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THE ALBATROSS

REQUIEM

BOOK 2 IN THE ALBATROSS SERIES

CONNOR MACKAY

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FICTION, SCIENCE FICTION, ADVENTURE

For tea and her.

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UNION TERMS AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION

Formations

Maneuver Team (MT)	*2 – 3 Personnel*	1 Unit
*Fire Team (FT)	*4 – 6 Personnel*	1 Unit – 2 MTs
Squad (Conversationally flexible term)	*12 Personnel*	1 Unit – 2 – 3 FTs
**S.O.F. Team / Section (Sec.)	*24 Personnel*	1 Unit – 2 Squads, 4 – 6 FTs
Platoon	*48 Personnel*	1 Unit – 2 Secs, 4 Squads
Reg. Company	*144 Personnel*	1 Unit – 3 Platoons, 6 Secs
Company w/ S.O.F. Attachment	*168 Personnel*	1 Unit – 3 Platoons, 7 Secs
Battalion (Batt.)	*864 Personnel*	1 Unit – 6 Companies, 18 Platoons

*Squad or Section C.O.'s have organizational flexibility in regards to number of FTs in their squads.
**Special Operations Forces (S.O.F.)

Simplified Union Rank Progression

Rank		Max. Command Level
Private (Pvt.)	-----	Fire Team
Corporal (Cpl.)	-----	Squad
Sargent (Sgt.)	-----	Platoon
Captain (Cpt.)	-----	Company
Major (Maj.)	-----	Battalion
Colonel (Col.)	-----	Regiment
General (Gen.)	-----	Army
Commander (Com.)	-----	Ship
Admiral (Adm.)	-----	Fleet

*In standard organization, with the presence of more than one of the same rank, the 1st Grade of any rank will be the leader of their individual unit, followed by 2Nd Grade ranks which usually encompass the 2nd In Command (2.I.C) when the 2.I.C. shares rank name with their superior. All subsequent ranks carry a 3Rd Grade classification.

Additional Miscellaneous Terms

K.I.A.	Killed In Action	(L)	Lumenarian
M.I.A.	Missing In Action	(H)	Human
F.O.B.	Forward Operating Base	(D)	Dorian
A.A.R.	After Action Review	(A)	Alchemist
Rodge	Roger (Affirmative)	Civvy	Civilian
Recce	Reconnaissance	(Fucking) Four(s)	Forsaken



PART I
(ELORA — WILL)



Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
By Samuel Taylor Coleridge

PROLOGUE

The Lost Ones.

The shuttle ride had taken about an hour, due east of Lumen central. That much I could tell. It had to put us somewhere in the middle of the Candleburn Ocean, but not far enough around that we had crossed into the dark side of the planet—the perpetual red dusk still reflected in the ship's displays. I stole a glance at my forearm band to see if tracking was punching through the jammer, if any blips were registering, or if my Raps had relayed triangulation off landmarks, but no luck. The dark, choppy water stretched in all directions as far as I could see from my side of the ship. My sense of unease grew the further out we went, the more exposed and isolated we became. This was a big risk, and I couldn't help but wonder whether it was worth it. I would have felt better having Will with us.

"Elora," Kilo said, nodding at the display behind me. I twisted around to see what he was seeing.

A small patch of ground covered in black grasses and navy bushes came into view. Barely large enough to accommodate the shuttle, it extended off the side of a massive, ancient space elevator reaching up to the planetary hydro-shield which, somehow, the pilot had managed to keep in our blind spots—not that he had enabled many of the displays for the trip. Another glance to my band still showed no new information. We landed gently and off-loaded out of the rear ramp. Once we were clear, the shuttle lifted off and sped away over the ocean.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Where is it going?"

The leader of the small chaperone group turned to face me. "It will return when you are ready to leave," he said. "It's best not having it linger around the entrance for long, in case it's noticed." I stared at him for a moment and then glanced apprehensively toward the shuttle rapidly disappearing in the distance. The Lumenarian gestured to the base of the structure. "Please follow me." I primed some energy into my Tempest, double-checking my ammo readout on my sleeve. Full. I knew it was, but I felt it was a good reminder for our "friend." Then, for added effect, I flared the biotech in my eyes a bright sapphire. The rest of my team simultaneously checked their weapons. The leader kept his gaze on me and smiled, then bowed his head and held his arm out toward the entrance.

"No, after you," I said, also bowing my head. "I insist."

As we stepped inside the titanic structure, we were greeted by dozens of Lumenarians milling about the ground level: parents with children playing games, the young ones' tails whipping wildly from side to side; ragtag militia eyeballing us and tightly gripping their black-market weaponry, inconsistent sparks of emerald along their tech lines; workers around machinery that looked like it was somehow older than the tower; and elders that seemed to be just leisurely hanging around—there for the show. Ring upon ring of leveled balconies rose higher than I could see, fading up toward the atmosphere within the hollow tower. Onyx vines with deep navy and maroon flowers crawled up the sides, and slits in the walls let beams of scarlet light filter in. Above us, the word had quickly spread about our presence, and thousands of faces leaned out from their levels to observe us. Every surface looked weathered with age and salty ocean grime and gave the impression we were walking into a futuristic favella. It was not what I was expecting at all.

I closed my awestruck mouth and turned to the leader. "What is this place?" I asked.

The leader spread his arms out and spun in place, looking up at

the curious inhabitants. “Home,” he said with a relaxed smile. “You can wait here. He’ll be down shortly.” With that, he walked off to the side and spoke with some of the workers tinkering on a beat-up machine that I’d guess was some sort of water desalinizer or purifier, based on the leaks and the piping fed through the walls and into the floor. I turned to the rest of my team and nodded.

“Stay sharp,” I said. “It might not look like much, but be prepared for anything.” Everyone returned an affirmative nod.

Kilo stepped in closer and glanced at the families playing a game of, amazingly, soccer. “I might not feel good about this,” he said. “But I doubt even *they* would risk a fight with children present.” I bobbed my head side to side in response, unsure. But all the same, no chances.

“I agree,” Miguel said, walking over with Megan and Ska. “Plus, they’re playing soccer. That’s our game. Can’t be all bad.”

“Also, I put a det charge on the door when we walked in,” Megan said. I raised my eyebrows at her. She shrugged. “What? Better safe than fucking sorry. Don’t look at me like that. Will would’ve loved my initiative.” Everyone went a little stiff at the mention of his name, especially Miguel. The other Dorians, humans, and Lumenarians on the team huddled together off to the side, looking nervous. I couldn’t blame them, but after all we’d been through, it was surprising that this is what was making them twitchy. Isolated or not, what surrounded us was hardly something formidable.

Suddenly, Miguel’s jaw clenched, and his eyes panned up the far wall. “We got something,” he said, nodding behind me. I turned and watched a rickety lift descend to the ground level. The doors opened and three Lumenarians stepped out. The one in the center strode toward us and held out his hand to shake mine.

“Welcome, Elora Bhele,” he said with a calm, tight-lipped smile. “My name is Mason.”

STORMWATER RESCUE ORGANIZATION

Albatross Command – Admiral Arthur of Lumen

X.O. – General Flak of Lumen

Chief Comms Officer – Corporal Trig of Ashwood

Albatross Echo Zulu Raid Company (Post Failed Extraction Assessment)

(1St) Captain Elora Bhele (H)
(Alb. EZ 1-0)

1St Squad *Personnel: ~~60~~ 13*

EZ 1-1	(Cpl.) Wick (L) (Critically Inj.)
EZ 1-2	**K.I.A.**
EZ 1-3	(Pvt.) Gerry Smith (H)
EZ 1-4	(Pvt.) Brad "Bayou" Laboutin (H)
EZ 1-5	**K.I.A.**
EZ 1-6	(Pvt.) Terry "Gopher" Morgan (H)
EZ 1-7	**K.I.A.**
EZ 1-8	**K.I.A.**
EZ 1-9	(Pvt.) Shubham "Baldy" Gamesh (H)
EZ 1-X	**K.I.A.**
EZ 1-X-1	**K.I.A.**

2Nd Squad	**3Rd Squad**	**4Th Squad**	**5Th Squad**
(Cpt.) River (L)	(Sgt.) Carb (L)	(Cpl.) Charlie Cooper(H)	(Cpl.) Tale (L)
(EZ 2-0) (EZ 2.I.C.) **K.I.A.**	(EZ 3-0) **K.I.A.**	(EZ 4-0)	(EZ 5-0) **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-1 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-2 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-2 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-2 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-2 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-3 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-3 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-3 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-3 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-4 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-4 (Pvt.) Colby Rathers (H)	EZ 4-4 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-4 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-5 (Pvt.) Eric "E" Elswood (H)	EZ 3-5 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-5 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-5 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-6 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-6 (Pvt.) Bryan "Hot Dog" Tully (H)	EZ 4-6 (Pvt.) Tara Williamson (H)	EZ 5-6 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-7 (Pvt.) Dan "Tipper" Tipman (H)	EZ 3-7 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-7 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-7 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-8 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-8 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-8 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-8 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-9 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-9 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-9 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-9 **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-X **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-X **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-X (Pvt.) Omar "Oms" Sahin (H)	EZ 5-X **K.I.A.**
EZ 2-X-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 3-X-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 4-X-1 **K.I.A.**	EZ 5-X-1 **K.I.A.**

CHAPTER 1

Situation: Fucked.

- ELORA -

STORMWATER – 2 HOURS SINCE EXTRACTION FAILURE

"*Albatross* Command this is *Albatross* Echo Zulu 1-0, Copy?" The static crackle of nothingness made my ear itch. The uncomfortable deep sort of itch you can't scratch. "*Albatross* Command, this is *Albatross* Echo Zulu 1-0, do you read me?" Nothing. Not even a faint whisper of a voice trying to penetrate the distortion. "Any Union crews on Stormwater, please respond," I said. The pulse in my temple throbbed aggressively. I had to swallow down the guilt and terror threatening to overwhelm me. If only I had been more offensive in the mines, or not hesitated to call for our extraction, or not committed any number of other missteps, maybe my team and I wouldn't have been one of the last shuttles trying to get off the planet. I was responsible for these people, and I may have just doomed them all on one of the most inhospitable of the Lumenarian worlds. I just hoped the rescue mission had gone better for everyone else.

"Dey gone, Cap. All da birdies flew da coop. We jus' dead chicks squawkin' now," Bayou said, leaning back against the wall of the crumpled shuttle and cradling his Tempest. He was whiter than usual, and I knew he was scared. He talked the most when he was scared, his thick Louisiana lilt adding to the strange dark poetry of his words. He spit a large, deep brown gob of *Bird Shit* chew onto

the floor; it mixed with the different hues of blood already there. "Dat said, dem fuckin' Fours know dey gone. Ain't no rush for dem to clean house down here. Could be couple days we chillin' fo dey come. If we lucky."

"Shut the fuck up, Bayou. That shit ain't helpin', Bruv," Charlie said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. He was an ex-SAS black man with a cockney accent and, like me and several of the others, a recent transfer to the *Albatross* back on Lumen. We would have been better off staying on the *Osprey*.

"Dat's what I'm sayin', Charlie," Bayou continued. "Dere no help comin'."

"And you don't need to be highlightin' that to everyone . . ." They bickered on in the background as I stole a glance through one of the large tears in the shuttle's hull. Outside, the heat waves on the Thresher city streets rose in such thick mirages, it almost seemed as if I were staring into a waterfall. Several Lumenarian bodies littered the streets, and their rotting stench wafted in through the perforated shell of the craft, filling my nostrils. It was also uncomfortably quiet. Every now and then, the silence was punctured by small bursts of gunfire in the distance—no doubt the Forsaken eliminating any trace of survivors, but the tense quiet quickly swallowed the outbursts. Maybe if they had answered over comms we could have helped, but I doubt it. We were all alone.

Anxiety squirmed beneath my skin like something alive desperately trying to get out, and I balled my fists to keep from shaking. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in some dark corner and break down. One of the original human *bright eyes*, more powerful than anyone else here by far, and all I wanted to do was scream. The protocol for surviving on Stormwater had been painfully incomplete, and I was desperately running through every bit of information I could remember. The general consensus had been that if you got left behind, you were dead. Not very helpful or hopeful, but the reality was, even as a best-case scenario, there would be no support for a

minimum of three or four months: the time for the rescue ships to make it back to Lumen, recruit and rally more rescue ships, and then come back. The problem was, as far as we knew, none of the fleeing Union vessels were aware of survivors on the planet, and even if they did know we were here, they wouldn't mount a rescue operation for so few. Shit, the Lumen War Council had dragged their feet at the chance to rescue millions. We also had zero long distance communication capabilities to let them know we were still alive. They'd be in no rush to return until they were ready for a full campaign to retake the planet. I closed my eyes and let out a slow and steady breath. Focusing on my team and what was right in front of me seemed like the only way to keep from being crushed by the thoughts and giving up hope.

"Elora?" I turned to see Gerry crawling back into our wrecked ship through a small, ground-level hole that fed into the building we were half crushed against. Though she may have looked mousy, I knew she was fearless. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, but a loose strand hung in front of her red-flushed face, and she blew it out of the way with a big huff. "Damn, it's hot out there," she said, arriving at my side. Despite her heavy breathing, she looked much calmer than I felt. Charlie and Bayou shuffled over to us and huddled in, while the others stayed with our injured.

"What's the word, Gerry?" I asked.

"Unless they just decided to hide on the other side of the planet and ignore us, it's what we thought," she replied, sighing. "Union ships are gone."

Bayou shook his head. "Told you dey was—"

"Did they make it away?" I asked, silencing Bayou with a glare.

She exhaled slowly and shook her head. "I don't know. At least one definitely didn't. The debris is still burning up in the atmosphere."

"How many Forsaken ships?"

"Five," she said. "Far as I could tell." So we really were all alone. Ten able soldiers (all human), four more critically injured,

three Stormwater civilians, and five Forsaken prisms in orbit with who knows how many of the enemy aboard. Still, we were lucky. Seventeen survivors out of nearly five hundred. Probably the only reason we had survived was because of the mass of soft human and Lumenarian flesh that cushioned us. *Lucky.* I did not feel like it as I glanced around at the carnage we had been forced to hide within. The civilians, huddled together on the side, stared over at us. Though we could understand them, we had no way to communicate with them without the language patch. All our Lumenarian comrades were dead, save for one who was still alive but unconscious, and I wasn't hopeful he'd ever wake. The non-combat nanites in our blood were amazing bits of technology for healing, but they needed time, and he didn't seem to have it. We couldn't stay here. Sooner or later, enemy patrols would circle toward us.

"We need to move," I said.

"That's gonna be tough, Luv," Charlie said. "We're a hurting unit."

"All the same. Help could be a long way away. And do not call me love, Charlie."

"Roger that, mum," he replied with a grin, which I fought poorly to not return.

"I didn' wanna be da one to say it, but . . ." Bayou said, glancing back at the Stormwater civilians. "Be a lot easier withou' da dead weight."

"No one is getting left behind, Bayou," I said. "I do not want to hear that again." He threw up his hands and bowed his head. He made a sarcastic, exaggerated show of being shut down, but I knew he was only voicing the guilty thoughts others had been having—a thought I had but would never entertain. I looked around at everyone. They nodded that they agreed with me. As beaten and banged up as we were, we would not take the easy way.

Gerry took a deep breath and exhaled, locking eyes with me. "What's your plan, Elora?"



After a frustrating game of charades with the Stormwater civilians, we zeroed in on an objective: make our way to a potential safe haven to wait out until help arrived. It was a defunct water processing plant on the outskirts of the city. The problem was how to get there. Thresher was the last place we wanted to be, and we were right in the heart of it. It would take us days to get to the facility, scurrying like rats amongst the rubble of the city, and then crossing open ground at the fringes, but it was our only chance.

"I want us on the move in five," I said, looking around at the remainder of my team rummaging through the dead.

"Feels wrong, looting them," whispered Tara, a sturdy Australian farm girl with tear streaks cutting through the dirt on her face and her shoulders tremoring with every breath.

"Dey sho as shit don' need it no more," Bayou said, inspecting a Tempest clip and rattling it next to his ear to check how full it was.

Charlie put his hand on Tara's shoulder and nodded to her. "Doesn't feel right to me, either, but help is a long way out," he said. "Surviving honors them. Just breathe and gather what you can."

Tara exhaled slowly. "Thanks, Charlie," she said. Charlie smiled and squeezed her shoulder, then walked over to me. As much as Charlie could be a man-child when bickering with Bayou, he also had a strong maturity when it mattered. It was part of the reason I was attracted to him.

"Thank you for that," I whispered, nodding toward Tara.

Charlie winked at me. "Oms is on you, though, Luv," he said, gesturing with his head to Omar behind me. I turned and saw him sitting on the floor, cradling his legs and staring at nothing. *Great.*

Bayou shouldered past with two full kit bags and walked up to one of the Lumenarian survivors. "On da plus side, got us some lizzie mules," he said, looping the bags' straps over the alien's neck and

smiling. “No fight. Ya carry.” Bayou nodded until the Lumenarian nodded back and then Bayou slapped him on the arm. “Der ya go.”

I glanced back at Charlie, who just shrugged, giving me a *makes sense* expression. As I turned to go check on Omar, my hand brushed against Charlie’s and we let the touch linger for a moment. I wished more than anything the two of us could just hide away somewhere together and forget about what was happening. He leaned in close. “By the way, I tell you today how sexy your South African accent is?” he said with a grin.

“Shut up, Charlie,” I replied with a chuckle, warmth spreading into my cheeks. Then we separated, and I went and crouched at Omar’s side.

“Hey Omar, how are you doing?” I asked.

Omar rocked forward and back slightly, his eyes locked onto the unrecognizable body of one of our former teammates, the top half of his corpse crushed in the shuttle’s twisted wreckage. “They’re not coming back,” he muttered.

“Yes, they are,” I said. “We might have to wait a little bit, but they are coming back.”

“Cerberus,” he said.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“They were planning the next campaign for Cerberus,” he said. “They’ll never adjust in time.”

I shook my head. True or not, it wasn’t helpful. “Omar, that’s—”

Omar chuckled manically and his eyes darted wildly throughout the ship. “They didn’t give us a better survival plan because— because they knew there was no surviving here! They’re not coming back!” Omar’s panicked voice rose in volume.

“Omar, calm down—”

“We’re dead, Elora!”

“No, we’re not, Om—”

“We’re fucking dead—”

“Be quiet!” I boomed, jumping to my feet and igniting all my

tech in a bright sapphire flare. Omar flinched away and finally looked at me, going silent. I saw the pure fear in his eyes as he cowered beneath me—the fear I felt inside, uncontrolled and reflected back. I glanced at the rest of my team staring at me and then let my tech fire fade down. I took a deep breath and only half turned back to Omar. "It makes sense to launch an invasion here as quickly as possible before the Forsaken can really dig in. The Union will adjust, and they will come back," I said. "Now get up and load your gear." Omar didn't move. "Get up, Omar."

Omar was dead still for another long moment and then finally pulled himself up to his feet, avoiding my eyes. "Yes, Cap," he said with a nod. I didn't show it, but relief flooded through me.

Everyone doubled or tripled up our sling packs to accommodate the equipment—all the ammo we could carry, grenades, stims, spare kites, gel-sustenance packs, extra canteens, anything we might need. Next, we had to build stretchers to carry our wounded. I would not leave them, or anyone else, behind. It felt strange to be tying together fragments of the shuttle for their carry—fashioning something so primitive while being surrounded by, and operating, such advanced technology—but it was all we could do. The collapsible stretchers our primary medics carried were buried somewhere in the fore section of the shuttle, which had been crumpled into the building. There was that *luck* again, us having been last onto the boat.

I wanted to help carry our friends, but my squad felt more comfortable having the bright eye fully armed and capable. It did make sense. I was more powerful than several of them combined. But I still felt guilty. *Dammit!* If only we had been quicker. If I had taken more people into the mines, we might not have been among the last shuttles to attempt evacuation. The same guilty thoughts circulated through my mind on a continuous loop, replaying each tactical decision, each moment I had felt the full weight of my inexperience. But as difficult as it was, I needed to push the echoes from my mind. There might be time to dwell on them later, if we survived

the journey to our objective, but not now. There was enough fear to overcome without worrying about the guilt.

We tried to hop from building to building as much as possible, but no matter what route we took, there was no way around traversing the streets occasionally. The exposure set all our nerves on pins and needles. We needed a perfect extraction from Thresher. All it would take was one Forsaken spotting us and our exfil would be over before it began. The entire city would close in around us, choking off our options. I did my best to keep my voice calm during orders, and my hands from shaking on my Tempest, but I was terrified. Every time we spied the enemy in the distance, or had to duck into buildings waiting for them to pass, or cower in the shadows beneath the jet-black and crimson strafing Forsaken shuttles, I could feel my heart nearly pounding out of my chest.

"Zulu 1-3, 1-0. Status?" I asked over comms.

"Standby 1-0. Still getting in position," Gerry responded.

"Zulu 1-6, 1-0," I said.

"1-0, clear south," Gopher reported, his voice whistling slightly.

"Copy," I replied. Gopher's nickname was derived from the unfortunate angle of his two front teeth. Some small kindness had spared him from the nickname *Rat* though that wouldn't have fit—he was too nice and seemed too innocent. I exhaled slowly. According to our Raps' translation of the Lumenarian's strange cursive script on the walls, the building we were in was a half-collapsed nightclub named *Origin's Light*. Different from most of the dreary structures we had passed through, the club was an homage to Lumen. Within the standard exterior bunker, the interior architecture was bright, smooth, and decorated with colorful neon lighting and the dark navy, maroon, and black plants you'd find on the home-world. The problem was that it opened into another square with bomb-ruined buildings lining it. There was no skirting along the side structures; we had to go straight across the opening.

"Been meanin' to ask, Cap. You Zulu yoself?" Bayou asked as

we prepared for the crossing. I glanced over and raised an eyebrow. "What? Dat's South African right?"

"No. Half-Xhosa," I replied, chuckling.

"Ah. Wondered if de Zulu was intentional."

"Don't be a cunt, Bayou," Charlie chimed in.

"I wannit bein'. Just curious s'all."

"They gave me a choice, and I liked the show 'Band of Brothers,'" I said with a grin.

"Oh sheet. E-Zee baby. I know da—"

"Zulu 1-0, 1-3," Gerry cut in.

"Lock it up," I said to the group. "Go ahead, Gerry."

"Platoon about a quarter mile back to the Northeast," she said. "Heading our way, but not rushing. Recommend moving now. There's more behind them and they're going door to door."

"Roger, copy." I looked around at my group. The three civilians and Baldy were carrying the two stretchers. Wick, our injured Lumenarian comrade (the only one who had survived the crash), had died before we could move him; and Tipper was moving under his own power, but barely. "OK. It is a straight shot, 75 meters to the next building. We need to move quickly. No stopping. Charlie and I will take lead. Bayou, Omar, bring up the rear." I leaned into Tipper. "We are almost there," I said to him. I turned to the Stormwater survivors. They looked more terrified than ever. "We. Need. To. Move. Fast." I pointed in the direction we were going to be moving with both hands and tabbed forward quickly. Then I wagged my finger side to side. "No. Stopping," I gestured with my palms down to the ground and then wagged my finger again. "No. Stop," I repeated the whole gesture again. Then I raised my eyebrows, hopefully as a universal sign for a question, and flashed a thumbs up. "Yes?"

They all glanced up at the ceiling. "You want us to go up?" one of them asked.

"Shit," I muttered. This one-way communication was getting to me already.

"You know Cap. I think you had 'em until de thumbs up," Bayou said with a chuckle.

"Don't worry, Elora. We'll keep them moving," Omar said with a nod. He was still shaky but seemed to be managing. Then he turned to the Lumenarians and gestured for them to follow him.

"Good." I turned to the doorway. "OK. Gerry, Gopher. We are coming now."

"Roger that," Gerry replied. "We got you covered. But you need to move." I gave one last glance to my team and opened the door.

The wave of heat slammed into us like we were standing behind a fighter jet. I blinked quickly to tint my Raps, the glare nearly blinding. The gap looked much longer now that we were in the middle of crossing it, and our footsteps echoed roughly through the square as each contact ground into the black Stormwater dust. One of the civilians dropped the back of the stretcher carrying Eric, startling us all. Eric groaned but didn't wake.

"One fucking job," Charlie grumbled at the apologetic-looking civilian gathering the stretcher back up.

"Shit! 1-0 you got incoming to the Southwest!" Gerry called over comms. "Just came out of an alley. Thirty seconds and they're on you!" I felt my heartbeat jackrabbit and the uncomfortable buzz of adrenaline run up the back of my neck.

"How many?"

"Five."

"Move!" I said with hushed urgency into comms. Charlie and I hit the wall first, and he went to work on the door panel. The door was scarred with blast scoring and Charlie had to pry off the access console, digging his fingers into the gel circuitry behind. I put my shoulder into the wall and aimed my rifle to the southwest corner. A moment later, everyone else huddled around the entrance.

"What is the hold up, Charlie?" I asked through grit teeth.

"I'm workin' on it!" he grunted. "Silas was the tech-guy!"

"Work faster—" Suddenly, the first Forsaken stepped casually into the square.

BOOM! Somewhere in the not-too-distant distance, an explosion echoed through the air. We stood frozen, all of us staring at the Forsaken soldier. The weapons not aimed at it already slowly and silently raised on target. I held my breath. It hadn't seen us yet, and it slowly turned back the way it came to confer with its not-yet-revealed comrades. A second BOOM rattled the space. *Go. Go. Don't turn this way*. I could feel all my tech-lines igniting in blue fire. *Not now.* It might as well be a flare. BOOM! A third explosion rippled further away. Finally, the Forsaken soldier turned and marched back the way it came. I exhaled slowly.

"Got it," Charlie whispered, pulling out the small fragment of charred gel that had disrupted the circuit.

"Charlie, wait—"

Then, time seemed to slow as the door finally opened with a loud sharp screech—the blast scoring grinding through the opening.

"Get them inside now!" I said without waiting to hear a response. I sprinted toward the corner with my rifle up. I could see my tech-fire waking off of me as I ran. The first Forsaken popped around the corner when I was ten feet from the edge. PHHT! PHHT! PHHT! Two shots lanced it center mast and my last round disintegrated its head in a gruesome pop of sparks and searing blood. The next two folded around the corner and managed to get a few shots off; the second crimson blast glanced off my shoulder armor, torquing me around slightly. A bright blue shot tore over my head from the building tops and took the first down. I finished the second. I couldn't slow down. Blitzing was my only way to get the upper hand. At the corner, I baseball slid right past it and aimed up. The two remaining soldiers flailed to track me, but I shredded them with a handful of well-placed shots. They clanked to the ground heavily

and everything went still. I breathed hard and pressed myself back up to my feet. *Damn Stormwater gravity*.

A moment later, Bayou arrived at my side and braced on the corner, aiming down the side street. "Cap. You good?"

"Yeah," I replied, wiping some sweat from my brow.

He stared at me for a moment. "You shou' be dead, Cap." He nodded towards my shoulder and I looked down. The shot that I thought had glanced off my shoulder had melted away my jacket in the middle of my left breast. It had been a direct hit, but my armor underlay was still fully intact. That *should* have killed me, or at least torn my arm off.

"Lucky glance, I guess," I said, still not exactly sure how I had survived.

Bayou stared at me for another moment and then nodded slowly. "You say so, Cap. Either way, we gotta go."

I nodded and we turned back to the building entrance. "Gopher. Thank you for the sniper assist," I said into comms.

"Uh . . . That wasn't me, Captain," he replied.

"Gerry?"

"Not me either, Elora. But I think there's someone you're gonna want to meet . . ."