

The Shipyard

Alana tightened the clasps on her combat vest and grabbed her helmet, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She powered up the helmet's holo display, checking that her drones were active. Three green pips lit up on the side of her gloves, indicating that all three robots in their charging cradles outside were ready. Taking one last sip from her cup of pareto, Alana stepped out of the guard room.

Outside, the peculiar purple-red of the Maelstrom lit the shipyard. The sun wouldn't come up for another three hours, and a few years ago the sky behind the half-completed spaceships would have been a dark black. Now, like many aspects of life on Zycanthus, things had changed. In the months since the Karist Enclave had destroyed the orbital refineries above the planet, the Maelstrom had got much closer. The tidal wave of dark energy that would soon destroy the planet created a sickly purple light from dusk till dawn, a nightly reminder to the citizens of Zycanthus of their impending doom.

Although late, noise still arose from the shipyard gates, where scores of protestors had their encampment. The shacks and tents grew every day, new refugees desperate to get a place on the evacuation ships by whatever means necessary.

When Alana had enlisted in the Epirian Foundation, she hadn't imagined she'd be a patrol guard, protecting one of Zycanthus' shipyards from its own citizens. But these were difficult times. Her drones beeped a greeting as she approached their charging cradles. The wall outside the guard room was lined with the grey metal boxes that charged the drones, and around a hundred of the robots were connected to the facility. It was easy for Alana to pick out hers, by the way they leapt out of their charging cradles in recognition of her presence.

"Hi, Brakka, Couples, EeeBee," she said. "Activate."

The drones made agreeable noises and unplugged themselves from their charging cradles. The robots were about the size of a suitcase, painted a dull grey similar to that of the concrete building they protected. Although they were built around the same modular chassis, each drone was fitted with different propulsion methods. Brakka the firefly drone hovered, his rotors spinning with a faint whine, whilst Couples rolled along the ground on caterpillar treads and the team's newest recruit, the spider drone EeeBee, stood on four robotic limbs like a giant metal bug.

"It's time to get to work."

They queried her about the mission, flashing messages up on her wrist computer.

"Just a normal patrol today guys," she told them, "Standard scouting setup."

The drones beeped in acknowledgement and rolled, flew and clambered their way towards the equipment station. As they slid into place, robotic arms reached down to install sensors and weapons onto their backs.

The drones were about as intelligent as a dog, able to follow simple commands but not able to truly think for themselves. As their handler, Alana was responsible for their training, and commanding them both in routine work and in the heat of battle. As drone controllers, they were encouraged by their instructors to give their drones names rather than the simple alphabetical designation given by the factory, so that they would care more about their charges.

"Hey Ally," said Barrett, one of the other controllers. He was just finishing his sweep, and his two bulky Hunters stomped along behind him, heading for their charging stations. The Hunters were much taller than Barrett by several feet, their bulky frames and chainguns far more of a threat when the fight got started.

"Hi Barrett." Alana grinned and pretended to prop her eyes open. "Nice early start again... anything happen overnight?"

"Not much." He jerked a thumb towards the shantytown outside the gates. "The great unwashed are getting restless, though. Keep an eye out."

"I will," she said. "Thanks."

Barrett began pulling the chainguns from his Hunters and preparing them for cleaning. He looked up as Alana left the compound.

"Fancy grabbing something to eat later? I hear there's a new shipment of vegetables from offworld."

"Can't tonight," she said. "I'm expecting a call from my family. Command reckons they might have got to the next staging post."

"Great!" Barrett said. "What's that, two more to go until they can settle?"

"Three," Alana said, "but yeah, pretty close."

"Couple more years and you'll be heading out that way too."

Alana glanced up at the purple skies, and thought about the destruction that approached.

"Yeah..." she said. "Only a couple more years of this. No worries."

Barrett laughed, and waved her out. Alana used the control pad on her wrist to send her drones the waypoints for their patrol, and settled into a stride around the shipyard compound. Brakka shot out ahead, skimming through the air at head height, his infrared cameras scanning for movement. Couples scooted a few metres in front of Alana, whilst EeeBee, still quite unwilling to stray too far from his controller, skittered across the ground, keeping close to her side.

"It's ok," she told EeeBee, "You're doing a good job."

She wasn't sure the four-legged drone's processor could feel nervous, but EeeBee was definitely still very cautious. Brakka and Couples had been given to Alana when she started her training, along with a third, Appleby, her favourite. He'd been destroyed in an attack by members of the Karist Enclave a few months later, disintegrated by a blast of destructive cybel energy whilst they guarded an important supply convoy from the mines in the mountains to the north.

Appleby's replacement, Drigger, had only lasted a few weeks. He hadn't been as well-trained as the others, and his lack of caution had got him destroyed by a booby-trap on the shipyard's fence. Alana was determined not to make the same mistake with EeeBee, and had been giving the spider drone extra training on her days off.

They made their way along the tall perimeter fence, all four of them scanning for threats. It was easy to get bored or distracted doing this everyday, but Alana had seen too many surprise attacks and jury-rigged traps to lose focus. The Karist Enclave's attack on the refineries had kickstarted conflict all across the world, so the Epirian Foundation was dealing with not just the Karist religious extremists, but also the Artarian Remnant fleet that had appeared in orbit, and the Broken rebels who'd used the Foundation's moment of weakness as an opportunity to seize control of many towns in the South.

In the face of all those threats, it was hard to imagine anything more important than what she was protecting. The shipyard behind her churned out a new vessel every month, rugged tunnelhuggers that could take a few thousand lucky souls away from their doomed world. By joining the Epirian Foundation and signing up to this rotation, Alana had secured her parents and little brother a place on a ship that had eventually left a few months ago. Now they were far away from Maelstrom, and the destruction and chaos of Zycanthus as society collapsed under the strain of impending apocalypse.

Flying up in the air ahead of them, Brakka flashed her a warning message over her wristpad. Movement flickered amongst the protestor's tents at the gates.

"I see it Brakka," she said, walking towards the fence. In between the hodgepodge spires of the protestor tents, a crowd had gathered. In the early morning gloom it was difficult to make out how far back the crowd went, but there were at least a few hundred, the front row pressed against the bars of the compound's gate, the back of the crowd filtering into the shadows of the camp and the darkness of the twilight. Alana slipped a hand down to the holster at her belt, flipping the catch open so she could reach her weapon more easily.

"EeeBee," she told the drone at her legs, "activate facial recognition. Let's see if we can't identify a few of the idiots before they do something stupid. And Brakka, Couples, let's stay alert, ok?"

The drones beeped and formed a tighter circle around her as they reached the compound gates and stepped into the full view of the protestors. Even next to the buzzing electrified fence, they showed little signs of fear. She scanned the crowd for troublemakers as she slowly walked past. Many of them were hooded, and a few further back had masks, destroying any attempt identifying them.

Placards and electronic messages stuck up at random angles, declaring the Epirian government of Zycanthus illegitimate and calling for free access to the evacuation ships. The Epirian governor of Zycanthus, First Settler Tobias Legarde, was depicted in a variety of unflattering or violent images. One sign had a video running of Legarde's head being chopped off by a guillotine.

The protestors stared at Alana, eyes so full of hatred she couldn't keep eye contact with any of them without flinching. All ages, races and species were represented, from teenage boys with red hair and freckles to gnarled old gnolti, giant hulking creatures eight foot tall, skin as hard as old tree roots.

The shipyard had a perimeter measuring in the tens of kilometres, and every entrance had its problems with protestors, rebels and sabotage. Alana and Barrett's little patrol area was unimportant of itself, but if an attack happened on their patch and they didn't raise the alarm and delay the attackers long enough for reinforcements to arrive from the shipyard's central barracks a few clicks away, it could mean the difference between an escape ship off the planet and a long painful death.

"Dirty Foundation bitch," one of them hissed at her. "Do you sleep with those robots too?"

"She doesn't deserve a place on those ships," another said. "We should be saving humans, not a bunch of rusty machines and their robot lovers."

Her drones were capable of interpreting language as prelude to a threat, and Brakka, always the most aggressive of Alana's charges, began to spool up the guns mounted beneath his rotors.

"Easy, Brakka," she said, tapping restraining orders into her wristpad, "don't shoot anyone unless they attack. We don't want to give them any excuse for the kind of thing we saw at Grabel Station."

The drones complied, keeping their guns activated but without firing. Her presence at the gate had fired up the crowd, however, and the noise from the protestors grew.

"Salvation for the living!" someone shouted out, and the crowd picked up on the chant, hurling the words at her like they were weapons. "Death to the mech!"

Amongst the more aggressive protestors at the front of the crowd, there were other, more despondent petitioners. These were often those who had been there for longer, and had given up hope of their protests succeeding. Or they were those with nowhere else to go. Alana spotted a tired young mother, matted hair clinging to her head, skin beige with dust, clinging to a sallow-skinned child who could have been five but could have been a starved seven year old.

Seven, Alana thought. The same age as her sister Sara, but with no one able to swap service in the Foundation for her safety. The child clutched a battered cuddly toy, one of the fluffy winged Angels that had become popular since the amorphous aliens began appearing in the planet's atmosphere.

"Please," the mother said. Her eyes implored Alana, but there was nothing that she could do to help them. There just weren't enough ships to rescue everybody. She had to keep walking, and do her duty, knowing that by protecting the shipyard, she was helping rescue as many people from Zycanthus as possible.

"Patrol, this is base." The voice of the operator at the shipyard's security cut in over her thoughts. "Report in."

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Alana replied. "The crowd's restless, but no more than usual."

"Keep an eye out," base replied. "We have word that--"

"Word that what?" Alana said, tapping her earpiece. "What's going on?"

The fence a few hundred yards behind her exploded in a shower of sparks with the high pitched whipping sound of taut cables suddenly being cut. Several members of the crowd screamed and fell back, sliced open by the snapped steel.

Through the smoke, several masked figures slipped into the compound, spitting automatic fire in her direction.

“Condition red,” Alana shouted into her headpiece as she stumbled back towards cover. “I repeat, condition red. The perimeter fence has been breached by an unknown number of hostiles. I need backup, now!”

Crouching behind a delivery truck, Alana turned her attention to her drones. Brakka and Couples had responded immediately to the threat. Couples advanced towards the attackers, spraying bursts of fire at their heads. Brakka swooped in close to the fence, launching a phalanx of self-guiding rockets that tore into the rebel position.

EeeBee, unused to combat, remained close to Alana, sensors and weapon arms spinning wildly, unable to process all this new information. She threw together some quick codes and commands on her wristpad, trying to give the drone some more guidance.

“Come on Eee,” she muttered, wondering if something had gone wrong at the factory that caused the drone’s apparent cowardliness. “It’s not supposed to be this difficult.”

Whilst Alana watched in horror as one of the rebel figures fired a rocket-propelled grenade at Brakka. The missile streaked upwards, its white smoke trail drawing a curly path straight up into her oldest drone. Brakka disintegrated in a ball of fire.

“No!” she cried.

As if sharing her grief, Couples picked up his assault, rolling forward on his treads, firing round after round into the rebel stronghold, blowing away the rebel with the RPG. Despite her difficulties with EeeBee and the loss of Brakka, Alana felt like she if she could just keep the attackers where they were for a bit longer, the reinforcements would surely be able to get to her.

Something large and fast pulled apart the damaged fence rails next to Couples. Alana recoiled as she saw the gnolti step through the new hole in the fence, ripping off one of the metal fence rails with one hand. Without the electrification, the four inch steel post snapped like a matchstick in the gnolti’s hand. It swung the metal down towards Couples, smashing the drone like crushing a bug with a hammer.

Gnolti had long been a feature of many worlds. Found by humanity on a high gravity planet, the alien race had quickly found its twelve foot tall, thick hide-bound frames in great demand for heavy labour and dangerous tasks ordinary humans couldn’t do. But their huge bodies required special transportation, and few of them were even considered for evacuation, so many had joined the rebellious Broken. And one of them, having killed another of Alana’s drones, was heading straight for her, bellowing an assault cry.

Alana stared at the onrushing gnolti, wishing that before she died she could have seen Sara’s reaction to her new home planet. Her feet caught in the dirt as she stepped backwards, but there was nowhere left to run. As the concrete walls of the compound pressed up against her back, the gnolti pulled up its makeshift hammer for a new attack.

The giant creature lost its footing a few paces away from her. A star pattern of dark holes appeared in its chest, and its eyes glazed, looking down in puzzlement. Then the damage to its body caught up to its brain and the alien crashed to the ground. Alana’s hair flew up by the wind caused by its fall.

She breathed out a long sigh of relief and watched as her saviours turned their weapons on the other attackers. Barrett’s Hunters had been the first to appear on the scene in response to the attack. Their legs rang loud as they strode across the metal gangway leading towards the gate. The maglock chainguns on their arms sprayed fire towards the rebels, causing them to duck into cover behind a fallen fence pillar. The rebels looked like children next to the formidable exoskeletons of the mechs.

The child. In the midst of the carnage, Alana’s thoughts suddenly turned towards the mother she’d seen in the crowd, and the tiny scrap of a girl. She looked towards the crowd, which had evaporated into a panicked mix of bodies, fleeing, fighting, falling, or simply stumbling through the remains of the protestor camp. Of the mother, there was no sign.

The onslaught of Barrett's Hunters tore apart the rough cover the Broken rebels occupied near the fence breach, and several collapsed, their torsos blown apart by the heavy munitions. The others began retreating back towards the fence, their scavenged weapons no match for the heavy armour of the Epirian robots.

"Yeah, you run!" Barrett called out in jubilation as they fled. "Go back to your hovels, and leave the real fighting to the professionals!"

"Something's wrong," Alana said, scanning the scene. The rebels wouldn't be so stupid as to plan an attack that breached the shipyard's fence so they could just sit at the breach taking fire. "There has to be another group of attackers. We're missing something."

"What?" Barrett said. "They're just badly organised. Don't worry Ally, we'll soon have you clear."

"No," she said, a sick feeling rising in her gut, the feeling that everything was about to go wrong. She called up EeeBee's command map again, activating his most energy-intensive search patterns. The little robot beeped and began throwing up pulses of ultrasound, comparing its echolocation responses against the ones in the compound database.

"Where are you?" Alana said, watching the results stream back to the heads-up display in her helmet. Everything seemed normal, with nothing away from the breached fence looking any different. She started to think she was wrong to be paranoid when EeeBee went crazy, exclaiming warnings in a burst of binary.

The infiltrator dropped from his position stuck to the ceiling of the inner compound, right behind Barrett. Previously near-invisible, his movement exposed his optical camouflage, so that Alana could see his outline visually as well on EeeBee's scan. The infiltrator stood from his landing crouch, and drew a long, thin blade.

"Barrett!" Alana shouted, "behind you!"

The other Epirian operator was too slow to react to Alana's warning. The infiltrator's silvery blade sliced into his midriff, spurting blood that splattered against the optical camouflage, causing a strange red-soaked silhouette for a few seconds until the camouflage adjusted. The infiltrator span acrobatically away into the building.

Barrett sank to the ground. Alana knew he was dead. Without his guidance his Hunters lost their focus, their attacks on the rebel position slowing as they began to rely on their own judgement. Other forces would be on their way from the security posts across the site, but if the infiltrator was to get to the control room before then, it was all over.

Alana stepped towards the last place she saw the infiltrator. EeeBee, the little scaredy-drone, followed meekly behind her. She glanced down at its dull white shell.

"I'm relying on you," she told it. "If you don't want to shoot anything, at least don't stop scanning until we've found that thing. If I get gutted by a samurai sword, I don't think you'll last long as anything other than spare parts."

The drone beeped reassuringly, showing her updated echolocation data. Alana crept through the rooms at the entrance to the facility, pistol drawn. She felt totally exposed, that at any minute she would feel the point of a blade passing between her shoulders. She stepped into the broad, high-ceilinged drone charge room, feeling like every object in the room could hide a hidden rebel.

In the overlaid echolocation schematic, she spotted a splash of colour in the corner of the ceiling. It wasn't much, and she couldn't see anything when she looked with her naked eyes. She glanced down at EeeBee.

"Are you sure?" she whispered. EeeBee was silent, but a green light flickered on his shell. Stepping out from behind a drone repair station, she aimed her pistol at where the schematic seemed to indicate her enemy might be. Her fingers twitched. The heavy pistol bucked back against her arms, once, twice, three times.

The infiltrator fell to the floor, his optical camouflage flickering off to reveal a thin, athletic boy not much older than a teenager. The white porcelain mask attached to his face was cracked by the

impact of Alana's bullet. Sensing the day was lost, the last few rebels at the fence leapt away from cover and fled into the twilight.

In the aftermath of the attack, it was decided to clear the camp of tents from in front of the compound. Several six-legged robot tanks, adapted from the harvesters used out on the farms, used their heavy arms to clear away the wreckage. Alana stood in front of the burning camp, wondering how it got to this point. The remaining refugees had fled, whether they were protestors, rebels or simply poor homeless people.

The harvester droid pushed forward, its long blocky forearms swinging away debris and bodies. As the metal limb dislodged a pile of broken fence cables, Alana noticed something. In amongst the mud, she caught sight of a squashed and dirty piece of purple fabric; a cuddly Angel toy, trampled into the ground. She swallowed hard and glanced up at the shipyard, still standing tall above them against the purple, Maelstrom-tainted sky. At least in her actions today, she'd made sure that as many little girls as possible would have their chance to get on an evacuation ship and leave this doomed world.

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