

JAMES DAVID VICTOR

IMPERIAL MARINE



STAR DRAGON
BOOK 1

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CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

1. [Three Days Earlier](#)
2. [Today, the Last Day of Keel's Life](#)
3. [Any Choice is Better than No Choice at All](#)
4. [3-3ers and Dracis Scum](#)
5. [Training](#)
6. [Training II](#)
7. [Strategy](#)
8. [The Voice of a God](#)
9. [First Mission: Suit](#)
10. [First Mission: Stars](#)
11. [First Mission: Formation](#)
12. [First Mission: Error](#)
13. [The Orpheus Brigade](#)
14. [Deployment](#)
15. [The Twelfth's Mission](#)
16. [The Jaali](#)
17. [To Save a Species](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank You](#)

PROLOGUE

THE EYE OF THE DRAGON

THE MAN LOOKED up to find himself staring into a massive, burning, golden eye. As large as a buckler shield and shot through with threads of ruby red, it filled Keel Hennity's vision through his visor.

The well-built man with spikey blond hair hadn't particularly known what to expect when he was called into the Dragon Vault of his home world, Dracis.

Sure, everyone knew what the Imperial Planet 24b kept there. Their greatest shame. The great threat. The things they had to keep safe, at any and all costs.

Maybe that was why *he* of all people had been assigned here. One of Dracis's most beloved pit-fighters, hero of a hundred challenges. Keel had heard that there were even songs being sung about him.

Still, it was unnerving to find himself looking directly into the wide-open eye of a dragon.

Especially when a moment later, that eye blinked.

"Oh, crap—"

Keel Hennity—barely into his thirty-first year and who had always prided himself on his iron will—hardly had time to swear before all hell broke loose...

THREE DAYS EARLIER

DRACIS, Imperial Planet 24b

DOWN! Keel thought as he threw himself to the ground, dropping onto his side as the pike—a two-meter wooden pole with a long blade sharpened to an icy glint—slashed through the air where his head had just been.

The pit-fighter hit the sand, ignoring the small jolt of pain as he rolled away from the Cetan fighter's following downward jab.

His adversary, one of the best gladiators from the rich Inner Systems world of Ceta, was good. Keel hadn't expected that. Ceta was probably the most important world of the Imperium, apart from the emperor's palatial dome of Solas itself.

Cetans were certainly the next richest. Keel had never been there, but he knew that they exported the best silks, the best cloths, and every (semi) reality show and news broadcast was about how amazing and perfect life was like on the planet nearest to Solas.

Keel, the homegrown hero from the Outer Systems planet of Dracis, hadn't expected this upstart gladiator to be that quick enough or skilled enough to challenge him. What did the Cetans know of fighting and strife and wars? Had a single pirate ship *ever* managed to make it to the Inner Systems?

It also didn't help that Gregor Sims, his challenger, looked to be about half his age. Damned posh Inner Systems anti-aging serums...

Keel Hennity bounced back up to his feet, spinning around so that his steel buckler shield—a barely half-meter circle strapped to his left arm—could catch the next jab from Gregor's pike.

Thock!

It struck with a sound like a hammer hitting an anvil. Keel danced backward, allowing the shock and pain to ripple through his body and be forgotten.

Never think about the pain. It does no good...

Around the two men rose the coliseum of the Dracis Interplanetary Challenge Arena. It was a pit dug into the red and brown rocks of his desiccated home world. It sunk into a sandy floor several levels down, each level a gallery of viewing benches carved into the rock, with the distant sun far above in a merciless blue sky.

“DRA-CIS! DRA-CIS! DRA-CIS!”

The roars of the home crowd rose in volume to support their boy as Keel skipped lightly out of the way of one jab, and then another. This pretty guy from Ceta was fast, Keel would give him that. Technically brilliant, he would even be as generous to admit.

But he wasn't Keel, was he?

Keel Hennity had already lost his own straight blade and his mace, so all he had now was that damned buckler on his arm.

What round is this? Keel jumped out of the way of another sweep as his eyes flickered to the floating holographic display.

ROUND 6.

That was a good number, wasn't it? Plenty long enough, Keel thought as he held himself back, feinting whenever Gregor moved forward, ducking, giving ground.

Gregor Sims, as if sensing he had the upper hand, flashed a toothy grin before

he tensed and lunged.

Come and get it, Keel thought as he allowed Gregor's attack to unfold.

The Cetan was good, *very* good, but he was still a rich kid from the Inner Systems. Probably had the best tutors that imperial credits could buy. Probably had every possible genetic treatment to keep him at the top of his game. Probably had psychological consultants to sharpen his thinking.

In short, he was used to being the best. He was used to winning. That would be his downfall.

Gregor was delighted as he flicked his pike blade up, and Keel made the expected dodge. Then, fast as thought, Gregor reversed his grip and lunged again in an attack that would surely skewer the older, slower Draconian pit-fighter.

It probably would have, if Keel hadn't seen this attack coming a league off.

Keel half-twisted as he stepped forward, feeling the rush of air as the blade slashed through the empty space next to his stomach.

The Hero of Dracis was inside Gregor's reach now, and he was still spinning. He brought up that stupid buckler and backhanded the kid with one mighty blow.

Both challengers had the same head-guards made of composite impact suppressant poly-foam braces that ran across their brow, around the back of their skull, and down the sides of their jaw. It still wasn't strong enough to resist Keel's powerful blow.

Gregor Sims, darling of the Inner Systems, went down like a sack of yams.

The crowd went wild, the Dracis supporters leaping up and laughing, cheering, and shouting, while the Inner Systems fans shouted in alarm and outrage.

“FOUL! FOUL!”

It wasn't a foul, of course. Anything was fair in the combat games that his great and glorious majesty, Emperor Mikhael Solas XIII, had encouraged across his realm. You were allowed to wound, maim, cripple, or gut your

opponent. Deaths were commonplace.

It was considered uncouth to win without even drawing blood, and right now, with an unconscious challenger at his feet, it did look a lot like Keel had won.

“And there we have it, folks! Yet another no-kill victory for the Hero of Dracis, extending his one hundred and one fight winning streak! The Cetans will certainly be going home with their heads in their hands—quite literally for poor Gregor Sims!”

The projected voice of the match announcer was one that Keel knew well, as it was a Dracis homeborn celebrity. He heard laughter from the Dracis side of the coliseum as medics ran in to check his opponent, who was starting to blink and groan on the floor.

A few moments later, the large trophy—a goblet carved out of Cetan amethyst—floated into the pit on its own field unit.

Keel stepped back, put his hands on his hips, and looked up.

It was right about then that the fights broke out, the Cetans trying to take revenge for their fallen hero.

It didn't last long. The coliseum guards were more than happy to bust a few heads in the stands as Keel, still grinning, turned to wearily march back to his dressing room. All around him was chaos, but Keel had never felt better.

And the best thing?

Dad's gonna love this! Keel thought with a smirk. The thought of his father, the Governor of Dracis, having an absolute fit was the icing on the cake.

“KEEL. I see that you at least listen to me when I summon you, even if that is *all* you are capable of doing these days.”

His father, Governor Markos Hennity of Dracis, was a man who could drip displeasure even when he didn't shout it.

It was two days after Keel's victory in the Interplanetary Challenge Arena,

and the governor's son had been summoned to the council buildings. There was even a squad of Dracis-born imperial soldiers waiting outside his small compound to 'help' him get there.

"It's not exactly like I had much of a choice, is it?" Keel flung his words at the man he despised, walking into the main council room, and throwing himself on one of the low leather couches by the open gallery windows.

The room was too vast to be an office, and one entire side was nothing more than a large opening to the courtyard below with gauzy white drapes in between. At least it gave a little relief from Dracis's constant heat and humidity.

The floors were tiled in white and faded ocher, and his father had a large wooden desk to one side. By the side of his desk stood the servo-robot Andrea, standing at attention with her hands folded before her as she awaited whatever pointless order his father would give next.

"Could you at least call me governor, or sir, when on official business?" his father sighed. The older, slim man pushed himself back in his chair and rubbed at the same eagle-like nose that he shared with his son.

You would love that, wouldn't you, Pops? Keel almost laughed but said nothing.

Keel didn't like his father. That was a well-known fact. Keel didn't like how he was always toadying to the Inner Systems, and to the emperor, and never taking decisive action against the pirate raids like he should.

Instead, the Governor of Dracis—appointed by imperial dictate—did his best to toe the party line...which meant achieving not much of anything, as far as Keel could see.

What was worse was that Keel had been expected, as the governor's son, to perform a life of service to the Imperium. Become an imperial soldier and maybe, if he did well enough, even migrate to the Imperial Marines, *stars forbid!*

Keel's intransigence to authority and desire for autonomy was a thorn that drove through the heart of their relationship, and when Keel had instead chosen the life of a pit-fighter, his 'service' to community was roundly

mocked by his father.

Don't I bring excitement? Entertainment? Don't I send a message to young Dracisians that they can have the life they want, that they can be strong and unashamed!? Keel had said these words a thousand times to his father. Every time, they fell on deaf ears.

“What did I do wrong now, sir?” Keel asked heavily.

“Quite frankly, you won,” his father said, pushing himself up from his desk.

Keel blinked in surprise.

“What did you want me to do, let that uptight young *snook* embarrass Dracis? I was better than he was. I even let him last until the sixth round!” Keel pointed out. He felt instant, hot anger run through him.

“Keel, he was one of Ceta’s favorites, which means he was one of the emperor’s favorites. This is something that I have been trying to tell you, again and again. The emperor likes to remind the rest of humanity that he has Dracis under control —”

“*He* doesn’t. *We* do,” Keel pointed out.

“And that means the dragons. It always comes back to the dragons.” His father turned with a huff, motioning to Andrea. She opened her hands for a holo-emitter to display a very ancient and very well-known scene of burning skies.

“Ah, Dad, really? You’re going to bring up the Great Burning, again? How long ago was that now? Three hundred years!?” Keel scoffed.

Everyone had seen this footage. Star dragons across the Inner and Outer Systems had managed to attack several planets, bringing fire and destruction to countless hundreds of thousands of human settlements until the emperor at the time, Emperor Clavis X, had finally pushed them back to their home world—Dracis—and somehow managed to incarcerate the last of them in giant subterranean vault.

“Millions of people died, Keel,” his father pointed out wearily.

“I’m not even sure half of that isn’t myth,” Keel muttered, earning a heated

glower from his father. Not that it was going to stop him from speaking his mind. “I mean, how are the dragons supposed to have spread across the Imperium so fast? How did they hop from world to world before Clavis’s imperial fleet wiped them out?” Keel went on as his father stalked steadily around his desk.

“We all know that the dragons are capable of space flight. There is ample footage, son. You’re being willfully ignorant.”

“Sure, they can do some weird field energy thing which means they can fly in space, but that doesn’t mean they can go at near-light speeds, can they?” Keel argued. He liked arguing. It was something like pit-fighting, jousting and getting the upper hand, testing your wits against your opponent.

“We barely had near-light drives back then either, son! Now, please, shut up and open your ears!” His father broke his usual stoic demeanor to actually shout, thumping a fist onto the desk as he did so.

Woah. Pops really is mad, Keel thought.

“The star dragons came from Dracis. And no, it’s not fair, but we have to bear the brunt of that. This is our world, which happened to be home to the dragons, and in the minds of many, many scared people —”

“Inner Systems people,” Keel couldn’t help but point out.

“—*many* scared people, it means that we’re dangerous too. When the emperor sends one of his beloved fighters to challenge the Hero of Dracis, then he expects a victory. He expects to win.”

“Well, the emperor can go screw—” Keel began.

His father coughed loudly. Before Keel could finish his sacrilege, Andrea had twitched just slightly. A tiny movement, but her head and body were now turned to face Keel directly. Keel knew that she, an imperial construct, would have orders to defend the name and honor of the emperor at all costs, from all enemies.

Keel froze. Even a lowly servo-robot could be deadly. Who knew what routines and programs had been placed inside of it by the imperial technicians? Was Andrea also a spy? An assassin? Waiting to deliver the

emperor's wishes at a moment's notice?

Slowly, Markos Hennity, Governor of Dracis, breathed out. He appeared to have come to some sort of decision.

“Keel Hennity, Hero of Dracis, it my honor to inform you that you have been selected by the Imperium for service to the Imperium. You will serve in our most select, our most sacred role,” his father started to say.

Oh no... Keel could hear this coming, and it wasn't what he wanted. Not at all.

“No, Dad, come on. You can't —”

His father's words overrode him. “You will be taken from this place to the Dragon Vault, where you will be a warden. This is the highest reward that our governorship can ever bestow on any individual. As you have shown bravery in the challenge arenas of Dracis, so you will defend us all against the ultimate threat.”

“Dad, no!” Keel shot to his feet. He wasn't going to be sent down to the vault. He wouldn't do it. He just wouldn't.

At that point, there was a tramping of feet behind him as a phalanx of imperial soldiers marched in through the open archway. A team of eight men in black uniforms of part armor and combat visors stood, their laser blasters held loosely in their hands.

“Father!” Keel said in amazement.

“I'm sorry, son. It wasn't my decision,” his father said softly as he watched his son being led out of the chamber, about to start a new life for the good of the Imperium.

TODAY, THE LAST DAY OF KEEL'S LIFE

“I BET it was Gregor Sims. I bet that little *snook* complained to his father or something!”

Keel railed to the imperial soldiers as he was led through from the council building to the underground mag-lev tram. It was a one-stop trip, and this secure line was one of only two ways into the Dragon Vault.

“I mean, this is ridiculous, isn't it? I'm a pit-fighter. The *best* pit-fighter that Dracis has seen in a generation, I'll bet!”

The black-armored imperial soldiers continued to say nothing.

Keel couldn't help complaining, but he also knew there was no point. Not now, anyway. The soldiers might have been born on Dracis, or they might not. They might be from Ceta, or Rust, or any of the Inner Systems worlds and were just posted here. They were all fervent with their belief in the religion of the emperor himself—the light of civilization, the continuance of the human race in the stars.

Maybe I could overpower them. Escape...

The idea did flash through his mind, he had to admit, but he had also been fighting since he wasn't even old enough to enroll. There were eight of them and one of him, in a confined space. He knew he would have to get a hold of the laser blasters, which were probably bio-linked to each soldier, meaning

they would lock up if anyone else tried to use them.

He would have to kill, Keel knew, and then what would he do? How would he get out of the council buildings? Or off world? He would be on the run for the rest of his short life!

No, cool your stars and think, Keel told himself as their train accelerated. The rocky walls outside blurred into a constant gray.

He could challenge the decision, couldn't he? Maybe his father was just sending a message but would bring him back up as soon as all the Cetans had left Dracis, right?

Their train suddenly came to a halt, and Keel was encouraged through the doors to be faced with a strange but compelling sight.

The platform was long, but it was completely dominated by two vast iron slabs.

Doors, Keel realized. He was looking at doors.

"That's...the vault, isn't it?" he whispered.

One of the imperial soldiers broke ranks and stalked forward to rap on the metal three times. A moment later, there was a thin sliver of blue light at the bottom of the righthand door, moving up to illuminate a smaller rectangle, then resolving into a door as the section slid inward with a hiss. It revealed a well-lit corridor with a hunched silhouette inside.

"Is that the new one? Warden Hennity?" There was a tremulous voice, one that sounded old, from the silhouetted figure. It moved to reveal a man in white lab coat with wizened skin and wisps of dirty, straw-colored hair.

No extra nutrition regimes down here, Keel thought immediately, before answering, "No."

"No? I was sure we were informed that we would be joined by a Warden Hennity." The man squinted at Keel.

"I'm Pit-fighter Hennity. There's been a terrible mistake," Keel started to say, but there was a sudden painful shove in the small of his back from one of the imperial soldiers.

“Hey! Why don’t you take off that goon armor and let’s see how we go, pal!” Hennity spun around, but before he could even get his fists up, there was a ring of laser blasters pointing straight at his chest.

Oh.

Keel looked at the guns, knowing that an injury to even an imperial soldier was regarded as an injury to the emperor himself.

Of course, he wasn’t entirely sure he believed this. He figured that Emperor Mikhael XIII had probably never been injured in his life and would probably take it much more seriously than any soldier.

“Come, come now, Warden Hennity. It’s not so bad. It is quite an easy life actually, all be told. Many of us have found great peace in our work,” the older man in the lab coat said as he came forward and gingerly put a hand on Keel’s shoulder.

“I’m Doctor Agrippa, but everyone calls me Aggy. Just come with me. Everyone is a little overwhelmed at the start.” Keel knew that he couldn’t well fight eight armed men, even he wasn’t *that* good, so he reluctantly let the dragon doctor guide him.

Bide your time, Keel. Put in a complaint. Ask for an appeal, he told himself. After all, half of Dracis was probably up in arms about what had happened to him, weren’t they?

If the emperor had wanted to slap Dracis back to their place, all he had achieved today was making an entire planet full of people angry, hadn’t he?

Let’s see how the emperor likes THAT! Keel thought, but he instantly felt bad. The emperor was a powerful man. A very powerful man. What could Dracis do to a man like that? The ruler of all of humanity? Owner of over a hundred worlds?

Keel couldn’t think of anything he could do, so he allowed himself to be walked into the small corridor filled with light. The door slid back into place behind him.

He soon found himself in a larger hallway, carved out of the natural rock and appearing to stretch into the distance. It was lit by orbs of blue-white radiance

that hung over metal doors on either side. Each door had small blinking holos beside them with indecipherable numbers and letters.

“What’s that?” Keel asked with a vague look of shock.

“Security, cameras, bio-lab, physics lab...all sorts of things really, and down and to the right, we have state-of-the-art canteen, gymnasium, a swimming pool, and every warden has their own room of course!” Doctor Agrippa, or Aggy, said with a self-satisfied smile.

“Color me impressed,” Keel said dourly.

“Oh, yes. It can be shocking. But it really isn’t. For a warden like you, all you will have to do is to monitor the cameras and feeds on the subjects, that’s all,” Aggy continued cheerfully.

“Subjects? You mean the dragons?” Keel said, for clarification.

Aggy let out a nervous chuckle. “Yes. We don’t use that term down here. It doesn’t seem respectful, somehow.”

“What, *dragons*? Are you afraid of hurting their feelings?”

Aggy coughed and steered him toward one of the open corridors.

“Let’s get you settled in first, shall we? Find your room? Meet your teammates?” the older doctor said. His eyes were small and sunken inside his skin, but bright.

“Nah, let’s see them,” Keel muttered. He wasn’t intending on spending any more time down here than he had to, but at least he would force himself to see the scourge of the Imperium, the very beasts that made his home planet so hated, before he managed to get out.

“Right, well, yes. Actually, a tour of the vault is one of the first things we do for all new wardens. But I take it you have a strong constitution. You should do fine.” Aggy stopped, turned, and directed them down the main tunnel.

They walked, and walked some more, until there appeared another large metal door. This time, there was a small silver unit beside it, from which Aggy removed a couple of visor-masks for them to fit over their heads.

“The subjects are kept in a state of suspended animation, you see. Their body temperatures are cooled, and their lungs are filled with special gases. This will give us about ten minutes inside the vault. We check on them around the clock with cameras, but you will also be required to check on them physically, with one of these,” Aggy was saying as they fitted their masks. Keel felt the warm tingle of an energy field crackle over his skin.

No expense was spared, then, he thought.

Aggy pulled a small handheld unit from his pocket and pointed it at the door. Another small blue light formed into a recessed doorway. This time when it opened, the crackle of a blue energy field was visible.

“Follow me, young man, follow me!” the doctor said, stepping through the field.

So, this is it, Keel thought. “Let’s see how bad you really are, huh?”

He stepped forward.

“Sweet stars!”

He had stepped into a vast cavern of unbelievable proportions. It had to be an entirely hollowed-out mountain, as far as Keel could tell.

It was murky and dark down here, but there was a soft radiance spilling from their visors that Keel could see by.

He saw vast shadows in the distance, huge boulders or pillars. Beside him, the doctor was pointing at the uneven, rocky floor to point out the hazards before carefully picking his way forward.

The vastness of this space really began to settle over him. It could fit all of the main colony of Dracis inside here, couldn’t it? It could fit an imperial cruiser!

Aggy was pointing up and across Keel’s vision.

At first, Keel struggled to make out what he was referring to.

“Where are they, then, these dragons!?” Keel muttered angrily. It would just his luck if it turned out that this was all some imperial con and star dragons

had died out centuries ago—or had never been as dangerous as everyone thought.

In fact, doesn't all this make it quite convenient for the emperor himself?

What if the dragons had never been that bad, but the emperor could make up a few dodgy videos of them? Get everyone terrified and afraid, fervently loyal to him, so he could save them from those pesky monsters!?

The air was filled with white mist, slowly falling from above. By the time they had picked their way around half a dozen more boulders, Keel was certain they might find one, mostly dead lizard barely capable of starting a barbecue, let alone terrorizing a quarter of a galaxy...

Up ahead, Aggy had stopped and looked up.

“And they’re taking me, the best pit-fighter to ever come out of Dracis, to be what? A button-pusher? A screen-watcher of geriatric snakes!?” Keel muttered angrily as he came up beside Doctor Agrippa and looked up.

That was when he saw it.

The giant shadows, which he had thought were stalactites, *weren't*.

There were monstrous, pendulous shadows suspended from the distant ceiling, hanging like an upside-down forest. These shapes were so large that they looked like they could dwarf the buildings easily. They were larger than any imperial transport ship. They weren't made of rocks but of scales.

As the light shifted, a crook of shadow became a tucked wing. A fissure became an arm held tight against a chest. The organic flows of rock weren't the action of wind and minerals but were, in fact, the ripples and curves of tendons and muscles.

Keel couldn't believe it. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen any creature so big in his life.

And the entire mountain was full of them.

“They are quite safe. You can go towards the nearest one!” Aggy said, pointing to where a shape hung closest to them. Keel startled, because he had taken it for the side of the cavern itself until he recognized the long snout,

wide enough to swallow him whole.

He turned toward it and saw swept-back horns running along a neck that he had mistaken for stone. Now, he could see the jawline and the brow encrusted with smaller horns...

Then the single, large golden eye staring straight at him.

“Oh, it’s perfectly safe! Their bodies are in suspended animation, as I told you. They sleep with their eyes open, you see, which is probably some primitive survival mechanism...” Aggy was saying as Keel stared up at that giant eye. It was laced with red threads, running like flame to a slit black iris in its center.

“Do... Do you think they can hear us?” Keel whispered.

The doctor was turning back, the light from his head visor following his gaze as he peered toward the next titanic beast, and then the dim shadow of the next after that.

“Oh, perhaps on some subconscious level. If they even have subconsciousness, of course, but our research leads us to believe that they are highly advanced creatures, certainly with an intelligence comparable to our own.”

Keel couldn’t stop staring at the great gold-and-red eye.

It was eerie.

He imagined the strength it had in just one human-sized claw, let alone the tail that was curled tight around some rock above.

Then, Keel saw the giant eye blink.

“*Oh frack,*” he managed to say before his body registered the next, impossible movement far above him.

It was like a landslide, as if an entire mountain was unfolding itself. Bits of rock chips and dust started to hammer on the floor and hit Keel’s suit.

“*What the frack, what the frack, what the—*”

The dragon was shaking itself free from its centuries of sleep, and in its

wake, the entire cavern was starting to tremble. Keel staggered back as he heard a terrible, deep hiss so loud and sonorous that his entire ribcage reverberated.

“Agrippa!” Keel called out in panic, his heel hitting a rock and sending him thumping against the floor.

“Impossible! It’s impossible!” Agrippa was crying out.

Keel scrambled to look up, seeing the very small man standing a few meters away, lit by the radiance of his own helmet lights as he stared up in horror.

The ground continued to shake, and with it came a fierce gale that sounded like a thousand trees being torn from their roots.

The dragons were waking... The dragons were waking, and Keel and Doctor Agrippa were directly in their path.

“Run!” Keel shouted, throwing himself to his feet as he stumbled forward, shoving the older man ahead of him.

It was already too late, because who could ever outrun a dragon’s fury?

There was a piercing scream that cut through Keel’s suit, turning its small speakers to pure static. He could feel the noise drill through his bones. The ground seemed to rise with each giant form that dropped from the ceiling to land on it. Their huge wings stirred winds that buffeted Keel as he tried to escape.

I’m not going to make it. I’m going to die here... Keel knew in the marrow of his bones.

Well, he wasn’t going to die crying and scared.

He skidded between the crash of falling rocks as he spun around, shouting in futile rage at what was coming for him.

ANY CHOICE IS BETTER THAN NO CHOICE AT ALL

LOGOS, House of Records

“WELCOME, Soul, to the first hour of the rest of your life.”

A voice spoke in the darkness, and it brought light with it.

Keel awoke with a start. His mind was flooded with memories of giant, yellowed teeth flashing in front of him and the sudden breath of an impossibly hot wind... He flinched, but there was no incandescent dragon's breath engulfing him. There were no teeth tearing into his flesh.

In fact, Keel realized that he felt fine, if a little light. He opened his eyes to see that he was seated on a plain black surface, his arms up as if to guard himself, but there were no dragons. There wasn't much of anything at all, apart from a dark floor that was partially reflective. The only radiance appeared to be coming from somewhere far above him.

Am I still in the cavern? Did I survive!? he thought, blinking as he looked down to see another strange fact.

He was naked.

Did the dragon's fire burn all the clothes from his body!? He didn't think so, because he was weirdly sure that he remembered feeling the heat. The pain. In fact, he was sure that he remembered *dying*.

“No, you didn’t survive, and no, you are nowhere near Dracis,” the mysterious voice replied, seemingly to his thoughts. This time, Keel recognized it as a woman’s voice. It sounded almost amused by his antics as he made to stand up, paused when he remembered his nakedness, then shrugged and stood up anyway.

After what he had just been through, he wasn’t going to be embarrassed.

“It’s a feature of the House of Records, apparently, although I always thought that we could at least let the Souls have their dignity,” the voice continued as a shape walked into the radiance.

The speaker was indeed a woman. She was about his height, which was tall for a woman, and she appeared to be athletic and willowy underneath the billowing, cream-colored robes she wore.

“I mean, we recorders get to wear stuff while we’re in here, right? What is that all about?” she said. Her hood fell back a little from her head to reveal that she appeared young, with elfin features, a sharp chin, and dark hair in a bob cut to a severe angle toward her cheekbones.

“Uh...recorders?” Keel blinked, as his mind tried to catch up. The Imperial House of Records was one of the largest, if silent, power brokers in the entire Imperium. He had never met anyone from Dracis who’d ever been to their apparently utopian, monastery planet, but he once met a much older—and quite frankly peevish—recorder who had been sent to interrogate his father on minute historical details.

They were the Imperium’s historians, librarians, and archivists. They were its memory. They were also the keepers of the...

“That’s right. You’re a Soul. You’re dead. Completely and utterly dead.” The young woman smiled at him cheerily. “At least you don’t have to worry about the laundry anymore, right? You are very, very lucky in that you specifically were chosen to have your consciousness uploaded into the Imperial House of Records. You are also exceedingly lucky that there was enough of your brainstem left for us to image your consciousness, as well!” She took a step closer as she eyed him. “One thing I have been dying to ask you in person, though, is what were they like up close?”

“I beg your pardon?” Keel’s mind was still reeling. He was dead. He had died in that cavern, and his memories weren’t wrong.

But now he was reborn. He had become a Soul—a piece of digital information stored at the Imperium’s leisure, to download and ask questions of whenever they wanted.

It was supposed to be a very high honor, especially if they chose to download you into a body so you got a second shake at the biological.

“What were the dragons like!? I mean, I’ve seen the footage, of course, everyone has, but tell me what they were really like up close. Did you see their intelligence?” The recorder was uncomfortably close, and Keel could see her hungry fascination in her eyes.

“Angry and pointy. And very, very hot. That was what those damn lizards were like,” Keel snarled, turning away to pace a few steps, but the radiance followed him wherever he went.

“I’m dead,” he repeated, earning another low chuckle from the recorder behind him.

“Well, *yeah*, but I understand it can be very disorientating. I am sorry. I was so excited to actually talk to you that I forgot to give you the proper introductions. I’m sure that Preceptor Charbonne will be angry with me for this,” she said. She cleared her throat before saying in a fuller, more authoritative voice, “Keel Hennity of Dracis, you have been chosen by the Emperor Mikhael Solas, the thirteenth of his name, to become a Soul. You will join the very small number of humanity who are ever given that honor, and you have been chosen because it is believed that your character, your skills, your wits, and your experience will benefit the future of humanity.”

Keel blinked. “Really?”

“*My name is Recorder Sula, and I shall be your guide as you begin this journey,*” the woman carried on, ignoring him.

“But I was just a pit-fighter. A damn good one, but just a pit-fighter,” Keel said, before he suddenly remembered what else Souls were used for.

Oh no, you don’t mean...

“Your courage and bravery, not to mention your martial skills, mean that the emperor wants you to join the ranks of his Imperial Marines, where you will fight for the glory of humanity. Your name will be inscribed on the golden Hall of Memory itself, and you shall be given a flag and crest,” Sula stated.

An Imperial Marine, the most feared fighting unit in all of the Imperium, made up entirely of downloaded fighters, warriors, and soldiers. Most of them came up from the Imperial Guard, or the security services, and Keel would be one of the few ever chosen who had never served military service.

Then again, he was from Dracis, the planet deemed to be the curse of the entire Imperium.

“Can I say no? Maybe fast-forward straight to having a body again?” Keel tried. He wasn’t sure if an eternity of fighting for the honor of a man who hated his home planet was really his cup of mookoo juice.

Recorder Sula visibly suppressed a grin before her mouth became a flat line.

“That’s not the deal, I’m afraid. I am under express orders to introduce you to the Imperial Marines, or else send you back to deep stasis,” she said.

“Deep stasis?” Keel didn’t like the sound of that.

“Exactly. It’s basically the garbage bin of history. It’s for all the governors and ex-wives who we had to upload into the records, otherwise there would be a tiff at court, but we rarely pull them up. We keep them on ice. I’m told they don’t feel a thing. Like being asleep. Or a hairbrush that never gets used,” Sula explained.

“So, this isn’t really much of a choice at all,” Keel muttered angrily.

“On the plus side, once you’re downloaded into a Marine suit, you have apparently the most fantastic array of sensors and abilities and super-strength and all of that, which I am sure a guy like you would enjoy,” Sula pointed out.

“A robot. You want to put me into a robot.” Keel had seen the Imperial Marines on the video feeds, but never in person. They were knights of metal, with servo-units at their joints, sliding pistons, metal plates for muscles.

“Just to start with. If you do well, then you upgrade to a real biological body, the same one you had before, and you get to wear the Marine suit instead of be made of it,” she said.

Some of the Imperial Marines are real people inside their suits? Keel didn't know that.

It was still a bum deal, but he had to admit that it was tantalizing.

“Just think about it. I'm sure it wouldn't take long for the best pit-fighter in the Outer Systems to earn a real biological. Then you get to taste ice cream again. Or stroke a cat. Or feel the warm salt seas of Vindinia Blue.” Sula winked at him.

Keel thought that any ice cream would have to be seriously tasty to put up with all the uprisings and pirate attacks, but he was happy to agree that having a body was better than being a disused hairbrush.

For just a moment, he thought of all of the soldiering he would have to do. It would be like starting again, from the bottom, learning to fight in formation. He would be deployed to combat zones. He would find himself on alien worlds far, far from Dracis.

But who said he had to stay as an Imperial Marine once he got his body, right?

“I'll do it,” Keel said.

Recorder Sula's face cracked into a broad, mischievous smile.

“I knew you would say that. Buckle up then, hero, because this is the bit that really hurts,” she said, raising a hand to lightly prod him between the eyes.

Suddenly, Keel felt a blinding agony as everything turned a burning, incandescent white.

3-3ERS AND DRACIS SCUM

THE JUDGMENT, Somewhere, Imperial Quadrant 3

KEEL SCREAMED. It felt like every molecule in his body was being torn apart, when in reality, they were being created.

His world was white fire, as all-consuming as dragon's breath. Just when Keel Hennity knew he could take no more, the light collapsed. The pain turned into a small, single blip.

He gasped and sat up, his voice almost sounding like his own...almost.

Was it his imagination, or was there something vaguely *mechanical* about it?

The light flickered in front of him and was replaced with scrolling words.

IMPERIAL MARINE DESIGNATION: 3-3 / 1023

KEEL HENNITY (Deceased)

ACTIVE RANK: Private

BOOTING MARINE ARMOR...

The words flickered away. His vision returned, growing into sharper clarity.

He was in a room. A metal room, one that looked like the hold of a ship.

There was a floor of segmented plate hexagons, and the far wall was ribbed with thick metal girders. The entire room was lit with discrete blue-white floor LEDs. Keel shook his head and felt the faint whine of motors.

“Easy, champ, the first step is always disorientating,” said a voice in his ear. Across the top of his vision appeared a smaller window.

A face. The face of Recorder Sula, the same woman who had been his ‘guide’ in the digital afterlife now apparently sat before a camera, her image beamed directly into his brain.

Not his brain, Keel thought. His neural cortex. He wasn’t a human anymore, was he? He was a machine.

“Sula? I don’t understand...”

“You will. I’m your guide, so I’m direct-link connected to your mainframe. But don’t worry, I won’t be here all the time. I’ve got a life to lead as well. All the newly reborn Souls get a guide, and everyone in your squad is probably just as disorientated as you are right now.”

“My squad?” Keel said.

Then, he heard murmurs and groans around him. He turned his head—again, that whine of motors—to see that he was surrounded by a metal frame holding his body in place, and he was in a line with other similarly suited people in their own frames. They were all shaking their heads and starting to talk to themselves.

“I look like that now?” Keel blinked, or felt like he blinked, although nothing actually happened to his field of vision.

The others around him looked like robots. Their frames were thin and made of rods, girders, whirring pistons, and other mechanisms. They looked strangely frail, and he could see the strange silver-and-black units throughout their main body. The worst parts were their heads—misshapen, block-like shapes with two white lights for eyes and a flat grill for a mouth.

“Don’t freak out. It’s the premium in technology,” Sula’s voice said in his ear.

“I look like a damn can-opener!” Keel said, hearing other voices gasp and argue with their own guides.

“Just think of that ice cream on the beach of Vindinia Blue!”

Before Keel could answer, there was the blare of an electronic alarm, and the lights suddenly leapt in brilliance. He heard the hiss of a door and every mechanoid in the room turned their expressionless, faceless heads toward the opening bulkhead door.

“Listen up, Marines! Get your rads together! Eyes forward!” a voice boomed as another robot clanked through the door. This one looked very different to the thin robots of Keel’s brethren.

This one was tall but also broad, with a vast breastplate of bronze armor vaguely sculpted like a human form. Keel could see the shadows of black metal workings between the plates, and the space where the end of the ‘rib plate’ would meet the waist.

His—*its? Their!?*—legs were caparisoned with more large plates of bronze-colored metal, with a heavy circular joint in the middle, before they descended to large, articulated metal boots. The arms were large, ending in claw-like fists. Everything was made of metal with rubber or silicone joining seals.

The head was different, more human-shaped, although it was taller and looked like a serious bronze mask with two gleaming white lights for eyes and four lines for a mouth grate. At the sides of the head were two metal flanges rising almost to the height of the head, looking like a solid metal collar, set back just a little to allow the head to turn and move.

“I’m Major Ovid of the Third Marine Army, and all you helpless pieces of junk are lucky to be the Third Army and Third Squad. Three-Three-ers. You got that?” the Marine barked as he marched into the room, his head turning to scan along their line.

3-3ers, got it, Keel thought, feeling more than a little out of place. He wasn’t sure what exactly he had been expecting, but he’d thought that it might be a whole lot more...gentle than this. Maybe offered a cup of coffee and a chat before he got thrown into military service?

Oh yeah, I don't need to drink and eat anymore, do I?

“You are Souls, downloaded into this metal body, which is the property of the Imperium. Our glorious emperor has called on you to be the ones to safeguard humanity as we venture further into the stars. You are our hope and our pride, understood!?”

There were a few muttered grunts from around Keel as Major Ovid spun around with a squeal of metal boots.

“Say *SIR!* Yes, *SIR!* Is that understood!?” Ovid bellowed.

This time, everyone joined in. “YES, SIR!”

Their superior officer paused, and Keel saw his chest rising and falling as if he really was panting for air. He wondered if the suits were programmed to do what the mind thought a body should, or if they really did need oxygen in some weird way.

When the major spoke again, his voice was lower and a little easier, but with no less iron in it.

“Right. I guess we get straight into it. Your bodies are made of metals and composite synth materials. You don't need to eat, sleep, drink, or crap in any conventional sense, but you *will* need to rest and *will* be taking in nutrients, which I will explain later.

“Your bodies are made of some of the toughest alloys known to humanity. They are designed to give you durability, strength, and speed. You will find that you are faster, stronger, and tougher than you ever were before, and I don't care *who* you thought you were before this life, understood?”

The assembled Imperial Marines shouted, but it was ragged and out of time.

“For stars' sake, repeat that! I said, *understood!*?”

“SIR! YES, SIR!”

This time, Keel put a bit more heart into it, as did everyone else. That appeared to earn a grudging nod from Ovid before he continued.

“You are impervious to biological diseases and poisons. You can survive in

conditions where the human body would freeze or evaporate. You can operate in space, you can operate under water, on ice planets and on scorched ones, but that does not mean that you are invincible. Believe me, you are not!”

“SIR! YES, SIR!”

They were getting into the swing of things.

Ovid turned to stalk up and down the line. “You find yourself on board the Imperial Marine Warship *Judgment*, heading for our first deployment.”

What!? Keel thought, blinking suddenly. They were going to see action already?

“But do not wet your diodes, as this is standard operating procedure. This will be a slow cruise, with plenty of time for you to get to know your squad-mates and get prepared. Your suits are already programmed for most of what you need —”

“Oh god, oh god, oh —”

A voice suddenly cried out from along the line, and there was a clanking sound. Everyone turned their head to stare, seeing that one of the Souls was shaking at their frame, trying to wrench their arms free from the clamps that held them in place.

“Did I give you permission to speak, Private!? Eyes forward! Pull yourself together!” Ovid snapped, instantly marching toward the panicking, distressed robot.

“Oh god, no, this isn’t happening! This isn’t natural!” There was a screech of metal as the Soul managed to break one arm free and raked their hand across their chest, as if to tear the metal apart.

“Private!” Ovid shouted.

“I can’t do this! What is this? This isn’t me!?” They wrenched their other arm free and then one leg, flailing forward for one foot to land on the segmented floor as they continued to grab and smash at their own shoulders and chest. Keel saw sparks and heard the crunch of metal.

“Rebirth panic. I’ve seen it before, and it’s horrible. Don’t look, Keel. Not every mind has the strength to find themselves in a new body.” The small image of Sula appeared in his vision once again, speaking quickly and smiling queasily as she attempted to reassure him.

“I can see it’s horrible!” Keel hissed.

Ovid snapped his head around. “Quiet down the line!” the major spat before turning back to the panicked robot, who had now managed to peel off layers of metal and was grabbing fistfuls of wires and thick rubber cables.

“Private! Stop that right now! This is a direct imperial order!” Ovid stood over him as the Soul within the robot pulled at their innards.

There was a shout as sparks erupted from the robot’s neck, scattering over Ovid’s suit, and the robot twitched as they grabbed at the smaller, block-like units behind it.

“Private!” Ovid grabbed the robot’s shoulders, but it was too late.

Keel, and everyone else in the room, saw the robot clamp their hand over a small unit inside their chest, behind where their breastplate would be. If they had a biological body, this would have been their heart. They took that small unit and crushed it.

The poor Soul shook in place, and sparks erupted in a fountain from their chest before, with a mechanical whine, they fell to the floor in a juddering heap. Keel watched, stunned, as their movements slowed until they were completely still.

“He couldn’t hack it, poor Soul. There will be an inquiry over this, I’m sure. I don’t envy whomever their guide was,” Sula said.

“Who cares about their damn guide!?” Keel whispered in anger and horror. He had just watched a Soul die. Tear themselves apart. Did that mean they were uploaded to the House of Records again, or were they gone forever now?

“I said *quiet* in the line!” Ovid suddenly bawled, turning and stalking away from the dead robot.

Oh frack, Keel thought as he found himself staring into the gleaming white eyes of the large war robot.

“Sir—” Keel began, wanting to explain himself, but Ovid wasn’t having it.

“Did I give you permission to speak, Private?” Ovid barked.

Keel had a guess how this was going to go. He shook his head.

“*Nice one, Keel. Just try and not make an idiot of yourself, will you?*” Sula was almost sniggering in his ear.

“That *is* me asking you to speak, you dullard! Say SIR! NO, SIR!” Ovid shouted.

“SIR! NO, SIR!” Keel did his best to shout, thinking that ice cream on the beach seemed like an awfully long way from this.

Ovid made the smallest gesture of his fists, and Keel felt the frame clamps at his wrists and ankles release.

“Step down, Private. Let’s see if you are just stupid or are incapable of obeying orders!”

“Sir! YES, sir!” Keel shouted. He didn’t know if that was expected but it seemed best.

“*Keel, go steady! Think about every movement!*” Sula hissed urgently, but it was already too late.

Keel took a step forward, feeling his metal leg rise somehow. It was just an impression inside his mind, but the step was wild and lunging. His foot landed on the floor and then, somehow, his leg lost all strength and he crumpled to the floor.

He didn’t feel pain as he landed, but his mind reacted, producing a dull shocked sensation as if he had grazed himself on the hard metal floor.

“Huh. Well. Looks like you’re going to be about as useful as a bag of worms. What have you got to say about that, Private!?” Ovid leaned over him, and Keel knew it was a trap.

He also knew that it was unfair. His body was new and strange to him, just as

it had been to that other poor Soul, now dead a few meters away.

“Private Hennity thinks they’re above orders. Thinks they can talk and chatter when we’ve just lost another Soul. A loss to the entire Imperium! Is this what you are going to be like in battle, son?” Ovid demanded.

He’s making an example of me, trying to break me down in front of the others to impose some discipline, Keel knew. He knew all about this because he had experienced several martial arts mentors like this. In his view, it was a poor training method, because it made people reliant on command, on their teachers.

He guessed that was kind of the point, though, wasn’t it?

Turn people into a unit.

Forge them into something that will follow orders, no matter what.

“Sir. No, sir,” he said, placing his hands on the floor and attempting to push himself up. It worked, but it felt like a lot of effort.

“Maybe it’s because you’re from Dracis, is that it? Another Outer Systems world. Never even served in the Imperial Guard!” Ovid shouted.

Keel froze where he was, half-raised. Why did Ovid have to tell the others where he was from? Dracis was widely hated across the Imperium because of some centuries-old mistake to do with dragons.

“Ho! It says here that you died in the latest outbreak. That you were there when it happened? When you released star dragons on humanity again!” Ovid said.

“Sir, it wasn’t exactly like—” Keel began. He heard a wary hiss from Sula and knew he’d made the wrong decision before he even finished.

“DID I ASK YOU TO SPEAK, PRIVATE!?” Ovid bellowed with a voice like thunder.

“Sir! No, sir!”

“You were a Warden of the Dragon Vault. You were supposed to keep everyone safe—to keep humanity safe from our ancient enemy—but you

failed. They got out, again, and Dracis was scorched to the ground because of it!” Ovid shouted.

“What!?” Shock ran through him as Keel shoved himself up, looking at the major in blank horror.

Dracis was scorched!?

This was the first he’d heard of what happened after the dragons had broken free. Of course they had wreaked destruction. That was what they did. They destroyed cities, provinces, even worlds. Keel felt shame that he hadn’t even stopped to think about it before.

“But my father...” he said weakly.

All of his friends, his training partners, every friend he had ever made on his home world... Were they all dead?

“Tens of thousands *dead*, Private! Entire populations. Cities. Families. Servants of the emperor who might have made something of themselves, who might have done something for humanity, all dead now *because you couldn’t do your job!*” Ovid shouted.

“But...but it wasn’t me. I don’t know what happened...” Keel shook his head.

“Do you know how long it took for the emperor to put down those beasts? To bring them back under control!? Six years, Private! Six years of terror for every citizen and soldier who was sent to contain the dragons of Dracis!” Ovid roared.

Keel fell back on the floor, feeling like he was hyperventilating.

“Okay, he’s being harsh, but ride it out, Keel. This is just panic in your mind, but it can’t affect you physically. I was trying to find a proper time to tell you.” Sula sounded apologetic.

“A proper time to tell me that everyone I know is dead!?” Keel hissed to himself.

He suddenly felt a sharp clang to the side of his shoulder, and then he felt Ovid’s giant metal hand closing on his upper arm, starting to lift him off the

floor, one-handed.

No one lays a hand on me! Anger surged through Keel.

Of course, he was used to the many small jabs and pokes, slaps and prods, from his many teachers, but that had always been a part of something. A part of a training system.

Keel was pulled up to eye level with Ovid, who held the smaller robot as easily as a ragdoll.

“You don’t talk to your guide when you should be listening to *me*, do you understand it, dragon-born?” Ovid hissed straight into Keel’s face.

“*Oh, olok-spit,*” Sula whispered.

“If you cannot manage the transition, then I will put a request for you to go back to the House of Records. If you cannot follow orders, then I will send you back to the House of Records. If you cannot concentrate when your squad-mates need you, then you will die and you will get them killed as well, understood, Private!?” Ovid said, his voice low and threatening now.

“Sir. Yes, sir,” Keel said. He would have been gritting his teeth if he had any.

“I will be putting a note on your file. You already have a lot to live down, Private. Let’s hope you made a better Marine than you did a dragon warden!” Ovid dropped him. This time, Keel managed to catch his weight and stood, wobbling.

Ovid stood before him for a moment, looking at him, before turning back to the others.

“All the rest of you line up. You will be taken from here and shown to your quarters on board the *Judgment* and, after orientation you will begin your training!” Ovid marched out as the bulkhead door hissed open. A small drone no bigger than Keel’s head flew in and hovered. It had no visible wings or thrusters, just hovered on silent whirring motors.

“Attention, Three-Three Squad! Welcome to the *Judgment!* I am Training Droid D-Seven, subordinate to the *Judgment* mainframe. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Now step forward, Marines!”

The droid sounded lighter and chirpier than Major Ovid, and it somehow gave the vague impression of a harried but generous schoolteacher.

Keel saw many of his fellow squad-mates, six in total now, stagger or even fall to the floor just as he had. There was no Ovid to make fun of them, though, and D7 did not appear to be in the business of persecution. Instead, Keel saw them wobble and sway and struggle to get their bearings as D7 continued to talk.

“Your mind can rebel against your new body at first, but it will grow accustomed over time. Act carefully, slow steps, reach your arms up and down, to the sides and back again...”

The droid started running them through simple ‘orienting’ exercises as Keel felt glances thrown his way. It was almost impossible to read their expressions, but he was sure that he was earning the ire of his colleagues, confirmed when one of the new Marines grumbled to himself.

“Dracis scum will probably get us all killed!”

Keel tried to trace who had said it, to call them out, but he was still too disorientated.

“Just ignore them, Keel. It was just a show. Ovid probably wanted you to focus as a group, and to take your mind off of that other poor oloker...” Sula tried to reassure him, but Keel just felt a dull, angry shame.

It wasn’t his fault the dragons had escaped, or that he had been born on Dracis.

“You’ll get used to your new skin in no time, and then you can show them what a great fighter like you can really do!” Sula was saying, but Keel rather thought that any chance to make friends and influence people here had been thrown out the airlock.

After a few minutes of stretching, D7 buzzed open the door to lead them out into the corridors of the imperial warship that was now their home.

Keel waited to march after the others. His eyes were on the dead robot, still lying on the floor and looking as useless as discarded trash.

TRAINING

THE *JUDGMENT* WASN'T a large ship, Keel knew. He had seen plenty of larger freighters lifting across Dracis, behemoths the size of small moons that carried ore and raw minerals to the far-flung worlds of the Imperium.

Even so, the *Judgment* was possibly the most advanced. Keel saw that almost immediately.

His quarters were small, but with enough room for him to turn entirely around with his metal arms outstretched. That was something he was advised to do daily, along with a whole set of other exercises to get him 'oriented' to his new metal skin.

His 'bed' was another metal frame that he stepped into, which then turned on its side to give him the impression of lying down. D7 informed them this would also help with their orientation.

His room was just a wide space, the frame hangar, and a small round porthole. Through the porthole was the constant fiery gleam of near-light travel, a kaleidoscope of colors that Keel knew were decaying molecules and burning gases as their ship tore its way across the galaxy.

He was ordered to take 'nutrients,' which was the Marine term for attaching a cable to his wrist to feed power into his suit. It was a process that happened naturally when he was 'asleep' in his frame, but they were instructed to get used to doing this as well for any other times.

“Your metal body will keep itself powered up so long as you have a frame to return to after every shift, but there may be away missions where you will not have that access and will have to do it yourself, so get used to it now. Your suit can accept a variety of power sources and will automatically detect the appropriate surge,” D7 advised them.

Their ‘shifts’ were their day cycles, after which they went to ‘sleep,’ although Keel wasn’t sure if that was precisely what they did.

“You’re still a human mind, even if you are in a robot body, and your mind needs its periods of unconsciousness just as a biological one. A space to dream. To feel. Even though you physically don’t need to rest, you will mentally need to try and sleep at least every sixteen to eighteen hours,” Sula advised him.

The strangeness didn’t stop there. Keel was used to getting hungry and tired, especially if he was to be awake for eighteen hours at a go. Instead, what he felt was more a ghost of fatigue, his thoughts slowing and actions becoming lethargic as his mind rebelled against his metal body.

Despite this, he was still amazed at how alert and energetic he generally was.

“This is like being in peak performance!” Keel confided to Sula at one point, and she had merely sighed.

“Don’t forget that biological body and the Vindinian Blue beach, Keel. You might not want to stay a robot forever,” she said.

Once briefly acclimated, their days consisted of training. Major Ovid was usually the one to lead them in this, although Keel saw a number of other humans on board the *Judgment*, all dressed in the black-and-bronze uniforms of the Imperial Guard.

Major Ovid was a hard taskmaster, even if he never repeated the earlier accusations that he’d thrown at Keel. For one thing, he didn’t believe in ‘starting light.’

“Get yourselves into pairs! Stand to attention!” Ovid shouted after he’d led them into the large gymnasium, which was just a large bay with sloped walls whose lower half was covered with thick rubber mats.

Ovid, in his full battle-armor, strode to the middle of the room, pointing to the floor where a series of large hexagons slowly lit up.

“In pairs, step into the ring! We are going to run through some basic suit wrestling, let you get a feel of the capabilities of your bodies, and more importantly, let *me* see where you’re at, what you know, and what you need to know to become *real* Marines!” Ovid shouted.

Keel turned to the robot next to him to find the robot looking at him, too.

“Tobin Vandale, Bosphorus,” the robot said, extending a metal hand.

The name rang a bell with Keel, but he couldn’t quite place it right now.

“Keel Hennity, lately of —”

“Yeah, I think we all caught the memo,” Vandale said with a short laugh.

Keel wondered immediately if there was a hint of scorn in that—it was so hard to read people without seeing their facial expressions—but when Vandale shook his hand, he found the grip firm and reassuring.

“First pair! Hennity and Vandale!” Ovid roared.

The two broke apart and turned to see Ovid pointing them toward a large hexagon on the floor.

“First things first, Marines. When your partner submits, you have to leave off. If you don’t, you’ll have a mark on your record, *which some of you already can’t afford.*”

Keel assumed that meant him.

“Other than that, any move allowed. You are not trying to incapacitate or injure, but move your opponent out of the hexagon, understood?”

“SIR! YES, SIR!” Both chorused.

The hexagon flashed once, and Keel assumed that the fight was on.

Smack!

You have been struck on the faceplate.

Self-healing systems deployed.

“Huh!?” Keel was surprised when Tobin sprang forward faster than he would have thought possible, planting a jab across his face. It didn’t hurt apart from a vague shock, but he did hear the ragged cheer from some of the others.

“Keep up, Hennity!” Ovid encouraged.

Keel saw Tobin dancing back, not pressing his advantage.

He’s quick. Quicker than me, Keel thought. But they were in exactly the same suits, weren’t they? How could that be the case?

Keel shook his head slightly and tried to execute an old pit-fighter move he knew well, a quick forward jab and foot stomp. As soon as he willed it, his metal body was in motion, and he was flinging a hand out to see Tobin ducking to one side before Keel’s metal foot planted squarely on Tobin’s thigh, kicking him back.

Tobin Vandale, for all his earlier speed, clearly wasn’t expecting that. Keel also hadn’t been aware of quite how strong his suit was. Vandale was spun around from that simple kick, hitting the floor and sliding to the very edge of the hexagon in one move.

Yes!

“They have to be *out* of the hexagon, Marines!” Ovid bawled as Tobin scrambled to his feet, pushing himself up and into a backflip that Keel had seen few biologicals ever do.

It’s these new bodies. They’re faster, stronger. They react as soon as we think.

Vandale proceeded to launch himself across the space, one fist jabbing out, and then another in blisteringly quick time.

Keel realized almost at once that Vandale wasn’t actually a fighter. Maybe he had some conscripted service, but he threw his punches wrong. He didn’t put his hip and shoulder into it. Keel dodged the first, swung his arm up to block the second, and then caught the third on his forearms.

Vandale isn't a fighter, which probably means he isn't ready for this, Keel thought as he stepped straight into Vandale's guard and shoved him with open hands, leaning as he did so and putting all his strength from his calves right up his back and from his shoulders down his arms.

"Oof!"

The result was impressive. Tobin flew backward, actually lifting off the ground and hurtling through the air to slam against the padded wall before crumbling to the floor with a grunt.

I didn't know I was going to be that strong! Keel froze for a moment, wondering if he had actually hurt his opponent, before Vandale unfolded from the floor, stood up, and waved to the others.

"Bout one to Hennity! He's the Marine to beat!" Ovid called. They were dismissed and sent back to the wall as the next fighters took their place.

Keel was aware that there were no cheers of victory for him when he joined the others. He gestured to Tobin.

"Sorry about that. No hard feelings—" he began.

Tobin laughed it off. "Honestly, I knew I had no chance against you. I was an athlete on Bosphorus, and I got the feeds of your matches on Dracis. I thought if I could just land as many blows as possible then maybe you would forget that you used to be the best fighter in the Outer Systems!"

Keel was touched that anyone remembered him. It had been six years, after all. Or that his fame had spread that far, until he suddenly remembered.

"Tobin Vandale! Star track athlete! I remember hearing about you," he laughed.

The other Marine robot shrugged. "That was a long time ago for me too, and before the pirates destroyed the transport I was on to the Three World Games. I guess that's why I'm here. My family probably couldn't bear for me to be just another memorial." His voice caught a little.

"Enough!" A sudden roar from Ovid snapped their attention back to the fight to see one of the other Marines slamming their opponent repeatedly into the

floor.

“Venez! I said enough!” Ovid hollered.

The offending Marine stopped, stood, and slowly looked around. “I didn’t hear him submit,” Venez said flatly.

Ovid hissed in annoyance but didn’t reprimand him. “Bout to Venez. Next fighters!”

Venez and his opponent joined the ranks, and Keel got a chance to see who made up their squad. There was himself, Tobin, and Venez, but also Lafferty—the one Venez had almost beaten to a pulp, Sabo, and Jamieson. Out of those left, Sabo and Jamieson seemed to be the ones with some military experience as they traded a long series of classic military hand-to-hand moves. Their bout was only over when both robots collapsed to the floor, with Sabo falling over the line.

“Bout to Jamieson, and there we have a perfect illustration of just how resilient your new bodies are. You can take an incredible pounding, even direct plasma fire,” Ovid shouted.

“*Lucky you didn’t fight me, Dracis-scum,*” a voice whispered behind him, and Keel turned to see Venez looking at him.

“Excuse me?” Keel shot back.

Ovid was saying something about their suit resistances and new speeds, but Keel’s attention was on Venez.

“I know who you are. Wouldn’t stand a chance against a real soldier. You’d probably run away, which I bet you did when you were a dragon warden, right?” Venez sneered.

“You say that again,” Keel demanded, his entire vision narrowing to just the Marine in front of him.

“No one wants you here, dragon-boy. No one wants a coward, no one wants a failure, and everyone knows that Dracis has only ever brought pain and misery to the rest of us. If I were you, I’d toddle off back to deep stasis!” Venez whispered.

Keel snarled in anger and reached for him.

“PRIVATE!” Ovid bellowed, his voice cutting through their argument like a knife.

“You take one more step or lay hands on your fellow Marine and I will personally dismantle you, component by damn component, you understand!?” Ovid marched up to them.

Keel knew better than to say anything like ‘but he made me do it.’ He was no tell-tale, and he was no coward either. He continued glaring at Venez, who had casually turned to stand at attention before their superior officer.

“Everyone! Eyes forward and listen up!” Ovid strode in front of them.

“You will be *expected* to become a unit, whether you like it or not! If you have any personal difficulties, that is irrelevant. You are Marines! You are made by the Imperium, for the Imperium, do you all understand that!?” Ovid shouted.

Keel lowered his head slightly as anger boiled in his heart.

“Sir. Yes, sir,” Keel said dully, while the other marines around him chorused it.

“I DIDN’T HEAR YOU, PRIVATE HENNITY!” Ovid took a surprisingly quick stomp forward to shout directly into Keel’s face.

“SIR! YES, SIR!” Keel said loudly.

The major stepped back and regarded them all before shaking his head in disgust. “Back to training. And stars help you, but you had all better start showing some promise, because I will be introducing you to your combat suits in the next few shifts!” he snapped. “Some of you have got some natural combat skills, I can see that from this morning’s show, but you are all far, *far* below the level that I need you to be at. You have no discipline. You have no resolve. No control. Over our time together, I *will* forge you into a unit worthy of the name of Marine, or stars help us all!”

After that, he instructed them in a number of physical combat drills and practical exercises.

The gymnasium was transformed as metal levers appeared from the walls that they were expected to climb. Keel had no idea how long this went on for, but it felt like hours. Maybe this was Ovid's way of punishing them for their high tempers. Keel was starting to get the impression that Ovid might like to do that.

By the end of the climbing session, even though Keel knew that his metal body couldn't feel any tiredness, his mind still felt shattered.

TRAINING II

“DODGE!”

“MOVE!”

“MOVE FASTER!”

Ovid’s voice boomed over the training session as Keel easily moved through the exercises. A new shift, a new round of combat, a new set of exercises, and this rhythm happened again, and again, and *again*.

Keel had lost count of the number of ‘shifts’ they had been put through so far, which, although they had no natural daylight here, he still thought in terms of days.

Had it been thirty? Forty?

“SPEED UP!”

“NEXT LEVEL!”

“FASTER!”

The life of an Imperial Marine, it turned out, consisted of an awful lot of routine and, for a man like Keel, an awful lot of monotony.

So far, they had been put through the same pattern every ‘day.’ Wake up at exactly the same time, in their rooms, and then assemble in the large

gymnasium to be run through physical exercises supposedly, as the Major Ovid put it, ‘to find their competency levels.’ They would then be drilled in a range of formation movements, ‘square bashing,’ as Ovid called it, which mostly meant they would march up and down the gymnasium to the major’s roaring voice.

They spent the first two hours sparring with each other in the hexagon arena, and then they had to perform physical endurance and speed tests—dodging and jumping over cascading giant red holographic spheres that, if touched, would send an electric shock and paralyze them for a few seconds.

Keel hissed as electricity ran through his metal body, holding itself on the floor around him as he reacted too slowly and was caught by one of the red spheres.

ALERT! You have been struck.

Instantly, his suit locked up. He was surprised it actually hurt, like the spasm of a headache.

“How can I feel pain when I’m a robot? How is that fair!?” Keel snapped as more cascading red spheres tumbled all around him. He saw his squad-mates trying to jump, dodge, or side-step out of the way with varying success.

Tobin did the best out of all of them at this. Even though the Bosphorus athlete had the same metal flesh as the rest of them, he could still react faster.

“But how is that possible?” Keel murmured under his breath, surprised when the small video face of Sula appeared in the upper right corner of his vision. She’d appeared to check on him less and less in recent days, and the times that his guide did appear were unpredictable.

“Your mind remembers your physical body and acts accordingly. Tobin was used to being the fastest, probably, so he still is now...” Sula explained.

“But I know that I’m faster and stronger than I ever was before, why can’t I access that!? And why does it hurt when I get hit?” Keel muttered, waiting for his suit to reactivate as the red spheres continued to flicker into existence near the ceiling and tumble toward them.

“Residual body memory. You have to train your mind to accept its new parameters. It’s like being given a new, better transporter but never liking to travel faster than your old battered one you were used to,” Sula said, which made sense.

So, this was all mind over matter? That was intriguing.

Did that mean, technically, he could do anything!?

“STOP DAWDLING, HENNITY!” Ovid bellowed.

Keel looked up to see that the next sphere was right there in front of him. Surprised, he threw himself to one side, but he wasn’t fast enough. The sphere engulfed his lower left leg with another spasm of electricity.

ALERT!

He growled in pain as he was hit again. His vision degraded into a cloud of white static for a moment before it cleared again, and Ovid was shouting for the simulation to close.

“Terrible, terrible job. Private Vandale’s the only one of you who’s got the hang of it!”

As Keel’s vision cleared, he saw that Tobin had indeed managed to get the furthest against the onslaught of the red spheres, almost getting to the far side of the gymnasium. There was a good twelve meters between Tobin and Keel, who was the next closest. When he turned around, he saw that all of the other Marines of the 3-3 Squad were in various states of paralysis on the floor behind him.

“Coming in second is good, right?” Sula congratulated him.

Keel grumbled. No one ever won a pit-fight by coming in second. He figured the same was the true for wars.

But it’s only mind over matter, he remembered.

Ovid clapped his hands to end the simulation, and wall compartments opened, rolling out a series of what looked like iron bars.

“Your suits are quite possibly the most advanced things to ever be produced by the Imperium, but even they are nothing compared to what the full Marine suit can do,” Ovid was saying, directing each of them to take an iron bar.

Keel waited in line before he grabbed a meter-long length of black iron and wondered if they were going to be asked to whack each other over the head with it. He had a particular wish to do so around Venez’s metal mush.

No such luck, however.

Ovid stood in front of them with the feeling of a grin in his tone. “I want you to snap that metal bar for me,” he said, earning some surprised responses.

“It’s a bar. Solid metal. How are we supposed to do that?” Sabo asked.

Ovid turned on him. “And what do you think you are made from, if not also solid metal?”

Mind over matter, Keel thought as he held the bar in front of him, just like everyone else did, and tried to bend it.

He felt the sudden resistance of the bar, the solid impossibility of the task he was trying to achieve. Keel felt the servo mechanisms inside his arms whir and lock, and still the bar didn’t budge.

There were grunts of frustration up and down the line as other Marines found the same impossibility as he did. Sabo cried out and was the first to drop the bar, panting with exhaustion.

“Do you think your metal body is getting tired!?” Ovid roared.

Keel’s mind raced with what Sula had told him. This was all just body memory. His own mind was not used to being able to bend solid iron bars, therefore he couldn’t do it now.

His mind was the only thing holding him back.

There was a snarl and a creak of metal as Venez’s bar started to bend slightly. There was no way that Keel was going to let an idiot like Venez beat him. Venez had probably been a brute when he still had a body, so there was nothing new here for him. He expected to be the strongest. He wanted to be the strongest...

“Mind over matter, mind over matter. I’m made of metal, not flesh...” Keel whispered to himself as he re-seated his metal palms around both ends of the iron bar and started to pull downward.

He felt the strength of the material, and he felt his mind screaming at him that this was impossible, utterly impossible...

But it isn't, is it?

Keel had once thought that dragons were a legend. He had thought they would never awaken again, and he had stood in front of them. He had turned and faced them...even if it had been his last act.

Just mind over matter, he demanded of himself, trying to imagine himself not as flesh at all but as a machine. This was his new body. This was his flesh.

CREAK!

There was a loud, protesting groan from the metal in his hands as Keel opened his eyes, even if he still wasn't quite sure how that worked when he didn't have eyes anymore. It might just be that he could turn off his sensors at will, like when he went to sleep. However it happened, he opened them now in surprise when he realized he'd bent the metal bar into a half circle.

“Hm. Looks like somebody is learning.” Ovid's voice brought Keel back to his senses, and he looked around to see that the other Marines were all looking at what he had achieved.

He had bent the bar the most out of all of them, although Venez came second and Lafferty after him. Neither Jamieson nor Sabo had managed to budge the metal at all.

Keel saw Venez's head focused straight at him, and he was sure the other Marine was hating him in that precise moment.

“None of you managed to break it, though,” Ovid said dismissively. “Pile your kit away and prepare for the next training session.”

“You got lucky, Dracis,” he heard Venez hiss as he walked past Keel.

Keel felt his rage rise in his chest, but he bit it down. *Bite me, olok-dung*, he thought.

“Get your diodes dusted, Marines, and line up, because next shift, I’m going to show you what being a Marine is *really* all about!” Ovid shouted.

So far, Keel thought being a Marine mostly seemed to be about getting shouted at.

STRATEGY

AS IT TURNED OUT, the major could even turn a lesson into a shouting match.

“FORWARD! Take your places beside the hammocks!” Major Ovid used what Keel was coming to think of as his ‘traditional force 10 voice.’

The members of the 3-3 Squad had assembled outside of the gymnasium just as they had every other shift for the last seventy or eighty cycles, so it was a surprise when the major had instead marched them not into the large space but down the corridor and into a room that none of them had seen before.

It was a hangar bay, sort of.

The room was rounded with eight different alcoves set around the bulkheads. Inside each one was a frame similar to the ones each Marine had in their berth, and the ones they had been downloaded into.

Keel stared at the large frames for a moment, seeing that each had a small visor-like helmet that looked as though it would swing down on automated pistons and levers. There were more ports near the hips and clamps that would attach to their ankles.

Looks like a torture rack, he thought dimly as Ovid marched to the center of the room, which lit up a small glowing hexagon where he stood.

“Well, what are you all waiting for!?” he demanded.

Keel saw that there were holo names appearing over every hammock, with his own just a few spaces away.

(PVT) HENNITY, KEEL // STRATEGY + OPERATIONS

He stepped up beside the hammock as the others did with theirs.

“I promised you that today you would be learning what being a Marine is really all about, and so here it is: *smarts*. Everyone take their spaces, please!” Ovid announced.

Keel stepped into the hammock, feeling a small moment of alarm as the clamps closed around his ankles and small cables sprung forward to magnetically seal to his hips.

“You can fight, for the most part. You all were chosen to become an Imperial Marine because you were deemed worthy. You were judged, at the time of your death, to at least have some skills that would suit you to your new role,” Ovid continued.

Keel heard a hiss from overhead. The visor descended smoothly, cutting off his vision until he felt it settle with a slight clunking sound over the top half of his head.

“But being able to fight isn’t just what makes a Marine. You need to be able to *think*. You need to be smarter than your opponents. You need to be quicker, more cunning, more knowledgeable. The only way to truly defeat your enemies is to outsmart them. Remember that, Marines! Every battle is won or lost in the mind first!”

For a second, there was darkness, and then Keel saw a flash of light. It grew larger and brighter as it shot toward him. He flinched, and he felt instantly stupid for it, as the light hit him. With it came the strangest flash of pain across his thoughts—or not really pain but a sense of discomfort—as he saw what appeared to be a light, bright space all around him.

He wasn’t alone. There were objects hanging in the space. One appeared to be a rifle, another a sword, and a third appeared to be fists made of something.

“What do I do, just pick one?” he asked, but his voice echoed as each visual representation jumped slightly in their place. “I guess that is exactly what...” he said as he selected the rifle. Words instantly streamed down his vision.

IMPERIAL MARINE PRACTICE RIFLE

Single shot. Burst fire. Plasma fuel cells.

There was another bright flash. This time, Keel saw what appeared to be small dots moving across a rocky landscape overhead. As he looked at them, his vision magnified and he realized that each one, disconcertingly, looked to be an Imperial Marine robot, just like him.

Each one was carrying rifles, and they appeared to be charging ahead to a ridge line.

He looked up and all of a sudden, *he* was running toward the ridge line, which was currently being blasted with plasma fire. Plumes of black smoke rose all around.

/(PVT) HENNITY, KEEL

/ 1 of 6

/ Assault

“Huh?” he wondered as he raised his rifle and saw the targeting crosshairs but couldn’t actually see an enemy to shoot at.

Suddenly, his vision moved out, above the battle line, to see all six of the ‘hims’ running forward. This time, there were faint green arrows. By waving a hand, different options were presented to him.

Skirmish (All Marines fight individually)

2 × 3 (2 groups of 3 Marines)

3 × 2 (3 groups of 2 Marines)

With each selection, there appeared different movement vectors for him to select, either six different green arrows for the case of skirmish, or two for the 2 × 3, and so on. He chose the 3 × 2 to start with, and the battle line

immediately split into three groups. One headed dead center while the other two moved to the right and left.

Flash.

Before he could think, he was seeing the perspective of one of the Marines in the group, seeing the distant nearest group on the far right of him and the exploding rocks right ahead.

“Whoa!” Keel flinched, then he saw the assault itself. Explosions hit the top of the ridge as the Marines arrived, and some of the smaller figures were thrown into the air while others threw themselves on the ground to fire at the unknown enemy.

Flash.

His perspective changed again. He was fast cycling through either being in the battle itself or directing it from afar. He tried to keep up, but it was almost impossible.

/ Objective taken.

/ 2 Marines lost. 1 severely injured.

/ Rating: Mediocre.

“Hm. It’s a training program,” Keel muttered.

Suddenly, the image completely vanished, and there came scrolling a line of text.

The Battle of Horlin Ridge occurred in the early reign of Emperor Constance X. In the taking of the planet of Horlin, a scouting squad of Imperial Marines were shot down and had to move on foot to the pirate camp location, which included crossing the Horlin Ridge.

Read here for:

Horlin Planet Climatology...

Pirate Group Composition...

Initial and Alternate Strategies...

“Oh, it’s a sim?” Keel murmured as images flashed across his vision, too fast to take in consciously. He saw snippets of young men and women with mud and blood smeared on their faces, alongside technical data and schematics.

The whirlwind of images came with an intense array of feelings. Loss. Fear. Loyalty. Savagery.

“Dear sun!” Keel gasped. His mind and heart were overthrown.

Everything went white again before it resolved into moving block-like shapes in orange and green. Some of the shapes looked like right angles, others had holes in the middle. Some were long, some short, with different corners attached.

The blocks rushed at each other. Some joined. Others exploded.

“What?”

Keel quickly realized he could move his hands and orientate the blocks so their colors and corresponding shapes matched. He thought he was getting a handle on it when suddenly, the view changed again. Now, he was looking down at what appeared to be large landmasses.

Green vector arrows appeared, one approaching a hook-like part of the mainland at the top and several more approaching further down the coast. Keel focused on the largest and highest of the arrows. After a moment, he was drawn into a simulation of armored infantry units.

Heavy Track R3-10

1 to 8 occupants.

Heavily armored. Medium artillery. Tracked vehicle.

1 x Plasma Cannon (Roof)

4 x Side Guns

Data again streamed down his screen, telling him about the vehicle’s capabilities and uses, before Keel was a driver in one of the vehicles as he led an assault against large, blasted plains. Giant, walking mechas shot at him

and his group.

Once again, Keel had strategy options: all-out assault, holding some of his vehicles back, splitting the forces, or concentrating them. He still only achieved a “*Mediocre*” result when it had finished before he was bombarded with information, images, and feelings associated with the historical version of this campaign.

The Uprising of Cantor 5

Inspired by heretics, the entire Cantor System attempted a rebellion against the reign of Empress Fiabold, which took six Sol cycles to fully quell.

Keel was rocked by emotions. It was an entire story of the betrayal of a beloved planet, of brother turning against brother, of pain and nobility during the battle, and the final exultant victory when Cantor was liberated.

Liberated, Keel thought. The word stuck oddly in his mind for some reason. He couldn't deny the feelings being generated in him. He felt the lives of the soldiers passing through him, he felt their savagery, their camaraderie, their desolation.

But I know what you're doing... This was propaganda, wasn't it? He was being programmed.

He cycled through several such simulations until he was sure that his brain—or his motherboard, perhaps—was going to burst before the brightness flashed again, and this time stayed longer than it had previously before slowly fading away. The logo of the Imperium—a shining sun over swords—showed for a moment before it too faded. The visor rose from his head.

“RIGHT! I am sure that was informative and stirring. Remember your lessons. Think about all of those Marines who came before you, who died so that we can be here today!” Major Ovid said as he stepped out from his own hexagon.

Keel's ankles were released, and he stumbled forward.

“It can be a little disorientating at first, but you will find your life enriched!

Now, back to the gymnasium!”

The Marines, in varying states of disorientation, staggered toward the door. Keel waited a moment to re-orientate himself as the others filed out. He swore he could still see the colored blocks moving in front of his eyes.

But then again, I don't even have eyes anymore, do I?

Someone slammed into his shoulder. “Out of the way, Dracis!” snarled Venez, pausing in the door as he glared back at Keel.

“Just give it a rest, Venez.” Keel shook his head. Venez had been like this since the beginning, always finding ways to put him down, make him feel stupid or like a disgrace.

“What did you say to me, Dracis?” Venez didn't rest. He stepped toward Keel and gave the impression of posturing, even in the metal body.

What, are we going to do this here? Keel thought. His mind still swam, but underneath it all was a spark of anger.

No, not anger. Rage.

“Just what the hell is wrong with you, Venez?” Keel shot back.

Venez wavered slightly in place, clearly not expecting Keel to actually challenge him, but then his voice came back low and murderous.

“What I am on about? I am on about the fact *you* don't belong here, Dracis. Everyone knows the Dracisians are cowards. Filthy. Dirty. You're a stain on the Imperium! Why the emperor doesn't just bombard you and your accursed star dragons from space and be done with it, I have no idea,” Venez said.

“Shut the hell up,” Keel growled. Normally, he might have been able to ignore remarks like this, but he still felt disoriented and emotional after that strategy training. Being born on Dracis meant that you put up with opinions like this all the time. It was, sadly, part and parcel of being a Dracisian native. It seemed that the entire Imperium blamed Dracis for the fact that dragons existed. That Dracis was their home planet. That somehow, the humans who lived on Dracis—even though they were Imperium citizens, too—were responsible for the millennia of conflict between the two species.

“You gonna make me?” Venez replied.

Keel thought about it. He thought about going for him and dumping him on his ass like he so badly wanted to. He thought about the number of different moves that he could pull off right now that would probably see Venez eat ground—and possibly lose some of his plating.

But I'll never get a body if I do that, will I? Keel held himself back, although his fists clenched tight.

“That’s the problem with you Dracisians. Cowards. You don’t even have the guts to stand up for yourselves, and certainly not against the dragons! You ask me what my problem is, *Hennity*, and it’s this. *I* have to serve in this squad, and *I know* that *you* are going to get us killed!” Venez snapped.

Keel stood where he was, barely holding onto his rage. His fists shook at his side, and he knew Venez saw it and was grinning at Keel’s helplessness.

“Yeah, I thought not,” Venez said, turning to stalk into the corridor and leave Keel feeling somehow worse than if he had actually attacked the man.

Keel felt smaller somehow, like maybe he really *was* a coward.

No. You don’t get to be the best pit-fighter in the Outer Systems by being a coward, he told himself.

He knew that one day, he was going to have to face up to Venez. A situation like this couldn’t go on, especially if they were going to serve on the front lines together. There was no way at the moment that Keel wanted Venez behind him with a fully charged pulse rifle. He just didn’t know how he was going sort Venez out without also being kicked back to the House of Records and lose the only body he had at the moment.

It was then that Keel saw movement near the ceiling. The small drone form of D7 lowered itself, turning slowly as it regarded them.

Keel found it creepy, like the little thing was observing them the whole time and had done nothing.

THE VOICE OF A GOD

“STAND TO ATTENTION, MARINES,” Ovid said. Surprisingly, he wasn’t shouting at them as he brought them to a halt in one of the large corridors of the *Judgment*.

“So this is what the rest of the place looks like,” whispered Lafferty, who was the one standing in front of Keel.

We’ve only been shown the parts of the ship we need to know, Keel agreed, realizing that their orientation tour had only included a number of gymnasiums, their quarters, and their original ‘upload’ hangar bays. They had also been introduced to some of the smaller units here, including multiple repair shops, where Keel had seen things like hangar frames but angled flat like a bed, and with far more arms and strange, almost surgical equipment affixed to the other bars. They looked more like garages than clinics.

Luckily, no one had been sent to be repaired yet.

The imperial soldiers—the biologicals who were a full head shorter than their robotic comrades—appeared and disappeared at times, generally falling silent around them whenever they shared a corridor. Keel had guessed they must have their own canteens, gymnasiums, actual surgical bays, and berth rooms, but otherwise, he had no knowledge of their life.

That was, until now.

“Eyes forward. Take a breath,” Ovid advised. Somehow, his voice was a lot lighter than usual. There was an air of reverence about him as he walked their line and looked them over.

“You have been training for the last shifts. You’re doing fracking terribly, all things considered, but you’re still Marines. Barely. You are about to understand why that is so important,” Ovid said as he walked to the large door at the top of the corridor, calmly waving a hand for the door to open. “Now, quick, after me, and *march!*”

At least Keel felt fairly confident at this part. The marching had been drilled into their heads and metal bodies until it was almost second nature.

The eight robots marched with perfect timing, their metal boots clanging on the floor as they filed into a space far larger than Keel had expected.

It was an amphitheater, only it also wasn’t. It couldn’t be aboard a spaceship.

One side was a vast curved wall of what looked like synth-crystal that showed the bright, boiling, endless flare of plasma as they tore through space. The other sides of the room formed as a gallery of tiered levels, extending down to a podium at the floor. There were benches on each level.

The benches were filled with people. There had to be hundreds of imperial soldiers here, Keel realized, seeing how many were wearing black-and-gray uniforms. He saw others as well. There were biologicals wearing white suits that Keel had rarely seen on the *Judgment*, which he thought might be various ship’s crew. There was another, much smaller section of the audience that drew Keel’s eye—humans seated on the front row in a variety of outlandish and flamboyant costumes, such as large dresses in gold and orange with wide collars or suits that flared at the shoulders to form a sort of cape.

“That’s Ceta fashion,” Tobin whispered behind him.

Keel nodded. He had seen such people at some of his tournaments back when he had a body. They were usually wealthy Inner Systems gamblers who ventured out ‘into the lawless wilds’ in some bid for adventure.

“Look!” Tobin suddenly whispered.

Ovid, in his full combat suit, stood silently at the head of their line, waiting

for something.

“What is it?” Keel whispered back, but then he saw that there was another group of figures standing at the bottom of the room, made smaller by how many levels down it was.

These figures wouldn’t be small up close. They were Marines, full Imperial Marines in combat suits. Each of them wore large, bronze-colored breastplates and armored greaves and gauntlets over their legs and arms, as well as the large, rounded pauldrons and the flaring metal collar that protected the sides and back of their neck.

Keel whistled quietly. Even at this distance, they were impressive.

Everyone in the room was lit by the lurid glow of burning plasma, and there was a sense of expectation in their air as the crystal flickered and dimmed the view into darkness. A voice followed a moment later.

“My Imperial Marines, my staff, my most treasured family... Arise!”

The voice was a golden, mellifluous baritone, and even Keel felt a surge of something as it hit his ears—or whatever he had in place of eardrums. It almost sounded like the voice of a god.

Everyone who had been seated immediately stood, and the dark screen flared with the light of a burning star, growing closer and brighter. It was so realistic that Keel saw Lafferty flinch, as if the *Judgment* were about to be hit by a comet.

The burning light stopped, its fire flaring and solidifying into the burning sun emblem of the Imperium, the logo of the ruling family of Solas.

“At ease,” the voice sounded again as the burning sun faded and was replaced with an overlarge image of a man dressed in a military dress suit the same shade of golden bronze as the full Imperial Marines before him. He looked broad-shouldered, standing before a stone throne whose back was carved into a giant orb.

The emperor! Keel was stunned. He had never seen the man, not even on video. It was said that he rarely showed his face to anyone, never in public, and very rarely even on screens.

This man was looking down on them with a slight smile and piercing blue eyes. He looked youthful, perhaps in his early forties or a little younger, with high cheekbones and a square jaw. His hair was a tousled chestnut color, shaved at the sides around his ears.

Something that Keel noticed was that the emperor wasn't wearing any medals or an insignia. His golden suit alone would suffice to announce who he was, it seemed.

"Today is a great day, and one that I have been looking forward to," the emperor said as he turned to look around the room.

"This is no recording. It's live, isn't it?" Lafferty whispered.

"However, it is also a grave day," the emperor continued as he lifted his eyes to briefly look up at something off-camera, then he looked back at the crowd. "Today of all days, we pass on the sacred baton of humanity. We are encouraged by the bravery of our new Marines, but we are also reminded of what we have lost..."

As Emperor Mikhael XIII spoke, his image faded and was replaced with an image of a small blue-green orb, floating in the blanket of space.

"Earth. Terra. Tiera. Our original home," the voice of the emperor said.

Keel felt his heart hammer.

Impossible. I don't even have a heart anymore!

It was still an undeniable feeling that surged through him at the image of their ancestral home, that tiny, fragile planet.

Something was happening to it. It was changing before his very eyes, morphing, lighting with spiderweb trceries of civilization. He saw tiny flares of light, larger flashes that could have been explosions, and waves of crimson red over the dark landmasses.

"We lost our home, as the old legends tell us, when it was attacked by the very same beasts that we fight today," the emperor said. "Dragons. *Reptilis Draco Galactus*. These are the creatures that took our home away from us. That destroyed it. That almost snuffed out our entire species..."

Suddenly, the image of Earth really *was* engulfed with giant explosions. Mushroom clouds appeared over the continents, becoming brighter and brighter until they joined, and Earth appeared to light up like a lightbulb. There were glimmers of light in the darkness as small shapes moved—ships that were small, needle-nosed, and clunky compared to the *Judgment*.

“Luckily, we fought back. We managed to halt their attacks for a time, buying our species time to escape, to find a new home, to survive...” The small ships burst into near-light speeds and raced away from Earth. “My family rose to power in that terrible, terrible time, and it is my greatest honor to say that we did our best to keep our family safe.”

The images flickered through a series of different, smaller worlds with all sorts of appearances and spacecraft around them.

“We started to colonize, far away from where our precious genetic heritage was born. We started to grow once again...”

The scenes changed to planet-side views—deserts with lone figures on wind-swept dunes, habitats made of geodesic domes, and other domes clustered around a lake.

“What you have to understand is that we are a precious, precious gift to the universe. Intelligent life. Millions and millions of years of evolution, and there is only us. Our light can so easily be snuffed out, if we let it, if we do not *fight!*”

The images changed again to show a previously seen space station, now exploding and crumbling, as dark shadows flocked past it. Then images of forests and domes bursting into flames, and jet-ships chasing after dark shapes in the skies.

“The dragons found us again, and for a second time, they almost destroyed us utterly, but humanity has never been shy of a fight!” Now, it was images of earlier versions of the Imperial Marines that were still biological, dressed in spacesuits and armor, carrying lances as they charged ahead or harpoons that they fired into the sky. “We tracked down our ancient enemy to their home world, and we kept them contained, because we are not like *them*. We are not monsters, and we will not kill everything in our path just because we can.”

Keel flinched when he saw an image of Dracis and the vault's mountain. Legions of people, thousands of them, lined the roads as they drove the giant, unconscious, and wounded bodies of the dragons towards giant metal doors. This was before the greater habitat domes of his father's palace had been built, and Keel could hardly think of just how long ago that scene was supposed to be. Five hundred years ago? Six?

The image returned to Emperor Mikhael, standing before his throne once again.

“This is why I am here today. I seek to greet every new squad of Imperial Marines into our family, because our species has only survived because of them—*because of YOU!*”

The emperor roared those final words, and no one in the room could help but join their voices with his. Even Keel felt a stirring in his non-existent chest.

“You are here to protect our precious genetic heritage and preserve our light into the great darkness of the universe. Just as we carry the memory of our original star within us, within our very DNA, you must carry that fierce love for our humanity. For our place in the humanity.” The emperor raised a hand toward the crowd as his voice dropped, and he repeated words that every human had heard before, even though Keel had never been in this position to know how important they were.

It was the Mantra of Humanity.

*“Through darkness, through fire,
Through struggle, through strife,
We still stand. We still fight.”*

Keel found himself repeating the words along with the others around him. He could hear the fervor and passion in their voices.

This was what those words meant. This was how important they were.

“Marines of the Third Army, Third Squad, I welcome you to our family. Step forward,” the emperor said, opening his arms as all eyes turned to them.

Ovid stepped to one side.

“Marine Private Uni Jamieson!” the emperor called. The first Marine in line startled. Keel saw Jamieson—who was mostly a quiet fellow, didn’t say much—salute with fervor before marching down the steps to the bottom of the room.

The crowd watched as the emperor spoke, but no one else could hear him now. Some sort of field effect must have made it so only Jamieson would hear his words. Keel saw Jamieson wobble slightly in place, then salute and walk to one side where an actual Imperial Marine in full battle-armor handed him a bundle.

“What is that?” Tobin whispered.

The emperor called out another name. “Marine Private Jakobs Lafferty!”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Keel whispered back.

He was the next in line. He was about to meet the emperor, the father of humanity.

“Marine Private Keel Hennity!” Emperor Mikhael XIII called, and Keel felt all eyes upon him as he started down the steps.

“*Congratulations, Hennity. Just don’t mess it up, huh?*” Sula suddenly appeared in his vision, startling him and almost causing him to stumble.

“Watch it! Not now!” Keel whispered back, but his guide had disappeared with a laugh. If any of the crowd had seen him almost trip and fall, no one said anything. Suddenly, he was standing before the giant image of the emperor, and he felt a crackle of energy as he was enclosed by some private energy field.

“Marine Private Keel Hennity. The Imperium and I entrust upon you a holy mission. To keep humanity alive. To keep the Imperium alive, against enemies monstrous and mundane. *DO YOU AGREE?*”

The emperor was looking down at him, judging him, his eyes piercing and wise and powerful.

“Sir. Yes, sir.” Keel nodded.

The emperor started to smile, before his eyes narrowed just a little. “You’re the one from Dracis, aren’t you? Governor Hennity’s son?”

Keel was rocked that he could even know who he was. He nodded once more.

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

At that, the emperor’s smile grew wider, and Keel got the strangest impression. He felt like he was standing before the dragons once again, in the moment before his earthly body was killed.

“Ah, yes. The pit-fighter. The one who beat my champion, and then the one in the vault itself at the time of the...incident,” the emperor said.

“Sir,” Keel said a little slower, unsure of precisely where this was going.

The emperor’s face flashed with anger for an instant, but it was just an instant. If Keel hadn’t become so good at reading expressions because it was how he predicted his opponents’ moves, he might never have seen it.

The emperor was smiling again now.

“It is unfortunate that your father died in the...incident. And the entire palace. And yourself, of course. They would be so very proud of you, in the service you are about to perform for the Imperium,” the emperor continued.

Keel got the feeling that he was being toyed with.

Did he...mean for me to become an Imperial Marine? Is this some way of punishing me?

Keel’s mind raced. That was why he had been sent down to the Dragon Vault in the first place, wasn’t it? As a punishment for defeating the emperor’s beloved gladiator...

And the Inner Systems loved hating Dracisians anyway, right?

There was a crackle of energy, and Keel knew that his time was up. The emperor was lifting his hand and looking up at the others as he called out the name of the next lucky Imperial Marine.

“Marine Private Tobin Vandale!”

Keel found himself walking in shock toward the line of power-suited Marines. When he stopped before them, the second in line stepped forward to offer him a bundle.

“Your seal and dagger. Look after them, rookie,” the giant Marine growled, and Keel realized he could see actual eyes behind the slits of the helmet visor.

This was a biological! A Soul that had been awarded a body for their service!

“You’re human,” Keel uttered in surprise.

The Imperial Marine looked at him in silence for a fraction of a moment before he nodded, just the once before a gravelly voice met Keel’s sensors.

“You can find your way out of that metal box, son. Just do your duty and fight hard,” the man said, handing the package over.

Keel’s heart was riven with conflicting feelings as he looked at what he held: a badge of golden metal shaped like a stylized, radiating sun over a sword. The seal of the Imperial Marine Corps. He also held his ceremonial dagger. Its handle and pommel were a carved piece of white bone, somehow fitting perfectly to his hand, while the blade itself was subtly curved and shiny with a precision, wavy edge. On its handle were inscribed the words ‘Through darkness’ on one side and ‘Through fire’ on the other.

Keel’s non-existent heart reeled as he looked at the things in his hands and heard the real, physical voice of the Marine standing before him. He was being made to meet what he could have—a real body, the chance to become a feeling, sensing, biological person once again—but he had also just been told, in so many words, that the emperor was punishing him for daring to prove he had once been a better fighter than his little pet!

Hadn’t the emperor seemed happy that my entire family died!? What! What!? Keel tried to make sense of it all, but he failed. He marched to his place beside Jamieson and stood at attention.

People were cheering and clapping for the new Marines, but Keel found it hard to join in the celebration. Right now, Keel was starting to get the impression that the holy and sacred Emperor Mikhael XIII was a bit of an *olok*.

FIRST MISSION: SUIT

IT WASN'T long after meeting the emperor that Keel's squad was given their first mission.

Keel had been doing well in his one-on-one combat tournaments. With every shift that passed, it started to feel like he knew more of what his new body was capable of, and his old fight instincts were coming back. He could anticipate the moves of his opponents, and he was one of the few to realize that the only thing getting in his way, truly, was his own mind.

It's all mind over matter. I am stronger, faster, and deadlier than I could ever dream of being before.

There weren't any 'championships' in the hex rings, not officially, but the Marine privates tested themselves against each other during every training shift, and Keel was clearly coming out on top. Venez and his brute came in second, then Sabo, while Tobin, Jamieson, and Lafferty were too close to call.

"This is insane, surely. How can we be ready for a mission already?" Tobin confided to Keel one shift when they were lining up before their expected gymnasium session.

Keel shrugged. "I'm thinking Ovid reckons we are, or we'll have to learn it very quickly or die trying. I'm not sure that the Imperial Marines leave much room for do-overs."

Maybe it was because they weren't technically alive, Keel wondered. Was that how the Imperium could appear to be so reckless with their troops?

While a new sense of purpose had fallen upon the 3-3 Squad ever since their official meeting with the emperor, Keel almost felt the opposite. He was fairly convinced that the emperor had been sneering at him during his 'interview,' as if the man was laughing at his fate and reveling in the death of Keel's family.

Like he blames me for the dragons waking up, Keel thought. He made a note to ask Sula the next time he saw her how he could find out more about Dracis. To his surprise, he realized that none of them had any way of accessing data about the outside world. There were no terminals, no holo-ports, not even data screens anywhere, and Keel burned with questions.

How much of his home world had the star dragons destroyed?

Had anyone he'd known survived?

Was Dracis still inhabited? Being rebuilt? Quarantined?

Keel sighed heavily, realizing he had no idea when he would find answers, nor how much good they would do if he heard them anyway. He was stuck here, on the *Judgment*, rocketing toward their first training mission that none of them knew anything about.

Even Sula had been erratic recently. Scores of shifts went past without Keel seeing her, and he wondered if this was normal for a guide. Maybe they gradually took themselves out of the picture once it appeared that a Soul wasn't going to try and tear themselves apart like he had seen when they were first downloaded.

Keel turned to Tobin, to ask him whether he still had contact with his guide, but they were interrupted.

"ATTEN-HUT, Marines!" It was the resounding voice of Major Ovid, standing as the far bulkhead doors hissed open. "Follow me, Marines. And you'd best be on your wits today!"

When weren't we? Keel wondered, but he filed out along with the rest of them into a corridor they hadn't seen before. It was clearly a part of the

‘biologicals’ section of the ship.

“Tight march. No talking!” Ovid said as they clanked down the wide metal corridor, under heavy girders like they were moving through the ribs of a vast metal sea creature. Biologicals in white suits appeared from smaller hissing doorways, saw the Marines, and stopped immediately. Keel even saw a look of fear cross their faces.

So that is how they view us, Keel thought. He hadn’t even stopped to think about it, but it would have given *him* the creeps to find that he was sharing his ship with the walking robot dead.

There was a large door at the end, which opened as their seven-man squad approached. A moment later, they were walking across a bridge, and Keel and the others got their first look at the actual *Judgment*, or as much as they could see from this walkway.

They were on a wide connecting bridge that ran like an artery between the two segmented portions of the warship. The Marines couldn’t help raising their heads and looking around to see through the synth-crystal glass to where ‘their’ section of the *Judgment* looked to be a large, block-like collection of cylinders. This bridge ran toward a more streamlined, blue-gray metallic section of the ship, thinner and longer with wing-like fins extending from its sides.

“Whoa...” Tobin whispered.

They could see the vast envelope of plasma fire around the entire ship, too. It was the cosmic bubble that their near-light engines generated that allowed them to tear through the fabric of space itself.

“Something’s happening,” Lafferty whispered, and Keel looked up to see what his fellow Marine was talking about. There was a change in the lurid colors outside. The burning orange, white, and cerulean blue was being replaced with deeper, heavier purples and reds. The flames themselves—which had been a psychedelic, constant inferno seen from every porthole—appeared to be thinning, and Keel could even see patches of black space through them.

“We’re slowing,” he said, half to himself as they approached the next door.

“This is the main crew section, but where I’m taking you is to the A-and-D Hold, Armaments and Deployment,” Ovid announced as the door opened, and they were inducted into a world of noise and motion.

There were biologicals everywhere. *People, humans*, Keel corrected himself, wondering when he had started calling them that. The room was really a main hallway through the guts of the ship, but it was wide enough for the white-suited imperial staffers to be driving or overseeing drone transports across the hall to the upper gallery, where they disappeared into open archways.

A troop of imperial soldiers jogged past, a few of them throwing wary glances at the slim robots. Still other humans, with pips on their lapels, were discussing things as their hands moved through complicated schematic holos that flashed green or orange as they hung in the air.

“Major in the hall!” one of these pip-wearing humans said, standing to salute Ovid as the large, power-suited Marine marched past, throwing a quick salute back.

It was the first time Keel had been on a fully-functioning deep-space ship, and it was a wonder. He had heard that some people spent years in deep space, traveling the breadth of the Imperium, but a planet-lifer like him had always thought it would drive people mad. Here, however, there was an entire functioning mini society.

“A-and-D!” Ovid announced as they reached a large steel-gray door with an almost jigsaw-like seal running down its middle. A wave of the major’s gauntleted hands, and the door opened to reveal a hangar bay. “Marines, may I present to you your power suits.” Ovid stood aside as Keel and the others saw a line of lockers on the walls opposite three wide bay doors. The lockers looked tiny, but as they approached, lights appeared over each one and out slid what appeared to be frames, like the ones they slept in.

Only these frames were standing upright and were already holding large, bulky pieces of metal.

“Find your number and get suited. The frames are automated, so they will run you through the process. Then, assemble before door three,” the major called.

Keel shot a glance at Tobin. It was hard not to feel excited at this, given the

reputation of the Imperial Marines.

(PVT) HENNITY, KEEL / 3-3 / 1023

As he approached the racks of armor-laden frames, words scrolled across his interior vision. There was an answering flash of green light from one of the frames.

He found himself standing before his power suit—a helmet visor with two slits for eyes and a grill mouth, a large belt, plate armor.

IMPERIAL MARINE POWER ARMOR: Armor Belt...

The large, bulky, segmented contraption that would gird his hips flashed with an overlay of color as his sensors picked them up. It extended from the frame on tiny, whirring servos. He took it and looked down to see parts of his own metal body, small magnet locks, flash an answering green.

He looped the armor belt around his body. As soon as it locked into place, he felt it tightening.

Synchronizing...

Marine Armor Belt

Energy production: micro-fusion with battery backup

Servo-assists, weight and load distribution, armor packs, generic weapon types, self-healing procedures

The next thing to flash green were the greaves, wide sheaths of metal plate over thick layers of carbon-mesh armor, thinner sheaths of metal, and compacted shock-absorbing pads. They locked into place around his shins, calves, and thighs before small rods extended to lock into the rotating hip joint and the armor belt.

Marine Breastplate

The largest piece of kit was the breastplate itself, which was actually two

pieces, the chest and back, that opened at the head and down the sides, allowing him to pull it on almost like a shirt. It immediately felt heavy in Keel's arms as he struggled with it, seeing the same multiple layers of shock absorption and metal mesh, as well as bulky units running down the center spine.

Enhanced armor protection: concussive, thermal, plasma, radiation

Jetpack

Strength assists

As soon as it was in place, Keel felt small mechanisms whirring and locking into place along his back and hips, and then the vast weight of the breastplate lifted to almost nothing against his body.

Next came the pauldrons and gauntlets, all of which aided his strength by tightening pistons and servos as soon as they were connected.

The last pieces were perhaps the most impressive.

Marine Mantle

Enhanced protection

Communications: short, long, direct-wave transmission

Holo-production

Flare deployment

Suit lights

The mantle was a metal collar that fitted under the helmet and over the breastplate, with two 'wings' rising on either side of the head, almost to where his ears would be and curving to meet at the back. Keel felt it lock tight and then he pulled on the helmet.

Marine Helmet

Synchronizing...

Instantly, his vision was enhanced and layered with information. As Keel turned, he saw codes and recommendations light up beside every Marine he saw, displaying their name and identification as well as a faint, flashing green

arrow pointing toward door three, where he knew he was expected to be.

“But not before this.” Keel saw that his suit was directing him to its final additions.

There, at the bottom of the frame, a box was opening automatically and presenting three weapons to him.

The first looked like a large, stubby semi-automatic blaster, the sort that could be fired single-handed if needed but was better in a two-handed grip. As soon as he picked it up, a point at his thigh flashed, and he realized it was a magnet lock for easy access.

“Weapons training! At last!” Tobin said almost ecstatically.

Imperial Marine Standard-Issue Plasma Repeater

Single burst

Grenade launcher attachment

Stun + smoke physical rounds

50 x Plasma cells

Keel wasn't used to firing guns, however. He was more interested in the second item.

Imperial Marine Sword

Titanium-laced poly-steel

It was an actual sword, a longsword from the looks of it. It had no scabbard, but he knew from the butterfly-effect waves of purple and blue across the folded poly-steel that it would probably never rust anyway. He attached it to his belt and saw there was only one item left—his ceremonial dagger, which had somehow found its way from his ceremony to here without him even being aware of it.

“Through darkness, through fire,” Keel whispered to himself, locking the dagger in place on his belt at the small of his back.

He turned to follow the flashing green mission arrow to the doors out.

*IMPERIAL MARINE CORPS / 3-3 /
/ (PVT) HENNITY, KEEL
/ Mission One: START.*

FIRST MISSION: STARS

“IT’S GOING to be a simple one. All I am asking you to do is to travel to the nearest moonlet over there and overcome any adversaries. Simple, right? Especially for Imperial Marines who have been designed for battle!” Major Ovid barked at them from the front of the hangar bay after they had all lined up.

I’m not buying that. I bet there’s nothing simple about it, Keel thought but had the wisdom not to say as the major clanked across their vision.

“I know that most of you can fight, at least at a primitive level. What I am asking you to do now is to act *in formation*, like a real squad. Your superior for today will be —”

Ovid spun around and pointed at Tobin Vandale.

“Sir!?” Tobin’s voice, although mechanized, sounded panicked.

Keel turned to look at his friend and saw a holo of a small bronze shield appear on his vision over Tobin’s head.

“You are to be the commander for today’s mission. You will be responsible for keeping your squad alive,” Ovid said.

“But, sir, I don’t know anything about—” Tobin started to protest, which was a mistake.

“Did I tell you that failure was an option!? Your *expectations* create your *success*, Private! Or should I say, Commander?” Ovid snapped before dismissing him back to the line. “Your suit is already programmed with every formation and tactic you need. Trust the Imperial Marine Corps, robots. We know what we are doing and how to do it. All *you* have to do, Commander Vandale, is to decide what tactic to employ and when.”

Ovid turned to address the rest of the squad. “And all you lot have to do is to obey! Understood?”

“SIR! Yes, *sir!*” they chorused, even though Keel had a sinking feeling in his gut.

But what is the enemy? The targets? What are we to expect? Why are we carrying pulse rifles and swords?

It was only too soon that Keel had far greater and more pressing problems on his mind, such as learning how to use a jet suit at very short notice.

MISSION 01: Overcome
/MISSION START...

As soon as the major stepped aside, there was a moment of queasy silence as Tobin hesitated, then stepped forward.

C'mon, Vandale, you got this! Keel silently wished him well. He was one of the few other downloaded Souls here who hadn't been an idiot to him, and Keel knew that Tobin would have to make a good impression. Just like pit-fighting, even if you didn't know what you were doing, you had to look like you did.

Tobin half-turned toward them and nodded. “Right, everyone, well—” He raised a hand to his own wrist, clearly manipulating a command hologram that only he could see.

/MISSION DISEMBARK...

Green holo words flashed across his vision, and he saw the giant metal bulkhead doors start to slide open, revealing the canopy of stars.

Frack! Keel took a panicked half-step back, as did several of the others, but then he saw the flicker of a blue energy field across the expanding gap and sighed in relief. He looked behind him, and he saw that there was another flickering wall of electric blue energy there too. The energy field cut across the Arms and Deployment Hold like a wall.

Huh?

/ PREPARE SUIT ROCKETS...

The commands came across his vision, and there was a tiny diagram of an Imperial Marine crouching, hands on the floor as if they were about to start sprinting.

Double-huh? Keel was confused.

“Everyone, I need you to—” Tobin began, just as the blue energy field behind him disappeared. Their newly crowned commander managed to give a brief *sound* of surprise before he was thrown backward into the void.

“Tobin!” Keel managed to shout, right before he too felt the pull as the atmosphere was sucked from this part of the *Judgment*. They were all drawn forward, metal boots scraping along the deck.

/ DEPLOY SUIT ROCKETS?

/ Move hand to control...

Keel tumbled out into the space. He saw brightness, darkness, he saw the vast wall of metal behind him that was the *Judgment*. A part of his vision flashed, and he knew his sensors were trying to update him on nearby objects while he fought the urge not to choke.

I'm going to choke! I can't breathe out here! He began to panic, but then he realized...*I don't breathe anymore, do I?*

He stopped flailing and started to spin slowly, and all around him was infinity.

Space wasn't dark. It was never dark. Out here, it was brilliant with the

tapestry of stars—a dense canopy of softer or sharper lights pricking the darkness.

Sweet holy sun! Keel had never been in space itself. He had never seen this wonder in its natural form. He saw constellations he had no names for. He spun and saw a glowing, flaring orange triangle.

/ Target 1. Traath Moon-base.

- 1. Use rocket suit to form into 3-man units.*
- 2. Approach Traath Moon-base.*

More controls appeared across his vision, but Keel was too busy being in awe. He could see the size of the two-part *Judgment*, the apparent leagues of metal as the vessel slid slowly higher to their right. It appeared like two wedges of metal, the ‘nose’ being sharper and meaner, with a wide, shining bridge like a glowing spine connecting them.

“Private Keel!” There was a sudden voice over his sensors, and he realized that it was Tobin. He turned and flailed, sending his body spinning.

“Damn. Frack. Olok!” he said as different arrows appeared over his vision, directing his movements.

/ Zero-gee Movement.

Use arm and leg movements to create counter-movement. Every forward action creates a response without friction. Combine with suit rockets and use hand gestures for control...

Keel could see where several of the others were already trying out their rockets. There was a burst of green-and-yellow fire from Jamieson’s back, and he was thrown forward. His arms rose and waved as he spiraled past Tobin, then Keel saw him use his arms to slow down and finally stop.

Okay, I think I got this, he thought and clenched his metal hands into fists, just as the suit indicated.

He felt a kick of power to his back and was thrown forward. The small collection of upside-down, slowly turning Imperial Marines was right ahead

of him, growing larger and larger.

Up, up! He opened his hands and pushed downward. His rocket sputtered, and he ended up flying ‘high’ above the group, waving his arms and kicking his legs to stop himself.

“Right, okay, everyone. That’s...good, I suppose.” Tobin was a little forward of their group, his arms making gentle swimming motions. Although every time he moved, his body started to turn. “You’ve all got the target. We head to that moon-base over there, ah, in formation.” He made a small gesture with his hand and saw a green ‘A’ blinking at the top of his vision. He turned his head to see the same marker over Tobin and...

Oh no, come on! Keel thought when he realized he was looking at Venez.

The other Marine didn’t look any happier about them being in the same squad.

“What!?” Venez shouted. “With these idiots!? They’ll get me killed!”

“Now, Venez. These are our orders,” Tobin began, but Venez expertly fired his rockets and somersaulted over Tobin, laughing.

“You’ve never even used a rocket suit before! I have. I was an Imperial Guard. You have no command experience, Vandale!” Venez sneered, pushing himself into Tobin’s personal space.

I’ve had enough of this, Keel thought. He even thought that he might have a handle on how to use the rocket suit.

He squeezed his fists and thrust his hands backward, kicking out, and was rewarded with forward motion. He released his grip only when he drew close enough to slam between the two.

He heard Venez’s grunt of surprise over their suits’ linked comms.

“Why, you little coward!” Venez flicked his wrists, and his rockets micro-burst so instead of being flung away, he careened toward Keel, the Dracis Marine who had just sent him flying.

Try me, fly-boy. Keel grinned. “You heard Major Ovid, Venez. Tobin is our commander for this, or do you wanna take it up with the major!?” Keel

shouted.

Venez looked like he really was going to throw a punch, but then he just snarled and floated backward.

I'll take that as a win, Keel thought, although he didn't like having to invoke the name of Ovid in order to get it.

“Right, everyone, follow your orders. Our suits will tell us,” Tobin said as he turned toward the gleaming white ball ahead of them with its marker declaring itself to be Traath.

FIRST MISSION: FORMATION

*/ Target 1. Traath Moon-base.
3. Follow formation orders.*

THREE PALE GREEN arrows appeared over Keel's vision, each pointing forward, with the largest one flashing.

"I guess that's me?" Keel muttered as his suit updated across his vision.

*/ 3-Man Fire Team.
Each Marine takes a point in the triangle, presenting a fire arc to all sides.*

He did his best to move his arms and legs and direct himself into position on the lower right, with Venez on his left and Tobin ahead, but his flying was erratic at first. With a little more effort, he managed.

I just have to keep my legs straight and use my arms to direct my flight, Keel thought. He saw that the second 3-man fire team—Lafferty, Jamieson, and Sabo—were following them. They sometimes pulled apart as one or another of them mismanaged their rockets, but then they managed to pull it together.

"We can do this!" Tobin said excitedly. His own flight had kept on course for the last few minutes. Keel could hear his enthusiasm, and he concentrated on their target as the moon-base of Traath grew larger in their vision.

It was mostly white and gray, with pockets of dark light that to Keel's magnified sensor-gaze looked like canyons or rifts on the moon's surface. There were small, bright flares around the planet that he took to be satellites or drones, and as they drew closer, he started to see more geometric shapes. Squares. Rectangles. Buildings!

WARNING!

Keel's vision flashed orange at the same moment there was a small sparkle of light from up ahead.

"What?" he got out just before there was a lance of burning, brilliant white energy searing toward them.

"Evasive action!" Tobin shouted.

Keel clenched his fists instinctively and he roared forward as the pulse beam shot through their scattering formation.

"What the hell is that! They're firing at us!" Keel heard one of the other Marines saying—Sabo, he thought—as there was another flicker of light and another pulse beam shot toward the second group.

"It's the training exercise, it has to be," Tobin said.

The comms filled with chatter.

"That's live energy! They're firing damn energy weapons at us!" Lafferty called.

Only one way to learn in a fight, Keel thought grimly as he recalled his first times in the pit. He had been young and cocky and had trained at the best of his groups, but all of those years of practice and exercise had counted for precisely nothing until he was actually there, in the ring, with the adrenaline thumping through his system.

Only I don't need adrenaline anymore, do I? That thought flashed through his circuitry.

"Reform! Take evasive action as required!" Tobin shouted.

Once again, the three green triangles appeared on Keel's view, asking him to retake his position at the lower right point in the 3-man fire team as they flew forward.

“Forward straight into live fire!?” Keel muttered, moving his hands to haphazardly retake his position in the triangle as the points firing at them from up ahead started to get larger and clearer.

He focused on them, and their image magnified. He saw disks of metal with smaller puffs of stabilizer rockets at their edges. On their tops—or bottoms, depending how they were positioned—each bore a large, single-barreled pulse gun. The barrel alone was almost as long as Keel. They were not big enough to counter the thick hulls of an enemy ship. To his eyes, they looked to be anti-personnel.

Identifier: Anti-Raids Pulse Gun

Often used in low atmosphere or low orbit around sensitive locations such as mines, prisons, encampments. Designed to prevent controlled fall pirate attacks.

The words flickered across his vision, which he guessed was informative, but it didn't exactly tell him how to take it out, did it?

There was another flare of light from the guns. One shot lanced toward Keel's group, and two more shot toward the second fire team.

Keel was getting the hang of his movements now. He gestured with one hand and sent himself spiraling to the side. The pulse blast shot through the gap where he had been, and he winged his way back into formation.

There was a snarl of alarm, and Keel turned to see a flashing orange counter over Sabo. He had been struck!

“Vandale!” Lafferty called as he had slowed to turn toward his spinning comrade while Jamieson carried on.

“Keep formation! Help him!” Tobin responded, slowing his own flight to turn completely around—just as Keel saw another flash of the distant pulse gun.

“Tobin!” Keel yelled, sending a burst of energy through his body so that he shot forward. He could see the blast extending through the dark, straight at Tobin’s exposed back...

He slammed into Tobin’s body, his arms grabbing him as he sent them both spinning out of the way of the blast.

“We need to get rid of those guns. This has got to be a part of the mission to. Give the order to fire!” Keel hissed at Tobin.

Another pulse beam shot toward the others, who flew apart and then reformed.

Tobin turned back to their team, which was scattering out of formation more often than they were pulling together. Without any command, they were starting to widen and separate.

Easy to pick off by the guns, Keel thought as his hands moved to his pulse rifle at his side, detaching it.

“Marines! Rifles active and fire at will!” Tobin called.

He and Keel pulled apart, and Keel pulled up the rifle to his line of sight.

As soon as the rifle was in his hands, a small, red targeting triangle blinked in his vision. It followed wherever he moved his arms, and he swung it to focus on the magnified image of the nearest anti-raid gun.

“Get some!” he hissed. He pulled the trigger.

He felt the powerful recoil of the rifle and the way his mechanical body instantly made allowances for it as different absorbers and springs in his arms and shoulders compressed and expanded.

He released a tight burst of fire. The first glittering orb of energy missed entirely, but the next struck the disk’s outer edge, and the third struck near the gun’s hub mechanism.

“It’s a hit!” he exclaimed, seeing the flare of sparks. The disk wobbled slightly, rising in turn as the pulse gun started to compensate.

Flash!

Another series of pulse bursts hit it. This time, they all hammered into the disk and gun, and they must have hit something important. There was a large burst of sparks and a flash of brilliant orange plasma fire, and then the weapon broke apart.

“Good shot!” Keel heard Tobin call.

Keel turned to look at which Marine was so good with their rifle and saw it was none other than Venez, easing his gun down and firing his rockets to propel himself forward. While Keel knew they were all supposed to be on the same team, on the same side, he had to admit to no small feeling of jealousy.

“Forward!” Venez shouted, taking the lead as Keel looked at the floating Tobin. The moon of Traath was now giant in the background.

“You need to take control of this. Don’t let him intimidate you,” Keel did his best to whisper, hoping that his suit comms somehow understood the difference between direct messages and open comms.

“Fire teams! Fire on the targets! Move out!” Tobin shouted as he turned and shot ahead in a blaze of rocket fire to catch up with Venez. Keel cursed and then did the same.

Sabo was alright. It seemed that the shot did little more to his suit than dent it, and soon, the second fire team was also back in formation. The remaining anti-raid guns were swiveling to try and track them.

Keel fired, sending a burst of plasma at one of the flying gun emplacements as he and the others swept toward it. It was no more than twenty meters away, and he saw his three bolts of energy strike the barrel of the gun, then the hub, and then —

Flash!

The gun exploded, as another did on their left as the second team shot it down. Then they were soaring past the expanding fields of debris and evaporating plasma burn, straight toward the bright dome of Traath.

/ Target 1. Traath Moon-base.

4. Make moon-fall and advance to target structure.

Keel's vision updated with the latest mission parameters, and now there was a faint, flashing green vector stretching out toward a small, red triangle on the surface. He saw more of those angular structures all around it and guessed that had to be the 'target structure.'

This is raid training, isn't it? Keel realized as he felt his suit start to shake a little and increase in speed as he hit Traath's minuscule envelope of gases.

Everyone had grown up hearing reports like, 'Imperial Marines have taken pirate bases X, Y, and Z,' and he had always assumed it was done with ships like the *Judgment*, from afar, bombarding the smaller bandit hideouts until they gave up or gave out.

But a ship like the *Judgment* was huge, and probably hard to conceal, while a team of Imperial Marines, flying low and fast to make planet-fall, could go undetected much more easily. He realized, as the moon rose fast toward him, that this was exactly the sort of mission he might be called to do in the near future.

/ Suit Rockets.

Control descent with outward arm movements...

The guidance flashed up, and he saw that Venez hadn't been lying. He was the one with the most experience, flaring his arms like a bird as he brought up his knees, slowing his flight as he approached the surface. Venez hit with wide-planted feet, slamming into the gray-and-white ground and immediately sprinting ahead.

It was pretty clear that he'd done this before when in the Imperial Guard.

Tobin came next, and Keel saw him trying to copy the other man, but he opened his arms at the last moment and hit the ground hard. Instead of moving smoothly into a spring, he ended up tripping. He bounced high in the low gravity before he hit the floor again.

There was no time for Keel to say anything, and he had no way of judging whether he was doing the right thing or not as he pulled his arms out and knees up, felt the rockets die and his flight slow. He kicked out...

Wham.

He hit the surface of Traath and sprang forward, leaping high in the air and then coming back down on one foot, swiveling to turn toward Tobin and steady him.

“Mostly good, right?” Tobin said in a close whisper.

“You saw what it said! Move on structure, you cowards!” Venez was shouting, and Keel turned his head to see that the Marine was already halfway across the moon’s icy plain from where they had landed. The structures now looked like the ruins of some old mining habitat, with metal walls and low, bunker-style, poly-crete buildings laid out on the edge of the plain ahead of black rock foothills.

“Venez! In formation!” Tobin shouted as he sprang forward over the dark ice. Keel was certain that the other Marine heard him, but he made no sign that he was going to obey.

He probably thinks he’ll get more glory if he’s first to the target. Keel shook his head and broke into a run after Tobias. What an idiot Venez was. This was combat training, not a game!

No sooner than he had thought, the ground shook underneath him. Keel skidded on the ice, bouncing into the air right as a plume of boiling white steam erupted ahead of them.

Right where Venez had been charging.

Keel looked down and saw dark cracks racing across the plain, and everywhere they opened, they released a cloud of ice shards.

“Venez!” Tobin shouted, but he had to skid to an abrupt halt as the section he’d been racing toward rose a shocking ten feet into the air.

“It’s all unstable! We need to fly!” Keel shouted—right as the ground tilted and sent him sliding backward. “*Hyurk!*” His metal fists battered at the ice to see what lay below him: a dark chasm of black rock, glittering in the cold starlight.

No way. Keel wasn’t about to die on some sun-forsaken moon in the middle

of nowhere. He turned himself around as the ice plate started to sink, its edges crumbling as it started to fall into the chasm below.

He growled, throwing his fists behind him as he lunged forward. He felt the kick of the rocket pack as he was propelled almost vertically up the slope, his feet scrabbling at the shattering surface until he saw stars above him. He jumped, and his rocket pack flung him in an arc as more plumes of boiling vapor exploded across the plains.

“Fire teams! Get in formation! Take to the atmosphere!” Tobin shouted.

Keel couldn't see the other man as Keel himself slammed back down on a smaller island of ice-plate, its neighbors rising and falling at crazy angles.

“Squad!” Keel called out, turning to see that there was a small green marker at the end of his plate, bouncing over the edge.

He dove toward it, careful to slide his feet across the ice instead of stamping on it. He saw the dark chasm below...and Venez hanging onto a ledge a foot below the thick piece of ice Keel was standing on.

Oh.

Keel dropped to his knees and extended his hand. As much as Venez might be a star-slubber, and an olok, and a sun-damned fracker, Keel wasn't the sort to just let the man fall to his death in the dark.

“Keel!” Venez saw him, his visor helmet looking up at him as his voice sneered.

“Take my hand! Quickly!” Keel braced with one arm and leaned as far as he could toward the other Marine. He could just about reach his wrist, if he tried.

“I must have damaged my rocket suit when I hit the floor, otherwise I wouldn't need *you*, Dracis!” Venez snapped as Keel grabbed his wrist.

“Wow, you're not one for swallowing your pride, are you?” Keel hissed as he pulled, feeling all of the servo mechanisms down his spine knit together and tighten.

“Just get me out of this mess, Dracis!” Venez growled.

Keel was sorely tempted in that precise moment to let him go, but he didn't. *I might have killed people in a challenge, but not like this.* This wasn't a fair fight, and Keel was no murderer.

He hauled back, certain for a moment that he wouldn't be able to lift the Marine at all.

But it was all mind over matter, wasn't it? His was a metal body, state of the art, and the suit he wore was capable of tearing through entire buildings if he had to.

He lifted Venez clear of the chasm, falling back onto the ice in a clump.

"Oof!"

"Get off me!" Venez growled, rolling off and bouncing high in the low gravity.

"Gee, a thank-you wouldn't go amiss." Keel pushed himself up just as forms flew over their position and circled.

"Keel! Venez! We thought we'd lost you!" It was Tobin, along with the others.

"I can still push him over the edge if you'd like," Keel muttered, earning another growl from Venez beside him.

"We have to go in on foot! My pack's busted!" Venez shouted up at the others.

"Then we go in formation. Assemble at the edge of the rock," Tobin said. The Marines above them swooped haphazardly toward the nearest edge of the exposed rock, right on the edge of the ruined moon-base.

"Come on, Dracis, or are you going to make me late again?" Venez said, taking a big leap through the air to the rock and leaving Keel behind him wondering just what on earth he was supposed to do with a man like that.

FIRST MISSION: ERROR

/ Target 2. Secure Objective.

“SECURE OBJECTIVE, THAT’S IT?” Keel heard Sabo say just up ahead of him.

He was just finishing his final jump and felt the crunch of the rock underneath, saw that it was brittle and striated with strands of silvery mica. He didn’t know what this planet was made up of, but if it was this unstable, he could see why it had been abandoned and turned over to the Marine Corps.

Ahead were low, blocky buildings made out of the same featureless, gray poly-crete. Hardly any were actually in tact, and it appeared as though great chunks had been gouged out by...something.

“Cheery,” he breathed, seeing the six-man squad already waiting for them. Tobin was peering down at the buildings.

Their objective marker, a bouncing red triangle, was clear, superimposed over the buildings. It pointed to somewhere in the center of the ruins, only they couldn’t see the exact target from here.

Keel’s mind immediately moved to their strategy lessons, with terms like *Full Assault*, *Charge*, *Pincer*, *Circumnavigate*, *Rear-guard*, and so forth. He waited for his vision to update with more of the command green arrows, depicting where they should go, but they were curiously absent.

“Leaving it up to us to figure out, I take it?” Keel murmured as he stepped up beside Tobin.

Vandale still appeared jittery, but less so than when he was first thrown out of the *Judgment*’s airlock. Keel figured that Tobin was in the first stages of ‘sobering up.’ He’d seen it happen during pit-fights; you learned on the job real fast, or else you ended up real dead.

Was there still a distinct possibility of them dying out here? It had certainly seemed so. If their suits had been hit by enough of those anti-raid guns, or if they had been crushed by the plates of ice and rock?

It definitely looked as though Imperial Marine Corps training was designed to be deadly.

“Through darkness, through fire, I guess...” Keel said. Tobin turned to stare at him with his bronzed helmet visor for a second.

“I suppose so,” Tobin said with a sigh. “We stay in our fire teams. Two triangle formations, one moving to the right, down that slope and coming in on the right of the objective, while the other team—with me—goes straight ahead.”

“You don’t want to send a scout first?” Keel asked in a low whisper.

Before Tobin could answer, Venez was doing it for him. “We’re Imperial Marines! And this is a training mission! Don’t be such cowards! Come on. I’ll get this done.” He started to move straight toward the first ruin.

“Venez—” Tobin began, but Keel could tell that his voice already sounded weak. Like a child asking an adult to change their mind. Venez ignored him, and so did everyone else.

“Don’t let him get away with it!” Keel hissing. He knew that bullies were usually stupid, or at least short-sighted, but he also knew that those who projected confidence were the ones who usually won a fight.

Venez was looking at this whole thing like a fight, not a unit.

“Just, come on!” Tobin hurried, half-bounding after Venez as he accepted the lefthand point of the triangle, with Keel taking the right. This put Venez on

point, ahead, and Keel hated the way he assumed natural superiority over everything.

It wasn't going to go well for any of Tobin's later command duties, was it?

"Eyes forward!" Venez breathed, and Keel felt like kicking him in the back of the legs. It should be Tobin, their commander, saying that. But they were already walking right up to the first gray wall.

Venez paused, turning his back toward it as he edged to the side. Keel peeled off to the far side of the building, as it wasn't very large anyway.

"Cover," he said, bringing up his rifle as he moved. Tobin stood a few feet behind Venez.

Keel crept along the rear wall to see another, larger building ahead of him, and then an opening out into what looked to be a small street. There was the ruined semi-circle of some kind of dome, and he could see where the metal plates had been pulled back to reveal the girders underneath.

What happened here? Keel thought, scanning the available walls like he'd been taught, moving his rifle and arms in sweeping motions as he checked all points.

"Clear!" Venez called loudly, and Keel could have coughed. He could see blank openings into the larger rectangular hall. Any person, robot, or droid gun emplacement could be sitting in one of those.

Still, if Venez wanted to be an idiot...

Keel could see him now, striding forward into the open avenue, his boots kicking up ice and dust with every thump. Keel saw him turn, take in the larger building and the broken dome, then turn down the avenue toward where the objective symbol was still superimposed over their image.

"Easy," Keel heard Venez say cheerfully as Tobin arrived from behind him, taking his guard stance on his lefthand side as Keel stepped forward.

"Clear," he repeated dully.

He stepped out to follow Venez and Tobin, seeing them walk toward a large, cleared area in the heart of the ruined camp...

From the corner of his eye, he caught a flicker of movement from behind the broken metal dome.

“Watch out!” Keel had time to say as he spun on his heel and raised his rifle.

A shape rose from behind the dome. A shape many times taller than they were.

“Tobin! What the hell is *that!*” Keel shouted as the giant robot creature’s four segmented, metal legs casually ripped the dome from its foundation and flung it at the Marines. “COVER!”

The thing was fast. The metal dome, plates over girders, crashed into the avenue where Venez and Tobin had been patrolling. Keel jumped back, feeling the ground shake and a cloud of ice and dust erupt into the air, completely obscuring his view.

“Tobin! Venez!” Keel called. He could see their holo markers flashing ahead of him, but he couldn’t see *them*. He had no idea if they were still conscious...or even alive.

Crunch.

The ground shook once more as a giant spider-like leg jabbed out of the starlit sky to the ground in front of Keel. He looked up to see the metal creature rising over him, its blocky body turning. He saw that on either side of its carapace, where any other sensible creature might have arms, this thing had two barrels of heavy pulse rifles and they were trained on him.

Keel reacted, one hand slapping the ground as he threw himself over, the very light gravity sending him spinning through the air as he did so.

WARNING!

Behind him came the heavy pound of pulse fire as bursts of crimson energy strafed the avenue where he had been, slamming into the concrete wall beside him as he landed awkwardly, stumbled, and threw himself down the side of the rectangular building.

WARNING!

The blasts followed him, hammering the side of the building and chipping off concrete fragments the size of his head before the bombardment suddenly fell silent.

Keel ran, lengthening his stride as he sprinted along the building's rear wall. Calls from the other Marines flooded his comms.

"Tobin, Keel!?"

"What's happening down there?"

"WHAT IS THAT THING!"

They must have been able to see the battle from their higher vantage point as they started to circumnavigate the ruin.

Higher vantage point, Keel thought as he reached the far end of the building, skidding to a halt and sending up a plume of dust.

Did that mean they were exposed against the night line?

"Fire Team Two, take cover!" Keel hissed, just as he saw flashes overhead when the creature fired bolts of plasma. The shots slammed into the black rock foothill that the others were traversing.

"Okol!"

"Get back, down!"

Keel could hear Lafferty's and Sabo's voice as they tried to not get killed.

This had to be part of the training program, right? Keel's mind raced as he brought up his rifle, advancing until he could sight the creature from around the corner of the building.

There it was. It stood over a plume of slow-moving dust and concrete fragments, centered in the destruction it had caused. Keel saw it start to swivel toward him.

"Frack you," Keel growled, firing a burst at it from his rifle, seeing his own pulse hit it on the top joint of one of the legs. A second shot hit the side of the body before he popped back behind the wall...

...which suddenly exploded under the powerful barrage of the creature's return fire.

WARNING!

/ Suit Damage: Back Plate 80%

Keel felt something like pain, but it was more like an electrical charge applied to his back as he was thrown forward. He hit the ground alongside chunks of concrete.

“Keel! Report!”

It was Tobin's voice, but Keel wasn't sure where he was. His vision was dark and when he tried to push himself up, he felt an impossible weight on his back. Looking behind himself, he saw a chunk of concrete the size of a personal transporter lying across his back legs.

And the metal creature was walking steadily toward him.

Its gait was slow and awkward, however. Keel saw that one of its leg joints looked burst open, its metal melted and ripped.

He had done some damage to it then, he thought savagely as he did his best to push himself up.

/ Power Suit Enhanced Force Servo: ACTIVATED

Keel again felt his suit changing. All along his back and spine, tiny pistons whirred and servo mechanisms took the tension, delivering more power to his legs, shoulders, and arms than he ever could have dreamed of as a biological.

He felt the concrete starting to shift, but it wasn't happening fast enough. The thing was going to give him both barrels of those ridiculously strong guns before he could escape.

“Hey! Ugly!”

It was Tobin's voice, and it was followed by flashes of light that must have been his pulse rifle. Keel felt gratitude and relief flood through him that he

wasn't being blasted apart.

He tried to push himself up as he heard and saw more blaster fire streak overhead, undoubtedly from Fire Team Two.

"C'mon, almost!" Keel gave it one last push and suddenly, he was up. The creature was firing at the ridge line, while single shots hit it that must have come from Tobin.

Keel saw his rifle, grabbed it, and spun around just as he saw the thing turning to fire both barrels into the wreckage behind it, presumably where Tobin was.

"No!" Keel shouted, not knowing if Tobin had managed to jump out of the way or not. He was quick, the quickest out of all of them, wasn't he?

Keel fired at the creature, his pulse blasts hammering into one of the gun emplacements. The thing wobbled to one side, tracking back towards its new attacker, but before it could bring both guns to bear on Keel, one of Keel's shots must have hit something vital. Its side erupted with sparks and a flash of green-laced plasma fire, and it staggered to one side.

He could hear Jamieson shouting as more shots hit the enemy robot, driving it backward until it almost tipped over.

Tobin. Venez. Keel was on his feet and running around the edge of the ruined dome to find his teammates, somewhere in the cloud of dust and ice particles that drifted in the air alongside fragments of metal and poly-crete.

The light show continued over head. The thing must have been able to return fire, because he heard shouts of alarm from Fire Team Two.

"Tobin!" Keel could see his small, bronze-colored marker hanging in the murk. It was low to the ground, which shook as the thing stomped its legs and broke more of the brittle planet's surface.

ALERT! Unknown Signature Detected...

His suit suddenly gave him a command he had never seen before right as a shadow loomed out of the murk on his right. It was dark and humanoid, but

as Keel spun around, he didn't have time to react before he was struck on the back of the neck with something heavy.

WARNING!

/ Suit Damage: Back Plate 60%

Keel was driven into the icy surface beneath him. Once again, a feeling like an electric shock ran through his body, quite unpleasant but not the same as real biological pain.

What? What was it now? Another challenge? Another bot? He tried to push himself over, but before he could, something heavy crunched into the small of his back. It was forceful enough to keep him on the ground.

“Stay down, Marine. I really don't want to have to put a blade through your cortex.”

The message was sent directly to his suit, but there was no name attached to it like there were when any of his team talked to him.

Huh!?

Keel's mind felt scrambled. He was sure that this had to be a part of the training mission, but the form wasn't speaking or acting like it was a part of the mission at all.

Still, Keel wasn't about to just lie there. Decades of training came back to him, years of fighting on the sandy pit floors, in the few times where the other fighters had actually bested him and he had to play dead.

For a moment, he didn't move. He stayed exactly where he was as he felt the weight against his back get heavier for a moment, then shift.

As soon as it did, Keel moved. He twisted around as he raised a knee, hooking one metal leg around the leg that had been on his back. He sent the form crashing into the ground in a wrestling move that was almost second nature for Keel.

He heard the grunt of surprise from his attacker in a direct suit-to-suit comm, and Keel felt a shadow of that same savage pleasure he used to feel when he

knew what to do, how to do it, and that he could win.

“Get off me!” Keel growled, flipping himself over to grab his opponent by the shoulder, his other arm sliding around their neck in a chokehold as he forced them down with his knees.

That was when he managed to get a look at the one who had attacked him, and he almost let go in surprise.

The man was an Imperial Marine.

Kind of.

He wore a similar, bulky power suit just like the sort that Keel was wearing, but it looked several decades out of date. It was also mismatched, with two huge metal shoulder pads instead of one, and the side mantles that protected Keel’s neck were much smaller and sleeker. The suit was visibly patched repeatedly, and he could see where it had been painted in russet camouflage tones of forest green, phthalo blue, and cream.

The weirdest differences were the ragged black cape and the helmet visor, which was sculpted into a vaguely humanoid face but with a large grill space instead of a mouth.

The enemy Marine’s eyes pulsed a glowing white as one giant hand clamped on Keel’s forearm and held it for a moment. “You don’t even realize you’re dead yet, do you?” the Marine hissed. He calmly plucked Keel’s arm and bent it back as if he were a child.

Keel felt pain shoot up his own arm—his metal arm.

WARNING!

/ Suit Damage: Right Gauntlet 70%

He looked down to see that the enemy Marine’s gauntlet had crushed the metal plates of Keel’s arm, and Keel knew he was in danger of having his arm pulled apart by such a force.

“Cute move, but you’re still thinking like a biological. Fool!” the Marine spat, before twisting around and sending Keel flying.

Keel gasped as he slammed into a concrete wall, flailing in the void for a moment before thumping to the planet's surface.

He was outmatched. His enemy looked to be wearing a power suit that was several generations behind his own, but it had capabilities and strength that Keel's didn't.

There were flashes in the haze, and Keel knew that the rest of his squad were still fighting the giant war-bot.

But who is this person? A new challenge? A part of the training mission!?

Keel was confused as he started to push himself up. The shadow of his new enemy loomed over him again, this time holding a blade that he flicked toward Keel's neck.

"You've got some toughness, I'll give you that, but you'll just be another drone soon enough if you don't wake the *Sol* up," the Marine hissed.

Keel blinked, seeing the cerulean and green shimmer of the blade, sharp only on one side and thicker at the end. Its edge glittered like crystal.

That's a diamant blade. Diamant was one of the strongest atomic alloys known to the Imperium, with a structure that was more crystalline than metal.

It would also be able to cut through his outer plate like an ax through wood. All the stronger Marine had to do was to lunge forward, and it would go through Keel's breastplate in a heartbeat.

For a moment, both parties did nothing, even as the battle raged past them. Keel had dropped his rifle, and somehow lost his sword, but he still had his ceremonial dagger. Was he quick enough to grab it?

"Well, are you going to kill me with that thing or just stand there?" Keel hissed, hoping to distract the Marine for a moment.

What's the point of this? Just beat us up? Nearly kill us? Or see how we respond to threats?

His enemy just looked at him, and then a strange sound erupted over Keel's sensors. It was laughter. The Marine was laughing at him.

“No... Why, oh why, would I come all the way out here just to kill you if I don't have to?”

Huh? Now, this wasn't making any sense at all.

“What!?”

The enemy Marine flicked the blade away as he stepped back, still laughing as he did it, but his laughter ended abruptly.

When he spoke again, his voice was in a low, menacing growl. “You're being used. You and all the rest of you recruits. You're being used, and it's time to pick a side. Do you want to think for yourself, or do you want to be a stars-damned drone like all the rest of them!?”

Keel slowly pushed himself up, one hand resting on his ceremonial dagger—the same one the emperor had presented to him.

“Is this a test?” Keel asked. Would Major Ovid do that? Would the Marine Corps? Were they trying to assess his loyalty as well as his battle skills?

“I guess you could say it is.” The enemy Marine merely stood there, but the way in which he agreed made Keel think it wasn't the sort of test that *he* thought it was. Like the enemy Marine knew something he didn't.

“Through darkness and through bloody fire,” Keel hissed back as he forced himself to turn away. “You can frack off, because I have two of my squad-mates I need to find before they get killed!” He started toward the small, bouncing holo of Tobin's marker.

“You won't be able to keep them safe. Not from what the Imperium will do to them! What did they promise you, a body?” the enemy Marine shouted after him.

Keel stopped and spun around to tell the Marine to frack off again...but there was nothing there but rock, ice, and debris. There was no visual or sensor sign of the other Marine.

It was almost as if he'd never been there at all!

“Weird...” Keel shook his head, hoping that he had done the right thing. Maybe Major Ovid wanted him to try and kill the Marine. Had that been the

objective of the training mission? It was psychological mind games, wasn't it?

He saw more flashes of pulse fire and ran toward Tobin's signature.

"Tobin!? Tobin!" he hissed into the murk, seeing that an entire side of one of the bunkers had come down, and then there was a groan over the comms.

"Keel? What did that thing hit me with?" It was Tobin, rising out of the debris. He had two massive, slagged holes in his suit—one at the shoulder and the other in his lower leg.

"Sweet stars, Tobin, look at you! I think I can see straight through that one!" Keel gestured at the hole in his friend's leg. Tobin looked down and made a small, confused noise before staggering to catch onto the bits of the wall.

"Oh. Wow. It doesn't feel as bad as it looks, if that is any consolation," he murmured.

Keel was once again amazed at how tough their metal bodies were. *Maybe I am still thinking like a biological*, he thought before turning toward Venez's marker further inside the building.

"Venez. I haven't seen him since that thing turned up," Keel said, pointing toward the holo marker.

There was a sudden plume of plasma fire behind them, and a shadow crossed his vision. Keel felt the ground shudder as the giant war-bot hit the ground, its side completely petaled open and torn by some internal explosion.

"*We did it! Mission accomplished!*" Sabo shouted victoriously. The others whooped.

"Not accomplished yet," Keel muttered as his boots crunched through the wreckage, seeing where the giant metal dome was crumpled and riddled with plasma holes.

"Venez? Venez are you..." he whispered as he got to where the intolerable Marine's marker was. His body was flat on the floor.

"Oh, frack. No way," Keel said, kneeling beside him to put a hand on the Marine's side.

SQUAD DIAGNOSTIC CHECK:

/(PVT) VENEZ: Stable. Suit-saving mode...

It was another mystery to Keel until the information expanded, giving him a brief description of what he was seeing.

/ Power suits are able to shut down various auxiliary services to the Marine when severe or critical damage has been received. In this way, as long as the core unit is preserved, the Soul can be held and restored.

“Holy frack-stars, I think Venez is in the equivalent of a coma,” Keel said, leaning forward to pull the larger Marine up and see that his back plate was a mess of metal and wires. Droplets of bluish lubricant fluid leaked out. Tobin arrived to inspect the damage. “He had already crushed his rockets when he went down the chasm. I think having a building thrown at him was too much again.”

“Okay. We need to contact the *Judgment* to get a repair team or a medic or whatever it is we’re supposed to do...” Tobin said just before every Marine’s vision flashed.

MISSION 01: Overcome

/ MISSION ACCOMPLISHED...

/ Generating report...

Their destination marker vanished, and there was a piercing set of lights above them as Keel and the others looked up to see the large silhouette of a Marine transporter—a wedge of black and brown metals with fiercely bright lights at the front—appear low over the horizon.

“ATTENTION Three-Three-ers! This is Major Ovid speaking. You have succeeded in your first training mission. You have overcome the obstacles set for you with a mixture of skill and stupidity. You are one step closer to full service with the Marine Corps!”

Keel once again heard the whoops of victory from the others, but standing where he was, holding Venez’s inert suit, he couldn’t exactly share in their

enthusiasm. That ‘training’ mission had been serious enough to almost kill them. It almost killed Venez, and Tobin, and Sabo, and Keel!

“Wow. They don’t mess around in the Imperial Marines, do they?” Keel whispered.

Tobin shook his head, his voice sounding small with emotion similar to Keel’s. “Looks like they really don’t, but I’m glad you had my back today, Keel.”

“Don’t sweat it. I can handle the fighting, for the most part, but it’s the weird mind games that I can do without. That weird traitor Marine...” Keel shook his head as the transporter overhead slowed and started to lower itself on the far side of the ruins.

“What traitor Marine? What are you talking about, Keel?” Tobin asked, tilting his metal head at Keel. “You sure you didn’t get hit in the diodes a few too many times yourself?”

Keel started to speak but stopped.

I didn’t come all the way out here just to kill you, he remembered. When are you going to start thinking for yourself?

Keel’s mind shuddered. He felt the spookiest sensation—as if maybe, just maybe, that traitor Marine *hadn’t* been a part of the mission at all.

THE ORPHEUS BRIGADE

KEEL WOKE in what felt like the middle of the night, his mind feeling tired although he knew that couldn't be the case. He was lying in his berth hammock, while the rest of his small cabin was dark save for a muted LED light over the door.

Do I really ever sleep? he wondered as he did the mental version of blinking and yawning. His metal body never slept, since it never truly got tired. It just powered down.

Residual body memory, he thought as he stepped out of the hammock to see that the berth cabin was still stubbornly dark. The usual 'morning' shift lights weren't coming on at all.

Huh?

That was odd. Usually, for the last eighty—ninety, hundred or so—shifts, he had woken when the bright berth lights came on, with one blinking green light over his door to follow a trail of green lights to the gymnasium.

Every shift began the same, just as it for the last three or four regular solar months, but his mind felt foggy. He thought he could still see after-images of the floating blocks from the strategy sessions.

“Wow. I have even been dreaming about them!?” He groaned as he looked around his berth, seeing that there was a small, blinking light over his interior

vision.

/ Guide Online

Oh, he thought. He hadn't spoken to Sula for what felt like a long time. His life had become training, fighting, and strategy sessions. Even the aftermath of their first real training mission had passed quickly and without much applause. Venez had been rebooted and his suit repaired, as had Tobin's, Sabo's, and his own.

There was no fanfare or recognition, and certainly no apologies for their almost dying. It seemed to be accepted that even in training, being an Imperial Marine was deadly.

/ Incoming Message: RECORDER SULA...

"Hey?" Keel clicked open the message with a wave of his hand. The image of the recorder—wearing her dark teal robes and leaning toward whatever camera she was using, her short hair falling in front of her face—appeared.

"Keel. How are you?" she asked. Her tone was urgent.

"Uh, tired, I think. But fine?" he said as he checked above the door once again, seeing that the light was still stubbornly muted. It wasn't changing to the green of an active shift. "Why am I awake again?"

Sula observed him pensively before looking away. Her hands flicked through some holo-controls at her side. *"I've woken you up. I needed to talk to you. We haven't got much time, because something big is happening..."* she went on urgently, but all Keel heard was the phrase 'I've woken you up.'

"Sula. Do you... I mean, can you take control of my suit? My body?" Keel said with new concern. The words of that strange traitor Marine came back to him. 'Become a drone like the others.'

"Control? Pfft. No. Absolutely not. I cannot control your suit. Your autonomy as a Soul is an essential part of what makes the process work. But that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about. How, ah, has anything happened to you recently?" she said, looking between her out-of-sight holos and the camera.

“What do you mean?” Keel shook his head slightly. Was she referring to his near-fight with Venez? His mind-numbing hours in strategy? His recent training experience? What did she expect him to say exactly?

Her face screwed up, then relaxed, and then frowned again.

“Look. You can tell me anything. You understand that, don’t you? ANYTHING. If anything has happened that is troubling you, then you are far better telling ME first, okay? Because I care about your Soul, your consciousness...”

Keel groaned, leaning against the porthole to see that the colors of the plasma were back out there. They were skipping along at near-light speeds, and from the look of the strange green, purple, and crimson flames, they were going at some clip.

“Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about Sula, honestly. If there’s something you need to ask me, then spit it out!”

She took a breath—a luxury that Keel recognized he didn’t have—before she nodded.

“Okay. Fine. Look, I get reports of your test scores. Every guide does for the Souls in their care. And yours... Well, your choices in strategy are showing a...difference.”

Oh, Keel thought. So, strategy sessions weren’t just for learning about tactics, equipment, and the history of the Marine Corps? He had already guessed that a long time ago, that it was some form of mental training going on with its weird colored blocks, but he hadn’t realized that these results were beamed to the House of Records.

He felt a slow, burning anger rise in him. The words from his strange encounter came back to him. ‘When are you going to think for yourself?’

“A difference?” he said lightly, although his voice was flat and tough as the poly-steel of his boot.

Sula made an exasperated gesture, then leaned forward to hiss at the camera. *“Look. This is why I woke you up—to talk to you before all the regular monitoring systems come online. Your strategy results are showing...”*

deviance. Defiance, even. You're making choices that we wouldn't expect from an Imperial Marine at your stage of training."

"Huh," Keel said noncommittally. He knew what she meant, at least. Recently, the wave of images and feelings that the lessons beamed into him—pictures of battles, flags being raised, or units deployed—hadn't so much filled him with victorious pride but more a sense of distrust.

Had the more recent Marines—the Souls—ever had the chance to get a body? Was it right that they were plucked from their previous lives and asked to fight an eternal war?

"There's something else, Keel. There's a blank spot on your suit integration system," Sula said.

"My what the frack now?" Keel spluttered.

"It's the system that updates the Corps, and the House of Records, what's going on. We need it to make sure that you, as a Soul in our care, aren't going mad. Being reborn is a big deal..."

Like the Soul who had torn itself apart on that first day, Keel recalled.

"Anyway. There's a blank spot, which most people might not notice, but I do. A period of time when it appears as if you went totally offline. Like you were dead," Sula said.

"Or powered down?" Keel thought about Venez and the training mission, when his suit went into a low-energy mode until he could be saved.

"Yes, precisely, which should send alarm bells to the corps, your local command group, your superior officer...whatever. But it was for such a small period of time that I don't think anyone noticed it. At first, I thought your suit was malfunctioning, and I was going to raise it with the Judgment, but..." Sula shook her head quickly, looking again at him with that concern in her eyes. *"I need you to tell me that you are alright. That you are not planning on doing anything drastic."*

"Oh, you mean Venez?" Keel thought that he understood.

There was a change in the plasma fire outside. It was starting to change

colors as darker turquoises, greens, and blues took over. That meant they were slowing down and slowing down fast.

“I have some business to settle with him, but to be honest, he’s changed since the last training mission. More reserved, quieter. I still get the odd comment from him, but I think it scared him...” Keel began, standing up to stretch. He was sure that his metal body didn’t need to, but it still felt good all the same. Residual body memory, indeed.

“Right. No. That’s good, I suppose, but it’s not that. It was during the last training mission. You went totally offline for just a small period of time, right near the end. Your suit reports damage, targeting controls with your rifle, and then nothing. Did anything happen!?” Sula insisted.

Damage. Like when that building fell on me, he thought. Targeting, like when he blew the gun on the giant war-bot.

And after that...

That was the time he had been challenged by the traitor Marine, wasn’t it?

A chill ran down Keel’s residual memory of a spine. So far, he had asked Tobin a few times about the experience, but every time, his friend had looked at him like he was crazy and asked if he’d been hallucinating. Keel had even asked the others about any strange, chance encounters or loyalty tests out there. Lafferty and Sabo had both said no.

As such, Keel had thought it was just him who had been singled out for a loyalty test by an Imperial Marine playing a part.

One with a diamant blade, worth almost as much as the governor’s palace on Dracis that Keel had been brought up in?

“Keel. This is really, really important. Did anything happen to you out there? And if it did, you need to tell me. There’s evidence that there are certain... attacks against the Imperial Marines,” Sula said.

“Attacks,” Keel repeated, his mind racing.

The strange figure had said he had ‘come all the way out here,’ hadn’t he? And for the entirety of their fight, his suit had apparently not been sending

information back to the Marine Corps or the House of Records.

“Yes. Attacks. I don’t know if the corps has told you about this yet, but there are dangers out there other than pirates and revolutionaries. Have you ever heard of the Orpheus Brigade?” Sula asked.

Something twiggled in Keel’s memory, but it was a long time ago. Had his father, the now-dead Governor of Dracis, ever mentioned them? Had he seen a memo? Overheard someone at the palace say the name?

“No, I can’t say I have—” he was saying, when suddenly there was a flash of static across his vision.

*/ COMMS INTERRUPTED.
Connection lost.*

“Huh?” Keel shook his head as his vision came back. Sula was gone, and he was just standing inside his berth room. The green light came on over the door, and the automated voice of D7 sounded over the cabin room speakers.

“THREE-THREE IMPERIAL MARINE SQUAD, REPORT FOR DUTY AT THE A-AND-D HANGAR IMMEDIATELY.”

A&D. That meant Armaments and Deployment, Keel thought, as his door slid open automatically. The green lights were there in the corridor, leading him toward the main bridge between their section of the *Judgment* and the main section.

Keel tried to forget his weird conversation with Recorder Sula, and the rising unease that came with it. As he stepped forward, he felt a vibration running through the ship. He knew what that meant.

They were falling out of near-light. The *Judgment* was arriving at wherever it had been trying to get to for the last four months.

DEPLOYMENT

OUTER EDGE, Quadrant 4

“LISTEN UP, screwheads! This is the first day of the rest of your lives. You have been called, and you will not let the Imperium down. There will be no regular shifts today. No training, no gymnasium, no strategy,” Major Ovid roared as he stood in the large hangar with the 3-3 Squad standing at attention before him.

To be honest, Keel could have guessed that already. The green lights had not led them to the regular suite of training rooms but instead to the wide bridge between the two sections of the ship. There, he hadn't seen any plasma fire from the near-light drive. They hung in a region of space curiously devoid of stars. The stars that were there were not the full display of brilliance that Keel was used to seeing. They were few and scattered.

It was almost like they had arrived at the edge of the universe itself.

“The *Judgment* has been tasked with a priority mission and in a little under twenty minutes, you will depart. You will follow your orders beamed to your suit accordingly, and you will listen to your fellow Marines whom you will be meeting on the surface,” Ovid stated.

The surface of where? Keel thought, shooting a glance at Tobin. He just shrugged back.

“The Three-Three Squad will not be acting alone, but have been seconded to another Marine force, the Twelfth.”

The Twelfth? Keel was confused for a moment. He had never heard of them, and then he suddenly realized who Ovid was referring to. Every Marine squad had its own nicknames and designations. They were the 3-3ers, or the 33rd, owing to the fact they were of the Third Marine Army, and the third squad after that. Squads were always numbered after their parent group.

That meant the Twelfth was the second squad of the First Marine Army. 1-2. The Twelfth.

Holy suns, the First Army!? They were legendary. They had been around for probably hundreds of cycles. The oldest and most experienced Souls to be downloaded into Marine bodies. The fact that they would be working alongside the second squad of the First Army meant that they were going to be working with some of the hardest, most committed, and deadliest Marines, who had seen countless battles and skirmishes—entire wars, even.

He also knew that the First and Second Army had hundreds of squads, as presumably the Third did as well. The fact that they weren't serving with, well, anyone more experienced was insane.

Was it normal for such a new unit to be paired with such a prestigious squad?

“To your suits, Marines! Do me proud. Do the emperor proud. Do yourselves proud!” Major Ovid shouted before giving a rigid salute.

“SIR! Yes, *sir!*” Every Marine copied his salute, and even Keel had to admit to feeling a tremor of pride at that collective, almost primal experience.

The major dismissed them, and their battle-armor frames emerged from the bulkhead lockers. Once again, Keel found himself looking at the large, bronzed power suit so bulky and powerful that he hardly recognized it as his own.

Is this what I am now? he thought as he looked at the suit for a split-second, seeing its sculpted armor and imagining what it must look like to all the others around him. Like he was a walking tank. A warrior made of metal.

He stepped into the armor and let it fold around him, connecting and

powering up. He felt the whirring and tightening as the suit adjusted and secured itself to him one piece at a time.

IMPERIAL MARINE DESIGNATION: 3-3 / 1023

KEEL HENNITY (Deceased)

ACTIVE RANK: Private

BOOTING MARINE ARMOR...

/ Sensors...ACTIVE

/ Strength Management System...ACTIVE

/ Scanners...ACTIVE

/ Reserve Power...STANDBY

/ Targeting Systems...ACTIVE

The list scrolled for a few seconds and then he saw the flashing green arrow before him, turning him to one of the main sets of hangar bay doors, where a glittering blue field was across a field of oddly scarce stars.

/ READY FOR DEPLOYMENT.

MISSION 02: Guard

/ Target 1. Formation. 2 x 3 Fire Teams. Commander VANDALE.

/ Target 2. Make contact with 1-2 Marine Squad.

Keel dropped into a crouch, one hand on the floor as he leaned forward, knowing that he would be asked to deploy his rockets. He had run through this procedure once in actuality, but easily twenty or thirty times in his strategy sessions. It felt like second nature to him now, which he thought was odd.

Over his vision were green pulsing arrows to his right. When he glanced over, he saw Tobin and Venez, sharing the same arrow.

This was his fire team for this mission, too. Once again, his friend Tobin had been granted the acting 3-3 Squad Commander, and there was a small floating shield over his head when Keel looked at him.

Well, congrats, he thought, although he wondered if, after last time, Tobin actually wanted the honor. Still, Keel knew that he was committed, he trained hard, and he was the first of them to start breaking the mind-over-matter limitations, pushing his suit to faster and faster feats. He must also be acing his strategy sessions, Keel thought a little wryly, before turning his attention to their destination.

He looked up, keeping his eyes on the target. The *Judgment* was a lot closer to what had to be their destination than they had been before. This was no deep-orbit deployment, but almost a close-atmosphere one.

If the rock down there had any atmosphere, which Keel rather doubted.

Occupying the lower third of the space was a barren, icy world. Keel could see humps and ridges of what must have been mountains of pure ice, and he wondered just how deep into space they were.

Did Sula say they were near the Outer Edge? That was beyond the Outer Systems, which Keel knew more than most, given Dracis was an Outer Systems planet.

The Imperium was divided into the Outer and the Inner Systems, with the center point of it revolving around the sun that was the emperor from his imperial dome-planet of Sola. The further you got from the influence of the man who parented humanity, the wilder things got, such as Dracis.

Then, however, there was the Outer Edge, the very limits of the reach of the Imperium—either because they had reached the edge of the galactic arm, beyond which there was only the endless eternity of the void itself, or it was the limit of humanity’s expansion.

From the distinct lack of stars, Keel rather thought he was looking at one of the edges of the galactic arm. The very notion of that cold edge made Keel shudder. To think that, for all of its reach and glory, the human race was still such an infinitesimally small thing against the cosmos...

/ DISEMBARK

The blue field flickered off, and Keel clenched one fist for his rockets to fire

as he was pulled into the dissipating envelope of gases and atmosphere from the *Judgment*.

Tobin shot forward, and it was clear that all of that training had paid off. Venez silently peeled to their left and Keel to the right.

The others—Lafferty, Jamieson, and Sabo—appeared to have learned as well. There was no flailing about this time, only tight, controlled flying. Keel thought that everyone was thinking about their imminent new comrades, the Twelfth. He guessed they all wanted to look the best they could. To look like a proper Imperial Marine unit.

They shot out into space, and for a moment, Keel was struck with a sense of vertigo.

There were too few stars out there.

Beyond this planet, there was...almost nothing!

A part of him imagined what would happen if any of them kept flying, kept roaring out into the dark. It was a terrible, disturbing vision of freedom that Keel couldn't explain.

“Hennity!” Venez’s voice hissed in his ear, shaking Keel from his dark reverie as he realized he had been drifting off target and out of the large green arrow that they were following toward the planet. He adjusted quickly, and Tobin informed them that they were approaching their target: a collection of squat metal buildings on an icy plain, with what appeared to be the wedge of a black-and-silver Marine ship parked nearby.

Keel felt his suit being buffeted just a little as they tore through the shreds of an atmosphere and then he could see the icy plains ahead of him. Whichever planetoid this was, it was little more than hardened ice. Even the distant mountains looked to be made of cerulean shards.

“Ready for land!” Tobin said.

Keel and the others flared their arms up and raised their knees. Tobin hit the ice plain first, then Venez, and then Keel. They bounded into three giant steps across the plain, reaching their floating red marker.

This time, the ice didn't splinter, but it did crunch. It felt as hard as steel, Keel thought as he bounded in the zero-gee to Tobin's side.

"Okay, where are—" he began, but then he saw that Tobin was standing perfectly still, looking in the opposite direction. Keel followed his gaze to see a line of approaching figures.

It was the Twelfth.

THE TWELFTH'S MISSION

THE TWELFTH WAS ALSO a squad of just six Imperial Marines, and they wore the same generation of power suits as Keel and the others, but somehow, they were totally different.

Their suits bore telltale marks of repair—finer lines of brighter solder or small patches that hadn't been beaten back into shape. There were also more personalized marks, such as a parade of crosshatch hairs across the greaves of one, or a trio of red droplets painted on the breastplate of another. These were the signs of battles fought and friends lost.

They were also completely silent as they approached, waiting for Fire Team Two to land and stand in a line behind Tobin until they finally addressed them.

“Come. We start now. Keep your sensors sharp and make no movement unless ordered. Understood?” one of them said. The floating marker over his head read ‘CAPTAIN JORGEN.’

At that, the Twelfth turned around and marched across the plain as the 3-3 suits updated.

/ Target 3. Guard patrol with 1-2 Squad.

“Wow. They really are a barrel of laughs, aren't they?” Keel whispered to

Tobin as he broke into a bounding stride after them.

One of the Twelfth flinched and looked back in his direction. Keel saw a glimmer of life behind the Marine's visor and realized that they had eyes. This Soul had a body. A real biological body.

He immediately wanted to ask about it. Was it their own body, remade? Was it better than their old one? What was it like, after being a robot for so long?

The look the Marine of the Twelfth gave him was colder than ice, and it certainly said that they didn't want to chat—or any chatter at all, apparently.

Okay, I get the memo. Keel fell silent as they continued over the icy landscape, their boots crunching against the frozen planet. Two lines of killing machines heading toward... Where?

They crossed the plain quickly and headed away from the buildings. At first, Keel thought they were heading toward the shard-like mountains, but then something flashed in the murk at the base of the hills.

What was that!? There was another flash of something iridescent, like a sheen of oil against the dark ice.

It was the light from the stars, or even their suits, catching against something, Keel thought as they bounded closer. The Marines of the Twelfth started to slow as the objects ahead became clearer.

Pillars?

The Twelfth formed into two groups of three, just like the 3-3. With a wave of his hand and an update to their suits, Captain Jorgen directed the 3-3 to stand in a loose perimeter around the site, with the two groups of the Twelfth Marines in their middle, standing before two giant, silver pillars.

They were widely spaced, which made Keel a little nervous. The pillars also made him a little nervous, because he had never seen their like before.

They stood easily twice the height of any Marine and appeared to be made of a metal that shone iridescently whenever the light caught it. As Keel studied it, he could see no obvious sign of construction, but he could see places where the pillars looked whorled and whirled.

/ Scanning...UNKNOWN POWER SOURCE

Keel's suit updated as his targeting vector tried to focus on the pillars, but it started jitterbugging and jumping.

“What does unknown power source mean?” Keel whispered.

“*Silence in the ranks!* I told you to stand guard and not move. Do not speak. Do not turn your head. Do *nothing!*” the captain roared.

Keel wondered if this was going to go down as insubordination. This guy was worse than Major Ovid. He stood there staring straight ahead at these strange pillars as the Marines of the Twelfth got to work.

They watched as the more experienced Marines moved in their two fire teams, each one taking small components from their belts and attaching them at the base of each pillar.

Are those...explosives? Keel thought. His targeting sights were on the small, silver devices, but his sensors wouldn't operate so close to the strange pillars. He wondered if this was a new type of mineral, like diamant, that the Imperium had found, way out here on the edge of the galaxy.

Maybe that is why this is so secretive, and why such an important squad is here... Perhaps this was a discovery that would change the face of the Imperium forever?

The Marines of the Twelfth stepped back, and Keel got a better look at the devices. They were no bigger than a fist, connected with wires around both of the pillars. They didn't look like explosives to him.

Captain Jorgen waved the other Marines back, but he stepped forward, raising a hand and swiping several times. He must have been using holo-controls that only he could see.

After a moment, both pillars started to pulse. Keel saw sparkles of static race up them, and the iridescent metal began to shimmer with something almost like plasma light.

What is happening!? This was some kind of experiment? Some new technology that the Imperium was testing out?

But then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the glow faded, and the pillars returned to their remarkable but not shining state.

What was that all about? Keel waited, expecting something—an explosion, a sparkle, a flicker of a reaction—but there was nothing.

The Marines of the Twelfth reformed into two lines and stood patiently. They waited.

And waited. And waited.

Nothing happened. The pillars did not shine again. Captain Jorgen and the Twelfth still stood patiently, heads forward, and it seemed that the Marines of the 33rd were to do the same.

It's lucky I don't feel fatigue, isn't it? Keel thought as time passed. Keel was certain that at least a regular hour passed, but he couldn't be sure.

He was just about certain they were going to call this weirdness off, when abruptly, static energy raced up the pillar. It again started to glow with its iridescent plasma light.

This time, Captain Jorgen hadn't initiated it.

The glow grew brighter, and Keel could feel the energy radiating from the pillars and buffeting his suit. It became difficult to stay standing.

WARNING!

Something small and incredibly fast struck the pillar base nearest to Keel, and there was a blinding flash of light. Keel, and the two nearest Marines to the right of the pillar, were thrown back by the blast, hitting the ice as voices burst out across their suits.

UNKNOWN SENDER...

“Stand down! You're abominations! Endangering all of humanity! Stop this madness now!”

Keel was on the floor, but he rolled, grabbing his pulse rifle as he slid into a

crouch.

“Team check!” he called as he swung around, seeing that the righthand pillar still stood, but its weird glow had vanished. Around its base was a crater in the ice, with the small metal objects burst open.

Someone had fired a pulse rocket at it, or a missile, Keel was sure as he turned to see who was attacking them.

Oh, frack.

There were figures racing across the ice headlands that rose over the pillars. They were bulky, compact, humanoid figures, and Keel saw glints of bronze, rust, and dark green.

Camouflage.

No. It can't be, he thought as his mind caught up with what he was seeing. It was them, but it was more of them. They looked like the rogue Marine that had attacked him on the training planet.

The ones that Sula had warned him about.

“Defensive positions! Return fire!” Captain Jorgen shouted as plasma blasts shot past Keel, coming from the Twelfth.

“Keel!?” It was Tobin’s voice, several meters away where he was crouched against the ice. He was the commander, but he was asking Keel what to do.

This wasn’t an exercise anymore. This was live fire.

“Stay alive!” Keel hissed, bringing up his rifle and sighting at the first of the figures bounding down the slopes toward them.

How many?

There had to be at least seven. With their two squads, the Twelfth and the 3-3 had almost double their number.

“Wall of fire. Burst on my mark,” Keel said.

Tobin relayed the command to the rest of the 3-3ers.

The attacking rogues were leaping and spinning, somersaulting and jackknifing, through the air as they bounded in the low gravity. They looked to be using their suits like acrobats.

“Mark!” Keel whispered. He and every other 3-3er pulled the trigger on their pulse rifles.

Six multi-shots erupted in a cloud of energy that threw itself toward the enemy. Keel winged one of the rogue Marines as he spun, sending him flying to one side. Another rogue went down, hitting the ice and rolling, but many of the shots missed their wildly moving opponents.

“Don’t let them in the circle! Eliminate the traitors!” Captain Jorgen ordered.

They fired at will, plasma lighting up the ice and streaking through the air to miss more rogues than they hit.

“*YOU MUST STOP! THESE ARE ALL LIES!*” one of the rogue Marines bellowed, and Keel was sure that he recognized the voice. Even robots had personalized voice modifiers, approximating their human voices.

It was him. The one who had challenged Keel before. Keel saw him now, the one with the tattered rags of a cape about his shoulders and a power suit that was several generations out of date.

“Eliminate them now!” Captain Jorgen shouted as the Twelfth fired.

This time, it was Tobin who called the command. “Mark!”

They fired another burst of fire, but this time, Keel fired high. There was something wrong here, something terribly wrong. None of these so-called rogue Marines had fired a shot at them yet. Not at the 3-3ers, only at the Twelfth. Not one had attempted to kill the new squad, even though they had their rifles and an array of personal combat blades and axes out.

“Tobin—” Keel began, just before his entire vision glitched with static.

What!?

*WARNING...UNKNOWN POWER SOURCE
WARNING*

THE JAALI

WHAT IS HAPPENING!? Keel thought as his suit updated with strange error messages. Had these rogue Marines done something? Used some sort of interference weapon?

“Look up!” It was Venez, who had rolled into a crouch and was pointing up with his rifle. Keel realized something was happening in low orbit over the planet.

Happening right over their heads.

There was a strange flare of plasma up there, but instead of all of the deep colors of the rainbow, these flares were curiously lighter in tone. Keel saw white, silver, and shades of brilliance he had no time for but glitched his sensors whenever he looked at it.

It was forming a brilliant corona, expanding outward into an elliptical shape.

“It’s too late! They’ve summoned them! The Jaali are here!” the rogue Marine leader—for that was what Keel thought he was—shouted as he and the rest of the advancing unit suddenly fell back, jumping and spinning as the Twelfth stopped firing.

“Fall back! Back to positions!” Captain Jorgen shouted, but the Marines of the 3-3 were disorientated and confused.

“Keel? What the frack is going on!?” Tobin whispered, now closer to him.

The pair remained crouching. Keel still had his rifle in his hands, scanning between the retreating rogues and the glowing light in the sky.

“I don’t know, Tobin, but I don’t like it. Not one bit. Those attackers, I think, were trying to stop this from happening,” Keel said.

“I said fall back to positions!” Captain Jorgen shouted again, but all eyes were on the plasma flare above them.

And the ship that was emerging through it.

“Holy, sweet, ever-loving stars,” Keel murmured.

THE SHIP that emerged into their galaxy was unlike any that Keel had ever seen, and he was convinced that it had not been made by human hands.

It looked vaguely like some sort of fish—an elongated body with a rising spike on the top that turned into a fan shape, with two more on either side like flippers or fins.

The entire thing was made of shining metals that Keel had never seen before, but he knew the colors were similar to the strange pillars they crouched near. He was sure they had to have the same origin. He just had no idea what that was.

The ship was huge, easily the size of the *Judgment*, even if it wasn’t as wide. It hovered and slowly descended, growing bigger and bigger in the skies. Keel saw tiny lights dotted all along his surface, but he didn’t know if he was looking at portholes or a ship’s system.

“Fall back to your positions, Emperor curse you!” Captain Jorgen hissed as he and his fire teams resumed their line in front of the pillars, heads craned up.

“Come on, we’d better do it,” Tobin whispered, although he shot a look to the icy highlands to see that the rogue Marines had vanished. Something told Keel that he should be running like they had, not standing around under the weight of that vast alien vessel, but he didn’t.

The rest of my squad are scared and confused, Keel realized. Even if he had never formed a deep friendship with most of them, thanks to his Dracisian heritage, he had still trained and exercised with all of them for months.

“Positions,” Keel whispered. He stood slowly and cautiously made his way back to where he’d been standing before. Above him, a fiercely bright light appeared in the underbelly of the craft.

Don’t just stand there! That could be anything! A death ray! An obliteration device! Anything! All of his instincts screamed at him.

The light hit the pillars, and it was as brilliant as staring straight into the sun. Keel swore he saw a shimmer inside of it, like heat...

Then the brilliant light was fading, and Keel was looking at figures standing before the pillars. Humanoid figures. Keel counted nine of them. They were tall, elongated, and—much to Keel’s surprise—all appeared to have long, prehensile tails.

Excuse me but what the frack?

That was a teleport. He realized that he had just witnessed an actual, real-life teleportation of living, humanoid people, right here in front of him.

The problem was that everyone—every human, anyway—knew that teleportation was impossible at scale. Sure, you could teleport atoms, or the subatomic parts of atoms. That was the basis of much of the Imperium’s quantum computing, and what had given rise to their plasma and field technology.

But teleportation didn’t work at scale. The sorts of forces required to be able to use it were insane, and it was rumored that only the emperor had been able to have some sort of limited teleportation in his private domain of Solas, which was an entire manmade moon made of plasma generators.

However, in this moment, Keel had just witnessed these nine forms do things out of fantasy...or nightmares.

The figures were dressed head to toe—and tail tip—in a silver armor that curved upward at their shoulders and atop their heads in flaring, fluted helmets. In their hands, they each held long, pike-like objects. When they

stepped forward, they did so with a strange, alien grace that made Keel uncomfortable. It was like watching the way a spider moved.

“These are aliens...actual, stars-damned aliens,” Keel heard Venez murmur on his left as the group flowed with their strange grace to form a perfect wedge, with one at the front, facing the two lines of the Twelfth.

ERROR! UNKNOWN SIGNAL...

Keel’s suit glitched again when the lead alien stepped forward and addressed Captain Jorgen. His words overrode any technology that was foreign to it and communicated directly into all of their suits.

“I am War Elder Uleek, of the Jaali. We have traveled a long way to be here,” they said.

Keel knew that his sensors weren’t hearing English, or any human language at all, but there was something about the alien signal interfacing with his suit that translated it automatically. His mind still rebelled. It was an odd, unsettling feeling.

“War Elder Uleek, I am Captain Jorgen of the Imperial Marines First Army, representing his most gracious Emperor Mikhael the Thirteenth, defender of humanity, light of civilization,” Jorgen said flatly.

Keel wondered if he was even impressed at all by what they had just witnessed.

Drones, Keel remembered. He had thought that the rogue Marine had been talking about the robot Marines, which he was one. Maybe he meant what happened to a Marine after they went through enough strategy sessions like the Captain Jorgen must have.

There was a hissing sound over the comms, and it was coming from Uleek.

Is he...laughing? Keel wondered.

“Civilization,” War Elder Uleek stated. His voice, whether it was the suit’s interpretation or no, sounded to be dripping with sarcasm. “Your emperor is not here personally, then. Not in the ship in orbit. Not in your...settlement

over there?” The word ‘settlement’ was similarly sardonic.

“Obviously not. The emperor does not leave the center,” the captain said, almost like a mantra. “We are here to discuss terms. A parlay between our two great cultures. Since learning of your existence, the emperor is keen to explore how we can benefit —”

The alien war elder twitched, silver-tipped tail flicking. “Your emperor, *your* emperor, your *emperor!* I don’t want to hear of what he wants to explore, unless it is a complete and utter commitment to destroying the abomination you have brought into the universe!” Uleek snarled. There was an answering hiss from the other eight aliens behind him.

This, at least, appeared to rattle Jorgen a little as he took a half-step back and moved his hands to his side. Keel knew it wasn’t alarm, however. He was readying into a fighting stance.

What!? What are you doing? Don’t threaten the alien species that can teleport through the universe, you fool! Keel thought. The rogue Marines had been right. Whatever this was, it was a big mistake.

“Be careful what you say. The emperor is a god, and we have brought no abomination,” Jorgen said. The Twelfth behind him moved at once to bring up their rifles and point them at the enemy.

“Wait!” Keel whispered. He looked at Tobin, Venez, and the others, but they all looked uncertain about what they should do.

“You insult life! You resurrect the dead and store them in a...a computer! You give them new bodies! You allow the dead to control the living!” Uleek hissed.

Oh, frack. He’s talking about us. About the House of Records. About the Imperial Marines! Keel swayed a little where he stood.

“When we heard of your race, we studied you, and we waited. We thought you would change your ways—become cultured, reasonable—but you have not. If your emperor will not submit to our demand, then I, War Elder Uleek of the Jaali, have to restore balance to the galaxy.” Every one of the Jaali lowered their pikes at the Marines. “I will destroy your species and your sins.”

What! What!? Keel raised his rifle, as did the other 3-3ers. This was not going well. This was not going well at all...

For a moment, nothing happened. No movement between the two groups as they stood with their weapons pointed at each other.

Then, Captain Jorgen of the Twelfth spoke.

“You have insulted the emperor. You will leave this system, or we will understand that as an act of war.”

“Wait!” Keel burst out. Surely there had to be another way, didn’t there?

For the Jaali, apparently, there wasn’t.

They didn’t give any more warnings or ultimatums. They simply started firing.

TO SAVE A SPECIES

THE JAALI pikes burst with burning purple energy, sending bolts straight ahead a moment before the Marines started firing.

Keel saw the bolts hammer into the Twelfth's ranks first, and he saw two of the six lifted off the ground and flung back through the air.

"Fire!" Keel shouted, dropping to his knees as he pulled the trigger. He sent three bolts of burning plasma toward the Jaali...only to see them hammer into an energy wall, rippling inches from their bodies. The impact was enough to send the Jaali stumbling back, but every time one of their plasma blasts hit, it merely pushed them back. It didn't wound them.

No! Keel gasped in frustration as the three Jaali who had managed to hold their position fired into the Twelfth once more, and then they were moving. They moved with such speed that Keel almost thought they were teleporting.

"Concentrate fire! Maybe we can overcome their fields!" Keel managed to shout before there was a flicker, and suddenly, there was a snarling alien standing right in front of him. It was taller than he was by almost six inches and was swinging the silver pike straight at Keel's head.

Keel allowed his hip and knee to drop as he hit the ground and rolled, the alien pike sailing harmlessly through the air. His old instincts kicked in, and he lashed up and out with his foot.

“Oof!”

The butt of that same pike was planted in his belly in a fiercely savage blow.

WARNING!

/ Suit Damage: Breastplate 80%

In the low gravity, Keel went spinning head over heels as the plasma and energy battle raged beneath him.

He heard screams over his suit sensors. Human screams. His squad.

He kicked his legs to control his jets and hit the surface just in time to see Jamieson’s arm being cut from its suit.

“No!”

The Marines of the Twelfth weren’t faring much better—two of their number had been cut apart—but Keel saw that two of the Jaali were also down, taking a constant bombardment of combined rifle power. They were hammered into the ground and let out blood-curdling screeches. It appeared that their fields could be overcome.

We can do this. It’s still nine against seven! Keel thought just before there was another flicker and the same Jaali he’d been fighting was leaping toward him, his pike coming down once more.

Keel had a fighter’s instincts. There was a part of his brain that remembered fighting with handheld weapons. He didn’t bother to get out the way, but instead fired his rockets with one fist as he slammed himself forward, hitting the Jaali warrior and driving him down. They skidded across the ice, crunching and tearing and scraping as they went.

The alien warrior was strong, very strong. Keel did his best to wrap one arm around his form and crush him while the other hand held onto the enemy’s pike. His pulse rifle was dropped and forgotten, spinning through the air as he grappled with the Jaali and exerted as much power as he hoped he had.

STRENGTH MANAGEMENT SYSTEM / Additional Strength

Keel felt the servos and mechanisms whirl and click into place around his body, and he felt the alien's suit start to crunch. The being within it screeched, but it was very tough.

Mind over matter. Mind over matter! Keel demanded more of himself. Then, the words of the rogue Marine came back to him.

I'm still thinking like a biological.

The pair were still speeding and scraping across the ice, powered by Keel's rocket suit. They were tumbling further away from the pillars and the deadly battle raging behind them.

The alien screeched again, unwilling to let go of its pike as it tore at Keel's suit with one silver-encased hand. Even though the alien appeared more slender than he was, Keel's pauldron went flinging away from his body, and he felt that electric shock of mental pain just before the alien dug its clawed glove into the top of his shoulder parts instead.

/ Suit Damage: Left Pauldron: 0%

/ Suit Damage: Shoulder Servos: 55%

Mind over fracking matter...

There was no reason he wasn't stronger. No reason, as a robot, that he couldn't break iron bars with his bare fists. He shouldn't feel any pain. He should be unstoppable.

Keel snarled and ripped the pike free from the alien's grip with one mighty wrench as he spun, hitting the ice. They sailed away from each other, with Keel shedding sparks from his ruined shoulder.

Now, he had the alien's weapon and twisted it around, pointed it at the enemy, and fired.

A powerful deep-purple blast flew forward, striking the alien as it swung around toward him. The shot tore a hole straight through the Jaali.

"Boo-yah!" Keel howled. The aliens were vulnerable to their own weapons, it seemed.

“The pillars! You have to destroy the pillars!” came a voice behind him, and he swiveled around to see that he was not alone out here on the dark plain.

It was the rogue Marine—the one that had attacked him and had attacked them. Or had attacked the pillars.

“Freeze! Who are you?” Keel said, his boots hitting the icy floor of the planet as he leveled the alien pike at the rogue.

“Your friends are being ripped apart as we speak. There is no time for this!” the rogue Marine hissed, pointing at the plasma battle behind them.

Fair point. Keel turned and saw that there were others joining the battle now. The other rogue Marines were attempting to fire on the Jaali, and the 3-3ers had been forced to one side in a defensive ring.

Jamieson was floating in the air, as was Sabo. Tobin was half-lying on the floor, and that just left Lafferty and Venez, standing over Tobin’s body.

“Defend your commander!” Venez roared, but he didn’t mean Jorgen. He meant Tobin, Keel realized.

The Twelfth wasn’t doing well either. Of the six that had begun this mission, at least four were dead. Only Captain Jorgen and one other still battled against two of the Jaali.

The influx of the rogues had almost doubled the human numbers, and that helped to keep the Jaali pinned, their shields crackling, but they were losing fast, too.

“The pillars, fool! That’s their power source! That’s their connection to this galaxy!” the rogue Marine was saying as he crouched, raised his rifle, and started firing careful, single shots at the pillar, careful not to hit any Marine.

“How do you know this? Who are you!?” Keel said, copying the rogue’s position as he raised the pike.

“Orpheus. That’s all you need to know. Now, fire!”

Keel fired.

Bolt after bolt of burning purple energy launched from the alien pike to fling

itself at the silver pillars. He saw them crackle and spark with static.

The base! He remembered the devices that had blown up before—the silver orbs and contraption at the base. He changed his position, knowing he had to fire freehand as his targeting sight was useless against the alien structures.

“There you are... There you are... There...” Keel whispered. He saw a glint of steel in the middle of the battle. “But the others!” he said, seeing Venez turning and firing bolt after bolt of plasma energy at the Jaali warriors that ran at him. Around him was a litter of friends. “Three-Three-ers! Get back! Retreat!” he shouted.

Lafferty flinched, grabbing Tobin and Sabo’s metal bodies.

“They either die now or when the rest of the Jaali get here!” Orpheus hissed, and Keel knew he was right. There was an entire alien warship hanging over their heads, after all.

He fired.

The bolts of purple hit the strange contraption, and whether it was the alien weapon or the damage that the pillars had already suffered, there came a brilliant white flash. Keel was looking into a ball of terrible white light, slowly expanding over everyone, before it suddenly shot forward.

“No!” Keel shouted for the rest of his squad, but it was already too late. The force wave hit him and sent him spinning backward through the air.

WARNING!

/ Suit Damage: All Areas

EPILOGUE

REBUILT, REBORN

SUIT REBOOT...

IMPERIAL MARINE: 3-3 / (PVT) HENNITY, KEEL

/ All Systems Reboot...

FOR A MOMENT, all Keel saw was darkness that he was floating in.

“Oh, so it looks like I’m dead again?” he murmured. He didn’t even hear the sound of his own voice. Perhaps he had been uploaded into Deep Storage, back in the House of Records.

Or perhaps this was what death was like—just an eternity of nothing.

“Keel!? Keel!”

Then came a voice, a woman’s voice, and it was one that he recognized.

“Sula?” Keel asked. He looked around, but all he could see was black.

“Thank the stars, we have him. I’ll reinitiate the Soul retrieval again. Maybe this time...” Sula was saying, and her words didn’t exactly fill him with confidence.

He felt something—like a glitch, a headache—and then his vision was returning. He was looking up at the bright LED strip lights of a room.

“Where...” he began, but suddenly Sula’s face appeared, superimposed over

the upper righthand corner.

“Mercy be, we’ve got you. I’ll tell the engineers you’re back. You’re on the Judgment, and you’re speeding back to the Inner Systems,” she said urgently, her face still looking worried.

The others... Keel’s metal heart clenched. *“My squad. Tobin, Venez. Sabo... I saw Sabo get torn apart —”*

“They’re fine. Well, they’re not actually. Sabo is being rebuilt as we speak, as is Jamieson, Lafferty...everyone, really. But their Souls are safe, at least. They’ll have new bodies and will return to duty,” she said firmly, although she winced a little at the last word.

Keel remembered the glowing, alien pillars, and he remembered seeing the vast Jaali warship in the sky.

“But...how did we get out of there? The Jaali were right there!” he said.

Sula shook her head. *“Okay, I shouldn’t tell you this, I should wait for your briefing, but I will, because you deserve to know. What you did saved a lot of people out there, Keel. A lot of Souls,”* she said. Keel could tell she was proud of him.

“Huh?” Keel asked. All he thought he’d done was blow up his own squad. How did that count as anything to be proud of?

“You reacted quickly, and you destroyed the power link between the surface of the planet and the Jaali warship. We don’t really understand it all yet, and the information is highly classified, but it seems that those pillar things? And the orbs? The Imperium has known about them, studied them, for a while. They seem to be a portal, or an energy source, for the Jaali to jump to our galaxy,” she explained.

Our galaxy, Keel thought. He had fought aliens from another galaxy. He had actually seen, and fought, aliens.

“These Jaali are from another galaxy?” Keel whispered. That was insane. There was no way that anyone, any civilization, could ever reach another galaxy. The distances were just too far apart.

Sula nodded. *“We believe so. I am trying to find out more, but the evidence is buried so deep that even I, a Recorder of the House of Records, is having trouble finding out about it.”*

At this, the young woman looked understandably annoyed.

“But I think the Imperium has received messages, or clues to their existence. The Jaali left a trail for us to follow, leading us to the pillars, and to recovering the orbs. At least, that is my guess. But that technology was only a way for them to jump, use a form of wormhole or plasma technology that we have no name for, to get to our galaxy. As soon as you destroyed it, the Jaali warship flew out of there. The Marine Corps is hunting for it even now.”

“It’s still here, in our galaxy?” Keel asked, suddenly shocked. It could be anywhere, and if it had soldiers and capabilities like that, with personal forcefields and teleportation devices, they could do untold damage ...

“I think so, I don’t know, but it’s only one ship. I think that is why it ran away. It must have realized that we outnumbered it thousands, millions, to one. Even the Jaali don’t fancy those odds, right?” Sula said with a savage grin.

“Hm.” Keel nodded, feeling like he wanted to see the rest of his squad, see if they were alright. He moved his legs, finding that he was in his regular metal suit, but he was clamped to a repair hammock.

“Wait a minute, Keel. One more thing,” Sula said urgently. *“Something else happened down there too. You faced them, the Orpheus Brigade. Your signal went off just as it did before...”*

Orpheus... Keel thought of the strange, rogue Marine who had tried to stop Captain Jorgen and the Twelfth from opening the portal or gate. He remembered that this Orpheus Brigade hadn’t tried to attack the 3-3ers at all, and they had even helped them against the Jaali.

Without them, we’d all be dead, he thought. There was something else going on here, some politics or conspiracy that he didn’t like.

“Look. Whatever happened, you cannot admit that they helped you at all. Even that they existed to most regular citizens. The Orpheus Brigade are downloaded Souls, Imperial Marines, who have...gone rogue. They mean to

bring down the House of Records, the library of Souls itself!” Sula said. “They present one of the gravest threats to the Imperium way of life, as we rely on our library of Souls for guidance, teaching, and experience...”

“But isn’t that exactly what the Jaali want? They hate humanity because of our Souls, too,” Keel pointed out. He didn’t understand how the Orpheus Brigade could have helped them, and yet the Jaali wanted to kill them.

Sula grimaced. *“The Orpheus Brigade are a threat. To the Imperium. That is all you or any of us need to know.”*

It was Keel’s turn to grimace. He knew that he wasn’t being told something here, he just didn’t understand what.

Before he could question her further, the door whisked open and in marched several Marines that he knew: Major Ovid, Tobin, and Venez.

“Hennity! We just received word from your guide that you’re back with us. That was quick thinking up there, and I fully expect that the emperor himself will want to reward you. There may even be a rank!” Ovid said in his roaring, booming voice.

“A body? Do I get a biological body?” Keel asked at once. That was what the Marines of the Twelfth had, after all...before it looked like they were wiped out.

Major Ovid stiffened. “That, I cannot say. And don’t be so quick to abandon your current construct. The reason you and your squad-mates are alive right now is because you are downloaded into this machine.”

Hm. Keel knew the major was right, but he would still rather have preferred a body.

“But I can offer you this. All of the Three-Three-ers will almost certainly be promoted to private first class, and I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you are offered even better!” the major said, as Keel nodded his thanks.

“Through darkness, through fire,” Tobin said as his head turned to Keel, offering his hand.

There was a pause, and then Venez raised his hand to join Tobin's. “Through

darkness, through fire,” he said.

Keel looked at them, his unlikely fire team, where they stood before him in their new, shining metal bodies. He hadn't thought that they would survive at all, let alone seem to forge a bond in battle and plasma fire.

“Through darkness, through fire,” Keel said, raising his own hand to join theirs.

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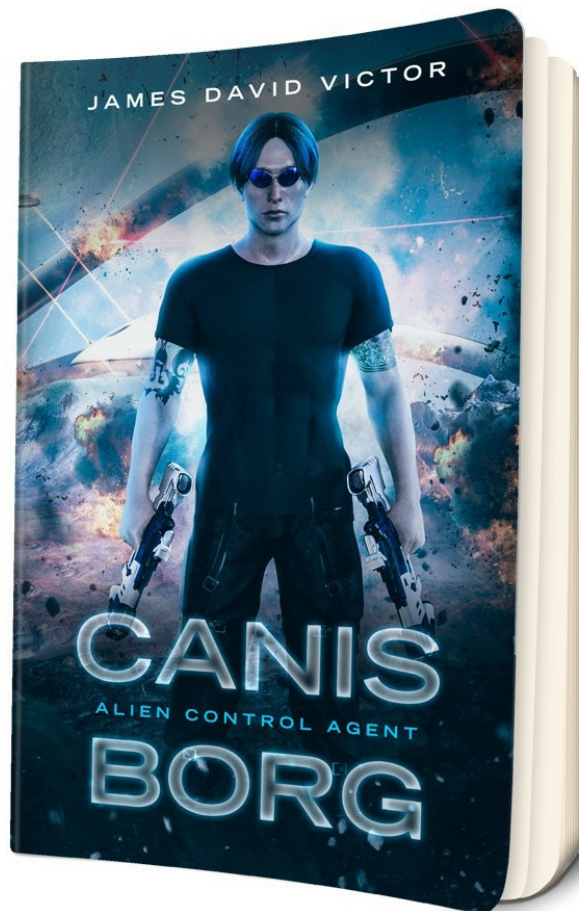
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