

The end of our world is just the beginning.

THE LAST EXODUS

THE EARTHBOEN TRILOGY BOOK 1



PAUL TASSI

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For Doug, the pioneer
For Mike, the motivator

For Nat, the mentor
For Michelle, the believer
For Mom, the editor

The war was over. And everyone lost.

Lucas walked down what used to be an interstate in northern California. It was January, he thought, and a sweltering eighty-eight degrees. The landscape was barely recognizable, and when he finally made his way to the ocean, he found himself overlooking three miles of beach where a few feet used to be. Every time he returned to the shoreline he found the murky water harder and harder to see in the distance. It was probably only a matter of weeks before it was gone from view altogether.

The ice caps had melted, but no floods came with the oceans mostly evaporated. Judging by his surroundings, he guessed Antarctica might be the most comfortable place on Earth right now. A while ago he heard that if anyone ventured south of San Francisco, their skin would start to fricassee like steak on a grill. Bet the cannibals would love that.

He wouldn't survive the summer, he knew that. But all that was left was walking. *Only a few more miles to Portland*, he kept telling himself. *Only a few more miles to home*.

It hadn't rained in weeks, and the last time it did, if he had been caught outdoors he would have been permanently scarred. The downpour was so acidic it killed off all the remaining plant life that hadn't already been burned to a crisp in battle or the ensuing endless wildfires. It was unclear whether it had been them or mankind itself, but something had killed the sky, and the sun was now masked by a haze of red clouds that stretched all the way down to the horizon. Every crash of thunder hinted at another deadly storm, but true rain never came as the clouds seemed to know their work was done. The planet was dying, and would be a husk soon enough.

If he could ignore the weather, the worst part was the hunger. The constant, pervading, consuming hunger. Wildlife was nonexistent. The animals had been killed in the war or the storms or had been hunted to scarcity by survivors. The only reason they stayed alive for so long was that there were barely any survivors to hunt them. Lucas found sustenance by eating cockroaches, the one creature everyone predicted would survive the end of days. But now even they were scarce, as they realized they were a rare commodity in the current conditions and had burrowed underground, to return once the Earth and the rest of its former inhabitants had turned to dust.

Why hadn't he eaten man? He certainly had the opportunity. His high-end rifle gave him more than a fighting chance in most encounters, and he'd created plenty of dead bodies he could sample from. But he knew the end result. When a desperate soul started eating human flesh, it ceased to be human itself, and at that point why bother living at all?

Outside of cannibals, he occasionally came across one of *them*. Staggering around, wondering where all his brethren had gone and how they had the audacity to leave him behind. Power armor cracked and disintegrating, guns dangling, useless, having lost their charge long ago. They might have tried to fashion some sort of makeshift weapon out of scrap metal, or attempted to fire a human gun with their misshapen hands, but out of their element they were rather easy prey, as most of their spirits were broken as well. He saw them eating the dead in their desperate hunger, so he didn't see a problem eating them. The last one he took down fueled his journey for an entire month. He didn't feel a bit of remorse.

Their arrival often crossed his mind during the endless hours he trudged north. It had happened the way few predicted. The first ship showed up and the world went crazy. It just hung there like a painting

in the sky, silent and motionless, observing the world's reaction. People flooded to New York to see it and Manhattan came to a standstill, overstuffed with everyone clamoring to get a view. They eventually had to shut the bridges and tunnels down, and people had to be content with watching it from the shore or on television.

Many worshipped it, naturally. Why wouldn't they? Many had suspected this day would come—but not for millennia or eons, certainly not in their lifetime. It was like a dream.

The military was more cautious. They began pushing people out of the city and set up shop in Central Park. They launched jets and helicopters to try and communicate. In retrospect, it was something they shouldn't have been provoked. It would have been wiser to let it sit there in its mystery and simply hope it would choose to share its intentions.

But after a week of no response, the metal behemoth just sitting there without making a sound, the government sent a crew to investigate. It landed on top of the colossus and began sending live reports back down to the ground. Not much to see; it was metal, seemingly impenetrable. It wasn't until they broke out the plasma torches and started cutting that anything happened. The feed went black. All communications went dark. There was a video on the Internet purported to be the last three seconds of the feed. Amidst bursts of static a door could be seen opening, and in an instant a swooping figure grabbed whichever head the camera was attached to.

The military scrambled. Not just America's fighting forces, but the world's. Already on high alert, they now deemed the thing hostile and were preparing to react accordingly.

But that's what it wanted. It was testing the planet, seeing what kind of firepower it had, judging its behavior. By now the rest of its kind had gotten the message that life had been found. And then they showed up, guns blazing.

The war was less one-sided than many would figure. They had no impenetrable shields, no molecular evaporating ray guns. They were tough to kill, but killable. The problem was there were just too many. The firefight raged for months, with no clear sign of what the end goal was other than destruction. Someone said they saw them scooping up civilians. Another saw one with a massive hose dropped in the ocean. Still more said they had ships with giant laser drills touching down and blasting their way into the ground.

At first it seemed like Earth was winning. Though humanity's forces suffered heavy losses, the alien ships seemed to be going down with enough firepower. But for every one that was killed, two would show up from the stars in its place, and the ships grew bigger as the invaders realized they needed more reinforcements than anticipated.

As the ships became more massive, Earth started throwing nukes. It worked, most of the time, but they started playing hardball as well, launching detonating devices that would wipe entire cities off the map.

That's when the lights went off and the sky caught on fire. Most electronics were fried from the blast, and any reports of action in the field were all hearsay with no Internet or television or even radio transmissions in most places. The sky had always been full of smoke and fire since the war began, but something had changed, and whether it was from mankind's nukes or their own doomsday tech, no one knew.

And then as quickly as it started, it was over. There were no more bombs to be launched, and no more ships to launch them at. As the survivors picked themselves up from the ashes of their cities and towns, some saw a few lingering ships flying into the clouds, presumably to report back that whatever mission they'd come for, they'd failed. Or succeeded. It really was anyone's guess.

But there was no celebration when they left. The Earth itself was mortally wounded from the conflict and everyone knew it. What few of its inhabitants were still alive began scrambling for the scraps. How many years ago was that now? It was hard to keep track when each day was a constant, bleak nightmare. A journey across the continent shouldn't take this long, even on foot. But with no maps, no landmarks, no sun and no stars, it was easy to go in circles. As the years passed, there were far fewer survivors left, and far fewer scraps to fight over.

Originally there had been a group, a wretched collection of the lost that had been attracted to him by the rare sense of purpose he seemed to possess. But with not enough food to feed one most of the time, how was he supposed to provide for five, or six, or ten, or even two? Those kinds of things never ended well.

He had watched two sisters claw each other's eyes out over a bottle of spring water. He witnessed a college student swan dive off a freeway overpass rather than drag himself one more step in the heat. He still had the scar on his elbow from when Carl, the mechanic from Coral Springs, tried to bludgeon him while he slept and make off with his weapons and the remaining food. Fortunately he raised his arm in time to stop the crowbar, and his knife quickly countered, almost on instinct. Carl looked apologetic in his last breaths. The group soldiered on, but eventually disintegrated along with everything else.

The truth was, if you were still alive now, you'd killed plenty of people to stay that way. At first human instinct had been to band together to try and overcome the devastation. But once hope died, the descent into madness was swift, and only a fool would trust anyone they met.

Some made it perfectly clear to stay away. Lucas once came across a man wearing what had to have been a child's skull around his neck. He was almost naked, wearing only scraps, and he screamed and flailed about when he saw Lucas, like some sort of primal defense mechanism when a creature encounters something he knows outmatches him. A makeshift spear made out of a broken pipe and a military bayonet was no threat to him, but the man himself was a vision of terror, a personification of what the world had become. Who did this cursed soul used to be? A dentist? A teacher? A janitor?

Lucas let him scramble away into the remains of a nearby forest, too transfixed by what he had witnessed to even fire a shot and rid the world of the monster. But the Earth was full of only monsters now, a lesson he had to learn quickly.

He had run into his first honeypot about four months after the sky's death, back when emotions like empathy and compassion still existed. His pack was full of water and preserved food he'd collected, and he only felt the need to carry one weapon. A novice mistake.

Roaming through a city street in a suburb outside of Atlanta, he heard a cry for help: a woman's voice, faint, but clear. It echoed down through the abandoned subdivision, occupied by shells of homes, upper middle class mini-mansions ravaged by early looters, which was an improvement over other population centers that had been leveled completely by bombs and fire.

As he turned the corner he saw her. She was trapped under a collapsed section of a house. He presumed she was scavenging for food like he so often did, and the damaged home had made her perfect for it.

"Oh thank god," she gasped. "I've been here for almost a day now. I didn't think anyone would come through."

Her legs were trapped under a thick piece of wood, and when Lucas looked into her eyes, he was taken aback. The woman was strikingly gorgeous, a true rarity in the midst of a scarred world. In her previous life, she would have stopped men in their tracks on the street, and judging from her current circumstance, it appeared she still had that power. Her wide, light green eyes overflowed with tears and

pleaded with him for aid.

~~He immediately did the human thing and went to go find something to lift the debris off of her.~~

“Thank you so much,” she moaned.

He found a metal pole that was once attached to a street sign. He dragged it over and thrust it under the wood plank across her thighs. The wood appeared heavy, but when he applied force to the pole, it shot upward so fast that Lucas fell backward onto his heavy pack. Canned tomatoes and peaches spilled out everywhere.

Before he could even comprehend what was happening, he saw the woman rise above him, a military issue Glock in her hand.

“You still don’t get it do you?” she snarled. “There are no more heroes.”

She pulled the trigger.

Lucas rubbed his shoulder, which still ached after all this time. Fishing the bullet out by hand had been excruciating enough, but it was the subsequent infection that almost killed him.

She left him with nothing, and he had had to claw his way back to where he was today. But the lesson she had taught him was more valuable than anything she’d stolen.

He’d encountered a few other honeypots since then, beautiful young women feigning distress in auto accidents or cannibal assaults. They always looked well nourished, which was an obvious red flag in the current era. Their strength came from the supplies of a dozen survivors they’d tricked with their sorrowful eyes and purposefully torn clothing. Lucas now left them lamenting in the dirt, no matter how pitiful their cries as he approached or vulgar their obscenities as he passed. Trust was something that no longer existed in the world, and he had more than a few scars to prove it.

He trudged down the road, the sun’s invisible presence above the clouds causing his vision to blur from the eternal heat. Rows and rows of abandoned cars on the freeway were all painted a singular color by dust. The heat was unbearable, and he had to rest. His weapon was a necessary burden, but he suffered carrying it through sweltering temperatures. Setting the barrel down on the pavement, he ran his thumb over the inscription crudely etched into the stock, NATALIE. A long-dead lover, but not his own. It started as a simple nickname for the appropriated weapon, but over time, it had become more than that. Natalie was his protector, savior, and friend, however mad that made him seem. But sanity barely seemed worth holding onto in those days.

He caught a reflection of himself in one of the car’s side view mirrors. Wiping the dirt away completely, he was stunned to realize he barely recognized the man before him. Gaunt from hunger, his cheeks were hollow and his gray eyes had sunk into their sockets. His sandy brown hair was crudely cut short and his face roughly shaven. He had to make do with his knife, as too much hair meant even more unbearable heat. His cotton T-shirt had lost its sleeves months ago and was torn and stained from a litany of past events. Digitally camouflaged cargo pants held much of his remaining ammo, and his combat boots were forever caked in dried blood. He broke the car mirror with his knife in disgust and trudged further down the corridor of cars.

Automobiles had a very short lifespan in the aftermath of the war. What gas hadn’t been used to fuel military operations had been vaporized by airstrikes. Even if the cars could run, most roads were too damaged for them to travel more than a few miles unimpeded. Lucas had tried out an all-terrain dirt bike for a few days, but quickly found the whine of the engine radiated for miles in this silent world and attracted too much attention from humans and creatures alike. Every so often he might stumble upon a bicycle, which would cut time off his journey until his tires were shredded by a rogue nail, a piece

glass, or the roots of a human tooth.

~~*It had to be only a few more miles.*~~ That's what he'd been telling himself each day he trudged further north. Though there were rumors of havens in this part of the country, in his heart he knew they were dead. They had to be. After he made sure, he would be at peace with leaving this wretched world like so many others. What was the point of remaining behind? To witness the exact moment when the planet breathed its last?

He had been a religious man before they arrived. Their appearance broke his faith like it did so many others, but not to the point where it drove him to participate in the mass suicides that happened around the world. Priests, rabbis, clerics, and their congregations had all been driven mad by physical proof that everything they had devoted their lives to was a lie. Some had ended it all when the first ship came, others waited until the rest arrived. But regardless of their apostasy, their purposeful deaths avoided at least one hell, the one currently in existence everywhere around him.

Lucas didn't think about God much anymore. If He did exist, what could He be doing right now? Washing His hands of the world He created, now a broken toy needing to be replaced by another? It was better to imagine He wasn't there at all, as Lucas didn't need to waste his energy with hate. Survival was the more pressing concern.

He was down to his last water bottle and was not looking forward to attempting another dry spell. His record was two and a half days without a drop, and he knew any more than that was certain death. Thankfully he had learned to ration efficiently and trained himself to think a mere sip was ecstasy that would last him the better part of the day.

Fortune had favored him one day when he heard a shot ring out. He had scrambled for cover, but realized it had come from further up the road. He approached cautiously, creeping up behind dead cars. A man lay in the middle of the freeway ahead of him, his hulking shotgun lying useless beside him, blood pooling underneath his body. His pack had burst open and four giant bottles of Absopure slowly rolled down the incline toward him. And to think, they used to mock the very concept of bottled water. It was the only safe way to consume it these days.

Lucas scoured the horizon for the person responsible, seeing nothing. Surely they would come to collect their prize, and when they did, Lucas would collect them.

Then, further down the road, Lucas saw movement on the ledge of a billboard. It was an advertisement for some TV action-drama in its first season, its run cut short by the apocalypse. The figure scurried down the side and hustled toward the spot where the man lay. Lucas remained crouched behind a car some ways down the road, mapping out a possible approach scenario. He could let the sniper take the water and run, avoiding a potentially dangerous skirmish, but it had been too long since he'd had anything to drink, and he could feel every ounce of his body burning, lusting after the water that lay there. One bottle continued to roll slowly in his direction.

The sniper was nearly at the body now, approaching cautiously in case the traveler somehow survived the .50 caliber slug that had caved in his chest cavity. The man was scrawny and tattooed. Lucas wondered if he had perhaps been a gang member before the war, but as he moved closer, his torn Black Flag shirt and gauged ears implied a more musical background. His sniper rifle was military grade, presumably picked up from one of the millions of fallen soldiers scattered across the countryside. It was surely a pain to lug around, so it was no wonder he spent his time camped out in the shade of the billboard, looking through the scope.

Satisfied with his prey's demise, he grabbed one of the water bottles and took a quick drink. Like Lucas, he was a professional survivor at this late stage in the game and knew how to savor what little

moisture still existed in the world. The urge to inhale the whole thing was a hard one to resist, but veterans of the apocalypse knew better than that.

The sniper quickly scooped up the rest of the nearby bottles, and shuffled through the man's pockets. He picked up a few shotgun shells and tossed them away. No need to carry another heavy weapon around in the heat. His gaze then shifted to the water bottle that had rolled a few yards away toward Lucas.

Underneath the car, there was a bit of a respite. The shade kept Lucas's body cool, and he'd slept in similar places on many an occasion, the way a lizard might. Shelter was often hard to come by due to most structures having been flattened by blast shockwaves. He saw the bottle and the man's feet approach it. He was wearing combat boots, again looted from a soldier, and they were worn and sticky with blood.

There would be no warning shot, no ultimatum of "if you leave now I'll let you live." Those days were long past. Lucas looked through Natali's scope and fired one round. The echo practically deafened him underneath the car. The sniper hit the ground, clutching his shattered shin, the rest of him now visible to Lucas in his makeshift bunker. Another round went directly through his forehead, effectively ending the pain in his leg. The Earth's population was one soul closer to zero.

Lucas finished the last drop and put the final empty container back in his sack. Who knew, maybe one day the rain might stop being the devil's fiery piss. But he doubted it. He felt he was probably close enough to Portland where that would be the last drink he ever needed. The last intact sign he had seen said eighty miles. But how many days ago was that? How many weeks? He had lost track, but it had to be soon, even if his pace had slowed to a crawl.

He was inland now, having left the coast to make his way toward the city. The dry beaches sometimes provided supplies hidden away in wrecked yachts or beached aircraft carriers, but mostly they'd all been picked clean. Now back on the main freeway heading northeast, it was the usual expanse of an endless automotive graveyard surrounded by the burned sticks that once made up a vast pine forest.

Trudging forward, Lucas felt that old familiar wrenching pain of hunger gnawing away at his insides. Ideally he'd stumble upon another creature and, after a short fight, could have a feast on his hands, but such ideas were only a fantasy at this point. The creatures were worse at adapting to the new landscape than the humans most times, so there were barely any still roaming about.

Ahead, he saw the collapsed remnants of a freeway overpass sign. He scanned the ground until he saw what he was looking for, a faded green sign that read DOWNTOWN PORTLAND EXIT TWO MILES with a diagonal arrow. *At last*, he thought, and he turned the corner. The road became steeper.

As he rounded the bend, what he saw perplexed him. The road ended. In its place was a giant pile of earth covering the street and the cars on it. A landslide? *No. Then it's . . . No, it couldn't be.* But of course it was.

Lucas mustered his last bit of strength and started sprinting up the rocky cliff, loose dirt giving way under his feet. He understood what the makeshift mountain was, and was dreading the view from the top. But he had to see it. He had to.

Above him the red sky roared with thunder and lightning jumped from cloud to cloud. The mountain became steeper and he was forced to drop to his knees and climb up with his hands. Rising higher and higher, he didn't look behind him to see the remnants of the freeway below. His muscles burned and he was almost blind from stinging sweat, but he ignored all of it. All that mattered was reaching the top.

At last, he arrived. What he saw was a familiar sight, but it shattered him all the same. He was standing on the brink of an enormous crater, looking down at the ruins of a metropolis now blown

dust and resting in the middle of a desert.

~~The city was gone. All of it. The devastation was from one of their bombs, because otherwise his skin would have started boiling days ago, cooking in radiation. The landscape was almost entirely bare for miles until it was bookended by the opposite crater wall. In a city of skyscrapers, nothing stood above a few stories, and what did was a mere mask, a wall or two standing as a memorial to the building once rooted there.~~

They were gone, like everything was gone. His fool's errand to cross the entire country to return to them had been a worthless pursuit. He ran his hand through the dirt and ash at the top of the crater. *They're no more than this now*, he thought as he let the particles slide through his fingers. He would have cried if his body had any liquid to spare. Instead his vision blurred, then blackened, and his body went limp. He cascaded down the side of crater, rolling across the smooth surface of dust until he came to a stop at the bottom. Darkness consumed him fully.

He woke minutes or hours later, he couldn't be sure which. The thunder had stopped and a hot breeze blew through the sandy wasteland around him. Pulling himself upright, he found his head throbbing and his arm in a good amount of pain. Searching himself, he found no blood. Sitting with his arms folded around his knees, he stared out into the shifting sands. Nothing remained. Behind him the crater wall rose up two hundred feet. Even if he had the energy, the climb would be impossible. But where would he go? Where could anyone go with the world in such a state? He stood up and looked around. Scraps of twisted metal poked out of the black earth, but all were maimed to such a degree it was impossible to imagine what they had once been.

His journey was over. Reaching into his boot, he pulled out the picture of his wife and son. It was the one thing on him he hadn't taken from a corpse. The photo was torn and faded, but he could just make out their smiles. It was time to join them at last.

He took Natalie off his shoulder and quickly checked the magazine. This would be her final mission to reunite him with his family. He always knew this would be her purpose in the end. Positioning the barrel under his chin, he put his thumbs on the trigger and raised his eyes to the sky.

Above him, he saw a patch of clouds that had somehow turned blue among the angry red.

He stopped. He looked down. He hadn't pulled the trigger yet. This wasn't some portal to the afterlife above him; the clouds were actually blue. The sand swirled around him as he looked at the mysterious apparition above. Was it something just above the clouds, or something shining up? Focusing more intently he saw trails of light reflecting off the sand. They narrowed to a focal point he couldn't see.

He dropped Natalie from his chin and slung the rifle back over his shoulder. Marching through shifting high shifting ash and sand, he followed the path of the light. It flickered briefly, then went out. The landscape was lifeless again, the clouds red. He paused, then continued forward and the light flashed back on for a second or two before it was extinguished once more.

As he progressed further, the winds died down. The sand and soot stopped swirling, and he could now see more than a few feet in front of him. But there was nothing around but charred rubble. The clouds lit up again as the light reappeared and he saw exactly where it was coming from.

Along the side of the crater wall, a few feet up from the ground, there was a hole. The light shone brilliantly from it, then went out again. Lucas could hear some sounds that resembled electrical fizzling. Looking around, he walked toward the opening. The light remained off, but he could now hear mechanical whirring coming from within. He approached the hole and peered over the top with Natalie leading the charge. He hadn't seen anything with power in months. *What the hell could this be?* With nothing to lose, he climbed in the hole, Natalie at the ready for any snake that might be lurking there.

The light turned on again and engulfed him with its radiance. He had to shield his eyes from the blinding whiteness of it, and his retinas felt like they were on fire. When the light dimmed again, he could see nothing but red blotches. As his vision slowly returned, he looked to his left and saw an offshoot tunnel. The fizzling and whirling spooled up again, and he jumped inside. The light shot past him unimpeded out into the sky. *Can't go that way*, he thought, *at least not without my Ray Bans.* He laughed. It was the first time he had done so in recent memory. This strange new mystery had reinvigorated him. Lucas forgot how hungry he was, how much his muscles ached, and even about his family, now a part of the dirt that surrounded him. The light had transfixed him.

He started down the alternate tunnel, and after a few moments in blackness, saw a blue glow. It paled in comparison to what had just blinded him, but it at least allowed him to see through the darkness. At the end of the tunnel, he approached an open, metal doorway and immediately knew what he had discovered.

The room he entered was a cathedral of machinery, and not any of this world. In front of him loomed two giant objects with a familiar blue glow at one end. They pointed at an upward angle into the same darkness. The glow amplified. The objects were producing the brilliant light.

Of course, he should have recognized that light. The engines of the creatures' crafts had soared past him many times, but always at supersonic speeds. He'd encountered many a crashed ship in his travels across the wasteland, but none that were operational. What normally was unrecognizable when dashed into a million pieces on the side of a cliff was here fully formed, and, apparently, fully functional.

Outside of the two rear engines there were panels lining the walls of the room. The interfaces were holographic, and Lucas ran his hand through the closest one. He half expected a missile to fire or a self-destruct sequence to initiate, but the ship didn't seem to recognize his presence and kept whirring along, spurting out occasional flashes of light from the engines.

Lucas approached stairs that led to the upper deck. He could see a door leading to what looked like an engine room, where a red light was flashing overhead. With the craft apparently working, there had to be someone, or something, inside it. Was there really a crew of creatures still alive to resurrect the behemoth? Lucas clutched Natalie feverishly. Sure, the pair of them had taken down straggling creatures before, but they were starving, delirious, and lacking equipment most times. But here? On their home turf with their armor and weapon systems possibly as operational as this ship? He wasn't taking any chances. In a craft this size, there could be dozens. But how had they survived for so long?

His eyes and barrel constantly darted to every creak and beep coming from inside the room. Then he heard a sound he recognized instantly. Gunfire. The popping noise was unmistakably an automatic weapon of some sort, judging by the frequency. Sticking his head back out into the dark tunnel, he thought he could hear voices as well. Creeping back through the blue glow of the passageway, he saw the bright flash of the engine light in the main pathway up ahead. He turned his back to it, and hoped his silhouette wouldn't give him away.

As he approached the lip, he dropped to his stomach and peered out into the crater. The scenario he saw unfolding in front of him was something he hadn't witnessed in a long while. A trio of people together, not tearing each other apart, but working as a unit against a common enemy. An enemy that was the eight-foot-tall creature slowly backing up toward the hole where Lucas lay prone.

The creature's head turned back and forth frantically, and he ducked as another volley of shots was fired over his head.

"What's wrong frogman? Where are all your buddies?" a man wearing goggles holding the light machine gun called out to him.

Another stood to the right, clutching a shotgun.

"Once you tell us what you got stored in that glowing cave of yours, you're gonna make a real nice dinner."

The third figure was hidden from view by the backside of the creature. But a woman's voice spoke.

"He can't understand you, idiots. Just shoot him and we'll figure it out ourselves. I'm starving anyway and I'd really rather eat him than you."

"Aw, we're just having a little fun aren't we?" Goggles said. "He's not going anywhere."

And indeed he wasn't. Despite his working ship, the creature had no power armor or guns. Instead he was clutching a glowing cylinder, which didn't appear to be a weapon, or else he would be using it.

Thoughts raced through Lucas's mind. Presumably if the trio murdered this creature and found him inside the hole, they wouldn't exactly welcome him into their merry gang. From the looks of the two he could see, they had the crazed tremors of cannibals. He still couldn't make out the woman.

Lucas made a judgment call. Hell, did consequences really matter anymore? As Goggles raised his rifle to finish his game with the creature, Lucas raised his. He fired one slug that passed directly through his eyeball, and by the time he hit the ground, Lucas was trained on the shotgunner. As the man whipped the right to see what had happened to his partner, Lucas fired a spray that ripped up through his tattered outfit and sent him tumbling to the earth. His shotgun veered upwards and fired a blast into the sky.

At that point the creature stumbled and fell on his back, looking side to side, unaware of what was going on. In front of him, Lucas saw the woman with a raised .45 Magnum. It was pointed at the creature, but she quickly shifted its focus to Lucas when she saw him in the hole behind the downed alien. Lucas fired, and so did she. Her shot buzzed by Lucas's ear, but his found a soft target in her flesh. She screamed and lurched backward, her gun flying from her grip.

Lucas exited the hole and made his way toward her. The other two lay motionless, with mortal wounds, but he could hear her gasping in agony ahead of him. He passed by the creature, who looked up at him and instinctively scrambled backward, away from the additional human threat.

Lucas reached the woman and kicked her Magnum further away. He had hit her in the arm, a pretty far distance from her head, which was where he'd been aiming. She was clad in torn pants and a black tank top. A checkered cloth was wrapped around her nose and mouth, as was true of her two cohorts. It was probably to avoid the whirling sands in this area, but it made them look like Old West outlaws. He raised his rifle to finish her off and saw the woman's wide eyes staring at him, anticipating her final moments. Her brilliant, green eyes. Wait. Had he . . . ?

His thought was interrupted by a sharp crack across his back. The creature was on his feet and had struck him from behind. Lucas rolled over and raised Natalie but the gun was swatted from his hand and cartwheeled across the sand. The creature swung at him with a three-clawed hand, and Lucas rolled left and right to avoid it, though one swipe grazed his face. He brought his knee up into what he thought would be a solar plexus, and the creature reacted accordingly, crying out in pain. Lucas then got a foothold on his chest and pushed the beast over the top of him, and he landed with a muffled thud beside the woman, who was now on her feet and staggering over to her Magnum. Lucas veered over to tackle her before she got there while the creature lay on his back moaning. He swung his fist and struck her, knocking her out cold, but as he raised it again, it was grabbed by the creature's claw. He was pulled up and off of her, and flew into the sand as the creature loomed over him. He kicked the creature in the stomach and went to his boot for his pistol. The creature lay sprawled on the ground, then slowly sat upright and held his arm up in a submissive manner. His left arm didn't have a claw. In fact, it had nothing but a stump where a claw should have been, the wound long healed over. Lucas saw the sign of defeat, and hesitated.

"Is this your ship?" he yelled over the roar of the wind.

The creature just looked at him and made no sound.

"Is this your ship?" Lucas repeated. He leaned in closer, brandishing his gun. The creature made a guttural sound and nodded.

"Can you understand me?" Lucas asked in a cracking voice. He had never thought to try and talk to these things before; he was usually too busy barbecuing them.

"Are there more of you inside?" he asked.

The creature made another noise and shook his head slowly from side to side. He patted his chest with his good claw.

Lucas slowly circled around the creature, his gun still trained on him. He reached down and picked up Natalie sticking upright out of the sand.

“Can you fly it?”

The creature pointed to the glowing cylinder he had dropped a few feet away. Lucas wasn't sure exactly what it was, but he had an idea.

“So you found the keys . . . Alright, inside. Get up.”

The creature staggered to his feet, and Lucas slowly backed up to where the woman lay. He pointed his gun at her head.

The alien started emitting a cacophony of sounds and thrust his arms out toward him. Lucas immediately jumped back and trained his sight on the creature again.

“Whoa, whoa! What are you doing? Get back!”

The alien raised his arms and slowly circled toward the woman. He pointed at her, then at the ship.

“You want to take her inside?” Lucas lowered his weapon. “Why?”

The creature had no response but bent over and scooped up the woman, a light burden for the tall creature. He slung her over his shoulder and walked toward the hole. Lucas grabbed her pack left lying on the ground and followed him toward the opening, which was still intermittently flickering with bursts of light.

Inside, the ship still sputtered and whirred. The creature sauntered over to a panel at the base of the two engines, inserted the cylinder into a slot, and tapped a few virtual keys. Immediately the engines ceased their groaning, converting to a dull hum, and the light shone a constant cerulean blue and more brightly than ever. Lucas felt the floor beneath him shake.

But then it all stopped. The creature swirled his hand around in one of the arrays, and the entire room powered down completely. He turned and trudged up the stairs, practically walking downhill as the entire ship was buried in the earth at a sharp angle. Lucas found his footing and followed him, Natalie always at the ready in case the creature attempted another assault, but he seemed to be paying him no mind.

They walked through the doorway of the engine room and down a long hallway lit by a pale green glow that seemed to pervade the ship. There was a massive door at the end of the hall, but the creature diverted to the left where there was a smaller one. Lucas followed him cautiously, expecting an ambush at any time. But there was none. Instead he turned to find a small empty chamber, one with no windows and a solitary light embedded in the ceiling. The back wall was full of metal cuffs, and the floor was caked with dried black blood.

The creature set the woman down on the floor. He walked back a few steps and played with some controls. A white wall of light flickered to life across the middle of the room. It stayed there for a few seconds until it disappeared, and the creature made a sound of dismay. He walked back inside and grabbed the woman by the hand. Lifting up her limp wrist, he inserted it into one of the wall cuffs which automatically snapped around it, her body dangling lifelessly underneath. The creature turned, grunted, and motioned toward the door. Lucas slowly circled around him, his gun still raised and his hands shaking from a combination of anxiety and exhaustion. Breathing a sigh, the creature walked slowly out the door with a slight limp, presumably acquired during their last altercation. As he moved toward the door, Lucas looked behind him and saw a mummified hand lying on the floor next to the unconscious woman. One bigger than his head with three claws.

He followed the creature out the door, which slid shut smoothly behind him. They walked to the end of the hallway where a tiny circular room waited. It turned out to be a lift, and Lucas soon found the

ride up a few levels was painfully long. How could a ship so advanced have an elevator that moved slowly?

Ahead, two giant doors opened with a hiss, and the pair entered what must have been the command center of the ship. A giant circular table was in the middle, and flickering above it was a hologram of Earth. Red dots appeared all over its surface. Surrounding the central hub were panels with holographic interfaces similar to those in the engine room. Some were glowing a constant blue; others were flashing an angry red. Lucas saw that the far side of the room was completely open, made of a transparent material that resembled glass, but was assuredly far more durable. Instead of an expected view of stars and galaxies, it was black with dirt and ash. In front of the viewing area sat what appeared to be some sort of seat, albeit with a massive amount of technical and holographic add-ons whose purposes were unknown.

The creature walked over to this area and made a few hand motions. The ship roared to life, and almost knocked Lucas over, in combination with the tilted floor. Another claw swipe and the ship powered down again. A grunt of approval.

For the first time, the creature turned to look directly at Lucas. He was large, but Lucas had seen bigger. He looked kind of pathetic in a way, his naked form far less impressive than the ones Lucas had come across all suited up in armor. He was breathing heavily, and Lucas wondered if he had knocked the wind out of him earlier. Bruises were already beginning to form where he'd struck him.

These things had two arms, two legs, two eyes, and a long-snouted mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. Their pupils were entirely black with a singular ring of color running through them; this one were gold, but Lucas had seen a full spectrum in his travels. Their legs were bent backwards like a bird's but their arms and hands seemed to function as one might expect, with three clawed fingers and toes. They were all shades of varying gray, and had darker patches of natural armor plating across much of their chest, abdomen, and back. They had no tails, nor wings, nor tentacles, nor anything one might expect from a Lovecraft novel, but they were certainly built to give mankind nightmares nonetheless.

Lucas called out from across the holotable.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

The creature put his arms out and looked down, as if to say he had nothing on him that was dangerous.

"Yeah, well that doesn't really matter does it?"

Lucas pointed to the scratch over his eye made by one of the creature's claws minutes earlier.

It grunted and pointed in the direction of the prison area, then down at the floor.

"Yeah, yeah, you want her here, I know. But why?"

That was an answer that couldn't be communicated with gestures.

"You can understand me, but you don't have a way I can understand you?"

The creature motioned to his right. Lucas turned and saw a cracked screen with a cluster of controls flashing red beneath it.

"That thing?"

The creature nodded. Sparks erupted from the controls every few seconds; clearly whatever the unit was, it would take some time to repair, if it could be salvaged at all.

"Where's the rest of the crew?"

The creature grunted, and flung his claw toward the darkness in the viewscreen behind him.

"I'm going to guess that means they're not coming back."

It shook its head and walked toward the holotable. Lucas readied Natalie again. The creature gave an annoyed grunt and put his arms out again presumably to signal he had no ill intentions.

He pointed at Lucas, then at the hologram of Earth floating in the middle of the table.

~~“Yes, I know, you destroyed my planet.”~~

A few flicks with his good claw into the console’s holocontrols summoned a three-dimensional scene that flickered to life in the center, replacing the globe.

The holographic recording was a first-person view, shot from the perspective of a creature—this one Lucas presumed. Amidst a flurry of overlaid symbols he recognized from the controls around him, two clawed hands tinkered with a piece of machinery. One was then inserted into some sort of glove device and started searing a metal object in front of him with a hot orange glow. He was surrounded by complex machinery, and on the opposite wall there were tanks filled with fluid. *Did something just move in there?*

A loud bark came from his left side. The creature turned and in front of him was a figure that towered above him, decked out in full power armor. A soldier. He grunted at him and the smaller creature grunted back. The soldier grunted louder and threw a weapon at him. The creature caught it in his claws, and looked at it like it was a foreign object. He gestured toward his lab. *A scientist.*

A holographic data pad was presented to the scientist. An array of unintelligible symbols scrolled across while the soldier was saying something in the background. Pointing toward the device on the table, the scientist barked in protest, but the larger creature grabbed him and started dragging him out the door. The screen cut to blackness.

It booted up again almost immediately, this time in the heat of a firefight. Around the scientist was a squad of other creatures, all wearing full power armor. They marched down a city street, firing indiscriminately, but the creature's viewcam showed him not using his weapon at all, rather ducking and dodging. Time a blast rang out nearby. The scene around him was chaotic. Fighter jets strafed alien ships, and tanks and Humvees were exploding on the ground. Bodies lined the streets. From the burning skyscrapers, Lucas thought it looked like Portland. Amidst all the carnage, Lucas was fixated on only one thing: the sun. *I'd forgotten what it looked like.* The feed cut out again.

It reappeared indoors, the creature squad was now inside what appeared to be an abandoned school. Outside, muffled explosions and gunfire could be heard, and the occasional jet or alien aerial fighter would scream by overhead, shaking the walls. The hallways were dark, and the team had dwindled in number to four, including the commanding officer who had approached the scientist initially. He was covered in mud and a mixture of black and red blood. A real cocktail of war.

The camera twitched frantically from left to right, mimicking the panicked mental state of the scientist as he was forced out onto the battlefield. The school was a mess and had clearly been evacuated in a hurry. Locked doors were hanging open, ungraded tests and assignments littered the ground. Only a few lights still worked, and even in holographic form, the mood was undeniably tense.

Suddenly, a wave frequency began to fluctuate on the scientist's display. A heartbeat. The lead creature raised his hand and made a fist with his claws. The heartbeat increased in frequency. The group slowly crept forward again down the hallway, and the singular heartbeat was soon joined by a chorus of others, causing the lines on the grid to go off the charts. The commander motioned to a door that was shut, which was conspicuous as all others down the hallway had been flung open. He removed something from his suit that immediately dissolved the hinges of the door. Shouldering his weapon, he grabbed the sides and flung the wooden door backward as the two other soldiers jumped in front of him with weapons drawn and fully charged. Screams rang out from inside the room. The two creatures pushed back the mess of tangled desks and chairs in front of the door and wrestled their way inside along with the scientist, given a firm push by his commanding officer. There in front of him was a small

group of children, all flocked around a young woman who looked to be their teacher.

All of them were shrinking against the opposite wall, trying to crawl further backward away from the creatures, but with nowhere to go. There was pure terror in their eyes, and almost all of them were crying and screaming. They couldn't have been older than eleven or twelve, middle school students, he imagined, and the teacher herself didn't appear to be more than a few years out of college. The leader creature went over to the blinds and ripped them off the wall with one swift swipe of his claw. Sunlight poured in and destruction could be seen and heard outside.

He turned to the scientist and barked something, then gestured toward the huddled, shaking group of students. The scientist looked at them, then back at his commander and made some low, guttural sounds. The other two soldiers in the group each vocalized a thought and stepped up, weapons raised at the humans, who shrieked and tried to sink further into the wall. The leader snarled at them, and they immediately stood down. He turned and grabbed the scientist's gun, and pointed it toward the cowering students. The scientist looked at them, tears streaming down their cheeks, now mute out of fear. It was deathly silent, except for the occasional muffled explosive thud outside. The scientist paused, lifted his rifle, and then swung it toward his commanding officer.

It caught him by surprise, but the officer reacted quickly. He grabbed the gun and flung it upward, causing it to fire and blast a hole in the ceiling, which drew a cry from the children. He ripped it away from the scientist, and then jammed the butt of it into his stomach. The camera keeled over toward the ground and then peered up again just in time to see the gun come crashing down. Everything went black for a few seconds, but then the image resurfaced. It was unfocused and blurry, but showed a side-view of the scientist's head as it was resting on the ground, looking at the students and teacher on the far wall.

The room erupted in a blaze of light and sound, then the screaming stopped. The heart rate monitor went flat. Everything went black.

Lucas looked up at the scientist. He motioned for Lucas to direct his gaze back toward the hologram.

The scientist was now being dragged through the hallway in the ship he and Lucas had just walked through moments earlier. He was thrown through a doorway and two creatures set upon him, tearing off his armor piece by piece. When they were finished, they pulled him over to the wall, emitting noises that sounded vaguely like sneers. They put his arms in two restraints on the wall, then backed out of the cell. The white wall flickered to life and stayed that way. The camera panned up toward one of his imprisoned claws, and back down toward the door. Cut to black.

The hologram flickered to life again, this time the scene was in a state of panic. Droning sirens echoed through the brig, red lights flashed every few seconds. The scientist looked from side to side, but could see nothing relevant through the translucent force field, just the closed door. He heard footsteps and frantic cries outside, when suddenly, the room started spinning.

Everything shook and the sirens intensified. The impact of the ship's crash made the image cut out again.

The scientist awoke with the force field now deactivated. The sirens were silent and the only light was from flashing emergency strobes. Everything else appeared to be offline. He looked to his right, where he saw one of his claws had broken out of the cuff, which had burst open. Glancing to the left, he saw the other claw was still trapped. Blackness again.

He woke once more, the emergency lighting was no longer flashing, and instead produced a constant ambient glow. Holding his right arm out in front of him, it was deathly skinny, as were his legs and

torso when he looked down. His gaze shifted upward toward his trapped claw. He pulled at the cuff which, ~~unlike its counterpart, had apparently suffered no damage and wasn't budging.~~

Breathing heavily, and then drawing shorter and shorter breaths, he reached up and plunged his claw into his own wrist. Lucas probably would have winced had he not been bathing in gore these past few months and was all but immune to its appearance.

The scene quickly escalated as the creature found his dulled claw wasn't enough for the task at hand. He hoisted himself upward, and sunk his teeth into his own flesh. He pulled back and a big patch of skin and muscle tissue was missing. Alerts went off on the heads up display, but the scientist went back for more. This time there was a loud crack, his mouth wrestled with his wrist, and finally he ripped it away. He quickly backed up and his claw hung there in the cuff, like some sort of bizarre light fixture.

He stumbled out of the door and into the main command center. It was empty and baked in a dull red ambient light with no control panels lit up or functioning. He approached the central hub and pounded on it. Eventually, an image flickered to life, a globe with a pulsating red dot where Portland used to be.

The hologram shifted from the scientist looking at the globe to the globe itself. Lucas looked up at the creature across the table.

"You're a traitor."

The creature shook his head. He rewound the video to the part that showed his squad taking aim at the children. He pointed toward them and grunted angrily.

"They're the traitors? I hate to say it, but they seemed to be the majority opinion."

He rewound the video further to when he was tinkering in his lab.

"You're just a scientist, you didn't want this. I get it. I didn't think you things had a moral compass."

The creature remained silent. This was now officially the longest conversation Lucas had been a part of in months. And no one was dead yet. Amazing.

"So you've spent all this time repairing the ship? How did you manage that?"

He swirled his claw and the globe zoomed into the surrounding area around post-crater Portland. There were certain points flagged with symbols. The display was magnified further and the wreckage of the ship came into view. It panned out, then back in on another point, where a different ship lay in ruins.

"You salvaged the pieces from other crashed ships nearby. Damn. That's a dangerous move in this current climate. I imagine you ran into a few folks who weren't happy to see you."

The scientist motioned toward a set of power armor hanging on a wall nearby. An energy rifle lay next to it on a console. Both items looked battle scarred and broken down.

"Yeah, I would imagine it would have helped when those were operational."

The creature chortled.

"Where have you gotten food, water, while the ship's been down? I know even you things need them."

He pointed at Lucas, then raised his claw to his mouth, clenched it, and bit down.

"Well, I guess we can call that even then."

The mere thought of meat made Lucas's mouth water.

The creature held up one claw and pointed to the display screen. It showed a video of a bay door opening, and a giant, flexible pipe was lowered down into a body of water and made a low humming noise.

"And?"

The screen flickered and changed to a security camera-like shot of a giant cargo bay. Huge cleats and drums of water were stacked in rows, backlit by blue lights.

Lucas's jaw dropped.

“Take me there, now.”

In the lift, Lucas was lusting after what he'd seen on the monitor. He didn't think stores of water so vast even existed any more, and as little as he thought of the creatures, this one in his underground desert castle had turned out to be incredibly resourceful. But his finger never left Natalie's trigger. He might have saved his life, but the nuances of alien honor codes still escaped him, and to him there seemed to be no reason he couldn't turn on him at any moment. And why had the scientist spared the woman? She was clearly intent on murdering him, and with his knowledge of English he likely heard her threats. Why was he so determined to keep her alive?

The doors finally opened, and the sight that awaited him was simply majestic. The bay was cavernous, and lining the path in front of him were rows upon rows of tanks, glowing blue and filled to the brim. They were about twice as tall as he was, and as wide as grain silos.

“This . . .” he stammered. “This is all water?”

His guide nodded.

“And it's . . . safe?”

The scientist turned to the right where a smaller container sat, about the size of an oversized refrigerator. Tubes connected it to the closest two tanks on either side. Opening a compartment, the creature took out a metal cylinder, and brought it up to his mouth. Water spilled out the corners of his face as he drank.

Lucas's mouth was open in amazement. As soon as the creature brought it down, he grabbed it from his hands. He threw the container back and downed the remainder. It wasn't just water, it was *good* water, something he hadn't tasted in the better part of a year. He couldn't detect any traces of salt, meaning if the hose he saw had been in the ocean, it had been expertly filtered.

He threw the container down to the floor where it bounced with a loud clang that echoed throughout the storage bay. He immediately unhooked another container from the compartment and guzzled it all down. Finally, no more need for restraint. With how much was there, it could last indefinitely. Tossing the second empty container aside, he grabbed a third.

The creature put his claw on his arm. Instinctively, Lucas snapped it away and raised his gun at the scientist, who retreated. Immediately, Lucas turned his attention back to the water container, and raised it to his lips again. The liquid was the best medicine that still existed on Earth. Almost instantly he could feel some of his lost strength returning.

But then he felt something else. He choked halfway through the container. His stomach began rumbling and intense nausea filled him. Dropping the cylinder, he vomited up everything he had just drunk, which splashed down to the metal grated floor looking as clear as it had when it went in.

Panting, he brought himself upright again. *Of course*, he thought. After endless bouts with starvation and dehydration, his stomach had shrunk, and too much of a good thing wouldn't fit in the now-tiny capsule. He would still have to pace himself after all.

The creature stared at him blankly for a minute, took another cylinder from the tank, and started walking back to the elevator. Lucas peered outward toward the tail end of the bay, wondering what else he might find down there. But he turned and followed the scientist, as he felt it was still in his best interest not to take his eye off him.

After another interminably long ride on the lift, they were back in the command center. The alien set the water cylinder on the holotable and played with a few more controls, causing unidentified whirring throughout the room. He walked over to the damaged console he had motioned to before. To the side

lay a crate with what appeared to be tools sitting on top of it. The scientist opened some drawers within it and pulled out a strange device that looked like a cross between a power drill and blow torch. He took a panel away and peered inside of it. Sparks greeted him, and he made a dismayed grunt.

Turning to look at Lucas, he pointed toward the water cylinder next to him. He then motioned toward the hallway door, where the woman sat unconscious and bound a few levels down.

“No. You take it to her.”

The creature pointed to himself, and then to the damaged console. He then motioned to his mouth, then to Lucas, then to the sides of his head, where ears would be if he had any.

“Oh, that’s the thing that lets you talk to me?”

A nod.

“How do I know you won’t just lock me in there and electrify the floor or something?”

The alien simply shook his head, turned around, and activated the odd-looking power tool. The smell of smoldering metal filled the room.

Lucas shifted Natalie uncomfortably in his arms. He wouldn’t stop being suspicious, but between the creature’s alleged betrayal of his own kind and his gift of endless water, he figured there probably was no immediate threat. For the first time in about an hour, he slung the rifle back over his shoulder and his tired arms breathed a sigh of relief. He grabbed the water and made his way toward the door that led to the main hallway and the lift.

When he reached the bottom level, he walked a short way down and peeked into a few other doors which also looked like formerly functional jail cells. All of them opened immediately in front of him to show some fizzling controls and empty rooms. A few of them were bloodstained, but no more missing limbs were present. When the ship was fully operational, he imagined there would have been more security in place than a series of motion-sensing doors that opened automatically like at a local supermarket. The scientist must have deactivated all that to move about the ship more freely as he rebuilt it. There was no point in stopping every two minutes for another password entry or DNA scan when you were the only one around.

He turned and entered the last room before the engine bay and saw the woman still slumped over and unconscious, one hand raised above her head locked in the cuff. For an advanced race capable of jumping setting across the galaxy from god knows where, it was a rather primitive means of imprisonment, but he remembered the force field that should have been operational. That was a little more Star Trek, he supposed.

Drawing closer to her, with a cloth no longer masking her face he could see that the woman was maybe seven or eight years younger than him. Twenty-five, twenty-six perhaps? She wasn’t even stirring, which, after a quick, albeit solid, punch to the face, seemed a bit suspicious. In the wasteland she had surely endured worse on many occasions.

Lucas set the water cylinder down and reequipped Natalie. The woman’s long legs lay stretched out in front of her, and Lucas kicked one of her dusty boots, but she made no response. He got down on his knees and thought of a new means to test her commitment, if this was indeed a charade. He unholstered his buck knife, another of his longtime allies, though one without a name, and brought it to her shoulder where the boot stopped and her torn pants began. He found a tan bit of flesh exposed by a rip and balanced the point of his knife on top of it. He’d kept it sharp on stones and metal wreckage, and he spun it around until it quickly drew blood from the point where it rested. Again, not even a flinch. He supposed she really was still gone.

He shouldered his rifle and leaned in closer, raising his hand in an attempt to check her pupils.

dilation so he could see just how under she was. But as his hand was an inch away from its target, his head lifted slightly and her bright green eyes opened.

“Shi—”

He didn't even have time to finish the expletive as she brought up her free hand, which hadn't reached the other cuff, originally meant to house eight-foot-tall creatures. By instinct alone, he managed to stop it before it collided with his face, and looking right, he saw there was a sharp point of metal protruding from a cloth strip wrapped around her wrist. It hung motionless a few centimeters from his eye for a moment before he thrust her arm back into the wall. He leapt backwards as she swung at him again, and as he did so, bumped into the water, which spilled all over the floor and ran down the angled surface away from the woman. Her attention was immediately diverted by what she saw leaking out onto the ground and she lost all interest in assaulting Lucas. She made an effort to dive over to the floor to lick up some of the water that was pouring forth, but she couldn't quite reach it. It was an almost pathetic sight, but Lucas could empathize. He'd done far worse things for a drop of water over the last few months.

He quickly picked up the cylinder, which was rolling away down the incline, spilling most of its contents as it went. Still seated, he shook it, and it seemed to still be about a quarter of the way full.

Realizing she couldn't reach the water on the floor, she looked at the cylinder, quiet splash indicating its remaining volume. She lunged for it, but it was out of her reach, and Lucas pulled it back even further.

“Give me . . . that,” she said in a cracked voice drenched in venom.

“Yeah, you definitely just made your case for being released on good behavior. How about we start with you throwing me that blade?”

The woman looked angry, but grabbed the protruding spike with her thumb and forefinger, pulling it out of the wrapping that contained it. She lobbed it in Lucas's direction where it clanked on the metal floor.

“What else you have on you?”

She glowered.

“Fine, play this game.” He brought the water to his lips, and the desire in her eyes was palpable.

She reached into her boot and took out a switchblade, tossing it toward where Lucas sat.

“Keep going. If you've survived this long, I know you're as well prepared as I've been.”

She reached behind her back and came back with a grenade, pin mercifully still in place. Lucas's eyebrows instinctively flew up.

“Wow, and in what scenario is that your weapon of choice?”

“Not this one, but you'd be surprised.” She put the grenade on the floor where it rolled down to the opposite end of the cell.

“That's it. I've been running a little low on artillery these days. Now give me that.”

Lucas handed her the cylinder. She took it down in one gulp.

“Trust me, you don't want more than that.”

She wiped her mouth with her free hand.

“Cold? Where the hell did you get that? And more importantly, where are we?”

She looked around the room and saw the working lights and strange symbols attached to the door controls and surrounding consoles.

“No, it can't be,” she said with a look of horror slowly creeping across her face.

“One of theirs? Yeah.”

Her mouth remained open and she panned around the room.

“But it's . . . working?”

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