

COMBAT

TRANSIT

Oni*asha was less than fifteen minutes away. Goddess sat, letting her body sink against her harness. The straps dug into her shoulders and her stomach, but that was only a small discomfort compared to the unease which permeated her thoughts.

Beneath her, the transport whined and shook. The vibrations tingled her earlobes, her eyelids, her toes. She let her head droop; she didn't want to see

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the other trooplings. She didn't want to hear them. She put her fingers in her ears. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, pounded in her body. Her soul quaked.

What was this she was heading toward—this narrow path into fire?

Oni*asha had a history of rebellion. Its residents, who were known as Onis, on the whole, believed that the EUL was corrupt, concerned only with profit margins, hostile takeovers of insignificant, poor countries, and increasing its influence across the planet. They had protested in small ways at first—political pressure, rallies, cyberspace propaganda campaigns. When those methods failed to achieve results, they chose to make their dissatisfaction known in other ways. They launched cyberspace assaults. They created a virtual entity known as a Data Devourer. It ate through cyberspace, consuming EUL data stores, crashing their systems. It was rumored that the Data Devourer had eventually become self-aware and now roamed cyberspace on its own, free of its creator's control.

After that, the rebels of Oni*asha started blowing things up.

The EUL fought back, but stopped just short of calling down a tac nuke on its defiant, illegitimate son. Only recently had the EUL scaled back their operations involving Oni*asha. The matrix news agencies had reported that select members of the EUL governing council were considering introducing legislation which would release Oni*asha of its ties to its unwanted father. Still, the overwhelming majority of the council believed that Oni*asha should be dealt with. Force was justified. Force was necessary.

The Species—the hammer in the EUL's right hand—would be wielded. The hammer would crash, and Oni*asha would break.

This evening, only a week after Basic had ended, Talon-5—the blunt end of the hammer—was en route to Oni*asha, ready to be swung. It was just one mission in the grand scheme, but it had its purpose. Its sole objective: destroy a single building located in the heart of the city. The Species had obtained intelligence that the building—an ordinary office monolith on the outside—was being used as the hub for Oni information processing and routing. If the intelligence was correct, the mission, along with the others being carried out at the same time, would drive a pike into the heart of the Oni terrorist underground.

Goddess trembled with the weight of the mission.

The Talon had been divided up into Stingers, which consisted of two or

three trooplings each. Death-nuke and She7 were paired of course. Helix, Zilch, and Fluffy were teamed.

That left Goddess with Exxy. Could God have been any more cruel? Goddess knew Somebody up there was scheming, plotting. Laughing.

The Talon was jacked. As in Basic, they manifested in realspace and cyberspace at all times now. Goddess had her eyes and ears shut so she could shut out the real world, but cyberspace remained behind her eyelids. In there, she settled for activating a sphere of silence to shut out the noise of the trooplings talking.

“Five minutes, trooplings,” Glix Kill Thrill’s voice rang.

What *was* this she was heading toward?

Life? Pain? Suffering? Death?

Goddess cradled her DL2, feeling its familiar curves under her fingers. She traced designs in its surfaces. Its shell was warm. Underneath its skin, she believed that it might have been alive, just sleeping.

It would wake soon enough.

She fingered the brand on the back of her hand. After Basic, they had all been branded—for real this time. Goddess chose again to have the one placed on her eyelid. So she would remember.

A hand on her shoulder. It was Exxy.

Scared, Exxy touchspoke. *Me. Too.*

Goddess let that small touch break through. Goddess moved her hand so it rested on Exxy’s. She tapped. *Yes. Very. Thanks.*

Don’t. Be. Mad.

Goddess didn’t want to be mad. After a week, she wasn’t, really, but she hadn’t made any overt gestures to Exxy. She hadn’t planned to either. She may not have been mad, but the wounds were a little too fresh to be ignoring. Acceptance was one thing, but forgiveness was a difficult beast to wrangle.

Exxy’s tapping was more urgent. *Talk. To. Me. Cyberspace.*

Goddess pondered the consequences of that for a moment. Did she want to do this?

Time. Short. Urgent.

In cyberspace, Goddess deactivated the sphere of silence. “I’m here.”

Exxy’s matrix-husk moved close, erecting a sound barrier around them. “I don’t want it to be like this between us anymore. It’s been hell not talking

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to you this week. I know it hasn't been long enough, but I can't stand it anymore. It hurts."

"We're all hurting in some way," Goddess said, avoiding Exxy's gaze. Exxy's eyes weren't as blue in cyberspace as they were in realspace. If she couldn't look into those virtual eyes, and their realspace versions would have been unbearable.

"I—I know. And I know that's my fault. I don't expect you to forgive me. I can't expect that right now. Maybe, eventually, you can let me know on that. But, we're a Stinger. We *need* to be able to communicate—not just on a professional level, but on a personal one. *I need to talk to you.* It's the only way I can function. I guess...well, I guess that's not going to be easy. I'm asking you if it's possible. We're headed into something here. Time is short, and this isn't a game we're playing here. It's life and death, what we're doing."

"I know," Goddess said, forcing herself to look Exxy's matrix-husk in the eyes. Her heart pricked at the sadness she saw there.

Exxy made a move to touch Goddess, but pulled her arm back, changing her mind. A flash of fear had crossed her face. What did she fear?

Goddess. Rejection. It was clear. Goddess felt, in realspace, that she was crying.

Exxy took a halted breath. "It's just, this is our first time. All our training, and it could still turn into %@!#ing Eiech down there. I don't want to go into that without it smoothed between us. It doesn't have to be perfect. Just tell me that you'll talk to me. Can you at least give me that? Please?"

A stillness came over Goddess. She had a moment of clarity that was beyond her sixteen-year-old maturity. She knew what could make this better. She knew what could make this go away. Make them both feel good. So she did it.

In realspace, she undid her harness and stood up, pulling Exxy with her. Then, she jerked Exxy into her arms. Exxy was stiff against her at first, disbelieving, but then she hugged Goddess back, tight. Their cyberspace selves mirrored their realspace actions; data swirled at them both—it was the ultimate embrace, both virtual and real. Goddess had never felt anything like it. Hadn't felt this close to anybody in a long time. With Ky Lin it had been different. It had been easier with him, the brother-figure that he was. This, with Exxy, was difficult—painful and frustrating. Goddess wasn't sure how a friendship would work between them. Could it, even?

“Oh, look,” Death-nuke said. “That’s #@!#ing beautiful.”

Exxy made a gesture at Death-nuke. Goddess didn’t see it, but could imagine what it had been.

“I’m all #@!#ing weepy here,” Death-nuke said. “Let’s get down there and kill some #@!#ing Onis.”

“That’s not the mission,” Glix Kill Thrill said.

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

Glix Kill Thrill stood. “Get up, trooplings. You know what to do.”

Exxy whispered, “Thank you,” as Goddess released her. Then they were checking their gear. As Goddess inspected Exxy’s ‘chute her nervousness returned.

“We’ll be fine,” Exxy said without looking back.

“Stay close to me, and we both will,” Goddess said.

“Stay close to your Stinger-mate and you’ll *all* be fine,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Remember what I have taught you. Cyberspace is a weapon; use it as such. Bury your emotions deep. In battle, there is no room for it. It will #@!#ing weaken you, make you vulnerable. I know everybody’s nervous, but do not let that take hold of you and turn into fear. Remember, if your enemy doesn’t kill you, fear #@!#ing will.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel!” the trooplings responded.

“That’s it. I’ve taught you all you need to know. There’s nothing else. Do your job as soldiers of the Species. Complete the mission and return alive. I am your Mother Sentinel. *I will get you through this.*”

“Pulse, open this glitch bucket up. Trooplings, prepare for drop into Oni*asha.”

Pulse made a gesture in cyberspace. The back of the transport began to lower.

Glix Kill Thrill’s voice came over their assault helmets. “Snake Three will land on the roof of the target. Snake One will provide cover fire as Snake Two and the officer Stinger breach the front of the building.”

“Transport doors open,” Pulse said. “Clear for drop.”

“Scan that,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Zilch, take Snake Three on out.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel,” Zilch said, tapping Fluffy on the shoulder.

Fluffy ran to the back of the transport and jumped. Her body tore away into the night. Helix followed. Zilch jumped a second later. In cyberspace, their matrix-husks were noticeably tense.

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“Zilch here,” came the voice. “We’re out.”

Glix Kill Thrill nodded. “Goddess, you’re next. Get out there. Get down there. Clear the coordinates.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel,” Goddess responded, then moved toward the door.

Exxy followed, tapping on her neck. *Don’t. Worry.*

But Goddess was worried. *Very worried.* Almost paralyzed by it, in fact. She couldn’t do it; she couldn’t make herself move forward. It wasn’t the drop that was the problem—they had trained in cyberspace for that—it was what waited at the end of that drop. The mission. The combat.

Oops, Exxy touchspoke.

“Wha—?” Goddess began.

Then she was falling into the darkness.

DROP

In cyberspace, Goddess raged. “Exxy! You pushed me!”

“Hey, I’m right on top of you. Don’t worry.” There was a carrier wave of laughter in her voice. “Just don’t let go of your DL2. I don’t know if I’m fast enough to catch it if it passes me at this speed.”

Goddess couldn’t be irritated. Not when Exxy sounded like that. “Goddess to Mother Sentinel. We’re out.”

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“Scan that,” came the reply. “Give those Oni %@!#ers glitch.”

“Scan that,” Goddess said. The wind bit at her, trying to peel away her gear. The visor on her assault helmet had come down automatically an instant before she had exited the transport. Through the visor, she could see the landscape below in pristine detail. The target building glowed red. Goddess flattened her arms and plummeted.

As she did, Ky Lin was suddenly back in her thoughts. Only this time, he wasn't alone. Exxy was there too. It was all so confusing. What did she feel toward them? For Ky Lin, there was only an empty hole and a persistent ache. She had been given permission to contact his sister—also a ward of the state—to find out what had happened. Unfortunately, his sister had turned up absent. Nobody knew where she was—not even the EUL. That was strange. Even Glix Kill Thrill had been surprised that the EUL was unable to locate one of its own wards.

Without that knowledge, Goddess couldn't effectively come to grips with the fact that Ky Lin wasn't going to be waiting for her in two years. If she thought about it too long late at night, she ended up sobbing into her pillow, trying not to let the other trooplings hear—even though she knew they did. At least they didn't say anything. Exxy hadn't dared approach her.

Exxy. A violent storm of emotions churned, even now, when Goddess thought of her. Her secrets. Her lies. Her attraction.

Her love.

Goddess pushed that back down, not wanting to think about that.

A thought occurred to her. *What if she didn't deploy the 'chute?* The fall wasn't survivable. Maybe there would be pain, but it would be brief. Wouldn't it? It'd put an end to all of this. Put an end to her. She wouldn't have to think about Ky Lin. Wouldn't have to worry about Exxy. Wouldn't have to deal with any of it. Really, it was merciful wasn't it? She hadn't asked for any of this pain, this suffering, and yet, here it was—cold and unending. Two more years of forced servitude in the Species was unbearable, or at least it seemed to be in that instant. And her sister trooplings, they wouldn't think worse of her after she was gone. They would assume a failure in the 'chute deployment circuitry. They would never know the truth. It was much better than the pulse dagger option. Wasn't it?

Ky Lin's face appeared suddenly. He was angry! What could that mean? Was he mad at her?

“Are you okay?” Exxy asked, breaking through Goddess’s introspection. In cyberspace, she was simply standing by Goddess in a simple construct.

Goddess found it difficult to talk. She was going to have to lie. “I’m fine. Why?”

“It’s just...your matrix-husk. It—oh, glitch, never mind. I’m nervous, and I’m transferring that to you. I’m sorry. I’m not handling this well.”

“It’s okay. It’s me too, not just you. I—no, *we* will get through this.”

“Okay, tell me if I’m getting you upset. I’ll shut my mouth now.”

“Don’t you dare,” Goddess smiled into her visor, her recent thoughts banished from her mind at the sound of Exxy’s voice. “That mouth is the only thing distracting me from what we’re doing.” Goddess checked her data unit. “Thirty seconds to objective. Deploy when your set.”

“Scan that,” Exxy said.

Goddess triggered her ‘chute. The thin fabric shot from her back and expanded. Off to her left, Exxy had done the same. The material was invisible to everything except the naked eye. If everything went well, they be on the ground and undetected.

“Zilch to Talon-5. We’re on the roof. Cutting our way in now.”

“Scan that,” Glix Kill Thrill’s voice came. “Snake Two and Snake Zero are vertical. Arrival in three minutes.”

Goddess and Exxy plummeted into the city, maneuvering between the tall buildings. They hit simultaneously, rolling across the rough surface of the street. Goddess flipped a tab on her ‘chute. It detached, dissolving as the nanotech machines woven into the fabric were called into action. She unslung her DL2, flicked the safety off. Exxy crouched, scanning the area.

“Clear,” Exxy said. “Zero Oni activity. That I can see at least.”

Goddess’s visor slid up. The air here was different. It had a thickness to it, and tasted of toxins. She didn’t want to breath it, but to spit it out. It was warm too. Beneath her ‘flage—which had already changed colors to blend with the surrounding buildings—her body began to sweat. The ‘flage attempted to compensate for the change in temperature, but Goddess could tell that it wasn’t going to be able to keep up. Her visor came back down. They were less than a hundred meters from the objective. She motioned for Exxy to take point.

“Goddess to Talon-5. We’re down.”

Exxy moved. Goddess followed. Her trigger finger was shaking. She

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concentrated on Exxy. Perhaps that would be enough to keep her steady. Was she going to survive this? Could they keep each other alive? How would it all unfold. They continued along.

This narrow path into fire.

INSERT

“Glitch!” Exxy said when she saw it.

The target building sprung up from the earth like a blasphemous monument. Black and silver—mostly black—it towered into the night sky as if it were defying the heavens, as if it could defy the Creator.

They were flattened against the side of building across the street. Goddess was amazed. Why weren’t there any people out? Where were the

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citizens of this doomed city? Was there a curfew?

There were only two Onis in sight. They stood on either side of the main entrance—a long series of transparent doors. Inside, a wide-open area gathering area could be seen. The bases of enormous pillars were visible inside. Outside, two people waited. They wore skinsuits, and didn't appear to be armed.

“Goddess to Talon-5. We're at Death's door. “Awaiting confirmation to proceed.”

“Negative scan on that,” Glix Kill Thrill came back. “I'll be breaching this %@!#ing piece of j'aa. Snake Two will assault with us. You'll provide cover.”

“Scan th—” Goddess began, but the air was suddenly blazing with a deafening siren. Around the corner, the wall of the building they were pressed against exploded. Goddess pulled Exxy back as the air filled with dust and debris.

“%@!#ing glitch!” Exxy said. “They're shooting at us? How the %@!#ing glitch did they spot us?!”

“Goddess to Talon-5. There's Fire In The Temple!”

“Glitch, I can see the smoke,” Glix Kill Thrill yelled. “Maintain position. We're right above you. Clear a path for us. I'm gonna bring us in on their front door.”

Goddess couldn't hold her weapon still. This was it. The battle had begun. Her teeth were chattering. She crouched behind Exxy, touchspeaking against Exxy's elbow. *Don't. Know. About. This.*

Exxy raised her DL2.

Goddess tried to do the same, but the weapon wouldn't rise. Had her body rejected the command? Or was she simply frozen? It was one of those.

Exxy squeezed the trigger. A thin, green beam reached out. Twice, rapid-fire. Both of the guards—if that's what they were—looked up, surprised to find that their torsos had been severed from their legs. Their halves fell to the ground.

“Zilch to Goddess. Looking over the side of the building, I can see the origin of that explosion. We got a group of %@!#ing Oni j'aa eaters halfway up. Looks like a mid-level sentry station. Rocket turrets. Other assorted defenses. I can't get an angle from here.”

“Scan that,” Goddess said, looking up. Through the smoke, she could see

movement on the side of the building.

“Goddess to Mother Sentinel, you scan all that?” Her voice was shaking.

“We’re already engaged,” Glix Kill Thrill said.

The sounds of combat descended down around Goddess and Exxy. Flashes of light burst like fireworks as the Talon DL2s activated, went to work. Stitching along the side of the target building.

Exxy pointed her DL2 up, unleashing several shots. Goddess didn’t see who she’d been shooting at, but suddenly there was less hostile fire coming from the building.

Glix Kill Thrill, the other officers dropped to the ground. Pulse came in fast, her ‘chute damaged. She compensated at the last minute, but went tumbling. Her DL2 broke loose, spinning end-over-end till it came to rest several meters away. Quaze helped her up as Death-nuke and She7 came down.

“%@!#ing Eiech!” Pulse said when she picked up her DL2.

“What is it?” Glix Kill Thrill said.

“The %@!#ing thing’s useless now. Glitch, unless somebody’s carrying an extra guidance unit. Sorry, Mother Sentinel.”

“Take mine,” Glix Kill Thrill said, one-handing her DL2 and tossing it. Pulse caught it, surprised.

“But—”

“No time for this j’aa, Pulse. Cover me. Death-nuke, give me yours.”

Death-nuke wasn’t facing Glix Kill Thrill, so the Sentinel-8 didn’t see the wave of fury that passed over Death-nuke’s face.

But Goddess did.

There was a moment there—just a second—that Goddess thought that Death-nuke was going to refuse the order. Give you my weapon? Not in this lifetime, Mother Sentinel or not! This weapon is my life! It is my salvation! A soldier is nothing without her gun! Give it to you? I don’t %@!#ing think so.

The moment passed. Death-nuke pulled her handheld pulse accelerator, flicked a switch on the DL2, and handed it over. “Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

“Follow me,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Goddess, Exxy, make us a path.”

Pulse and Quaze ran behind her.

Exxy flipped her DL2 over to automatic. It pulsed, dealing a wall of death to anybody unlucky enough to be in her sights. Goddess got her weapon up, but was unable to pull the trigger.

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Death-nuke was at her shoulder suddenly, her mouth right in Goddess's ear. "You haven't fired yet, have you? Well %@!#ing glitch that! You %@!#ing fire and make sure my sister and I—not to mention your friend here—make it in and out of there alive. I can't say the same for the others, but I'm not dying in this %@!#ing hellscape because my sister trooping couldn't bring herself to deal some pain. I will come back after you if you don't fire that weapon. You don't want Exxy dead do you? It's likely if you don't %@!#ing push your emotions out of the way and fire that DL2. Do you scan me?"

Goddess was shaking even more now, and crying, but she nodded. What else could she do? This was real. This was battle. She didn't want Exxy to die.

As fate would have it, the street around Exxy suddenly lit up with enemy ammunition. Someone had zeroed in on her. She jumped back, but ran into Goddess. Exxy lost her balance and had to go down on one knee, her hand out on the street for support.

Adrenaline surged in Goddess. Where had that come from? There, over to the side of the target building. An Oni with some primitive, projectile weapon. Goddess didn't really think, she just pointed an shot. It was dream-like in its clarity. The green light reached and burned a hole in the Oni's chest. The Oni went down, screaming. Goddess exhaled even as tears filled her eyes.

So it seemed, that for Exxy, she could kill. She wondered if she would have done the same for Ky Lin.

"That's the spirit," Death-nuke said. "You're making me quiver."

"Thank you," Exxy said, getting back in position. "I'll watch high, you watch low."

"Scan that."

"Fire it up," Death-nuke said "She7 and I are inserting."

She7 accelerated toward the building, Death-nuke instantly on her heels. Glix Kill Thrill and the other two officers were just breaching the front doors, having lased a passage through the doors.

The Oni's were returning fire now. They were firing from the windows all over the target building. Goddess and Exxy answered back, letting their DL2s speak, shouting angry lines of green energy at the enemy. The Oni terrorists died, falling from the building, their bodies crushing when they hit the street below.

A hail of fire fell around Death-nuke and She7 as they ran, but Exxy and Goddess were able to keep some of the enemy from firing.

“Glitch!” Exxy yelled, spinning, targeting an Oni who had moved around behind them. She fired, searing his head from his shoulders. “Why don’t we have aerial support for this? Our movement is limited, and they have the high ground! They better be quick setting those micro-nukes.”

“Just keep yourself alive,” Goddess said. “We’ll complete our part of the mission. We’ll go home. We’ll talk some more. I’ll let you talk as much as you want, if you let me listen as much as I want.” Despite the heat she felt—from the air, from the DL2, from the battle—she felt cold. She felt outside of herself. It couldn’t be her pulling the trigger, could it? She wasn’t capable of that. She was weak, frozen with fear and cowardice. Wasn’t she?

It was amazing what a few minutes of life endangerment could do to you. It changed your perspective. It changed how you thought. Changed who you were.

Exxy reached back, tapping Goddess’s knee. *Promise?*

“Yes.”

After, Exxy smiled. *You. Me. Drunk.*

Goddess laughed, shaking her head, flinging a tear from her eye. No more crying, for now. Death-nuke and She7 were in the building now.

“Glix Kill Thrill to Goddess. Snake Two is home. Your turn.”

Goddess took a deep breath, blew it out. This was it. “Scan that. Snake One inbound.”

“Goddess,” Glix Kill Thrill said, “keep an eye out for anything strange. This is going too smoothly for my taste. I’m not sure what it is. Keep an eye out for any cloaked Onis. These %@!# rebels aren’t known for playing fair. I’m—”

Her voice stopped abruptly. What the?!

Goddess scanned cyberspace. What?! Glix Kill Thrill’s matrix-husk was gone.

“Goddess to Mother Sentinel. I didn’t scan that last. Repeat.”

No answer. Exxy shot her a questioning look.

“Goddess to Talon-5. Somebody give me a coordinate on Mother Sentinel.”

No answer.

This wasn’t good. Goddess looked into her visor. Her helmet couldn’t

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locate Glix Kill Thrill. She checked cyberspace again. Now, the only matrix-husks visible were her own and Exxy's.

"This isn't making me feel all warm inside," Exxy said. "What do we do now?"

Goddess didn't hesitate. "We have to go in, find out what the situation is. Fight for them." She could hardly believe her own words. Were they really hers? Was *she* the one being valiant? Where was the cowering? Where were the tears?

"I %@!#ing scan that," Exxy said.

Goddess tapped her shoulder. *Go!*

Exxy sprang forward, sweeping the area with the DL2. Goddess ran after her, using her visor to scan for nearby hostiles. The area appeared clear. They skirted debris, the dust billowing around them.

When they were within twenty meters of the building, Goddess caught sight of Glix Kill Thrill. She was leaning against one of those enormous pillars. Her DL2 panned to one side, cutting a swath through a line of Oni rebels. Pulse and Quaze were at her side, picking off Onis who escaped the green beam. There was no sign of Death-nuke and She7. Wait, no, there they were, ducked behind an ornamental wall. They were bathed in multi-colored light from a gigantic, transparent art piece which hung from the ceiling. Glix Kill Thrill was shouting something at them. She had stopped firing her DL2. No, that wasn't it. She wasn't firing it because it had stopped working. She shook it with both hands, her mouth wide in frustration. Goddess saw Death-nuke turn to She7, who was shaking her head. They were arguing. Back to Glix Kill Thrill, Goddess saw her about to throw the DL2 to the ground, but she stopped, as if confused.

There was, it seemed, a brief pause in the fighting then. Pulse and Quaze had stopped firing too and were reaching to Glix Kill Thrill, trying to pull her away from—no, they were reaching for the DL2. Glix Kill Thrill held it away, but she stepped away from the pillar, in the direction Pulse and Quaze were trying to pull her—toward the opposite side of the building. A curious look came across Glix Kill Thrill's face. She looked up—for whatever reason—and locked eyes with Goddess.

Time slowed, and their eyes communed. Glix Kill Thrill opened her hands, and the DL2 began to slip from her fingers.

Goddess realized that there was a high-pitched whine in the air. What

was that? Exxy was pulling at her now. What had she done? Oh, she'd stopped in the open. There was nothing to hide behind out here. How stupid could she be?

Her eyes were still locked with Glix Kill Thrill's. The Mother Sentinel was shouting something, her eyes wide. Goddess couldn't hear from that far away. Couldn't hear over that whine. Where was that coming from? She was entranced. Even as Exxy yanked her to the ground, she couldn't tear her eyes away. Then.

Oh, then Glix Kill Thrill exploded.

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FOUNTAIN

Red. The air was filled with it. How could there be that much of it? *Was the air itself bleeding?* Goddess's visor saved her from blindness, going dark at the first hint that light levels were going to exceed her tolerance. However, the visor couldn't save her from the fountain of blood that filled the air. How could this red miasma have reached this far? They were outside

the target building! The persons whose blood Goddess now breathed in were inside that building! It was impossible!

The color of red filled her nostrils, her lungs. It painted her eyes, covered her flage, coated her weapon. It filled her.

“Oh my Goddess,” was all Exxy could say.

Goddess couldn't bring herself to say anything.

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CHAIN

Glix Kill Thrill was dead.
Pulse was dead.
Quaze was dead.

Goddess could only hope that a few Onis were now dwelling in Eiech too.

Death-nuke and She7 were running toward where Goddess and Exxy

had retreated to after the explosion. An eerie calm had descended across the field of battle, and they moved without opposition or threat.

“What in the #@!#ing glitch was that?!” Exxy hissed at Death-nuke as they approached.

Death-nuke didn’t look winded, but she was trying to catch her breath. She looked at She7 before responding. She shook her head, bowing it. “It was my DL2. It exploded.”

“No glitch! They’re all dead aren’t they? Pulse? Quaze? Mother Sentinel?”

“Yes,” Goddess said. “I saw them. There were at ground zero when it went. There’s not even anything left of them to take back.”

“Ah, #@!#. What do we do now?”

“What the #@!# can we do?” Death-nuke asked. “We get the rest of the Talon out and we extract the #@!# out of here!”

“I scan that,” She7 said. “We just took it in the gut. And we’re not in cyberspace. We can’t just jack out and have it all be a #@!#ing dream like last time.”

Exxy shifted in her crouch, adjusting her DL2.

“No,” Goddess said.

“What the #@!# do you mean, no?” Death-nuke asked, turning on her.

Goddess held firm. “What I mean is, no, that’s not what we’re going to do at all.”

“Like glitch it isn’t!”

Exxy whirled her DL2 onto Death-nuke. “Don’t #@!#ing say that again, keetcha. In case you haven’t kept your ugly self aware of current events, not to mention the chain of command, you’re talking to your Mother Sentinel now. So, watch your #@!#ing mouth.”

“There’s no need for that,” Goddess said, lowering the barrel of the DL2. “Death-nuke knows what I am now. She’ll follow my orders.”

Inside, Goddess was tormented. How could this be real? She led the Talon now that Glix Kill Thrill was dead. She hadn’t planned on this development. It was too much. What did she know about leading a Talon? She wanted to cry, but she managed to keep the flow back this time. Crying after only minutes on the job wouldn’t inspire any confidence. It certainly wouldn’t make Death-nuke respect her.

Would the rest of the Talon actually follow her?

Death-nuke’s purple eyes softened, but only a little. There was still plenty

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of rage there to go around. “Aye, Mother Sentinel. I ask your forgiveness.”

“Given.”

“What are we going to do, Mother Sentinel?” She7 asked, as if calling Goddess that was equivalent to tasting some new food..

To Goddess’s ears, being addressed like that felt strange. Could they really be talking to her? Calling her that?

“We are going to get the rest of the Talon out of there, but we’re going to complete the mission too.”

There was a muffled explosion. Something had gone off in the building.

“Okay, what the %@!# was that?” Death-nuke asked.

In cyberspace, three new matrix-husks appeared. Zilch and Helix and Fluffy. Their characters were agitated, animated.

“Zilch to Mother Sentinel. We found how they’d been jamming us. Fluffy handled it.”

“Goddess here. Have you set the rest of the micro-nukes?”

There was a pause before Zilch replied. “Uh, we have three more to place. This little detour put us behind schedule. Plus, we’ve had some resistance.” In cyberspace, her matrix-husk looked around. “Where are—?”

“They’re dead,” Goddess said a little too quickly. “All three of them. I’m the Sentinel-8 now.”

“Oh,” Zilch said.

“We’re completing the mission. Get the rest of those charges placed. We’re coming in after you to clear the way.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel. We’ll have the micro-nukes ready in ten minutes.”

“I scan that.”

“Zilch out.”

In cyberspace, Goddess did something she knew had to be done. It was all done at the speed of thought; her matrix-husk didn’t even move. A small button appeared a the right side of her vision. She reached out and pressed it. “Mother Sentinel Goddess to Species Control. The Pagan Temple Is Crumbling. Execute code is *Severed Talon*.”

A second later, the reply came. “Species Control here. Transport is inbound. You have some explaining to do.”

“I scan that. We’ll be waiting.”

As Species Control signed off, Goddess sighed, turning to the others. “Keep your eyes open and your head down. Now, let’s finish this.”

The three trooplings followed their Mother Sentinel, back into the battle.

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SAVE

Goddess stepped directly into the beam. In doing so, she was going to die.

Exxy launched herself horizontal, catching Goddess in the stomach, hurting her, but taking her down fast enough to avoid the self-targeting laser beams which burned a fist-sized hole in the floor where Goddess had been standing a moment before. In mid-air, they twirled, dancers in space.

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Exxy landed on her back, her assault helmet clanking against the floor. Goddess, of course, landed on top of her. Exxy's DLT ripped a gash in Goddess's 'flage and dug into her belly. Exxy groaned when they came to a stop. All Goddess could do was grunt, her breath knocked from her. Her face was at Exxy's neck. The smell of blood and girl sweat was strong in Goddess's nose; she could taste both of them, though she wasn't sure if they were hers or Exxy's.

Goddess briefly wondered if the laser beams were targeting them still. She craned her head. The wall-mounted lasers had gone dark.

"Oh my Goddess!" Exxy sighed, her voice low. "Uh, I mean, Mother Sentinel. I thought you were going to..."

The warmth of Exxy's body bled into Goddess's, her figure surprisingly firm and hardened. Goddess pushed up, blinking. In cyberspace, was that Exxy's matrix-husk blushing?

Goddess helped Exxy to a sitting position. "I think I'll let you take point now."

"Aye, Mother Sentinel."

"Don't call me that. I don't want you to call me that."

"But I'm not allowed to—"

"I don't care," Goddess said. "And I don't want to make it an order. So, please."

"Aye, Goddess."

"Goddess to Death-nuke. What's your coordinate?"

"Death-nuke here. We've found Snake Three. We're having a hard time getting to them. We could use some assistance."

Goddess pulled Exxy to a standing position. "We're inbound."

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EXTRACT

Helix took two hits at the same time. The first bullet tore a chunk out of her shoulder, and the second caught her thigh dead center. The second bullet didn't go through, but remained lodged inside her leg. The force of the impacts spun her into the wall of the hallway where she tumbled to the ground, leaving streaks of blood on the wall.

“%@!#ing glitch, I'm hit!” Helix yelled. She had said it loudly enough to

make sure everybody knew, but there was no trace of panic.

Goddess, who had been standing across the hall, ran over and crouched, protecting Helix's body with her own. "Exxy! Location on the shooter! Take that Oni out!"

"Scanning," Exxy said, still on the other side of the hall.

The hallway was long, but wide and open on both ends. There had been no sign of the enemy for several minutes. Goddess had lost track of what floor they were on. A stray shot—or possibly a very accurate one—had severed her MIU cord on the way up here. The abrupt exit from cyberspace had knocked her unconscious for several minutes. She had awakened to Exxy's kneeling over her, acquiring and eliminating targets with her DL2, protecting her. In Goddess's daze, Exxy had looked so serious, so majestic. So lethal. There was an intensity to her that intimidated Goddess, even scared her.

Now, Exxy squeezed the trigger on her DL2. The beam shot right through a far corner of the hallway. The Oni, hidden behind, screamed and fell out into the hallway, a gaping hole in his neck. "Got the %@!#ing j'aa eater," Exxy said.

Fluffy came up from behind them.

"Give me coordinates on Snake Two and Zilch, Exxy," Goddess said. "Fluffy, I don't want any more surprises. I need locations on all enemy personnel. Can you get that from the building databank?"

"Yes, Mother Sentinel," Fluffy said. Goddess knew that in cyberspace, her matrix-husk had just shot into the air, vanishing into the depths of the construct.

Helix was on her side. The wound in her thigh had closed itself up, but blood was streaming from her shoulder. Goddess reached over into Helix's pack. Helix wasn't making a sound, though Goddess knew she was in a great deal of pain. Goddess pulled a cauterization sponge out.

Helix saw it and winced. "That's gonna hurt like hell."

Goddess stripped the packaging off. "Ready, Helix?"

Helix nodded. Goddess slammed the sponge into Helix's wound. Helix's whole body went tense, her back arching. She closed her lips and moaned into her own mouth. Her hand clawed out and sunk into Goddess's shoulder. She touchspoke a string of obscenities.

Goddess pulled out her pulse dagger and slit a gash in the thigh of

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Helix's 'flage. The wound was a small indentation in her flesh, and there was almost no blood. It wasn't a field-treatable wound. They'd have to take her out of her with the bullet still inside.

Goddess pulled the cauterization sponge from Helix's shoulder. It was completely red with blood, but the wound had stopped bleeding. She's have a permanent scar there, even after the Species doctors got to her, but she wasn't going to bleed to death in the hallway of some random building in the middle of Oni*asha. At least there was that.

Exxy filled the end of the hallway with energy from the DL2. "Snake Two is one floor below us. They have Zilch with them. Death-nuke is wounded. She7 and Zilch are carrying her. They've cleared us a path, mostly."

"How high are we?" Goddess asked.

"We're on five."

Goddess sighed. They had to travel up to fifteen to dig Snake Three out of the hole they'd been backed up into. On the way back down, a roof collapse from an Oni ion grenade on thirteen had split the Talon in two. The two halves were just trying to make it back down to the ground floor so they could detonate the micro-nukes that would take this building apart.

It was hot in here. She was overheating. The 'flage couldn't keep up with her body's perspiration, the hot DL2, the smoke, and the fire. She was sweating all over. Four more floors. It seemed so far.

Fluffy was at Goddess's back. "We have minimal resistance the rest of the way, except for the lifts and stairways on the ground floor. We'll have problems at either of them."

"I need a recommendation."

"The stairway. They can't cut the power to the stairway like they can the lift."

"Scan that. Exxy, you're gonna have to help me lift Helix. Fluffy, make sure the path is clear."

"Aye, Mother Sentinel," Fluffy said, some minor form of bloodlust in her eyes. She moved down the hall.

It was strange to see that on somebody so young. Goddess didn't like it. She hoped she would never have that look on her face. She hoped she'd never feel like that—so hungry for blood, so hungry for death.

Goddess and Exxy lifted Helix between them.

“I only need one of you,” Helix said. “And give me my DL2. I can still fire with my free hand.”

Exxy released Helix and handed her the weapon, wrapping the strap around across her chest. Helix had to hold the weapon with her wounded arm; she clutched it tight and didn’t move it much. She leaned on Goddess, limping.

“You’ll be fine,” Goddess said, resetting her DL2 against her hip. “We’ll get you patched up just as soon as we’re back in friendly territory.”

“I’m looking forward to that, Mother Sentinel. I’m sorry for getting wounded and slowing the Talon down.”

“You’re a good soldier, Helix. You have nothing to be sorry for. You’re a vital part of this Talon. I need you.”

Helix’s smile was tainted with the pain, but it was a smile nonetheless.

On floor three, Fluffy pulled up short. Her DL2 nozzle drooped, almost hitting the ground. “I don’t %@!#ing believe this!”

“What is it?” Goddess asked. She didn’t think this was a good place to stop. They were all out in the open.”

“It’s that %@!#ing signal again. How can that be?”

“What signal?” Goddess asked.

“From Basic. I’m picking up that signal again.”

“That’s not possible,” Exxy said.

“I know, I know!” Fluffy said. “But there it is. I recognize it all too well. God, I’m never going to forget that %@!#ing signal. It got me %@!#ing killed. Well, virtually.”

“Where’s it coming from,” Goddess asked, guessing what the answer would be.

“No coordinate. Glitch. It’s stronger than it was in Basic though.”

“Okay,” Goddess said. “Record it, but really, we don’t have time to deal with it.”

“Scan that. I’m getting it down. I’ll run it through an analyzer as we go.”

“Fine,” Goddess said. “Let’s move.”

They made it all the way down to the ground floor without further resistance. Fluffy and Exxy were standing at the doors which led from the stairway out into the central area.

Fluffy turned as Goddess and Helix descended the stairs. “Databank is tracking thirty of those %@!#ing Onis on the other side. They’re spread out

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all over the place. No way to get out of here unnoticed.”

“Coordinate on the others?”

“They’re in there too. They’re engaging the Onis on the opposite side of the building.”

Goddess didn’t know what to do. “Any ideas? Anybody?”

“I have one,” Fluffy said. “Take the neuro-chill grenades. Arm them and roll them into the center of the room.”

“That won’t be enough,” Exxy said.

“It will be if you lase them with your DL2. The feedback from the DL2 beam will amplify their energy output by a great amount—maybe by over a thousand. They’ll knock anybody out on that entire first floor.”

“Including the rest of our Talon,” Helix said.

“Tell them to retreat,” Fluffy said.

“Oh my Goddess, that’s good,” Exxy said. “Those %@!#ing Onis will think they’re winning. Then, *kaboom!* Yeah, cosmic idea, Fluffy!”

“You can hit the neuro-chills then?” Fluffy asked.

“With my eyes closed.”

“Let’s do it,” Goddess said. “Helix, I need your MIU cord.”

“Scan that. You’ll have to take it though. My arm is freezing up. Can’t lift my %@!#ing hand past my %@!#ing elbow. Okay, I’m jacked out. You’re clear.”

Goddess removed the thing cord and jacked herself in. “Goddess to Zilch and Snake Two. Retreat To The Inner Sanctum And Find Your Rest. Execute code is *Mind Blank.*”

“Zilch to Mother Sentinel. I scan. Give us twenty to make it look good. I’m out.”

Twenty seconds later, Goddess triggered the door. It screeched open. Fluffy hurled her pack, which was now filled with every neuro-chill grenade they had, and hurled it into the open area. Shots began to impact all around. Goddess triggered the door. Exxy, lying prone on the floor, squeezed the trigger on her DL2 just before the door closed. The green beam reached out and hit the pack dead center. The door closed, smoking and burning as the DL2 beam cut into it, and then there was a magnificent *WHUMP* as the neuro-chill grenades exploded. The sound was deafening; it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. The building shook—felt like it was threatening to come down all around them. Goddess could hear debris

hitting the door.

“Oh my Goddess,” Exxy said.

“Nice aim,” Fluffy said.

Goddess triggered the door and put her arm around Helix. Exxy went first and Fluffy followed. The area was quiet except for debris which was raining down from high above. The neuro-chill grenades were designed to disrupt brainwaves, but they did have a small physical shockwave to them under normal usage. How Talon-5 had just used them was anything but normal.

“The building databank isn’t seeing any conscious Onis in here,” Fluffy said. Looks like that %@!#ing did it.”

“Goddess to Zilch. Evacuate The Temple. Execute code is *Outbound Sentinel*.”

“Zilch to Goddess. I scan that. I was getting %@!#ing sick of this place too.”

Exxy and Fluffy led the way out. Zilch and She7 appeared at the far end of the building, with Death-nuke between them. Death-nuke’s arm was missing. Goddess’s heart sank. Tears jumped to her eyes, but she jerked her head and they flung away. This was not the time for that. The Talon was depending on her and her leadership. There would be time for tears—lots of them if that’s what it came down to. Goddess knew there would be a flood, eventually.

Exxy and Fluffy blazed a path, picking off the remaining Oni resistance. The Talon exited the building. The mission was almost complete.

It was almost time for tears.

PILLAR

“Now,” Goddess said, her matrix-husk making a gesture in cyberspace.

The Talon paused, looking back.

A flash of blinding white light turned the night into day as the micro-nukes blew the target building apart. It blew out in all directions. Pieces of the target building flew outward, pummeling the surrounding buildings. The shockwave blew out windows as it tore through the streets.

The sound of breaking glass was a constant, high-frequency wave which carried throughout the city.

A small, mushroom-shaped cloud began to form.

Fluffy grunted. “They must have disarmed a couple of them. The explosion should have been bigger than that.”

“Right,” Exxy said, drawing the word out.

“Species Control to Talon-5 Sentinel,” the voice said over Goddess’s assault helmet. “We see fire on the scope.”

“Goddess here. Target building has been nuked.”

“We scan that. Transport is inbound on your position. It should be visible now.”

“Scan that. Talon-5 is outbound,” Goddess replied, looking up. A dark form was descending toward them, navigating between two tall buildings.

“Mission accomplished,” Exxy said.

“Yeah,” Helix said, leaning a little more on Goddess. “But it cost us.”

Goddess looked over at Death-nuke, who was passed out in She7’s arms. Death-nuke’s arm was missing from the shoulder down. The wound had been cauterized, and the limb had been saved—She7 had it in her pack—but it was unlikely that it could be reattached. The nerve damage was likely to be severe.

She7 wept, cradling her anesthetized sister.

The transport landed. Talon-5 limped toward it.

Behind them, the target building burned, now just a pillar of fire trying to reach up and commune with God.

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RANK

The insignia over her left breast was that of a Talon leader.

It was official.

Goddess was the Sentinel-8 of Talon-5. There had been little ceremony. After being debriefed, Goddess, Exxy, and Zilch had been called in. There, Goddess had met the Commander-9 of Hive-4, to which Talon-5 belonged. In the Commander-9's office, they had all been given their official

changes in rank.

Exxy was the new Guardian-5.

Zilch was the Warrior-3.

Exiting from the Commander-9's office, Goddess was in a sort of stupor. Exxy's mouth sped onward at its normal speed—she was excited about her new rank. Zilch just walked in silence, perhaps listening to Exxy, perhaps not.

In the midst of battle, that was one thing. Taking charge of the Talon permanently was another matter.

Goddess tuned Exxy out and wondered how any of this could have happened. To her of all people.

It was enough to make a person want to end it all.

TEARDROP

“Glitch. That. Mother Sentinel.”

It was Exxy. She was the only one who would dare let those words slip past her lips. She’d slipped though, hadn’t called her Goddess.

Goddess let that slide.

Zilch had more control, but Goddess could see that she silently echoed Exxy’s sentiment.

Exxy's eyes were fiery blue. If they got any more fiery, they be jetting bolts of flame right at Goddess.

"May I speak freely, Mother Sentinel?" Exxy asked.

"Oh," Goddess said. "You need my permission? Well, I'll make it easy on us. Both of you, never ask that again. *Always* speak your mind to me."

Exxy took a deep breath. Goddess knew she wouldn't breathe again until she was done saying what she was about to say. "Good. Then let me expand my earlier exclamation by saying %@!#ing glitch that %@!#ing j'aa that you just tried to pass off on us. You are our Mother Sentinel, and personally, with Glixi Kill Thrill dead, I wouldn't have it any other way. This Talon needs you. As the Guardian-5, I need you! There's no way in glitch that I'm ready for Talon command, which is what it would come down to if you were out of the way. You handled yourself %@!#ing beautifully on the Oni*asha mission—even Species command recognizes that. If they didn't, they would've shipped you off to Deep Locker Six, and you'd spend the rest of your life weeping like a youngling at the bottom of the sea, playing with the Zannathan.

"So glitch stepping down, Goddess. I doubt they'd let you anyway. They'd probably send you off for intrusive mind scans. You'd end up a brainfried and drooling, put out on the streets. Then, some flesh vendor would snatch you, chop you up, and sell your limbs as spare parts."

"You're my Mother Sentinel," Zilch said. "It's that simple."

"Okay, I won't reject my rank," Goddess said. Then, because it had been a long time in coming, she burst into tears.

It was everything, every single event that had happened to her since she joined the Species. It all came out, each event enveloped in a thick teardrop.

Ky Lin.

Processing.

Basic.

Pain.

Death.

Self.

Love

Exxy.

Death.

Glixi Kill Thrill.

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Pulse.

Quaze.

Wounded.

Death-nuke.

Helix.

Goddess sobbed, her tears dripping on the table. She put her head in her hands, felt the wetness against her palms. The liquid ran down the valley in her palm and down her wrist, onto her forearms. She imagined that it burned all the way down, letting her offer some minor penance for what had happened. She let the tremors quake through her, her chest convulsing in deep waves. She was crying so hard it was difficult to breathe.

Her soul...ached.

She mourned for Glix Kill Thrill and Pulse and Quaze. She mourned for Death-nuke and Helix, who were in the Species medical facility, recovering from their wounds. Death-nuke would never have the use of her arm again, and Helix would have restricted movement in her shoulder and in her leg. They would both return to active duty in Talon-5, but they would be changed.

Goddess wept for them, but mostly, she wept for herself. Perhaps that was selfish. Perhaps that wasn't the right thing to do. She did it anyway.

At some point, she felt two pairs of hands on her back. Exxy and Zilch put their arms around her and pulled her into a warm, two-pronged embrace. She felt surrounded and comforted. For some reason, they were crying too. Maybe they all wept for different reasons; maybe they wept for the same. It didn't really matter. How long they were there, none of them knew. When, eventually, their tears dried, they pulled away from each other, each wondering what the others were thinking, but none of them wanted to break the mood. Goddess held both their hands, maintaining a physical connection to her new officers. In the end, there were knowing smiles, rays of hope.

Well, so much for emotion suppression.