is . . .’ I knew what he wanted. ‘For me to make it through the war?’ I asked, and he nodded, and he begged me to swear I would. ‘Oh, mijo, yes, I swear, cross my heart and hope to—I double swear, triple swear.’ Then he stopped crying and I put him to bed, but I don’t think either of us slept that night, and neither of us imagined a universe where I survived the war and he didn’t. I don’t want anyone else to have to go through anything like that again.”

* * *

VII. Aboard *Pelasso*, 186 NT Days to Plymouth

How did centipedes hatch their eggs? Did they just hatch on their own, or was it triggered by a chemical signal from the adults? Was mass hatching synchronized or not? Dr. Li didn’t know, and Wah, still in a coma, wasn’t much help.

I was in charge, even if I knew less than Li. One thing I did know: I needed gravity to train them to fight on Plymouth. But McCracken wasn’t about to allow thousands of ravenous hatchlings on *Lexington*, and bug ships weren’t made to spin. When I asked Chief Engineer Bishop if he could rig one of the ship’s segments to rotate, he said it was an engineering impossibility. But Dresdin saved my bacon, ordering him to make it a priority, while giving him a huge budget and team. Once he got started, you could just see him fall in love with the challenge. I suppose anything is possible with enough money and people. Bishop was lucky in that *Pelasso*’s segments were more spherical than a regular bug’s. That made it easier for work crews to surgically cut one segment from the rest of the body, install catwalks and deckplates and bulkheads and an enormous geared rotation system, and reroute the nutrient arteries and the brain node—the latter the size of an aircar.

When Bishop was done, we had a roughly spherical training room with gravity ranging from one gee along the equator down to freefall at the spin axis. Climbing the walls was a treat. It would make an excellent training room, but now it would be a hatching chamber. Bishop had given the segment its own environmental control and installed the software to control it on a tablet. The oxygen scrubbers were running, and the air was just perfect for the horrible little darlings.

The segment was barely finished when Dr. Li told me that the centipede larvae were twitching in their eggs. Hatching was imminent!

Acting under my authority, Li and his civvie contractors spread out five hundred eggs in the hatching chamber. He spaced them a few centimeters apart, but admitted: “We’re actually not sure what the proper spacing is.”

Dresdin and I floated along the segment’s spin axis, breathing masks over our faces, looking down on our egg field like gods. “Why would it matter?” I asked.

“I hope it doesn’t here—but in some species, where there’s a danger of predation, eggs are laid next to each other, so nymphs can synchronize hatching with vibrations. Mozart works, too.”

“Mozart, really?”

“Yes, Mozart.” Dr. Li looked hurt, as if I’d accused him of mischaracterizing science, a crime he considered almost as bad as murder.

Many of the senior officers were there, watching from their screens: McCracken, Sugawara,

Colonel Zmarzlak from *Cutler*, Major Ryan Allain, Commanders Tom Wilson and Dan Spahr. It felt like a party or—if we failed—a court martial.

If we—if *I*—screwed this up, and the eggs all perished, there would be no joint strike force of bugs and humans against octopoids on Plymouth. How would we explain to the Skolopendran Chief Victor Priest how we'd left with his noblest warriors and returned with none? Yet we still wanted peace?

At that moment, yes, it felt like the future of humanity hung on me.

Dr. Li asked me for permission to turn up the heat, to what he guessed was the prime hatching temperature. Before I responded, I looked deeply into his eyes. Was he following the science, or an agent sent to sabotage this operation? I had no idea, but if hatching and training were to happen, I needed him, and I needed him to trust me.

I gave him permission.

As the temp reached 40 Celsius, then a sweltering 45, I thought back to my basic training, being yelled at, shark-attacked by superiors. If I let these eggs die, I'd be blasted again, this time by overheated flag officers. And I'd deserve it.

Li mumbled to himself: Did the eggs need some parental signal like a pheromone? No way to know, no way to deliver it.

Suddenly I heard something else: Dresdin cheering and clapping! The operculum—the cap atop one of the eggs—flipped open like a tank's top hatch. Antennae flicked, and then a centipede head popped up, surveying its domain, like Rommel emerging from an Afrika Korps Panzer.

Perhaps we are genetically hardwired to love babies, whether it's a baby human, a puppy, or a kitten. This baby centipede was no different. It was surprisingly cute. An adult has legs like witch fingers, jointed and stabby, but here they lined its newborn body like rows of nubs, like candy corn. The mouthparts, soon to be dripping with malevolence, were so tiny as to be invisible under its adorably rounded little head. This baby centipede was the size of a candy bar and everywhere cute and wonderful, pale and translucent as a vanilla jellybean. Being the first born made it a celebrity.

I'd seen a horse give birth once, but after the foal was free, it just lay there, exhausted, waiting for its legs to gain enough strength to stand.

This newborn centipede wasn't like that.

Suddenly it was attacking another.

Every single time I open my heart to my former enemies, they remind me how horrible they are!

It raced its little candy bar body on candy corn legs, to the nearest egg, yet unhatched, probing it with antennae, then biting savagely. After breaking through the egg's outer armor, it started burrowing, ripping out chunks, eating some and flinging the rest away. Then, only minutes old, it emerged from an egg a second time, already an experienced killer.

It whipped its bloody antennae across its back, marking itself with a pair of gory green lines, and giving itself a nickname: Stripes.

The bugs around Stripes started hatching. Maybe they smelled birth compounds or blood. If your hatch-mates could kill you in the egg, you never wanted to be the last out.

It quickly became a free-for-all.

The newborn centipedes were merciless, slaughtering the slow, the weak—those inefficient at or criminally incapable of killing and defending. It was the world's deadliest nursery school.

"Wow! Now I know how they evolved so quickly!" Dr. Li said. "In each new generation some are smarter, faster, and stronger than their parents. Some not."

"I guess they're getting rid of the 'not,'" Dresdin laughed.

"Yeah," Li said. "The survivors are incrementally better death-machines."

"How long do we let this carnage go on?"

"This is what Wah meant when he talked about providing a thousand soldiers, but three thousand eggs!" Dresdin said. "I suppose we wait until two-thirds of them are dead?"

So we watched in horror but took no action.

Some hatchlings were apparently the offspring of *Pelasso's* dead crew. One was born with three heads, but they attacked different hatch-mates, tearing their own body to pieces. One was clearly Kiraki's, born with wings. But these were wrinkled from being compacted in the egg, and when it paused to pump hemolymph, to straighten the wings before they dried, another killed it. Perhaps these oddities gave advantages as adults, but disadvantages when young, explaining their rarity.

As a soldier, part of my job was to preserve or improve every asset entrusted to me—including personnel—returning them in as-good or better condition to the issuing authority. A lot of recruits didn't make it through boot camp. This was just a souped-up, deadlier version. I was improving this battalion by destroying it.

Or was there more to it than that?

As I watched the slaughter, I slowly became angrier. On behalf of Jovita, Tato, Nalia and the rest of my family. And Dresdin's two dead sons.

What if peace with these monstrosities was impossible? In politics, if your opponent is hurting himself, you stand back and let it happen. Maybe we should just stand back. Why stop at two-thirds?

An hour later, the rate of cannibalism had slowed considerably, but not stopped.

"Maybe in the wild they aren't forced into a confined space with nowhere to hide?" Dr. Li conjectured. "Maybe we're maximizing the savagery?"

"So how will we completely stop it?" I asked. "What would Wah have done?"

Dr. Li shrugged.

"Suggestions?"

"Well, the general told you you're the drill instructor," Dresdin said to me. "So act like one!"

Again I thought back on boot camp, recalling the endless close order drills, the surprise midnight marches, the constantly being yelled at. But a gunny's diatribes weren't just to make you feel bad. They had a purpose: blasting through eighteen years of encrusted "But I don't wanna" and "You can't make me." Yelling reinforced the chain of command and taught us to follow orders and act like a unit. If I could fire straight and true with a DS yelling, I could with artillery yelling.

Now it was my turn to shout. "Listen up, you maggots!" Wait. *Maggots*? Was I asserting my authority if they actually looked like maggots? What else had my gunny called us? *Insects! Mealy worms!* Nope. Nope.

"Attention! You barf bags!" Good enough for now. "Each of you is ten gallons of barf in a five gallon bag! Knock it off! Line up on the red lines on the floor! Move it! Move it!"

"They were just born," Dresdin said. "They don't know the word 'barf.'"

I thought they'd respond to yelling.

Apparently not.

I had Dr. Li dial the temperature down, but the numbers kept dropping. No more than a hundred were left.

Desperate, I stared at the environmental readout. Temperature was down to 25 C, near room temperature, and they might not survive much lower. But one number ticked up. Oxygen partial pressure. It went up again. Their little metabolisms were running in overdrive, and the scrubbers were having a hard time removing the waste oxygen fast enough.

If the concentration got too high, it would finish the job that striped bastard started.

But long before that, they'd smell it. They *bated* the smell of oxygen. That gave me an idea. I shut down the scrubbers.

Dresdin said, "Is that wise, Lieutenant?"

"I need to get their attention."

After a few minutes, the survivors became sluggish. Most assumed defensive postures, the fighting reduced to isolated skirmishes, then to snarling and barking.

Success!

At that point, I could have called it a day and had them moved into the tiny barracks we'd made, carefully keeping them isolated.

But McCracken was still watching, and I was starting to feel good about life and about the day's work. I really wanted to impress her and was willing to take a chance.

I took my spare nitrox tank, opened the valve until it started to hiss, and tossed it down.

"But too much oxygen will—"

The nitrox tank drifted at first, then the rotating air currents curved its path as it approached the surface. It hit the muscle-wall and tumbled. Nearby centipedes snapped and scurried away.

I waited until the bulk of the hatchlings were clustered, as far from the canister as they could get, then dropped another tank in their midst. They scattered but had nowhere to go. Many took cover under piles of supplies.

But the striped one . . .

"You can almost see the wheels turning inside his head!" Dr. Li exclaimed.

"Excuse me," I said. "His'?"

"You can tell by the pheromones."

Stripes approached a canister cautiously, feeling it with his antennae.

"That's right," I said. "You'll have to do something about it."

"You're going to kill them all, Lieutenant," Dresdin said. "Not that I mind dead centipedes . . ."

"Don't worry! I'll run the scrubbers enough to keep it below toxic levels. But they don't know that."

Stripes recoiled from the odor, then he tried a new tactic. He gathered a few of the others, beating them with his tail legs. Despite their reluctance, he drove them to the canister, and after they'd explored the entire surface, they traded coded antennae thumps with him.

Dresdin gaped. "Are they communicating?"

"This is amazing!" the linguist Lt. Anyenini said.

"But they're babies! How do they know the language?"

"Maybe it's genetically hard-wired in their brains, like instinct?" Anyenini said.

"So they're born speaking Skolopendran?"

"Maybe just the basics of communication? Then the specific language is learned later? They have shorter life spans than us, reaching adulthood in less than six months. So they need to learn fast!"

Stripes' little group had a plan. They swarmed the canister again, this time clustering where the nitrox hissed out. They wrapped their legs around the valve and used their bodies to twist.

It didn't budge.

They retreated, and I cranked down the scrubbers a bit more.

Stripes didn't give up. He burrowed under broken eggshells and conscripted the hatchlings hiding there, slapping them with his antennae. His little detachment was over a dozen now.

This time the valve budged. Encouraged by the success, others scurried to join in. Soon the valve was closed, and then Stripes led his troops to the other canister.

"Sensational!" Dresdin said, reaching out to shake my hand. Best of all, General McCracken sent a congratulatory message to my tablet.

I gave some orders, and then floated panting as Sgt. Osendu ushered the bugs off to their barracks, where they'd be hosed down, cleaned up, and—most importantly—kept separated. Li, Osendu, and a small team of NCOs, enlisted soldiers, civilian scientists and others would take care of their physical needs, and Anyenini's team would use the translator bots to give them grammar school lessons. I was exhilarated by the day's success, excited for the future, but completely exhausted.

As I was wondering how I'd teach them to salute without hands, or port arms without arms, Dresdin turned to me and said, "When do you want to do the next batch?"

* * *

VIII. Aboard *Pelasso*, 166 NT Days to Plymouth

Now we were down to 962 centipedes.

The number was relatively stable, though occasionally we'd still lose some to a bad molt or training accident. We couldn't afford to lose many more.

We divided the Skolopendrans into companies, and then platoons. I'd concentrate on the one with Stripes in it, since he was the most problematic. Others—some who even had drill instructor experience—taught the rest.

Then Major Brennan got bitten. He was okay—they weren't making much poison yet. But day by day the bugs smelled different, as if their glands were learning to make toxins, one by one. They were already half a meter long, so we decided to start wearing dropsuits around them.

For training aids, I ordered Bishop to make some robotic centipedes. He gave me a look just short of insubordination and said, "Sure, why the hell not? While I'm at it, should I give the spinning segment a muon reactor, you know, to power your new jacuzzi?"

But he couldn't resist a technical challenge, and we both knew it. He started with the snakebots used to unplug the plumbing, modified their programming, and reskinned them.

Dresdin and I stood next to the first bot at the equator of the training segment, spin gravity nearly a gee. "You really think they're going to treat this thing as one of their own?"

"They will if I tell them to."

"And if they don't?"

The hatch opened, and centipedes began to swarm down the walls. Overhead, along the zero gee axis, Dr. Li and two *Del Vecchio* civvies in lab coats floated, observing.

Most of the recruits formed up in the teams I'd assigned them, but a few of the bolder ones circled the centibot. "What's this?" The translation bot said, but the hissing I recognized immediately. Stripes, of course.

I stomped over to him, bringing my armored boot down hard, next to his head. "How do you address me?"

"Sir, what is this piece of poisoned flesh, sir?" The translator tinged the words with sarcasm.

"This," I said sternly, "is your new platoon leader and you will follow it wherever it goes. It runs spinward, against gravity, you run spinward. It leaps into the zero-g zone, so do you."

"You mock us. Sir."

A few of the others were forming up around him, a show of support. If I thought like a centipede, I'd have squished him where he stood, then eaten him. I probably should have. Not the eating part, though.

Insubordination had to be corrected before it festered. But I couldn't just do that with *Front leaning rest position—move!* How do you tell if a bug has dropped and given you twenty when he's already crawling on his belly? Push-ups didn't just teach a lesson, so a mistake wouldn't be repeated and get us all killed. No, all those pushups made my goddamn arms *buge*, more than sufficient to carry around my weapons and equipment. What kind of punishment would make a centipede a better soldier?

I pulled a metal ring from my pocket, remembering the training rings Wah had shown me. It was a split washer, just big enough to fit around my thumb. I threw it at Stripes, hard, plunking him in the back.

"Pick up that ring! Put it around your hind-most tail leg, and pass it, leg to leg, to your head. Move!"

Bugs were born able to move their legs in waves. But moving them individually? Like they'd have to do to run their ship's controls? That required the utmost control of tiny, under-developed muscles in the mantlet of each leg, and the mental ability to coordinate them. Stripes squirmed and thrashed, trying to move the ring from that last leg to the penultimate then antepenultimate. It reminded me of watching the strongest kid in class, sweating and struggling in shop to turn one tiny rusted screw. After ten minutes of torture, while the other bugs watched, eventually Stripes got it all the way to his head.

"Now, do it backward." This was even harder, as each leg is longer and longer as you proceed to the tail—so a centipede doesn't trip over itself.

Finally, after all that, he handed the ring back to me, and I tapped a command icon on my tablet. The centibot scuttled forward. I purposefully chose a path that made Stripes jump out of the way. "Form up on your leader," I said. "Odd teams on its left flank, even on its right. Move!"

The teams scrambled, forming a segmented chain trailing behind the centibot. Stripes hesitated, but when I reached for the ring in my pocket, he jumped into line.

I had the centibot put them through their paces—forward, double time, turns, wheels, the works.

Stripes had other plans.

A commotion among the troops drew my attention. A knot had formed in the formation on a simple wheel left, and it grew into a swarming undisciplined mass. It spread quickly and the whole formation fell apart.

“What in the hell is the problem here?” I commanded the centibot to stop, and reached for the metal ring. *It was gone.* Someone had reached into my pocket while I wasn’t paying attention and pilfered it. I was impressed, but couldn’t let them know.

So I strode as confidently as I could to the edge of the swarm and pulled centipedes bodily out of the mass, setting each one on the deckplate *hard.*

Stripes was at the center of it. “Sir, the bot must have malfunctioned, sir.”

A wave of flicking antennae—centipede laughter—rippled through the troops.

I planned to make them run laps, spinward, but again the centipedes had other ideas, all sparked by Stripes.

Even though the centibot was down, Stripes couldn’t resist attacking it again, this time ripping off one of its sensors. Then another centipede—one of the longest—followed Stripes’ lead, rushing the robot, ripping out some motors. But as it did so, a jagged bit of metal tore a small gash in his side. Another centipede—one with a lean, hungry look—saw the delicious green hemolymph dripping from the wound and charged. In moments, there was pandemonium, as Stripes hung back, watching and laughing.

I had learned to always carry a small oxygen tank with me. So I blasted all the bugs with bursts of oxygen, scattering them. Mostly. But that lean and hungry one would not let go of his victim, no matter how much I blasted him. I had no choice but to step on him. I positioned the toe of my boot very precisely, not squishing his tail, but catching some tail legs between boot and deckplate. They’d regrow. Then I had to physically pry the attacker off, stringy pieces of his victim’s meat coming with him, flinging bloody splotches and giving this one a nickname, too. Splotch thrashed, trying to bite me, even as I pinched his legs between armored fingers. I cradled the wounded one in the other glove, holding them as far apart as I could, and calling for Dr. Li.

I told him that McCracken had stressed the importance of getting the centipedes under control. It wouldn’t do to take them down to Plymouth to fight octopoids, only for them to fight each other—and us.

Anything he could do to help was appreciated, starting with repairing this injured centipede.

He replied: “Yes, I can. But are you sure you can train them? That striped one seems like he’ll be a problem.”

* * *

“You should kill him,” Wah said groggily as I visited him in the medbay.

He had only been out of a coma for a couple days, and I filled him in on everything.

Wah’s legs were regrowing. But the ecdysone and other molt-related hormones that Dr. Li had given him were damaging his fat bodies, the liver-like tissue clusters in Skolopendrans. Li said he had to stay there for observation, and Wah was not very happy about it, nor was he happy about how I was training his warriors.

“Killing keeps us strong, eliminating the weak—not just of body, but of mind and soul.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s how I handled Kiraki Kirakanuui.”

“But that was different. She was going to kill me.”

“What you’re saying is that he’s challenging your leadership. A challenge is a battle.”

“But it’s not like that,” I said. “It’s just, I don’t know. He’s just following his instincts, doing what he was bred to do. Sure it’s a pain for me, but nothing worth killing over. I’ll make him a soldier.”

“Well, be careful he doesn’t use your lessons against you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said the others formed up around him? He sounds like a natural leader. Would the others have obeyed his orders?”

That would have been a bad day. But it was a good sign, in its way; the others were learning to work in teams. “Maybe I can use that,” I said. “Turn him into a Skolopendran NCO.”

“If that’s what you’re teaching them, I wonder if they’ll be Skolopendran at all.”

* * *

I had the Skolopendrants running the equator in the spinward direction, faster and faster, so centripetal gravity increased with tangential velocity. This time they had to do it without a reward, *and* they were ushered on by the repaired centibot, who thwacked the malingerers with its antennae and tail legs. Eventually they’d be so angry they attacked the robot. Just as I wanted.

Stripes and Splotch pulled off the robot legs now redesigned to easily detach. The bot coiled around the fake wound, writhing in mock pain.

The centibot had a new ability, as they would soon find out. They dragged it behind a crate, violent thrashing continuing until I hit a new button on my pad. Thrashing ended suddenly, with a yelp and a thump and a yelp and a thump—like a thing and a thing smacking the crate. I fought to keep from laughing.

Osendu saw and called out: “They sure got a *jolt* out of that! Can I get one of those shockers?”

Appearing from behind the crate, Stripes was surprisingly contrite, but Splotch still defiant. I dragged out the fake-damaged centibot, daring them to attack again. Stripes tensed his legs and twitched his mouth, fighting a genetic compulsion.

Splotch probed different parts of the centibot, touching for just a moment and receiving the tiniest electrical shock.

Then he leapt on the bot’s back and sank his poison claws into the space between the second and third segments. An alert came up on my tablet screen—malfunction, unable to discharge.

He’d severed the superconducting filaments that charged the capacitor bank.

Stripes gave a signal and several others rushed in a wave and within moments the bot was swarmed.

I blasted them with bursts of oxygen from my small tank, but that didn’t work as well as before, so I tabbed over to the environment controls and flooded the room with oxygen. *That* got their attention. They dispersed, instinctively separating to keep the local concentration down. I kept it just high enough to make them sluggish.

I ordered them to form up, but they obeyed slowly, listlessly. I cranked the oxygen down gradually. When they were lined up, I treated them to a rant, then forced them all to use exercise rings.

After that I shouted, “Enough for today, you little crap factories! Head back to the barracks segment for chow, but it’ll be a half-ration day for half-a-workday. Move!” I intercepted Stripes. “Not you!”

He clicked his claws, but stopped. A few others lingered until he signaled them.

When the hatch closed, I said, “Do we have a problem?”

“Sir, this soldier trainee is just fine, sir.”

“Okay, smartass!” I didn’t care how well that translated. “Do you have any idea how much time and effort the chief puts in to make these drones?”

“This one could use more work, sir.” If he tried to joke his way out of it, I wasn’t having it. Well, maybe a little. More and more, he reminded me of Dresdin.

I suppressed a smirk, hoping he couldn’t read my expression. “Tell you what. From now on, you’re the platoon guide.”

“Sir?”

“The robot will lead, and you will disseminate its orders. It’s going to take you on several long marches. That bot is my representative, my ambassador. If anyone attacks it, they’re attacking me, and *you* will be punished.”

Involuntary he defensively raised his tail, but to his credit recovered quickly.

“But . . . if you can keep your troops in line for three marches in a row—no attacks on the robot, no fighting, no blood—you will be rewarded.”

“What reward, sir?”

“You’re peeling and white at the edges. Molting again soon. You’ll lose your stripes again, but we will no longer accept violence among the Skolos. You keep the troops in line, you can replace your stripes. With paint.”

He stared, clusters of simple and compound eyes glistening.

“Sir, challenge accepted, sir.”

* * *

The next day:

The centibot led them on another long march. When Splotch got tired and cranky, he made a move on the centibot, but Stripes body-checked him, sliced him with a poison claw. Splotch would be fine but: No blood, I’d said. Stripes: 0.

The punishment for failing this march? Another march. The platoon repeatedly looped the circuit, except Stripes, who rested and had to watch them glaring every time they passed.

For the next march, we added crates and wet shredded waste plastic, representing Plymouth’s rocks and mud. Toward the end of that march: Splotch made his habitual move on the centibot, but Stripes again intervened, this time without his poison claws. Rather, he laid his antennae against Splotch’s side and firmly pushed him away. No blood. The march continued to completion. Stripes: 1.

For the march after that, a red light represented the line-of-sight of an “enemy”—me with a flasher set to 1/100, just enough to sting. An unobservant Skolo found himself out in the open, in a mud trap with nothing to hide behind. Mock-blasted, mock-dead. Another tested my marksmanship, racing across the trap at top speed. Dead. They tried tossing each other. Dead dead dead. Someone suggested going up and over, hiding in shadows in the fake ceiling. But that would require too much backtracking. No thanks. They tried racing across in a group. Five dead out of five—I was proud of that. They dawdled there for fifteen minutes, while platoons in parallel courses passed them over and over, jeering. I wasn’t going to help. Then one lit on the idea of crossing *under* the mud. Finally! But her antennae stuck up. Dead. They hated being unable to feel their way, but tucking them down was the only way to safely burrow across.

They did it! And this time, when several exhausted and angry bugs attacked the bot, Stripes successfully protected it. Stripes: 2. Game point!

But I couldn’t let them win that easily. I consulted Li, who reminded me that not attacking a friendly robot wasn’t the real goal; it was not attacking each other or humans. So he gave me a high-protein paste, mechanically homogenized centipede organs—test samples from various casualties—and Bishop gooped it onto the centibot.

In the next march, we discovered that bug guts are apparently irresistible to bugs. Stripes: back to 0.

In the following march, I blasted them with bluish methane and reddish tholin aerosols—compounds they’d find on Plymouth. They failed. Stripes: Still 0.

Since he was losing, technically I was winning, but I was really losing, too. It was not looking good for our joint mission. None of the Skolo platoons were getting over this bump. And this was just a fundamental—after this, we still needed to teach them to defend the wounded against attackers and call for medics. Oh, yeah, I also had to teach some to be medics. To say nothing of formations, tactics, and strategy. And weapons training. Without these basic skills, they couldn’t fight side-by-side with humans, and this peace strategy was doomed.

Days were ticking by.

So we tried everything: more food, attractive distractors, days off, stomping and threatening, even dumping ice on their heads. I gave Li permission to try anything he wanted, and meanwhile I liberally applied that all-purpose, ancient-but-evergreen cattle prod called “screaming in their faces.”

Nothing worked.

Until it did.

Bishop re-skinned a cleaning bot to look like an octopoid and had it mock-attack the Skolos. Stripes found a weak spot underneath: a superconducting cable nexus, near where the eight arms joined at the beak. When he cut through, the whole thing collapsed, but it dropped so fast he couldn't escape. Got part of his tail crushed. But the others pushed it off, then defended him against other faux attack bots, and even got him to a medic. I couldn't believe it! It was like a light switch going on. No idea how, but suddenly they'd done a march with no attacks. None! Stripes: Back to 1.

We did it again, but with fresh bug guts from Li and new attack bots from Bishop. Stripes: 2. Game point again!

Finally, their "graduation" march was a bit under two gee, just like Plymouth, uphill both ways. They all had to make it, even if injured—despite rocks falling fast in the high grav, guard bots popping up, knock-out drugs spraying, charges exploding, trapdoors opening, oxygen jetting, hoverbots blasting, random junk spinning and crashing, and me personally tranqing anyone out in the open. And . . . what the hell! Despite all that, despite everyone being beat up, they all made it to the finish line, dragging their injured and unconscious comrades to safety.

1, 2, 3! Stripes had won his bet! I didn't know how, but he had. So I did my best to mix green paint that matched centipede blood. From that point on, he never went through a molt without repainting the stripes.

I was so excited!

But I still didn't understand what had actually happened, until Dr. Li explained.

After I'd given him free reign, Li had mixed something into their genes so their mouths burned whenever they tasted another's flesh.

To make that something, Li needed labspace with gravity, so DNA droplets wouldn't fly everywhere, and zero gee wouldn't mess up gene expression. To do that, his spod people had spun up some centrifuges to one gee on *Del Vecchio*. To do that, on a ship too small for full-sized hab rings, they used room-sized lab centrifuges. To do science there, despite the steep, dizzying grav gradients, the experiments were run by robots, but designed by humans happily floating in zero gee.

Eventually Li's team devised a special enzyme, a protease, a protein that destroys other proteins, which he called Keirelisin IIIA and IIIB. It consisted of two essential parts—without both, nothing happened. But together they attacked nerve endings, causing incredible pain. Each of the two parts was itself made of two parts: Half of the protease, and an antibody. The same centipede protein was bound by both antibodies, bringing the halves of the protease together—like a screw holding scissor blades together.

The end result? Every time they tasted another's internal organs, their mouths would froth and sting and boil. Now they physically could not eat each other. Then, without asking their permission—or mine—he inserted genes encoding these artificial proteins into their chromosomes, both somatic and gametic. I didn't know then why it was necessary, but their offspring would have these characteristics, too. More importantly to me, while he was at it, he also rejiggered their genes so they wouldn't eat humans, either. The only thing they would eat now was the crude extrudate from our shipboard food processors—the same crumb-free gelatin-coated stuff churned out by the larger food plants on planet Aine.

McCracken was so impressed by all this work that she threw a huge banquet at *Lexington's* officers club. Skolos weren't invited, but Dr. Li and his team were honored guests. His success was my success, peace's success.

I'd never see Tato or Nalia graduate from high school or college, but seeing my Skolo troopers reach this milestone made up for it a little.

When McCracken, Dresdin, and other flag officers congratulated me on my work, I realized I was the happiest I'd been in a long, long time. Which meant that feeling wouldn't last.

* * *

The day after the celebration, I got it from all sides.

Captain Sugawara: "What next? We fight alongside octopoids? Maybe black mambas and

deathstalkers? Would you trust them? An army is a single united unified unit, not a menagerie, you throwback extremist hippy radtard—”

A scientist, first time he'd spoken to me: “I'm disappointed but not surprised you're turning Skolopendrans into machines fighting wars for our amusement! You should be ashamed, you atavistic militaristic gorilla—”

Another scientist: “This is a step toward reducing the centipedes to another commodity Keiretsu Corporation can sell, like a loaf of bread, you short-sighted Mengelian tyrannical capitalist—”

“But wait, don't you work for Keiretsu?” I protested. “How can you—”

“Change from the inside, baby, change from the inside!”

Yeah, yeah, this was all fun and games. Except, these people had access to powerful weapons—including genetics. And what of those less outspoken? From then on, I was always distracted by worry that someone might try to kill my centipedes—or free them.

I tried to shake the insults from my mind, to concentrate on actual work.

Now that I'd taught the Skolos not to attack each other, or us, I could teach them to fight and move as a single unit. They could learn column formations and basic tactics. Squad echelon right. Squad in “V,” fire teams in wedge. Direct charge vs. approach from multiple vectors. Wolf pack vs. snipe and run.

On one nerve-wracking day we first taught them to wear snub-nosed flasher guns mounted on their heads. Success that day would be no one getting killed.

No one did, but I was so shaken by the stress, I decided to go visit Captain Wah, who was finally feeling better. He wouldn't be discharged any time soon, but with some luck, he might be ready when we hit Plymouth.

When I arrived at Medbay 3, I was surprised at how small Wah seemed. Then I realized he hadn't shrunk. No, my troops had gotten bigger—whatever Dr. Li was feeding them was working.

I told my friend he should be proud of the troops' achievements. His response shocked me.

“You are destroying our culture!”

“What do you mean?”

“Skolopendrans are strong because we weed out the weak.”

“But these new warriors are really strong!”

“When I was injured fighting Kiraki,” Wah said, “And could not defend myself . . . you should have killed and eaten me. Why did you bring me here, to this sad place of weakness?”

I was so confused. “Don't Skolopendrans have hospitals?”

Wah struggled against his restraints to point an antenna at the equipment around him. “All these resources could have been used to feed hundreds! After all the time we spent together, I thought you understood us. Yet I see the injured parade through here, and I am ashamed.”

“They were really happy to get back to work, healed and—”

“Someone not strong enough to keep their station . . . should stop being a burden. I tried to do that, but your doctor intervened.” Wah again struggled against his restraints. “Help me now!”

“I can't,” I said. “But I'll try harder to understand you—”

“You humans could begin by not insulting me.”

“Insulting? When did we insult you?”

“Captain Sugawara and Captain Dresdin saw me a few days ago.”

“Huh. They didn't tell me.”

“I personally thanked Sugawara for not destroying my ship when Admiral Helinsky threatened us. I granted him the honorific of Akin to Jura Juranurra, one of our noble warriors . . . Then they returned the favor.”

“They gave you an honorific, too?”

“They said it was a name of a historical legend, a name that spoke of wisdom and strength, derived from one of your most ancient and revered languages.”

“So—What did they call you?”

“Onkeymay Uttbay Uttbay.”

I turned away so Wah couldn't see me laughing. It could have been worse. Sometimes the Sugawara-Dresdin combo got real obscene real quick. But shouldn't I feel ashamed at my compatriots' actions?

"Dr. Li told me what it meant."

Yes, ashamed.

"I find that I have both overestimated and underestimated humans. When I was young, I saw humans in battle, but didn't realized how soft you really are."

"Soft? Wait—You thought our power armor was an exoskeleton?"

"A not unreasonable assumption," Wah said. "In my mind, I called you: meat puddle. Shell-less claw-less harmless meat puddle."

"Ha! That's hilarious," I said. "I suppose it's preferable to trade insults than impactors? What else did you call us?"

"Lying, deceitful, stumpy-antennaed, nearly-legless false gods! I am sure you had some choice phrases to describe us?"

"Do you really want to know?" I paused. Then: "Multi-legged vermin! Shit-rolling worm-ridden bugs that eat our shit for lunch!"

"Unsegmented scabmolds stinking of oxygen!" Wah said excitedly. Then we both laughed, and he calmed and said, "But I suppose that you are right after all. My soldiers could not fight alongside yours if they were constantly fighting each other. Teaching them your ways was inevitable. I hate this place. I feel unsafe. Perhaps your Captain Dresdin was simply having some small amusement at my expense. It was unfair, but . . . War is unfair. If you are doing it right."

"I guess you're right."

"Captain Dresdin did apologize for the insult, actually, with a gift. It's quite nice, another thing that speaks of great heroes."

"Oh?"

I helped Wah pull something out of a box, and he snapped it on. Above his poison claws, atop his little head, was now a tiny plastic cowboy hat.

* * *

IX. Aboard *Pelasso*, 46 NT Days to Plymouth

Once again McCracken gathered the officers together, some in person and some remotely, and this time the mood was anxious, trepidatious, hopeful, excited.

We were about to find out what kind of battle we were rushing toward.

After that impactor hit Plymouth, the planet had gone silent. Not a peep for most of a NT year now. What had happened? Annihilation of two and a half million colonists? Flooding the planet, octo-forming it for octopoid invaders?

What would we face? Relativistic impactors, robot surrogates, or x-ray laser bombs? Suicide fleets coming out of nowhere?

And where would we be fighting? On the ground, in space, or in between? Here, there or in the air?

We were about to find out.

No, we weren't expecting word from the Plymouth colony now, but from our own unmanned *Vanguards*, the bleeding edge of the fleet.

The first robotic *Vanguard* would not only tell us about the octopoid forces at Plymouth, but take our first crack at them. That wouldn't be easy, even for an AI.

They'd be coming in at a third the speed of light, with their earliest chance of sensor contact about a hundred AUs out. At that range, the location info would already be thirteen hours out of date, and the *Vanguard* would have covered a third of the distance between them. Worse, an enemy ship would have detected the *Vanguard* by then, and its hyper-v missiles would already be on their way, trailing only seconds behind the sensor signal. The *Vanguard's* AI had that much time to determine whether the ship was broadcasting a friendly code, calculate its velocity vector, estimate its current position, determine a firing solution for where the ship would likely be nine hours in the future, and launch its own wave of missiles. With a

little luck, after all that it would have a second or two to deploy antimissile charges and fire its fusion thruster to deflect its own path by a fraction of a degree, hopefully enough to dodge the destruction coming its way faster than cosmic rays.

Interplanetary war isn't for the mathematically challenged.

The Vanguard's served another purpose. With Plymouth out of contact, we couldn't count on their particle beams to decelerate us when we arrived in-system. Our Vanguard's were tiny compared to their beam array, but the first would fire its beamer backward to slightly decelerate Vanguard II and everything behind it, which would slightly decelerate Vanguard III and so on, and so on, until we were slow enough to enter Plymouth's orbit. If Vanguard I didn't survive, well, there were redundancies. Enough to survive several lost Vanguard's? Don't ask.

So we sat at McCracken's briefing, fearful and hopeful.

Vanguard I went silent not long after entering Plymouth's star system. Then nothing more. Nothing at all.

"I guess the octopoids reacted quick enough to . . ." Sugawara said.

"Impossible! It was going too fast!"

"Then what happened?"

If we lost all the Vanguard's, it was worse than just not knowing the Plymouth situation. There'd be nothing to slow us down. Dresdin and I, Sugawara, McCracken, Dr. Li, Wah, *Lexington*, *Pelasso*, twenty thousand crew on two dozen ships. We would all keep plowing straight ahead at 0.3 cee, flying right past Plymouth and chasing our own photons through the galaxy for all eternity.

With some trepidation, we reconvened the next day, when Vanguard II was supposed to report.

We waited for hours. Still nothing.

Discontentment grew, but not panic. Not yet. But grumblings at McCracken's leadership, even if our ship was actually slowing a little.

A few days later, when Vanguard III was supposed to check in, our morale was very bad, and we were picking on each other for no reason.

At the moment we expected data from Vanguard III . . . we actually got some!

But from Vanguard I.

We weren't sure what was going on, but we were suddenly flooded with data: telemetry in the form of lines, big and little circles and green and blue triangles, plus virtual recreations and even enhanced imagery. You can bet we let out a loud whoop when we saw that first picture of an enemy ship near Plymouth. It had multiple outrigger hulls, shaped like extended diamonds, eight in total—the same kind I saw accompanying the impactor.

Octopoids!

The image was a little blurry, since the probe was going at 0.3 speed of light. With a background of black space, the exposure time was around 30 seconds. Thus: the probe had moved 2.7 million kilometers—seven times the distance between Old Earth and its moon—in the time it took to snap one picture.

So, yeah, there was going to be some motion blur.

All the enemy ships Vanguard I spotted at Plymouth were known octopoid designs. That quieted those still suggesting the enemy might be someone else. The Vanguard spotted eleven and had time to target two.

We only saw a few frames of that first ship, before—*Blam!*—it flared and died in an expanding puffball of fragments, tumbling, sparkling in the planetlight. Dresdin high-fived me, just as she had before we left Aine, when she heard her Gardien Station Bloos had won the Ramirez Cup again. Of course, she had as big a role in that victory as this one: none.

Sugawara then led us in a little Jodie he made up on the spot: *Got me a date on Plymouth world . . . Octopoid ship around it whirled . . . Here I come with a great big gun . . . Blast her good 'til I am done!*

Then an enemy ship broke orbit, thrusting perpendicular to Vanguard I's approach vector. Several missiles flew by harmlessly, unable to change direction fast enough. One managed to

make the turn, and that's all it took. *Kerbloolie!*

Minutes before we had been morose, consigned to our fate, but now we were screaming, hugging, patting each other on the butt. "Good kill! Good kill!"

Even more new data poured in. We saw octopoid ships deploying countermeasures: swarms of projectiles and chaff shot toward Vanguard II's missiles. The missiles were confused and missed the ships, but hit the chaff, exploding, turning both missile and chaff into high-speed shrapnel, some still around 0.3 cec. Green dots flashed and vanished. More octopoid ships exploded, fragments of destroyed missiles and ships flaring and dying in Plymouth's atmosphere.

Debris clouds that were once enemy warships: five. Enemies left: seven, including a couple that Vanguard I hadn't seen.

Again we hooped and hollered, and again we prepared to leave the room until Vanguard III arrived a day later.

We were barely in the corridor when we were called back, with new data rushing in.

Several octopoid ships had turned tail and run, but were in open space. Vanguard III—combining its own data with that from I and II—fired volley after volley, blasting them before they left the system.

Now we were dogpiling each other. Someone shook up a DresdinBrau and sprayed the foamy contents all over our nice uniforms. McCracken was glowing, the successful attack having transfigured her like Jesus on the mount.

We had expected data coming in spurts, a day apart. Now we got data from first three Vanguards delayed but in quick succession. There was only one possible explanation: The octopoid ships had been jamming comms from Plymouth. That's why the planet went silent. Vanguard III, with line-of-sight to I and II, had received data from them, but couldn't send it to us until it destroyed the jamming ship.

But if comms were no longer blocked . . . couldn't we finally contact Plymouth directly? Find out from them the situation on the ground?

We quieted down when we got a distress beacon from Plymouth. Then:

"Vanguard III has made contact with Plymouth Colonial Authority." Dresdin spoke flatly and without preamble, for maximum effect.

More hollering.

Plymouth reported that their beamer in polar orbit was still intact—the octopoids wanted it for their own uses. They'd aim it at us for deceleration. So less time hibernating with nasty chemicals clogging our lungs!

We still didn't know how badly Plymouth was hit.

Were millions dead? Or so many injured that we'd have to kit-bash some med ships? Or maybe evac the planet? If so, we'd have to dump expensive equipment into space, and still wouldn't have enough room or hibernacula.

McCracken summarized the rapid-fire reports as they came in. The Colonial Authority said they are mostly fine, thank you very much!

Hurrah! Damage on the surface was light . . . mainly tunnel collapses from impact quakes. If that same impactor had hit any other colony—they were proud to inform us—it would have set off fires for hundreds of clicks. But on Plymouth, there wasn't enough oxygen for that. Their weird mobile bushes burrowed down like it was just another solar flare, and then came back up, pretty as a daisy. Same with the colonists.

"So what's our assignment?" Dresdin asked.

"Search and rescue. The octopoids—cowards that they are—stayed up in their ships, but landed a garrison of robot surrogates. They're holed up in the flare shelter near New Boston. They have 165 human colonists as hostages." Then she handed out assignments, with Colonel Zmarzlak leading the battalion. Dresdin was in command of Company Alpha and got first pick of the centipede troops. I'd be leading one of her platoons, including our favorite striped Skolopendran.

"You have a little over a month to finishing training for cave fighting," McCracken said. "Be ready to fight the octopoids' robots as soon as we touchdown on Plymouth."

"No worries, ma'am," Dresdin said. "Easy as pie."

X. Plymouth: Arrival

From orbit, Plymouth didn't look inviting—more brown than green, blue-tinged methane clouds, orange photochemical haze at the poles. To say nothing of its high gravity, fragmented crust, and hypoxic atmosphere—all making Plymouth one of the least habitable inhabited worlds. The natives were acclimated, but anyone from the task force—human or centipede—would need to carry their own air. Scattered around the planet were impact craters, mostly dating back to the octopoid war. We'd be landing near the newest one. Some of the craters were perfectly arrayed in a symmetrical octagon pattern—Dresdin joked that the octopoids were often very tidy making a mess of us.

Plunging through Plymouth's atmosphere wasn't the terrifying thrill-ride Dresdin and I had endured when we had landed on Aine, buffeted and dodging flak, smacked around inside our dropsuits. No, we were in a larger Cornelius-class dropship, reclining in safety harnesses, like hammocks, with dropsuits protecting us. My Skolo troopers clung to the floor with their dozens of legs, wearing nothing but air tanks and breathing tubes plugged into their sides.

In the ship's hold below my feet were three razormechs from *Pelasso*. These vehicles were constructed from horrible monsters that the Skolos called razorclaws. A razorclaw looked like what you'd get if you sliced the heads—along with the claws—from three lobsters and then glued them together like a three-pointed star. Each razorclaw had six pairs of pincers, and in each pair, one was like a meat cleaver and the other a heavy chopping block. You could grab a regular lobster by the back, pointing its claws away from you, but with these monsters, there were pincers everywhere. And the Skolos grew these to the size of buses, while hollowing them out and turning them into tanks. The razorclaws were tough, with a chitinous roll cage outside their shells—like nerf bars or football helmet faceguards, an *exo-exoskeleton*. Their many legs—reinforced with metal tips—easily scabbled over rocky floors, and we mounted heavy turrets and grenade launchers on them, making them the perfect tanks for fighting in the caverns of Plymouth.

Outside the dropship's porthole, the methane clouds thickened and burned orange. My safety harness was surprisingly comfortable, rocking me gently as layers of Plymouth's atmosphere raced past. The dropship hit denser air, but the harness and dropsuit compensated, lulling me to sleep.

I awoke when the dropship suddenly turned into a party boat. Everyone was there—McCracken, Dresdin, Sugawara, Brennan, Tépper, even a now-recovered Captain Wah Chula Chula. I didn't know about the other nineteen dropships, but suddenly on ours ten human soldiers were singing bawdy songs, backed by forty-seven centipedes providing a clicking, hissing syncopated beat. Then we switched, the centipedes singing a weird clicky song in their weird clicky language, while we clapped and rapped our knuckles against dropsuit armor. No one could sing, but everything was wonderful.

Since that celebratory dinner on *Lexington*, all the pieces had begun falling in place. We were revved up by our unmanned Vanguard's blowing away the entire octopoid fleet—and the Skolos were impressed, too. Yeah, maybe their faces were made of ugly claws and crenelated toothplates, but they appreciated an overwhelming victory as much as anyone.

Rescuing hostages in caves seemed too easy, barely worth the trip. Dresdin dubbed it "Operation Pie." Of course, I'd been on many missions billed that way. One had cost me a leg and a hand.

Everyone had been so happy with the string of good news that there had been few complaints from human or centipede, even as we had spun up the training segment to two gee, and all platoons had been doing double-shifts. The Skolopendrans and their human platoon leaders were getting along well, and even Stripes stopped messing everything up.

We were through the cloud deck now, and the thrusters kicked in hard as the muddy ground rose up. My dropsuit stiffened, cradling me in response to the higher gravity.

Soon we would be well-armed, well-trained bad-asses riding razormechs like living tanks into battle.

Touchdown.

* * *

“You’re gonna have to be real careful going in.”

We sat in bulky dropsuits on too-small stools, inside a dreary little prefab hut, made of the chintziest metal Keiretsu could scrounge, with tiny, nearly useless windows. Surrounding us were fields of dun-colored, gen-modded grain in a sea of brown mud. In the distance were small, outdated defense batteries, useful as sticks in the ground. Ugliest planet I’d ever seen.

Colonel Hank, of Plymouth’s meager defense force, was briefing us, the officers from the fleet. The Skolos, who’d be doing most of the fighting and dying, weren’t invited.

“The enemy is holding 165 human hostages in the main underground shelter. That’s this large, hemispherical cave we use during UV storms.” Colonel Hank pointed at a cave map on an old flatscreen. He moved easily in the nearly two gee—which would have hurt my feet without the dropsuit. And he talked effortlessly in the unpleasant air, which had too little oxygen for us, but enough that the bugs hated the smell. Why would anyone live here?

“I assume you made rescue attempts?” McCracken asked.

“Several, but we got pushed back every time. When your Vanguard’s blew up the octopoid ships, we were hoping a fleet was close behind, bringing newer weapons.”

Of course we were. Centipedes.

There were three tunnels from the surface to the main shelter: from the north, the south, and the east.

The north tunnel was a straight shot, used for resupply. Being paved, it was the easiest approach, easiest way to get the hostages out, but most heavily defended. Major Brennan would lead Company Bravo’s assault from the north tunnel, with Colonel Zmarzlak as battalion commander and in charge of the overall mission.

The south tunnel was longer, twistier, and unpaved. In the middle was a tunnel crossroads, the perfect place for the enemy to ambush us—or, as McCracken noted, for us to ambush the ambushers. That would be Dresden’s Company Alpha. My platoon was assigned to it, probably at her request.

The east tunnel wasn’t as long and twisty as the south. But it was damaged from impact quakes, caved in a little past the entrance. We’d try to unblock it with razormechs. Tépper would be in charge there, her Company Charlie working with Bishop and his corps of combat engineers.

So the overall battle plan was a three-prong attack.

The main force would be Dresden’s Company on the south tunnel, triggering the presumed ambush at the crossroads, drawing them away from the shelter. With any luck, they wouldn’t have enough forces to respond everywhere. That would give us two bites at the apple: Brennan and Tépper attacking in the north and east tunnels, freeing the hostages from the now less-well-defended main shelter.

The caves would be hard going. Plymouth circled Proxima every six days, so its crust was heavily fractured by the tidal stresses of its tight, eccentric orbit. The surface was more mud than dry land, more wet sponge than solid crust. Some caves flooded at high tide, necessitating constant pumping, and creating pockets with deceptively thin crust.

Hank brought up an image of a robot, like an octopoid mech from an old war movie. “This is what you’ll be fighting.” A hemispherical body dangled tentacles of flexible electroactive plastic. Then he showed other kinds: Hammerbots, grinderbots, flambergers, and snatchers.

“Is it all bots?” Zmarzlak asked. “No actual octopoids?”

“Yeah, all Karls all the time, like the last war.”

“What’s a Karl?”

“It’s what we call the deathbot surrogates that the octopoids use, when they’re fighting on land. Named after some bot that kickstarted their uplift, I hear.”

We should stop making new life forms that later try to kill us, I thought.

“Far as we can tell, there aren’t any octopoids in the caves, even the flooded ones, or anywhere else on this planet. They are all . . . *were* all still on the ships overhead, gathering more.”

“An invasion fleet?” Dresden asked.

“Yeah, but if this was the octopoids’ Normandy, you got them before they left England. Congrats, but don’t get too cocky. The bots they left behind have heavy flashers, and for CQC, some have spinning hammers and bladestorms and all sorts of nasties.”

He paused and looked around the room seriously.

“When you go into the caves, be strong, be brave, be fearless. But above all else, for God’s sake, be careful! You can lose comms and get lost in the twisties, or crushed or trapped by cave-ins, or you can fall through the floor. And don’t count on your dropsuits to save you from stupid mistakes. Whatever you do, do not underestimate those bots. I’ve seen them blast and rip right through armor.” Then he smiled and nodded. “Good luck tomorrow.”

* * *

XI. Plymouth. Go time.

We were a diversion, to draw enemy killbots from the shelter with the hostages. Dresdin said that we should be prepared to take losses. She would take Platoon 1 into the south cave, then my platoon and the others would follow at ten-minute intervals. The cave led to the main underground shelter, the grand prize, where the hostages were held.

Once we were engaged, Captain Tépper’s Company Charlie would proceed into the east cave, assuming the blockages therein had been cleared overnight. Major Brennan would sneak Company Bravo through the north cave. With enemy forces pulled to engage our Skolos, we hoped that Tépper or Brennan would meet only light resistance and could waltz in to free the hostages. We hoped.

The political stakes were war and peace, the future of three sentient races in the balance. But for us it was more personal. There were a total of 165 hostages in that shelter, and we intended to bring them all out safely, even if we had to exchange our lives for theirs.

* * *

At G-minus-ninety, I gingerly folded myself into the open back of the dropsuit. I’d handled way more than Plymouth’s two gees during combat maneuvers, strapped into a harness, but tougher guys than me had suffered broken ankles, muscle tears, and stress fractures falling in this gravity. A Plymouthian sergeant ran—actually ran—past me. I tried not to take it as a personal affront; he grew up here. It would have been nice to take some of that beef with us, but all we could risk was a handful of guides and scouts. To be honest, they moved too fast for us, and our forces might be injured or spread out trying to keep up.

My Platoon 2 mustered at the south cave entrance. Stripes and Splotch were antsy but behaving, and all my Skolos were squared away, ready to move out. Everyone was on foot except me and eight Skolos in a razormech. Inside the mech, my command chair was bolted to a sclerotized bump, an inward projection of the shell into the crew compartment, normally for muscle attachment. The Skolos had trimmed back the internal musculature, and there was equipment mounted in the muscle scars, including screens linked to exterior cameras. A new human-usable console duped the Skolos’ weird pipe-shaped controls, and I used the down time to study the buttons, practicing opening and closing the claws, working the walking legs, building my muscle memory. I kept thinking of a quotation from Staroscik’s favorite play: All things are ready, if our minds be so.

Then Colonel Zmarzlak ran toward us, waving his arms. With less than half an hour before go time, he ordered us to disembark. I watched helplessly as our razormech was trucked away, but Zmarzlak promised we’d get it back before we went in.

Word came down a few minutes later. Engineer Bishop had nearly all the razormechs, including ours. His crews had been working them all night, unblocking the blockages in the East cave, dumping the spoils around the cave mouth in a tidy ring. Those neatly stacked rocks were now blocking Tépper from loading out, so the mechs had to move them again. Tépper would miss her go time. Maybe it would work out, because now we’d be walking, so the diversion would be late too. We hadn’t even left, and our well-oiled schedule was already fubar.

The order came down for Dresdin to go in with Platoon 1, including a razormech. Almost immediately, we lost contact with her team. Stripes found that funny, but I worried about worst-case scenarios.

Go time for my platoon crept up, and I scanned the roads for my razormech. Nothing. Still no comms with Dresdin, either. We got a last-minute pep talk from Zmarzłak, though, for what it was worth.

The comm boosters came online just as we went in, and we finally relinked with Dresdin. As expected, she reported seeing no actual octopuses, only their fighting robot surrogates.

“First Karl down!” she said. “Come join the party!”

“Inbound.”

The tunnel was twisty, and soon the light from the cave mouth disappeared. Dark vision snooters snapped on. We set boosters as we went, synching comms with the outside. There was no sign of Karls . . . yet.

Post impact quakes had rearranged the terrain, so our maps didn’t correlate with our location trackers. If we got lost, we’d throw the plan into turmoil.

“I can smell ’em,” Stripes said.

“The killbots?”

“Yes, sir. Their lubricants and hydraulic fluids. Same as the ones we trained with.”

“Which way?”

He led the way toward higher concentrations, and every so often, I caught a scent of it, something like machine oil. There was a cluster of Karls somewhere nearby, maybe waiting in ambush. We came upon a notable rock formation, with large, evenly spaced stalactites reflected in a pool beneath. Our guide recognized this as Moloch’s Mouth, which actually appeared on our maps. Back on course, we quickly joined up with Dresdin.

Dresdin’s infantry fanned out, proceeding alongside passages parallel to us. Human marines supported from the rear, the razormech taking point surrounded by vulnerable, exposed Skolos. At the briefing, Dresdin had called them “expendables.”

We got word that three other platoons were entering the caverns, and we proceeded to our designated positions. Splotch’s squad went up an airshaft too narrow for me, ready to jump out anywhere as needed. We had the element of surprise.

The Karls did, too.

The clatter of falling rubble echoed through the cave. I turned in time to see a wall, which had looked solid a minute before, collapsing in a cloud of dust and rocks. Cables with hooks shot out, and a robot emerged from the cloud. The cables retracted, having caught nothing. The bot’s mechanical maw irised open to reveal something like a woodchipper. The killbot was a walking woodchipper with harpoons!

Cables shot out again, but this time one wrapped around my ankle. I went down, feet flying.

Lying on my back, the bot’s cables pulling me toward its maw, I raised my flasher rifle toward the robot. Before I could pull the trigger, Stripes yelled, “Fire! Fire! Fire!”

Seven or eight flasher beams converged on the chipper-bot. Within seconds, the cable around my ankle snapped, and shiny streams of melted metal flowed between rocks.

Hopping mad, I scrambled to my feet. “Redeploy to your secondary positions, now!”

“Yes, sir.”

Stripes pinged me on a private channel. “Is something wrong, sir?”

“It’s overkill,” I said. “You wasted power and, worse, gave away your troops’ positions.”

“Understood.”

“Now move!”

Then things got worse. The fireworks with the chipper-bot had destabilized the cavern. A loose rock overhead fell, under nearly two gee, and meat-cleaved the back third off a centipede. With Li’s new techniques, the injury was probably survivable. Just as they’d been trained, two bug medics appeared out of nowhere. They started dragging this, our first casualty, toward the aid station, but one allowed his antennae to linger too long, tasting the victim’s wound. His body language suggested he was more likely than not to eat his fallen comrade. Had I taught them anything? He denied that he was tasting his injured comrade, but he had lost my trust. I assigned two other troopers to escort him from the combat zone, and another to take his place helping the wounded.

In exchange for one little Karl, the octopoids had cost me six troopers. I'd get four back shortly, but meanwhile there were holes in my platoon. I needed to establish order, quickly.

Stripes was still platoon guide, but with our tracker system down again, he needed to maintain line of sight with everyone. That was impossible from his position, with so many broken rocks and stalagmites, and I let him know in no uncertain terms. I hounded him until he knew exactly where everyone was. He used pheromonal signals, high-pitched sounds I couldn't hear, and messages coded in waving antennae tips, peeking from behind rocks. I tried to remain impassive, but his body language said he knew I was impressed.

The four centipedes returned quickly from their escort assignments, unbelievably fast, scurrying through the shadows, slipping in and out of tiny unseen crevices. Almost miraculously, the location tracker system snapped back on. My troops maneuvered back into their designated formation. "Well done, Stripes."

With my go-ahead, Stripes reported our new positions to Dresdin. He was cool and efficient, turning into a fine leader.

Dresdin's reply came back. "Platoon 2, data acknowledged. Stand by." I flipped to Dresdin's video feed in time to see her razormech smash a spidery tankbot a third its size. Its razor claws sliced off the thing's turrets just to be sure.

Comms came in on the main channel. "Company Alpha, this is Headhunter, mission is go. *Move out!*"

Stripes led our squads through the main tunnel, and I brought up the rear, flasher ready. The bugs effortlessly crawled around rock piles, up the twisted walls or even along the ceiling. They were born for this. I struggled against my dropsuit to keep up. I appreciated the suit supporting my weight in the heavy grav and giving my boots grip on the slippery flowstone, but it kept shifting my feet unnaturally as I navigated the uneven rock floor.

Dresdin pinged me on a private channel: "One hundred credits that my marines score more kills than your garbage bugs!"

"I accept. Hell of a gamble, considering the numbers." As if trawling through the bowels of a planetary hellhole with killer centipedes fighting alien deathbots wasn't a gamble. Hell, this whole trip had been one poker hand after another, with the ante getting higher and higher.

And yet . . . I grinned stupidly, feeling almost nostalgic for the old days, right before a drop with Dresdin. Another mission, and back to the old banter. Except the sides were all mixed up now.

Stripes reported, "Flankers in position, sir."

"Acknowledged. Proceed forward, but keep your eyes open."

"We don't have eyelids, sir."

Was that a joke? When did Stripes develop a sense of humor?

We approached our first waypoint, where the tunnel had partially collapsed into a cross-tunnel below. Larger shafts went up on the right and left. This was the major junction, the perfect place for the bots to ambush us. Our flycams and skeeter-scanners showed hordes hiding in the walls ahead.

I shifted my troops into a defensive position.

While everyone scrambled into place, Stripes yelled: "Enemy contact, left side!"

A shiny globe, like a metal soccer ball, emerged from a wall we'd already checked. The scanners were good, but they couldn't penetrate too deeply into rock. The bot dropped to the cave floor, then extended a rounded foot to kick-start itself, rolling toward a Skolo. It bounced merrily, like a friend inviting another to play.

"Soldier, get out of there! *Move!*"

The ball rolled up to the bug, and before he could react, sword blades shot out in all directions, chopping the Skolo into three pieces.

"Platoon, kill that thing! *Fire!*"

Everyone with line-of-sight shot. Some without line-of-sight fired, too. But the bot had retracted its blades, and the flasher blasts just ricocheted off its shell. It rolled fast, dashing behind a rock pile in one direction, then emerging from another, pausing only to slice up more of my

troops. Another one of the damned spinning bladebots came out of nowhere. They worked together, one distracting a Skolo, the other making the kill.

I needed them off the battlefield. Now. I noticed that their blades had cut surprisingly deeply in the cave floor. As if the floor wasn't solid, but a deceptively thin crust.

At my behest, Stripes snapped his antennae back and forth, signaling to the best-positioned Skolos. They fired their flashers, not at the bots, but in front of them. The entire section of floor collapsed, and momentum carried the spherical bots into the hole.

A flycam followed them down. Its video stream showed them racing around the bottom of the chamber, searching in futility for an exit, popping their blades, trying to jump up the slick walls.

When we were satisfied they couldn't get out, we prepared to move on.

I did a grim claw count. We'd lost four more.

A fifth lay in quivering pieces. Her head was attached to only the front half of her body. A borderline case—Li might not be able to save her.

Two centipede medics slithered in, one immediately dipping his antennae into the green ooze of the wound. Claws clacked. Was I about to lose another medic? His poison claws opened wide, but not to eat. Rather, as the wounded one death-rattled and then went still, the medic pulled out a homing beacon and mounted it on the wall. Then he moved on, leaving the body behind. As trained, he had marked the body for retrieval after the hurly-burly was done. He wasn't tasting the injured, but doing the bug equivalent of checking a pulse. I was wrong about that medic I'd dismissed earlier. I send two centipedes to return him to battle.

Still, my numbers were dropping too fast.

"Captain, come in. I'm down five more Skolos and we've achieved nothing. Let's get this diversion started!"

Dresdin replied. "Stand by." Minutes later, she came back. "Lieutenant, you've deployed your troops well. Platoons 1 and 5 are in position now, too. Four and 3 almost. Brennan's Company has started their rescue run. Tépper's only a couple minutes behind. Now's the perfect timing!" Dresdin sent me data, circling some deathbots. "Go pick a fight!"

A deep crevasse yawned before me, too wide to jump, so I tapped my landing rockets, just enough to shoot across. "Stripes, raise a ruckus! *Move!*"

Now the fun really began.

A sinewy body flowed like mercury in and out of cracks in the rock, sneaking up on a ripperbot. Poison claws explored the mechanism until it found its target, then sliced through critical superconducting conduits. Before it knew it was being attacked, the bot dropped to the cave floor, dead. It was just like the training drones—same design flaw, same kind of filaments. Word spread of these bots' weakness.

A gunbot—like a tank turret on spidery legs—had some squaddies pinned down with flasher fire. We launched decoys and chaff to distract it, but no one knew how to kill it. Skolos rushed it and died. I wished for my razormech. One brave Skolo burrowed under the rock debris, emerging from behind the bot, unseen. Antennae waved, signaling us to hold our fire, lest she be hit by friendly fire. The bug killed it with a single well-located swipe.

Others bots didn't let us get close enough to exploit that weakness.

One bot whipped a tentacle into a squad of infantry, discharging crackling bolts of electricity. Skolopendrants writhed and burned. Stripes ordered flasher fire concentrated at the tentacle base. Metal flared and melted, and the dying tentacle writhed as its capacitors discharged their last energy. Stripes was on another bot before it could bring its combat hammers to bear, poison claws ripping at superconducting conduits. The thing fell dead. Stripes used his antennae to whip bright streaks of greenish coolant across his back.

Every bot we killed here was a bot not holding the hostages in the shelter.

We advanced.

"Dresdin, where are Charlie and Bravo? My troops are taking a beating!"

"Almost at the shelter, Lieutenant!"

"What's taking them so long?"

“Dunno, but you need to bleed off more bots!”

We advanced.

A pit was in Stripes’ way, but the centipedes formed a chain with their bodies, bridging the gap, climbing across like army ants. When the hell had they learned that?

Dozens of dead bots littered the cave floor, but as Skolos approached, the bots sprung to life, lashing out with flechettes, chainsaws and combat hammers. We took more losses, but we killed all the bots.

We advanced.

Up ahead was the largest killbot I’d ever seen. It floated on a saucer-like body of non-coplanar rings, with gimbal-mounted rotors, a flasher turret head *and a flametbrower*.

The air here was hypoxic but with a lot of methane. All the bot needed was an off-the-shelf oxygen accumulator and an ordinary sparker. That’s all this cremator needed to ignite the atmosphere itself.

I hit the dirt, behind a wall of stalagmites, but I felt warmth on the back of my dropsuited legs. I waited for it to cool—indicating that the fireball has burned itself out—then fired blindly from behind the cover. “Where you at, Dresdin? I could use some help!”

“Coming in now with the marines.”

A terrible thought occurred to me. “Keep Wah Chula Chula behind the lines,” I said. “He doesn’t have the training my troops have. If he smells the wounded—”

Dresdin said, “He’s with me. I’ll keep him in line.”

How? Shoot him if he pounces?

The rock next to me glowed cherry red and spit hot fragments. Without poking out my head, I fired blindly again, toward the shadows where I’d last seen the cremator. A bang of light, and I heard something heavy crashing to the cave floor.

Scratch another!

Not so fast. The wall next to me shattered, rock fragments smacking my head around inside my helmet, *wham wham wham*, and everything went in and out of focus. Time moved in strange ways as I stumbled backward to recover, only to see the smoking cremator rising into the air, blasting away, with one turret shooting flames at Skolos way over there, and the other turret not shooting *at me but around me*.

So I was inundated by bigger and bigger rocks breaking and smacking, cracking against my dropsuit. Yeah, maybe the rocks couldn’t penetrate the armor, but they could bend it and crush it. My good leg screamed as muscle was pinched between bone and in-dented armor, and I called out for Dresdin, but the vid feed showed her razormech collapsing under a swarm of deathbots, exploding.

My dropsuit, without asking for permission, lifted me up and pinwheeled me away, because a boulder the size of Touchdown City was falling from the ceiling, about to crush me. As I flew away, my arms flailed and my last shot at the deathbot went wild.

The deathbot’s didn’t.

It was fast enough to track me as I pinwheeled, and suddenly I smelled burning flesh. Searing pain flared in my leg. I tried to adjust as I fell, but I felt a sharp, broken cutting edge of metal against the skin somewhere above my knee. It felt like it was cutting to the bone, and my hip went one way and my foot the other. The impact with the ground under that goddamn high gravity—why would anyone live here—sent a shock of agony through my spine.

Somebody’s flasher shot pinged one of the hovering cremator’s rotors, and it sparked and flew apart, sending the deathbot spinning away. When it was clear and I was about to black out, Dresdin appeared out of nowhere, suddenly by my side again, messing with my dropsuit with one eye scanning for enemies, firing her flasher with one hand. With the other, she extended catheters from her suit and plugged them into ports in mine, because the part of my suit that had all the stimplugs and painkillers and whatever was just gone.

She gasped, “You’ll be okay, you’ll be okay.” Half of her charred helmet has been blasted away, and she was sucking up this weird low-oxygen atmosphere of this ugly planet that smelled like an outhouse—and again why would anyone live here—as she pumped me full of chemical

hoopie-doopies.

That goddamn hovering deathbot came back and ohmigod it had a mine flail now. How many weapons did that thing have? It swiveled both heads and aimed its myriad cannons right at Dresdin's head, right where there was a giant hole in her helmet, and where there would soon be one in her head. She spun and raised her weapon, but it was too late because the bot's flasher was trained on her.

But then a serpentine form leaped off the wall, above her head and toward the bot. It was smaller than the others—

Captain Wah.

He had no chance of making the jump, not in Plymouth's gravity. But the cremator didn't know that. It redirected its flasher and fired. Chula's body flared and fell to the ground, smoldering.

The bot was at point-blank range, one turret aimed at me, one at Dresdin.

Suddenly Stripes was atop the metal carapace, ripping at wires with his poison claws. How the hell had he—

The bot fired wildly, but Stripes carefully positioned himself behind the turrets, so the flames and flashers couldn't reach him. Then Splotch dropped down, next to Stripes. I looked up and saw it. A rope dangled from the darkness above, except it was no rope, but a chain of Skolopen-drans.

Others dropped down, pulling up panels and ripping at the hoverbot's innards. The bot spun, its flasher seeking targets in vain. Then, finally, it lurched, puffed black smoke, and dropped dead.

I crawled to the smoking segmented body of my dead friend.

Tears stung my eyes. Yes, I cried for the monster I would have burned without a thought a year before.

Dresdin looked over my shoulder. "That little monkey butt saved my life!" She never sounded more astonished. "Alvarez! Are you okay? Are you okay?"

I started to say, "I'm fine—" when I looked down at my lower body. My leg was wrapped in charred and crushed metal, strips of cooked meat visible between torn segments of armor. I hadn't even felt it.

Stripes and several of the centipedes rushed to strip the useless armor away.

Then, with the selenotanium tossed aside, the bugs simultaneously turned toward me, and stared without moving, poison dripping from their claws.

My last good leg was a bloody, blasted mangled horror, protective armor ripped away.

I was a wounded victim. Helpless. Tasty.

Dresdin moved to cover me, but her gasping, wheezing breath had grown more ragged, and she slumped to the ground. Her med telemetry flashed a hypoxia alert.

"Dresdin! Dresdin!" I called out.

No response.

"Have I taught you nothing? Nothing?" An onrushing wave of centipedes crashed upon me, dozens and dozens of pointed little feet clicking on my armor. How long since they'd last eaten?

Poison claws exploring my knee plate, finding a weakness, digging in, slicing flesh. The fever and burn of the genetic buckshot of poison...

My vision darkened as the centipedes dogpiled me, and Stripes double-wrapped himself around my neck, poison claws and crenelated toothplates clacking at my faceplate.

"Have I taught you nothing?"

* * *

XII. Aboard *Lexington*: The Return to Planet Aine

I awoke in a panicked frenzy, thrashing to throw off centipedes. My flasher! Where was it? Oh my God—they ripped off my armor and chewed my hands to nubs. Something was wrapped tightly, coiled around my waist—

"Careful! You're going to rip out all my work!"

“What?”

As the nightmare cleared from my mind, I realized I was in a medbay on *Lexington*, my hands around a bundle of tubes. I let go.

“How did I get here?” I counted ten fingers.

Dr. Li said, “The bugs did good work getting you out. Even activated the anaesthetic and morphine derivatives. Made my job easier.”

I guess I had taught them well after all.

“So the hostages? Did we get them out?”

A familiar voice said, “Yes, all 165 of them. Everybody’s safe.”

Dresdin stepped in, and her face exploded in relief and delight when she saw me. McCracken was beside her—like double prizes!

“Alvarez, do you think you’ll be out of here by tomorrow night?” the general asked.

“Depends on him,” I said, pointing at Dr. Li. “Why?”

“We’re boosting for home in a few days, and Plymouth wants to throw a banquet before we go. All the freed hostages will be there, the centipedes that rescued them—well, the 607 that survived—and their human commanders. But you’re guest of honor!”

“I’ve capped off your leg mid-thigh, but I still need to build the replacement,” Dr. Li said. “I could let you out for a couple hours, long as you come right back. But no dancing!”

Suddenly Dresdin got very sad and quiet. “But we do have some bad news, Alvarez.”

“Oh God no!”

She said slowly, “Unfortunately, because of your recent actions, you’re no longer a lieutenant . . .”

Oh no! What had I done wrong, to get myself bumped down two steps in rank? Had I let too many centipedes die during the hatching and the rescue?

“I had no choice, Alvarez, but you know what you did,” the general said angrily. “That’s why I transmitted paperwork to get you . . . promoted to captain!”

Dresdin found a patch of my shoulder with nothing plugged in, and playfully punched me there.

“The change in rank won’t be official until the message gets to Gardien in a couple of months, but it’s a done deal. The rights and responsibility and, most importantly, the pay bump are all effective immediately. We’ll have the pinning ceremony when we get back to Aine.”

Pinning ceremony? I thought back to when I made second lieutenant, back in simpler times, when they let you appoint a loved one to pin your insignia on you. Jovita stuck it on sideways and gave me a mischievous wink before righting it and stepping back for the audience and flycams to see.

I glanced at Dresdin’s shoulder. “What about you? Are you a major now?”

“Nope,” she said. “Didn’t want it. My role’s secret.” Dresdin refusing a promotion? Was this the same Dresdin who’d committed a war crime to win a medal? “But when we get back to Aine,” she continued, “there’s going to be a parade and everything. Yours is the face of this operation. They’re even building a statue of you.”

A statue? A statue! They would only go through that expense if . . .

“Then the war really is over!”

“There are a couple things to wrap up on Aine, but yes! Yes! Consider the war over. Thanks to you, Captain Alvarez, we finally have a lasting peace!”

Tato! Nalia! Jovita! I did it. I did it! I did it! I finally had everything I wanted, everything I fought for, except for . . .

For a moment, I saw Dresdin sneer, a dark specter of anger flashing across her face. I knew what she was thinking about: her sons Jourdin and Devin. Maybe the war was over for us, but it would never end for them. I had been in a dark place, too, but now I felt a new sun rising. Would Dresdin ever find solace, or—despite a centipede saving her life—would her heart continue to pile vengeance atop vengeance, forever?

“Should we let the good doctor get back to work?”

“One last question first,” I said, not knowing I would soon regret it. “About the robots we

fought on Plymouth . . . They had similarities to the drones Bishop made for boot camp, the same design weakness.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Are the octopoids now copying our technology? Should I mention that in my after-action report—”

“We don’t need one, not for this,” McCracken said.

“But—”

“There is absolutely no need for an after-action report from you. There never will be. In fact, you have nothing on your plate right now. Except healing up.”

I’d never, ever *not* needed to write an after-action report. We joked we’d even need to write one after hitting the head.

A medibot started beeping. McCracken stepped out to chat with Dr. Li, and when they returned Li tapped the robot and said, “Hmm. Low grade fever. Maybe an infection.”

“But he’ll still be released for the banquet tomorrow?”

“I’m sure.”

* * *

My infection got worse, so Dr. Li gave me a new protein antibiotic, isolated from centipede poison and called Skololysin K. The antibiotic—peptoxerox used a protein-dependent protein synthase from a weird anucleate bacterium—was also so powerful and dangerous that I needed constant monitoring. *Wonderful*, I thought. *Now our side’s poisoning me, too.*

I missed the banquet. I also missed being boosted. So it wasn’t all bad.

Li’s new antibiotic wound up damaging my liver, and his treatments for that messed up my kidneys, and his treatments for that dropped my blood pressure, and his treatments for that . . . Days in the medbay turned into weeks and months. Dr. Li and other white smocks floated around me like ghosts as I drifted along, in a medically induced multi-color haze.

I also mourned my second leg. Now I’d lost both of the knees that I’d walked on, to the mini replica of the Basilica de Guadalupe on Gardien Station, while Jovita held my hand. Now Jovita, my knees, and even the Basilica were lost to the war.

To keep myself distracted, I watched videos of peace celebrations.

Not to be outdone, McCracken had filmed four episodes of *The Unity Games* on *Pelasso*. They were edited into an irresistible froth of playful conviviality, then broadcast back home. The bugs gathering on Aine—their new homeworld—loved it.

In one game, contestants ran around in giant penguin suits. These were twice my height and made from cargo lifters, each piloted by a human or Skolo buried deep inside. They speed-waddled through an obstacle course built in a hangar, tumbling into water traps, dodging a mechanical polar bear. Only at the finish line was the winning penguin opened to show who was inside. The overall winners were a photogenic human NCO and the least-ugly centipede they could find. By a weird coincidence, they ended with exactly the same scores.

My soul grew stronger every day. I had no specific orders to occupy me, but my thoughts no longer turned to overwhelming grief. I felt proud of my emotional healing. In the hours of clarity between doses of experimental meds, I felt well enough to study, probing unresolved questions about this mission.

After all this—was I really sure it had been the octopoids who had attacked Plymouth?

Why would octopoids copy our robots instead of using their own, which lacked such obvious design flaws? The Skolopendrants wouldn’t do that, either. Who did that leave? Some unknown alien species? We’d have seen their signs.

Humans?

The impactor clinched it. Maybe Plymouth was lucky, with the impactor hitting an unpopulated area. But I watched the video a hundred times, ran sims. That thing was actually lighter than it should have been—maybe it was foamed ice—so it looked dangerous but did little damage. The opposite of how invaders would do it.

But who would fake an attack like that? McCracken? But why?

I was finally getting some useful information when—

One day I awoke to find my tablet gone, my computer access revoked. Dresdin wasn't responding to my pings.

It was a lonely trip back to Aine.

* * *

XIII. Planet Aine, Peace Pyramid

Once again Commissioner Staroscik gathered to himself flag and field officers, neatly arrayed in dress uniforms. Not in a conference room, but on a new dais built from the side of the Peace Bubble. A pyramid of flexiglass covered us, filled with human-breathable air.

Beyond the Peace Pyramid was a festive, freshly paved plaza, studded with gazebos and Unity flags, teeming with centipedes breathing their poisonous air. Videos of the Unity Games looped on giant screens.

To the south were the blocky sides of the Keiretsu food processing plants, making the same protein exudate that my troops loved to eat. To the east were the spindly towers of the oxygen scrubbers. The joint infrastructure teams had been busy while we were gone.

After all the tinkering Dr. Li had done to me, I felt great. No pain anywhere, my teeth were tight, my fingers wiggled on command. Even my new legs worked fine.

Everyone seemed happy, or almost everyone.

General McCracken pinned shiny new insignia on me, as human officers and dignitaries clapped politely. Staroscik said, "You have done well, *Captain Alvarez*. You are a good and hardy soldier." I had a chance to ask McCracken questions about the mission, but this wasn't the time or place. I was too busy soaking up the adulation. I'd never felt prouder of my service.

My centipede troops paraded through the plaza, Stripes leading, as he had led them in combat. For his heroics, he had earned the right to pick a *nom de guerre*. He chose Kasaak Kasaakuma, after yet another fabled Skolo warrior—there seemed to be a million. But to me he would always be "Stripes."

The troops halted in front of the dais, raising their right antennae in a salute, like a Crusader kissing his sword's cross-guard, then slashing down. A very human gesture.

That moment is frozen in my mind forever. Stripes' poison claws held proudly upward. On my left were Staroscik, McCracken, and other officers, eyes gleaming. On my right was Dresdin with shoulders slumped, though I didn't know why.

Maybe McCracken was right. I should allow myself to relax, to be happy and proud of my work. My little band of bugs had proven that centipedes and humans could work together. I'd accomplished my mission, and achieved the peace I longed for. My family was smiling down on me. The war was over.

It still seemed weird, though, that my centipede troops were all down there marching, while I—and the other humans involved in the rescue at Plymouth—were up on the dais.

Captain Sugawara came up to me. I thought he was going to rip into me again, but instead he said, "Good job, Alvarez. This scheme of yours is going to turn out better than I expected. Didn't think you had it in you."

Scheme? Mine? I wasn't quite sure what he meant until:

Suddenly, through the flexiglass, I saw fluid spurt from Stripes' third segment like a gooeey green fountain. He coiled his body around the wound. The crowd of ever-hungry bugs roiled. Soldiers closed ranks around Stripes, blocking voracious fangs. This I had taught them—to protect their fellow soldiers from all enemies, which apparently now included civilians of their own kind. The insensate, insatiate crowd surged in waves, breaking themselves on the wall of soldiers around Stripes.

Staroscik and McCracken nodded at each other. That was their tell.

More shots! One centipede soldier lost its tail in a cloud of green spatter, then another and another, as more civilians and soldiers started fighting each other, poison claws glistening for a moment and then cutting into exoskeleton, crenelated toothplates clacking and snapping, antennae slamming into each other like broadswords. The feeding frenzy fed on itself, as clouds of poisonstench and angerscent filled the air, and shreds of Unity flags floated across the plaza.

A centipede civil war had begun.

I turned on Dresdin, rage in my eyes. “This? This is your peace?” I grabbed her by the collar, not caring that laying hands on a fellow officer was a court-martial offense. She didn’t resist. The look in her eyes—I still shiver when I remember it.

I released my grip, shaking with rage and fear. “What have you done? What did you make me do?”

“She did her duty.”

I spun to face McCracken. “Our *duty*,” I said, “was to preserve the peace.”

“Which we did, Alvarez, thanks to you. Commissioner, you always had a soft spot for the naïve type.” McCracken laughed. “A lasting peace was never going to happen, not the way you wanted it. How long before this planet was swarming with multi-legged scum? Cliodynamics predicted twenty years at most before they launched a new attack.”

“This is your solution? War now?”

“Ah, but *we’re* not at war. This looks like an internal matter for *them* to work out.”

“It’ll be a slaughter! Only six hundred troops against the entire population—”

“You’ll be surprised, Captain. Take a closer look.”

I’d never seen my centipede warriors next to civilians before—mine were longer and bigger, their poison claws proportionately larger. This couldn’t be an accident.

Later I learned that Dr. Li had not only beefed up my troops, but also hot-rodged the genes for altruism, including those that make neurotransmitters like tyrosine hydroxylase and DOPA decarboxylase, in a positively acting social interactome. Those changes literally made the soldiers happy to protect each other, even if that meant fighting and killing civilians.

Some of the female soldiers were already laden with eggs carrying these genetic traits. But even if they were killed, the genes would persist. In eating its victim, the victor also absorbed some of its genes, recombining them into its own chromosomes.

Now nothing could prevent a reservoir of these genes festering in the centipede population—along with dangerous ideas. A plague of camaraderie, empathy and esprit de corps—ideas alien and incompatible with the rest of their society, ideas working together to destroy. If a civilization consists of two groups with mutually exclusive points of view, its only long-term future is self-destruction. Without a powerful moderating influence or some middle ground, they’d face years of bloody conflict.

I was starting to put together everything I’d seen. Individually, none of the orders I’d been given, none of the orders I’d followed had been immoral or illegal. None. But because of the secret plans and spiritual darkness at the top, all my work added up to this: We’d poisoned their culture, and I’d unwittingly delivered the dose. I had been lost in my grief, adrift in a sea of details, unable to see the big picture. Maybe that’s why they picked me for this mission. Dresdin had been blinded by rage, and that’s why they picked her. Now the Skolopendrans would pay the price for our shortcomings.

In the distance, oxygen scrubbers and all but one of the food-processing units burst into flames.

“What are they going to eat?” I asked.

That was planned, too. The soldiers would commandeered and eat from the last food processor. As for civilians . . . the riot answered that question.

“Today I learned that . . .” Dresdin said without affect, “Keiretsu built those units with a lot of magnesium and aluminum . . . Turns out that both, with a little provocation, will burn in a carbon dioxide atmosphere. Who could’ve known?” Dresdin laughed a mirthless laugh.

“You’re destroying them. What gives you the right?”

The commissioner stepped in. “Do you think us stupid, Alvarez? Impulsive?” He paused, daring me to answer. “We carefully evaluated Helinsky’s proposal and others, before recommending McCracken’s plan to the council. Helinsky’s goal of a complete victory was enticing, but even the best-case scenarios had our fleets devastated, along with two or three cities—Tantalus, Touchdown, New Antioch, what’s left of Vizag—your pick. Our coffers would be emptied, our government weakened. The alliance between Nouvelle Terre and the orbital hubs would break down, leaving us open to insurrection. And God help us if the octopoids came back for

real. Yes, if we followed Helinsky, we'd deal a deathblow—to the centipedes and to ourselves. The centipedes' destruction is inevitable, but McCracken's plan—morally ambivalent as it is—is the only one that limited the destruction to one side, freeing humanity to flourish in a new renaissance. Isn't that preferable?"

I had no answer. Mankind's history, going back to Old Earth, bore him out. War after war left nations so weakened they descended into chaos and unrelenting cycles of bloodletting, with only brief respites of peace. It was our nature to fight—ourselves, or homegrown enemies like the octopoids or the Skolopendrans. It was our destiny, our poison to spread across the galaxy.

McCracken gave me a hard stare. "This information is highly classified and you *will not* speak of it. Ever. Alvarez, do I have your attention?"

I turned my back and walked away without permission. McCracken could have had my brand new insignia right then and there, but she had other schemes for me, a wonderful plan for my life.

* * *

In the hangars near the Peace Bubble, transports were loading to take us off this godforsaken world. I boarded one and took a window seat. Dresdin ducked in, next to me. I stared straight ahead.

"I tried to warn you," she said.

All my fury poured out. "You knew! All along, you *knew* what they were planning! You did nothing. You stood right next to me when I was briefed about the attack on Plymouth. You knew it was fake, and didn't say anything."

"I'm sorry . . ."

"And a *micrometeor* hitting the centipede ship? It was too convenient when the entire crew died—they wouldn't have allowed me to train the centipedes in human ways. What else did you lie to me about?"

She lowered her eyes. "Everything. The octopoids' robot surrogates were fake, their ships were fake. We all had to play our parts. I thought it was the right thing. I . . . I still don't know it wasn't. Damn it, Alvarez, why are you fighting this so hard? It's over. You're a hero! We bought peace for decades, isn't that what you wanted?"

Maybe. *No more Jovitas*. But at what cost?

"I respected you, sought you out as a mentor!" I shouted at her. "But you used me to get your revenge!"

"Yeah, I wanted them destroyed for what they did. I kinda still do. I didn't even care if we got peace in the process." She pressed her forehead against the back of the seat in front of her. "Then a centipede saves my life after I'd killed dozens of his kind. I never had a problem killing enemy *combatants* . . ."

Yeah, I thought, whether armed or not, in season or out.

"But *civilians* . . . I never would have accepted this mission if they told me it involved killing civilians. . . ." She groaned uselessly, "I'm sorry! I didn't know, I didn't know, I didn't know . . ."

She quietly trembled, and I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Well done, both of you!" General McCracken shouted. Startled, I looked up to see her standing in the aisle, smiling down on us. She reached out to shake our hands.

Not sure what to do, I shook hers.

Captain Dresdin stood, as if to shake the General's hand, but stopped short. "You knew civilians were going to die—lots of them! That was always an essential part of the plan, but you never told me! It's the only thing that separates us from them, what differentiates soldiers from the monsters who murdered my sons!"

And then Dresdin suddenly reared back and actually slapped the General. *Slapped* her.

In all my years of soldiering, I'd seen noncoms brawl a-plenty. I'd seen officers yell and insult each other in a variety of languages, but I'd never seen an officer strike another before, or since.

As I sat there in astonishment, Dresdin pushed past the general and dashed up the aisle—past passengers still onboarding—toward the open airlock. She stopped at a safety rack to grab a medkit and an escape hood.

Dresdin turned around and held up what was in her hand so I could see. It wasn't one escape hood—but two.

The pilot yelled over the intercom to close the damn airlock because they were about to pop the hangar doors and take off. I knew I had to make a split-second decision.

About a million years earlier a girl I kind of knew had sat down next to me and chatted about mutual friends and then out of the blue she said, "I love you." I had to think fast. She'd said it in English—so there was plausible ambiguity if "you" was singular or plural. I was so scared I thought of responding "We love you, too." But I scooted closer and whispered, "Yo te adoro, Jovita. Yo te adoro." I've never regretted that decision.

I looked Dresdin in the eye and slowly shook my head.

The airlock sighed closed. Whatever greatness was intended for her, I wasn't going to be part of it. Not anymore.

The transport shuddered and cleared the hangar. We rose slowly on turbofans, giving me plenty of time to look at the devastated civilization, before the main thrusters kicked in. I searched through the riot, through the smoke and clouds of poisonstench, but I never saw Dresdin again.

The last face I saw before we left Aine was in the wreckage of a brand-new statue called "Blessed Be the Peacemakers." Through the blood and debris, I saw broken bits of bronze, carved into the writhing shapes of mighty centipede soldiers—and a proud human being with a face that looked like mine.

* * *

After the war, I didn't have a home to go back to. With the demob, most everyone left the service, but they still needed someone to write reports . . . planning the next war. I stayed, telling myself I'd enact change from the inside. But I'm not sure I actually accomplished anything.

It's been seventy-five years now, and yes, we've had peace. Built on my greatest achievement and my greatest shame.

In all these years, I've told no one. No one!

McCracken and Staroscik and the rest of the old guard eventually kicked it, none of them saying anything, either.

As for Dresdin? I was given orders to send forces to track her down and keep her quiet, but I hope she got away. I hope she found peace with herself, wherever she is.

So I'm the only one still around who knows what happened. At my age, with my wounds, the secret could follow me to the grave at any moment. For the longest time, I thought that would be best. Not anymore. These seventy-fifth anniversary hullabalooes showed me that nobody knows what they're really celebrating.

Someone needs to be the guardian of the truth.

That someone is you.

You decide what to do.

Maybe you think your readers have a right to know. Maybe telling this story will gain you fame and fortune. Closed doors at the great publishing houses will open to you. That or hard labor in a prison bab.

But remember how the Skolopendran war started in the first place? How we humans had bioengineered them to terraform a planet we wanted, and we figured they'd all just conveniently . . . die in the process? When they found out the truth—we had created them to be destroyed—that's when they decided to go to war with us, their gods.

And you know how that went. Tens of millions of us dead. Who knows how many of them? The suffering, the destruction of our souls.

How will the Skolopendrants react if my story reaches them?

The question for you is: What do you want more? Truth or Peace? You can't have both.

Your decision.

ANALOG

Frank Wu and Jay Werkbeiser; aka Jay Werkbeiser and Frank Wu, is a chimeric entity forged in the heart of the secret labs of Analog. This chimera previously had the cover novella "Communion" published in the Jan/Feb 2022 issue; and outside the collaboration, both individuals have had multiple appearances in these pages: 4 for the Frank moiety, and 24 for the Jay moiety. They were brought together at an Analog function, where they quickly bonded (covalently) over their mutual obsession with biochemistry and other nerdy matters. Catalyzed by rapid-fire email exchanges, their minds quickly merged into the current chimeric form, one which spawns story ideas faster than their human hands can type them. The entity sometimes refers to itself as Wukbeiser; but never in the presence of polite company.