

“The Chaplain’s Legacy” © 2013 by Brad R. Torgersen (first appearance:
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The Chaplain’s Legacy

Chapter 1

“Chief Barlow,” said the female voice through the wooden door.

Lost in thought, I didn’t answer right away.

She cleared her throat, and tried again. “Warrant Officer Harrison Barlow?”

I sighed, and slowly got up from my seat at my desk in the tiny pastor’s quarters of my chapel.

She’d called me Chief. I wasn’t used to the new rank. There had been a time when I’d happily watched my military days fade into memory. But the recent return of Earth ships to Purgatory orbit meant that many of us former prisoners of war had again been pressed into service—whether we wanted our old jobs back, or not.

I was a prior enlisted man. They could have just slapped my stripes back on me. But my apparently pivotal role—as interlocutor between humanity, and our former enemies, the mantes aliens—had necessitated something a bit more lofty.

Not like I needed the shiny silver bar on my collar. I commanded no one. The chapel, built with my own hands in the early days of my former captivity, had never needed any hierarchy. I’d constructed the place in the

spirit intended by its original designer, Chaplain Thomas: *all are equal in God's sight*.

I'd have refused promotion if I'd thought Fleet Command was giving me a choice.

I opened the door.

She was young, with a startlingly beautiful face. I guessed Nile Egyptian heritage, but with something else mixed in. Not European. Southeast Asian, perhaps? Her fluent use of commercial English—that hoary old offshoot of British and American English which had dominated international human affairs for hundreds of years—gave me no hint of her nation of origin.

I looked at the captain's clusters on her collar, and tipped my head.

"Ma'am, what may I do for you at this early hour?"

"General Sakumora sent me," she said, her wide eyes staring up at me.

"And of what use may I be to the General?"

"You're the one who brokered the original cease-fire," she said. "The General is hoping you can do so again."

An instant prickling of alarm went up my spine.

"Have the mantes attacked?" I asked, not blinking.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

"What does that mean?"

"Nobody told you what's happening?"

"Ma'am, in spite of my appointment and what this starchy new uniform might indicate, I'm just a chaplain's assistant. Nobody tells me much of anything. Certainly I don't pretend to understand what Fleet Command worries about when it goes to bed at night. All I care about are the people still here, on this planet."

"And the mantes converts who come to you for religious indoctrination," she said.

"Instruction," I corrected her. "And it's not even anything so formal as that. You ought to know as well as anyone, if you've earned your commission recently, that the mantes are an utterly atheistic people. They cannot even conceive of a God, nor a soul, nor do they understand anything about Earth's varied and flavorful religious history."

Flavorful. A deliberate euphemism on my part. The mantis university Professor who'd first approached me ten Purgatorial years earlier, to study Earth's major systems of belief, had often used that word to describe our faiths. He'd considered them fascinating—a key to the utterly alien mentality

of the human being. If the mantes had thoughtlessly obliterated other species, each of them also displaying the telltales of belief, the insectoids had stopped short at exterminating humanity.

Thanks to me.

In a moment of desperate inspiration, with the fate of all mankind seemingly on the line, I'd been the one to make the bargain: in exchange for the survival of humanity, I would do all I could to assist the Professor—and his students—in studying and understanding religion.

But that had been a long time ago. The Professor, and most of his students, had gone. As had many of my parishioners, once the ships from Earth returned and it became possible for humans to go home again.

I'd chosen to remain. Despite Purgatory's hard, arid climate and the chapel's crude rock-and-mud-walled simplicity. A part of me had become invested in this place. I looked over the lovely young officer's shoulder to the chapel's lone altar, where various human religious symbols and objects were carefully placed for all to see. This early in the morning I had no flock to attend to. But soon they'd begin to trickle in, a few here and a few there. Most of them human. But not all.

"It's the mantes' difficulty with religion that brings me here now," she said. "It's been a long time since the armistice. Fleet stealth missions indicate that the mantes are moving some of their own ships. Renewed battle exercises. The truce you won may not last much longer. Not unless someone can help the mantes get what they came here for. From you specifically."

I laughed coldly.

"I labored with the Professor," I said. "For years. He read every last line of holy text I could put in front of him. The Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, you name it. He soaked it up like a sponge. We engaged in various rituals, both for demonstration and also to see if he'd take to any of them. But he was as deaf to the spirit as the next mantis. They're all like that—biologically incapable of feeling what you and I might call faith. The Professor eventually withdrew in confused futility."

"What about the ones who still attend?"

"They are young," I said. "Grad students. They come to the chapel for objective study, no more. Working on their equivalent of thesis papers, probably."

"General Sakumora was adamant. You must help."

I wanted to keep protesting, but the earnestness in her expression told me that there wouldn't be any point. I reached a hand up and felt the non-regulation stubble on my face. I hated shaving every day. But it looked like I was going to have to start again.

"Orders are orders, ma'am?" I said, straightening my duty topcoat.

"That's right, Chief," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. And if it's all the same to you, nobody around here calls me that."

"Then what do they call you?"

"Padre. One of my former parishioners hung that on me shortly after the cease-fire."

"Father Barlow," she said, testing it out.

"No," I said sheepishly, "just padre."

"Well, *padre*, I'm putting us on the next flight into orbit. The General is getting ready for a summit with his counterparts in the mantis chain of command. You and I have both been instructed to cooperate in every way—to ensure that the summit is productive."

"Are you part of the Chaplains Corps?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Fleet Intelligence."

I repressed the urge to scoff. If the military's blind hurling of the original human flotillas against Purgatory's impervious mantis defenders had been any indication, intelligence was the one thing we'd been sorely lacking.

"I don't think it will do any good," I admitted. "I tried to tell the Professor, when he started to give up hope. If mantis curiosity about human faith is the only thing holding back their war machine, then our fates truly do rest in God's hands."

Chapter 2

It had been a long time since I'd ridden a shuttle. I forgot they don't come with gravity. I almost threw up my breakfast when we hit space. I spent the ride—to the awaiting frigate—turning several shades of green. Once onboard the mothercraft I breathed a great breath of relief, then gratefully took a small hand towel from the Captain and mopped the perspiration from my face.

The young marines who'd ridden up with us, they seemed to find me funny. Until they saw my expression, and rank. They snapped to as I walked past.

I guess being the Chief is good for a few things after all?

The Captain—whom I'd learned to address by the last name of Adanaho—gave me 20 minutes to clean up in the frigate's cramped guest officers' quarters. As an enlisted man, I'd only ever gotten bay accommodations. Zero privacy. My little single-man compartment seemed palatial by comparison.

The hair on my cheeks and neck came off, and a fresh undershirt and topcoat came on. Then I used the tiny computer guide in my newly-issued PDA to walk me through the frigate's innards—to the command deck, where I was to meet Adanaho's boss.

Fleet was unique in the history of modern human warfare in that it blended all of the traditional branches—air, sea, land, and now space—into a unified whole, with a unified hierarchy. No more confusion over rank. A captain was a captain, a lieutenant was a lieutenant, and a sergeant was a sergeant. Admirals, commanders, and petty officers lived only in the history books.

Sakumora was a short, muscular, stern-faced flag officer who neither smiled, nor offered any pleasantries as I entered the room. Two lieutenants attended to his needs, while the Captain sat at his side, and two marines guarded opposite corners of the space. Against what, I had no idea. But protocol was protocol, and some things never change.

"Sir," I said, approaching his desk and saluting, "Serg-ahhh, I mean, Warrant Officer Barlow, reporting as ordered."

"Sit down," was all he said.

I took a chair which had been offered to me by one of the General's attaches. For the first time, I noticed the Captain's expression. Her eyes were turned down and staring at the space in front of my knees.

"I'll get to the point," said Sakumora gruffly. "We've got compelling evidence that the mantes are building strength for a renewed offensive. Everybody knows the generalities of what you did here, on this little dustball of a world. I've reviewed the records, your own file, and the reports given to me by my officers who've been to Purgatory. There was never any guarantee that the mantes would hold off on their so-called Fourth Expansion indefinitely. I'm afraid time's up."

My feet and hands went cold.

When the Professor had first come to me, the entire human population of Purgatory had been sealed behind an energy barrier that was lethal on contact. The mantes had been using it to slowly annihilate us when the Professor—through what passed for a higher education network in mantis culture—had effected a compromise: as long as he and his fellows in mantis academia needed humans for cultural study, the mantes as a whole would delay the annihilation of humans on Purgatory, as well as their planned final conquest of human space.

If the General was correct, the academic stay had been overruled, and humanity's reprieve was drawing to a close.

So far as I knew, we were as defenseless as ever. The mantes were a much older and technologically superior race. Human ships and weapons amounted to little against mantis shields. For the sake of morale, when the war had been hot, the Fleet hadn't broadly revealed its numerous and inevitable defeats—human colonies seized by the mantes and cleansed of all 'competitive' life. Only after the armistice and the Fleet's slow return did anyone come clean about the truth.

I cleared my throat.

"What do you expect me to do about it, sir?"

"Do what you did before," he said matter-of-fact. "Get this collective of . . . scholars, or whatever they are, to talk to their political leadership. Stage protests. Sit-ins. *Anything* that can hold the mantes for a few more years."

"Assuming I could do it," I said carefully, "would it make that much of a difference? I don't think we're any closer to fending them off than we were before."

The General looked over to Captain Adanaho. She raised her eyes to me. "Few people have been told this, so I'm ordering you to keep it secret, but we've managed to develop a working copy of their shielding technology—what I think you referred to in your notes as The Wall. In the process we think we've found a way to penetrate those same shields."

I startled.

"Is that so?" I said. "How exactly did we make this extraordinary breakthrough?"

"That's none of your concern," the General snapped, "all you're here to do is get the damned mantes to delay their attack. Until we're ready."

“Sir, what makes you think I have any more influence on the mantes than the Fleet’s team of expert diplomats?” I said, throwing my hands out in exasperation. “It’s not like I’m some kind of genius about this stuff. The Professor—the first mantis I dealt with, ten years ago—just happened to reveal certain information that wound up being important. And I had nothing to lose. That my bargain convinced him, and that his compatriots had the leverage and coordination to affect Mantis Quorum policy, were flukes.”

“Nevertheless,” said the General, “you *will* try.”

“We depart in one hour,” Adanaho said. “You’ll have a few days to prepare, before we meet the mantis delegation.”

Chapter 3

We met them in orbit around a nameless terrestrial planet, far from the boundaries of human space. The mantis ships were shaped like mammoth footballs, their surfaces studded with sensors and weaponry. I watched the alien vessels through the portholes of the Fleet frigate, *Calysta*. We’d brought some big stuff too. Opposite the cluster of mantes vessels—across the black expanse of space—was a squadron of Earth dreadnoughts unlike anything I’d ever seen before. Not that size and armament would do a lick of good if those new ships couldn’t break through the mantis shields, as Adanaho had suggested. Hopefully we wouldn’t have to find out, though I still wasn’t sure anything I did or said could make a difference otherwise.

I looked over to Captain Adanaho, who had followed me to the observation deck.

“Fifteen minutes,” she said.

“That means the General wants us there in five,” I said.

She smirked at me.

“Always arrive ten minutes before you’ve been told,” I said with a slight smile, “and then it’s hurry-up-and-wait.”

“The years on Purgatory haven’t completely dulled your memory,” she said. “Though it’s obvious you’re not happy about your current position.”

I looked down at my uniform.

“No, ma’am, not really. I was nineteen when I signed up. The Fleet tried to take Purgatory a couple of years later, and then I spent the rest of my time either as a prisoner, or trying to follow through on a promise I made to my old boss before he died.”

“It must have been an important promise,” she said.

“I thought so,” I said.

“But didn’t you consider that promise fulfilled, once the armistice was reached?”

“Not really, because by then the Professor and his school kids were showing up all the time. Plus, I had more human customers coming in the door than I’d ever had before. People seemed to think the chapel was special. Significant. It grew to be a landmark in the valley. *Somebody* had to stick around and sweep up. And it’s not like I had anything more important to do. Maybe if the Fleet had returned right away, I’d have jumped at a chance to go home. But when a couple of years went by and it was obvious that Fleet wasn’t coming back to Purgatory any time soon, I decided to make my plans for the chapel into long-term plans.”

“And yet our research shows that you don’t hold services there,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“Like I said, I’m not a chaplain. I’m just the assistant. This little silver bar you guys put on my collar, it doesn’t make me a chaplain either.”

“Would you like to be?”

I thought about it, still looking outside into deep space. Something I had not seen in many years.

“No,” I said, slipping my hands into my pants pockets. Like having facial hair, hands in pockets was also against regulation. But screw it, certain rules are made to be broken.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I’m not a preacher,” I admitted. “I’m also not a theologian.”

“So why even become an assistant? Of all the jobs in the Fleet available to you?”

“Seemed like the best fit,” I said. “I’m not a tactical guy, and I’m not that great with equipment either. But people? I like people. When hostilities with the mantes broke out, some of my friends signed up immediately. I kind of went along for the ride. It was a chance at to go to space. What kid doesn’t dream about that? But I didn’t want to kill stuff nor fix stuff nor do a lot of the other work on the list the recruiter showed me.”

She shook her head.

“And yet you were the one who managed to use the single piece of leverage we needed to stop the mantes.”

“Yeah,” I said, “dumb luck, that.”

She checked her watch.

“Well, it’s time to see if you can’t scare up a little more, padre.”

We walked from the porthole to the nearest lift car, went down three decks, and wound our way to the frigate’s largish main conference room. Marines in freshly-pressed uniforms guarded the hatches, with rifles at port arms. There were some mantes guards as well, their lower thoraxes submerged into the biomechanical “saddles” of their hovering, saucer-shaped discs.

Every mantis I’d ever seen was technically a cyborg. Their upper halves were insectoid—complete with bug eyes, fearsome beaks, antennae, wings, and serrated-chitin forelimbs. Their lower halves were integrated into their mobile, floating saucers. It was the saucers—the computers and equipment in them—which allowed the mantes to speak to humans, and have our own speech translated back into their language, among many other things.

The mantes guards all raised forelimbs in my direction as we approached, though they seemed to be ignoring the Captain.

I blushed in spite of myself, and raised a hand in return.

Was I *that* well known among the aliens?

We entered the conference room, and I stopped short.

There was the Professor—whom I considered a friend, and whom I’d not seen in a long time—and a larger, much older looking mantis on whom all human eyes were focused.

The human contingent was arrayed around a half-moon table with chairs and computers and various recording devices.

The two mantes merely floated in the air, about waist high.

I smiled, and in spite of protocol walked quickly up to the Professor.

“Hello,” I said. “I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get to see you again.”

“You would have not, Harry,” said the Professor, “had circumstances evolved differently.”

If the Professor had a name, it was unpronounceable for humans. The skitter-scratch mandible-against-mandible language of the aliens was incomprehensible for us. And he’d always been addressed by title, even though he’d asked permission to be on a first-name basis with me.

A familiar throat was cleared to my rear.

I turned to Adanaho, who's expression told me I was erring without knowing it. Behind her sat the General—staring hard.

“Sorry sir,” I said, then nodded knowingly to the Professor, and walked quickly to a seat that was offered to me. The Captain sat down at my side, and after the General gave me one last lingering look, he ordered the doors closed, leaving us alone with our guests.

I checked my PDA. The Captain and I were as early as we'd planned to be. Yet it appeared things were already well in motion.

Not good.

“Well,” the General said, “he's here now. Since nothing me or my staff say seems to be worth anything to you, maybe you'll listen to *him*.”

The old mantis behind the Professor floated forward.

“Padre,” it said to me, its vocoded speaker-box voice coming from the grill on the front of its disc. The creature's beak did not move. The translator was tied directly into the mantis's nervous system.

“That is what some call me,” I said. “May I ask who you are?”

“This is the Queen Mother,” said the Professor, his manner deferential as he introduced her. “She is the highest of the Select who rule our people. Her voice carries supreme authority within the Quorum of the Select.”

“She is your sovereign,” I said.

“Yes and no,” said the Professor. “She is elected, but she also shares a tremendous lineage, biologically. Her genetics run through countless mantes, over many of your generations.”

In other words, she was fecund, in addition to being old.

I sat up a little straighter.

“Ma'am,” I said to the Queen Mother, “of what service can I be to you?”

The Queen Mother floated forward a bit more, while the Professor floated back.

“Your name is spoken in my Quorum,” she said. “It is the only human name that has ever reached such height. When the one you call the Professor first came before me, many of our cycles ago, and petitioned for us to halt our Fourth Expansion, I considered him obtuse. Your superstition is of no consequence to me, nor do I have any use for it. And yet, the Professor had convinced a good many of his contemporaries that the elimination of your species—of your numerous modes of religion—would be detrimental to the

advancement of mantis knowledge. And his colleagues had convinced many on the Quorum. Rather than force a contentious vote on the issue, I acquiesced, believing that the merit of the Professor's proposed observation and research would become obvious in time. Even if I could see no value in it in the moment."

She let a tiny silence hang in the air.

"I no longer feel the need for such forbearance."

The room was dead silent, but the Queen Mother's words had hit me like a thunderclap. It was one thing to hear the Captain talk about a possible end to the peace. It was quite another to have the nominal leader of the *enemy* in front of me declaring that she was going to drop the hammer. I felt a slithering surety in my stomach: the Queen Mother would not bluff.

I cleared my throat experimentally, trying to shake off the dread I felt. The eyes of the officers behind me began to drill virtual holes in my back as I left my seat. The Queen Mother remained where she was.

"I have to think," I said, voice shaking just a bit, "that your mind isn't entirely made up. Otherwise why agree to this meeting at all? You could just as easily declare the ceasefire dead, launch your war armada, and have done with it."

"There are still some," she said, her triangular insect's head tilting back in the Professor's direction, "who petition me for further amity. I am not a hasty being. I listen to my intellectuals. If they say there is additional merit in long-term conciliation between our races, I am habitually obliged to entertain the notion—whether I agree with it or not. So rather than send a delegate, I came here myself. To meet the one human who has managed to alter the inevitable course of my empire. I had expected someone more impressive."

"My apologies," I said, "if my presence does not meet that expectation. As for what I can say or do to change your mind, I am not sure I can offer you much more than what I've already been able to offer to the Professor and his students. I am the chaplain's assistant. I've counseled the Professor that he'd do well to seek out a bona fide *chaplain*. Or, if a military man is not in order, then there are the finest theologians, scholars, religious teachers, and clergymen Earth has to offer. If I have failed to provide enlightenment, surely someone else might be better suited."

"Enlightenment," the Queen Mother said, her mouth hinged open and her serrated, vicious teeth vibrating—the mantis display of annoyance. "This is a phrase that I find utterly preposterous. I have studied what little of your

planet's history is available to me and determined that we mantes were building starships when humans were still scuttling about in caves. Enlightenment. Ridiculous. Does the larva *enlighten* the adult?"

I'd learned from the Professor that the mantes had two stages in their life cycle. Upon hatching from their eggs, they were mindless herbivores, consuming vegetable matter over a period of months until entering their transformative pupa stage. Only upon emergence from the chrysalis did a newly-carnivorous mantis achieve actual sapience. Prior to that, the larval mantis was about as intelligent as a box of rocks.

"Nobody questions your technological prowess," I said, choosing my words carefully. I looked quickly behind the Queen Mother to see the Professor floating dead still, his gaze locked on her.

"When the Professor and I first met, it was shocking to discover that you mantes cared anything at all about how or what a human believed. I didn't think it was possible. I'd only ever seen your people maiming and killing my people. And yet, the Professor showed me you are a complex race. Old and powerful, but also with a history of patient curiosity. Such that on prior occasions—when you've let your thirst for expansion overrule your prudence—you've genuinely regretted those choices."

"Some of us have," said the Queen Mother, her beak snapping shut. "But not all."

"What would be gained," I said, "by throwing away the armistice? It's been a long time since humans shed mantes blood, and vice versa. I think the ceasefire is pretty good evidence that our two societies can learn to share the galaxy. Sometimes, we may even share the same planet, if after a fashion."

Purgatory was still technically mantis property. Myself and the few hundred humans who'd stuck around after the return of the Earth ships, had more or less managed to stay out from under mantes feet. It wasn't an equal partnership. More like, *keep the noise down so the landlords don't show up with artillery*. But it was a persistent peace, and the more time I'd spent around the Professor—and later, his students—the more I'd become convinced that humans and the mantes had more in common than either they or we suspected.

I waited while the Queen Mother's antennae wove a thoughtful pattern in the air.

"You are dangerous to us," she said. "Or is the squadron of warships that greeted my delegation your idea of a friendly gesture?"

I looked behind me: at the General, and the Captain.

“She has a point, sir, and ma’am,” I said.

“I’m not a fool,” Sakumora retorted sourly. He looked past me to the Queen Mother, and his tone got sharper when next he spoke. “Who is more threatening to whom? What are my staff and I supposed to think about those battle exercises your ships have been conducting? For the first time in several years, eh? What have you got to say about that?”

The Professor seemed to visibly shrink in on himself.

I guessed that even the mantes never spoke that way to their leader. Much less a human. The Queen Mother’s posture was erect, and motionless. For an instant I recalled visceral memories of mantis troops striking with lightning lethality, carving into human flesh. I raised my hands instinctively in the air between the two leaders, trying to physically damp down the mood, which had grown dangerously electric.

“You both asked me to come here,” I said, swiveling my head from one party to the next, and back again. “But if both of you are determined to see evil in the actions of the other, no matter what I say, there really isn’t anything I can do. A new war is inevitable.”

“A war we would absolutely win,” the Queen Mother said.

“Are you that sure?” the General replied.

“Stupid human, you would do no better against us than you did the first time.”

Now it was Sakumora who remained motionless. He seemed to be deciding something. I stared at him, feeling altogether uncomfortable. Before I could shout for him to stop, his left hand reached out and tapped a single button on the keyboard in front of him. The lights in the chamber dimmed, and went orange, battle klaxons suddenly ringing through the space.

Outside the doors, automatic gunfire roared. I knew the sound. It wasn’t the sound of mantis weaponry.

“What have you done?” I said to the General.

Both he and his staff—all save the Captain, who simply sat with her mouth half open—stood up and removed overly-large pistols from under the table. Pistols, hell, they looked like sawed-off shotguns, with magazines attached. Sakumora and his people aimed their weapons at the Professor and the Queen Mother.

“We weren’t ready for you the first time,” Sakumora said, his demeanor become icily calm now that he no longer teetered on the knife edge of an

uneasy truce. “Part of me hoped this wouldn’t be necessary. But part of me also knew that things couldn’t end any other way.”

The Queen Mother’s wings unfolded and fluttered loudly.

Extreme amusement.

I’d also learned enough about mantis body language to know that the Professor’s mood was utterly crushed. He shrank back from all of us, his floating disc nearly bumping the far bulkhead.

“You’ve made it too easy,” said the Queen Mother.

The pitch of the frigate’s ambient engine noise shifted upward, just prior to the room being rocked by what sounded like rolling thunder.

“I’ve signaled my subordinates to destroy your entire squadron,” said the Queen Mother. “This ship and everyone on it will be the first to fall. The Fourth Expansion begins today!”

She looked triumphant.

I stared at the Professor, who appeared ill.

The room rocked again—with more loud rumbling.

The General tapped the large green communications key. “Damage report?” he said.

“The deflection system is holding,” replied a young voice through a small speaker on the desk.

Sakumora smiled wickedly, his pistol aimed squarely at the Queen Mother’s bug-eyed head.

“We adapt and learn quickly,” said the General. “I don’t think we’ll be the pushovers that you were expecting. Though I have to admit I admire your willingness to sacrifice yourself in order to commit your people to the battle. Had our positions been reversed, I think I might have done the same.”

The Queen Mother’s body language had changed. Like that of the Professor, she began to slowly shrink in on herself. I guessed that she’d not expected to survive past this point. Had the General and his Fleet engineers not found the secret to The Wall, it’s probable we’d have all been atomized already.

“So it’s war,” I said. “Only now neither side wins?”

“Shut up, Chief,” said the General in irritation. “Your job here is done. Unless you’re ready to pick up a weapon for humanity, you’re not much use to us.”

I looked from the General's face—set in an expression of grim and determined calculation—to the Captain's. Adanaho's mouth still hung half open and her eyes were wide, the whites like bright circles of ivory. She closed her mouth and swallowed once, then stood up and faced the General.

"Why didn't you tell me your plan?" she said, the rasp of accusation in her tone.

"It was my decision, according to Fleet Command edict," Sakumora said. "And I didn't feel like sharing it with junior officers who didn't have a need to know. Like I said to your superstitious friend, if you're not going to pick up a weapon for humanity, you're not much good to us."

A small mechanical sound alerted me to our danger, but only just in time.

While the Professor's disc had never been armed—armament being unseemly for a scholar—there'd been no thought given to the Queen Mother. Weapons, previously hidden within her disc, suddenly bristled.

I tackled Adanaho to the deck as the shooting started.

Chapter 4

Guns blazed. Human guns. Mantis guns.

The room rocked again from the concussion of enemy fire outside the frigate.

My ears were ringing when the Captain and I both looked up to see the General and all of his people sprawled bloodily across their side of the room. The Queen Mother had pepper-sprayed them with projectiles, their bodies pulped and grotesque. Though it seemed the Queen Mother had fared little better. She was down. Or, rather, her disc was down. Sparks spat from numerous holes in the disc's armored surface. Sabot rounds, I thought. The Queen Mother's forelimbs scraped and scratched futilely at the deck, her triangular head cocked in my direction and her mouth half open, the teeth looking wicked and deadly.

Her mandibles chattered ferociously, but the disc made no sound. Its translator was rendered useless, along with its weapons.

The Professor—unharméd—floated forward from his previous spot near the far wall, then stopped as the doors were cast open and armed

marines flooded in. The instant they saw the General lying dead, they raised their rifles to fire—having previously dispatched the Queen’s guards, per Sakumora’s plan.

Seeing this, Captain Adanaho shrugged me off of her and stood up, shouting, “Stop!”

The marines hesitated.

“That’s a direct order,” she said for emphasis.

The room rolled with concussive grumbling.

Lights flickered.

“General Sakumora, sir,” said an alarmed voice through the speaker on the General’s table, “there’s a feedback loop in the deflection matrix. We’re absorbing hits, but we can’t say for how much longer.”

The Captain stared at me for an instant, then she looked to the Professor, whose forelimbs dangled dejectedly in front of him.

“I’m assuming you didn’t know the Queen Mother’s plan either,” she said.

“That is correct,” said the Professor. “Though I knew as well as you that the situation was unstable. Had I known the Queen Mother intended to incite conflict, to force us to war, I’d never have come.”

More thunder, more flickering lights.

“Then it seems you’re destined to die with the rest of us,” I said, feeling the cold, dull ache of certain doom closing around my heart. I instantly rued the day Adanaho had entered my chapel.

But then again, was it better to die on Purgatory, alone, or on a Fleet warship among my own kind? Was either of these options preferable to the other? I tried to remember what the Chaplain had once told me, about keeping a stiff upper lip in the face of death, and discovered I couldn’t quite remember his exact words.

The Queen Mother continued to scrape and scratch frantically at the deck, her disc become worthless. It seemed suddenly that the mantes—even this, the greatest of her kind—weren’t all that terrible once you took away their technological advantage. Without the disc, she was as mortal as any man. With the frigate bucking beneath us and the Captain and I struggling to keep our feet, I almost laughed as I watched the supreme leader of the enemy struggle helplessly.

Now you know how we felt!

I wasn’t sure if I’d merely thought it, or shouted it.

The Captain and every other human were looking at me.

That's when true disaster struck.

Kakraooooummmmmmm!

The lights vanished entirely as the room tilted 90 degrees and hurled us to the port bulkhead, then back across the space to the starboard bulkhead, before leaving us floating free. Orange emergency lamps snapped on and I fought a savagely instinctual desire to vomit—zero gee proving to be every bit as terrible in the bowels of the *Calysta* as it had been onboard the shuttle.

Marines flailed and then lapsed into their microgravity training. It had been too long for me, so I kept flailing, eventually feeling Adanaho's grip on my left ankle. She levered herself up into my face and shouted, "The deflection matrix is falling apart! We've got to get to a lifeboat!"

"How?" I said, almost spewing my last meal into her face.

She turned her head, seeing that the marines were way ahead of her. They'd instinctually latched onto and levered each other like extension ladders, until one of them could get a grip on something solid, thus bringing them all into contact with the walls or floor or ceiling.

"We just need to get outside!" she said loudly.

Almost at once, the Professor was there.

His disc moved effortlessly, seemingly unaffected by microgravity.

"Grab on," he said, a forelimb stretched in our direction. I reached for it and took it, while Adanaho stayed attached to me, and the Queen Mother stayed attached to the Professor's other forelimb. Her disc trailed drops of mechanical fluid as the Professor began to tow all of us for the nearest open exit. If the marines desired to fire, nobody pulled a trigger. Perhaps because there was no way to shoot without killing both the Captain and myself? Fratricide being frowned upon, especially when superior officers are involved.

We emerged into the corridor beyond. The gore of dead mantes was everywhere. The marines had done their work well. I suddenly felt embarrassed and mournful. The Queen's guards had saluted me as I entered, then paid with their lives for that trust. I gaped at the nearest of them, his young face split in two and his insect's brain oozing out.

That did it.

I faced away from Adanaho and emptied the contents of my stomach, which spluttered away from us in a thick, chunky stream.

"Where?" the Professor said sharply to the Captain.

Emergency bells were chiming, and an automated vocal warning was issuing from every speaker.

HULL BREACH. VACUUM CONDITIONS ON MULTIPLE DECKS. PROCEED TO YOUR NEAREST SAFE DUTY STATION. REPEAT, HULL BREACH . . .

“There!” Adanaho said, almost climbing up my back so that she could point over the Professor’s shoulder.

A row of hexagonal hatches had opened along the walls, much further down the corridor. Personnel were piling into them. Each hatch was ringed with yellow and black caution striping, with tiny beacon lights spinning rapidly at the corners.

“Find one of those,” Adanaho said.

Though the ones closest to us appeared positively choked with people, all clamoring for escape.

Grrrrakkkkaaaaannggggk!

The guttural grinding sound of metal announced to even my inexperienced naval ears that the *Calysta*’s remaining moments were few. A wind had picked up in the corridor—air bleeding out into space. Men and women screamed, redoubling their efforts to seek escape.

For a brief instant, the Queen Mother and I locked eyes—hers as alien as the Professor’s had ever been—while we clung to the Professor’s separated forelimbs. I could not detect emotion behind her alien, multifaceted gaze, but her contorted body posture spoke of both fear and pain, while her mouth gaped in a show of murderous rage. I’d have let go of the Professor in terror at the sight of those tractoring incisors if I didn’t feel sure that the Professor, and the mobility of his functional disc, weren’t the only hope I had.

And besides, there was the Captain to think of. She clung to my back like a bear cub.

Suddenly the Professor moved in a new direction. Opposite the way we’d all been looking. We shot down the corridor, headed aft, bumping aside crew and marines alike. A few gunshots rang after us, but in the panic of the moment they went wide, embedding themselves into the bulkheads.

The wind spiraled up to become a gale-force howl.

Now, humans no longer floated or pulled themselves along the corridor. They were vacuumed away, shrieking.

My ears suddenly began to hurt.

I wanted to yell at the Professor—to ask where he thought he was going—but then I saw it: an open emergency hatch, unblocked.

The Professor's disc moved toward it at best possible speed.

We passed through the doorway and the Captain had the good sense to reach out and slap the panel just inside the threshold. The doors to the emergency exit snapped shut with a loud *clang*. Suddenly we were all flattened against the hatch as the lifeboat spat through the disintegrating interior of the *Calysta*, following a pre-designated route.

Rapid egress shafts honeycombed the ship—as with all Earth war vessels—such that it took only moments for the lifeboat to be disgorged into the emptiness of space.

We floated free as the force of our acceleration ebbed. I found myself at a small porthole, catching a glimpse of the *Calysta* as she spun away—in my eye view—from us. There were huge wounds in her belly, punctuated by the gradual fragmenting of her exposed bones as new missiles from the mantis armada continued to home in on and decimate the frigate.

Then the *Calysta* flashed. Her reactors going up.

I jerked away from the porthole, having been strobed almost to blindness. There was a human coughing sound behind me, and the additional noise of mandibles skittering and scratching out the mantis language.

I rubbed my lidded eyes and then opened them, seeing through purple spots that it was only the Captain, myself, the Professor, and the Queen Mother aboard.

We were alone.

Chapter 5

This far north of the equator, the nameless planet was arid and unremarkable—with barely enough oxygen and nitrogen to support a grown man.

A heck of a lot like home, I thought bitterly.

Hours after our ejection from the dying *Calysta*, our lifeboat had plummeted into the atmosphere. There'd been no sense trying to figure out who was winning or who was losing. The lifeboat had no tactical data nor any theater sensors with which to ascertain the progress of the battle. Every

once in awhile lights in the sky would sparkle and flash—ships exploding in the emptiness of space, their fantastic vanishings visible even in the daylight. Human. Mantis. All perishing together in one, pent-up orgasm of long-delayed, hateful fury.

Death.

It was the thought that most concerned me as I trudged back up the broken-scrree slope upon which the lifeboat had come to rest. The lifeboat's yellow and orange striped parachutes drifted and fluttered on a cold breeze, their cords stretched out across the crumbled and rocky bluff. My old survival training told me I'd best collect the chutes and tuck them away. But now it didn't much matter. Human or mantis, whoever found us, there'd be hell to pay.

I climbed up the side of the lifeboat and dropped in through the top hatch, closing it behind me so as to preserve the batteries that were keeping the interior warm. The Captain sat with her arms folded tightly across her stomach, back hunched and head down.

The Queen Mother was still helpless, her disc a dead weight while the Professor attended her with the gentleness and focus of a lover. Had they, I wondered, ever mixed seed? He the drone and she the recipient of his genetic lineage? There was still so much about the mantes culture and society at which I could only guess.

The Professor and the Queen Mother were engaged in gentle conversation, her mandibles clicking and chittering while he held one of her forelimbs in both of his.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Not good," the Professor said, his disc rotating so that he could face me. "The internal systems of her carriage have all failed. If we do not get her to a mantis physician soon, it's probable that she will pass from life."

"She's not bleeding," I said. "Internal injuries?"

"I do not think you understand," the Professor said, his mechanized voice only hinting at the emotion that seemed to hover beneath the surface of his chitinous skin. I'd spent enough time around mantes—and this mantis in particular—to know his body language. The Professor's agitation was plainly spoken in the way he moved his forelimbs and rapidly swiveled his wedge-like head from side to side.

"No," I said, "I guess I don't. Unless she's been hit somewhere I can't see, I don't understand what's the matter with her."

“Our carriages, or discs as you commonly call them, are integral to us from the moment we achieve consciousness. No mantis lives without one. They protect us and provide us with mobility, allow us to work and manipulate the world around us, they expand our senses as well as our consciousness, and without them we are worse than helpless. The mantis and the carriage are *one*.”

“Okay,” I said carefully. “But this can’t be the first time an adult has had her disc—her *carriage*—shot out from under her, right?”

“Of course not,” said the Professor. “But in those instances, death has either come quickly or medical aid has always been ready at hand.”

“So we can’t just pull her out of it?” I asked.

The professor’s antennae shot upward, waved a bit, then curled into an expression of pronounced shock.

“That would surely prove lethal,” he said, acting as if I’d suggested the worst sort of obscenity.

“But you just told me leaving her in the dead disc is bad too,” I said, growing frustrated.

The professor seemed to want to respond, but let his antennae fall to either side of his head, and turned back to speak to the Queen Mother in the indecipherable language of the mantes.

Now it was the Queen Mother whose antennae gave a sign of shock. She stared intently at me—multi-faceted eyes cold and alien without the vocoder of her disc to give words to her thoughts—then she yammered something at the Professor in a rather rushed fashioned, and slumped back into the center of her ruined disc.

“She says that while she was prepared to die in battle for our people, to commit helpless suicide in front of you humans is not to her liking.”

“If the Fleet finds us,” said Adanaho, surprising everyone as she finally looked up at us—her eyes puffy and red, “then the Queen Mother faces much worse than suicide. I’m with Intelligence and you can be certain that, with hostilities renewed, my comrades will spare no effort picking both of you apart in their quest for tactical and strategic information.”

“You assume humans will outlast the Queen Mother’s armada and reach our lifeboat first,” said the Professor, his wings rustling slightly with grim amusement. “Did not your warship fall before our own, despite your best attempt to replicate our defensive technology?”

“The flashes we’ve been seeing in the sky since planetfall tell me not everything has gone your way,” the Captain said, also grimly. “The fighting continues. General Sakumora was rash and quick to shed blood, but he was also well-prepared. Our dreadnoughts were the finest in all of Human space. Built using every lesson taught to us during the first war.”

I waved a finger in front of me, not looking at anyone in particular.

“The new war’s a non-starter if the Queen Mother can convince the mantes to cease offensive operations,” I said.

More fluttering of wings.

“And why would she do that,” asked the Professor, “assuming she could regain contact with our forces?”

“Because the Captain saved both your lives when it would have been more expedient to let our marines fill you each full of steel bullets.”

The Professor had no answer to that.

The Queen mother snapped and chattered at him.

He relayed to her what he’d heard.

They engaged in a quick series of mantis exchanges.

“She says,” the Professor proceeded delicately, “that the mercy shown by a single human does not translate to good will on the part of all humans. In fact, while we remain stranded here, events are doubtless in motion that are beyond recall for either side. If what the Queen Mother has told me is correct, her return to the armada was not expected—all they awaited was her signal, at which point the war plans would be put into effect. Doubtless our couriers are speeding back to join the rest of our ships, eager to relay news of the renewed offensive. Human planets will be under siege in a matter of weeks, if not days.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said. “But assuming we could contact the mantis hierarchy—prove that the Queen Mother was alive—could she impose a cease fire on your side of the battle lines?”

The Professor communicated my question to the Queen Mother, who stared at me a moment, then replied.

“Yes,” said the Professor.

“Then what are we waiting for?” I said. “We’ve got to find a way to get her back in touch with your people.”

“Chief Barlow,” Captain Adanaho said, “I appreciate that you might still feel obligated to accomplish the mission, as originally assigned. But events have clearly wiped all previous considerations off the table. Our first

objective is to alert Fleet to our presence. Intelligence will want otherwise, but I can argue from historical precedent that the Professor and the Queen Mother should be processed as prisoners of war. As such, they'd each be entitled to certain rights. Perhaps with her safely in our custody—unharmd and unmolested—we can bargain our way to a new armistice?"

"You sound too much like your old boss," I said. Then thought better of my tone and added a respectful, "Ma'am."

Adanaho raised an eyebrow.

"Believe me, Chief," she said, "I didn't intend for any of this to happen, either. Nobody wanted a war."

"But the Fleet bosses were obviously prepared for it," I snapped.

"And why not?" she said. "your own records from the original armistice state the matter plainly—the Fourth Expansion would have wiped humanity from the face of the galaxy. We were up against the wall, one way or another. It would have been foolish to count on the cease-fire to last indefinitely. Even if you and the Professor had managed to achieve some measure of mutual understanding."

A chime suddenly sounded through the lifeboat.

Adanaho got up and checked the lifeboat's computer.

"Our emergency beacon's been spotted," she said. "We're getting telemetry from a Fleet rescue team in orbit. Looks like they'll be here in a few hours, once they've picked up other survivors."

"Do they know we have the Queen Mother with us?" I said, alarmed.

"If they knew," the Captain said, "we'd be their top-most priority. That we're not tells me they think we're just another lifeboat filled with survivors—one of many, from the looks of it."

I would have been lying if I didn't feel a sudden surge of pride. A human rescue team meant that not only were we holding our own against the mantes, we were doing well enough to be able to afford search missions for the retrieval of survivors from lost ships. Not exactly the actions of an overwhelmed and beaten species.

The Professor shrank in on himself, just as he had while aboard the *Calysta*.

"Prisoners of war," he said. And none too happily.

"It could be worse," I said to my old friend. "I survived the experience for years. You will too, if the Captain is right about being able to secure your POW status under Fleet protocol."

He chitter-scratched with the Queen Mother, whose deflated body language grew even more so.

“Of course,” I said, thinking pessimistically, “if the Captain can’t secure your status, then you’re meat—subject to the total spectrum of our interrogation techniques.”

Adanaho didn’t meet my gaze.

I turned to face the Professor.

“Tell the Queen Mother that if she can promise us safety among the mantes, we’ll help her escape.”

Adanaho opened her mouth to object, but I held up a hand, not wanting to get into an argument with my superior—at least not yet.

“Impossible,” said the Professor. “With her carriage non-functional the Queen Mother is trapped here.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “There’s *no* contingency mode?”

The Professor hesitated, then he and the Queen Mother conversed for several minutes, their heads shifting back and forth and their mandibles rattling, clacking, snapping and stuttering. If Adanaho picked up on the fact that the Professor was straining to remain respectively persistent, she didn’t show it. But I could see what he was trying to do. Doubtless, like me, he was required to display deference to a superior, lest he forfeit his position. Or worse. But in the Queen Mother’s current state, she was dependent on him totally. And might be forced to acquiesce to whatever he suggested.

“The carriage’s engineering has changed little in hundreds of your years,” the Professor said. “It is one of the all-time outstanding technical achievements of the great forebearers of mantis civilization—the first ones to meld mantis biology with mantis cyber-technology. There is an emergency release procedure, though it is seldom used. And I have never seen it done.”

“Good,” I said. “The sooner she’s out of that thing, the sooner we can get moving. No doubt your own carriage has been sending out coded mantis distress signals, ever since we landed.”

“You guess correctly,” the Professor said.

“Then it’s a race against time—the further we are from humans, the safer we’ll be. We’ll have to hope that your people have started dispatching rescue missions of their own.”

“But where will we go?” the Professor asked.

“Anywhere but here,” I said, raising my arms out and indicating the walls of the lifeboat with my open palms.

“Very well,” said the Professor. “But you and the female must wait outside. The extraction from the carriage will be even more humiliating for the Queen Mother than remaining bound to it. This is not a thing for human eyes to see. Gather your human survival equipment and supplies and be gone. We will come out in time.”

The Captain and I quietly collected what we could, slung the frames of the emergency packs on our backs, and climbed out of the lifeboat and walked up to the top of the bluff, pebbles and sand swamping over the tops of our boots with each step.

“You realize I could order us all to stay put,” she said, her short-cropped hair ruffling slightly in the cool, dry breeze. The sun—a star smaller and yet brighter than that which Purgatory circled—was still high up in the sky, but sinking almost imperceptibly towards the horizon.

“Ma’am,” I said, “if you meant it when you told me you didn’t want a war, then there’s no way you can turn these two over to Fleet in their present circumstances. We might as well stuff apples in their mouths and shove them into the oven. They’ll be picked apart like frogs in a biology class. First their minds, then their bodies.”

“Are you forgetting that you have a duty, Chief?” she said sternly, turning to face me fully, with hands clutching the straps of her pack, elbows thrust just slightly out.

Our uniforms were barely keeping the cold at bay, and I suspected we’d have to use the emergency jackets in our packs if we didn’t start hiking soon.

“What good’s that duty going to do if we still lose? C’mon, Captain, you know the odds. The mantes own thousands of planets, and even with the years of the armistice taken into consideration, I can’t believe humanity has caught up much. Have those colonies crucified in the first war even fully recovered yet? What about Earth? No, ma’am, if the mantes want us dead, it will happen eventually. The only difference now is we can actually put up a fight, whereas last time they cut us down like lambs.”

My superior officer didn’t appear convinced.

“Look,” I said, figuring it was time to put all my cards on the table, “I’ve never been a great one for protocol and going along with orders at all costs. In some ways, the absence of Fleet rules and regulations from Purgatory life was the best thing that ever happened to me, because it made me realize what kind of man I am. I’m not a very good soldier. I don’t like being told

what to do. And if I'd had a choice in the matter I'd have thrown my non-standard commission back in Fleet's face.

"The Chaplain gave me a job once, and I did all I could to carry it out. For his sake. Now I have a new job, and until that job's been done—the resumption of peace between the mantes race and our own—I won't rest."

The Captain considered at great length, her eyes evaluating my expression while her mind evaluated the wisdom of my plea. It hadn't been a very persuasive one, but it was the only one I had to make. Either she went with it, or I'd be forced to mutiny. Definitely not something I'd prefer doing. But I'd do it just the same. And I think she knew it too.

Adanaho drew in a long, gradual breath through her nostrils, then let it out just as gradually, tilting her head to one side.

"You're right," she said. "You're not a very good soldier. You've been two steps from dereliction ever since I met you. But you've got guts, padre. And I respect that. Okay, just so things are official, I am *ordering* us to escort the Professor and the Queen mother until we can make contact with mantis forces, at which time we will parlay for a cease-fire, and pray that things get rolling positively from there."

"And if the Fleet finds us before the mantes do?"

"Then let me do the talking, while you do the praying."

There was a noise behind us. We turned to see the Professor slowly levitating upward, out of the lifeboat's hatch. He had the Queen Mother balanced on the front of his disc—his forelimbs wrapped under her insect-like shoulder joints while the rest of her body rested on the front of the disc proper. Her lower thorax was pale and shone with dampness, its chitin looking soft, and mantis blood trailing from several holes.

Adanaho and I rushed over to them.

"Does she need first aid?" I asked.

"What can be done, I have done," said the Professor, who seemed visibly shaken by what had just transpired inside. "She will heal. In time. The Queen Mother is severed from her carriage, and I do not know if she can ever be mated to another—such things being almost unheard of among adults of her great age. Her pain is terrible, but she is conscious, and she bade me tell you that we are in your care now. I have no weapons—as you well know—and would not use them to coerce you, even if I did. The Queen Mother rides with me, and I will follow wherever you choose to go. I can

signal for mantis help with my own carriage—for several of your months, depending on how long my carriage’s fuel cells last.”

“May fortune favor the foolish,” I said.

The Professor’s antennae made a questioning expression.

“Old Earth literature,” the Captain said, in reply. “Come on, let’s go. Padre? Since this is your idea, you’re on point.”

“Roger that, ma’am,” I said, tugging down on the straps of my pack to tighten them into my shoulders.

Chapter 6

We walked.

On rock, when we could find it. The sand and pebbles proving to be a lot of work despite our best efforts. I envied the Professor with his disc—floating effortlessly above the ground. Occasionally I dropped back to talk to him as he kept the Queen Mother securely held.

“Will you be able to sense it?” I asked. “If we get near any other mantis troops or equipment?”

“Yes,” said the Professor. “Though I must warn you that my connection to my people has been non-existent since our landing. I am beginning not to trust my own machinery. Perhaps there has been damage I cannot ascertain? Or perhaps your military has devised some way of blanketing or cloaking mantis communications—such a thing would prove very useful against us, in a pitched battle. Our coordination is our greatest strength. Forced to fight singly, we might not be nearly as effective.”

“If we did have such a weapon,” the Captain said, overhearing, “I am sure I’d have known about it.”

“I think we’ll have to trust that your readings are accurate,” I said to the Professor. “Meanwhile, we will go south, and hope that both terrain and climate are favorable.”

It seemed like a vain hope. All I could see on the horizon were rocks, more stony, broken bluffs, and sand dunes. Not a tree nor a bush in any direction. Nothing running, flying, squirming, or jumping. It occurred to me that when we’d entered orbit, the seas of the planet had appeared small, and

tinted green. Local evolution might not have gotten much beyond the microscopic level, and then only in the shallow oceans.

Enough photosynthesis to turn the sky a pale blue.

Which was both good, and bad.

Stranded for too long without rescue, we'd starve. Or die of thirst.

We plodded, and I stretched out the distance between myself and our little group. I scanned relentlessly for gullies or creek beds—any sign of fresh water. Adanaho and I only had enough for a few days, even with rationing.

A wind began to whip.

The Captain jogged to catch up with me.

"I do not like this," she said. "I feel a sandstorm is coming."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I grew up part of the time in North Africa," she said. "I can tell."

"Look!" said the Professor, his speaker grill yelling the word.

We stopped and turned. An ominous, dark wall of billowing dust was moving rapidly upon us from the rear. It seemed to stretch into the sky for a kilometer or more. I swallowed hard, then began to frantically search for shelter. The Captain pointed, and we ran for a nearby hill with a small overhang. When we got there we discovered a water-worn hollow at the hill's base. We pushed ourselves into it, huddling together, emergency jackets pulled tightly over our heads. The Professor landed his disc and used both the disc and his body to shield the Queen Mother.

If it was possible for a mantis to look more pathetic, I wasn't sure how. Her limbs were curled tightly against her body and dried blood dribbled away from the fresh scabs where her lower thorax had formerly interfaced with her disc. Her lower limbs were small and feeble looking, compared to the impressive forelimbs, and I wondered just how long it had been since *any* mantis had walked under its own power?

Without her carriage, the Queen Mother had been made small.

I experienced a moment of unexpected pity.

Then the rushing cloud of detritus swept over us. I closed my jacket across my face as tightly as I could make it, listening to the muffled howling of the wind as it broke across the top of the hill.

Something nudged me awake.

I slowly pulled the jacket off of my head. There was a sensation of fine grit in every pore and crevice of my skin. My lips were dry and my throat parched.

It was dusk, or getting on towards it. The storm had passed, and the air was clear. So clear in fact I could see the stars. Sharp and precise in the purpling sky.

I saw the Captain's pack in front of me, but no Adanaho.

The Professor hovered nearby.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, my tongue rubbery. Saliva flowed into my mouth, and I spit several times to get the dust out—though I still felt it on my teeth. My eyes were crusted and I wiped at them with hands that felt caked in powder.

"Yes," said the professor.

I slowly stood up, yawning, and stretching my back. There were wind storms on Purgatory too, but in the valley where my chapel was built, things had been more or less protected.

Not so, here. Though the hill had done us good. I couldn't begin to guess what might have happened if we'd been caught out in the open with nowhere to run and nothing to hide behind. There weren't any mountains on this world, from what I could see. No recent or ongoing geologic activity. Everything had been slowly worn flat by wind and occasional water. It was probable we'd see several more sandstorms before our journey was over.

My bowels suddenly told me it was time to do God's work.

"Excuse me," I said. And began walking away from our hill, looking for something farther and smaller—just big enough to crouch behind, and relieve myself.

When I was done I made my way back. The far horizon still glowed with the setting sun. I stopped short, seeing two silhouettes at the top of our hill: one human, distinctly female, and the other mantis. I observed them for a time. They were both facing into the setting sun, their heads erect and their eyes forward. I thought I could just barely hear the sound of Adanaho's voice.

Coming back to the makeshift camp in the hollow at the base of the hill, I quietly spoke to the Professor.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

“When the storm lifted, your Captain was the first to rouse. She checked the status of myself and the Queen Mother, then she shed her equipment and went to the top of the hill to survey the surround. When we heard her voice coming softly down to us, the Queen Mother asked me what your Captain was saying. I told the Queen Mother that it sounded like prayer.”

Prayer.

I was surprised, though I don’t know why. I’d not known the Captain long enough to inquire as to her upbringing or spiritual affiliation. If any. Was she Muslim? She had mentioned North Africa.

“So how did the Queen Mother get up there?”

“I carried her,” said the Professor. “She was curious. She’d never seen a human engaged in religious rite. Of any sort. Your Captain did not seem to mind. The Queen Mother asked that she be left alone with your Captain, and I have done this. I suggest you do it too.”

“It sounds to me like Adanaho is still talking,” I said. “She has to know that the Queen Mother isn’t able to understand.”

“Perhaps her words are not for the Queen Mother?” the Professor said.

Yes, perhaps.

I sat down in the hollow and retrieved some water and a concentrated food bar from my pack, drinking and eating in slow, deliberate portions. The Professor softly landed his disc next to me, and I felt his alien eyes studying me as I stared at the gravel in front of my toes.

“You are a curiosity,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Yes, assistant-to-the-chaplain. In all the time we have known each other—through all of the work that you have performed in my presence, as a religious human—I have never known you to be overt about your feelings in the way other humans are overt.”

I felt my face get warm.

He was treading in uncomfortable territory.

“I don’t believe it’s my place to be showy,” I said. “It might make some of the chapel’s attendees think I was playing favorites. In terms of which ‘flavor’ I subscribe to.”

“But we are not in your chapel,” said the Professor. “And there are no other humans around us to see you, save your Captain. Who is now occupied. Our circumstances are dire. I know from studying the human

history of belief that this is the ideal time for supplication. Harry, why do you not pray?"

The warm feeling in my face grew more intense.

"I don't know," I said. He was asking me questions I didn't dare ask *myself*.

"You built a holy house with your own hands, and you maintain this house for use by any human who comes through your door. You do this out of loyalty to your deceased Chaplain. Yet, you do not perform services in your chapel. Never have you offered a sermon. You do not pray, nor have I ever known you to habitually carry out any religious ritual of any sort—save for demonstration purposes, for the educational benefit of myself and my students."

"Stop," I said. Though perhaps too quietly. It was a plea, not a command. My eyes were closed, but that didn't prevent the tears.

"My apologies," said the Professor, when he noticed the muddy streaks on my cheeks. "It was not my intent to cause you grief. I was merely curious. It seems to me a very large irony that you of all humans should be a non-believer. Yet this has been my slow, hesitant conclusion. After spending many years away from you, during which I was able to further digest our mutual experiences. You support and feed the belief of others. You have made it your mission in life. Yet you cannot partake of that which you give."

"I'm . . . I'm not sure *what* I goddamned believe," I said, though perhaps too loudly. The gentle, whispery sound of Adanaho's voice had ceased. And suddenly the clicky-clacky speech of the Queen Mother replaced it. The Professor listened intently for a few moments, then looked down at me—his body and disc just faint outlines in the near darkness.

"I must go. The Queen Mother wishes me to translate."

He left me there, feeling embarrassed and miserable.

I put away my food and water and re-wrapped myself in my jacket. Nights in the desert—any desert—tend to be cold. Though I didn't think the chill was entirely physical.

Chapter 8

Captain Adanaho woke me.

“Chief,” she said in a whisper.

“Hmmm?”

“Sun’s coming up. We need to get moving.”

I slowly uncurled—stiff and cold.

At least on Purgatory there had been something akin to trees from which we’d harvested firewood. On this nameless sphere there wasn’t so much as a tumbleweed to burn. I shakily fished some food and water from my pack, the Captain and I ate in silence while the mantes watched dispassionately, then we began trudging into the brightening dawn.

The labor of the march warmed me up soon enough, and before long I felt myself sweating as the bright, alien star climbed steadily into the sky.

This time it was the Professor who led. He claimed to have felt the ghost of a flicker of a mantis signal due roughly southwest, and he stretched out a large distance between himself—with the Queen Mother riding on the front of his disc—and Adanaho and I as we walked side by side in their wake.

“Is it true?” she said to me as I put one boot stubbornly in front of the other—we were going too fast; there’d be blisters at this rate.

I yelled for the Professor to slow it up, then asked, “Is what true?”

“That you’re not really a religious person.”

“That was a private conversation,” I snapped.

“The mantis voice system doesn’t do whispers. I heard everything the Professor said.”

I didn’t respond right away. Just kept walking.

“Let me put it this way,” I said, letting my words roll around in my brain a few moments before they came off my tongue, “in my time as an assistant in the Chaplains Corps I’ve been exposed to virtually every systematized form of human religion in existence, and a great many examples of non-systematized faith—either the do-it-yourself smorgasbord variety, or the deeply personalized, individual one-of-a-kind variety.

“Almost everyone claims to have discovered some unique or otherwise ‘true’ path to God, or the Goddess, or at least to a deep connection with the Cosmic. The more I saw all of it, together, and heard all the insights and the prejudices and could observe the blind eyes being turned to this or that inconsistency or hypocrisy, the more convinced I became that we’re probably just fooling ourselves.”

“So if it’s all a load of shit,” she said, “why didn’t you quit and do something else?”

“I never said it’s a load of shit,” I replied, my eyes still on the gravel two meters in front of me. “I told you before: I like people. And many people on Purgatory would have withered and died if they’d not had their beliefs to hold on to. Just because I don’t necessarily believe in any of it doesn’t mean I have to doubt or deride its value for other people. That’s one of the problems with our modern society. General Sakumora had it in his eyes and in his voice: obvious contempt.”

“You noticed, huh?”

“How could I not?” I said, throwing my arms out in exasperation. “It practically oozed off the man. He thought I was nuts.”

“And yet you are closer to his view than he ever suspected,” she said, a tiny smirk on her lips.

“No,” I corrected her. “Disbelieving and being openly scornful of belief are not the same thing. I don’t begrudge those with faith. In fact, I admire it. I admire it a great deal. All those people who walked into my chapel all of those years while we were imprisoned? I thought they were impressive. I think one of the reasons why I stuck with my job was because I wanted to find out what made those people tick—how did they manage it?”

The Captain didn’t say anything after that, for several minutes.

“So,” I said, clearing my throat and spitting the grit from my tongue, “what conversation did you and the Queen Mother have? Any groundbreaking heart-to-hearts?”

“I don’t think she understood a word I said,” Adanaho replied.

“The Professor told me it sounded like you were praying. I didn’t ask before, but I want to ask now: are you a Muslim?”

“No,” she said. “Copt.”

I stopped short.

After the purges in Africa in the 21st and early 22nd centuries, many religious scholars doubted that the Coptic Christian religion had survived at all—that any modern Copts extant were “revivalists” trying to re-invent the faith following its literal extinction.

As if reading my thoughts, the Captain chuckled.

“Oh, we managed,” she said. “On the down-low, of course. Family legend has it that my ancestors fled North Africa, and went to Australia. Succeeding generations then went to Southeast Asia, then South America,

then North America, and finally back to North Africa as part of the resettlement agreement with the Brotherhood. Once the war with the mantes began, our enemies among the Muslims had a new devil to hate, so they left us alone. For a change.”

“Do *you* believe?” I said. “Are you a Copt in your heart, as well as by birth?”

“I didn’t used to be,” she said as we started up walking again.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You,” she said.

I stopped short for the second time.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever could I have done that re-ignited your belief?”

I felt my face growing warm again, and not from exercise.

“When I got out of officer school and went to the Intelligence branch, I began studying the roots of the armistice. I read all of your depositions and your final summary. It wasn’t scholarly writing by any stretch of the imagination. But I agreed with you then: the cease-fire was a practical miracle, achieved against all odds. Without it, humanity would have ceased to exist. The mantes had every intention of doing to us what they’d done to previous intelligent competitors in the galaxy. That they did not, and that they did not for the sake of something so utterly beyond their understanding and experience, as religion, spoke to me of a higher power at work.”

“Yeah, well . . .”

“You are a modest man, padre,” she said. “I know you try not to take too much credit. I personally believe you were a tool. And I don’t mean that in the pejorative sense.”

“Others have said as much, before,” I admitted.

“You are uncomfortable with this.”

“Of course I am uncomfortable with it!” I said, almost shouting. “Do you know how many human pilgrims have passed through my chapel in the last decade? All of them wanting to sit at my feet like I’m some kind of fucking Buddha? An enlightened one? A *savior*??”

“To their minds, that’s not far-fetched.”

“No doubt!” I said, facing her directly. We were deep into the weeds of the discussion now, and there was no holding back. “But do you have any kind of idea how much *pressure* that put on me? How badly I felt when these

people—from all over human space—came to my chapel and sat in my pews, and expected some kind of transfiguring or overwhelming experience, and didn't get it? I saw it in their eyes when they left. Every time: confusion and disappointment. I never wanted to be anyone's damned prophet. I was never good at preaching. I was never good at teaching. All I was ever trying to do was provide people with a quiet, clean, calming space where they could come and find their own answers. For themselves."

"Because you made a promise to your Chaplain," she said.

"Yes," I said, breathing heavily.

The Professor had stopped too. Had the mantes overheard? He was chattering for the Queen Mother's benefit; she seemed intensely interested. I suddenly felt a sharp desire to melt into the ground. Some messiah I'd turned out to be. I'd only delayed the war, not averted it. Things seemed to be more pointless than ever before. I'd have quit right then if I'd not still felt deep down that there was a chance—if only we could get the Queen Mother back to her people, she could make them listen.

"Okay," I said, waving all three of them off. "Let's get moving again."

The Professor and the Queen Mother floated off without protest.

The Captain resumed her place at my side.

"Thanks, Chief," she said.

"For what?" I asked, embarrassed.

"I think I'm finally starting to understand you."

I grunted, and didn't say anything more.

We kept walking.

Chapter 9

On the third day after landing, a rainstorm blew in.

Literally.

I wasn't sure whether to be happy or scared. The wind was ferocious, whipping my poncho about and driving the water into me sideways. It was cold water too, and before long the Captain and I realized we'd be in danger of hypothermia. Unlike when the sandstorm hit, there were no hills or outcroppings of rock to hide behind. We simply had to sit down on a raised mound of half-buried boulders and do the best we could.

If the storm bothered the Professor, he didn't show it. Though the Queen Mother looked perfectly miserable.

After an hour, things calmed down enough for me to get up and walk over to where the Professor was hovering over the Queen Mother, doing his best to protect her from the elements. My hands were shaking and my teeth chattered as I spoke.

"Is she in danger?"

"Yes," the Professor said, matter-of-factly.

"She can have my poncho if it will help," I said. "Though I can't say it's done me much good. The Captain and I are both soaked to the bone."

I removed my poncho and went to place it over the Queen Mother, who had curled up tightly on the rock, when I felt a sudden wave of delicious warmth on the top of my hand.

It was coming from the bottom of the Professor's disc.

The mantes may have been insect-like, but they were as warm-blooded as humans, varying only by a few degrees. I realized that the Professor had to be burning a lot of power to keep both himself and the Queen Mother warm.

"How long can you keep it up?" I asked.

"I do not know for certain," he said. "I can shut down various functions to compensate for the raw energy expenditure, but if these sorts of storms are the norm for this planet, and not the exception, it will dramatically reduce my carriage's longevity."

"Do you mind if the Captain and I try to share the heat? We can't make a fire, and our uniforms aren't designed for warmth when wet."

"Proceed," he said.

I beckoned the Captain over, and her face went from an expression of utter misery to utter amazement as she put her hands into the zone of pleasant heat directly below the Professor's disc.

We quickly huddled up close and stuck both arms and legs under the shadow of the disc, our ponchos over our heads and backs while our rear ends remained cold and soggy on the damp stone.

For awhile, I dozed. Between the lack of adequate food and walking many kilometers every day, I was definitely feeling the physical toll. Eventually I felt the Captain slump against me, and I allowed myself to do likewise, my head balanced on top of hers, a little patch of protected warmth growing between us. I closed my eyes.

They didn't come open again until hours later.

The storm had passed, and the sun was out again.

Still brighter and cooler than either Purgatory's star, or Earth's own Sol, but a welcome sight just the same. It was mid day, and there was a bit of a breeze, which meant the Captain and I might be able to dry our clothes out—essential, if we were going to survive the night without further draining the Professor's energy reserves.

The Queen Mother had drawn herself out from under the Professor's disc and was perched on a boulder a few meters away. Her wings were spread widely and she appeared almost frozen in place, forelimbs outstretched and her head tilted back. She seemed to be soaking in every last ray she could get.

The sound of running water nearby reminded me that we'd best replenish our own water supply while we had the opportunity. I regretfully roused the Captain, who jumped at the chance to refill our bottles. We located a formerly dry creek bed—now swollen with slowly running, very soiled water—and began to fill up. The mouth of each bottle had a micro filter on it that screened out the bulk of the soil. Leaving only the thinnest of hazes. Unsure of the bacterial hazard, we unscrewed the filters and dropped survival tabs into each bottle—the tabs made the water taste chemically nasty, but it would be safe to drink.

Returning to where the Professor kept watch on the Queen Mother, the Captain and I each did an about-face and stripped to the skin. Our emergency packs had one-piece smocks in them, which we quickly donned, then we laid our uniforms, underwear, boots, and socks out on the rocks as best as we could, hoping that the strong daylight and fresh breeze would be enough to dry things out. The smocks weren't nearly as sturdy as we needed them to be, and the slip-on shoes that came with them would quickly disintegrate on this planet's rough, unforgiving terrain.

With nothing better to do, Adanaho and I ate a little, drank a little more, went and did our business as far away from each other as possible, then returned and stared at the Queen Mother—who'd remained motionless as a statue the whole time.

I did notice that her lower limbs—which had seemed almost useless when the Professor had first removed her from her disc—appeared to be getting stronger. She was balanced on them now, with just a hand's width of space between her belly and the stone on which she perched.

"How is she doing?" I asked the Professor.

"I do not know," he said. "She has not spoken to me since the storm passed. I am suspecting that she is manifesting an instinctual behavior of our species, from the time before we had carriages to provide for our needs."

"What about food?" I said.

"The carriage provides that too, though we can ingest nourishment with our mouths for the pleasure of it."

I shuddered a bit, remembering mantis warriors devouring human flesh during the initial fighting on Purgatory.

"Can the Queen Mother eat our food?" the Captain asked.

"I do not think it wise," the Professor said. "Our nutritional requirements are not the same as yours. Besides, we have the ability to store a reserve—naturally—which should suffice for the Queen Mother's needs for some time yet. Assuming she gets water."

"She should go drink while the drinking's good," I said, pointing back to the creek bed, the water in which had begun to wane as the sun gradually began to drop towards the western horizon.

"I have already purified a supply for her," the Professor said. "For now, I simply watch, and wait. The Queen Mother's behavior is unusual and fascinating. I have never seen any of my people forced to live without a carriage. The Queen Mother's actions speak to me of how my people must have lived, eons ago in the distant past, before we ourselves even had fire, or tools. Before we took to the stars."

As the angle of the sun's light shifted, so did the Queen Mother. Like a solar panel, she made sure her wings caught the maximum amount of direct light.

Occasionally the Captain or I would get up to go check on our clothes, flapping them vigorously to try and get out every drop of remaining moisture. When evening came and the sun began to dip into the far horizon, we pulled out our emergency sleeping bags and prepared to make do on the hard stone.

"I'll be back," Adanaho said.

"Nature calls?" I replied.

"No."

"Oh . . . well, find privacy and peace then."

To my surprise, she went to join the Queen Mother, who'd folded up her wings, but remained staring in the direction of the setting sun.

Adanaho sat cross legged and appeared to hold something in her hands as she bowed her head. The Queen Mother's own head tilted just a little, her antennae moving ever so slowly, as if entranced by the Captain's soft, slow words of supplication. The Professor was listening too—I could see him alert. Like before, I was too far away to make out what was being said. And, I suddenly realized, I was a little bit jealous that the Captain felt perfectly fine sharing her prayer with the mantes, but not with me. A tiny spark of anger flared, and quickly died as I realized that maybe she was just doing what I'd done with the Professor many times: giving the mantes a demonstration, so that maybe the Queen Mother might enjoy a degree of understanding.

Though I couldn't be sure what progress Adanaho hoped to make, which I hadn't been able to make with the Professor or his students in all the years of trying back on Purgatory.

Eventually the sky faded from blue to purple, and from purple to black. Adanaho returned, and I was already in my bag, my one-piece rolled up under my head for a pillow. I averted my eyes as the Captain stripped, rolled her one-piece up for a pillow, then slipped into her own bag.

I didn't stay awake long enough to see what arrangements the Professor and the Queen Mother had made between them.

Some time in the night I felt a hand nudging my shoulder.

"What's happening?" I said. "Is something wrong?"

"I can't sleep, Chief," Adanaho said. "There's a hole in my bag and it got damp inside, and I am freezing."

My eyes popped open. I could barely make out the black silhouette of her shoulders and head against the perfect expanse of stars that stretched across the night sky. Clear sky meant frigid temperatures, and I could feel the cold night air on my face. I reached out and felt Adanaho's hand in mine. Her fingers were icy.

Not even thinking about it, I unzipped my bag and beckoned her in. She slid down beside me and zipped the bag up to our chins. Not designed for comfort, as an emergency bag it could hold two in a pinch—and I certainly was glad for it, as the Captain felt dangerously cold, her body shuddering next to me.

"Ma'am," I said, "why didn't you come earlier? You're a popsicle."

"I feel like a popsicle," she said, her nose stuffed.

"Here," I said, and closed my arms around her. Despite the frigidity of her skin, it was smooth, and womanly, and all of a sudden I realized I hadn't

lain in bed with a girl since before I'd joined the Fleet, and that had been a long, long time ago.

"You'll have to forgive me," I said, clearing my throat.

"For what?" She said. And then, because of the impossibly close quarters of the bag, she said, "Oh. I get it."

I felt a rush of blood to my face.

"It's okay, Chief," she said, sensing my mortal embarrassment.

"I hope you're not married," I said. "Explaining to your husband how you spent the night naked in a sleeping bag with another man who was unable to contain his . . . ahhh, *excitement*, could be problematic."

"No, I am not married," she said, laughing a bit. Then began to cough.

I suddenly realized that pneumonia could kill as easily as low temperatures, and held her tighter. She squirmed in my grasp and was suddenly face to face with me, her nose like a cold, damp button in the nape of my neck. She coughed a few more times, snuffling, and clung tightly to me. I rubbed my hands vigorously along her bare back to try and accelerate the process of warming. Gradually, her body relaxed. I then heard a small, quiet snore.

I shifted and repositioned my rolled-up smock so that her head rested on it, not mine, crooked an elbow up to my ear, kept my other arm wrapped tightly around her, and let myself drift off.

Chapter 10

I woke early.

The Captain was still snoring softly, so I slid out of the bag as slowly and as stealthily as I could, letting my superior curl the fabric around herself and bury her face deeper into my jumper. The sun wasn't yet up, but I could see well enough. Being both naked and cold, now seemed as good a time as any to go see if my uniform had dried. But first, business. I spied a low mound of split rock not too far off, and headed directly for it.

The Professor caught me halfway back.

I felt a bit awkward over my nudity, then decided it was silly to be modest in front of the alien. Though I also thought this is how the Queen Mother must have felt when she was forced to disengage from her disc.

“Good morning,” the Professor said.

“Hello,” I replied.

“The female still sleeps?”

“For the moment.”

“Did you mate with her?”

I sputtered a quietly exclamatory denial. Then asked, “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“On Purgatory you once told me that when male and female humans wish to copulate, they will share the same bed.”

“On Purgatory, sure, and then only if the male and the female know each other well enough and have agreed to have that kind of relationship.”

“It is not an automatic biological function?”

“No,” I said firmly. “Is it for you mantes?”

The Professor considered, a forelimb gently running along the edge of his disc.

“In some ways, yes. The egg-laying females—like the Queen Mother—when they enter what you would call estrus, they exude a pheromone that is both sexually rapturous and psychologically debilitating for males. Any male within reach of the pheromone becomes somewhat mindless in his pursuit of intercourse. The only way to avoid it is to avoid being where the pheromone can get to you.”

“But once you get a whiff—”

“Then the male is in for a delightfully stupid time of physical pleasure, followed by a lengthy period of slumber.”

“Well,” I said, smiling, “at least *one* thing is shared between human males and mantis males.”

“Still,” said the Professor, “with Adanaho, if she is available to you and there is the possibility of sex, are you not . . . tempted?”

“Of course I’m tempted,” I snapped. Then apologized for being harsh. “It’s been at least a dozen or more years since I had a woman in my arms like that. But when a human male gets excited, he’s still in full command of his faculties. He can still choose. Or at least he’s expected to behave as if he has a choice. Personally, I think it’s one of the few things that actually makes us different from mere animals. We can deny our lusts, even during moments of opportunity.”

“So you chose to abstain.”

“Yes.”

“Is she not attractive?”

“Yes, she’s attractive.”

“Forgive me Harry, I am still struggling to understand.”

“Look,” I said, my hands on my hips as I walked slowly over to the rocks where my uniform and boots were spread out, “attraction is only part of it. There’s other factors too. Like, she’s too young. Much younger than I am. I’d feel like I was taking advantage of her. Plus, she’s my superior officer in the Fleet. It’s against the rules for a superior and a subordinate to engage in sexual congress.”

“Why?”

“Bad for discipline in the chain-of-command, among other things.”

“And that’s all?”

“No,” I said, testing the fabric between my fingers. It felt dry enough. I started to put my undergarments on. “The male and the female should really love each other first, before they have sex. When sex happens before love, or without love, it gets . . . complicated.”

“Also immoral,” said the Professor.

“If the man and the woman subscribe to certain ‘flavors’ of religious or moral tradition, yes. That too. Though most religious proscriptions surrounding intercourse simply involve matrimony, not love. A few centuries ago, before humanity went into space, it was quite common for young men and women to be married off by their families. For political and social reasons, among other things. Love didn’t really enter into it.”

“Fascinating,” said the Professor. “Among my people we mate for genetic enhancement and advantage. Many, many males. A few females. In the far distant past males engaged in mortal combat to determine which ones would mate during a given cycle of estrus. Now we select for genetic traits we consider positive and bar those who don’t meet the standards. Those of us who meet the standards are then chosen via lottery to attend to the females when they are ready. I have copulated six times in my life. I am considered somewhat fortunate in this regard.”

“Because you’re smart, or because you simply got lucky?” I said, sliding on pants, then socks, then boots.

“Intelligence is key,” he said. “But luck rules the final selection process, yes.”

“Assuming you win the lottery,” I asked while buttoning up my topcoat, “do you choose the females or do the females choose you?”

“The females choose us,” he said. “In descending order of matriarchal seniority.”

“Did you ever mate with the Queen Mother?”

The Professor paused. A small flush of color along the semi-soft portions of his chitin told me I had embarrassed him.

“No.”

“I’m sorry if I intruded into a private area where I should not have,” I said honestly.

“No, Harry, it is I who began this conversation. The discomfort comes from knowing that no female of the Queen Mother’s stature has ever selected a scholar for mating. They prefer warriors to thinkers.”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nevermind,” I said.

The sun’s first rays peaked over the horizon.

I observed the Queen Mother’s silhouette in the distance. Just like the day before. She was immobile, faced directly into the growing light as it slowly bathed the landscape. The Professor and I watched her for a time, then I asked, “Penny for her thoughts.”

“If by that you mean to say you wonder what’s in her mind at this time, I wish I knew. I have inquired, and she will not tell me. I sense in conversation with her that the Queen Mother is both fascinated and troubled by her experience living without the disc.”

A rustling to our left told me the Captain was arising.

“Clothes are dry,” I called, deliberately loud.

“Roger that,” she said, her nose sounding stuffed up.

I walked away from the rocks where her uniform still lay, and kept my back turned while she shuffled up and slowly put on her uniform in silence.

“Okay,” she said.

I turned around.

“You look like shit, ma’am,” I said.

“I feel sick,” she admitted. Wiping her nose on her sleeve.

“We should have checked your bag sooner. We’ll have to let it dry out before nightfall if we don’t want a repeat of last night. Meanwhile, perhaps the Professor can spare room on the back of his disc for you while we travel today.”

“I’d be grateful for that,” she said, eyes drawn and puffy-looking.

“It could be managed,” the Professor said, after looking down at the professor—his antennae moving thoughtfully.

The Captain and I did what we could with the ration bars still in our packs, chewing because we needed the fuel, not because it tasted good. I’d never been a heavy chap. I realized that too much time on this nameless world would thin me down even more.

When we’d collected our gear and re-secured our packs, I helped Adanaho climb onto the back of the Professor’s disc—following his having helped the Queen Mother climb onto the front. The Queen Mother and Adanaho both seemed unusually quiet this morning, and I shouldered my burden wondering what the day would bring. The Captain had taken some pills from her pack’s emergency medical kit, and wrapped her sleeping bag around herself inside-out so as to let the liner properly dry. Her belt had been looped into a small cleat on the back of the disc so that she wouldn’t slide off.

A cool breeze started up.

We moved out, due southwest in the direction of the hinted-at mantis signals the Professor had previously detected.

Plodding through the gravel and sand I thought about the one time I’d been to the Mojave, back on Earth. At least there, I’d had some mountains to look at in the distance, along with a few Joshua trees, and the occasional rattlesnake. On this world, everything had been worn flat and made unremarkable. Without the Professor’s telemetry to guide us, I suspected it would have been supremely easy to wind up meandering in circles. One dune or low bluff looked like the next.

After awhile I noticed that the Captain’s eyes had closed. She was slumped against the Professor’s back. If either she or he were bothered by such close contact, neither of them showed it.

“Military is as military does,” I said under my breath. Sleep anywhere you can, when you can.

Good for her.

I kept walking.

Afternoon brought us to the edge of a narrow, deep canyon. A small river wound its way across the bottom headed northwest to southeast. The water tumbled and rushed against the rocks below, and a rumbling echo drifted out of the canyon as the Professor and I considered our options. I reluctantly woke the Captain, helping her down off the back of the Professor's disc, while he helped the Queen Mother down too. The two aliens spoke briefly in their insect language, then she scurried off to the Canyon's edge, peering out over it while the Captain and I counseled with the Professor.

"Have you detected any further signs of mantis signals or technology?" Adanaho asked. She didn't sound as stuffed up as she had in the morning, and her eyes looked somewhat better too. I was encouraged by this. Maybe the extra sleep had done her good.

"No," said the Professor. "But, given our new geographical impediment, I do not think it would matter even if I had."

"Can't your disc take us over?" I asked.

"The carriage is not an aircraft," the professor said. "Its impellers operate according to proximity with solid and semi-solid mass, not gravity per se. I would sink like a stone until I'd reached within just a few of your meters above the canyon floor."

"If we can find a way down," I said, "maybe we can rig up a way of traveling on the river current. Plus, we'd have fresh water any time we wanted it. I bet that flood creek we filled our canteens in is a tributary to this drainage. If we follow it far enough, we might reach a lake or something larger. What's your hunch, Professor? Would your people prefer such a location for setting up a temporary base of operations?"

"I believe that is a logical assumption," said the Professor.

"How about it, ma'am?" I asked, looking at my superior.

"It's as good a plan as any we've had so far," she said. "We'll have to make sure and get the Queen Mother's opin—OH MY GOD!"

I froze, watching the Captain's arm shoot out with an index finger pointed behind me to the canyon's edge.

I turned just in time to see the Queen Mother's body drop over the side. The Professor nearly bowled me over as his disc shot after her, then he too was over the side. The Captain and I rush to the edge and flopped onto our bellies, sliding across the last few inches of sand before putting our chins at the lip, hands clawed across the precipice.

What we saw was the most improbably beautiful thing I'd witnessed since going to space with the Fleet as an older teenager.

The Queen Mother circled lazily around and around in the air, slowly spiraling with her wings spread to their maximum width, each beating in concert with the others, and together making a low rhythm that sounded not too dissimilar from a helicopter. She obviously weighed too much and her wings were too small for sustained flight, but while she flew—her body extended and piercing the air like a javelin, her beak aimed directly forward and her legs and forelimbs folded up tightly against her body—she was magnificent.

The Professor's disc fell straight down the wall of the Canyon.

The speaker grill on the disc's front was blaring amplified mantis speech. Which the Queen Mother appeared to happily ignore.

"She's beautiful," the Captain whispered.

"I didn't know they could fly," I said, still astonished.

After a couple of seconds, Adanaho's lips peeled back from her teeth in a wide, genuine smile. "I don't think the Queen Mother knew either. Until now."

We watched as the Queen Mother continued her slow descent, until at last she lightly touched down on a wide sand bar in the middle of the river. Walking to the edge, she lowered her mouth to the water and began taking in copious amounts of fluid.

The Professor zoomed up to her, his disc's motors making funny shapes in the surface of the water as he moved across it. The Queen Mother appeared to ignore him for a few more moments as he hovered directly next to her, animatedly talking with his mandibles.

Finally she looked up at him.

She said something.

The Professor backed away from her and went across the water to the canyon wall directly beneath us.

I gauged the distance to be two hundred meters down.

Now he really did look like a bug. Smaller than my thumb.

"We are committed," he said, his speaker grill turned up to maximum. His vocoder-voice echoed long and far, up and down the canyon.

"We can't climb down at this point," the Captain yelled, then began coughing.

“Let us travel downriver until there is a place where you can join us,” replied the Professor.

“Agreed,” I called at the top of my lungs. Then I stood up and retrieved my load from where I’d dumped it on the ground. The Captain stood up too. She trudged over to me.

“Sorry ma’am,” I said. “Looks like you’re hoofing it again.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I need to work the knots out of my muscles. Here, give me my pack, I will carry it.”

I eyed her, but decided to follow orders.

She took the pack without complaint, and off we went. Staying just close enough to the canyon edge that we could see down to the Professor and the Queen mother, but not so close as to give me and the captain vertigo. After-images of the Queen Mother’s sudden, elegant, altogether astounding flight ran across my vision as we walked. Until that time I’d still considered the mantas to be an ugly race. They were also vicious and brutal in combat. But for a minute or two, I’d seen a mantis take flight—soaring and spectacular.

“What a story you’ll have for the intel people,” I said as we walked.

“What a story,” the Captain agreed. “Nobody’s going to believe this. I wish I’d had a camera or a recorder on me to get evidence. She looked as natural as can be. Free as a bird, one might say.”

“Amazing that her instincts were that good,” I said. “She jumped off that cliff purely on faith, apparently.”

“Apparently,” said the Captain.

I sensed something else from her, though she didn’t speak for several more minutes.

“Chief,” she said.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Is it true what you said?”

“About what?”

“About you not having had a woman in your arms for a dozen years?”

“You were eavesdropping again,” I chided her.

“I have good ears,” she said. “So, it’s true?”

“Uhh, yes ma’am.”

“How come?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“How come you didn’t have a lady friend on Purgatory? Someone to share your sorrows with?”

“That’s a good question. I’m not really sure. Granted, I am not the world’s most handsome fellow, but that didn’t stop a lot of the other prisoners from getting the attention of the opposite sex. I think once I built the chapel and took over where the Chaplain left off, people viewed me like I’d been set apart. The chapel and I became synonymous.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. “It must have been hard.”

“Yes it was,” I admitted.

It took a couple of seconds for the unintended double entendre of my reply to sink in, then she and I both burst out laughing.

For a moment we stopped and doubled over, until our diaphragms hurt. Then we got back to walking, the laughter dying to giggles, and then spastic coughing on Adanaho’s part.

She drank water while I waited, then we started out again.

“Sorry,” I said. “Didn’t mean to make you gag up a lung.”

“I think it’s allergies,” she said. “Something here—in the dirt, on the dust of the wind—is rubbing me wrong. I’ll be okay. FIDO.”

“Fuck it, drive on,” I said, smirking. The motto had been around in one form or another for as long as men and women had saluted and marched. Contrary to my first impression, as an intel officer the Captain didn’t seem averse to physical challenges. In fact, the longer we walked and the more I watched her, the more I came to believe she actually relished the effort. Every stride was a statement. Her back held straight and her head up, swiveling occasionally so that her eyes could take in the landscape.

“Ma’am,” I said.

“Yes Chief?”

“What have you and the Queen Mother *really* been discussing the last couple of nights?”

“Like I said, it’s hard to discuss anything with someone who doesn’t speak our language,” she said.

“I’ve been thinking about that, and I’ve decided I’m wrong. They may not be able to speak as we do, but they can hear us just fine. You don’t have to be able to speak a language to hear it, or understand what’s been said. I’m now wagering that the Queen Mother understood every word out of your mouth. Back on the *Calysta* she stated that our beliefs and rituals were of no interest to her. Why’s she suddenly become curious now?”

Adanaho knit her brow while she considered my words.

“I can only speculate,” she said. “

“Speculation’s better than nothing,” I replied.

“I believe the Queen Mother is in a state of flux. Pulling her out of her disc terrified her almost to the brink of insanity. But in the days since we left the escape pod, her perceptions have been pure. Unadulterated.”

“Unadulterated?” I said, somewhat incredulous. “You make it sound like her disc was an impediment, rather an advantage. Five will get you ten the Fleet would kill to replicate a functional disc. That’s a nifty piece of the mantis puzzle we’ve still been unable to unravel. Imagine that kind of advance technology adapted for human use.”

“I can,” she said, with a slightly sour expression. “But we’re already so dependent on our own technology—for what we eat, how we travel, how we live, even how we play, and for what we *think* and *how* we think it—that we forget what it was like before computers, spacecraft, faster-than-light travel—”

“Do I detect the sensibility of a Luddite?” I said archly.

“I do *not* hate technology,” she replied. “I simply think we’ve gotten lazy. Did you know that the bulk of our major scientific discoveries came to us without the aid of modern equipment? Hell, Chief, they built the first atomic weapons using long math and vacuum tube processing power. The first true spaceplane, the X-15? Also built using nothing but slide rules and a lot of shrewd paper-and-pencil figuring. Then came the Information Age, and suddenly anyone could know anything via Internet search engines. Why waste time memorizing or synthesizing? Click, the info’s at your fingertips. Entertainment too. The immersive games became addictive. People forget about the danger of the Virtual Reality Plague.”

“Nobody’s forgotten about that,” I said. “There are still millions of people on Earth going through therapy and rehabilitation.”

“After how many decades?” she asked, stopping in her tracks and facing me. Her eyes had begun to sparkle keenly. I could tell from her posture that we’d hit a sore point.

“There are whole generations of people addicted to VR. Why come out and face the real world when make-believe is so much nicer?”

“Plenty of people recovered when the mantes attacked,” I said.

“Sure, when we were forced to, we snapped out of it. Sort of. But if the mantes never existed and we’d been left to just toodle along the path of least resistance . . . I am not sure any force could have reversed the trend. We built

ships in virtual bottles, then climbed in after the ships and pulled the corks tight behind us.”

I couldn’t deny the ferocity or facts of her argument. Every family had a member, or members, who’d become addicted to VR. Minds lost to imaginary spaces existing purely inside the global information networks. Each man or woman a fairy king or cyber queen, a god or goddess of his or her own private electronic realm. Wealth, luxury, power, all limitless and beyond belief.

Just sit down, plug in, turn on, and tune out.

An infinity of sweetly alluring lies.

I shuddered.

“So how does the VR Plague tie back to the Queen Mother?”

“Have you ever seen the bad cases? The ones who went into VR as kids only to come out as adults? Everything you and I take for granted, even eating and drinking and shitting, is an alien experience for them. They don’t remember the real world, and because there are no rules in VR there’s no need to bother with the mundane functions of ordinary existence. Most of those recoveries take years, and the patients hate it.

“But a very few of them delight in escaping. Like being reborn. They can’t get enough of the *real* around them. Every morning they wake up is a chance to feel real hot and cold water from a real tap, running through their real fingers. To hear real music played on real instruments with their own real ears. To see a really blue sky with real clouds and a real sun with real warmth on your face when you . . .”

She trailed off. I stared at her as she walked. Her eyes were looking straight ahead, but she was clearly lost in reverie.

Instantly, I intuited the truth.

“You were one of them, weren’t you,” I said.

She looked over her shoulder at me.

“Yes I was.”

“How young were you when you went in?”

“Six.”

“Jesus, your parents let you get on VR at that age?”

“It’s the world’s most amazing baby sitter.”

I swallowed hard.

“How old were you when you came out?”

“Fifteen,” she said. “The war was hurting us. The government began cutting off and rationing resources. My parents unplugged me and sent me to a state rehab school for VR kids. When I was sixteen, they said I was well enough to go stay with my mother’s sister in North Africa, since my parents were denied custody. Auntie hated VR, considered it a tool of the devil, and took me in like the daughter she never had. When I was 18 I joined the Fleet through an ROTC scholarship. When I was 22 I went to space, and never looked back.”

I didn’t say anything for a long time. The Captain’s revelation had turned the mood stone-cold sober.

“I think the Queen Mother is going through something similar to what I went through,” Adanaho finally said. “After living her entire life through the technological lens of her disc, she’s suddenly experiencing reality on *its* terms. I think she’s finding the experience to be revelatory. Old instincts, long suppressed, are coming to the surface. Abilities. Perceptions. A whole new way of seeing and interpreting the world.”

“That’s a hell of a speculation,” I said, shaking my head. “No disrespect ma’am, but can you be sure you’re not just projecting?”

She was silent for a time. Then she reluctantly said, “No.”

We took a few more steps.

“But can you offer any other explanation as to why she’d suddenly leap off a cliff, relying on wings she’s never used to prevent her from falling directly to a gruesome death?”

“No,” I admitted.

“You said it yourself, Chief. It took a leap of faith.”

Again, I had no answer.

Finally we came to a crumbling break in the canyon’s edge. The canyon itself grew wider and the sides less steep. It appeared to me that we could make our way down, provided we took our time. The Professor must have seen this too, because he and the Queen Mother had stopped and were looking up at us expectantly. Waiting.

It took the Captain and I the rest of the day to make our way down. When we reached the bottom, the entire canyon was in shadow and the air had begun to chill.

I wished hard for a clutch of driftwood and some matches to light a fire. None appeared.

While Adanaho set about preparing our camp for the night, I noticed that the Queen Mother kept apart from the Professor. She stayed near the water's edge, gazing into the swirls and eddies that marked the surface. The water was mostly clear, all the way to the bottom. If I'd thought there might be trout, I'd have rigged a pole and a line. But the Professor's sensors and my own water test kit revealed the depressing truth: the river was as lifeless as the surface through which it had carved its course. There would be nothing fresh to eat for dinner.

I pulled the Professor aside before we all went to sleep for the night.

"I've been wondering," I said, "about what you told me."

"Specifically?" he asked.

"Sex. You said the males of your species are in a sexual stupor until they've mated with the female producing the pheromone."

"That's a close enough description, yes."

"How in the hell do you mate when you're still attached to the discs?"

He looked at me, unmoving.

"Very carefully," was his only reply.

I didn't have the heart to pester him further.

In the morning we renewed our journey. Whatever I'd thought about building a raft, we simply didn't have the resources to do it. The emergency inflatable life preservers in our packs might have kept us face up in the river, but the water was so frigid we'd have been risking hypothermia as a result.

So we walked all day, following the river's edge along the bottom of the canyon. More and more, the Queen Mother tested the strength of her small lower legs. Every time we stopped. She also tested her flight capabilities, flitting from rock to sand bar to the far side of the river, and back again. Whether it was instinct or learned skill, or both, she appeared to be getting distinctly comfortable in that mode.

Every night, the Queen Mother and the Captain sought solitude together, while the Professor and I just sat by the water and wondered between us what was happening with our women.

Chapter 12

"We have to get up and go. Now." It was Adanaho's voice.

“Why?” I said, suddenly coming up off the sand, despite the aching stiffness in my joints. We were two weeks from landing, our food stores almost gone, but still no closer to finding a mantis base than we’d been before. We’d stayed in the canyon for the water supply, yes, but also to give us shelter from the sand storms that hit every third or fourth day.

I’d grown to like the canyon, despite the gnawing in my belly. Sleep came easily with the sound of the river droning in my ears.

Tonight, my rest was interrupted. Or was it morning? The faintest hint of light was growing above the canyon rim to the east.

“A craft has landed. Not far from here. The Professor says it’s not a mantis vehicle. They will be searching for us, and they will have marines with them.”

She already had her pack snugly slung over both shoulders.

The Professor held the Queen Mother securely aboard his disc.

“We can’t move quickly on foot,” I said.

“This I know,” said the Professor. “Which is why you must ride with me.”

“Can the disc—your carriage—handle all three passengers?”

“I do not know. But we must try.”

The Professor offered a forelimb.

I helped the Captain climb up onto the back of the disc. She hugged her arms around the Professor’s upper thorax, then I climbed aboard too. The disc’s motors whined with additional strain, and for a moment we were all deathly still—waiting for any sound to tell us we’d been noticed. When none came, we began to slowly float forward.

“How did our people find us?” I asked Adanaho in her ear.

She leaned over and spoke into mine.

“Fleet’s been quietly reverse-engineering a lot of different stuff during the years of the cease-fire. I’ve only been involved in some of that. It’s probable they’ve discovered a way to home in on the signals from the Professor’s disc, even if they can’t reverse engineer the disc itself.”

“Please tell me you can switch off whatever it is that’s not been switched off?” I said to the Professor.

“We are now running silent,” he said, not looking at me.

The Professor scooted along, his disc become sluggish—this time not nearly as high off the ground as before, and complaining in an audible fashion.

The dark landscape of the canyon passed by us in a blur. There were no moons. Only stars in the purpled sky. The professor could see though, if one could call his mechanical-cyborg senses sight. What was it like to “look” with Doppler sonar or radar? What images or pictures were in the Professor’s head as he steered us through the canyon?

Suddenly the Professor halted.

A trio of spotlights illuminated us from overhead. The loud purring of VTOL fans told me the gig was up. Those were human machines in the air, not mantis.

I suddenly had the desire to lay on the ground, face-down, and put my hands behind my head.

Busted!

“MANTIS SOLDIER,” a booming human’s voice commanded through an electronic bullhorn, “RELEASE YOUR HUMAN PRISONERS OR WE WILL DESTROY YOU.”

Frantic skitter-scratching from the Queen Mother.

“We cannot allow ourselves to be taken,” the Professor translated.

But what could we do? The Captain and I both put our hands up to shield our eyes against the harsh light. I felt my heart begin to beat double-time. On the one hand, being discovered by Fleet meant our famished sojourn in the alien wilderness had been cut short. On the other hand, it was probable my friend was going to wind up as a *hors d’oeuvre* on some Fleet Intelligence geek’s interrogation menu.

“Ma’am,” I said. “You’d better be damned right about being able to push the POW angle.”

“Set us down, Professor,” she said. “I swear on my honor as a Fleet officer that I won’t let them hurt you, or the Queen Mother.”

There was a moment of agonizing hesitation as the Professor’s head tilted this way and that, his antennae waving frantically as he tried to quickly deduce the best course of action: were there any escape routes, and if escape was impossible, could Adanaho be trusted to fulfill her promise?

The canyon suddenly took on an air of claustrophobia.

Slowly, the disc settled to the ground.

The Queen Mother shoved herself off of the disc and began to skitter away—her stubby lower legs moving rapidly on the rock and sand. The Professor’s mandibles clacked and chattered violently. I guessed that he was yelling at her? But it did no good.

More spotlights appeared, this time from the ground.

Wheeled trucks roared around a bend in the canyon ahead and squads of human troops began to pile out, quickly surrounding us.

The Captain and I both stepped off the Professor's disc, our hands held up.

"I claim these creatures as prisoners of war!" Adanaho shouted at the top of her vocal range. The marines approached us hesitantly, rifles at their shoulders.

"Don't hurt them," I yelled. "They're under our protection."

One of the marines lowered her rifle and walked out of the pack.

It was difficult to see her rank in the blinding glare of the spotlights, and the blowing dust from the VTOL fans that kept the gunships aloft: three chevrons stacked on top of each other.

"Ma'am," the female marine said as she approached us, saluting Adanaho. Then she saw me, and added a quick, "Sir."

The Captain and I both reflexively saluted, then dropped our arms.

"Sergeant," the Captain said in a trained tone of authority, "I'm giving you a direct order to stand down. Neither of these mantis are armed. They're not a threat to you or your marines. As a Captain in Fleet Intelligence, I claim them as POWs."

"Mantis prisoners?" the NCO said, sounding doubtful. She watched as the Queen Mother continued to scramble, and the Professor's antennae drooped, his body language expressing utter defeat.

"Yes," Adanaho said. "We took them from the *Calysta* before she was destroyed. It's essential that we get these POWs off this planet and into safe keeping. They are vital to the war effort."

"We've got orders to frag every mantis we come across," said the marine. "No exceptions. Hundreds of lifeboats came down all across this world. It's been a hell of a job policing up survivors. Especially with so many mantis patrols running interception."

"Who has orbital space superiority?" the Captain asked.

"We do, for the moment," said the NCO. "But that may not last. There's no time to waste, ma'am, sir, we have to get you out of here. And I'm not authorized to bring back any mantis carcasses."

The NCO signaled with a gloved hand and the marines moved in, separating us from the Professor and the Queen Mother—who'd given up

escaping, and simply lay prone on the dirt at the Professor's side, exhausted as well as defeated.

A dozen muzzles were trained on them both, and I distinctly heard safeties clicking off.

"NO!" the Captain and I both shouted together. We pushed our way through the marines to stand in front of the Professor and the Queen Mother.

"How much more clearly do I have to give a direct order, Sergeant?" Adanaho commanded sternly. "In fact, if I don't see people standing down by the time I get to three, there's going to be hell to pay. One . . . Two . . ."

The squad looked confused. Eyes—covered by goggles—darted from Adanaho's young but determined face, to their squad leader's. The female NCO looked angry, but she wasn't about to ignore the Captain.

"At ease," the NCO finally said, slowly pushing a palm down towards the ground. "If she's Fleet Intel like she says she is, we'll let her bosses figure it out. Get the heavy-lift transport in here and we'll evac the lot of them to orbit."

Several *roger thats* echoed around the group, then some of the marines trotted back to their trucks while others remained to guard the mantes. The troops stood close enough to keep the mantes under watchful eyes, but not so close as to be within reach of a swiping forelimb. As I watched their young faces I realized that none of them—save for the squad leader herself—were old enough to have fought in the first war. All they'd ever heard about mantes had come to them from training vids.

They stared at the Professor and the Queen Mother the way children might stare at a pair of freshly-landed sharks.

Dangerous monsters.

There was a deafening shriek in the air, and the landscape around us instantly lit as one of the gunships overhead burst into flame.

Other shrieks announced themselves, and suddenly all three of the gunships were coming down in pieces, the wreckage scattering while it burned brightly.

"INCOMING!" the marines yelled collectively.

I scanned the constricted strip of orange-to-purple sky over our heads.

Several swift, lethal-looking shapes swooped over us, their engines sounding distinctly different from those used by humans.

The mantis cavalry had arrived.

Chapter 13

My heart rate went to triple-time.

The war—humans versus the mantes, part two—had suddenly become real again.

The burning remnants of human aircraft lay scattered across the canyon, or steaming in the river itself. Marines were firing their rifles indiscriminately into the air, though I doubt they hit anything. Whatever had attacked and destroyed the gunships was momentarily gone. Though I suspected they would return, probably with drop pods loaded with mantis shock troops. I'd seen such in action on Purgatory. The canyon was about to become a slaughter house.

I saw the Professor with the Queen Mother half aboard his disc. They'd been pushed far out into the river by a trio of marines who were shouting at them, rifles raised and aimed dead-center.

Captain Adanaho was between the marines and the Professor, water up to her waist. She'd pulled out her sidearm and pointed it at the marines.

Humans hurled incomprehensible commands at each other.

One of the rifles went off.

Captain Adanaho was pitched backwards into the water.

Alien jets howled down on us.

The water around the trio of marines suddenly erupted with hundreds of little fountains.

What was left of the trio began to drift down stream.

Not caring whether I was next to be fragged, I plunged into the river and strove mightily to reach the Captain. Her body was limply drifting with the current, and the Professor stared dumbly at it as it passed both he and the Queen Mother, who also stared dumbly.

I threw myself forward and began to breast stroke, the water chill and electric on my skin.

My hand finally hit something soft.

I knotted my fist into the fabric of the Captain's uniform and began to beat back towards the shore.

When I came out, my chest heaved for air.

I dragged the Captain's limp body onto the sand at the river's edge.

Turning her over, I observed the bloody hole in the front of her uniform. A liver shot? Warm blackness flooded from the wound and the Captain's eyes blinked furiously as she tried to draw breath. Whispered gasps were all she could manage.

"Oh God no," I said, wishing madly for one of the med kits in our packs. Which were who knew how far away. The current had taken us down river too quickly for me to correctly reckon where camp might be. And there was still shooting happening, though from whom and towards whom I could not be certain. Lacking a better idea, I pressed my hand hard on the wound and willed the bleeding to stop.

The Captain groaned loudly and clutched at my arm with both hands. Her eyes were wide and she stared up at me.

"Chief," she spat. I read her lips more than I heard her.

"Ma'am," I said, trying to sound calm, "you're hurt bad, and I have to stop the bleeding."

"Chief," she said again, our eyes locked. I quickly lowered my ear to her face. Her voice rasped and sputtered.

"The Queen Mother," Adanaho said, "you've got to protect her. She is the key, Chief. She has been . . . chosen. Like you. Padre . . ."

I started to blubber my incomprehension, then looked up to see the Professor hovering almost directly above us. The Queen Mother slid off the front of his disc and came to Adanaho's side—her forelimbs framed Adanaho's young face as the Captain fought to draw additional breath, but could not.

I pressed harder, to combat the gushing blood, but felt in my heart that it was no use.

"We must flee!" The Professor commanded. "Caught in the crossfire, we will all die."

"We can't move the Captain!" I hollered, looking up at my friend with a sense of panicked helplessness ripping me up inside.

A trail of bullets spattered across the sand near us.

The Professor spun on his vertical axis to face the four marines who advanced with rifles up. I couldn't see them, but I could hear them splashing through the river shallows. Automatic fire stuttered and suddenly I was flattened across Adanaho's body as the Professor lowered his disc right down on top of us: me, the Captain, and the Queen Mother.

“My friend,” the Professor said, “I regret to inform you that—”

He never finished his sentence. Bullets *pinged* and *panged* off his disc. Some tore through chitin, slicing mantis organs and soft tissue. The Professor’s disc moved forward three meters, then gouged its bow into the wet sand—the disc proper tilting up like a shield. I looked up to see the silhouette of his thorax and limbs flailing around the disc’s black edge, bits and pieces of him coming off and mantis blood splattering.

Then I put my head down as a concentrated series of bursts from the advancing marines shredded the Professor’s disc completely.

It split in two and burst into flame, sparks and electrical arcing lighting up the horrific scene of the Professor’s dismantled body.

The sky howled.

Mantis fighters. Overhead. Making a third sweep of the canyon.

The marines in the shallows vanished in a blinding display of pinpoint antipersonnel rocketry.

I flattened across Adanaho’s body.

Long moments of silence followed.

The Professor’s disc slowly smoldered, so close I could smell the cooking flesh. I turned my eyes back to Adanaho’s face. She stared up at me unblinking, her mouth half open but not drawing breath.

I began to hurl obscenities at the cosmos. Towards any deity or deities that would listen. I damned the Professor. I damned the Queen Mother, and the mantes, and the marines, and the awful stupidity of precious lives cut short. I damned Earth. I damned the Fleet. I even damned Adanaho for being young and idealistic and coming to me as if I had some power over circumstances; enough to alter the course of history. Such idealism had gotten her killed, and all I could do was sit there, soaked and cold and clutching the Captain’s lifeless hand in my own.

A slow build of tortured sobs burst out of me as I lowered my forehead to Adanaho’s chest and shook with grief. For her. For my alien friend. For the fate of two species apparently committed to annihilation.

After a few moments I heard the Queen Mother suddenly rise up, her wings unfolding and extending to maximum width. I opened my eyes and looked. Enough light was coming down into the Canyon now that I could see her clearly. She watched the sky.

Loud, thunderous, mechanized whining to my rear me told me that the drop pods had finally come. Multiple buzzing sounds told me the shock

troops—their armored discs studded with a variety of lethal weapons—were on top of us.

Perhaps it was for the best. To end things in this manner.

I wasn't sure I wanted to live to see the mantis war machine slowly grind the planets of human space to powder. Instead of a quick termination, now there would be a long, drawn out, dreadful fist fight as the Fleet contracted and toughened its defensive circle. World after world would be “cleansed” of humanity. Until at last Earth would fall under mantis crosshairs.

The final stand.

And then . . . humanity would join the handful of other extinct races in the mantis archives. A dead people, wiped from the face of the galaxy by a species determined to have the stars to itself.

I kept my eyes closed and held the Captain's hand tight.

The buzzing was loud now. They had to be just meters away.

A sharp hissing cut through the mechanized sound. It was a shrill, painful sound, almost like fingernails on a chalk board. I reflexively looked up to see the source, and saw the Queen Mother hovering over myself and Adanaho, her wings fluttering and beating the air ferociously. Her mouth was open as wide as possible and her tractor teeth were vibrating so quickly they were a blur. It must have taken an astounding effort for her manage the display, but it had gotten the attention of her subordinates.

Several dozen mantis soldiers surrounded us, looking unsure of what to do. Those in the front rank were recoiling at the sight of the Queen Mother, a mantis without her carriage, unchained, feral, her insect eyes adamant.

Her hiss slowly died in her throat, followed by a rapid series of clicks and clacks as she spoke to her people in their own language. I couldn't be sure what she was saying, but their reaction was immediate. A path opened through the mass of soldiers allowing four other mantes to maneuver forward. I didn't see weapons on their discs. In fact, their discs seemed like the Professor's.

Were these medics?

I could only guess.

Two of them converged on the remains of the Professor. The other two on the Queen Mother herself, who settled onto her small lower legs and began to instruct the lot of them, her forelimbs waving and pointing with the distinct authority of one bred to rule.

None of them touched me. Nor the body of the Captain.

The troops moved back, then began to disperse.

Securing the area, no doubt.

I slowly sat up, tears and mucus down the front of my wet uniform, and glared at the Queen Mother. She sat on the sand, her wings folded tightly and her beak shut. She glared right back, her eyes alien but her posture erect and dignified.

Eventually the medics returned with what appeared to be a small disc—a carriage without an owner. Though I guessed by size that it was only temporary, for the Queen Mother’s benefit.

She looked at me for a long while, not saying anything, and me not saying anything to her. Then she slowly climbed aboard the disc and settled into the saddle. A series of squeaking and mechanical snapping sounds told me she was being re-integrated. She shuddered once and her mouth opened in irritation, then she settled down and the disc rose off the ground.

Hovering over to myself and the body of the Captain, the Queen mother announced, “Pick up your Captain. There is a transport waiting for us. I have a truce to call!”

Chapter 14

Thirteen weeks later, I was in orbit around Earth.

It had taken a long time for the Queen Mother to regain full control of her forces. And longer than that to convince Fleet that the Queen Mother’s overtures of peace were sincere. Several human planets had been destroyed. Along with several mantis worlds too. For the first time, the fight had not been one-way. And though the weaponry of humanity had been more primitive, it had proven to be just as effective.

Millions were dead. Mantis and human.

Past a certain point, body count ceased to matter.

What mattered now was that the Queen Mother and her top officers were getting ready to meet with Fleet Command and its top officers with the intention of signing, not just a cease fire, but a permanent treaty of non-aggression.

My uniform had been cleaned and prepared for the occasion by my mantis aides—assigned to me by the Queen Mother herself. They’d managed

to get almost all of Captain Adanaho's blood out of the fabric, save for a vague discoloring of some of the lighter piping.

The Captain herself rested in a stasis casket.

The mantes had spared no effort preparing the body.

The transparent lid of the casket showed Adanaho in a flowing one-piece gown woven from traditional mantis silks. I'd told them how to go about it. They'd wanted her presented to Fleet Command with as much dignity as could be mustered—a token of their good will, and also in honor of Adanaho's act of sacrifice in defense of the Queen Mother.

I stood staring at Adanaho's face while our mantis shuttle maneuvered through Earth orbit in order to dock with the Fleet space station on the far side of the world. Thankfully there was gravity. Something I hoped human engineers would replicate soon.

The Queen Mother stood next to me. No disc. A small package of electronics had instead been attached to her thorax with flexible straps: a translator box and speaker grill for communications.

The mantis guards at the hatches did have discs, polished and bright. The guards themselves were rigid with respect.

"She was too young," I said sadly, not daring to touch the Captain's casket. Adanaho looked pristine now. Immaculate. I didn't want to disrespect what she'd accomplished by treating the casket like mere furniture. I had decided it was a kind of monument, both to the horrible bloodshed which had taken place, and to the new shoots of possibility which had sprouted amidst the ashes.

"And I am too old," said the Queen Mother. "Age has made me cynical. I had thought the one you called Professor to be an eccentric. I humored him just long enough to achieve my own ends. And now I find my universe transformed beyond reckoning."

"Do you miss your carriage?" I asked.

"Oh yes, all the time," she said. "But after our recovery from the planet's surface, it became apparent to me that there could be no going back. Not for me. Your Captain was correct. Our carriages have come to define us in ways we neither understand nor suspect. It took having mine ripped away from me to make me see what we mantes have lost in the long time since we first achieved sapience."

"And what is it you think you're regaining?"

The Queen Mother considered my question for a moment, then she said, “Illumination.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh?”

“If I understand the human use of the term, it means an emergence into a state of deeper understanding—of the universe, of the self, of the meaning of both.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” I said. “What will you do now?”

“Once the treaty is signed and reparations meted out, I will call the Quorum of the Select together and a new Queen Mother will be chosen.”

“You’re quitting?” I said, surprised.

“I must. Already I am an oddity among my people. They need someone who can lead them during this transition, and it cannot be me.”

“But the treaty is *your* idea,” I said. “What if the new Queen Mother decides to throw it away and re-start the war?”

“We do not behave so rashly, despite what you may think, Padre. It took us a long time to reach the conclusion that war must be renewed. It would take an even longer time for us to reach the conclusion that the new peace must be destroyed. There is an additional human name circulating in the Quorum now. The heroism of Captain Adanaho—for me, for the reclamation of the cease-fire—will live eternally in the memories of the mantes.”

I bowed my head, eyes closed, remembering the Captain’s last words to me. They’d hit me in a place so deep I’d not even known it existed. And whether she knew it or not, the Captain had bound me to this alien who now stood at my side—the matriarch of all I’d once feared.

I also remembered the Professor. The one who’d originally sought me out of curiosity, and upon whom so much had depended in the long run. That he’d died trying to protect the three of us—Adanaho, the Queen Mother, and myself—only seemed to cement the unspoken pact. Blood for blood. The life of a mantis hero for the life of a human heroine, each given freely so that there might be a future for both races.

If I had anything to say about it, the Professor’s prominence in human lore would be every bit as great as Adanaho’s was becoming among the aliens.

Aliens. I smiled slightly and shook my head. Time to get that word out of my system. The mantes had proven to be every bit as *human* as any woman or

man I'd ever known. To include their capacity for regret, and a longing for redemption.

"And once you're free of responsibility," I said to the Queen Mother, "where will you go? Home?"

"No," she said. "I will need time to properly dwell upon what has happened; what *is* happening. I do not yet fully comprehend what it is I am becoming without the carriage. I cannot say I am regressing, nor am I standing still. I feel as if I am pupating all over again. Only this time it's happening inside of me. In my mind. In my . . . soul?"

I arched an eyebrow at her use of the word. But said nothing.

"I will need," she continued, "a place of quiet refuge. Somewhere I can meditate. I think that's the right human word? I feel as if I am seeing the world and everything in it for the first time, all over again. I must be free of distractions. And I will need to be in contact with someone of whom I can ask questions. Many questions."

"There must be many planets in mantis territory suitable for this," I said.

"No," she replied. "Only one."

"One?"

"Yes. It's a sparse world. Not much to look at, really. Upon which there is a single, modest chapel."

A tiny thrill went up my spine.

"And I expect you'll be wanting me to go with you," I said.

"Only if you wish it. I cannot compel you to do this thing."

"It's okay. I'd have gone back even if you didn't ask. But not before I've had a chance to visit Earth again, and make proper goodbyes to the many people I left behind during the first war."

"Of course."

"Thank you."

"No, Padre, thank *you*."

"It's going to be difficult," I said. "This journey you're proposing to take. In all the thousands of years of human history, countless men and women have walked the same path. The results have not always been good ones. There can be no guarantees. You might get frustrated. Or worse."

"That is why I will need you, to be my guide."

"But I'm just—"

"Padre, what did Captain Adanaho tell you? What would her *spirit* say if it could speak to you now?"

I looked through the lid of the casket.

“That I can’t put off the inevitable,” I said.

“Then we shall walk the path together?” the Queen Mother asked.

“Yes, I think we’ll have to.”

“Good.”

A small chime in the compartment alerted us to the fact that the mantis shuttle was on final approach for dock. I took another long look through the top of the casket, then straightened my uniform and followed the Queen Mother out into the corridor that lead to the gangway hatch.

