

THE EXPEDITION



The Expedition

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Panting echoed through the oppressive hallway as the men slogged through the bog of broken black tendrils beneath them. Our lanky forms squeezed together as we marched through the darkness while black slithering vines snapped at us from the walls. I forced my burning legs to move forwards following the flow of the formation. My vision blurred as I struggled to keep my eyelids from collapsing under their own weight. I felt my grip on consciousness slipping as my body's exhaustion tried to drag me down into a dark sleep. The only thing maintaining my cognisance was the coiling tendrils yanking at my armour as I passed. I along with the rest of my unit shrugged off its groping and marched on in our formation of four columns and twenty rows. Engineers, cartographers, officers, tunnel-rats and anyone else with special expertise staffed the two inner columns, while the expendable soldiers like myself were stuck in wings. At our front Kaiser Karl von Wolfgang led us deeper into the murky bowels of the station. By this time in the expedition, he had come to exclusively take the lead.

"Ready a camp!" A hoarse shout came from the front rousing the soldiers from their autonomous march. We made our way through the last of the passage and into the room beyond. I reached up and pressed a button on my shoulder activating my armour's headlights. Around me, lights flickered out over the room fighting back the darkness. The rays of light stretched out a few meters in front of us before fading into the impenetrable black veil at the end of their reach.

"Form up! Injured in the rearguard!" A voice shouted. I staggered along with the rest of the expendables forming a semicircle in front of the entryway. The specialized units formed a line behind us shortly after. One of the officers pulled the remaining rat-tunnellers off the second line and ordered them to scout the area. I stood and waited with the rest of the expendables as we stared into the endless void. We pressed our burning bodies together forming a wall of meat and metal to guard against the things that lurked beyond. I watched shadows melting through the darkness forming liquid monstrosities, watching us, stalking us. The silence of their steps blared in my ears. They were coming, I could feel it. Hundreds, maybe thousands, just behind the black veil, standing in their jumbled formation preparing to pounce through the darkness. Their thick claws ready to sink through flesh, their infectious bile spilling out across our discarded corpses.

Our line grew smaller only to see the second line rush into the readied maws of the enemy. Death in the darkness, doomed defenders never to return home. In that moment I remembered my family back in Bastion, tearful screams ringing out at the realization of our deaths. Terror-filled screams

when the Vorgoth came to collect on our debt. I could see their droopy black eyes deep-set into their scaled heads. They would tear through Bastion dragging its inhabitants off to their slave ships. I could only think of their despair, as the creature before me slid its large claw through my stomach wall. From the vivisected gash my black coated colon fell to the ground interweaving with the tendrils beneath. I felt a hand grab my shoulder.

"Hey, you listening?" I turned to see a lieutenant staring at me as he pulled me back from the line. "I said you're on third watch. Get off the line!" I nodded to the man and stumbled towards the centre of the fort. I looked around to see the officers pulling soldiers and engineers off the line. They sent the engineers to set up the barricades around our position while the soldiers were sent to the designated sleeping area. Exhausted soldiers began collapsing around me as we approached the centre of the encampment. I could see their forms sinking into the swampy black beneath the weight of their packs. As I drew closer to my destination, my foot snagged on one of the tendrils tripping me forwards. I twisted my torso as I fell aiming my shoulder towards the ground. I slammed onto my side and after a feeble attempt to raise myself up gave in to my exhausted muscles. The tip of the helmet sank into the wriggling black mess beneath me. The position of my helmet managed to keep my suit's respirators above the pool of tendril fluid. Behind me, the sounds of metallic clanking ceased, replaced by the faint hum of the plasma shields coming to life. The shield's plasma field emanated a pale blue light that saturated the camp in a soft glow. As I lay in the black waters, I saw some officers walking through the field of sleeping soldiers. I watched one of the officers plant his foot against the man's shoulder and shift him into a fetal position. Then he turned and walked away just before my eyelids finally collapsed.

I awoke to a rough nudge on my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see one of the surviving officers peering down at me. I pressed my hand into the murky floor and pushed myself up from the ground. A piercing pain shot through my muscles as I lifted myself onto my knees. The officer watched as I rose to my feet and wiped the slime off the side of my armour.

"Karl wants you." The officer explained. "He's in the tent." Before I could thank him he walked off towards a group of engineers by a section of plasma walls. Looking around I saw a handful of soldiers patrolling the perimeter of the encampment. The rest lay scattered passed out across the floor. Towards the back of the encampment, near the corridor we'd entered from, was the command tent. It was a dull grey yurt with an ornate red fabric door. On the door were long white lines of interwoven and knotted patterns forming images of two wolves facing each other. At the centre of the door between the two wolves were two black runes, kaunan and wunjo, joined into a single bind-rune. I reached out and touched the runes and stroked the fabric. I pulled my helmet off my head and took a deep breath to steady my

nerves. Then I tucked the helmet beneath my arm, lifted the tarp up over my head and entered the dwelling. Inside the remaining officers sat on their sleeping packs staring down at the old maps scattered over the tent floor.

"Hello sirs." I said bowing to the officers. The officers ignored my greeting and stared down at the litany of maps covering the floor. I looked up to the Kaiser at the back of the tent who wore the same dead stare glaring at the mess of papers. Unlike our blacksuits, the Kaiser wore a heavily modified version of the previous model which had never seen mass adoption. Its plating was patchier, with padded cloth at the suits joints for mobility. Instead of metal gauntlets his gloves had only rubber protection around the knuckles. His helmet lacked the buttons, lights, or additions that adorned the V2 and was instead made only of several flat glass panes welded together. While the interior of the helmet had a simple battlefield information display, the Kaiser had welded numerous external sensors to the helmet to provide additional utility. I wondered to myself why he had put so much effort into upgrading the V1, when he could have produced his own V2. Could it be that the V1 offered some unique battlefield advantage I was unaware of? Did it have sentimental value from when it was used by the Black Knights in their special operations? Maybe he just didn't quite trust the V2s yet, after all they hadn't seen much field testing. The Kaiser decided to put them into production after the capture of the Balorian warehouse depots, only five months before the end of the war. Regardless of the reason, I realized I had been standing there in silence for far too long without direction, so I tentatively raise my voice and said, "You called for me Sir." Karl raised his hand in a halfhearted wave without deviating his gaze from the maps.

"Battlefield promotion." The Kaiser explained in a drained disinterested tone. "You're replacing Vic, take a seat." I nodded again and dropped my sleeping pack next to one of the officers. I sat down and looked at the maps that they were so engrossed with. The maps were a chaotic mess of scribbles and drawings over blueprints of the station levels. I tried pinpointing our location on the maps but all the paths and rooms were unrecognizable to me.

"Ya, I'm not seeing anything else." One of the officers stated, interrupting my concentration.

"I'm inclined to agree." Another officer replied. "Even if some of these sections did collapse, which is unlikely, it probably built new ones a long time ago."

"So our maps are still worthless." A third officer groaned.

"I hate to be the one to suggest this," another officer interjected. "But it might be time to cut our losses and head home."

"That's not an option." The Kaiser stated in a tone almost resembling an order. "We can't return without the jewel."

"We can fight off the Vorgoth if we have to."

"The Vorgoth are our only way off this station. If we turn back now not only will it trash our reputation, but we may never get another chance to get a planet of our own." The officer shrugged.

"Then we only have one option."

"Unfortunately." The Kaiser mused. "I agree this is probably our best chance right now, but it's a bit of a long shot. I'd feel more comfortable if we had a backup plan."

"We're already on our eighth backup plan. At some point, we were bound to run out." A grizzled voice emanated from the back of the tent. I looked over to see an officer lying back on the Kaiser's bed. He turned to look at the other officers, his long brown hair sliding down his face to reveal the iconic plasma seared scar he was known for.

"I see what you're saying Mal." The Kaiser responded. "We're running out of options, but I think it might be worth trying to figure out some more before we commit to anything." The general rose from the bed and walked over to the Kaiser. As he approached, one of the officers moved from his seat and allowed the general to take his spot. The general exhaled and placed a hand on the Kaiser's shoulder.

"Our Alcohol is low, our energy packs are more depleted than our manpower, and if we waste any more time we won't have enough rations for the trip back. Frankly, at this point, our best bet is to lump all our resources together into this plan, and hope our luck finally turns." The rest of the officers remained silent, unwilling to contradict the 'Savior of Waterfall Crossing'.

"Alright." His Majesty conceded with a defeated sigh, "We'll divide our forces into three battle groups. General Malvich will take ten of his men and head to the power station and get it back online." He turned to finally look at me. "Sergeant Simon will head to the security station and remove any station locks that will get in our way."

"Should we divide up the tunnel-rats for communication lines?" Malvich inquired.

"No point, there are only three left, the message would never get delivered. Better to keep them for limited recon ops."

"Very well."

"Who should I take?" I asked.

"Whoever you want, just grab some people. We don't really have much structure right now." The Kaiser replied waving at me to be gone. I rose from my sleeping pack, bowed and left the yurt. I walked out into the encampment and looked around at the available pool of possible recruits. Tendrils reached up from the ground and wrapped around the slumbering soldiers pulling them deeper down. I looked over to the plasmic barricades and watched a handful of engineers running around checking diagnostic windows and cables. At the centre of the chaos, was an engineer holding a portable screen connected to a bundle of wires that fanned out towards the

various machines. I walked up beside him and listened as he rattled off instructions to the workers. I stood next to him and waited for a lull in the work.

"What can I do for you?" He asked a few minutes into my wait without looking up from the screen.

"I've been ordered to recruit some engineers for a mission."

"Tough shit, I don't have any to spare."

"Should I report that back to Karl?" The man remained silently tapping at his tablet. I nodded, turned around, and began walking towards the yurt.

"Wait, hold on." He called after me. I stopped and walked back beside him. "Just give me a sec. How the fuck do they expect us to get anything done like this." I waited for a few moments until finally, he called over two of the men. "Jimmy, Henry, Karl wants you on a special mission. You're going with this fella here." They turned to me and bowed. "Any idea when they'll be back?"

"Don't know, sorry."

"Of course not. Alright, boys try not to die, we're short-staffed as is." They nodded to the head engineer and followed me towards the field of sleeping men.

"What's the mission?" Henry asked.

"We're headed to the security station. We need to make sure the elevation tube is online, and security locks are dealt with."

"We gonna have an escort?"

"We'll bring a cartographer and a fire team."

"That's it?" Henry exclaimed.

"Yep." I responded in a curt manner. Henry jogged up to keep pace beside me.

"That's insane." He asserted.

"Yep."

"That's a suicide mission." Henry insisted with more force and vigour than his previous objection. I sighed and turned to him.

"No, waiting here for those things to come or for us to run out of food would be suicide. This is just a very dangerous mission. So if you want to get through it alive, help me find our cartographer."

"Who are we looking for?" Phil asked.

"Long vertical scratch along the front of his armour from shoulder to waist." I responded. Together the three of us searched through the scattered bodies, looking for the familiar scar.

"So what did Wolfgang say?" Phill asked.

"Uh," I stalled trying to put together an encouraging explanation. "He said this was an important mission. That we have to succeed no matter the cost."

"Anything else?" Phill pressed. I looked up at him from my body search.

"Anything in specific he was supposed to say?"

"He's a native." Henry interjected.

"Oh, so you've never met Karl." I stated.

"No, I'm a little curious about him." Phil explained.

"If you're really curious, drop by the hall sometime after we get back. Usually you can just walk up and talk to him during the lunch break."

"That's if we get back." Henry snorted. I chose to ignore the comment.

"Usually there's quite a few people trying to meet with him, but he's pretty good about talking with everyone. Though it's been a little harder to talk one on one since the troubles started." I explained

"Do you know him well?" Phil inquired.

"I've met him a few times, he-"

"This him?" Henry called out as he stood over a black armoured form. I walked over and looked over the armour, sure enough, that recognizable scar ran down his chest.

"Hey, wake up." I ordered as I gave the soldier's shoulder a light kick for added emphasis. The form stretched out beneath me before looking up at my face and asking,

"What's going on?"

"Hey Alex, we got a mission."

"Where we going?"

"Security station. You know where Dave is?"

"That's pretty far off," Alex responded drifting off into silence. "Not sure, he should be around here somewhere."

"Alright, do me a favour, find Dave and chart out a route. I've got to put a fireteam together unless you know anyone whose team's still intact."

"I think Marks is the only one with a full team right now."

"Who?"

"Right, you weren't involved in the 'Pillar City Ambush.' I've only met him a couple of times. He's a little off, but has a high success rate."

"Okay where do I find him?"

"He usually likes to sleep by the plasma shields, look for a group of them there. He's the one covered in red lines."

"Got it. Where are we meeting?"

"West exit."

"Okay." I turned to the engineers. "You two go with Alex. I'll meet up with you in a bit."

"Yes sir." Jimmy responded. I walked off towards the barriers to look for the red-stained man. Most of the soldiers had made it a few feet into the safe zone before collapsing, so it wasn't hard to find a solitary group lying beneath the glow of the plasma. I walked over towards them and noticed one

of them lying back against the metallic base of the shield generator. A chaotic assortment of short red tallies decorated his black armour.

"Corporal Marks?" The man's helmet rose up to face my direction before twisting in a slow counter-clockwise motion coming to a stop at a forty-five-degree angle. After a moment of staring his head fell back against the plasma shield generator and his muscles relaxed.

"Yesss." His viperous voice hissed in response. He reached out and slowly stroked the red lines over his armour.

"What's the deal with the red paint?"

"They're my friends." The man responded with an audible smile. I stared back in silence as he continued stroking himself.

"What's the status of your unit?"

"We're good to go." He answered in wet raspy whispers.

"I'm recruiting your team for a mission. We're headed for the security station."

"My, how fun. When are we leaving?"

"Now. Get your men ready and meet us by the west gate."

"Understood." The man responded, I hurried off towards the west gate leaving them far behind me for the moment. As I approached, I noticed someone had joined Alex and the engineers. He was a large-framed man with a round metallic tank on his back. At the bottom of the tank, was a tube connected to a long metal shaft which the man leaned against his shoulder.

"Dave!" I called out to the big man whilst I walked towards them. The flamer turned to look at me.

"Simon!" He called back revealing a dazzling smile. "Congratulations on the promotion buddy." He clapped me on the shoulder as I joined the group.

"Thanks, let's hope I don't end up like one of my predecessors," I replied with a chuckle. "Alex, you got a route?"

"Ya." Alex answered, dragging out the word as he unfurled his map.. "Well, I have a couple options. The security station isn't super far away, the issue is it's eight floors up. Without the elevation tubes, I have to find a bunch of different points where the floors connect and, as you may have noticed, there are no stairs on the station."

"I figured we'd have to do something like this."

"Now we could run around finding all these different connected areas, or we can use one of the service tunnels."

"Can we even fit through them? I thought only rat-tunnellers were small enough to get through."

"Most of them are only designed to fit one maintenance droid at a time; however, there are larger tunnels that serve as the arteries of the station. They connect the droid bays to the smaller service tunnels that run through the walls. There's an entrance to one a few hours out that leads to

just outside the security station.”

“How much time will it save?”

“Without the tunnel, we're looking at a day and a half there. With the tunnel, we're looking at about eight hours.”

“That is a lot of time.”

“But about two of those hours will be us crawling through the tunnel assuming it's still usable.”

“Think it will be blocked?”

“Well honestly, these maps haven't been the most reliable, but the underlying structure should be correct.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It's there, but we might not be able to find it.”

“Alright then, if we take that route and it turns out the tunnel is inaccessible, how long will it take for us to get to the security station?”

“It will take about six hours to get to the tunnel. From there it will take us about four to five hours to get back on track.”

“Okay.” I paused for a moment to consider the options. I looked over the messy map, but couldn't derive any meaning from it. Finally, I looked up at the men and said, “Let's go for the tunnel. I don't want to have to sleep out there unless we absolutely have to.”

“Understood. I'm ready whenever you are.”

“We're just waiting on Marks then, speaking of which, he's a little...”

“Ya, I know. He's effective though, and he's great under pressure.”

“Didn't give me that impression.”

“He seem scared to you?”

“No.”

“Exactly,” Alex responded before raising his arm and pointing behind me. “Heads up.” I looked back to see Marks and his men walking towards us.

“Hello boys,” I called out.

“Simon, let me introduce you.” His serpentine voice slithered out towards us. “Darren, Bill, Tom and Jake.” They followed in complete silence, offering no bow or greeting.

“Welcome aboard. We're headed to the security station. Our mission is to secure the area and remove any locks on the elevation tubes.” The four men offered no acknowledgement of my orders. I took a step towards one of the men. He continued staring off into the distance oblivious to my presence. To my side I saw Marks slide over to Alex, wrap his arm around the cartographer's neck and caress his shoulder. Marks peered down at the map and ran a finger over the scrawling until he arrived at a particular point.

“Ooh now. By any chance will we be going through the service tunnels?”

“Uh ya, it's the shortest route,” Alex answered.

“My, how interesting. Shall we be off then?” Marks asked, turning to

look at me.

"Ya." I responded, lifting my helmet up "Bucket's on everyone, we're moving out!"

"Yes sir!" Marks' jovial voice shouted back. He slid around Alex allowing his hand to linger on the cartographer's shoulder for an extra few seconds as he passed. Then he along with his men marched off into the darkness. I looked to Alex who shrugged, slipped his helmet on, and rushed after them. The rest of us followed suit equipping our helmets and following after them.

Alex led us through the black maze stopping every few minutes to check his map. At one of these stops, Marks approached me from behind and coiled his arm around me.

"Hey there." He whispered, leaning into my ear.

"Most of my men are low on power, and the flashlights are draining what we have left."

"You want us to walk around blind?"

"Why not, sounds like fun doesn't it?"

"No."

"The map-man's the only one who needs the light to see where we're going. The rest of us are just wasting power. That said, if you'd rather do the latter half of the mission, blind and weaponless, be my guest, that could be fun too." I considered the suggestion. "Besides these lights make it easier for them to detect us. I nodded and reached up to my shoulder pressing one of the buttons on the upper section of my breastplate. My light flickered twice then fell into darkness. Marks chuckled and slinked back to the rest of the men. The lights behind me dimmed until only Alex's light remained to guide us forwards. As we made our way through the organs of the station, I could hear the men's breathing increase in volume, like they were gasping for air under unseen pressure. Off in the distance, my ears picked up the sound of skittering following along behind us. I ignored the noise and continued forward. We continued forward for hours following Alex's black silhouette behind the faint yellow glow of his lights. My legs grew heavy, I struggled to drag them forwards as I rocked from side to side. My muscles groaned in burning agony to the point I began to feel as though I was about to collapse under my own weight.

"Hold up." Alex whispered back to us. The unit stopped and waited as he looked around the hallway. "Light up, it will make this easier." We turned on our lights and examined the hallway.

"What are we looking for?" Dave asked as Alex moved about. "Service tunnel, a large one. Should be along the bottom of the wall."

"This it?" Jimmy called out, pointing to a large square tunnel about a meter wide. Black tendrils coiled over the rim of the shaft disappearing into the tunnel. Alex sprinted over and double-checked his map.

"Looks like that's it. This should take us up a few levels and exit right outside the main plaza."

"You want us to crawl through there?" Henry asked.

"It's the fastest way."

"There's no way I'm going to fit in there, let alone the flamer."

"Dave, think you can fit?" Alex asked, turning to the large tank-carrying man.

"Ya, just about."

"Well there we go then," Alex exclaimed looking back at Henry. "No problem then I assume."

"I'm not going in there."

"Alex," I interjected. "Head on in, we'll be right behind you." Alex nodded and crawled into the service tunnel. "Dave, you're next." Dave entered followed by Marks and his men until only Henry and I were standing outside the tunnel.

"I'm not going in." Henry reiterated. I raised my Razor C12 plasma rifle and pointed it at him. Henry reached for his gun.

"Don't." He froze. Slowly he raised his hands up from the gun and stared back at me. I waited and after a few minutes, he lowered himself to the ground and crawled into the tunnel. As soon as his feet disappeared into the tunnel I crouched down and followed in after him. I pushed into the chute crawling over the tendrils coating the walls of the deserted work-shaft. On hands and knees, we moved through the cramped tunnel while the thorny vines scraped against our armour. The tendrils reached out at us, hooking their thorns into the grooves of our suit. We continued forwards tearing the tendrils apart and splattering black mucus all over. Behind us, I heard footsteps of a creature pressing its paws against the tendrils and crushing them with a squelch. I turned to look back at the darkness, but could not see the thing within. The steps grew louder as the creature approached. I reached out to tap Henry on the leg, but my hand grasped at nothingness. I looked ahead to see that Alex's light had disappeared. Behind me, I could hear it getting closer and closer. I turned back around and aimed my razor at the noise. I tightened my finger around the trigger preparing to fire. The creature closed in. I raised my other hand to my button for my suit's headlight. Wet panting echoed in the shaft. I breathed in. Another step forwards. I could feel the flashlight button against my finger. Dripping saliva. A step forward. I squeezed my finger against the trigger. A blinding flash then silence. I tried to control my breathing, remaining as quiet as possible until a drop of black liquid fell on my helmet. I pulled the trigger firing hot plasma at the creature. In the light of the plasma blasts, I could see the grey and black monstrosity. With six limbs and covered in short pale horns. It howled as the plasma melted through its slime-coated skin burning a hole in its midsection. I scrambled back with a roar, firing at the thing as quickly as I could. I crawled on my back

deeper into the tunnel until the back of my head smashed into something. I turned to see Henry firing over-top me towards the beast. I looked back to see an empty tunnel stretch out into the darkness. Henry stopped firing letting silence permeate the air. He looked down at me.

"Hey what are we shooting at?" He whispered with a slight tremor in his voice.

"One of those creatures," I replied, looking back in his direction. Henry turned his light on to reveal a long corridor, empty aside from the tendrils.

"Everything ok back there?!" Dave shouted from the front.

"Ya!" I shouted back. "We're good, keep going!" The group began shuffling forwards. Henry looked down at me for a moment, before turning back around and following the troop. We pressed forwards through the metallic veins of the mechanical behemoth. All while those same footsteps stalked our progress haunting me from behind. After hours of cramped spaces, we emerged into an immense room. The floor of the hallway featured many platforms rising from left to right. Immediately we lit our torches and looked out at our surroundings. We had entered an immense hall with a towering roof hidden in the darkness. Long, rectangular platforms stretched out horizontally across the hall growing higher to the right and descending on the left. Gentle slopes connected the platforms together, allowing for ease of movement. Cubic buildings lined the walls on either side of the platform stretching up into the darkness. Black tendrils coated the buildings hiding their features beneath their interwoven mass. I nodded to Darren who revved up his Razor C12 and stabbed the chainsaw into the collection of limbs. The chain groaned as it began to cut through the vine's thick skin. Muck splattered out from the gash, coating Darren in dark slime. The rest of the unit spread out and surveyed the area checking for any possible threats. We moved through the open area securing the slopes on opposing sides of the platform. The previously dormant black vines began to squirm as if shaking themselves to life. I looked back to see Darren's cut had increased by only a few centimetres.

"Darren Stop!" I shouted at him. He pulled his weapon from the wall and turned off the power. "Alright, we gotta move fast," I called out to the group. "Dave, figure out how much alcohol we've got. Alex, figure out the general location of the entrance. Henry, get ready to drop a blockade. We're gonna block the entrance after we get in. The rest of you keep your razors ready and senses peeled." I left them to complete their tasks and walked towards the downward ramp. I looked over the edge of the platform to see a small form skittering through the darkness. No sign of anything big, but they were coming. The small ones didn't venture too far from the pack. I turned around and made my way back to the group.

"Got three bottles and a bit" Dave shouted to me as I approached. "Good, load it and make it count. Alex where we at?"

"It should be this wall," Alex responded, gesturing at one of the buildings connected to the wall.

"Gonna need you to be a bit more specific." Alex paced the wall with ever-shrinking laps until finally settling in one place.

"Here, roughly, I think."

"Alright. Dave over here! Get ready to go on my mark! Rest of you, semicircle, tight-knit, they're gonna be coming at as hard." I looked up into the impenetrable darkness and wondered what monstrosities lurked within.

"Dave, we ready?"

"We good!" He shouted back.

"Alright." I took a deep breath and readied my weapon. "Light'er up."

The flaming alcohol sprayed out like an angry geyser, watering the tendrils with droplets of blue flames. The tendrils desperately thrashed about whipping flaming droplets over the platform. Around us, the silent night grew boisterous. The tearing of metal and vomitous screeches echoing around as they descended upon us. We became caught up in the symphony of death firing blind into the darkness. The screams of my men joined with the shrieks of those creatures, building to an angry crescendo. Bile shot out from the darkness burning through our flesh like acid.

"The door!" A voice shouted as the creatures' viscous coats glistened in the light of our razor blasts. "I found the door!" The monsters lunged forward-thrusting their sharp bone claws through plated armour and soft flesh. They raised up the corpses in a euphoric display as blood and organs spilled down onto them like war paint. "Simon! The door!" I turned to see Dave slamming his shoulder into the metal door. The men switched their razors to melee mode. I grabbed Jimmy off the line and threw him at the door. The creatures pounced from the darkness, bile dripping from their grotesque maw. The door opening. The beast's corpses crumpling on our razors, weighing us down. Heads impaled on their white horns like ornaments. A light blaring into the courtyard revealing thousands of black eyes. My eardrums rupturing. A hand grabbing me and pulling. The electric hum of a plasma wall. Spinning and falling.

I realized I was lying on the ground staring up at the bright square panels that covered the ceiling. I tilted my head and looked over my surroundings. The room was clinical, cold metal walls devoid of black tendrils, and no entrances save for the faint blue glow behind me. I exhaled and laid my head back down on the ground. I let myself rest for a moment in the serenity of silence and allowed my breathing to slow to its usual rate.

"Who's left?" I asked the room.

"Marks, Jimmy, Henry, Darren, you and me." Alex responded, exhaling the names between breaths.

"Two engineers, one cartographer, and three soldiers."

"Yep."

"This the control room?"

"Looks like it"

"Alright. Jimmy, Henry, get to work." I ordered. I remained on the ground listening to them drag themselves to their feet. I closed my eyes as soft clacking of their fingers against the control panel filled the room.

"What happened to Dave?"

"Dead." Marks responded.

"How?" I asked. I waited for a response but the room remained silent. I asked again. "How did he die?"

"He wanted to make sure everyone else got in first." Marks answered in his slime-drenched diplomatic tone. "Unfortunately, he was so preoccupied with helping others he ended up sacrificing himself." I breathed out a jagged sigh that evaporated into silence. I waited there listening to the engineers tapping on their mobile interface tablets until I found my voice once more.

"Why'd you join the expedition?" I asked the room. No one responded. "It was a voluntary force, you all chose to come, why?" Jimmy spoke first.

"Most of my friends signed up." He explained while typing on his keypad. "I just went along with them. Only a couple of them left now though. I think John went with Malvich, but if our side is anything to go by..." his voice trailed off. Alex was next to break the silence.

"Seemed like a good deal at the time." Alex explained in a jovial tone. "A couple of weeks of work for first land picks. Seemed like a no-brainer, we'd been fighting for a few years already what's a couple more weeks." He let out a half-hearted chuckle that slowly died. He clasped his hands together and held them there while gently nodding his head. He continued this for a few minutes before finally breaking the silence with a deeper tone. "I'd heard the stories like everyone else, but after the 'Pillar Plaza Massacre' I thought we were invincible."

"Mh I'm sure the Barolians felt the same way before they met us." Marks interrupted. "Maybe this is what they felt like when it all came collapsing down around them." He suggested with a comical cadence that betrayed the smirk beneath his red-painted helmet. Alex turned to look at the corporal allowing for his words to hang in the silent air a few seconds before responding.

"What about you?" Alex inquired, his question laced with cold displeasure.

"Figured we see more action here than in Bastion." Marks snorted.

"I was looking for a real answer."

"That was a real answer." Marks responded, his typical sophomoric attitude replaced with a deliberate edge. Alex tilted his head back while staring directly back at Marks. He rolled his head back down and advanced towards Marks.

"So you're just going to keep fighting?" Alex asked as he moved to Marks' side and glared down at him. "Until you end up a corpse, like your friends outside?" Marks looked up at the cartographer and slowly lifted his blood-coated knife into the air and pointed it towards Alex's eyes.

"My friends never die." Marks hissed, pulling the knife to his armour and dragging three new red streaks across it. Alex stared down at him while Marks leaned back against the wall. Alex turned from him looking over to the remaining member of Marks' unit.

"What about you?" Alex said stepping over the corporal and advancing towards the silent figure. "You ready to end up like the rest of your unit?" The man called Darren stared off into the distance without acknowledging Alex's question. "Hey!" Alex shouted at the soldier taking a step towards him. "I'm talking to you!" Marks began to chuckle. "Hey!" Alex moved forward and grabbed the soldier. Darren's head twisted towards Alex in a slow tensing motion until coming to a stop with their visors within centimeters of each other. Still, the being known as Darren remained silent. Alex's grip tightened.

"Hey! You want to fight, save it for those things outside." I ordered. Alex's arms trembled but eventually released. Alex stared at the soldier for a few seconds before he turned and walked off to another section of the room. I watched the strange jerking movement of Darren's head as he turned it back to its original position. Once again silence filled the room and no one dared utter a phrase.

"What about you sir?" Jimmy's voice chimed out from the other side of the room.

"What about me?"

"Why did you join the expedition? Everyone else gave their answers already?"

"Karl asked for volunteers." Marks' head cocked at the answer.

"No ulterior reason? You descended into the pit just because he asked."

"Pretty much." Marks chuckled.

"If Karl told you to jump off a bridge, would you do that too?"

"I probably would have." Marks burst into a fit of laughter. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye as he doubled over.

"Loyalty is the highest virtue, and he hasn't steered us wrong yet." I argued. Henry snorted.

"You misunderstand, I am not ridiculing your reasoning." Marks explained. "I think you, of all of us, have the best reason."

"Great to hear coming from the crazy guy," Henry interjected. Marks ignored the comment and chuckled as he leaned back against the wall.

"If you have something you want to say, say it," I ordered, turning to face the engineer.

"It's fine, I know how you feel about people questioning you."

"It's fine." I groaned. "I don't mind you sharing your opinions." I explained before reminding him, "as long as you follow orders." Henry continued working at the interface for a few minutes until he worked up the courage to speak.

"He can be wrong."

"What?"

"Karl isn't a god. He can make mistakes, like coming here," Henry explained.

"We've yet to see whether this was a mistake or not."

"Look around you!" Henry shouted as he turned to face the unit. "We started with ten men! We've lost nearly half our unit in our first engagement!"

"An engagement we won might I remind you."

"One more victory like that and someone will have to complete the mission solo." He scoffed

"Henry," I said, tempering my voice. "We're going to get through this. We can get through this, but in order to do that I need you on team."

"You want to talk about the team?! The best thing to do for the team is to head back to Bastion. If Karl wants to die in this place, I say let him."

"We wouldn't make it." Alex's calm voice interjected. "Bastion is weeks away by standard march. Even if we had our food reserves on hand, we'd have to cover much of the same territory we crossed to get here. There's safety in numbers, if we went alone we'd be picked off one by one, or wholly slaughtered by one of their roving bands."

"We're surviving out here just fine." Henry retorted.

"Weren't you just complaining that we're getting all our men killed?" Marks reminded the engineer with a chuckle. Before Henry could respond Alex interjected once again.

"We're only a few hours away from camp. Most of the groups near us are going to target the larger force."

"Then were we just attacked?" Henry asked with rhetorical indignation.

"Like I said, most." Henry stared at Alex for a moment before he could speak, Jimmy's voice rang out.

"Sir, it's online." I sighed and pulled myself up to my feet.

"Alright I'm coming." I jogged over to the console watching as Jimmy pressed a few more buttons on his tablet. "So, tell me what we got here?"

"Got surveillance working, though most of the cams are blocked or broken. Most of the other sensors are working fine. Malvich's team got to their target before us, they're probably the reason the lights are on." Jimmy pointed to a monitor showing Malvich and a couple of men standing in a room filled with control panels and large screens. Malvich leaned against a wall watching as the two men worked the panels.

"You see-"

"Ya, he's the one farther back." I clapped Jimmy on the shoulder.

"Then I guess things are looking up eh? What about our mission, everything working on our end?"

"Yep, Henry's just trying to get the comms working."

"I thought signals could only reach a few feet down here."

"Our comm's range has been diminished, but there's a cable system installed for security purposes. It connects to the power plant, so we should be able to talk with Malvich's team. Might be a good idea to meet up with them on the way to camp. There aren't many of us left, and Malvich's team looks like they suffered even worse losses."

"Not sure I want to be waiting around out there at a rendezvous point."

"I see what you're saying, but look here." Jimmy pointed to one of the monitors. It was a security camera from the entrance to the power plant. The front lights formed a bright empty semicircle around the entrance. "What am I looking for?"

"The shadows just on the outskirts of the light." I stared for a moment as a slight movement drew my eyes. I could see the shifting claws slowly stalking around the ring of light. Then for a moment, a faint reflection swimming across the mucus coating the large creature's hide. "For whatever reason, those things aren't going near the light."

"Maybe that's why the encampment has been so effective." I mused. "The plasma shield generates light that keeps them at bay."

"Why not use that to our advantage?"

"How so?"

"Alex!" Jimmy called out to the cartographer. Alex looked back at us and rushed over as Jimmy explained his plan. "Security station is equipped with light controls for emergency situations. If we plan out our routes, we can activate the lights along that path. We set up a rendezvous and not only does it make our journey a little safer, but it will also save on energy usage."

"Think energy will be a problem?" I asked. Jimmy shrugged.

"It's an old power station that hasn't been serviced in centuries. We should assume the worst."

"Alright, Alex, get a route together for the journey back," I ordered.

"Got it. I can probably modify our old plan to include a rendezvous." Alex offered, pulling his maps out of his pack.

"I have contact!" Henry called out to me. I jogged over to the comm.

"Sergeant Simon here, elevation tube is online, what's your status?"

"General Malvich here. Whole group's been wiped out aside from the three of us. We're planning to cut a path through those things with what's left of our flamers and make a break for camp." Alex came over and laid his map down on the console. I looked over the map to see numerous scraps of paper,

scribbled with notes, sewn over top. The notes were so prolific they hid most of the blue and white of the original map beneath.

"Your cartographer still alive?"

"No, got a soldier and an engineer left."

"Alright, we got a plan we think might work. I'm gonna put on my cartographer to explain the details." While Alex explained the plan to the commander, I joined Henry to take a look at the main camp using the security system.

"They've fared a lot better than we have," Henry informed me with a tinge of bitter vindication. "Looks like they fended off an attack or two with minimal casualties."

"How can you tell?"

"It's hard to see because they're the same texture as the tendrils, but if you look closely," Henry traced his finger in a deformed circle on the screen, "you can see the parts where the black is... glossier." I squinted my eyes and began to notice the corpses littered around the room. As I surveyed the carnage, some soldiers by the elevation tube caught my attention. I pointed it out to Henry.

"Engineers?"

"Yep." Henry answered in an annoyed monotone voice. "Probably running tests to figure out how many they can send down in the first wave."

"Think it will work?"

"Well, if it doesn't, we're all dead. If it does, we're still probably dead." I sighed and pressed my fingers against the side of my helmet.

"Alright. We got anything more to do here?"

"No, we ran some diagnostics, and everything seems to be in order. I would recommend sealing the door behind us. It could be pretty bad if one of those things got loose in here."

"Alright, we'll leave behind an energy wall in the doorway. Hook up the energy pack with the least charge. It won't buy us much time, but we can't afford to run out of power."

"Hopefully it doesn't run out." Henry murmured as he turned from the console. I ignored the remark and turned to the cartographer.

"Alex, we good?"

"Ya." He answered as he packed his map back into his pack. "We're going to meet at a rendezvous point a floor up, and take the elevation tube down to camp. Figured better to test it over a few floors, before heading down for real. Plus it's faster."

"Jimmy, how are our lights?"

"All good!" Jimmy called back.

"Alright boys we're moving out, with any luck we'll be on our way back home before the end of tomorrow." With that everyone gathered their things and did a quick check around the room. With our things packed and our

razors ready we moved out into the now illuminated courtyard. The large hall was lit up like the upper floors of the station. A sticky residue drenched the walls in place of where the tendrils once were. I caught the last of the tendrils wriggling back into the service tunnels. Beyond the reach of the light, I could see the faint forms of those grotesque creatures stalking us. I turned from them and led my men back towards the camp.

The first few hours of our journey were uneventful. The tendrils had pulled back from the illuminated hall and into the darkness. While we on occasion caught glimpses of the things moving within the dim light, they did not approach beyond the shadows. We travelled the long-abandoned hallway passing hundreds of locked metal doors until we came upon an open room. The room had a rectangular floor shape with three hollow glass cylinders lined against the right wall. On the opposite end of the room from the cylinders was a strange rectangular cuboid. The prism was a pale magenta colour with long worming protrusion with fringed sides adorning its surface. I looked back at my swaying men and decided to order a rest. My men entered the room and sat down with their razors pointed towards the entrance, then began pulling out their ration boxes. I opened my box to reveal the five remaining pemmican bars within. I unwrapped one of the bars and snapped it in half placing one half beside me and the other back in the box. I then closed the box, locked it shut, and put it back in my pack. I pulled out my canteen and swished around the remaining water to determine how little remained before returning it to my side. I walked over to the strange cylinders and examined them. They rose to about my waist and were about as wide as my arm. At the bottom of the cylinder was a small circular metal disk, with a vertical crack along the centre. I turned from the cylinders and went to sit down on the strange box. The fringes were a little uncomfortable, but not very after weeks of tendril covered floor. I lifted my pemmican bar to my mouth and took a bite out of the fruity meat. I made sure to chew slowly to savour what little rations I was allowed. As I ate my mind wandered and began to contemplate our situation. Was any of this really necessary? There were several species exclusive to the citadel, why did we need our own planet? Was this worth the lives it cost?

"Simon!" A voice called out to me from the entryway. "Would you mind coming over here a sec." I turned to see Alex looking over at me. I shoved the last of the pemmican into my mouth and walked over to him. As I approached, he gestured to the hallway. I looked out and noticed most of the lights we passed had gone dark. We stood in silence as our hope dimmed like the flickering lights.

"Men!" I shouted. "Let's hurry it up." We rushed towards the rendezvous point. Behind us, the black abyss encroached ever closer. Indescribable sounds rose from the shadows as its monsters stalked us from the dark. Wet vile smacked against walls with a metallic screech. Ahead of us we could hear shouting over the sound of razor blasts.

"Keep shooting!" Malvich's voice echoed through the hall. We raced towards the source arriving at a dark hall branching off our main route. "Don't let them get close!" We heard Malvich shout from within. Jimmy didn't wait for orders and rushed forwards blasting hot plasma into the black.

"Jimmy!" I shouted as he disappeared into the darkness. "Fuck, formation now!" I revved the C-12. Behind us, the darkness raced towards us. Alex grabbed me stating.

"No, we need to go." Before us, the blasting grew louder. The sounds of splattering blood and mucus drenched the auditory senses. Animalistic screeching thundered from the corridor invoking a mangled shock. Behind us, the beats of the stampede followed the coming darkness growing louder and closer. I turned to Alex. "That hall's dead end, and we're an hour away from the rendezvous. It's not them." I glared back into the void. "We have to move now!" I could hear them all around us, racing towards us, bearing their serrated teeth dripping with green venom. Their bone claws burrowing into the station's soft metal and launching towards us. They were coming. "Simon now!" I heard one of the men bolt down the hall away from the darkness. I could hear Marks laughing. Alex tore the helmet from his head and threw it to the ground. The void was coming. Alex grabbed my collar and pulled me down to his eye level. "Run or die!" He shouted looking up at me with a wide-eyed panicked stare.

"Run." We raced along the illuminated path as the darkness swallowed up everything behind us. Soon the hallway from whence we heard Malvich's cries were also consumed by the void. The darkness did not stop and began to gain on us as the lights began to dim faster. Soon the darkness was upon us snuffing out the lights as we raced beneath them. I watched the light pass farther into the distance before us. We sprinted onwards, chasing the light as the blackness began to enrapture us. The vision around us faded. I could hear them right behind me, their wet lips spreading into a savage grin.

"Alex?!"

"Keep running!" Alex shouted back. I could feel the creatures breathing down my neck, sniffing at it. They were here and the light was not.

"There's an access panel at the rendezvous point." I looked around at the men surrounding us then turned back to Alex.

"Where's Henry?" A few seconds of silence as Alex took a swig from his canteen. "Ran ahead."

"Think radio will reach?" I asked, huffing the words out. Alex lifted his hand to the side of his head and grasped at an intangible helmet that was no longer there. I reached up to my helmet and pressed the comms button. "Henry, access panel at rendezvous dead ahead." My headset crackled with static as a garbled response came back over the comm. I smacked my hand against the side of my helmet. "Repeat. Access panel at rendezvous. Dead ahead. Fix lights." A chaotic jumble of buzzing filled my helmet mixed with a

high-pitched screeching whine. I smashed my hand against the side of my helmet. "Rendezvous ahead! Access panel! Fix lights!" My helmet went silent, my comms popped and a dark sombre voice responded.

"Come." Then the world went dark. I ran or merely thought I was running. I felt nothing but the sense of its presence. It was everywhere and nowhere. It surrounded me. In it were the monsters, or the monsters were it, or we were the monsters. Ahead of me, I could see a rectangle of light beckoning me to safety. I could hear screeching metal as those things snapped at my armour and ripped their pearl claws across my suit's flesh. The light drew closer. I was almost there. I could hear my armour being crushed beneath their bite force. Around me, flashes of invisible beams shot through me shredding me apart and watering the tendrils with my blood. I could feel the tendrils absorbing my drying blood into their blackened form as the creatures tore off chunks of my flesh and swallowed them. I could still see the light, a lighthouse beckoning me from my death and willing the fragments of my misshapen flesh towards the hope in drunken desperation. I reached forwards and, with the last of what might I could muster, threw myself towards the light as hard as I could. I sailed over the snapping tendrils and beasts, into the closing light and landed on the other side. The metallic door closed behind me as I looked up just in time to see Henry collapse to the ground beside the access panel. I panted into my helmet as the light once again disappeared from my vision and I fell unconscious.

"Rise and shine." A familiar voice slithered in my ear. My eyes cracked open to reveal harsh white lights blaring down from atop the metal walls.

"How long was I out?"

"Who knows?" Marks answered.

"A couple hours." I heard Alex shout from across the room. I turned my head to look at the cartographer laying back against the wall map in hand. I looked around to see all my men accounted for save Jimmy.

"When's Malvich supposed to get here?"

"He was supposed to get here before us." Alex answered. I looked back the way we came. The hall was blocked by two metallic doors interlocked at the centre.

"Any sign they were here already?"

"None."

"Write a note for them by the access panel. We need to keep moving." Alex nodded and pulled some spare paper from his pack. While he scribbled down a message, I turned to Marks.

"Everyone ready to go?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"Alright let's move." I forced myself onto my feet and made my way towards the elevation tubes. The rest of the unit followed suit stumbling after me. To our surprise, the lighting remained undisturbed throughout our journey.

After a few hours march, we finally arrived at the elevation tube. We stepped into the glass elevation chamber and waited as Henry punched something into his tablet. Upon the final tap, the elevation system groaned to life and we began to sink beneath the floor. We passed many floors unable to see what lay beyond the mass of tendrils coating the tube's glass walls. We continued descending passing the final floor and into the great chamber from which we had set out. Dim red lights radiated from the ceiling casting the faintest of glows down on the room below. I looked out to see our encampment on the other side of the room shining a pale blue light out into the dim room. Scattered around the room were portable light beacons illuminating the corpse field surrounding the encampment. Beneath us was a large square platform that the elevation tube exited onto. Atop the platform were many engineers walking about performing their tasks. I notice a group of men tottering towards the base of the elevation tube. They swayed from side to side as they made their way to within a few feet of the tube's exit. Two barriers shot up as the sluggish guards prepared for a hostile encounter. Finally, the elevation shuttle came to a halt and the glass doors opened before us. We stared out at the six men standing behind their barricades aiming their C-12s towards us. We waited in silence. The soldiers opposite us said nothing. Marks stepped out of the elevation tube and walked towards the men waking them from their silence.

"Identify yourself." The leader ordered. Marks continued forwards.

"Relax." Marks responded with his answer taking on the qualities of a sickening whisper without lowering in volume.

"Who are you?"

"We're soldiers, warriors of the Kaiser's most illustrious army." Marks explained his pace quickening.

"Marks stop," I ordered.

"What is your name and rank?!" The corporal shouted.

"We are he who never dies!" Marks shouted back.

"Sergeant Simon." I shouted over the two. "Karl ordered me to lead a war-group to get the elevation tubes operational." Marks came to a halt tilting his head back to look at me.

"Never any fun."

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" The corporal asked.

"You know anything down here that's human-shaped or wears our armour?" I responded. The corporal continued aiming his gun at us, but his subordinates began drifting off. The corporal looked around at his abandoning men and then he too lowered his C-12.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks." He turned from me and stumbled after his men.. I turned to what remained of my men and dismissed them from duty. Together we walked back to the encampment and upon reaching the safety of its interior went our

separate ways. I returned to the yurt and caught the Kaiser just as he was leaving the tent. The Kaiser invited me inside to give my report which the Kaiser listened to without interruption. Once I had completed my explanation of the ordeals we went through the Kaiser asked me one question.

"Are you sure Malvich wasn't in that hallway?"

"I'd bet my life on it." The Kaiser nodded. "Very well, we'll wait a few more hours for him while the engineers perform some tests, then we'll head down." He got up and began to move before stopping and turning to face me again. "Oh right, dismissed." I turned to leave but felt something stop me.

"Sir?"

"Yes."

"Is this really worth it?" The Kaiser sighed.

"For you? No."

"Then why?"

"I wasn't thinking about you or even your immediate family. I was thinking about your..." he paused. "Our descendants, generations from now."

"They can't live here?"

"They could, but that doesn't mean they should. There are two modes for any empire or species; They can expand, or they can die. To expand, to grow stronger and more powerful as a species, we need resources, opportunities, real sovereignty. Only a planet can offer us those things."

"I don't know, there are many species trapped on the citadel who have stayed here for thousands of years."

"And look at them. Small enclaves, unfit and unable to enter the upper station. Trapped between the galactic powers on top, and whatever these things are below. Their enclaves are a temple to their species' deaths. A slow inglorious death." The Kaiser took off his helmet and walked up to me so that I could see clearly into his blue eyes. "We are the last humans, a once numerous species reduced to a few thousand. Trapped in a shanty town set up in an old abandoned cargo-bay. We don't have the room to expand, nor the food supplies. If not for the casualties in the war, we'd already be starving." His words dripped with bitter anger. "This planet offers us a chance to do more, be more, to truly take our place amongst the stars and determine our future." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Your future and your children's future." I nodded to the Kaiser. The Kaiser nodded back and slid his helmet over his head before exiting the yurt. After a few moments I exited the tent too.

After a few hours the engineers had finished running their tests, and Malvich had still not returned, and the Kaiser ordered the soldiers to pack up and advance. Once the army arrived at the elevation platform, the Kaiser picked out six men to lead the waves down. The Kaiser led the first group, I led the last. As soldiers began to coalesce around the various commanders Alex walked over and stood beside me. Marks' and his unit, which had

already found three new men, joined me soon after. I greeted Marks' new underlings. but they, like Darren, remained silent and inexpressive. I looked around to see if Henry would be joining us, but I didn't see him in any of the groups. Once the impromptu battle groups were formed the Kaiser walked up to the elevation tube and punched the destination into the interface. I turned to Alex and asked.

"Any idea where we're headed?" Alex stared at the elevation tube before turning back to me.

"The heart of the station."

I turned back to watch the first group descend and disappear into the darkness below. We waited, but the platform did not return and I could feel they were dead. The tube came back to life and the platform lifted itself back to our level. The second group entered the death trap. The elevation tube hummed to life and the group sank beneath the floor. Above us, the tendrils began to encase the red lights drenching the room in darkness. The platform returned to reap more souls pulling our suicidal parade into its depths. The room grew darker. I could hear black claws skittering along the walls as the platform came back to life. I heard screams inside me, rising. The platform, rising. I tried to keep them down. Wet bile hit the ground sizzling in voracious fury. Death skittering in the darkness. Rising. Last group, death or death. Skitter, drip, growl. We entered the tube. A blast, a scream, death or death. The tube doors closed. Cursing. Blood and bile. Slush. Death or death. Lowering into our grave. We landed in a hallway. Black bile dripped from the crevices between the tendrils coating the ceiling. These tendrils maintained a stillness that gave the hall an eerie silence, aside from the sporadic drip of the tendrillike mucus.

"Form ranks." The Kaiser whispered. We fell into our columns and marched down the hall. The tendrils pressed themselves against the floor forming a somewhat flat covering for us to walk over. As we marched, I heard a man ahead of me whisper something about a light. I looked ahead, but couldn't see any light source. We marched forwards. Beneath me, I noticed the tendrils became thicker as we marched farther down the hall. I heard another man claim he could see light in the distance. I looked out into the black cavity engulfing us. I strained my eyes peering forwards with everything I had left, and then I saw it. A speck of faint white light in the distance burning the centre of my vision. The shape of the light grew more defined revealing a white doorway at the end of the hall. We marched forwards. I could hear a faint hum coming from the light. The humming blared louder and the light grew brighter. The blinding white seared my vision burning my retinas. Blood trickled from my ears as the humming enraptured my mind. It squirmed through my brain digging through the folds and sinking its hooks into the crevices. I felt it dragging my body forwards towards its source. We marched forwards. I could feel my consciousness passing through countless elongated

fingers coiled around my surroundings providing me with a tactile view of the lower station. I could hear it whispering as it tendrils probed through my mind. Sliding into the folds of my cortex. Memories flash before me as the coils send electrical shocks into my brain. Its whispering vines curled around my consciousness searching for something.

"Why are you here?" The creature whispered in a hypnotic trance. Memories flashed before my eyes. Visions of Bastion, visions of the war, visions of him.

"I did it because he asked." I saw images of death and slaughter. The loss of friends I held dear. Dave's face the last time I saw him and I knew what the creature wanted to know. The tendril gripped tight and I whispered,

"yes." The creature pulled me towards the entrance, towards the source of the light, towards its brain and heart. I passed the threshold and entered the room. I looked out over the room with my blind vision and for the first time in my life, I could see. I watched as we all moved forwards in unison through the spherical room. Along the circumference of the hollow ball, was a walkway reaching a few feet out from the walls. We followed the path spreading out along the ledge so that our toes just touched the edge. Service tunnels dotted the top and bottom of the room's domes allowing access for a plethora of tendrils. Tendrils shot into the room from these holes wrapping together and fusing to form a network of branches and roots. The roots and branches twisted together in the middle to form a single trunk at the centre of the room. At the centre of the trunk, the tendril bulged out into a sphere, shifting in around each other as the tendrils burned. Through the cracks in the bulge, I could see the source of the blinding light. We stood in awe waiting as a large tendril arose before us. The Kaiser stretched his hand out towards the tendril. A second tendril slithered up the side of the ledge, coiled around the Kaiser's waist, and lifted him into the air. The first tendril turned to hover over him. Minutes passed in silence, both the Kaiser and the tree remained motionless. Then the Kaiser opened his mouth, allowing the tendril to pass into his throat. The tendril slithered deeper into him. A slight struggle, then stillness. Then the tendril receded, and it put the Kaiser back down on the ledge. Another tendril rose up with a flower bud at the tip opening to reveal a small crystal. The Kaiser took the crystal from the tendril and led the men back down the hall toward the platform. Before us, the rooms seemed to shift with halls appearing that were not there before. I felt myself lose my sense of balance as we stumbled through the maze. Within hours we had left the tendrils behind and entered Bastion. Upon our arrival, women swarmed the remaining men and searched for their families in silence. Wailing began to fill the streets. Some men left the melancholic triumph to reunite with those important to them. Some followed the Kaiser to the central square. He stepped up onto the stage as he'd done so many times before and looked out over the crowd.

"Loyal citizens." He began. "I left Bastion with near four hundred men. Today I return with but an eighth of that." He paused and looked over the crowd. "The horrors of the pit are unlike anything I've ever seen before, and I hope, unlike anything we'll see again. We all owe an immense and personal debt to all those who volunteered to join this expedition. If not for their bravery and sacrifice, we would not be here today. If not for their bravery and sacrifice, we would be stuck here on this station." He pulled the jewel from his pouch and shouted. "Look to me! A crystal of the deep!" He held it out over the crowd showing it off to the audience. "With this, we have fulfilled our contract with the Vorgoth. I will not pretend our victory is anything but bittersweet, but finally, we have a chance at the destiny we were cheated from. A chance at a life surrounded by green fields and blue skies, instead of metal and plasma. A chance at a life that would not be possible without these great forefathers. The martyrs of our nation whose names will carry forever forwards as a legacy on which we will build our nation." I looked around at the people watching the speech. Their faces were a mixture of sadness, acceptance, but most of all the one emotion I saw on everyone's features was hope.

Soon after the Kaiser met with the Vorgoth representative and transportation arrangements were made. Some people refused to abandon Bastion, most chose to leave. On the day of the departure a great exodus took place. Members of the empire marched through the upper station to the Great Docking Ring as the inhabitants stared out from their balcony suites. Docked at the GDR was an assortment of mercantile ships hired by the Vorgoth to deliver us to our promised land. Soon enough we were orbiting the planet dubbed New Bastion. Areas were selected and divided into sections for us to select from. Being one of the higher ranking members to have survived the expedition I was one of the first to select their plot. This was followed by the closest kin of the expedition's deceased, the rest of the military and then the populace at large. I retired to my homestead to live a simple life farming. To this day I still don't know the details of what occurred between the Kaiser and that tendriled thing, nor do I have any desire to. These days I look at the smiling faces of my grandchildren and I am content to trust the Kaiser's judgment.