



Acid Burns

By Antony Johnston



KRAKULV, 2504

"We're not going anywhere! Man those cannons!"

Captain Brach Treicher turned from the heavy weapons platform and broke into a run, heading for centcomm. Despite the bulk of his CMC combat suit he took the stairs three at a time, listening to the cannons spit out staccato bursts behind him. The marines had watched medivac after medivac evacuate Krakulv Base over the past hour, and naturally expected they were next. But they were staying.

Krakulv was a secret early warning moon base on the edge of Dominion space, monitoring for zerg incursions. Maybe once, when the base was established following the First Contact War, there had been enough medivacs for everyone. But as time went on, and the base and its population grew — grew complacent, in Brach's opinion — they'd outgrown the medivacs' capacity.

The order to evacuate all non-combat, non-essential survivors after the initial attack had come from the major, and Brach would have done the same, but it left a bitter taste in his mouth. That first wave, before lunar sunrise, had taken them by surprise. It shouldn't have. What use was a watch station that didn't detect an impending attack on itself? But it hadn't, and within ten minutes a quarter of their population was dead. So the survivors had fled, taking all but one medivac, leaving a couple hundred marines to hold off an entire zerg assault until the nearest *Destroyer*-class ship could reach them...

The blast door to central command hissed open, and Brach strode through. "Do we have an ETA on that Destroyer yet?"

Base commander Major Lee Treicher peered at her status console. "Six hours."

"Six hours! Lee, we can't hold them off that long! Krakulv wasn't built for this kind of siege!"

Most of the centcomm staff had evacuated, but half a dozen had stayed behind to man tactical stations, and now every one of them found something really interesting to read on their consoles.

Lee fixed a cold gaze on Brach, and he sighed. If there was one thing about his wife that bugged him, it was this. She never lost her cool, never raised her voice in anger, even when she had every right to. Sometimes he wanted to shake her just to make her react and lose it once in a while.

"So what should we do instead?" she said in an even tone. "Surrender? You want to wave a white flag, hope the zerg have reformed and found their inner pacifist?"

"Counterattack. We can't just sit here and let them come at us."

"I've got raven spotters out right now, assessing the situation. I'll determine a course of action when they send their report, not before. Now either come here and help me out, or go and shout encouraging yet abusive insults at your men."

Brach hesitated, then stepped up beside Lee. He placed the hand of his combat suit over her gloved fingers and gently squeezed. "Sorry," he whispered.

She gave him a lopsided smile and turned back to the console. "Take a look at these formations here..."

* * *

GARXXAX, 2501

One hour before high noon, Illyana Jorres closed down her security monitors. She'd finished her remote sweep of the biosphere outposts twenty minutes ago, ahead of schedule, and all was normal. As it should be — Garxxax was a tiny planet in a tiny system, on the edge of terran space and far removed from the hustle and bustle of Dominion life, with no indigenous intelligences above forest vermin.

But that was what she'd requested when she'd joined the company. She'd seen enough action in the war, more than enough for any marine. With no other marketable skills, she had gone into freelance security and wound up here. A planet where the humidity made a trip through the mountainous rainforest unbearable without a coolsuit, and even the oceans that covered most of the globe were hot as an evening shower.

But there was no action, no excitement. Just her, ten scientists, and the heat. It suited Illyana just fine.

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The behemoth groaned, shifting its great mass to ease the pain of battle-born wounds. The protoss fleet had caught it unawares, drifting through space on the sector edge, and the behemoth had paid the price. Now its life was draining, even though the battle was over. Its own life was unimportant, but it carried thousands of other zerg within its cavernous membranes, and they too were in danger if it perished. Moving through space was its natural state, but the act was not without exertion. The old behemoth needed time to recover, to regain energy. It could not do that in the vacuum of space.

The Kerrigan had guided the behemoth to ultimate victory in the battle, at the price of its wounds. Now she looked through its tired eyes, scanning the region for a suitable resting place.

There, in the system ahead. A planet with a nitrous-oxygen atmosphere, and carbon-based life. Life that the behemoth, and the thousands of zerg carried in the cavernous membranes of its body, could consume to survive. To heal. The Kerrigan guided the behemoth towards its destination.

After a time — an hour, a day, a week, a month? Time meant little to one so old — the living ship entered the planet's gravity well. The drifting clouds were thick, obscuring the terrain. When the behemoth broke through, it recognized some features. It had seen other planets like this, with mountains and trees, and green covering the land. It had rested, once, on a planet such as this. There would be rich proteins here, perhaps even mammalian life.

Life. Yes! The behemoth sensed biological heat clustered below. Instinctively it adjusted its descent path towards the source.

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Brach watched the raven feeds come in, and sent them to Lee. They'd both fought in the First Contact War, and they knew what to expect. Zerglings, mutalisks, hydralisks... but there was something else he didn't recognize.

"Major, what the hell are those?"

Lee left the main console to stand beside Brach and scan the static-worn images on the feed. He pointed to a column of squat multilegged zerg scuttling over a layer of creep.

Their wide bodies were heavily armored by a spiked carapace that hid their features from the air, and they moved in unison towards a comms dish installation two clicks from the Krakuly Base walls.

Lee shook her head. "Never seen that unit before. But we know the zerg evolve and mutate quickly. It could be new, or even a unit we've seen before, with better—"

The zerg column came within a quarter click of the comms dish, and the front row rose up to unleash blasts of lurid green acid from their mouths. As they finished, the row behind them rose up and did the same. Thirty seconds later, the dish installation was a smoking pile of molten neosteel.

"LRC-4 just went offline," shouted one of the tactical staff.

Lee hissed through her teeth. "Roaches."

"Are you sure? I thought they were... smaller?"

"Obviously, they grew. Shit." Lee raced back to the main console and studied the base defense status for the hundredth time. "Our walls are still at a hundred percent, no breaches or serious damage yet. But those things will eat through them in an hour or two."

"'Or two,' is the question. We could all be on a transport by the time they get through."

Lee didn't reply. She looked paralyzed, indecisive. Brach hadn't seen her this nervous since their wedding, and he knew exactly why. His mind drifted to their quarters, and the trophy cabinet he'd insisted they bring with them, to remind them that even though they'd been assigned to a small, unimportant monitoring base, they were still marines who'd served with honor. But the cabinet didn't just hold medals and trophies.

They'd also filled it with battlefield souvenirs, reminders of what they'd both been through during the war. He knew what Lee would be thinking of right now. He had to do something.

"I'll lead an aerial squad and buy us some time." Brach saluted and turned to walk out. "Major."

Lee looked up from the console, suddenly alert. "What? No! You know what those things can do, and these are bigger than any I've seen before. What if these ones can attack air units?"

"So why didn't they take out the raven? That heavy armor restricts them so much, they can't look up. All I need is half a dozen banshees and coordinates from the ravens. Easy strike."

"And when was the last time any of you took a banshee out? Six months? A year? You're as rusty as the ships, and I'm not risking more lives without good reason. Nobody goes outside the base walls... including you, Captain. Got it?"

Brach knew Lee was serious when she called him either Captain or by his full name of Brachyan. He hated it, mostly because it made him feel like a child. She was his wife and his superior officer... but that didn't mean she was never wrong. For example, she didn't know that he and a half-dozen other vets took the banshees out for flybys every month during lunar midnight.

"Yes, Major," he said, and left the centcomm.

* * *

"Hey, Illyana. What's up?" Dannion Kortter spoke without looking up from the monitor.

"Not much," she replied as the door closed behind her. "Me, you, nine eggheads, eleven fake ecosystems, and a whole lot of nothing going on. Just the way I like it."

As if on cue, Dannion's entire console lit up, and a scratchy transmission sounded over the comms.

"Raynolds to base. Are we expecting a storm out here?"

Dan opened the channel. "This is base, Raynolds." He scanned the worklog rota. "I've got you in biosphere three, the slug and sap dome under the mountain. What's the problem?"

"It's like the lights just went out. But I checked the forecast before I left base, and there was no sign of storms or bad fronts rolling in. Can you double-check?"

"Sure thing, hold on." Dan called up the day's forecast and real-time patterns. "You should be clear and dry. Could it be the mountain shadow? We're closing on two in the afternoon. If the sun's going down on the other side..."

"I'm out here twice a week, for God's sake. I know when it gets dark."

Illyana leaned over Dannion's shoulder. "Raynolds, this is Jorres. Is it definitely clouds?"

"How would I know? I'm in the slug dome, can't see a thing through the geodesic screens. And the light's getting worse in here by the second. I'm heading back to the console room before I need a flashlight to KRZRRZKRZKRZZZKKKK."

The ground shook.

"What the hell was that?" Dan jabbed at the comms, trying to reestablish the connection.

Illyana thought the ground was still shaking, then realized it was her alert sensor, vibrating on her hip. She checked it. "Shit."

Hesken, one of the scientists, ran into the room, panting from the brief exertion. "Earthquake?" he gasped. "I hate earthquakes. Please don't say this planet's unstable."

Illyana pushed past him. "We don't know, but whatever it was compromised biosphere three's integrity. I just got an alert: the seal's broken, and failsafes have kicked in. Kortter, keep working on raising Raynolds."

Data and reports scrolled over the monitors in rapid succession. Dan's eyes flicked from screen to screen, skimming everything, looking for a solution, or at least an explanation. "What about you?"

Illyana stepped through the door without looking back. "I'm going out there."

* * *

Six banshees screamed out of the purple sky, raining backlash rockets down on the zerg. The valley lit up with fire as Brach brought the lead craft around for another pass.

"First strike is deadly, Major," he said into his headset. "Banshees, commence second run."

Back at Krakuly Base, Lee fumed and clenched her fists in silence. She'd known, perhaps only subconsciously, that Brach would disobey her and take the banshees out. She

knew all about the practice sorties he organized every month at lunar midnight, when he thought nobody was looking.

If they survived this battle, she might reprimand him. But that was the point — if they survived. When it was life or death, a court martial was the least of a marine's worries.

She let them go, and tasked the centcomm staff to give full tactical support. Now that they were out there, she had little choice.

Brach lined up for his second bombardment pass, arming all systems as he brought the banshee in low and level. For the first strike they'd flown in cloaked all the way from base, swooped out of the low sun, firing at the last second, before the zerg could move an overseer towards their position... and before power to the cloaking systems ran out on these old rustbuckets, which would be any second now. Lee had been right about that, at least.

So now the zerg knew they were coming. Brach had to hope they could press home quickly enough to stop zerg reinforcements from arriving before his men exited the theater.

"Fire!"

Brach swooped over the column of roaches, no longer a solid mass of carapace but broken up, gaps punched in the line by the banshees' missiles, and as more rockets blasted down into the valley, more gaps appeared —

But something wasn't right. He expected to see broken carapaces and zerg guts spread over the ground. Instead, the gaps in the roach column were just that. Gaps, as if the roaches had vanished into thin air.

Or into the ground.

Brach saw roaches burrowing into the ground, letting the dusty, cracked surface of the moon swallow them up, safe from harm. Some were injured; others burrowed as a preemptive defense. The banshees would need something more powerful than stingers to take out these particular zerg.

"Pull back from the roaches! Concentrate fire on—"

Before he could finish, a sickening thump filled his headset, and a shockwave threw his banshee off kilter. Brach yanked the stick to correct his balance and pulled up, glancing around to locate the source of the concussion, and saw the disintegrating hull of another banshee as it fell to the ground in fiery pieces. And behind it, flying through the explosion, a squadron of mutalisks.

"Three and high, Captain!"

His wingman's shout pulled Brach out of his thoughts. He turned to face front and saw two mutalisks soaring down from the upper atmosphere, heading straight for him.

* * *

Illyana zipped up her coolsuit and checked its status. All green. The Garxxax atmosphere was breathable, but nitrogen-rich, so she attached nasal oxygen tubes in case she ran short of breath. Next she pulled her boots tight and double-checked the seal against her suit legs. She'd neglected that the first time she'd gone into the rainforest, and had come within seconds of having a zantar slug slide inside her boot. She'd seen the effects of their acidic mucus excretion often enough on the lab monitors to know how easily it could have taken her lower leg, and she had never neglected her boots again.

Weapon. Hopefully she wouldn't need it — most of the indigenous wildlife was docile or scared of terrans — but she never went outside without a sidearm. She picked out her old P220, running a quick manual check. It was almost as old as she was, and she knew most old soldiers had moved on to newer, more powerful rifles. But the P220 never jammed, never misfired. The most powerful gun in the galaxy was no use if the damn thing didn't work.

Finally she slipped a visor over her forehead, ready to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun. Biosphere three was on the north side of a mountain, but if this was a widespread problem, she might need to check the other outposts, and some were in exposed areas for maximum sunlight. Garxxax's extreme axial tilt meant the sun could take hours to finally dip below the horizon at this time of year.

Dannion walked into the prep room. "I got through to Raynolds. Kind of."

"Don't be coy, Dan; it doesn't suit you."

He didn't reply, and Illyana realized the expression she'd initially taken for disappointment was actually fear.

"What I mean is... he's flatlined. Comms to the biosphere are still out, but I picked up a weak trace from his vitals monitor." Dan exhaled.

Illyana ushered him back out of the room. "You said the signal was weak. Maybe it's just not getting through properly. Keep trying, OK?"

"I don't think you should go. We should call for evac right now. It takes four hours for a planet-hopper to reach us out here..."

She ushered him back towards the main comms room. "It'll be fine, Dan. I know how to handle myself."

* * *

The banshee corkscrewed like a drunk offworlder, weaving in all directions as exploding glave wurms filled the air it had occupied a moment before. Twenty mutalisks pursued it through the sky, spitting writhing wurms at the banshee's retreating backside as the ship wheeled and spun towards Krakuly Base. Black smoke billowed from its left side.

In central command, Lee Treicher watched the scanners nervously. Her staff had run projections showing that the banshee could make it back to Krakuly defense perimeter before the mutalisks made physical contact. But the projections were rough, and allowing for a damaged turbofan made them even less reliable.

"Ten seconds to defense range perimeter, Major."

The banshee flipped into a barrel roll, avoiding a cluster of mutalisks concentrating fire on its right flank. A knot of wurms exploded together, cascading down like firework trails.

"Five seconds. Four. Three. Two..."

"Fire all cannons!" Lee shouted.

The marines manning the heavy weapons heard her loud and clear. A quarter klick from the base walls, the sky blackened with anti-air barrage fire, ripping through mutalisk flesh and wing. The banshee ducked low to avoid the tail end of the barrage.

"Holy shit, guys, let me get inside before you light her up!"

Brach's voice crackled through static and the muted whump of nearby explosions, but Lee heard it just fine. She hated herself for smiling, when the other five pilots he'd taken

out had fallen to mutalisk fire or the hydralisk backup squad that had appeared moments later. But with every passing minute this looked like their last stand, and favoritism be damned, Lee wanted her husband by her side when the shit came down.

"Report to centcomm for debrief ASAP when you land, Captain."

Five minutes later he arrived, back in his CMC combat suit as if he'd never left. But his expression betrayed a different story.

"We eliminated a couple of squadrons, Major. I estimate we've bought ourselves two, maybe three extra hours while they regroup and re-prepare the ground wave."

"Was it worth it?"

Brach stiffened. "That's not for me to decide, Major. The men carried out their duty, as do we all."

Lee sighed. "And what about intel? Was there anything to indicate the zerg line of attack when they reach us?"

Brach hesitated. "Hard to say. They burrowed down into the rock like it was sand."

"Have you ever walked outside the base? Give me a shovel, and I could burrow into this moon."

He ignored her sarcasm. She didn't know yet. "And could you heal up a broken leg in five seconds while you were down there?"

Lee's eyes widened. "What?"

"I thought I'd killed half the column on my first pass. Then as I came around, I saw a bunch of them burrowing into the surface... and after the mutalisk ambush I looked down again, and I swear, so help me, almost every last roach came back out of the ground good as new. It was like I'd hit them with party streamers."

Lee set her lips into a thin, grim line and nodded.

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The landing had not been kind to the behemoth, and it would need time to recover. More time than the zerg it carried inside its body could survive without sustenance. Besides, there was exploring to do.

The Kerrigan guided them out of the behemoth's unconscious form and out into the terrain. The planet was hot, humid, mountainous, and treacherous, but these discomforts were nothing to the zerg. Many Ones, Spinebearers, Winged Ones and more swarmed through the rainforest, sweeping aside flora and fauna alike.

Mutalisks soared over the forest canopy to scout the location. Through them, Kerrigan saw a nearby structure in the forest. Two pale domes, and smaller buildings of metal branching off. Terran or protoss? It didn't matter. Her primary interest lay in military installations, which this was obviously not. Still, if it harbored life, it could feed the zerg. She issued a single command.

Attack.

The hydralisks were the first to smash through the dome's pale screens. Hot air and steam rushed out, and the terrans' primitive warning system flashed colored lights. The terrain inside the dome was the same as outside, but hotter, with paths of hard floor surface weaving through the vegetation. The hydralisks ignored it, surging onward —

A sound, a terran scream. The Kerrigan urged the hydralisks forward.

Small slug-like creatures, unknown to the zerg-mind, fell from the trees and plants as the hydralisks passed. Some latched onto the zerg, which registered pain where the slugs landed, but the Kerrigan's attention was elsewhere.

A single terran, standing in front of a metal door. He reeked of fear and desperation, a heady cocktail that flooded and intoxicated the hydralisks' senses. They drank of it, savoring it, and then the cocktail was drained. The only odor remaining on the terran was death.

Now the zerglings were inside the dome, and followed their brethren to the door. But more slugs fell from the trees as the zerglings crashed carelessly through, and more zerg registered pain, some at high levels. The Kerrigan brought them to a halt, curious that a creature as small as these slugs could injure the mighty zerg.

She willed some of the zerglings to examine the slugs, but they were fragile creatures and died easily under the zerg's razor-sharp claws. She moved her attention instead to the hydralisks around the door, and saw something she had originally missed.

More slug creatures covered the door, and the surface was pitted with holes. Some slugs lay inside the shallow holes. The dead terran wore protective coverings over his hands. A container at his feet still held several slugs.

The slugs could not only injure zerg flesh; somehow they could also eat through metal. This could be very useful.

The Kerrigan sensed unexpected movement, and through the zerglings' eyes found its source. The slugs they had accidentally killed were twitching. Those only wounded were already moving again, with no sign of damage.

Very useful indeed.

* * *

"Contact from Destroyer transport evac, Major. ETA is sixty minutes."

Lee breathed a sigh of relief. Forty minutes ago, the zerg had completely surrounded Krakulv Base. Now they were pounding the walls with everything they had, including roach acid blasts, while mutalisks flew hit-and-run raids from the air. The walls were holding, and Brach was in command of repelling the mutalisk waves with batteries of anti-air cannons. But Lee knew it was a matter of when, not if, the zerg breached the moon base.

Sixty minutes. If the walls, and the cannons, held for that long, she could get the rest of the marines off-site, with total casualties of less than thirty percent. Far better than her estimate after the first attack.

The mutalisk raids held off for the moment. Lee turned her attention to the exterior feed from the walls, punching it up on the main console. The zerg's relentless battering had damaged many integral wall systems already, and the feed was barely more than static and artifacts. She squinted, trying to discern movement and shape through the fuzz. There were the zerglings; there were the hydralisks and roaches...

She saw something, or thought she did, that made her heart skip a beat. She scanned back thirty seconds and saw it again. Scanned forward to live feed, and there it was again. And again.

She drew breath to relay what she'd seen to Brach, but the captain's voice came over her headset before she could speak.

"Lee, something's happening on the ground! It's hard to make out... Krakulv is negative for seismic activity, right?"

"That's not an earthquake, Brach. I just saw it on the feed."

Lee reached for the red alert signal on the console, then remembered it had been running since dawn. She touched her headset and broadcast to all hands.

"Attention, all units. The roaches are tunneling under the walls. Repeat, roaches aren't just burrowing; now they can move underground, too! All non-gunnery hands to the courtyard, immediately!"

The internal feeds showed marines running from all over the base, making for the courtyards. Then Lee remembered what Brach had seen in the valley.

"Use heaviest weapons only and confirm kill shot. I repeat, be one hundred percent sure of total kill! These bastards heal real fast, so do not settle for injury! If they burrow, grenade them as they go down!"

As the marines poured out into the courtyards, C-14 "Impaler" assault rifles armed and ready, the first roach burrowers broke the cracked moon soil inside the walls. The base lit up with gunfire as Lee's troops took the battle to the zerg. The roaches retaliated with acid blasts, and powerful chitinous limbs that ripped one marine in half while she watched. Another fell as a roach erupted from the ground beneath him. She watched him struggle as it dragged him down, and got only a grim satisfaction when earth and carapace showered out of the hole. The marine had set off a grenade as a last resort.

Ten minutes later, the battle wasn't going well. The roaches were big and well armored, and they regenerated wounds as fast as her marines' Impalers could deal them. She counted five roaches dead, but at the cost of thirty marines and counting. Her men tried to keep their distance, but with roaches literally erupting from the ground beneath them, there was nowhere to hide.

And then the roaches turned around.

Lee hoped they were retreating, preparing to burrow back under the walls, but then she realized getting the roaches inside the base was only stage one. They'd been unable to break through the base walls, reinforced against all but the strongest attacks from outside, backed up by automatic sentry weapons. But here on the inside there were no sentries, no buttresses. Just thick slabs of neosteel, which the roaches now assaulted with concentrated streams of acid blasts, three roaches focusing on each single point of attack. The marines hit them with Impaler volleys, but other roaches moved between them, acting as living shields to protect their fellow zerg.

The mutalisks held off, probably waiting for the roaches to finish their breach. It was what Lee would have done. But that left her with a weapon, and a hard decision to make. She took a deep breath.

"Brach, take the gyro restrictors off the anti-air cannons, and focus fire on the roaches."

"Say again, Major?"

"Point them down, dammit! They're the only guns we have big enough to take them out before they break open the walls!"

"Our guys are still down there!"

"I know!"

Brach cut the comm link.

Lee waited, powerless and impotent as the roach acid slowly broke down the base walls, molecule by molecule. Section 4D was falling fast.

A deafening barrage of anti-air fire blasted down into the courtyard, tearing into a group of roaches. The impact splash blew three nearby marines back, arcing through the air.

"Everyone fall back! I repeat, keep your distance and do not engage!" Brach's voice cut loud and clear over the all-hands comm as anti-air cannons continued to rip through the courtyard.

Lee scanned the wall status as her staff shouted out reports.

"Section 8C is falling!"

"3B at eighty percent!"

"4D is gone!"

"Loud and clear! Focusing on those areas now!"

More cannon fire blasted the courtyard, concentrating on roaches attacking the weakest spots. Where sections of the wall had already been breached, Brach moved the fire from the courtyard to the hole itself, ripping into zerg as they swarmed through.

Now the mutalisks began attacking again, drawing fire away from the ground as they swooped through the air, unleashing a torrent of wurms at the marines below.

Lee checked her chrono. Forty minutes.

* * *

Illyana and Dan entered comms together. Dan set to work trying to strengthen the signal from Reynolds's vitals monitor, breathing fast as he punched buttons and tweaked configurations.

Illyana called up the Extra-Vehicular Assistant console and activated the warm-up sequence for one of the jungle jeeps. They were modified mohicans, but Dr. Callins — chief project scientist, and head of biomorphology — had called them "jungle jeeps" on the first day. Illyana wasn't sure if this was hilarious to scientists, or they were all just sucking up to Callins, but regardless, the name stuck.

Dan looked up from the console. "What's that noise?"

Illyana turned, trying to pinpoint the sound, before realizing it was coming from her coolsuit pocket. Her alert sensor was vibrating again. "Oh, no..." She checked the status. "Sphere six is compromised."

"That's the nearest one to three, heading west. Was there anyone...?"

"No, only number three was manned today, thank God. What the hell is going on?"

Dr. Callins rushed into the room. "Kortter, did you screw up the signal? My entire monitor bank to sphere six just went offline!"

Callins had the typical short temper of a scientist. Illyana stepped between him and Dannion to defuse the inevitable argument they would have. "It's not our doing, sir. Six has been compromised, just like three."

"Then what the hell are you standing around here for? Get out there and fix it!"

"That's what I'm about to do. If you'd just calm —" Still in her hand, the alert sensor buzzed. "And now we've lost sphere one."

"What?!"

Illyana ignored Callins and called up the outpost map. The biospheres were arranged in a rough circular pattern, each between ten and twenty clicks from the central base. It was close enough to reach them with relative ease, but far and wide enough to

ensure a good variety of environments. Sphere three was roughly northwest from their position. Six was west of three. One was southwest of six...

"Dan, look at this. You were right: they're falling in order. Counterclockwise, circular."

Dannion's expression told Illyana he'd much rather have been wrong. "Order of what, though? There's no reason the spheres should fail in sequence. They're autonomous, with dedicated parallel systems. The only connection they share is us."

Illyana looked at the order again and recalled Raynolds's words: *Like the lights just went out.*

"Sound full alert. Dan, call for that planet-hopper. Dr. Callins, please assemble your staff and ensure all evac prep is carried out. You have four hours."

Callins protested, spluttering, "What —? But... you can't —" She shooed him out of the room, still protesting. Illyana knew she was the least-respected member of staff on the planet, but security technically outranked non-combat personnel, so he could suck it.

Dannion's fingers hovered over the console. "Illyana... don't go out there. Please."

She smiled sadly. "Dan... there's nothing I'd rather do than stay here and just wait for evac. But I can't. It's my job." Deep down, even after the horror and trauma, Illyana Jorres was still a soldier. A marine. And she couldn't just stand by while... while...

She didn't even want to think of the word.

* * *

"Krakulv Base, this is the marine Destroyer Victory. We have visual; please respond."

Five minutes ahead of schedule. Lee switched her headset to the outbound channel. "Victory, this is Krakulv Base, Major Lee Treicher speaking. Good to hear you. We're just about cooked down here. I have approx one-zero-zero to one-five-zero survivors for evac; please advise."

"Looking kind of crowded down there, Major. Can we land a Destroyer in your bay?"

Lee swore under her breath. Krakulv hadn't been designed to handle a ship the size of the *Victory*. Nobody had thought it would be necessary. "Negative. Can you set down outside the walls?"

"Negative back at you. There's a blanket of zerg for half a klick in all directions."

"Did you already pick up our medivacs?"

"Affirmative, all present and accounted for."

"Then listen up. We have one medivac remaining here. Send three more down empty, then move into position over the base and give us air-to-surface artillery fire to buy us time."

The line went silent. Lee knew the ship's captain would be weighing her suggestion, but it was the only sensible option. Even a basic Destroyer like the *Victory* was loaded out with enough artillery to make the zerg think twice, and had enough armor to withstand counterattacks.

The line crackled back to life. *"Copy that, Major. Sounds like a plan. ETA to firing position is three minutes. We'll launch the medivacs from there."*

Lee spent the next three minutes coordinating her marines. She directed injured troops to the base's remaining medivac, and ordered everyone else to fall back inside the building. Then she sent the remaining centcomm skeleton crew to the medivac bay. They

argued, but backed down when she hit them with that cold glare that worked so well on Brach. They filed out... and ran into her husband, pushing his way through in the opposite direction.

"Lee! Come on; let's go!"

A green light on the main console signaled the medivac pilot was ready. Lee opened the hangar blast doors. "You go ahead, Brach. I'm staying until final evac."

"This is final evac! The Destroyer's leveling into position. This base is not a starship, Lee, and you're not the captain! You don't have to go down with it!"

"I don't intend to. But we can't risk the zerg getting our intel, and there's no time to wipe everything."

"So set the self-destruct nukes, and let's go!"

"It's not that simple. Too short a timer, we might take out the *Victory* and everyone on board. Too long, and the zerg could have cleared out with everything before the nukes are even primed."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Lee looked down at the console. With the marines retreating, the zerg were already starting to breach the outer sectors of the main building. And roaches would make short work of the bulkhead blast doors, including the one here in centcomm. She turned to Brach and smiled. "Remember how I argued about bringing the trophy cabinet?"

"Yeah..."

She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "Well, now you're a genius. Here's the plan..."

* * *

The jungle jeep rattled over rough ground, crashing through the rainforest's undergrowth as fast as Illyana dared drive. Vines and creepers smacked the windshield, breaking and falling away while insects and small primates scattered out of the jeep's path.

The shadow of the mountain turned the afternoon sun into a twilight glow, but she made out the biosphere ahead, a hundred meters higher up the mountainside. From here it looked OK. There might be fine mist rising from one of the domes, but this was a humid environment. She'd seen steam rising from bare rock out here at times, just because of the rainforest's heat.

Illyana turned the jungle jeep back onto the dirt track. She was close enough now that it would make little difference, and trying to drive up the side of a Garxxax mountain in a mohican was just asking for trouble.

She reached the base and parked. Something was definitely amiss. The base was completely dark, no sign of power or life at all. Cracks spidered up the geodesic shell of the nearest dome. The main entrance door had been ripped from its frame, battered and discarded on the forest floor, and inside Illyana saw only devastation.

The central hub looked as if wild animals had rampaged through it, mindlessly destroying equipment, consoles, and furnishings. Tangled power wires fizzed and popped, poking out from wrecked panels. Floor plates were smashed, as if broken by the pounding hooves of a beast herd. Was there some native life on the planet they were unaware of? Some enormous beast that could stampede through a structure like this?

She opened her comm. "Kortter, this is Jorres. I'm at sphere three, and it's bad. Almost total destruction."

Dan's response was filled with static. *"Just about read you, Jorres... You all right? Sound... damn thing. Comms are failing... out there?"*

"I'm fine," she lied. "Just tell me you called that evac."

"Affirmative... before you even left... ninety minutes... come back."

"It's OK; I read you. Static like hell, but I read you."

"No, dumbass... come back! Four more spheres... happening... get off this rock!"

Four more spheres down. And she'd bet her savings they were still falling in that circular pattern. A pattern that was, slowly but methodically, surrounding the central base.

Illyana reached the airlock to the main sphere. Every sphere had one, to maintain its ecosystem's integrity. The doors were set to lock automatically if a sphere was breached, but she punched in a security override code, holding her breath.

The door unlocked with a heavy metallic sound. At least those systems were still operating. The metal handle was hot, which she figured was down to the environment controls' being screwed until she remembered where she was.

Biosphere three was researching two indigenous life forms. One was a tree whose vines bled a weird sap that stuck to neosteel like glue. They were trying to figure if they could use the stuff as a neosteel-strengthening agent. The problem was, the sap was also seriously flammable. All it took to generate a fire was a single gunshot... or, they had discovered, a chemical incendiary reaction to the second dome's inhabitants.

The zantar slug was just a few inches long, but excreted a highly corrosive mucous when threatened, to deter predators. The mucous could eat through neosteel... and ignite

the sap if they touched. In nature, the slugs and vines lived at opposite ends of the continent. But time and chance sometimes brought them together, generating an explosive reaction that made Reynolds, a chemical biologist, very excited. He once joked that Garxxax's tropical storms were all that kept the planet from burning to a crisp. But in the artificial biospheres, they could control and examine the reaction in safety.

The next problem was catching the slugs. They weren't intelligent per se, but they had enough survival instinct to get the hell out of the way when endangered. Evidence of this was found on the planet's rainforest floor, where clusters of tiny sinkholes hinted at groups of zantar slugs that had burrowed underground.

Reynolds and his colleagues were trying to decode the makeup of the mucous that allowed the slugs to carry it without being harmed by its corrosive properties. The mystery seemed to be connected with their strange metabolism, which meant they healed outrageously fast. Hesken had once shown Illyana video of a slug being all but sliced in two, then stitching itself back together and moving on as if nothing had happened. On the video it had taken less than a minute, and she'd asked Hesken what the frame rate was. He had laughed, and said it was real time. No time-lapse recording required.

Now Illyana looked around at the devastation in the sphere, and wondered what could have gone wrong. The vine sap ecosystem was all but razed to the ground. The sprinklers had kicked in and saved some vines, but not before the fire's heat had cracked open the dome above.

The floor was littered with the charred bodies of slugs. She assumed they were casualties from Reynolds's experimental stock, freed when their jars and cages burnt.

She realized how wrong she was when she brushed past a vine, and a shower of zantar slugs fell on her from above. She was lucky — none of them touched her head, visor, or oxygen tubing. But several landed on her right arm, and reacted instinctively before she could brush them off. Some landed on vines, setting the sap alight. They shriveled and fell while the fires burnt themselves out quickly, with nowhere left to spread.

The back of her hand burned as hot as the flames. A searing pain crept up her forearm, and she realized they weren't just on her hand. The hand just had more nerve receptors to register the pain.

She ripped off her glove, frantically tore the coolsuit arm away from its shoulder, and stared in horror. Patches of skin on her hand and arm smoked and hissed as the slugs' acid settled into her flesh. On the floor, the fabric of her coolsuit arm and glove melted like ice. The mucous even ate into the sections of neosteel plating that had covered her major muscles.

Illyana cried out. The pain was like nothing she'd ever felt, not even in the war. Worse, it wasn't even an enemy-inflicted wound, but a mishap that was ultimately her own stupid fault. She felt like a rank amateur, and cursed her stubbornness. She should have listened to Dan, stayed in the central base, and helped prep for evac.

But she hadn't. And that same stubbornness kept her moving, drawing her P220 with her left hand. Somehow, the slugs had gotten free in here, lit up the vine sap, and razed the ecosystem in this dome to the ground. But how?

She backed out into the destroyed hub. The slugs and sap fire certainly hadn't caused all the damage in here. So what had? She walked down the second corridor to the

slug dome, and found the answer to her first question. The airlock's inner door had been torn from its hinges and lay on the floor, bent and battered.

It was pockmarked with holes, and lying there on the ground, it resembled one of the sinkhole clusters outside. The slugs had attacked it for some reason.

Many possibilities ran through her mind, and she raised her pistol as she stepped through the doorway. Her right arm, what remained of it, no longer hurt. Just a dull ache. Either she was going into shock, or her brain had somehow shut off the receptors to that part of her body. Regardless, it was a bad sign. Even if she made it out of here, her arm would be useless. She wondered if the company would buy her a cyberlimb as compensation.

She heard a hollow, cynical laugh from somewhere, then realized it was her own. She was burning up. The coolsuit's temperature controls had shut down when she'd ripped the arm off, breaking the seal, and now sweat ran down her face, stinging her eyes.

Her mind focused with remarkable speed when she almost tripped over Reynolds's body inside the doorway.

He was unrecognizable, torn and shredded to a pulp. But it was a human body, fallen probably at the spot where he'd spoken his last words, that call to base Illyana had overheard while talking to Dan.

The cracks she'd seen from outside were in this biosphere, but it was the other side that spoke volumes. It was almost completely destroyed. Shards of shattered diffuser screen lay everywhere. The plants of the miniature ecosystem, so carefully arranged to replicate rainforest conditions, were trampled and ruined. Several larger trees had been ripped out by their roots.

She glanced down, checking for more slugs, and realized that whatever had done this, it was no stampede of wild animals. The floor tiles weren't just scored by deep claw marks. They also bore burn marks, serrated spines embedded in the surface, and a halo of trampled debris. It was all familiar enough to tighten a knot in her stomach.

Around a corner, behind a raised section of forest vine, something flashed in the shadows. Illyana approached, treading softly. Unconsciously she flanked around the other side to take a more covered approach, keeping her back to one of the few standing sections of geodesic. The scent of something rotten assaulted her nose. She quietly popped the oxygen tubes out of her nostrils, just enough to be able to smell properly, and immediately pushed them back in. The smell was rank, a concoction of putrefaction and sharp acid.

Her breath caught in her throat as she rounded the corner. A seething, broiling mass of membranous flesh obscured the floor, simultaneously rotting and living. It gave off clouds of noxious vapor that drifted up and out through the wrecked dome.

And in the center, turning to face her, was a creature that might, once, have been a zantar slug. Now it was twice the size, its brown flesh hardening to a carapace punctuated by vivid, pulsing purple membranes.

It didn't move, but Illyana did, slowly backing away. She found what she was looking for in the first biosphere, a container of viscous brown liquid, undamaged by fire. She took it back to the slug dome and rested it on the floor near the rotting flesh-matter, to break the seal with her good hand.

Getting back up, she threw the liquid at the evolving slug in the center, drew her P220, and fired a single blast at the spreading vine sap.

It ignited with a bright flash and spread, emitting choking black fumes that made her back off, stumbling through the vines and uprooted trees. She turned to run, and through the broken dome shell glimpsed a vast, dark shape outside, in a nearby recess of the mountain. She didn't get a good look — too dark, too distant, and she wasn't hanging around — but she recognized the behemoth instantly.

The claw marks, the discarded spines, the mutating zantar slug... they could all have been coincidence. But now there was no doubt.

The zerg had returned. And they had come to Garxxax in force.

* * *

The zerg ripped through the acid-weakened door as if it were wet paper. Brach turned and fired, killing four zerglings before he heard the next door hiss open.

"Brach, move!" Lee shouted, envying him his helmet as her unprotected ears rang from the gunfire. She was already through the next door, her hand poised over the lock pad. Brach ran through, ducking as Lee hit the emergency close button. Two more bulkheads to cross.

They made it through the next before the zerg broke down the door behind them, and Brach breathed a sigh of relief. They were getting some safe distance between them and their pursuers.

"Captain, we're ready to roll. What's your twenty?" the pilot's voice barked in Lee's headset.

"Entering hangar now," she said. "Stand by."

The final door opened, revealing the hangar bay. It was empty but for Brach's wrecked banshee and the final medivac, packed with marines, its boarding ramp open and waiting. Lee and Brach were the last to leave. The medivac's engines roared, the pilot holding the throttle just above idle, itching to fire them and get the hell out.

They ran across the hangar, Lee in front, sprinting for all she was worth. Brach could easily have overtaken her with the powered servos in his CMC, but instead he moved slowly, covering their rear. As they closed on the boarding ramp, Lee heard a dull crunch, barely audible over the engines, from somewhere behind. She looked over her shoulder as two auxiliary entrance doors smashed open, and hydralisks and roaches rushed into the bay.

Brach saw them, raised his rifle, and opened fire. "Keep going," he shouted into his helmet comm. "I'll cover you!"

She fought the impulse to turn around and go back. Brach was right; she wasn't equipped for combat, and in his suit he could make it to the ship in just a few seconds. But she knew him, knew the kind of risks he took. "No," she shouted, still running. "Get to the ramp! We can make it before they reach us!"

Brach seemed to ignore her, and unleashed a volley of rifle fire at the hydralisks, killing two. But then he began walking backwards, firing short bursts. Zerg bodies piled up, blocking the corridor and leaving the zerg behind them struggling to push through. "I'm just making sure," he said. "Now get on board! I'm right behind you!"

She knew that was a lie, but clambered onto the boarding ramp anyway before finally looking back. "I'm in! Get your wrinkled ass over here, soldier!"

Brach started jogging to the ramp, turning occasionally to fire at the zerg. He fired one last volley on the roaches before leaping at the ramp, but he'd wasted too much time. They were closer than he'd estimated. The front roach rose up on its front legs and opened its maw, vomiting a stream of acid as Brach landed on the ramp. It hit him above the right knee, knocking him off-balance. He collapsed on his stomach beside Lee, and she watched in horror as his neosteel armor smoked and dissolved before her eyes.

Brach screamed in pain, but even with his helmet mike, Lee could barely hear him above the engines. He writhed in agony, flailing his arms, and accidentally pinned Lee to the floor of the ramp. She struggled under the weight of his suit to reach around her belt, twisting her shoulder to find a grenade. Something popped inside her shoulder joint, but there was no pain. Her fingers closed around the smooth, cold, hi-ex pebble. She wrenched her arm back out, up, and under, releasing it.

"Go! Go! Close the ramp!" she shouted into her headset. The grenade arced through the air, catching sunlight through the open hangar. It landed in the ragged mouth of the roach that had hit Brach.

Lee watched the zerg explode through the thin slit between ramp and hull as it closed. Two marines wrestled Brach onto his back while another shouted something at the pilot. The engines spun up to full burn. The medivac rose off the ground, turned ninety degrees, and blasted the zerg with its exhausts as it soared away.

Brach, still flat on the floor, turned his head to Lee and raised his visor. He smiled, winced at the pain, then smiled again.

"Always said we were a good match."

* * *

Dannion watched in horror and resignation as the last biosphere went offline. The evac ship was still thirty minutes out. He wondered if the central base would last that long. If they lost power, the ship would have to rely on manual coordinates to find them and land, but the mountainous rainforest terrain would make that tricky. There was one suitable spot nearby: the same place used to land the transports that had brought them, and the lab, to Garxxax. But after six months of disuse the rainforest was reclaiming the area, and identifying it from above would be difficult. Especially with a heavy storm rolling in from the west.

Dannion's last contact with Jorres had been an hour ago, when he urged her to return. Since then he'd been unable to raise her. But there was nothing more he could do for now. He entered the central lounge area, where Callins and the other staff were gathered. Two were missing.

"Hey, where are Hesken and Dirthiss?"

Callins scowled at him. "Still packing in their dorms. It's fine; we have time."

Everyone else sat around the room, drinking and chatting. Most were complaining. Some of them eyed Dannion warily. They'd argued earlier about the blackouts, and Hesken had even accused him and Jorres of overreacting to what was "clearly a comms issue." Dannion had mentioned Jorres's report, that sphere three was completely destroyed, but Hesken had shrugged it off. Maybe a tree had collapsed, or a rock had tumbled down the mountain. Maybe a rogue meteor had just happened to make landfall on the sphere's location.

Not all the scientists were complaining. Some had never done an isolated tour like this before, and were going a little stir-crazy. But the loss of research hit all of them, even Dannion. He was originally a physicist, and had been using his spare time to perform some deep-space radio wave analysis. He'd downloaded as much data as possible, but since the comms system itself had started going haywire, data corruption had been a problem. For all he knew, the data would be useless when they returned to Korhal. One more casualty.

A crashing sound broke his train of thought. "The hell was that?"

Callins waved in the direction of Hesken's dorm. "Hesken probably saw his own shadow and dropped his flight case." A few scientists laughed. Hesken was notoriously nervy, and the evac order had understandably made him even more frantic.

Then, a second crash. Dannion started walking across the room, weaving around luggage and chairs. Before he reached the corridor leading to Hesken's dorm, his personal comm sounded.

"...To base... Jorres... Dan, you there?"

The line was fraught with static, but it was good to hear her voice. "Illyana, where are you? I've been trying to raise you for the past hour."

"Not good, Dan... sphere was completely... zerg, I'm sure... trying to reach you..."

The crashing sounds from Hesken's dorm now combined with another noise. The screams of panicking men fighting for their lives.

Dannion shouted at the other scientists, "Shit, they're here! Head for the armory! Everybody run!" He spun round, trying to remember the direction of the "armory," which was little more than a cupboard stocked with a half-dozen pistols. They wouldn't do much

good if Illyana was right, and he couldn't be a hundred percent accurate that he'd heard her correctly...

It turned out not to matter.

Dannion, Callins, and all the other scientists stood frozen to the spot, gaping openmouthed at the massive numbers of zerg breaking through the base corridors, into the lounge area, to surround and overwhelm them.

It wouldn't take long.

* * *

The medivac landing was rough. The *Victory's* bay was already full with its own complement of medivacs. The addition of Krakulv's fleet had maxed out their available space.

But any landing you could walk away from was good enough. The marines began disembarking, greeted by those who'd come up earlier. A medical crew rushed over, ready to take Brach and several other injured marines into emergency surgery. Lee would follow soon. But not yet.

Instead, she threw open the medivac cockpit door and grabbed the pilot's headset.

"Captain, this is Major Treicher."

"Welcome aboard, Major. Your boys already told me you're the last —"

"Shut up and listen. Take her up, right now. Do you hear me? We have to clear low-level orbit!"

"No can do, Major. We have orders to cleanse Krakulv Base with nukes before returning to station."

"What the hell do you think we were doing down there, cutting it fine for some laughs?"

"...Oh. Copy that."

* * *

The terrans had gone, fled like the cowards they were, and abandoned their precious base. The Kerrigan scanned through her zerg's eyes, assembling a patchwork panorama of the terrans' leavings. Much of the tech was old or useless to the zerg, and no biowork had been detected anywhere in the base. But that was logical; this was a warning station. Their primary sustenance would be intelligence.

The zerglings spread out, swarming throughout the base, every square foot to be noted and marked. The mutalisks did the same over the base's exterior. The Kerrigan would leave nothing to chance.

Hydralisks and roaches moved onward through the base, to the nerve center. If there was any useful human intel on the dead moon, it would be here. The Kerrigan sent the lead roaches to excrete their way through the blast doors, opening them into a hive of light and sound that hummed with activity, an electrostatic ghost soul playing out forever in forlorn hope of the humans' return.

The first roach detected heat as it scurried through the liquefied remains of the door. The Kerrigan registered the sense, but it seemed inconsequential until more zerg began feeling the same thing.

Flames spread across the walls of the nerve center, moving outward from where the blast door had been. A singular scent stirred all of the roaches as one, awakening a dim ancestral group-memory of humid jungles, proud mountains, and exotic vine sap.

Flames rippled along the ceiling. The light wavelength altered, shifting towards infrared. A fast-oscillating wave of sound filled the space.

Deep inside the dead moon of Krakulv, systems hummed to life.

* * *

The line to Dannion had cut out seconds after Illyana heard the screams, and she knew it wasn't because of a bad connection.

She'd seen their tracks as she escaped the wrecked dome of biosphere three. She'd heard their distant movements as she collected jars of vine sap in a box. She'd heard the explosions from other biospheres as she frantically drove the jeep away one-handed, while one of Garxxax's characteristic tropical storms rumbled awake overhead.

Her wounded arm hung limp and useless by her side. And it looked even worse now, as if the acid was somehow spreading. With every movement of the jeep, pain jabbed her chest, even though she was sticking to the dirt track. Was it the acid, or just the pain and exertion of trying to make it back to the base? She didn't know, didn't care.

Five minutes earlier she'd glimpsed a hydralisk in the rear mirror, lurching out of the rainforest, as she rounded a corner. There had been no sign since, so she figured it hadn't noticed her.

Wrong. Trees splintered into fragments as a zergling crashed out of the forest and slammed into the jeep's hood. She yelped involuntarily and tried to swerve, but the heavy rains had turned the dirt track into a mud bath, and the jeep's fender smashed into its bulky, chitinous body. A panel of neosteel came away, sailing overhead to land on the track behind. The vehicle lurched down as one of the front axles buckled under the impact.

It was still moving, though. Still working. Smoke rose from the base's position in the valley, obscuring the base itself. But she'd seen what the zerg did to terran bases and structures plenty of times during the war.

The jeep staggered another hundred meters before something hit the rear with a heavy thump. She had time to glance in the mirror, and see a column of zerglings pursuing her, before the rear end slammed into the ground, dragging steel through the mud and pulling the jeep towards the forest.

She leapt out before it smashed into a tree at the side of the track. She landed on her bad arm, and screamed in pain as what remained of the bones snapped and shattered.

But she forced herself up, and dragged the crate of jars out of the jeep. Many had smashed on impact, but some were intact. She checked the width of the track, figured the distance of the advancing zerg, and reckoned she had enough to make a wall of fire deep enough to hold them back... if the rain didn't extinguish the fire too quickly. If the storm passed, it might even spread into the forest and slow them down enough for her to reach the base.

Or it might fry her to a crisp. But she was going down anyway; that was pretty damn certain. She'd take as many of the bastards with her as possible.

She removed the first jar from the crate... and looked up in surprise at the sound of engines roaring above her. A planet-hopper broke through the cloud layer, starting its descent towards the base. *Even marine pilots should be able to find that column of smoke,* she thought with a smirk.

The pilot managed to get through on the comm channel, although the line was filled with static. *"Garxxax Base... planet-hopper evac... First Lieutenant Treicher. We... visual, please..."*

"Evac ship, this is First Security Officer Illyana Jorres! The base is down — I repeat, down! I'm the sole survivor, half a klick away on a dirt track! Look for the goddamn advancing zerg! Do you read me?"

A pause on the line. The zerg drew closer to her position.

"Roger... Officer Lee... breaking up... Scanning now for... Stand by."

Illyana sighed. The pilot had only heard half her message, and name, through the static. But at least he'd heard her. Now all she had to do was survive long enough for them to land...

She threw the jar of sap at the advancing zerg, and fired her P220.

* * *

She watched the rear view on a landing bay monitor as medics strapped Brach to a gurney.

Krakuly trembled, then exploded in a bright flash of nuclear heat. Vaporized.

"Whoa," said one of the medics. "Did... did you do that? That's cutting it damn close."

"We drilled nukes into the core when the base was built. I couldn't risk a countdown that might miss, so I rigged it up to the incendiary alarms. Then all we had to do was wait for the zerg to start a fire."

"Since when do zerg use incendiaries?"

Lee smiled. "Well, we helped them out. I keep a little souvenir in our trophy cabinet, a jar of sap from — Look, never mind. It worked."

Brach's grip on her hand tightened. "Heh... goddamn... slugs."

Lee squeezed his hand in return. "Yeah. I know." She turned to the medics, and gestured at Brach's leg. "Now listen, this is a roach hit. The acid contains viroids that propagate through the nervous system, and a standard nanoscab just exacerbates the process. The only way to neutralize infection is put the whole leg in an alkali bath, shoot it up with bacteriophage virals, then clean and assess." She paused. "But honestly, you'll probably still have to amputate."

The medic gaped in disbelief at her frankness. "Uh, ma'am... thanks and all, but could we discuss this in private?"

Brach managed a thin-lipped smile. "She's my wife... you bozo. And she knows more... about roach wounds than... your professors ever taught you... Show him, honey."

Brach let go of Lee's hand. She held it up in front of the medic's face, palm out, and pulled off her glove. He gasped at the neosteel plating, the endoskeletal nerve clusters, the soft glow of status lights.

"A cyberlimb."

"Right up to the shoulder. Give you one guess how I lost it."

Brach laughed, coughed, hacked up phlegm, and took hold of Lee's hand again. She walked alongside his gurney while the medics wheeled it through the ship's corridors.

"Like I said... a good match."

"I'll be right here, Brachyan." She squeezed his hand. "I guess that's two I owe you."

Brach smiled. "Ever get that... sense of déjà vu, Illyana?"

She held on tight as they entered sick bay.