

MAGENTA SKIES

RISE OF THE BERSERKERS

For those who feel misunderstood, where the hurt
runs deep yet you still persevere.



***The subject matter and themes used in
this book may be sensitive to some
Reader discretion is advised***

Universe of the Trinity

Novels and short stories that are part of one connecting arc, each spanning across the stars, transcending space & time itself.

The episodes in this novel occur after the events of
Magenta Skies: The Standalone Prequel Novel

For a broader understanding of the lore, character
backgrounds, and more, you are welcome to read the
standalone entry at your convenience.

But for now, please enjoy Book 1
of the **Berserker Saga!**

ACT 1

"Two possibilities exist: either we are
alone in the universe or we are not.
Both are equally terrifying."

- Arthur C. Clarke

PILOT EPISODE

Project Dead Space

Nightfall descended on Titan with a bleak frost in the atmosphere. A galaxy of stars were visible through the planet's vapours, although none of it held its usual splendour. Death was on the horizon. She knew this feeling well, as that profound foreboding seemed to spread to her quarters with some abnormal purpose. After receiving her mission brief, Amina's sense of dread was at its peak. This wasn't because of the mission, but rather what had happened before it, and how this purported "new development" was handled. She rose from her chair behind her desk. Her orders were received. The words blinked from the fourteen-inch hollo monitor before disappearing. She lifted her left wrist to her lips and spoke.

'Wilson, I want those Grunts ready in five.' The only reply was the texted lettering on the screen of her Echo-Watch.

We'll be ready in three, Sarge.

She looked at the hollo-recording playing on a transparent photo frame beside her single bed, directly facing the white pillow on a cold metal dresser. It was muted, but she would usually play this recording repeatedly until sleep took her. 'Look, mommy, I can do

cartwheels,' the four-year-old boy in the recording would say. His afro beige hair was blowing in the wind, his soft chocolate eyes seeking praise, approval, and affection from the one recording. But before that could happen, a man would swoop in, lovingly hold the boy, and fling him high into the air. The man and the boy would express so much joy at that moment; then, they would turn and smile at the camera. Then the recording would stop and repeat.

Amina exhaled, grabbed her gear, and commanded the photo frame to turn off before leaving.

Ten veteran marines silently entered the hovering transportation unit that matched the colour of the sky. Alone on a spanning landing pad, its hexangular shaping was elongated to a car's frame. A slight sparkle gleaned from its reflective coating. There would be no indication that a mission was even taking place. There was no personnel presence or movement in the other barracks. Night excursions were a frequent training exercise, yet there were none this night. The other squads must be on standby in case they fail, Amina thought, as she was the last to enter the levitating shuttle.

To the right of their chairs, their gun racks contained their distinctive, intricate, and lethal weaponry. Amina waited until her squad were buckled up. The over-the-shoulder bar frame that held a neon blue glow within its design came down from behind their heads to lock them in. One had to be refitted for Jager's bulky size, making Mendoza even more uncomfortable.

'Hey, Sarge! I speak for us all when I say that we shouldn't have to suffer being squeezed like artificial

sardines because of one giant asshole!’ He turned his head, covered entirely with a new nano-helmet issued to the entire squad. He regarded them all, then set his sights on the Master Sergeant.

‘Speak for yourself, Mendoza,’ said Murphy through coms. ‘We’re all snug here,’ she chuckled, as did the other four marines on her side of the shuttle. The burly grunt that was the topic of discussion made a pet-like pat on Mendoza’s head.

‘There, there,’ said Jager finishing his sarcastic action, ‘my body will keep your scrawny hide warm. I have to make sure not to apply too much pressure. Don’t wanna break ya.’

‘Everyone is scrawny compared to you. Why do I have to suffer because your momma wouldn’t stop breastfeeding? Actually, when did she stop? Fifteen? Eighteen?’

‘She stopped when I was ten. Then I went to your momma’s house for my daily supply,’ Jager answered.

‘Why you...’ Mendoza started, his words holding a smidge of frustration.

‘Can it, you two!’ ordered Amina, cutting him off. Her gruff voice of leadership was the only thing that could stop any conversation dead in its tracks. ‘Everyone secure?’

They all responded with a ‘Yes, Master Sergeant!’

Amina walked to the front end and sat in her command seat. She secured her RDX Revenant heavy assault rifle and strapped herself in. She clenched her right fist and pounded the metal wall separating the pilot from the passengers. The knock came in threes, the pilot sounded off his final checks, and before they knew it, they were skyward, flying high and fast to their objective.

‘Listen up, Marines! We are heading to an underground facility. What they do there, I do not know. But I know that a military presence was stationed there, and we lost contact with them and the civilians living onsite. It could be a basic signalling issue due to the electrical distortion those freaks produced when attacking the Conclaves...’

‘But why call us if that was the case? And why was it imperative we wear these new nano-suits?’ questioned her second in command with expected interruption.

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Amina confirmed. An amber-coloured screen display popped up in all their hover-cycle-style helmets. The map of the facility appeared like a complex architectural design. The screen focused on the entrance, which stood at the base of a mountain. ‘We enter here,’ the Master Sergeant continued, ‘then take the E-Shaft down to the outer station.’ The hollo-display faded through the door, following Amina’s plan. The screen moved like a camera that could go anywhere. ‘We then enter the main lobby... here, and find out what the fuck is going on.’ Their screens now showed the layout of the whole installation.

‘Any questions?’

‘This place is massive!’ lance corporal Stone exclaimed.

‘Sarge, power to a place like that doesn’t just cut out; it would have its own reactor.’

‘Meaning what?’ Perez asked, seated directly opposite her.

‘It means you couldn’t just flip a damn switch and shut everything down. You would need command authorisation, which usually takes the two in charge, or it was damaged beyond repair, which usually means an explosion,’ Stone pointed out.

‘These reactors are considered safer to use. They’re not made with any radioactive material. But when

those suckers are damaged, they become unstable and explode,' Miller added.

'Yeah, real safe,' Mendoza muttered.

'You'd rather get vaporised than contract radioactive poisoning. Trust me on that, Mendoza,' Samuels said, seated next to him.

'Yeah, I've seen the movies. I don't need a medic to tell me that,' he replied with mouthy sass.

'Trust me, Mendoza, you'll be the first to scream "Medic!" when shit hits the fan,' Samuels retorted. Most of the squad cackled with laughter. Even quiet Anderson and serious Perez gave a faded smile in their helmets.

'What is this? Pick on Mendoza day?'

'Sarge,' Samuels turned towards her commanding officer, 'the signal from their Echo devices shouldn't have any interference; they run on a completely different technology. Do we have any readings from those?'

'No, we don't, but orbital cams detected bio-signatures throughout the facility, so we know people are alive down there.'

'Permission to speak, Sarge?' Perez's vocals were semi-robotic and direct.

'Go ahead, Marine.'

'This mission is Fubar, ma'am,' he expressed openly.

'I hear that,' Mendoza mumbled. Perez waited while fixing his gaze on his commander.

'Care to elaborate, Marine?' Amina insisted.

'Our squad prevented more loss of life during the Conclave incident. For three days, we distracted those freaks while they tore through the city. We then get shipped off for special ops training, we get these high-spec suits and new weaponry, then our first mission is some rescue op in the middle of nowhere. This rig isn't

holding all those survivors, and I don't see any other shuttles. Even this transport unit is specifically designed for us. If this was a training exercise for these nano-suits - then I doubt they would send us to round up a bunch of scientists.' Perez adjusted himself, clicking his neck while looking away. 'And that's why this mission is Fubar, ma'am.'

The Bucket set down on the installation's platform, mimicking an offshore oil base firmly implanted in the rocky foundations of the planet. Hollo-lights shone brightly around its octagon shape, like a busy runway. Fortis Squad acquired their weapons and exited the hovering shuttle. It powered down to conserve fuel. Amina ordered her squad to wait. She turned to the suspended craft, still feeling the intense heat from its undercarriage, her helmet and suit holding the same black hue as the edge-framed blimp of futuristic design, if only a little less reflective. 'The mission brief said nothing of a rescue, but these people may need an evac. I'm calling in my favour, Irons. If needed, I want the Flyboys prepped and ready.'

'This will be my third strike.' There was a momentary pause. 'Ahhh, to hell with it, I got you, Sarge. Evac will be ready on your call. This platform can hold around five buckets, so let's hope that's enough,' said the pilot through coms, his voice light-hearted with a subtle Earth-Texan twang.

'Make sure the line is secure when trying to reach them,' Amina mentioned.

'Will do, Sarge,' Irons assured. Amina began walking away. 'Hey, Sarge?' She stopped and looked back,

the frigid air not even affecting her semi-skin-tight nano-suit.

‘What is it?’

‘You don’t trust the higher-ups anymore, huh?’

‘Between this mission and our last,’ Amina was facing forward again, ‘no, I don’t.’

Fortis Squad was on the move, covering each other’s blind spots as they stepped across the comprehensive bridge-like platform. A thick industrial door stood implanted in the mountain. Lance corporal Stone had her hollo-scanner at the ready - whilst her NEO-UMP 465 submachine gun was magnetised to her central torso. The tactical scanner was no bigger than a hollo-pad, but its software was of her own making, and many industry professionals would kill for her inventions. She pointed the scanner in the direction of the door. Though it was impossible to see, a deep frown had formed on her freckled face. ‘Errr, Master Sergeant?’ Amina came up behind her; the squad rapidly completing the broken circle, aiming their weapons at anything that moved. ‘What you got, Stone?’ Amina asked, lowering her rifle. ‘This is odd, Sarge. If the power to the installation were gone, then the emergency backup power would have kicked in. The solution is in the name, ma’am, “emergency,” as in, in case of an emergency, people could escape off this base,’ explained lance corporal Stone, her account harbouring between apprehension and confusion. Amina regarded her tech expert. ‘So what are you telling me, Marine? That someone shut down emergency power too?’

‘Yes, ma’am. The reactor must have been shut down deliberately if emergency power was also shut down.’ She sighed with perplexity. ‘It would take the person in charge, and they’re second in command to authorise this, as we said before.’

‘So,’ Amina stared at the navy-coloured entrance, then gaped up at the mountain, ‘you locked yourselves in,’ she said aloud to herself.

Stone gave Amina a bewildered look.

‘But that doesn’t make any sense! And no way would our Marines agree to that!’ the techie cried with nervous passion. Amina’s gaze went back to Casey Stone.

‘I think judging the circumstances and what we now know with certainty, whatever they were doing down there must have gone wrong, as it did with EX-Corp. But these people did a brave thing, and that’s why if there are any survivors - we will save them.’

‘OORAH!’ yelled the other squad members. Stone’s hidden smile was wide and agreeing.

Amina focused on a particular soldier.

‘Miller.’ He relaxed his Scar67 rifle to regard his commanding officer with full attention. ‘Door.’

Miller had made his final slash to the thick steel using a relatively small object named the Crystal-Matrix Laser Cutter. The focused heat from this ultra-modern device could pierce and slice any item known to man, exceeding 3.6 million degrees Fahrenheit. Taking no more than three minutes to accomplish, he put the gadget back inside his compartment holder, which was attached to his lower back, packed to the brim of lethal engineering tools. ‘J-Zilla, would you like the honours?’

Miller asked, directing his question to Jager. The bulky soldier moved from his position and joined the engineer at the door. He placed his H.S. light machine gun across his back, the layer of his suit, weapon, and helmet glinting in the starlight as he walked over. Miller stepped aside, and Jager kicked the entrance through with the staggering force of a battering ram.

‘Woohoo! That’s how it’s done, big guy,’ Mendoza cheered encouragingly. The blue framing of the door was still intact, the scorching heat still prevalent around the inner edging. Miller placed his right hand on Jager’s shoulder and stared down through the visor of his headgear. Although it was too dark to see, his suit’s mechanisms acted as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He looked around with an assessing glare. His aqua-coloured gaze widened and fixed to one point. His sight had turned thermal. He saw a self-charging power box leading to an area near the inside wall where he was standing. He put a hand on the searing frame, his suit and skin not even burning. He could see where the lead had ended. He then pushed open a concealed plaque in the wall. He pressed a button - and a wail of slates opened out, with a mechanical noise that echoed down into the bowels of the dark installation.

He smiled.

‘Sarge, we got ladders,’ stated Miller. Amina walked over. Jager and the engineer parted. She dipped her head; her vision also adjusted. She could see the four deactivated power couplings of the large E-Shaft below. She frowned at it. At least one hundred meters down. Before she could give the order for her squad to make their descent, Perez ran towards them.

‘No fair!’ hollered Mendoza, the humour evident in his words. Amina moved as if expecting such action from

either one of the pair. It seemed like time had slowed to a crawl - as Perez nodded to his commanding officer before jumping through.

‘He’s insanel!’ Miller bawled. ‘We’ve never evaluated a drop from this height before.’ The whole squad went to look. A great bang reverberated up from the chambered shaft a few seconds later. Perez saluted them with two fingers, confirming that he was still, in fact, very much alive. He moved to the corner.

‘That crazy son of a bitch,’ said Jager laughing.

‘I’m next!’ announced Mendoza.

Amina touched down on the E-Shaft roofing, absorbing the impact by bending her knees and flattening her left palm. Her right hand was still clutching her weapon.

‘Miller,’ she said, rising to a stand.

‘Way ahead of you, Sarge,’ the engineer responded, his tool in hand. He went to work on cutting out the shape, but Jager spoke as he slid down the emergency ladder.

‘I’ll get us through,’ he said, leaping from the twentieth step and landing with a hard thump. He concentrated on Mendoza. ‘What? I hate heights, and I ain’t making an ass of myself by falling through this thing.’

‘I wasn’t gonna say anything, I swear,’ Mendoza replied, his hands in the air.

‘Yeah, yeah. You can’t help but open your big mouth,’ said Jager accusingly. He turned his head to Miller.

‘Look at the groove you’re cutting; I could kick that through, no problem.’

‘I know that,’ Miller said sharply. ‘I never get the chance to use my tools, and now I have the opportunity, you

want to take over and kick things. Selfishness is an ugly trait, Zilla.'

Jager was about to say something, but Amina interrupted.

'Save it, Miller. Jager, get us in,' she ordered. Miller got up in a huff and folded his arms petulantly as he stood against the wall. Mendoza was next to him, snickering. Miller punched his arm.

'Ouch!' moaned the Big Mouth.

Amina moved back as it only took J-Zilla one whopping stomp of his big foot to open the emergency hatch.

'I call that the Zilla Step,' he told his commanding officer. 'I'll go first this time.' He attached his gun to his back, held by the magnetic microfibres within his suit, and jumped through. A brief moment passed before he said anything. 'Sarge... you'll wanna see this.'

Amina did not hesitate before jumping through herself. Her frown was a borderline of annoyance and puzzlement. 'Stone,' she said calmly. The soldier jumped down and was immediately beside her.

'Yes, Sarge...' she broke off, gawking through the transparent elevator door. A pitch-black sub-tunnel was ahead of them. 'Where in the Fall did that tunnel come from? It wasn't on the map,' contended tech specialist Stone with shock in her voice.

'We were gonna ask you that same question,' said Jager looking down at her.

'Well...I... don't...'

'I want your opinion, Marine, don't trouble yourself with the specifics here,' said Amina, interrupting her stammering. Lance corporal Stone walked over to the glass, gaping outward, clocking the tracks.

'The map they showed us is wrong, Sarge.' Stone removed her scanner, which was kept in a compartment

holder similar to Millers - but more compact with black straps across her thigh; the holder itself angled comfortably on the side of her right leg. She held it up for a manual reading, using its camera feature to scan the length of the tracks – that were placed below and on the ceiling of this seemingly vast and ominous underpass, which Amina assessed was used to stabilise the E-Shaft for higher speeds. ‘These are monorail tracks, Sarge, with a continuing line for thirty-eight-kilometres.’

‘So there’s no installation?’ Jager asked curiously.

‘There is, but it’s further away,’ Stone reassured.

‘Fucking hell,’ Mendoza bellowed, voicing his feelings from above as he peered through the hatch.

‘Listen up!’ Amina commanded. ‘It would take hours for a regular person to travel thirty-eight kilometres. But we are not regular people - are we, Marines!?’

‘No, Master Sergeant!’ they all yelled; their morale spiked.

‘Perez, Mendoza, you’re on recon.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ they both said in unison.

Amina heard them shuffling, and then jumped down to her position. ‘As for the rest of us, I want in that facility within the hour, no excuses. Let’s put these suits to the test. Now move!’

A revolutionary change had occurred during their combined run, forever propelling them forward into the gloom of blackness. The limitation of their human bodies was now set to a higher plane of existence. Before spotting Perez and Mendoza at a closed entryway, they had already discussed how their new capabilities had felt

unrestricted, like the suits could unlock an individual's true potential. The Marines weren't even out of breath; they stood guard, waiting for their squad to catch up.

'Sarge, this door is also locked up tight,' Mendoza reported. 'And it's thick as hell.'

The door was sturdy and higher than expected, appearing like the grand entryway to an ancient tomb. Although this tomb door was a smooth metallic blue, with a surface that had a distinct sheen, like it was polished daily.

'I can still get us through with J-zilla's help, Commander,' Miller claimed confidently.

'Do it,' Amina demanded. 'Stone?'

'Yes, Commander?'

'Can your scanner map the entire installation?'

'Of course, Sarge,' Stone replied.

'Good. Samuels, I want you to sync with Stone's scanner. I want a bio-trace on all personnel, including anything abnormal, like those freaks in the Conclaves. We will not go in unprepared, understand?'

'Yes, Sarge,' said the medic.

'The rest of you, keep watch.'

Miller was crouched and halfway into cutting - with Jager standing beside him. Stone and Samuels were only a few feet behind, their devices in hand. Their conversation switched from medical jargon to tech-savvy terminology. Mendoza, Murphy, and Anderson stood on the platform's edge, while Perez stood alone near them. Wilson was next to Amina watching the door's progress.

‘Well, what a predicament we’re in now, hey Sarge,’ he voiced, addressing his commanding officer but staring ahead.

‘Nothing we haven’t dealt with before, corporal,’ she countered.

‘True, but there’s a pattern here. I know you’ve noticed it too.’

‘I have,’ Amina admitted reluctantly.

‘They lie to us, endanger us, and keep doing these experiments on innocent people, even after what the new President has promised. I thought he was different.’

‘They’re all the same; haven’t you figured that out yet?’ imparted Amina coldly.

‘I have now, Sarge,’ replied Wilson.

‘Then you’re learning, and I expect nothing less from my squad.’

‘Copy that.’ He sighed, then eyed each Marine. ‘We’ve turned into the expendable clean-up crew. If we didn’t have a commanding officer like you, our morale would have been shot to shit months ago.’

Amina regarded the corporal.

‘That’s where you’re wrong,’ she paused briefly. ‘Do you know why I chose you for my squad?’

‘No idea, Sarge,’ said Wilson shaking his head.

‘I selected you because each of you could lead a squad in your own right. There hadn’t been much need for the military in recent years. Most of our training was via V.R. and regular drills, but each of you has been involved in conflicts where a Marine presence was needed. Each of you has faced real danger first-hand.’ She turned to face the door. ‘So that’s where you’re wrong, corporal. From childhood to joining the military, all of you are survivors, and all of you have

a survivor's instinct, a uniqueness. That is your gift, wouldn't you agree?'

Wilson gave a faint nod.

'Judging our history, I'd have to agree with you, Sarge. All of us are either from the streets or the hollo-homes. Survival has been bred into us. We've all had trouble with our commanding officers. A bunch of pencil-pushing assholes that only care about their rank and appearance. You are different. We could see that, and we knew you were like us. I mean, jeez, you got Big Mouth Mendoza and Mad-Dog Perez to follow orders,' stated Wilson in admiration, staring at the two Marines. As usual, Perez was checking over his weapon and equipment while Mendoza tried to make quiet Anderson and Murphy (aka Snappy) laugh. 'I think that's what it is, Sarge.'

'What?'

'You having faith in us when no one else had.'

Amina began looking at Wilson, and then the heavy banging from Jager's kicks soon followed. The echoey noise bounced off the surrounding space so resoundingly that everyone jolted to attention, with Murphy gasping from the sudden sound.

'Asshole! How about giving us a warning before you do that!' screamed Murphy.

'You're always banging something; I thought you'd be used to the noise by now, Snappy,' Mendoza teased.

'Fuck you, Mendoza! If I shot this hundred-Cal burner bullet into your dome - you wouldn't say shit then,' Murphy barked.

'Such violence is uncalled for,' said the Big Mouth. 'You may wanna work through those issues before we enter this place,' he provoked.

‘That’s it!’ said Murphy, raising her hand and moving towards him.

‘Enough, you two!’ Wilson ordered. ‘Listen,’ he advised, concentrating on Stone and Samuels, who asked Amina to look at something, while Jager made the final kick to the entrance. The weighty slab of metal that fell showed everyone just how hefty the opening was.

‘Sarge, this place isn’t an installation,’ Stone announced, relaying her findings discouragingly. Amina glared at the entryway, instantly realising what she’d meant. It led into a white decompression chamber - with a closed airlock door further down.

‘This can’t be right; it just... can’t be,’ said Samuels, her right hand on her helmet, simulating her usual action of pinching the bridge of her nose when something confused her. Amina went to her first and looked over at her tightly clutched hollo-pad. The tech’s mapping and the medic’s joint scanning had indeed worked, if not a little too well, as bio-signatures congregated in key areas of the false installation, though Amina could see the issue that had Samuel’s mind in disarray. She recognised the red dots on her scan as human signatures from their size and colour. But there was something else. ‘Sarge, my scan picks up the bio-imprint of any living thing - and picks up moving air particles. As you know, this is how we can track an enemy, even find where they are in a block of apartments, let’s say.’ She paused for a second before continuing. ‘See these dots here?’ The Marine biologist closed and extended her thumb and finger to enlarge the schematic-looking image. There was a collection of red dots in one location. ‘I can say with certainty that these dots are human. This is real-time, so as you can see, one is pacing up and down, others are at the door here, and others are near the far

wall.' Samuels swiped her finger. 'This area is the same, and here too.' Samuels closed her finger and thumb, making the map an outward view. It was all orange lines with a black back-screen. The flickering red of where she was pointing contrasted against the hollo-pad, like spilt paint. 'This is what disturbs me, Sarge. I took readings from those monsters in the Conclaves. I kept these for myself because I knew my readings would have been confiscated, and if I had refused to hand them in, I would have been court marshalled for sure. Those monsters produced a red signature, meaning they were human, but the rock monster had a purple mist over his red imprint, and the other had a white cloud over hers. That's the only way I can describe it anyway.' She postponed her clarification to swallow anxiously. 'See these?' Samuels pointed at multiple sections on the map - with more extensive readings in particular areas of the facility. These signatures were human with a pinkish tinge of some sort. 'That's what's got me worked up, Sarge.' Samuels hadn't noticed Amina shaking her head, for if she did, it would be clear that her commanding officer shared her dismay, and for the leader of the Fortis Squad, that would never do. But there were four Marines that saw the subtle hint of hopelessness from their leader. Wilson, Murphy, Perez, and Anderson. And all four had set a firm grip on their weapons in response.

'Sarge...' pleaded tech specialist Casey Stone, moving closer to her Commander.

'I know, Marine,' Amina responded. 'We focus on one thing at a time. What you have is relevant, but it can wait. I'll need you alert if those other signatures are

hostile and move to our position. We'll need you for a real-time mapping survey, looking at cleared sections of this place, spaces where these things cannot get to. Understand?

'I understand, Sarge,' replied Stone calmly, as though her worry was temporarily soothed.

'Good. If it weren't for you, our chances of survival during the Conclave incident would have been much slimmer.'

'Way fucking slimmer,' Mendoza added, cutting in as he pointed his four-barrel TreonTex Shotgun at the airlock door. Stone exhaled a breath.

'Thanks guys. Let's do this,' she said.

'Fuckin' Ay!' hollered Murphy in agreement, her Variant Sniper Rifle aimed.

'Snappy?' Murphy's dark eyes were peering through her squared sniper scope. She lifted her head in response to her nickname. Perez was further up, nearer the door - but looked back at her over a broad shoulder.

'Yeah?'

'Do you still have any of those NATO six-zero-nine rounds? the ones that explode and continuously burn until they need putting out?' Murphy's frown had not let up. She looked in the ammo pouch of her protective vest that gave ample coverage. She pattered herself down, stopping at the hip area of her body.

'Yeah,' she said in relief. 'R&D could only make two of these bullets since the last mission. I had to use all five before,' Murphy explained in frustration.

Perez then set his sights straight ahead. 'Let's hope two is enough.'

Miller and Jager were in the decompression chamber, analysing the airlock door. They were muttering something that Amina couldn't make out, and Miller called for lance corporal Stone. She walked in, head dotting around, eyeing everything with a hum of suspicious intrigue. She regarded Miller. He looked at the console on the side wall next to their obstruction. Surprisingly, the console flashed red, indicating a power source was reaching it.

'Switch to thermal,' Miller began, 'and you'll see that the cables are behind this airlock.'

'This runs on an independent power source, like the ladders,' Stone observed.

'Precisely,' Miller concurred.

'Master Sergeant?' Stone called.

Amina walked into the room-like chamber.

'Everything good here?'

'Yes, ma'am. I will be able to get us in, and it will only take a few seconds.'

'Good. Wilson, Perez, Jager, on me. The rest of you, spartan formation.' Miller left the chamber and got into position on the platform. He lowered a knee and took his stance. Amina heard movement, but it was quick. She brought her heavy assault rifle up; her alert eyes fixed on the digital reflex scope. Its base frame was a cold, glinting black alloy with red casings and components. Both she and Stone gave confirming nods to one another. The tech specialist tapped and swiped away on her hollo-device, and then the airlock door lifted, with a strong breeze and the disgusting smell of death behind it.

Amina ventured forward cautiously. Stone held her position, her yellow metallic submachine gun locked and pointed as her finger stroked the trigger, while her other hand wrapped around the vertical fore-grip of her UMP. The rest proceeded. Musty darkness infected the air, blacker than midnight. The environment was stale and pungent, with freezing temperatures that activated the internal heating of their suits. Amina used her peripherals to see upwards, the sign semi-hidden above a wide archway. The border around it shone a minimal neon-blue glimmer. But Amina saw that it read, **WELCOME ABOARD THE U.N ARGO**. Although, concurrently, the Master Sergeant had noticed something else, the sight hard to fathom yet undeniable. A trail of blood was leading into the facility. Dried blood on the console on this side of the airlock door, blood that was too dark, too wide, and too copious for its owner to be conscious or living. Whoever it belonged to was dragged away with a killer's cruelty. Amina had noticed the unavoidable footprints that held no human bearing. 'What in the Fall happened here?' said Jager, not expecting this scene at all.

'Keep it tight, Zilla,' ordered corporal Wilson.

'Yes, sir,' said Jager, taking slow, wary steps.

Wilson whistled as they crossed the threshold.

Some fixtures were still producing a small spread of lighting, like certain parts of them were made by glow sticks. It went along the walkways, around cylinder advertisements, even the frames of the panelled doors. The intersecting lobby was simply too expansive with too many blind spots to feel comfortable. The entire zone was a cross between a space station and a vacant shopping mall. The ground was slick, smooth, and shined like the Conclave pavements. Half expecting

the place to be as quiet as a grave, it wasn't. A gale-like wind of howling temperament sounded from high above. They all looked up when nature's presence introduced itself. A gaping hole was the cause, at least forty to sixty feet in its circular diameter, which only contributed to this ever-growing mystery. Unmistakable evidence of forced entry was apparent when seeing the humungous shards of metal laid out on the floor below, along with the bent and jagged roofing that twisted inward. Amina could see the multiple layers it took for this thing to pass through, and she could now see the twinkling dots in the Titan sky, its haze of indigo more alluring than ever. The contrast of destruction and beauty, murder and secrecy - had made for an even more unsettling view. Ahead was an unlit hollo-kiosk with an impressive list of zones and substations. This only confirmed the suspicion of lance corporal Stone, which she made clear as she entered, giving a horrified gasp. All had the same reaction, apart from Perez and Anderson, who showed no change in body language. Mendoza bent down, inspecting the gore. 'Damn. All this blood and no bodies. Yep, sounds like a Murphy party to me,' said the Big Mouth. 'Fuck you, rookie!' cursed the sniper. 'Can it, Grunts!' Wilson demanded. 'Yes, sir,' they both said, half sounding like scolded children. 'On twos!' Amina snapped. 'I want this area secured. Stone, Samuels. You didn't pick up anything in this section, but I want answers.' 'Yes, Master Sergeant.' They were on the move at once. 'Wilson, Murphy, I want you to source every hidden spot in this zone. From air ducts to none seen entrances. And I want you to find a perfect sniping position.'

Amina swung around, glaring up with focus, seeing a bridged walkway. But she saw a level higher than that, an obscured section of some kind. A severed hand with a sparkled ring attached was still gripping the railing. She scrutinised it with a scowl, then said, 'See if you can get up there when you have finished your search. I want eyes on this entire zone, like a god damn angel from above. Understand?'

'Yes, Master Sergeant.'

And they were gone.

'Perez, Miller, Anderson, Mendoza.' They still had their backs to Amina, looking for anything to shoot, but they paid close attention when she called their names. 'Every zone has a shaft tunnel attached to them. These blood trails here lead to three of them. Perez, Miller, check the tunnel leading to the Medical Station.'

'Yes, Master Sergeant,' they said, voicing their confirmation in one note.

And off they went.

'Anderson, Mendoza, check the Engineering tunnel.' They began to move, and Amina continued her orders via coms. 'Only check to the end of the tunnels if you can; do not enter the other zones. Back here in thirty.' They all responded with a 'Yes, ma'am.'

Her attention went to Jager.

'You're with me, Zilla. We're checking the tunnel to the Living Wards. It has the most blood trails.'

Jager came up behind her.

'With you, Sarge.'

Darkness enveloped the two Marines, their footfalls following an unseen path. If not for their headgear, not

a thing would have been visible. Something forcibly carried at least five people in this direction. Judging from the other set of strange tracks, it was clear that whoever or whatever was responsible was of a formidable size, with a terrifying amount of strength and endurance to drag these people this far in. This passage was vastly different from the earlier tunnel. This resembled smooth tubing with enough room to fit a horizontal E-Shaft in. Amina and Jager were not five minutes into their strides before noticing the blood path did not follow a straight line. It even smeared the side walls, like whatever dragged the bodies had the manoeuvrability of a giant crab. Up ahead, they spotted a pin-size light.

‘Give it to me straight, Sarge; what do you think is going on here?’ Jager was a few feet behind Amina but matched her fast-forwarding pace. There was no delay when she spoke.

‘This is not an installation, as I am sure you’ve gathered,’ she said with not a breath lost.

‘I have now you’ve said it, Commander.’

‘Well, from what I can tell, and from what I was taught in school... this is a Vessel,’ said Amina confidently.

‘You’re shittin me!?’ voiced Jager shockingly. ‘The Vessels that brought people over here from Earth all those years ago? That kinda Vessel?’ he queried.

‘One and the same,’ she answered.

‘Why in the holy Fall would one of those be down here?’ he said, then continued speaking, not giving Amina time to answer. ‘Fuckers were experimenting like Ex-Corp, I bet.’

‘I thought that; until I saw the lobby and kiosk,’ Amina disclosed.

‘Huh...what about it?’ Jager was puzzled.

‘I saw the severed hand of an elderly woman. She was wearing civilian clothing.’

‘Fuck me.’

‘The kiosk showed an Entertainment Ward and many other non-essential substations. That, topped with a military presence who acted as overqualified security guards; I’m betting most of them had never seen actual combat before - and this was part of their training. This place has been turned into some kind of sanctuary; for people that did not want to live in either Neon City or the Conclaves.’

‘So someone or something attacked these people for no good reason. Now I’m pissed!’

‘Halt,’ said Amina in a whisper. They stopped abruptly.

‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what, Sarge?’

‘Concentrate, Marine. Remember our training. These suits extend our natural senses and increase our physical attributes.’

Jager stepped forward, motioning his head, so his ear was facing the direction of the distant sound.

A shuffling, a squishing, a groan, a loud bang, and something else, something his brain could not interpret but only associate, and it was this association that caused him to take a step back, bumping into Amina.

‘Would you like me to continue on point, Marine? It’s okay if you’re scared,’ baited the Master Sergeant. He regarded his commander for a time, then focused on the disturbing noise again. He rotated his shoulders and adjusted his posture. ‘Fuck no, Sarge. After everything we’ve been through, nothing scares me anymore.’

The light was filling out, its deep ocean colour emitting the same powerless glow as the lobby. Jager ceased his pace.

‘Sarge, it’s an E-Shaft,’ he said vigilantly.

Amina studied the small train-like elevator.

‘Press on, Marine,’ she commanded, seeing a shape within the shadow of the transparent locomotive. Her vision switched to thermal. Blood was in there too, a large amount of it.

‘What’s that smell?’ wondered Jager. Amina had first-hand knowledge and experience of this potent, throat-gagging stench. It was something many go a lifetime without knowing, only theorising when listening to a person’s account of such an acrid odour. The scent was as if someone had soiled themselves, mixed with the nasty aroma of vomit and decay. ‘Fuck me that’s strong,’ he said disgustedly.

‘Breathe through your mouth, Marine,’ Amina advised.

‘I think it’s in my mouth already, Sarge.’

‘Listen,’ Amina murmured. The noise she heard earlier was becoming more distinct. Their entrance was no longer in view, a quick escape now impossible. ‘Guns up,’ she commanded.

‘Sarge.’ It was Samuels on coms. *‘I’ll be quick in case you cannot speak. The bio-signature with the pink colouration over it... well, I thought I saw it blink on my screen. And I’m sure the reading was in the tunnel you entered.’*

‘Copy that,’ said Amina.

As if reading each other’s minds, they both stopped, eyeing the thing in the see-through subway unit, now no more than eighty yards away. Whatever it was, was looking right at them, and whatever it was, almost reached the full height of the ten-foot-high

compartment. Amina swallowed hard, an action that Jager instinctually imitated.

‘What the fuck is that!?’ Jager’s voice was hushed and panicked.

‘Murphy, high ground now, and watch this tunnel,’ Amina instructed.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ she said non-hesitantly.

‘Wilson, Samuels, Stone, get eyes on all three tunnels. I want nine, twelve, and three o’clock positions,’ said Amina, giving the order as if expecting something to happen.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ they all replied.

‘Get back to the entrance, Zilla, double time.’

‘But Sarge...’ he began appealing, ‘I can...’

‘No buts, Marine. You’re slower than I am, but with these suits, you can run faster than any athlete. I need a heavy gun and a good aim.’

He breathed out with a trace of frustration.

‘Okay.’ He walked behind her, readying himself to do as she asked. He stopped, his helmeted head going sideways. ‘Please be careful, Sarge,’ he said softly. She gave a gentle nod, her attention straight ahead. She continued onward and could hear Jager sprinting back the way they came. The figure watching them was no longer there, but the awful smell remained. Her grip was tight, her senses alert as she came up on the E-Shaft. The whole thing was like a transparent train with metallic features. The end door was smashed to smithereens, and the edges of the exit and entrance held traces of skin and cherry-coloured streaks. The flooring was a hard glassy surface with every inch covered by a mutilation of the worse kind. Torn limbs and viscera hung over the public-style seating that went up in rows along each side. The windows, even the ceiling of this

carriage, were stained in a blackish crimson. Innards were the décor here, the blue of the compartment lighting placed above each seat now mixed with a red illumination. Amina became mindful of the sudden sensation within her suit. Her weapon felt lighter than usual, her breath calmer, and her responses had a swifter way about them. Using her other hand as support, she lifted herself and stepped in, now fully immersed in this horror show, landing her foot on something mushy, which caused an electrifying shudder up her spine. It was a blooded organ. Gun raised, eyes on everything as she trudged through. A male body was half sprawled over on a seat further in, his lifeless stare facing upward, his glazed-over eyes showing the horrific pain he felt in his final moments. He was wounded so badly that he looked to be ravaged by an angered beast. Parts of his stomach, arms, and legs were gnawed away, only hanging from the stubborn parts of his muscle and bone. His blood was dripping wet, and his painted saliva was still stringing to the floor. There was another concerning aspect of this homicide. The fact there was a shimmering pool of scarlet at Amina's feet meant whoever did this had just moved the corpse and dropped it there. She saw the splatter of red on the seating and windows leading up to the man. Her vision highlighted this with a brighter saturation. He was thrown there with such abnormal power he resembled an upside-down L, as his head almost touched the ground - and his broken back hung over the chrome armrest in a gruesome display of flexibility. She also realised that the man was not a civilian but a Marine. A cracked hollo-data pad was sticking out from his grey combat jacket. It was suspended from his chest pouch. Amina swiped it up quickly, placing it in her vest pocket, her uncomfortable

gaze still concentrating on the horrifying path of carnage ahead. Amina's helmet, which was so sleek and polished that every picture reflected off its surface like a black mirror - allowed the pungent odour to assault her nose with greater force than before. Its sudden arrival told Amina that a presence was certainly nearby. Was it this dead Marine that watched them, or was it this new thing? A wave was hitting the space around her. Still, she advanced into it, moving up, scanning her environment, seeing more broken windows, more butchery, and more destruction as her eyes examined the crime scene. She couldn't avoid the crunch that her feet made when stepping on the broken pieces of glass debris, but she trod with composed grace. Another sensation was entering her ears. A heavy tapping, but it would continue and pause. The other end was fully in view, only showing more colourless shade. She unwillingly tensed, her heart pounding like a steel drum, but a plan formulated in her mind quicker than ever before. And as this evolution was transpiring, she saw shadows move, swaying in the gloom. She frowned. Her visor switched to night vision. She took a step closer, pointing her rifle, then stood stiff. There was no more doubt, no more suspicion. Whatever did this - was a cold-blooded monster, an accursed creature made by forces that should never have been tampered with. And this evil dweller of darkness was bombing towards her with a fierce screech. 'Come and get it, you fucker!' she bellowed, opening fire, hitting parts of its body. The silhouetted devil jumped - merging into what it thought were her blind spots. Still, Amina could see it just fine and continued shooting through the glassy roof of the locomotive, making it shatter and fall with her micro-drill bullets spraying into and in-between each serrated

piece. This quantum monster was not like the armoured freaks she had fought before. This disgusting fiend was softer, made from tissue and organic matter, which meant she could kill it if she weren't alone, had more firepower at her disposal, or had her squad by her side. The horrid monstrosity gathered its speed, strength, and agility from its backend, meaning its front body was only an attachment of some sort. It seemed to rise to a giant's height, then lower itself to the predatory stance of a reptile. Charging head-on, it smashed into the E-Shaft's opening, moving the whole elevator train backward, almost knocking Amina off balance. The tracks were on the bottom left wall, with sparks flying out before the shaft stopped its turbulent motion. Amina grunted and locked her legs into place. It made a vicious swing for her with its enormous appendage, but caught nothing due to its distance. She glared at the thing, captivated by its devilry, and in that surreal moment, it seemed like it was returning her stare - with a sort of longing expression. Strange seeing it up close, it was like her bullets had no effect at all, yet its bleeding wounds spoke otherwise. This cosmic horror was a weird amalgamation of the human and insectoid species. Part of it was a man with a head full of walnut hair and eyes of mocha that were semi-tearful. His nose was pointed, and his high cheekbones were well crafted, although once you passed that point, nothing about him was human. His mouth was a hard pink slab of muscle with two full rows of razored teeth - that went down each side, all curving inward but would move outward like a Venus Fly Trap with every breath he expelled. His arms were gangly with huge deformed hands. His clawing fingers were at least twenty inches long. Amina saw them grip the seats, pressing down and denting them

with his horrendous strength. The rest could only be described as a nightmare on legs. Extended arms were attached to the anatomy of a male, which one would presume was his own body, but it was faded and wrinkled, naked, and much smaller than his head would imply. His bottom half was affected by this change, appearing childlike. Nothing about this creature was natural to begin with, but even its front body seemed to have undergone a traumatic transformation, as if something had drained it of all its fluid, muscle, and nutrients. Amina scowled at this walrus-coloured atrocity, wondering why and how it could elevate its revolting construction to the height at which it stood now. Her question was instantly answered. This was no splicing of nature, no act of the Star Gods. However, Amina could not deny the odd similarities between its human physiology and that of an arthropod, nor deny their flawless integration if such a melding occurred. Its miniature human frame was linked to an abdomen that was very much ant-like in its shaping, though its overall size was far more considerable. The lifting limbs that held its nine-foot structure seemed just as long as its freakish arms, be it wider and stronger; strong enough to run, move promptly, and jump like a fearsome arachnid, which is how they appeared to Amina. Hairy overgrown spider-legs that bent forward so it could spring to action when needed, decimating all around it, fulfilling its primary directive of killing her. Not that she was convinced of this when looking at it. Something in Amina's guts told her that this mutated crossbreed had a more sinister motive when charging at her, like its purpose was beyond human understanding. But she wasn't going to stand here and find out. When the shaft slowed the creature's charge - her hand was already in

her vest pouch, lifting out an incendiary grenade primed to detonate after five seconds. 'Suck on this!' she exclaimed, throwing the explosive like a bowling ball and whirling one hundred and eighty degrees to make tracks the opposite way. Knowing the abomination would move further in, she accounted for this in her throw, and as planned, the bomb was directly underneath its middle. Its four outlandish legs were bending once more, but the final beep of the grenade sounded, and an explosive bang arrived only milliseconds after. The surging fire engulfed the monster in a liquid flame that spread to every inch of its hideous body, burning every hair and blistering its malnourished skin. Its screech was a frightened cry of agony. It knocked itself back and forth, slamming itself into everything around it, cutting parts of its flesh with the remaining shards of glass. It wailed its arms of colossal length with no knowledge of dealing with such throbbing pain, even though the fire extinguisher was in the emergency cabinet next to it. Amina was fully out of range, in the tunnel, with her attention fixed on her scorching enemy that burned like a solar flare within the darkness of space. She placed another explosive on the ground, then arose and shot at the giant human bug. One shot hit its right eye, with its ichor pouring down its face - while the other ten zipped at its demonic maw, shredding its flesh-tearing mouth. Its hands were gigantic compared to the human part of its own body, and it used this feature to protect itself, waving them around with the sporadic movement one would perform when swatting flies. This verified something significant. The area where Amina was shooting must be a vital spot for it to protect that part of its midsection so resolutely. A number of its hooking teeth cracked, broke, shattered,

and fell. She saw its blood boil from the fire, at least four of its long digits being blown away - as the bright flash from the rifle's muzzle flickered through her sights. She knew exactly what it would do after announcing her presence. 'We're not done yet, fucker!' The vile creature appeared enraged. The pitch, tempo, and cord from its screech had completely altered, becoming even more deranged. Still wrapped in flame, it bolted at her, dragging the seats of the destroyed metro unit with it. From Amina's point of view, it was like a focused hurricane of glass and fire hurling toward her. Using short controlled bursts - she kept shooting, then stopped, setting the timer of another small bomb for ten seconds. She swung around, pivoting on her heel, and ran. She glanced back. The insect demon was almost on top of the second grenade, but then, theatrically, it side-hopped and leapt to the ceiling, identifying the fiery item. Amina's eyes were wide with shock when witnessing its intellect. The explosion went off, affecting nothing but the surface of the tunnel. She put her gun to her torso and sprinted for her life. She could feel the heat of the beast on the back of her neck; feel its anger, hatred, its frantic wish to kill. It wouldn't lay there and die; it would commit to vengeance in one final act of slaughter. This unholy spawn of corruption was not the only being that converted. Amina could feel herself getting faster, as if her leg muscles were adapting and growing. If not for the suit, she would have surely been swept up by its razor grasp by now. She saw the exit light ahead. She could feel herself fatiguing, but the demonic scream from behind gave her that small dose of energy she desperately needed. It had given her the will to keep going, to keep living, even though her usual thoughts were of ending her own life - so she could be with her

husband and son again. She could sense them now; pushing her to live, pushing her to protect her squad and cleanse this place of a terror that would spread to every corner of the world. A reaction to this thought caused Amina to dig deep, keep her chest down, and run hard to the white light that had Jager waiting with shaky nerves. Disbelief was his expression, but that soon became a frown when eyeing the flaming demon on her tail. 'MOVE TO THE RIGHT, SARGE, NOW!' he shouted hastily. She did as asked, as if foreseeing this outcome, and he unloaded the full force of his light machine gun. It was like Amina could feel the heat of each thermal-bullet tearing through the air, just skimming her head. But Jager's aim and control of the weapon were borderline miraculous due to his suit. His arms were bulging, his war cry haunting, he was his own artillery, and warfare was his pleasure. Amina's speed was something out of a comic book movie. She whizzed past Jager as he continued his barrage. Stopping seemed impossible; her only choice was to skid and place her hands before her for the momentum to break. She almost crashed headfirst into the kiosk wall, but managed to halt herself somehow. Her entire body was sore. She controlled her panting breath and rounded herself. 'FALL BACK, ZILLA!' she yelled. He released the trigger and moved back to Amina's position, the shrieking creature roaring furiously in an endless echo behind him. 'SNAPPY, AIM BELOW THE NAVEL!' 'Commander...' she started to answer confusedly. But the crossbreed mutation was exiting the tunnel, and it had no intention of stopping. 'DO IT, NOW, MARINE!' Amina barked. Murphy's reaction was immediate. From above - she squeezed the trigger of her high-calibre rifle. It had enough force to

immobilise a tank, and so did it separate the monster's body with utter ease. The entity was no longer aflame with liquid fire. It was smoking now, wafting fumes from its smouldering flesh. Its humongous backend dropped with a weighty thud, the vibration of it travelling up Amina and Jager's legs like a shiver. It was twitching as if it refused the natural order of death. A ridiculous amount of blood spewed from its shredded hide. But another substance came from its abdomen. A yellowish-green goo that bubbled and popped like an experimental formula in a science flask. The human part of the beast stared up at Amina one last time before closing its bloodshot eye. It gave a final demising screech. Everything was quiet after that. The Marines were as silent as the dead. All hearts were racing. Then, Jager blasted it more, making everyone jump out of their skin.

'God damn it, Zilla!' Murphy cursed.

'What? Don't you watch horror movies? They never stay dead. By doing this, I just saved everyone here.'