

WAR

SOLDIERS: A TALE OF XX CHROMO WARFARE

INBOUND

Goddess's confrontation with Exxy didn't occur.

The second she jacked back into cyberspace, her matrix-husk was forcibly ported to a Species emergency node. Talon-5 was to report back to base immediately for instructions. They would be mobilized within twelve hours for a critical mission.

Now, a day later, they were inbound on a transport to the Free States.

Goddess's mind attempted to cope with the thought of being sent to another country to fight. Why? Well, she knew the answer to that. The EUL had made a business deal with the Free States. In exchange for sovereign rights to key ports and major sections of land along the eastern edges of the Free States, the EUL would lend its substantial Species might in order to eliminate certain problems the Free States wanted to be rid of.

In this case, it was Athara, home to the Driftlings. Athara divided the Free States land mass in half. While the States to the east and west of Athara had banded together, declaring themselves *free*, Athara had remained content with its solitary nature. The Free States governing entities regarded Athara as a bastard child—it was part of the family, but it was tarnished. Assimilation into the Free States and a simple name change would get rid of the images that mention of Athara brought to mind. Until Athara was brought under the umbrella of the Free States, the Free States would remain a divided body; it could never become the unified expanse of land that it desired.

Political and economic pressure had been brought to bear upon Athara, but the Driftlings were a rebellious people. The mutative nature of their race enabled them to survive in the ruined desert that dominated the Atharan landscape. They knew their land. They were self-sufficient. They didn't need anything from the Free States.

But the Free States wanted what they couldn't have.

The numbers were run. The estimates were made. The Free States found themselves lacking. Their military might would not be sufficient to carry out a successful campaign against the Driftlings.

The Species of the EUL was a viable option. It was costly, but in the end, Athara would be theirs. The Free States would be a sprawling conglomeration that spanned the continental coasts.

Goddess didn't like it, and neither did most of the rest of the Talon.

But, it wasn't their job to *like* their job—just to do what they were ordered to.

Goddess looked at Exxy, who was sitting across from her in the transport. She had told him that she wanted to talk with him. Alone, in person, and not in cyberspace. There had been no chance for them to talk before the Talon had boarded the transport. Now, they could only look at each other.

Goddess wondered what Exxy was thinking. There was a raw ache

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reflected in his eyes. Goddess knew that she was at least partly responsible for what was there, and she didn't feel good about it. She was comforted, though; she knew that things would be better soon, once she could confront him.

Still, by not being able to talk to him, letting what was inside her fester, the flight was just this side of torture. Goddess gritted her teeth, gritted her mind, wondering if emotional pain was just emotional weakness leaving her body.

It certainly didn't feel like it.

TRUE

Unease was in the air the night before the mission. Goddess could taste it, feel it on her skin, crawling under her skinsuit. It left her feeling cold, clammy.

They were in a small meeting room which adjoined the Talon-5 temporary barrack that the Species had constructed. Goddess had finished briefing the Talon, and was leaning back in her chair, listening to the

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conversations that were taking place around her. She didn't actually hear them individually, but took them in as a whole. The voices of the trooplings mixed and matched, losing their individuality, merging to become a single, unified cacophony. Goddess let the voices coil around her, slithering like a serpent of sound.

Goddess surveyed her Talon.

Zilch sat beside Goddess, muttering to Fluffy, who was on her other side. Zilch had seemed happier since their time at Keetchas and Virgins. Goddess hadn't asked her why, but had been content to see Zilch in a better mood, without the biting tone. Without that cold undertone, her voice was pure music.

Fluffy was barely listening to Zilch. Goddess knew she was performing some complex activity in cyberspace. Fluffy's matrix-husk was moving so fast, it was blurring.

Helix was walking a circle around the room. She retained a slight limp—something she would have forever. She would be able to fight, even run, but she could never be the soldier she could have been. She was talking to herself, repeating a few sentences over and over. Her liturgy warmed the room somehow.

She7 and Death-nuke leaned in the corner of the room. Death-nuke cradled her new arm—a twining construct of flesh and metal. They had used her severed limb for raw materials to construct the new one. She had a full range of movement; flexing her hand now, the fingers moving independently, strong and deliberate. The dark gray metal woven through her limb glimmered.

“There's one more thing,” Goddess said. The room went silent. “In the Species this is just another mission. I'm telling you right now: It is not. Not in my eyes.” Goddess pushed back her chair and stood. “I'm going to ask something from each of you. First, jack out, all of you. Pull your MIU plugs when you're out.”

The Talon didn't hesitate. Goddess watched as their matrix-husks blinked out. When she was alone in the local node, Goddess jacked herself out also. Almost as one, the trooplings reached up and pulled the cords connecting their MIUs to their data spheres.

Exxy shot Goddess a questioning look that said: *I hope you know what you're doing. I'll do whatever you want—no matter what. I owe you that. Oh, and by the way, I*

still love you.

Goddess turned to Fluffy. “Do it.”

Fluffy pulled a small, white disc from one of her pockets. Placing it on the table, she slid her thumb along one edge. Nothing happened, but Fluffy said, “It’s on, Mother Sentinel. We’re clear.”

“Thank you, Fluffy.” Goddess backed up so she could see all the Talon members. “As I was saying, this is not just another mission in my eyes. Every assignment we take, every battle we fight, there is a chance that some or all of us will not make it back. That’s the Species way of life. I believe most of you have come to accept this fact. As for myself, I haven’t. I don’t always know how I deal with it. Somehow, I do. Back when Glix Kill Thrill, Pulse, and Quaze were alive, I felt that I was responsible only for myself. I believed that I could kill myself—perhaps one of the few ways out of the Species that doesn’t involve Deep Locker Six—and nobody else would be affected. I think the death of Glix Kill Thrill and the others proved that belief to be incorrect. Each of you is critical. Each of you is important. Your death affects the whole Talon.

“Some of you may be questioning why we’re being ordered to fight in a foreign land. I have the same questions as you do. I have the same answer that you do: We are soldiers. We go where the Species orders. We fight where the Species says to fight. We follow orders. And that’s what we’re going to do tomorrow.

“Tonight, however, we are going to go against the will of the Species. We are going to break the rules.”

Complete silence reigned. Were the trooplings even breathing?

Goddess looked each trooping in the eye before continuing. “My name is Emily Nokani.”

When she’d said it, Goddess had been looking directly at Exxy. His eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped open a little. His lips formed words. *Oh my Goddess!*

“You just...you just...” Fluffy said.

“Ah, %@!#ing Eiech!” Death-nuke said. “What the %@!# are you doing?...ahhh, Mother Sentinel, forgive me for my tongue.”

“No apology needed,” Goddess said. “Tonight, everybody speaks freely. As for what I’m doing—I’m doing what needs to be done. I’m doing the right thing. This Talon—all of us—are about to enter a battlefield. I’ve

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decided that I'm not going to ask that of any of you without you knowing me for who I really am. I want you all to know my true name."

"And you want us to give ours to you?" Death-nuke asked.

Goddess shook her head. "I want that. But I will not order any of you to tell me. I don't have that right."

"My name is Kera Flynn," Fluffy said without hesitation.

"I'm Sari Sha," Helix said. "But really, all of you already knew that, didn't you? Sha is my father's last name, not my husband's."

Zilch spoke up next. "Shea Hammer. My friends tend to call me by my last name."

Goddess thought if anybody was next, it would be Exxy, but She7 spoke first. "Since I'm from a Black Vale, the proper way to address me is Kija e Black Vale. I'd rather you just called me Kija."

Death-nuke gave her sister a sideways glance, letting a pause pass before saying, "My name is Dara e Black Vale. Like my sister, you can just use my first name."

All eyes were on Exxy now.

"You're not going to like this," Exxy said. "I'm Zeezi Ka."

A pause in sound.

"So?" Death-nuke said. "You have a boy's name. Who gives a %@!#ing glitch?"

"Yeah, that's not all that unique," Zilch said.

"I like it," Fluffy said.

Exxy caught Goddess's eye. Goddess smiled, gave her shoulders a imperceptible shrug. Goddess had known the danger, and had decided that Exxy could make his own decision. He had chosen the truth. That made Goddess happier than she could describe. Even Ky Lin was smiling. Still, Goddess breathed an internal sigh.

Whew, that was close.

Goddess held her arms out. "Thank you, all of you. Knowing our true names, each of us has power over the others. This binds us together. We are stronger because of it—because our bonds are tighter." Goddess sat back down.

After that, the Talon talked amongst themselves in realspace for quite some time.

TRYST

Exy wasn't in his bunk when Goddess entered the Talon sleeping quarters. A quick check of the local cyberspace node confirmed that Exxy wasn't jacked in.

Goddess sat down on Exxy's bunk. She ran her hands along the synthetic fabric of the bed sheets. The fabric whistled under her fingers. She stretched out, putting her feet up, and rested her head upon the pillow. It was warm

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here, as if Exxy had been lying here only minutes before.

It smelled like Exxy here.

The only picture Goddess could bring to mind was Exxy as a female. Goddess tried to image Exxy as a male, but she couldn't do it.

She sighed, looking around the room. The bunks were empty except for Helix, who was asleep and Zilch, who was on her side, propping her head up with one elbow, reading from a handheld data screen.

Goddess put her hands behind her head, wishing the bunk could swallow her up.

Wait, what was this?

Goddess pulled a thin slip of paper from underneath Exxy's pillow. Was this from Exxy? If so, where had he acquired paper?

The slip had a single word on it:

meditation

She sat up, crumpling the paper accidentally. Exxy was waiting for her. In the meditation sanctuary.

Goddess went to him.

The mediation sanctuary was separate from the Talon-5 barrack, as all the sanctuaries were. The night air between the two was cold, sending shivers up and down Goddess's spine as she crossed the distance.

As the door to the inner sanctuary slid upward, Goddess held her breath. It was a subconscious reaction to the general unease she felt about the next day's mission, and it was a conscious reaction to the very specific anticipatory dread about the confrontation with Exxy that was about to take place.

The inner sanctuary was a bare room with eight sides. Each side bore the artifacts of the eight religions practiced in the EUL. The Species was noncommittal when it came to religion, but it saw the benefits of soldiers who believed in higher purposes. The meditation sanctuaries were provided for the soldiers to use as they needed. As it turned out, they weren't used often. Goddess had never been in one before, though she knew Fluffy and Helix visited it on a daily basis. The neoplastic walls seemed to contrast with the ornate decorations that were scattered across them. In front of each wall

was a place to kneel. At all but one of the walls, candles burned. The sweet smells of fire and incense filled the room. In the center of the room was a rectangular pedestal. The floor was covered in a plush material that Goddess had never experienced before. Goddess took off her boots. Her bare feet sank into the floor material. It was the softest surface her feet had ever come into contact with.

Exxy was waiting, kneeling with his back to Goddess. He wasn't wearing his flage, but a white skinsuit. The surface of the skinsuit was glossy, giving the impression that it was wet, as if it had been poured over his body, perverted with girl-curves as it was. Warm flames reflecting from the skinsuit gave off the impression that its surface was moving, flowing along his body like a living creature. His head was bowed, his hands clasped at his stomach. He was praying. Goddess could hear muted supplications coming from him.

Goddess knelt down and waited. She felt that maybe she should be praying too, but she didn't know what to say, Who to pray to. Maybe Exxy could tell her someday. He looked like he knew what he was doing—as if he were just talking to a friend, instead of pleading with an omnipotent deity who ruled the universe. Who was he talking to?

Exxy stopped, turning his head. "I'm glad you came."

"I was the one who was seeking you out," Goddess said. "We need to talk about that night in Keetchas and Virgins."

"I take everything back," Exxy said. "Your friendship is more important than anything else. We have to make this working relationship work. My personal feelings will only get in the way."

Goddess put a hand on Exxy's shoulder, pulling. "Turn around and face me. I need to look you in the eyes when I say this."

Exxy turned. Goddess took his hands in hers.

Goddess felt enraptured by the blueness in Exxy's eyes. "I realized, not long after I left you, that I still care about you—no matter what you've done. Your faults can't change that. You still mean something to me. I don't want to lose that between us."

"Neither do I, but I don't know how to leave it at that. My feelings for you are too strong. Too deep."

"When you kissed me..." Goddess began, taking a deep breath, willing herself not to blush. Ky Lin thought that was funny. He made some face that had all the characteristics of an obscene comment. He was taunting her! How

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could he?! Goddess pushed him back down. "...I didn't know what to think. How could I be attracted to you? You're a boy, but you look like a girl! It was all too much too fast. You shouldn't have done it, and you deserved everything about the way I reacted."

"I know."

"But, for myself, I'm sorry. I lashed out. Even if you deserved it, that doesn't make it right for *me* to do it. I'm asking for your forgiveness."

"I-I can't—"

"Yes," Goddess said. She squeezed Exxy's hands. Was it his palms that were sweaty, or hers? "Yes you can. Just say the words."

"Mother Sentinel..."

"Don't call me that. Forgive me. Say my name and forgive me. Please. It's the only way we can move past all this. I forgive you for everything you've done to me. I'm putting it behind. What's between us—it gets reset, as of this second."

"Goddess, I forgive you." Exxy's eyes searched hers, looking for confirmation. Could this mutual forgiveness be true? Could it last?

Tears jumped into Goddess's eyes. "I think," she said, "that I'm a little confused about you. About me. About us."

"That makes one of us. I know exactly how I feel about you. I know what I want between us."

Goddess paused, expecting Ky Lin to chime in with some visual commentary. He didn't. She was on her own on this one.

"We have only a little time," Exxy said. "You know where I stand. What about you? Did you come here just to ask for my forgiveness? What do *you* want out of this? Is there any hope for us?"

"I..." Goddess trailed off, the words killed off in her throat. Why was it so hard to say? She wanted *something*. Even if she couldn't fully explain her wants to herself, they still existed. Why couldn't she just push the words out? Because none of it made sense? Because it went against how everybody else would react in her situation? Because any sort of relationship would be based on...what? Physical attraction? Couldn't be that since she'd only seen Exxy's true form once. What about emotional attraction? Could be, but Exxy had done nothing except cause Goddess pain in that area, so she'd have to be messed in the head to be emotionally attracted to a boy who had driven an emotion knife into her gut on multiple occasions now. So *what*, then? She

didn't want to be lonely? She was scared of being alone? Scared of losing the closest thing she'd had to a friend in the Species? The truth—Goddess couldn't sort it all out. All she knew was that she wanted *something* from Exxy. She was willing to accept it, whatever form it might take.

“What is it?” Exxy asked.

“I want there to be something. Between us.”

“I want that too, but I don't understand why you're changing your mind.”

Goddess turned her head away, then abruptly leaned into Exxy, throwing her arms around his neck. “I don't understand it either! It doesn't make any sense, and you know what? I don't care.”

Exxy hugged her back, but Goddess was the one who made the move this time, running her hand up Exxy's neck and over his head, the short hairs there scraping under her fingertips. She brought her hands to the sides of his head, holding him there. His lips, full and inviting as the girl's body he wore, were there, only a centimeter away from hers. She held him there, a split second from warm contact, listening to her body breathe. Had it just gotten harder to take a breath? Surely the oxygen was low here in the inner sanctuary, stolen by the candle flames! Goddess could feel Exxy's pulse where her littlest fingers touched his neck. His pulse was as quickened as hers was.

Exxy leaned forward, almost initiating contact, but Goddess pulled back, maintaining their distance and their closeness. Was it supposed to happen like this? Was this what she really wanted? Did she know what she was doing?

Goddess decided she didn't know.

She pulled Exxy's lips to hers and surrendered herself to the moment.

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SKIN

Heat and moisture filled Goddess's thoughts.

Exxy's mouth on hers. His lips—those perfect, girl lips—slickened and soft, slipping on Goddess's saliva-moistened skin. There was such heat there! This tingling emanating from the connection of their lips! What biological circuit had they completed? And then, it became something more, because there were tongues involved now. Goddess's mouth felt like it was

on fire, saliva rushing into it in some meager attempt to quench the flames.

There was an energy between them. Goddess could feel her body feeding off of it, drawing as much of it in as she could. Her own saliva was thick in her mouth; she found herself drooling. She moved her thumb to wipe at the drool, not wanting to break the contact between them, the heat. Exxy adjusted, taking the tip of her thumb into his mouth. Goddess shivered, pulling her thumb back, leaving a wet trail along Exxy's cheek, still holding him tight, trying to pull his head closer to hers, to deepen the kiss.

Surprisingly, Ky Lin approved of it all, blessed it all. It didn't make a bit of sense...but there he was, even turning his face away from her, as if he was giving them some privacy.

Exxy broke the kiss. Goddess made an involuntary squeal that was some combination of regret and desire all tumbled together. She had to swallow a mouthful of saliva. What had her body done to her? What was it thinking?

"Emily," Exxy breathed, eyelids drooping.

The way he said her true name almost had her pressed hard up against him again. That voice—maybe that was what it had been all along; maybe it was his voice that made her saliva flow like a river. Made her flushed. Stole the air from her lungs.

Exxy turned Goddess's ear to his lips, but touchspoke the words into Goddess's palm.

I. Want. You. Now.

In Exxy's touchspeak, the words meant something different than when Death-nuke had said the same. His touchspeak carried more pure heat and naked desire, while Death-nuke's words had been about dominance and lust. She floated in the sensations of the moment, barely comprehending what he was saying, barely understanding what he wanted from her. Well, what did *she* want?

Not. Like. This. Goddess touchspoke back. *Need. Time.*

Slowly, deliberately, Exxy shook his head. *Time. Short. Tomorrow. Uncertain. Future. Glitched. Maybe.*

Goddess sighed. Exxy was right.

His lips still at her ear, Exxy asked, "Are you jacked?"

No.

Exxy smiled. "I love you, Emily."

It took Goddess's breath away to hear that.

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Exxy's hand was at her neck, fingers pulling at the cord there, removing it, fingers circling the MIU jack. The swirling of his fingers sent delicious ripples down her shoulders and back. Exxy's hand reached back to his own neck then, unplugging the cord from his data sphere. With the other end still connected to his MIU, he took the end he had just unplugged and inserted it into Goddess's MIU.

Their MIUs were directly connected.

"Jack in," Exxy whispered. "Go online with me."

Goddess jacked.

She gasped at it—this new sensation coursing through her as if her bloodstream was a hypercurrent.

She felt like she could hear his thoughts. Whispers in her mind. Then, when he kissed her in realspace, she *could* hear his thoughts. No, she could *feel* his thoughts.

But it was even more than that. *She could feel him kissing her—as if she were kissing herself.* Suddenly, it was *her* lips on *her* lips. They were soft enough, she found. Wet, textured, perhaps a little chapped from the past few days. He liked the feel of her lips. He liked the taste of her mouth. What Exxy experienced, she felt. She felt her skinsuit beneath his fingers, the scratchiness of the short hairs on her head. If Exxy hadn't had his eyes closed, she thought she would've been able to *see* herself kissing him. Together, they formed a human feedback loop which had Goddess swirling in an ocean of strange input. The sensations built, fed from her to Exxy, and then back to her.

She drank in his kiss. Her kiss. The beating of the pulse between them.

Goddess pulled back, breathing hard. The MIU cord hung between them, tethering them together. She knew the extent of his desire for her because of that cord. What strength he possessed! What passion for her! How had this all spiraled downward? How had she lost control?

When exactly had she begun to feel this way about him?

"We can't," Goddess said, swallowing. "We can't take this any further."

"Why?"

"It's too fast. I'm not ready."

Exxy sat back, causing the MIU cord to rise. He fingered it idly, running it between his index and middle fingers. "You're right. It is too fast. Too %@!#ing fast. But time is short. It's passing us right now. I'm afraid, if we

don't make the best of it, it will pass us by completely. I don't want that. I'm afraid of that. I care you for too much."

Goddess slid her hand along the MIU cord till her fingers touched Exxy's. "I know how much you care for me. Because of this cord, I know. Thank you."

"I also know," Exxy said, averting his eyes, "your feelings. You're confused. You have passion—you like me—but it's too much for you. There is...timidity inside you. I can see that. Also, there's something else. I can feel another...almost as if there were another person inside you, talking to you. It's indistinct, but you—" Exxy paused, wrapping his hand around the back of his neck, fingers caressing the MIU jack. "You're holding yourself back because of it. Why?"

Goddess couldn't tell him about Ky Lin. Not now. It wouldn't make any sense to him. Glitch, it didn't make any sense to *her!* "Someday, I may be able to explain that to you."

"It doesn't matter," Exxy said, his eyes seemingly filled to the brim with blueness. "When you're ready, I will be too."

"No," Goddess said, after a moment, her thoughts straying to the battle that tomorrow would bring down upon them all. No guarantees there. Not a single glitched one. Would any of them make it back? Would she come back? Would Exxy? Goddess kissed Exxy then. Hard. "I know what I want," she said into his mouth.

Exxy made no move. She could sense that he was waiting for her. He didn't want to instigate this. He wanted it to be her choice. She would have to initiate it. She would be in control.

"Not like this," Goddess said, grabbing the zip tab at the neck of Exxy's skinsuit. "Not with this metaskin—this pseudo female flesh—covering you. I want to see the true you. Peel away this husk and let me touch and taste the realflesh underneath." Goddess was a little shocked at her own words, but realized with an internal blush, they reflected the animal cravings inside her.

The sounds of the zip tab reverberated as Goddess pushed it down. The skinsuit split down to Exxy's stomach. Exxy hands were at his neck, finding the seam to his skin, digging his fingertips under, then pulling it away. Like the skinsuit, it peeled away from his body with a quiet rustling—skinsuit on pseudo-skin, pseudo-skin on flesh. It took a couple of minutes, with Goddess interrupting to kiss his fingers and skin as she went. When the top

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of the skinsuit and the top of the pseudo-flesh hung limp from his waist, Goddess planted a kiss right in the center of his chest, just below his collarbone, pushing her tongue between her lips at the last second. He tasted of male sweat and something else—the not-unpleasant chemical taste from his skin being in contact with the pseudo-flesh for so long. She put one hand on his chest and the other went around to his back. Lean, muscular, breathing, sweating, living—this was the real Exxy beneath her fingers and mouth.

Both of them shivered.

“This isn’t real,” Goddess said. She couldn’t believe it was.

Exxy kissed the top of her head, his hands interlocking at the base of her skull. “As real as it gets.”

He reached for the zip tabs on her shoulders. They slid like lubricant, all the way to her forearms. He bared her arms to the glow of the candles. She could feel their warmth, even though they were too far away for this to be true. He left a trail of kisses from her shoulders to the tips of her fingers, each kiss a spot of evaporating moisture, a little bit of him mixed with a little bit of her. He pause, holding her gaze. *Now*. He tapped as he raised her arms. Goddess held her hands, elbows bent above her head, allowing him access to the zip tabs at her underarms. His touch tickled her when he reached for and missed the tabs.

Ky Lin looked over his shoulder, then around, eyebrow raised. Should they be doing this here? In a meditation sanctuary? It was a place reserved for silence and contemplation. For prayer. For liturgy. For communing with the gods. For speaking with God. For contacting aliens. For communing with higher powers.

Not for touching.

Not for kissing.

Not for heat.

Not for this...*fervor*.

None of this belonged here.

Goddess didn’t care. She didn’t care for anything at that moment but what Exxy felt for her, was doing to her. How she touched him, how his skin felt. How he tasted.

What they were about to have between them.

Just as the zip tabs at her sides had been lowered, and the front of her

skinsuit was on the verge of tracking down her body—Exxy had already danced his fingers underneath, trickling across her stomach, into her bellybutton—an alarm rang out. Exxy looked up to the ceiling, as if the sound might be coming from there. Goddess just bowed her head; she knew where the sound was coming from. Exxy had been right. Time had been short. Too glitched short.

And it had passed them.

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PREP

“We’ll insert to the south of the encampment,” Goddess said. Beneath her boots, the aerial transport vibrated and hummed. “Intelligence says there are less than fifty Driftlings in the camp.”

“Mother Sentinel, what about prisoners?” Helix asked.

“We’re not taking any,” Goddess said. Those had been the orders from the Species.

“Are we wiping this place then?” Death-nuke asked. “Because I’m itching to kill some Driftlings. Athara and the Black Vales have a long history with each other.”

“That’s not what we’re doing. We are clear to eliminate any forces that endanger us, but our mission is to make sure this encampment is unusable.”

“Mother Sentinel, a tac nuke would do that too,” She7 said. “I do not understand.”

“We’ll follow the orders we were given,” Goddess said. “Regardless of whether we understand them. That’s our job.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

And Goddess would be monitoring each of them through cyberspace, recording the entire mission. She’d have to keep an eye on Death-nuke.

The Talon prepped their gear. Goddess, Exxy, and Zilch made inspections of the trooplings. Weapons were checked one last time, then powered on. Boots were tightened. MIU cords were secured. Flage was adjusted. Assault helmet diagnostics were run. Every piece of gear needed to be functioning at its peak level. There would be no room for error against the Driftlings.

When their gear was checked, Goddess motioned for Exxy and Zilch to join her. Goddess touchspoke against Exxy’s shoulders. *Soon*. Exxy, one again in his female guise, gave Goddess a strained smile. If Zilch noticed the exchange, she didn’t give any indication.

Even now, just over three hours later, a fire continued to rage inside Goddess. Her thoughts continually swerved back to Exxy and how they had been interrupted—she, seconds away from her first, willful baring of herself to another person. Ky Lin’s expression indicated that there would be time for that later; best to keep one’s mind in the present, focused. But Goddess couldn’t stop herself from thinking of the passion that remained unfinished between them. She wanted him to kiss her again. *She wanted more*.

Ky Lin reminded her. Patience.

Goddess brushed something from the corner of her eye. It was probably the beginning of a tear, but she wasn’t sure. “It’s going to be intense down there,” she said. “I’m relying on you two to help me get everybody through this in one piece.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel,” Zilch said.

“Aye, Mother Sentinel,” Exxy said, but with a bigger smile.

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Goddess narrowed her eyes. “I told you two not to call me that.”

“We had to say it one more time,” Exxy said, talking fast. “It’s out of my system now. I won’t do it again. I can’t speak for Zilch here though. She’s %@!#ing independent. Go figure.”

“Glitch you,” Zilch said, touchspeaking something on Exxy’s back that Goddess couldn’t see. Oh, was Exxy blushing now? Zilch stepped back then, checking one more time on the trooplings.

In cyberspace, Goddess checked the data entity she had hovering inches in front of her eye. It was displaying a series of numbers, counting down. They had just entered Atharan airspace.

They were less than five minutes away from the war.

PRECIPICE

Only thirty seconds left now.

The transport was descending. The exit ramp would lower just as they approached the ground. They would have to jump the last few feet back to Earth, since the transport would not be landing.

Goddess could barely breathe. She was at the head of the ramp. Exxy and Zilch were right behind her, the rest of the trooplings behind them. Her

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heart had decided to increase its beat rate. She could feel the adrenaline surging through her body—could almost feel it coming out her pores, taste it on her tongue. It was making her shaky. Her DL2 felt weighty in her hands. Had it really been this heavy before? Surely not! Perhaps she had picked up somebody else's weapon. She adjusted her grip, feeling no comfort from it. From anything.

Then, something more than adrenaline took hold of her. Ky Lin's eyes opened wide, as if he were standing on a sandy shore and had just spotted a tsunami. His mouth parted to warn her, but it was too late.

Goddess panicked.

It came from nowhere, but she suddenly knew that she was going to die on this mission. She was going to take a hit, and she was going to die. It would be a shock to her when it happened. One instant she'd be standing there, fighting maybe, talking to her officers maybe, and then she'd take a single shot to the forehead or the heart. There would be a spray of blood and shredded flesh, and she'd be flung to one side, into one of her officers—maybe Exxy—getting blood and gore all over them. They'd catch her, ease her to the ground, but by then it would already be too late. The wound would be fatal, and there wouldn't be anything they could do for her. She'd die in their arms. She hoped it was Exxy's arms.

Her eyes blurred. Tears.

A hand on her shoulder took her from her thoughts. She was being spun around. It was Exxy. His assault helmet was off. He reached up, pushed hers back from her forehead, and in one unannounced, fluid movement, brought their mouths together.

It was such a bolt of pleasure, Goddess almost lost her footing. Her knees trembled, and her hand—pinned at her side—almost released her DL2. Exxy's whole body seemed to be pressed against hers, their utility belts getting tangled, their weapons and supplies clanking against each other. Exxy's neuro-chill grenades were poking into her stomach; the sheath to her pulse dagger was digging into her thigh. It was uncomfortable, but Goddess loved every nanosecond of it. She wilted, Exxy's hand at the small of her back. Goddess thought that he might be the only thing keeping her from falling to the floor of the transport and rolling down the ramp—the ramp that was now whirring open.

Exxy released her, leaving Goddess wanting more. Much more. "I

needed to do that one more time,” Exxy said.

Goddess struggled to form words. “Put your assault helmet back on, you stupid g’ekk. I need you to stay alive through this.”

Behind Exxy, Goddess could see that the rest of the Talon had been watching them. Zilch was just nodding. Fluffy and Helix were laughing. She shook her head, but had a smile on her face. Death-nuke’s face was unreadable. Something fierce danced in her eyes.

“I love this girl,” Exxy said to the rest of the Talon as he secured his assault helmet back on his head.

Somebody—Goddess wasn’t sure who—started clapping.

Goddess turned back toward the rear of the transport, where the ramp was still lowering. She walked forward, feeling the heat of the intrushing air. Out there, the world was a bright yellow blur, full of dust. Dirt swirling into the transport.

The ramp was lowered. Goddess stood by the end of it.

Placed her feet at the edge of the precipice.

Not knowing where stepping off of it would lead.

“Goddess to Talon-5. Join Your Deity In Darr-Eiech. Execute code is *Enraged Sentinel.*”

The transport was ten feet off the ground. The DL2 in her hands seemed to hum, as if it knew it was about to enter the field of war.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Goddess said. “I love Exxy too.”

Did she really? She didn’t know, but it felt like the right thing to say.

Underneath her, the precipice loomed, inviting her to meet the world below.

Goddess stepped off.

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DARR-EIECH

The Driftlings didn't appreciate Talon-5's assault on their encampment, as it turned out.

Goddess and Zilch were lying in a small impression in the ground. Pulses of purple energy arced over their heads. About ten meters away, Exxy and Helix were in a similar situation. Death-nuke, She7, and Fluffy were trading fire with several Driftlings off to the east of the encampment.

Goddess could see the clean, green DL2 beams reaching out, answered by jagged dashes of purple. Goddess didn't recognize the weapons the Driftlings were using. She had Fluffy running a matrix scan for any information she could find, but she hadn't found anything yet. The briefing on this mission had been inaccurate; it had indicated the Driftlings were primitives and didn't have a wide range of weaponry at their disposal.

Wrong.

"Goddess to Fluffy. Run a scan of their cyberspace node. See if there are any holes we can punch through."

"Aye, Mother Sentinel. If everybody else can keep these #@!#ing g'ekk glitchers busy in realspace, I can concentrate on the more aggressive probes."

"I scan that. Goddess to Talon-5. Scorch 'em."

The encampment, a tightly packed cluster of domed structures which covered an area half a kilometer in diameter, accepted the DL2 onslaught with a resigned quietness. The domes, constructed of a thick, shiny material stretched over an internal skeleton, reflected many of the DL2 beams up into the sky. Other beams found weaknesses in the domes, the green lines of light penetrating the material, which smoked and hissed at the violation. In the center of the encampment was a dome with was three times as large as any of the others. The DL2 beams didn't even phase that one.

"I scan over a hundred of them!" Zilch muttered, broadcasting to the entire Talon. "The #@!#ing Species data we got isn't worth j'aa!"

"Yeah," Exxy said. "Good thing we were prepared for anything."

"Helix to Death-nuke. I scan ten Driftlings trying to flank you from the north."

"Scan that," Death-nuke replied. "They're in for trouble."

Goddess could see She7 flip over to face north. She7 pulled a neuro-chill grenade from her belt, armed it, and tossed it over the small rise where the Driftlings were coming from. There was a flash of light as the grenade detonated.

The Driftlings didn't appear.

"Zero movement from the north," Zilch said. "Looks like you dropped that neuro-chill right in the middle of them. The farthest couldn't have been more than a couple of feet away. They'll be out for hours."

"Goddess to She7. Good work. All trooplings, get ready to make forward progress. We need to take the center of the encampment, then set the pyre-

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nukes. Get ready. It's gonna get a little more intense."

"Good," Death-nuke said. "Because I was starting to get bored."

"Scan that," Exxy said.

Goddess surveyed the encampment. It didn't look like what she had expected a Driftling military encampment to look like. There was that big dome, surrounded by the smaller domes, and that was the extent of the layout. There were no heavy guns to defend the perimeter. There were no barriers. The Driftlings were fighting back—quite adeptly—but that was about it. Goddess knew that some Driftlings had been wounded by DL2 beams, but the scans showed that all of them seemed to be alive.

Good. The body count needed to be low.

Goddess knew that it wouldn't be zero by the end of the day though. She brought down her visor, zoomed in on the encampment, got her first good look at a live Driftling.

The only thought that came to her mind was that she was looking at a ruined human being. The Driftling—a female—was fit enough, muscles taut and strong. Her skin was rich, obviously colored by years under the sun. Her arms and legs were bare, a simple brown material wrapped tight around her shoulders, torso, and waist. She wore a thin, black belt. A plain, cylindrical device was on her hip. Her hair was shoulder length and light green, with darker streaks interleaving. Across her bared skin, bones protruded like amputated branches from a tree. One bone, which formed a rounded horn, stuck out just over one eye. There were many such protrusions. They dotted her arms. One stuck out from her elbow, preventing her from straightening her arm. Her legs were worse, one of them twisted at such an extreme angle that Goddess didn't know how she was able to walk. The Driftling, as if sensing that Goddess was observing her, pulled a small pistol from a waist pack at her back and moved laterally behind a nearby dome.

Goddess wondered what they were doing here, in this desert, attacking these people. Why *were* they inflicting damage here? Did the Driftlings really deserve this?

No time during war to think about these things. Orders had to be followed. The mission had to be completed. There were other things to do. Places to go. People to see.

Exxy. Despite the rising conflict around her, Goddess thought of him in that instant, looked over at him, where he was pressing himself as low as he

could into the ground depression he was taking cover. Goddess felt a stab of fear at that—purple flashes exploded less than a meter away from him, melting the ground, turning it to liquid.

“Goddess to Talon-5. Converge Upon The Pagan Altar. Execute code is *Flaming Shrine*.”

Up. The Talon-5 got up. Rising to their feet, they charged the Driftling encampment. Goddess cut a zigzag path toward the nearest dome. Zilch was right behind her. Goddess could see the other trooplings making similar moves toward the encampment.

“Fluffy to Mother Sentinel. I just smashed through their firewall. They’re not gonna be able to resurrect the %@!#ing thing for awhile. God, I love these new AI viruses. Anyway, I’m gonna shut down the power to the camp in five.”

“Goddess to Fluffy. I scan that. Proceed, then join us inside.”

“I scan that. Disconnecting power now.”

Across the encampment, all machinery ceased to function. Outside of the sound of weapon fire and Driftling shouts, the camp had gone noiseless.

“Mother Sentinel, track right!” Zilch shouted.

Goddess went into a crouch, swinging her DL2 right, squeezing the trigger as she did. The DL2 hummed, spewing truncated green laser beams. The group of Driftlings who had been approaching through a narrow gap between two of the domes, retreated. One of the DL2 beams caught the lead Driftling in the head and he spun to the ground. The two Driftlings behind him grabbed his shoulders and pulled him away. The wounded Driftling got his pistol up and let loose a barrage of purple hail that had Goddess and Zilch retreating sideways. Goddess launched herself into the air, twisting as she did, legs wide. Purple beams zipped around her, searing the air. She hit the ground on one knee and one foot, but lost her balance and went sprawling into the dirt. The back of her hand slammed into a blunt rock on the ground. Instantly, her wrist went numb. Zilch went prone, holding her DL2 in one hand, returning fire in a wide, sweeping arc. When the Driftlings stopped firing back, Zilch rolled to her hands and knees and crawled over to Goddess.

“Are you okay?” Goddess asked.

Zilch grabbed for Goddess’s pack. “Yeah, but you look like you took a hit. Looks like it went right through. Ah, %@!#, looks like it drilled your

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AquaSucker.”

Goddess was more concerned about getting shot by another Driffling. She rotated, scanning the area. “Keep your head down. The pack isn’t important right now.”

“Scan that.”

“Goddess to Exxy. What’s your coordinate?”

“Exxy here. We’re approaching your position. Most of these domes are empty. Helix and I are thinking most of them have pulled back to the big one.”

“Scan that. Goddess to Death-nuke. Coordinate?”

“Death-nuke here. We’re in the center of the encampment. We’re taking fire from both sides, but we’re holding our position. Just for the record, all the domes we cleared were empty before we arrived. I don’t like that. I expected more resistance from these Drifflings. This isn’t the Darr-Eiech I expected.”

“They’re resisting enough,” Goddess replied, ducking behind a row of storage containers just as crisscrossing purple fire cut across the space where she’d just been. “Use whatever force you need to. Disable them whenever you can, but kill any Driffling you have to.”

“Better them than us,” Zilch said.

Goddess couldn’t argue with that. Thoughts of the safety of each of the Talon members plagued her. Especially Exxy. She supposed that it wasn’t right to have these unique feelings towards him, but she couldn’t stop them. The Species hadn’t made any great efforts to instill a greater sense of belonging in her. She’d been forced into service and had been abused ever since. What did she owe them? She did want the best for her trooplings—wanted each of them to make it back alive—but she couldn’t deny that Exxy’s survival was paramount in her mind. She didn’t like it, but it was there, unavoidable. Undeniable.

Ky Lin just shook his head, looking sad. What was that supposed to mean?

“Goddess to Talon-5. Neutralize current opposition, then converge on the center do—”

But Zilch’s body flying into Goddess’s cut her off. Zilch’s body—deadweight—rolled to one side. Goddess made a grab for Zilch’s shoulder with one hand while fumbling with her DL2 with the other, bringing it across

Zilch's body, targeting the direction Goddess thought the shot may have come from. She squeezed the trigger, aiming from the waist. The beam hit the Driftling at the shoulder. His arm dropped to the ground, still clutching the pistol he had used to shoot Zilch.

"Goddess to Helix. Zilch is hit. I need some help. Goddess to She7. Break with Death-nuke and Fluffy. Form up with Exxy. Pronto, trooplings!"

"Helix here. I'm inbound."

"She7 here. Scan that. I'm inbound."

"Extreme caution. Both of you. I don't want any more wounded troopling."

Goddess turned Zilch over. She was unconscious, but breathing. Oh! The wound—which was just above her waist and to one side of her stomach—was glowing! A purplish haze seeped from the wound like smoke from a fire. There didn't seem to be any blood; maybe the shot had cauterized the wound.

Goddess placed Zilch's body to one side, then crouched over her, ready to fire at anything that moved. She saw nothing. Even in her visor, she wasn't detecting any warm bodies close enough to be a threat. A quick check showed her that Helix was almost there.

Zilch's body jerked as she came suddenly awake. She coughed. When she did, the wound in her chest spewed a cloud of purple gas. "Hurts," she said, her voice strained. "Those #@!#ing Driftlings! I was just about to target that glitched g'ekk glitcher, but the glitch bucket was quick on the draw. Nailed me from the hip. Help me up, and I'll #@!#ing hunt that j'aa eater down. Shove my DL2 up the most inconvenient bodily orifice and squeeze the #@!#ing trigger. God, this is glitched. Sorry, Mother Sentinel, this wasn't how it was supposed to be."

Goddess smiled, "Helix is on her way."

A voice crackled in Goddess's assault helmet. "Helix to Mother Sentinel. I've encountered some resistance. Not all these domes are #@!#ing empty. I'm gonna be delayed."

"Goddess here. I scan. Don't get hurt, but get her soon."

Zilch's eyes rolled back in her head, but she fought it. "It burns," she said, then slipped back into unconsciousness.

What could Goddess do? Helix was the medical expert of the Talon.

Ky Lin shook his head. He didn't know either. Both of them were

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helpless.

No!

Goddess reached into her pack. The ruined AquaSucker fell to the ground. She reached back in. Her entire supply of cauterization sponges had been burned by the hit her pack had taken. Oh, it was much worse! Frustrated, she stripped the pack off her back and dumped its contents on the ground. None of it was glowing, but it was all burned and useless.

Another word—perhaps more accurate than any other—to describe the state of her pack’s contents would be: *dissolved*.

Goddess looked back at Zilch’s wound. Was it really steaming?

Oh. God. No.

In cyberspace, she ran the command sequence. A button appeared and she pushed it. “Mother Sentinel Goddess to Species Control. Zealot Lies Bloody On The Narrow Path. Execute code is *Wounded Talon*.”

It only took a second. “Species Control here. Negative on immediate extraction.”

Goddess was furious. “What? Why not?!?”

“Your transport is refueling. Minimum time to early extraction is thirty.”

No! No! No! This wasn’t going to happen like this! “I have a wounded officer here! They hit her with a weapon I wasn’t briefed on! I think...I think it’s eating away at her! Get me a %@!#ing transport so I can save her life!”

There was silence. They weren’t going to respond to that?

“Scan that. We located another transport. It’s inbound. It’ll be there in ten.”

“Thank you, Species Control. Goddess out.”

“Goddess to Helix. I need you.”

“I’m here,” Helix said, appearing from between two of the domes. She ran over.

“Zilch got zeroed by a quick Driffling,” Goddess said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel. It got pretty %@!#ing intense there. I was trading fire with about seven of them. I wounded all of them. I think I killed two of them. Didn’t feel so bad about that after I got the call from you.”

Helix reached for the supplies in her pack. Goddess looked over Helix’ shoulder. “Any of them on your rear?”

“No, I made sure I switched directions a couple of times while I was

inbound. I'm pretty sure I ditched all of those %@!#ing g'ekk glitch—”

A bolt of purple streaked across the back of Helix's head. Her eyes went wide and she fell forward into Goddess.

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MERCY

A sense of unreality passed through Goddess. It was a spirit of disbelief and it wanted to possess her with its unholy essence.

She cradled Helix—who was obviously dying—with one hand, and pulled two neuro-chill grenades with the other. She armed them both with flicks of her thumb and lobbed one in the direction that the shot had come from. The other went the other way, where her visor indicated three more

Driftlings were approaching. The grenades went off simultaneously, converting both sets of Driftlings into deadweights, slumping them to the ground.

A voice crackled. “Exxy to Goddess. She’s with me, but Helix’s matrix-husk just disappeared. What happened?”

“Goddess here. It’s bad.”

“Scan that. We’re on our way.”

“Negative. Complete the mission. Species Control has a transport inbound. Her wounds are beyond any of us. I’ll hold here till the transport arrives.”

“I don’t like it, but I scan you. Be careful. Exxy out.”

Goddess spared Zilch a quick glance—she was still breathing, thank God—but quickly turned back to Helix. Letting her DL2 relax on its strap, she rotated Helix’s body across hers, careful not to touch the back of Helix’s assault helmet where the shot had hit. Purple steam was venting in a fury from the hole there. The back of the assault helmet had a trough plowed horizontally through it. Goddess peered at the wound, trying to see the extent of the damage through the steam.

Ky Lin warned her. Don’t look.

But she had to. *She just had to.*

So, she looked into that melted hole, broken assault helmet shards seemed to be floating in a pool of blood. Skull fragments? Brain matter—was that what those spongy pieces were? There was so much blood. It was filling up the hole.

Goddess choked back a sob, wanting to help Helix, knowing that she couldn’t. Knowing that Helix was beyond help now. She didn’t think that even the Species medical personnel would be able to help her. The wound was so deep!

As gently as she could, Goddess rolled Helix over opposite Zilch, sickened by the stream of blood, fluid, and unidentified fragments which poured onto the ground as she did so. Oh, God, how could this have happened!

Helix was still alive, her eyes open and focused. A tear fell from Goddess’s eye. The drop splattered on Helix’s cheek. Helix smiled.

“...guess won’t...haveta...worry ‘bout...glitchusband or...stunt rumors...” Helix said. “...much better...death this way. Show...’em all...”

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“No, you’re not dying on me, Helix!” Goddess said. “The transport will be here in a minute. They’ll help you. Just hold on. Fight it!”

“I...wanted to go this way...y’know...fighting. Woulda liked to...get husband though...g’ekk.”

Goddess wiped away tears. “I’ll make sure he gets your message.”

“...thank...you.”

“I’m...sorry,” Goddess sobbed. “I—”

“One...more thing. Don...wanna...die from %@!#in’ Driftling...want you...do it.”

Goddess shook her head. “Don’t ask me that. I can’t do that! Helix, don’t ask me that.”

“...name...is Sari. Say my...true name...before you do it. Please, it...hurts.”

Goddess mouthed *No* over and over, but found that her arm was digging through Helix’s pack. Her fingers, when she found the object she was looking for closed around it instinctively, pulled it out.

Helix’s eyes focused on it, her mouth turned up, her blue eyes liquid with pain. Goddess took Helix’s hand, held it between them. With her other hand, she reached around to Helix’s neck, felt her MIU jack with her index finger.

“Sari, I can’t do this...”

“Thank...you...”

Ky Lin nodded his head, affirming. It was right. It was mercy.

Goddess kept her eyes wide and on Helix’s as she inserted the suicide stick into the MIU jack. There was a click. Helix’s face flashed an extreme sense of momentary peace before her eyelids slammed shut and her grip went loose. Her body had been switched off.

Helix, Troopling-1 of Talon-5, was dead.

LEAK

“Goddess to Talon-5. I need an estimated time to mission completion.”

No answer.

In cyberspace, the only matrix-husks visible were her own and Zilch’s. Zilch’s was fading in and out as she moved in and out of consciousness. When had the other matrix-husks disappeared?

“Goddess to Talon-5...” she began.

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But really, what was the use? If they were all jacked out, then either there was something blocking the signal, or something else had gone wrong. Goddess didn't want to think, right then, what could have happened.

"Species Control to Talon-5 Sentinel-8. Transport has been delayed. It's taking fire from hostile forces. New time to arrival is twenty."

"Goddess here," she sobbed. "One Talon member terminal. Another one is dead if you don't get here soon. Glitch!"

"Complete the mission, Sentinel-8. Transport is inbound. It'll be there as soon as possible."

"I scan that. Goddess out."

She was swearing out of frustration now. Out of sorrow. Out of the pain in her stomach. The ache in her throat. The knife in her heart. She thought of Exxy. What if he...?

No. Don't think of that. Not that.

The wound in Zilch's side was...leaking. It was an ooze, tinted purple and pink. Solvent and blood. The mixture seeped down her side, eating through the flage there and into the skin beneath. The hole had widened. Who knew what damage had occurred internally—what had been eaten away in there. Zilch's chest wasn't moving. When had that happened? In cyberspace, Zilch's matrix-husk was gone too.

Goddess wanted to retch, but settled for letting her eyes blur, fill, and overflow with tears. Her chest vibrated with the ache which entered her then.

Between the corpses, Goddess wept.

THROAT

The central dome rose above. Goddess was pressed up against it. She'd made it this far, unharmed. Unbloody. Not dead. Out of breath, she rested and leaned. The dome material seemed to give under her slight pressure, but that wasn't possible—the structure was too big, the material too thick. The DL2 nozzle was fire hot against her thigh, but she didn't lift it away.

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There was no sign of Driftling activity. In her visor, Goddess didn't see any heat signatures indicative of potential threats. Everything was nominal. Except it wasn't. At this point, Goddess didn't trust the data her technology was feeding her. Fluffy, Exxy, Death-nuke, and She7 weren't scanning. Presumably, they were inside the central dome, placing the pyre-nukes. Presumably, none of them were wounded. She hoped, prayed that this was the situation, but no amount of technology was going to reveal this information to her. She would have to find out the realspace status of the trooplings for herself. See it with her own two brown eyes.

There she was, pressed full against the central dome outer wall, letting her DL2 melt a hole in the skin of her 'flage, and wishing that she was back with Exxy at The Glitched SEAL, so she could undo some of the things she had said and unthink some of the things she had thought. Then, maybe she and Exxy could fast forward right past the incident at Keetchas and Virgins and proceed directly to some more of that stuff in the meditation sanctuary, and then dabble in... *whatever was destined to follow*. Goddess sighed.

Ky Lin wanted her to get her sixteen-year-old butt moving. Get this over with. She was older than her chronological years portrayed her, so she should act like it. *Yeah, last time I'm telling you, now get moving, buckaroo!* his look said.

Okay, Ky Lin. You got it.

Goddess hefted the DL2, holding it with one hand on the nozzle grip. Her visor indicated that the entryway, which was a meter to her left, was clear of Driftlings. She didn't trust it, so she peeked around, leading with the business end of the DL2. The entryway was clear. She stepped through.

It was hotter in here. Outside, despite the sunlight, the air had at least been free to circulate. In here, it was as if the air had stopped and gone instantly stale. Fluffy had done her job well; the air circulators were offline too. Beads of sweat began to form on Goddess's neck. Her 'flage began to feel sticky against her skin. She pulled the zip tab at her neck down past her breastbone, spreading the flaps with her thumb and little finger. It was against Species protocol for a soldier to open their 'flage during combat, and it was questionable how much good it would really do—how much cooler it would make her—but Goddess didn't care.

She moved deeper in. The entryway opened into a great, domed room. She estimated that the room was at least half the size of the actual structure, extending upward about thirty meters. Like the outside of the structure, these

walls were ribbed. Only in here, the ribbing was exposed. Thick metal rods rose from where they had been driven into the ground, continuing up to the apex of the dome—where they all crossed—and back down the opposite side of the room. Between the ribs, the walls looked strangely empty, as if items that had hung there, decorating the room, had been removed. It left the room feeling hollow. It was missing something. The floor was bare dirt. Goddess could see boot impressions there. Her trooplings had been here. There were burns on the walls from DL2 beams. Mixed with the DL2 burns were uneven holes which glowed with that purple steam. Several unconscious Driftlings lay scattered around the room, near where the walls met the ground. A couple of them were moaning weakly. Goddess didn't check to see if any of them were dead, just that none of them were hiding weapons. She didn't find any pistols.

In cyberspace, the matrix-husks of Exxy and She7 flickered into existence momentarily. Blink. Blink. Then, they were gone again.

“Goddess to Talon-5. Respond with coordinates.”

No answer.

In addition to the primary entrance on the one side of the dome, there were two other exits from the room. Goddess, in the center of the room, chose the one on her left based on a look from Ky Lin. She didn't think about it, but what a way to make a decision.

She moved down a wandering hallway, making sure doors—thin material stretched over a wire frame—along the way were closed. If they were open, she quick-scanned the room beyond. All the ones along this path were vacant. Where had everybody gone? There were more Driftlings here. Somewhere. The rest of the Talon was here. Somewhere.

Fluffy's matrix-husk flashed into existence. “Hey—” was all she got out before she was gone.

In cyberspace, Goddess scrambled for a coordinate on Fluffy. Nothing specific as it turned out, but the afterimage indicated that she might be at a higher altitude. That meant she—and the other trooplings perhaps—were on the next level. It was time to find a way up. Goddess's pulse quickened. Her feet moved faster.

There, at the end of the passage, an alcove containing a set of steep stairs. She did a quick pirouette, swinging her DL2 in a complete circle, verifying that the area was devoid of Driftlings. The alcove was too. Looking up, she

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could see that the stairway ascended at least three levels up into the dome.

Movement on the third level. Just a quick flash of black, a swish of red—hair, possibly—and then it was gone. Goddess raised her DL2 and checked the energy level. It was down below fifty percent, but that should be adequate as long as this didn't take too much longer.

Goddess skipped the second level, taking two steps at a time. She heard footsteps other than her own as she crested the top of the stairway. The door which led into the hall was open. Goddess went onto her stomach, rolling laterally, checking the hall as she did.

A foot disappeared into a doorway. It was dark, but Goddess's visor had caught the movement. As she rolled past the doorway, she brought up detail from the image she'd captured of that foot before it had been pulled out of view. It was a Driftling foot. A protruding bone from the inside of the ankle was a telltale sign of that. It was a young Driftling too. No older than ten years. A youngling! Was that possible? There were children here? Something must be wrong with the visor.

Back on her feet, feeling the flooring give and sway beneath her feet, Goddess moved into the hall. She repeatedly panned back and forth across the hall, approaching the doorway where she'd spotted the Driftling. As she got closer, she could see that the door had been closed. Her assault helmet scanned, picking up sounds inaudible to her ears. Feet skittering across the floor, skin on skin, skin patting material, quiet whimpering, some crying.

Goddess approached the door. Her visor gave her the pertinent data. No heat signatures on either side of door, but there were massive readings from further in, on the opposite side of the room. With the nozzle of the DL2, she pushed the door inward.

The room was dim, lit only by several candles hanging from the ceiling.

There were about thirty Driftlings huddled against the far wall. All of them were children except for three women who, as soon as Goddess stepped into the room, moved in front of the children. The women were young, only a year or two older than Goddess, but they carried themselves with an authority that was well beyond their years. They spaced themselves evenly in front of the children, legs wide and calf muscles tense. Each wore the same, simple clothing that Goddess had seen outside, but each differentiated herself with a different color and style of hair. One had long, frizzy, dark crimson hair. One had close-cropped yellow. The last had chin-

length, purple and green strands. All of their bodies were disfigured with bone protrusions and twisted limbs. Dark tattoos slid along the length of their limbs. The tattoos were thin and wispy, broad artist strokes which seemed to crawl along their muscle and bone structures like some race of dim, alien beings fused to their flesh. Like the Driftling women outside, each had a metal cylinder at their waist.

Goddess wondered what those were.

As if some silent signal had sounded, the Driftling women reached to their belts and pulled the cylinders free.

Goddess realized she was still holding her DL2 in an offensive position. The nozzle was pointing directly at the Driftlings.

Ky Lin had his hands on his hips. *Children!* What was this place? They had a right to defend themselves, and that's what they looked like they were doing.

Goddess lowered the DL2 and held up her other hand, palm outward.

With a twitch, each Driftling activated the device in her hand. Three wire-thin strings of light poured from the cylinders. The tip of one wire touched the floor and sparked. The floor at the impact point went black, smoking. The others were more careful, lifting their...*weapons?*...so they didn't touch.

Whips! Ky Lin shook his head. These three...it would best not to dance with them. Even a weapon as powerful as the DL2 may not be mightier than those three dancing whips.

The glowing ends of the whips lit the room in a different hue, overpowering the light from the candles. Goddess was mesmerized by the wavering, hypnotic ends.

Ky Lin sent her a look that said: *To them, you're not human. Get ready.*

Goddess raised her visor. She *was* human. She'd show them.

If the Driftlings cared, they didn't show it. If anything, the tension in their faces had increased.

One of them spoke. Goddess didn't understand the words, but her assault helmet translated well enough: "Take one more step toward us and our younglings, and you will not leave this room breathing, alien soldier."

Goddess thought of the pyre-nukes. She motioned with her hand. "Get out of here as fast as you can."

The Driftling defenders tensed. One of them began to move her whip in

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a circular motion, the slowing length of it forming a luminescent, torqued tornado.

They hadn't understood. The assault helmet translation didn't work in reverse. Ky Lin looked frustrated.

There was no reason to be here. It would be bad if she stayed—no matter what her reason. Goddess stepped back, all the way out of the room, closing the door in front of her. Her last image of the Driftlings was one of the children running up to one of the women, wrapping its chubby arms around her leg, rubbing a cheek against the outside of the woman's thigh.

Goddess found herself disturbed. She hadn't expected any of that. Children and their mothers. They certainly weren't defenseless. And now, if they didn't leave, they were going to die when the pyre-nukes turned this encampment into a lake of flame. She had hoped that most of the Driftlings would just abandon the encampment. Why had the Species targeted this place? What purpose did it serve? Was this the mandate of the Free States, or just a tactical decision by the Species.

Goddess shook these ponderings from her head. Back to the task in front of her. Find her trooplings. Get out of here. Burn the camp.

Only, maybe that last one wasn't going to happen. She wasn't sure. She alone had the activation sequence for the pyre-nukes. When it came time, maybe something would go wrong. Maybe the activation sequence wouldn't work. Maybe the pyre-nukes were faulty.

Nothing was guaranteed with technology. Right?

Goddess moved to the second level. The moment she stepped onto the floor, Death-nuke's matrix-husk winked on.

Goddess exhaled, wiping her forehead. "Goddess to Death-nuke. Give me a coordinate. You know where the others are?"

"Death-nuke here. Coordinate uploaded. Got it? Fluffy's with me."

"I don't scan her matrix-husk."

"Her data sphere took a hit. Completely dissolved. She jacked out just in time. We cleared the level though."

Goddess lowered her visor. Death-nuke was on this level. "I scan your coordinate. I'm inbound."

A couple of Driftlings lay against one wall. They didn't look like they were breathing. Blood was trailing out onto the floor, soaking into the material.

Two doors down and on the right. Goddess moved through. The room was dimly lit. In here, only a solitary candle lit the room. It was sitting in the center of the room on a small circular disc. Around the room, indistinct lumps had been pushed aside, streaking the floor with some dark liquid.

In the corner was Death-nuke, her back to the rest of the room.

“Are you hurt?” Goddess asked, raising her visor.

“Me?” Death-nuke asked, not turning around. “No...I’m fine.”

“Where’s Fluffy? I thought she was—”

“She’s right here. We were just...talking.” Death-nuke shifted her feet. Oh, Fluffy had been standing in front of her. *What had they—?* Death-nuke swung her arm around, pulling Fluffy around. Fluffy spun, her assault helmet falling off, skittering across the floor. Her body twisted around—almost android-like—coming about to face Goddess. Fluffy’s eyes were wide, but the blankness in them caught Goddess off guard. Fluffy was moving her mouth; nothing was coming out. Her arms were limp at her side, and her knees were trembling.

Goddess stepped forward. “What are you—?”

Ky Lin was shouting something, trying to break through. Was he yelling at Goddess or Fluffy? Confused, Goddess couldn’t tell.

Fluffy stumbled, but managed to stay upright.

Goddess was about to lower her visor, but

Oh.

Fluffy.

Was.

Wounded.

Bad.

Blood poured from Fluffy’s throat in a waterfall.

Then, she did go down, leaking a river.

Goddess moved to catch Fluffy, but Death-nuke was turning around, a dripping pulse dagger in her hand.

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WITHIN

“I hated my mother for what she was,” Death-nuke said. “She was a keetcha in every sense of the word. Just a dirty, %@!#ing keetcha.”

Goddess’s mind reeled, the vision of Fluffy falling face-first onto the floor, landing with a dull thump against the taut floor material was strong and demanding in her mind’s eye.

Death-nuke turned sideways, as if she was about to pace. “My sister, she

says she doesn't remember our mother, but I don't believe her, not really. She's either %@!#ing lying, or she's blocking it out. I don't know which. I don't give a glitch, I guess. I just know how I feel now—and I how I felt when we had to leave Black Vale One. You know—” Death-nuke stopped suddenly, looking down at Fluffy, tilting her head at Goddess. “I don't think you saw this coming. Did you?”

“What have you done?” Goddess asked, kneeling down to Fluffy, but keeping one hand on the trigger of her DL2. Fluffy was face down in a growing pool of her own life fluid. The stain was expanding at an alarming rate. Goddess felt the side of Fluffy's neck. There was a pulse, but it was weak, without pressure.

Ky Lin bowed his head. He knew that, without Goddess's pack, there would be no cauterization sponges to stop Fluffy from bleeding to death.

“What have I done?” Death-nuke asked, tilting her chin up, as if she were actually pondering the question. “That's not the right question. The actual question you should've asked is: *What is Death-nuke going to do next?*”

“Give me your cauterization sponges,” Goddess said. “I can save her life.”

Death-nuke reached into her pack, tossed a sponge to Goddess. “Go ahead and try. I won't stop you.”

Goddess ripped the sponge from its package, and shoved it under Fluffy's neck. It was crude, but as long as Fluffy didn't choke on her own blood, it might save her. Goddess pushed her onto her side, holding the sponge against the long chasm that had been opened in the young girl's throat.

Quick check of cyberspace. It was just her and Death-nuke. Where were Exxy and She7?

“She's going to die,” Death-nuke said. “You know that don't you? You can't save her with one of those things. I made the wound deep and ragged—just like they taught us in Basic. Cut a %@!#ing wedge out of her like the manual says. She's not going to recover.”

“Why?!” Goddess screamed, watching Fluffy's eyes fading. How could she still be conscious. Fluffy was mouthing a word, but Goddess couldn't make it out.

Death-nuke laughed, ignoring Goddess's question. “Don't worry though, we had fun before I did it though. You know, we...*expanded our perimeters*. She

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gave me willingly what you would not. You wouldn't think there was enough time, but well, I was quick about my business. So was she, when it came down to it."

Goddess knew Death-nuke was lying. She *believed* she was lying. *She just had to be lying.*

"Hold on, Kera," Goddess said, watching in horror as the cauterization sponge turned red in her hand, overwhelmed with the flow of blood it was expected to put a stop to. "Transport is on its way."

Fluffy's eyes focused then, a grateful look in her eyes. She managed to move a shaky, bloody-fingered hand to Goddess's thigh. It was a weak, miniscule gesture, but it sent a pang of agony through Goddess. Oh, too much! This wasn't happening...all this suffering! All this death!

"Goddess to Species Control! A Zealot Has Gone Insane! Execute code is *Betrayed Talon!*"

"Species Control here. Maintain control of rogue trooping until transport arrives. There are armed soldiers on the transport. They will aid you."

"Hurry!"

Death-nuke stopped pacing and pulled something from her belt. It was one of the whip weapons that the Driftlings carried. "You know what this is?" A wire of light shot out the end of it.

Goddess didn't answer. Instead, she pulled the cauterization sponge from Fluffy's neck and squeezed it. Lukewarm blood coated her hand—her mind shot her the impression that she wasn't squeezing a sponge, but Fluffy's heart—flowing between her fingers, thin red streams pouring onto the floor, then strained through the material there. The sponge was completely red now. Goddess put it back on Fluffy's neck. Fluffy's eyes were closed now. Her breath was shallow.

"It's a Driftling weapon. I'm sure they have their own name for it, but everybody calls it a sever-whip. I'm told that they invented it. That's probably true. Only the Driftlings have really mastered its use. Somebody like me—I could never become as proficient as an actual Driftling could. Still, I have held one before..." With that, Death-nuke made a small movement with her wrist. The end of the sever-whip shot forward, snapping only a few centimeters from Goddess's face. There was a flash of light that Goddess's visor could have compensated for if it had been lowered. Goddess jerked her

head to the side out of pure reflex, barely registering what had just happened. It had been so sudden! The air seemed to burn and there was the smell of charred atmosphere. Death-nuke giggled, sending shivers up Goddess's spine; from Death-nuke's lips, those sounds had been unnatural. "I guess I remember how to use one of these things well enough. It's humorous, I think. The most potent betrayals come from within. Tell me, do you feel betrayed?"

"What do you want?" Goddess said. "Why are you doing this?"

"That's simple, Mother Keetcha. I'm getting paid to."

"Who's paying you?" Goddess asked, but in cyberspace, she ran a quick, unobtrusive scan of Death-nuke's matrix-husk. She was shielded. That would make things more difficult for what Goddess had in mind.

"Ah, well you see, I'm not supposed to let that sort of data out. Informing on my employer means I don't get paid. It also means I get %@!#ing dead when they find out." Death-nuke paused. The end of the sever-whip wavered in mid-air, almost touching Death-nuke's ankles. "But since I like you so much, what the %@!#...it's Takiyoma Corporation."

"Why?! Why do they care?!" The blood from Fluffy's neck wasn't flowing as fast any more. Goddess knew that the cauterization sponge hadn't been able to keep up; Fluffy was simply running out of blood.

"Hey, they have their reasons for making sure there are no clear winners in this little conflict the Free States have cooked up—not that they're siding with these Atharan glitches either though. They don't give a glitch about Driftlings. They told me I could kill as many as I was able to without raising any suspicions. My primary objective was the EUL forces though. My own %@!#ing Talon! Ah, now that's where the subterfuge came in. How could I make the deaths of my own Talon look accidental? Well, it wasn't %@!#ing easy. But you—I knew I wouldn't be able to keep you out of it. Not since I walked perimeter with you in Basic. You're too naïve for your own good. Now, look what you've stumbled into. If only you had taken me up on my offer before. It would've been %@!#ing beautiful—just like you, my little Mother Keetcha. How I could've given you pleasure if only you had relented."

"Don't call me that again, troopling." Goddess raised her DL2, standing up. She could feel her back creak as if it were bearing some massive weight. "You killed them didn't you? The others?"

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“If you’re talking about our %@!#ing former Sentinel-8 Glix Kill Thrill and her glitched underlings Quaze and Pulse, then...yes. It’s amazing really, how easy it is to modify a DL2 to overload. I was originally planning on lasing them all into pieces, but when Glix Kill Thrill asked for my DL2, I had an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.

“If you were referring to She7 and Exxy. No, they’re both still alive. Believe me or not—I haven’t seen them since Fluffy and I entered.”

Goddess had a panicked thought. In cyberspace, she ran a coordinate trace on the pyre-nukes. Goddess couldn’t get a reading. “Where did you place the pyre-nuke?”

Death-nuke wagged a finger, the sever-whip mirroring her movements. “Someplace fun.”

In cyberspace, Goddess ran a code sequence that had been given to her when she’d been officially promoted to Sentinel-8. It was a matrix-husk Burrower/Killer. There was one for each of the trooplings, specifically programmed for their individual husks.

The Burrower/Killer hung in front of Goddess, spider-like, legs—if that’s what they were—twitching in a frenzy. They were eager. Eager to scurry. Eager to burrow.

With a blink of one eye, Goddess loosed the Burrower/Killer.

In cyberspace, the entity leapt. It wrapped its spindly legs around Death-nuke’s matrix-husk and began to feed. Her matrix-husk went still.

However, in realspace, Death-nuke twitched, then choked. Her hand gnarled, dropping the sever-whip, which deactivated in midair and fell to the floor. She let out a strangled moan, low and filled with anger before doubling over, hands at her stomach. Then, she was reaching up toward the back of her neck, fingers clawing for the MIU cord.

Ky Lin didn’t think so.

Neither did Goddess, who launched herself forward, bringing the butt of her DL2 around. The weapons slammed into Death-nuke’s assault helmet instead of her chin like Goddess had been aiming for, but Death-nuke went tumbling sideways. As she did, Goddess flipped her DL2 over her shoulder and drew her pulse dagger.

It wasn’t going to happen like Death-nuke had planned. Goddess was going to make sure of that.

Death-nuke was on the floor, writhing. Goddess pushed her trembling

knees out of the way and got on top of her, straddling her across the midsection. Death-nuke's eyelids were blinking so fast, they were blurs in the dark against her eyes.

In cyberspace, Death-nuke's matrix-husk was almost eaten away.

Goddess took her pulse dagger and cut Death-nuke's MIU cord. Death-nuke's body arched, every muscle in her body contracting. The movement lifted Goddess from the floor, but she held on. Then, with a powerful exhalation, Death-nuke winked into unconsciousness and crashed to the floor.

Goddess breathed deep.

Now what are you gonna do? Ky Lin's expressions asked.

"I don't know," Goddess said. She wasn't entirely sure she was responding to Ky Lin—it was more of a general statement to the room, perhaps to the world.

In cyberspace, She7's matrix-husk appeared, an apparition taking form.

Realspace movement. Behind Goddess. At the doorway.

"Did she tell you?" the voice asked from behind her. "Did she tell you that our mother was a Driftling?"

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STRAY

She7 stepped into the room as Goddess lowered her visor and swiveled her head around. She ran a cyberspace probe against She7 and readied a second Burrower/Killer. Absently, she noticed that She7 wasn't wearing her assault helmet.

Outside, Goddess thought she could hear the whine of a transport. Or maybe that was just her imagination. The immediacy of the moment

demanded too much of her attention to be sure.

She7 closed the door with her foot, bringing her DL2 to bear on Goddess. “She was a Driftling, and the %@!#ing Black Vale hierarchy exiled our family for it. I don’t remember my mother, but I know what she was. I know what she did to our family—what she forced upon us. I don’t even know if she’s dead or alive. I don’t harbor the unchecked hatred that my sister does for the Atharans—I just don’t give a glitch about them. My mother was just one of this filthy race, but she spoke loudly for them.”

“Don’t do this,” Goddess said.

“Do what? Lay waste to this %@!#ing encampment? Burn these %@!#ing Driftling j’aa eaters like so much waste? This is what our employers are paying us to do. Destruction and devilry—that is our game, and I will play it to the apex of my abilities. I know we caught you with your throat open with our subterfuge, but don’t be disappointed in yourself—there was no way you could have predicted our...*betrayal*. It had no sense to it, and that’s what made it work so well. I don’t care about your %@!#ing Species, or the %@!#ing EUL. The %@!#ing Driftlings can burn, along with ever square kilometer of %@!#ing Athara. I just want to give back a little of what my keetcha of a mother gave to me. Well that...and to get paid, of course.”

“The Species won’t let you live after this,” Goddess said. “They won’t even bother with Deep Locker Six. They’ll perform a field execution. I’ve already contacted them.”

She7 laughed. “I’m not worried about that. In the end, only the living get to tell the tales. What happened here, once you’re terminal, will exist only as words on our lips. In short: We get to write the ending.”

“Not this time,” Goddess said, triggering the Burrower/Killer coded for She7.

In cyberspace, She7 deflected the Burrower/Killer with an upward swing of her forearms. The Burrower/Killer dissolved, eaten away by a Def/Off virus. How had She7—?

Didn’t matter.

In both the virtual and the real worlds, She7 cackled. It sounded as unnatural on her as the giggling had on Death-nuke. “And now, I cut you in half.” She7 squeezed the trigger on her DL2 and cut a diagonal across Goddess’s chest.

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Only Goddess wasn't there to be halved, having thrown herself to the side.

The green beam—a stray line of fire, thick as a finger this time—cut Death-nuke into two pieces.

DUEL

Death-nuke died quietly.

She7 had been shocked into silence, and even Goddess could only gape at the quick precision in which Death-nuke had been dispatched. The line of severing ran from the top of her left shoulder, down across her breastbone, slicing through the curvy meat of her right breast, then down to just above the opposite hip. The beam had continued from there, slicing off

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her hand in the middle of her forearm. That the beam had cut off her hand seemed to be a final affront to Death-nuke's body—an unnecessary wounding to a body that had already been damaged beyond repair.

Goddess continued to roll, flicking her DL2 to automatic. As she rolled, she felt the handle of the sever-whip under her. She grabbed it, hooking it to her belt. When she was against the wall, she pushed herself onto her feet. DL2 in one hand, activated pulse dagger in the other.

She7 was crying.

Goddess ran the code sequence to summon another Burrower/Killer.

“You killed my sister,” She7 said.

“No,” Goddess replied. “She was alive till you lased her.” Where the glitch was Exxy? Goddess didn't want to think about the possible explanations for his continued absence.

She7 shook her head. “No. That's just not true, Mother Sentinel.”

“Believe what you want.” Goddess set the Burrower/Killer loose and sprinted sideways, stitching a line of DL2 fire at She7's legs.

She7 was more alert than her tears indicated; she jumped straight up, avoiding the DL2 beams. When she landed, she brought a continuous beam to bear on Goddess. The beam tracked across the floor, searing a smooth line into the material, bathing the room in an eerie green flashing. The smell of burning synthetics began to fill the room.

Goddess kept moving, knowing it was her only chance. In cyberspace, the Burrower/Killer attached itself onto the left of She7's matrix husk. In both worlds, She7 stumbled. In cyberspace, Goddess dove at She7, feeling the collision of their matrix-husks. The collision sent them both spinning off the cyberscape and into the virtual air. Goddess was careful to keep her legs clear of the Burrower/Killer. In theory, it would not attack her—wasn't coded for her—but she didn't trust it. Those thin legs and dripping fangs were a nightmare to look upon, even though she knew it didn't exist in realspace. Still, what happened in cyberspace had direct effects on realspace. It was best not to tangle with code that was designed to devour other code.

At the same time, in realspace, Goddess changed her angle and ran for the door. Close-quarters combat with DL2s was as dangerous as it got. More maneuvering room was her desire. She had to jump over Fluffy's blood soaked form—eyes lifeless now—and Death-nuke's disunited corpse.

She7, resisting the effects of the Burrower/Killer's data-sucking assault,

pulled her DL2 around, leading Goddess, then firing off a beam, cutting backwards. Goddess launched her body, going prone in midair. She felt the heat of the DL2 beam flash underneath her, missing her by mere centimeters. Still in midair, Goddess grabbed a neuro-chill grenade with the two free fingers on the hand that held the pulse dagger. Curling her body under itself, she flipped the grenade to the floor.

Goddess hit the floor on her back, but she was out in the hall. Her leap had carried her out of the room. She was getting to her feet, noticing that the nozzle of her DL2 was half a meter shorter than it should be—She7's aim had been true—when the neuro-chill grenade exploded.

It was obvious from the shockwave that the grenade hadn't rolled as far as Goddess had hoped it would. The energy wave that hit her body had all the power of a charging eoa. Goddess slumped to the floor, her muscles surrendering to the disruption in her motor control. Her connection to cyberspace wavered and died.

Seconds later—or was it minutes?—Goddess opened her eyes. Her face muscles were twitching, along with—it felt like—every other muscle in her body.

Ky Lin told her to get up. Better get a handle on the situation. Better find out where She7 is. Find her, neutralize her. Then find Exxy. In that order.

Goddess could barely feel her arms. Were her hands still attached? Were there fingers and toes at the ends of her limbs? Could she move them? Was that her drool on the floor beneath her face? Was that her blood? Something was digging into her thigh. She recognized the feel of the length of the DL2. It was hot and felt like it was melting her 'flage onto her skin. Goddess pushed off of it with one shaky arm, rolling onto her back.

She7 was falling on her, pulse dagger trailing a glowing red tail.

Somehow, Goddess managed to get her knee up into She7's stomach. The kick was lacking in any real strength, but apparently, so was She7. Goddess's boot took the breath from her and sent her to the side. The pulse dagger dug a furrow across Goddess's stomach. She shouted in pain, but rolled to her feet. Keeping upright was going to be harder than she thought; it was taking all her concentration to keep the floor from rushing back up at her. She brought a hand to her stomach, feeling the wound there. It wasn't deep, but when she brought her hand out in front of her, it was spotted with blood. Partially congealed by the effects of the pulse dagger, the blood took

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on a brackish, spongy consistency. It clung to her skin, and wouldn't be wiped away on her 'flage.

"I can't really think straight," She7 said. "That neuro-chill almost did the job for you, Mother Sentinel. I was just out of maximum effect range. Still, you did manage to neutralize my %@!#ing DL2. I'm not sure how long we were out. How about you?"

Goddess found she was still holding her pulse dagger.

Ky Lin was surprised she hadn't stabbed herself in the heart with it when the neuro-chill had gone off.

Goddess was too. "Where's Exxy?"

"Well, she's not dead, if that's what you're asking," She7 shrugged. "At least, I didn't kill her...yet. As long as the Driftlings haven't got her, she's probably wandering around, lost and talking to herself. Really, I don't know what you see in her. You know, my sister was much more tasty than her. You made a mistake by rebuffing her that night in Basic. I should've warned you when we were walking perimeter. I knew she was going to proposition you. I should have warned you against resisting."

"There are many things that you and your sister should have done differently." Goddess jacked back into cyberspace. She was alone. She7 had unplugged herself; Goddess could see her MIU cord hanging from her data sphere.

"I won't deny that."

Ky Lin was glaring at her. That was enough of that!

Goddess agreed. She swung her whole body around, her arms extended, the room twirling around her. When she came back around, she released the pulse dagger. It flew straight and deadly. She7 was unable to dodge, and the pulse dagger sunk deep, right through her breastbone. She7 staggered backward, but didn't scream out. Her body shook and lurched toward the end of the hallway, where the open door led to the stairwell. She slammed into the wall there, right next to the doorway, clutching her shoulder. Her breath was coming in short, forced bursts, but she was barely making a sound. The pulse dagger had to be tearing at her insides, imbedded in her like it was. How was she staying on her feet? How was she holding all that pain inside?

Goddess moved forward, yanking a tie wire from her belt.

In cyberspace, Exxy appeared.

In realspace, Exxy appeared.

Goddess registered his presence in the doorway.

“Goddess!” Exxy said, speaking like his tongue was on fire. “The pyre-nuke is placed. Let’s get the others and get outbound! You know where they are? She7 and I got separated, and my cyberspace connection has been %@!#ing sporadic at best. Oh my Goddess, it’s good to see that body of yours. I just want to—”

Goddess reached out, horrified. *“No! Exxy! Watch—!”*

She7 stepped behind Exxy and slid a pulse dagger against his neck.

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GUT

Exy froze. “What’s going on? She7, is that you?”

“Exxy, I never did like your mouth,” She7 said. “I just might cut it off.”

“Don’t move,” Goddess said, not knowing if she were talking to She7 or Exxy.

“Emily, what’s happening?” Exxy asked in cyberspace.

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Goddess brought her matrix-husk close to Exxy's. She touchspoke. *Death-nuke. She7. Betrayers. Murdered. Fluffy. Zilch. Helix. Killed. By. Driftlings.*

Just? You? Me?

Yes.

Glitch.

She7. Not. Jacked. Cant. Get. Her.

Neuro-chill. Us. Both.

She7. Too. Fast. She'd. Cut. Throat.

Zero. Delay.

No. Guarantee. She. Could. Wake. First.

I'll. Use. Mine.

No. Too. Close.

I. Love. You. Emily. Know. That.

No! That's! An! Order! Troopling!

She7 was laughing. "Now, aren't we in a situation here? I'd say it was a standoff, but I have the advantage."

In cyberspace, Goddess pleaded, grabbing onto Exxy's matrix-husk. *Do. Not. Do. This.*

Before. I. Do. Tell. Me. Back.

Goddess shook Exxy's matrix-husk, angry, frantic, and afraid. *Do! Not! %@!#ing! Do! This! Troopling! I! %@!#ing! Love! You! Too! %@!#ing! Much! To! Lose! You!*

Thank. You. Emily. My. Whistlewisp.

EXXY!

He slid his hand ever-so-slowly along his belt. His fingers activated the neuro-chill while it was still attached. There was a small whine. He hadn't set it properly; it wasn't a zero delay. Something had gone wrong.

She7's eyes widened at the sound of the neuro-chill activation, but her hand snaked around to Exxy's midsection. Goddess realized that She7 was holding Goddess's pulse dagger, having pulled it from her breastbone while leaning against the wall.

She7 hesitated only a second before plunging the pulse dagger into Exxy's gut, then ripped upward through his chest.

WETWORK

She7 let the pulse dagger remain embedded in Exxy's body as he fell to the ground, but he managed to get a hand on it and pull it out, letting it deactivate and bounce away. When he hit, he rolled onto his back. She7 reached down and deactivated the neuro-chill grenade.

Goddess screamed, and threw herself at She7.

Tears sprang into her eyes, blinding her as if She7 herself had summoned

them into existence. Goddess didn't notice; she was beyond seeing at that point—this new agony which gushed through her was feeding a tsunami of adrenaline. As she ran, her muscles quivered, her fingers shaking, one hand forming a fist, the other a lethal pose taught to her during Basic.

A glowing form flashed toward her. She7's pulse dagger. Goddess moved her head out of the way, turning her shoulder to the side. She7 had her other hand up to ward off Goddess's charge, but Goddess batted it away and drove a fist into her stomach, bringing her knee up at the same time into her crotch. She7 doubled over as Goddess's fist sunk in, but rotated her thighs, deflecting Goddess's knee. She reached around Goddess's neck and grabbed her ear. Goddess was forced to spin back and away out of She7's reach to avoid having her ear ripped off. She took several steps back, dodging here-and-there swipes with the pulse dagger. Through the visor, the pulse dagger drew wide slashes in the air. She7 faltered, her hand going to her wound.

Goddess took the opportunity to wipe tears from her eyes. Exxy was slumped there.

Dead.

No...no he wasn't. Just wounded, that's all.

"Who the glitch gets their Talon-5 brand on their %@!#ing eyelid?" She7 asked. "What were you thinking?"

"I'm going to kill you," Goddess said, shocked by the sound of the words on her lips. Had she really said that?

Ky Lin nodded, but he didn't look like he liked what she had said.

Yeah, and it was scary how much she had *meant it...looking at Exxy there, bleeding, breathing shallow.*

"Only one of us is dying today, Mother Sentinel. Why don't you come over here so we can figure out which one of us it is?"

Exxy's body was only a couple of meters away. Goddess's face was hidden behind the assault helmet's visor, so she risked a look. His pulse dagger was sheathed on his belt. She7 was closer, but if she could get to it...

"The transport's almost here," Goddess said. "Better come get me now."

"Good idea," She7 said as she strode forward, stepping over Exxy's body.

Exxy's hand shot out, grabbing onto She7's ankle. It wasn't much, but it was enough to send her to the floor. She landed on her shoulder, close to where Goddess's pulse dagger had punctured her. This time she did let loose

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with a cry of pain.

Then, something was spinning across the floor at Goddess. It was Exxy's pulse dagger. How had he—?

Didn't matter, now did it?

Goddess scooped it up, activated it, and charged forward. A second later she had set her legs wide and was bringing the pulse dagger down toward She7's heart. She7—though clearly in a great amount of pain—spun laterally, forcing Goddess to pull her thrust up short. She7 was still on her back, spinning, her arm flashing back around, her pulse dagger slicing toward Goddess's feet. Goddess jumped over She7, landing a few feet away, but out of reach.

She7's spun to her feet, holding the dagger in a reverse position, the blade extending back toward her elbow.

Goddess blinked. They hadn't been taught this form of combat. They'd been given extensive pulse dagger training, but they hadn't had time to learn multiple styles of close-quarters pulse blade fighting. It was obvious that She7 knew something that Goddess didn't.

"My dagger lusts to be up inside you," She7 said. "I like giving it what it wants. Come here. I'll let you feel what it's like to be caressed."

"No thanks, I'm into men," Goddess said, straining to hear the sounds of the transport. Had what she heard before just been her imagination after all? The skin at her stomach burned. The flage there was stained with blood from the long cut. Every time she moved or shifted her body, it felt like she was lengthening the wound, pulling the skin apart just a little bit further.

"I don't really give a glitch," She7 spat. "My dagger will dance within you." She7 lunged, swinging her pulse dagger in a horizontal swipe.

Goddess brought her own pulse dagger up to ward off the attack. The glowing blades met and rebounded off each other. Brilliant sparks exploded into existence, showering them both in a ball of light. Goddess's visor compensated for the sudden change in light level, but She7 hadn't closed her eyes in time and was forced to take a couple of steps back, out of Goddess's reach.

Did she think that was going to work?

Goddess pressed her attack, rage fueling her with an intensity she hadn't felt before, except maybe for a few seconds back in the meditation sanctuary with Exxy—and really, that had been a different type of intensity.

She7 was swinging her pulse dagger blindly, so Goddess went in to one side, and low. Her dagger took hold of a chunk of She7's thigh and bit deep. A lump of flesh and 'flage disappeared into the darkness. She7 wailed, kicking that same leg out. Goddess, already on her knees, couldn't move out of the way in time, and She7's boot clipped the side of her assault helmet and her chin. Goddess tumbled to the side, feeling like the assault helmet had just been driven into her jaw. She tasted blood in her mouth. It was warm and metallic. Her teeth had dug into the side of her cheek. Blood ran out of her mouth; she could feel it—a warm streak on her chin, probably dripping. She spat a mouthful of blood and saliva, then she was crawling backward to avoid a lurching advanced by She7.

"You glitch!" She7 screamed. *"You keetcha! You vootch! You witch! You cut me!"* Goddess, beyond responding, pushed herself to her feet.

She7 was unsteady now, her outer thigh a wall of descending crimson. Every step she took, the flow of blood increased, pulsing out with renewed vigor. Her whole body leaned to one side. She grinned, flipped the pulse dagger around with still-nimble fingers so that the blade was pointed forward. Then, she thrust the blade forward. Goddess brought her pulse dagger across, deflecting the thrust and bathing the room in fire again. The energy sparks bit at her exposed skin, burning her 'flage and heating the air between them. Goddess swung around, bringing her foot up and out. She7 ducked under Goddess's foot and stabbed her pulse dagger forward, right at Goddess's crotch.

Goddess, catching She7's intent out of the corner of her eye, saved herself from a violent dagger-rape only by letting herself fall onto her stomach. The blade of the dagger slid down the length of her leg, gouging her kneecap and digging through the front of her boot, passing right between her big toe and the one next to it. The blade hadn't cut her, but the side of the pulse dagger scraping between her toes burned with a fierceness that had her whole leg twitching in pain and trying to go numb at the same time. She rolled to her side, wanting to clutch the top of her thigh, as if she could tourniquet off the pain at that point.

She7 was still on her feet, and close, bringing the dagger down again, striving to drive it into Goddess's other leg. The pulse dagger seemed to be glowing brighter. Goddess imagined that the weapon was feeding off the blood it had tasted. It liked blood, and it wanted more. It was getting

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stronger. Could that really be true?

Ky Lin was shouting at her now. *Get back! Get up!*

She got back.

She got up.

Somehow, she did those without getting wounded or killed. Was somebody watching out for her, or was it skill? Luck?

She7 growled, panting, her hands shaking from the loss of blood. There was something animalistic about her now. She reminded Goddess of some feral beast she couldn't recall the name of in that instant—a creature of base thoughts and little intelligence. She7 was in that state, focused on a single task of violence and retribution.

Goddess was in a similar state, but she retained her mind. Ky Lin was there too, helping in his own unique way.

She7 made her move.

Goddess made hers.

Both of them attacked; neither made a move to parry the other's blade. The room filled with fire as the pulse daggers kissed once again.

Goddess stared at She7's face as the fire faded, taking the heat of the room with it. There was a chilled madness there. And a sense of triumph. Why? She hadn't won! Not yet!

Wait.

Oh.

What was this...*hurt?*

Goddess looked down, realizing that the pain—if *pain* was a strong enough word for the supernova that was searing a hole in her—above her hip was coming from the pulse dagger buried to its hilt there. She7's hand still held firm onto the handle, but she wasn't moving it around to inflict additional damage for some reason.

"Raise your visor," She7 rasped. "Let me see your eyes."

Ky Lin shook his head, and told Goddess what to do. She nodded

"To hell with you, Kija," Goddess said, yanking her pulse dagger upward.

The blade sliced through She7's wrist, cutting it off. The motion carried a trail of blood into the air with it—the wound not fully cauterized. She7 moved back, her other hand clawing at her spurting forearm, a mixture of shock and pain playing at her face. She fell to one knee, her arm pumping a stream out onto the floor.

Goddess looked down and saw that She7's hand was still gripping the pulse dagger in her body. With an amazing measure of calmness, she put her fingers around She7's twitching and pulled. The cold fire that burned through her as she slid the glowing blade from her body almost took her from her feet. The room seemed to be dimmer now, and her fingers...were they numb? She couldn't feel them for a moment. Her toes—they were gone too. There was a beeping. An alarm. Far away? Was it the transport? Was it the Species come to take her and Exxy away from this glitched mission? But no, the alarm was closer than that. Oh, it was coming from her assault helmet. How could she have missed that?

In that moment, she barely had enough cognizance left to quiet the alarm. She didn't note the reason, simply trying to stay on her feet as the tip of She7's pulse dagger slipped from her side. A glob of blood welled there for a second before bursting and running down her hip. Somehow, she managed to deactivate the pulse dagger. She grabbed the cool blade and held it vertical. She7's hand couldn't maintain its grip, and it fell to the floor, still twitching, taking a couple of bounces when it landed.

Goddess looked up, saw She7 rushing her, realized she couldn't do anything about it, and took the hit. She7's fist caught her right between her breasts. Goddess flew down onto her back, coughing, spraying red spittle-mist, dropping the pulse daggers, barely getting her hands out in time to cushion her fall, then barely getting them back up to catch She7's body which fell on top of her. She managed to get a hand each on She7's arms. She7's stump of an arm poured a thin stream of blood onto Goddess's face and mouth.

To Ky Lin's dismay, Goddess drank it down, warm and thick. What was she doing?

"You like how I %@!#ing taste?" She7 asked, trying to shove a knee between Goddess's legs. "Good, 'cause when I'm done with you, I'm going to eat your %@!#ing heart right out of your %@!#ing chest."

Goddess pushed She7 back up, letting go of She7's good arm, then taking two fingers and shoving them into the end of She7's amputation. In all that squishy flesh there were small pieces of bone. She7 let loose with a primal scream and recoiled. Goddess threw her to the side, and rolled, grabbing for the pulse daggers. The movement tore at her wounds—she imagined she could hear the ripping skin and muscle—and the world slipped

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dangerously close to the edge of complete darkness. She came to a stop on her stomach, where she allowed herself a couple of weak inhales to see if she could hold off her approaching unconscious state. It was a cloud lusting to envelop her, but she willed it away, beat it back with raw stubbornness, anger, and an unwillingness to fade before She7's throat was in her hands, crushed and useless.

Her first attempt to push herself up on her hands failed, her head slamming back down to the floor. She exhaled blood and bile for a few seconds, wondering if She7 was behind her, above her, about to kick her in the back. No attack came, so she tried again. This time she was able to get her chest off the floor, then sliding back, she was able to hold herself up on all fours. Off to one side, she could see She7 laying on her back, moaning, clutching her ruined arm. She was lying in a thickening puddle of blood, and she was moving less and less.

Grabbing the pulse daggers from the floor, Goddess stood, but found that she was unable to bend the knee which had been cut by the pulse dagger. She hobbled closer to She7, wincing at pain and at the tears which ran out of her eyes. Her fingers moved over the pulse dagger handles, and the blades glowed brighter, spreading their pale light against the walls.

She7 was barely conscious. The wound in her breastbone had been widened, and now her entire torso was streaked with blood. Her arm was spitting out red drops as it were expelling poison. Her breath came in short gasps, and her eyes were beginning to roll up into the back of her head.

Goddess stood over her for a moment, wondering if the rage inside her would die down at the sight of She7's condition. She found that it didn't. For her, right then, it wasn't enough. She put one foot on either side of She7's body, she sat down, She7's stomach between her thighs. Her knee complained, but she swallowed the pain.

"You...hurt...me," She7 said, her voice not much more than a squeak. "It's too...much. Hurts...bad...need help."

Goddess shook her head. "The transport is coming, but not for you." She brought the pulse daggers forward, holding them inches from She7's neck.

"Mother Sentinel...*please don't*," She7 said. She coughed. "Look...at me."

Goddess did. There may have been a tiny prick—something that poked at her briefly, through the rage, through the cloud of pain—that was akin to

sympathy, but it was small, just a tiny speck of dust in a twirling storm. It was gone. Had Goddess even noticed?

“I feel nothing for you,” Goddess said, raising her visor. She wanted to *see*.

She7’s eyes went wide. “*D-Don’t...do this...please Mother—*”

Goddess plunged one pulse dagger in, twisted it. “You don’t have the right to call me that.”

She7 smiled then—as if Goddess had just made her extremely happy. As if she knew something. As if she had a secret and knew that it was dying with her.

Goddess didn’t give a %@!#ing glitch.

The other pulse dagger went into the side of She7’s head. Goddess slid it in with a measured slowness, watching the life in She7’s eyes tremble, then wither and fade. Goddess leaned into She7’s dead face and said, “You’ll never call me that again.” She rolled off, leaving the pulse daggers to melt at She7’s skin and muscle.

With the black cloud of unconsciousness closing in on her, she crawled over to where Exxy was on his side, coughing up sprays of blood into his cupped hands.

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FLUTTER

He was close now. It wouldn't be long.

Exxy knew it.

Ky Lin knew it.

Goddess knew it.

Goddess cried.

“Don't cry,” Exxy said, his voice thick with liquid. His chest was leaking

air and blood in a lethal mixture. “Suppress...it. I hate it...when I make you cry. I’ve...done that...too much.”

Goddess wept more at that. Exxy’s words were soft and weak. The thought that he was dying—about to leave her—was unthinkable. How had it come to this? How could things have gone so wrong? Her Talon was destroyed, its members lying in ruins all around her. They had been killed by the enemy. They had been killed by each other. They had been killed by *her*. Her emotions hurt her as much as her physical wounds did.

And now, she cradled Exxy in an awkward embrace. Their blood mixed between them—more Exxy’s than hers. She lay sideways, bringing his body against hers where they could both breathe easier. There was pain, but it was lessened by this position. Exxy’s head rested against her breast, his hand against her cheek, fingers fluttering, held there by her hand. She didn’t let her gaze drift from his, but the quantity of tears dripping from her eyes made it hard for her to see him clearly. She wiped them away, but there were always more to take their place.

“I don’t want you to leave me,” Goddess said, touching Exxy’s cheek with a tear-glistened finger. “I need you too much.”

“I need you too...” Exxy coughed, a trickle of blood seeping from the corner of his mouth. “...sorry I was...stupid...got hurt...”

“No nonono! It was me—my responsibility.”

Exxy managed a smile. “...not much...to say at the...end. Is there? Except...regrets. I-I...don’t want regrets between...us.”

Goddess shut her eyes, overwhelmed, unable to speak, her throat just an aching conduit of flesh.

“Know this,” Exxy said. He touchspoke the words: *I. Love. You.* Then finished by saying, “Emily.”

Goddess could only press her lips to his cheek and mouth the words back against his skin. No sound would come out of her, but when she was done, she could feel Exxy’s cheek tighten in a smile.

“Hold me,” Exxy said. “Kiss me and hold me until it’s over.”

Bringing her lips down to his and holding him tighter than she should have, she did just that.

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LATE

Laying there, opening her eyes...*how long had it been?*...Exxy's dead body still warm, still bleeding against her, Goddess realized that she had forgotten one thing.

The pyre-nukes.

She didn't remember jacking out of cyberspace, but she was out, so she thought herself back in. When the connection reestablished, it hurt. She

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couldn't help but wince, her fingers tightening around Exxy. Her cyberspace eyes opened, and the virtual world came into focus.

Now, where were those pyre-nukes?

Not good. Ky Lin shook his head, worried. If she couldn't see them in cyberspace, then she couldn't interact with them—make sure they weren't going to perform their original duty. They weren't going to trigger of their own accord, but she couldn't permanently disabled them without some sort of contact, whether it be real or virtual.

Goddess raised her head. How long had she been unconscious? Setting Exxy's head on the floor, Goddess managed to hold back more tears as she struggled to sit up. Then, standing up was what had her back down, kneeling, removing her assault helmet, and spitting pink drool strands. She wiped her chin, disgusted at the pain, disgusted by her weakness. The sight of Exxy's motionless body loosed her tears, and she gave into the urge. She sobbed, great convulsions coursing through her whole body. She let her forehead touch the floor, not caring that it was wet with her own lifeblood-saliva mixture. She stayed like that for some time, letting her body do whatever it wanted, letting her pain run wild, letting her emotions drain out. When, after awhile, she was done, she just concentrated on breathing, feeling that she had been...*used up*, as if she were a resource, and that the last of her had just been consumed.

Ky Lin had been patient. He had let her grieve—if that's what it was she was doing—but now that she had finished, he has sending her a look. It said: *Get up. Get those pyre-nukes disabled. If that's what you're going to do. Or, you can complete your original mission and burn this place. Your choice. Just get up and get moving. None of your trooplings would've wanted you like this, a sobbing youngling. I know you cared for him. In the end, even more than you did for me. That's okay. That's fine. It's what I wanted for you all along, anyway. But you owe it to him, and the others, to save yourself.*

"I can't just leave him here," Goddess said out loud.

You cannot save their bodies if you cannot save your own. The Driftlings have not left this place. If that Species transport does not come, they will be back. You would not survive another encounter with them.

Ky Lin was right. She would have to escape first. Then, she would come back and retrieve the bodies of her trooplings. It was the only way.

Goddess got to her feet, her hands slipping as she grabbed for her assault

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helmet, which went spinning. She bent back down, several vertebrae popping, snagged the helmet and put it back on her head.

The helmet was talking to her.

“...port to Talon-5 Sentinel-8. Are you there?”

The transport? Could it be?

“Goddess to Species transport. I’m here.”

“Glad to hear it. We had to triple-boost the signal to get you. We have confirmed coordinates on two of your trooplings—readings indicate they’re both terminal—but we don’t have a definite lock on you or the rest of your Talon. Can you give us your coordinate?”

“I’m in the central dome. All the other trooplings are near my location.”

“Status on those trooplings?”

“All terminal.”

A pause before: “We scan that. There’s minimal Atharan movement within the encampment, and we’ve got Talon-3 onboard to deal with any threats. Sorry we’re late, but we got here as fast as we could. Inbound in one.”

Goddess breathed deep, limping toward the doorway, then turning back. Bringing her visor back down, she immediately saw the energy signature of the two activated pulse daggers, which were still embedded in She7’s body. Goddess walked closer. When she knelt down to pull the pulse daggers out, she noticed that She7’s head now resembled a deflated balloon, her features indistinct and run-together. The pulse dagger had melted her head from the inside, causing her brain matter to liquefy and leak out her ear, her nose, and her eye socket. Her eyeballs were gone; Goddess couldn’t identify them in the coagulated soup that had formed. When Goddess pulled the pulse dagger free, it dripped a sickish goop. She deactivated the pulse dagger, did the same to the other, put them on her belt, and limped back to the doorway, trying not to think about the fact that she was leaving Exxy’s body to cool casually on the floor.

“Goddess to Species transport. We placed two pyre-nukes. Can you get a status and coordinate on them? There’s something preventing me from seeing them.”

“Scanning.”

Ky Lin wanted her to hurry.

“We got them,” the voice in Goddess’s helmet said. “They’re right—oh

“%@!#ing glitch!”

“What is it?” Goddess asked, but she had a feeling she already knew what the problem was. She had a feeling that—

“They’re activated.”

That was impossible.

“Ah, glitch, they’re on a countdown.”

That was impossible too. Unless...

Ky Lin wanted her to hurry *faster*. He sent her a picture. The image which appeared filled the view of her mind’s eye and sent a bolt of terror into her heart. The image was She7’s smiling face only a second before she had died, smiling as if...

Goddess moved faster, taking the stairs two at a time now. It hurt, and tears sprang into her eyes, but she gritted her teeth against the pain. “How long do we have?” Goddess asked.

“Two.”

That was not going to be enough time.

“I’m sorry, Goddess, we’re going to have to pull back to a minimum safe distance.”

“No! I can give you the deactivation sequence!” Goddess said, knowing that it was futile. She was down to level two now.

“We already downloaded the codes and sequence from Species Command and transmitted them to the pyre-nukes. They didn’t work.”

If that were true, then there wasn’t anything Goddess herself could do to stop the pyre-nukes from detonating. Somehow, She7 and Death-nuke had reprogrammed them.

This mission had been glitched, right from the beginning.

“Don’t leave me here!” Goddess shouted. “I’m almost there.”

“Negative, Goddess. There’s nothing we can do for you and still clear the blast radius of the pyre-nuke.”

“*You %@!#ing piece of Species j’aa!*” Goddess raged, jumping down the last few steps onto level one. Her legs gave out and she went to the ground, scraping her knees and her hands, almost braining herself on the wall at the side of the stairwell. The knee that had been cut by She7’s pulse dagger sent her a warning that the wound there had just been worsened.

Swearing to herself and to Ky Lin, unconsciousness just a moment away, Goddess let out a sob of pain and frustration. A thought occurred to her.

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Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, after all. What if she just didn't get up? Let herself slump right there, and wait for the explosion. The pyre-nukes would detonate, tearing the encampment apart with two out-of-control chain reactions. It would be the heat, not the force, that would kill her. Everything would burn. The encampment. The Atharans. Her trooplings, good and evil. It wouldn't be so bad would it? In the beginning, when she had first joined the Species, she had wanted out bad enough, suicide hadn't been far from her mind. Now, at the end, was it not still an option? It wasn't even suicide—not technically since it was unlikely she could escape the blast anyway. So really, it wouldn't be her fault, would it? Here it was, the way to get out of it all. She could escape the Species, her physical pain, and her emotional pain at the death of Exxy and the others. This was the easy way. Wasn't it? It wasn't even suicide.

Only, it was.

Suicide wasn't about killing herself. It was about *giving up*.

Did she want to give up? After all she'd been through, was *giving up* still an option?

Ky Lin shook his head.

Exxy shook his head.

At the image of Exxy in her mind—still in female guise—Goddess was shocked enough that her tears stopped like they had been cut off at the source. She opened her eyes and raised her head, but she could still see them both, ghost-like, as if they were simply cyberspace entities manifesting in her vision while she operated in both worlds. Both Ky Lin and Exxy were saying something to her, mouths moving in unison:

Get!

The!

Glitch!

Up!

Now!

Emily!

Goddess got up, and ran, faster than she thought her wounded body was capable of. There was pain, sure there was, but it was far off now, like it was happening to somebody else, in some other place.

As she exited the central dome, she saw the Species transport at the edge of the encampment, moving away.

Goddess picked a direction and ran, moving between the domes, catching a glimpse of a Driftling—or what she thought may have been one—scurrying every few seconds. If they were Driftlings she was seeing, none of them moved to confront her. Goddess wondered if those three Driftlings and their younglings had evacuated the encampment. Were they far enough away? Would they be safe when finally, fire filled the sky?

Probably not.

She had entered a familiar section of the encampment, but she couldn't think of why it seemed that way. Had she really been here before, or was her mind just coming up with ways to distract her from saving herself. Was there still a part of her that wanted to let it all end right here?

She was running blind, and the only indication that she hadn't run fast enough was a high-pitched whine that cut through air like a sharpened blade. Following the whine, there was a low-frequency rumble that shook everything. Goddess, knowing that it was useless to run anymore, stopped and turned.

At the center of the encampment, there was a sudden flash of orange light. From the flash came a tight pillar of flame which shot a thousand meters into the sky. The heat from it was hot against Goddess skin, but she knew that the real heat was yet to come. Her visor compensated for the light increase, so she took her assault helmet off. She stared at the glowing needle of fire, and waited.

There was movement off to one side. Something was lurching toward Goddess. Unwittingly, she turned her gaze toward the something, seeing instantly that it wasn't a something, but a *someone*.

Implausible as it was, that someone was Zilch.

Her arm was cradled at her midsection, holding a crumpled length of material against her body. She walked as if it was taking all her strength just to remain hunched, each footstep a chance to end up back in the dirt.

Goddess, as much as she wanted to reach out to Zilch, was frozen where she was. She knew they were both doomed. Reaching out to Zilch carried little comfort.

Zilch turned, momentarily looking up at the pillar of fire that was coming from the central dome before hobbling the rest of the way over to Goddess. When she was only a couple of steps away, the world went white and cold, heat sucked out of the world in an instant.

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Goddess, who instinctively turned back to watch the pyre-nuke complete the final phase of its detonation, didn't see Zilch unfold her body and take an impossibly quick run at her. Goddess was thrown sideways, Zilch landing on top of her, just as the pillar of fire collapsed on itself, sending an expanding bubble of flame through the entire encampment.

Goddess could only look into her dying eyes as she said the last words Goddess would hear from her: "There's not...enough absolution for me, but this...counts for something. Doesn't it?"

Goddess nodded, and then could only try to cling to Zilch's body as they were lifted free of the ground and tossed. The world became heat and fire, and Zilch was torn free, ripped into the endless inferno.

Strangely, or perhaps not so much, a sense of great loneliness came over Goddess before she died.