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DOMINANT SPECIES

a novel of military science fiction



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PROLOG

Her great engines blazing, the mile-long vessel thrashed against the relentless pull of gravity that dragged her toward the abyss. Violent tremors ripped through her hull like the convulsions of a dying animal.

The gaping hole in space vomited tendrils of gravity that coiled around her. With each twist, wave upon crushing wave of force spiraled through her decks. Bulkheads crumpled beneath their own amplified weight. Support cables snapped from their moorings like steel bullwhips. Reality tore apart.

The launch bay bucked violently. Over six hundred feet in length, the structure contained flight decks, hangars, and vehicles. In a cloud of vapor and glittering debris the entire bay tore free from its pylon mounts amid the shriek of tortured metal. It tumbled away, dissolving into the vortex like a fading shadow.

Two of her engines died in quick succession and the great ship faltered. With a sickening lurch she slid backward, slowly at first, then accelerating, plummeting toward the cavernous hole in space.

Mortally wounded and out of control, the *Ascension* fell into the void.

As she did, the screams of her crew fell with her.

Jenner sighed wearily as an arc of yellow light swept through the darkness, rotating to the pulsing drone of a warning claxon. With a hammer-on-anvil ring, hydraulic rams withdrew a dozen steel lugs back into the reinforced doorframe. A widening shaft of light poured out as the sixteen-ton doors parted with a deep, grinding rumble. With a final, metallic clang the elevator doors stood open.

The surge of relief helped him ignore Briggs' most recent jab. "What'd I tell ya? Out and back. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Truth be told, Jenner thought, "*miserable*" would have been a better description.

Driving the huge truck out to the chem facility had been a constant struggle, followed by a long wait as the empty hex tank was swapped for a full one. After wrangling a swimming pool full of hex back across the rough terrain, the lights of the compound looked like heaven.

Most of the tarmac was framed by a thick berm of gravel and slag that had been bulldozed into an expedient barricade. The top of the berm was laced with twisted coils of razor-ribbon. A pair of concrete guard towers rose above the makeshift wall, defining the forward edge of the courtyard.

The southern edge backed directly into the base of the mountain. Tons of stone had been cut away to create a sheer wall that rose nearly thirty meters. Centered in that flat expanse of granite, a lone window gazed down upon the courtyard. The wide elevator door centered directly below the window.

Orange-vested figures emerged from the mammoth elevator, followed by two small yellow tractors that bristled with antennae. The vehicles moved to either side of the truck while technicians scurried about hauling power lines and air hoses.

Jenner tossed a weary nod, "What's the deal?"

"Security runs a scan of the tank," Briggs replied. "Gotta make sure we didn't pick up anything like a tracking device or a bomb."

"Aside from the one we packed ourselves?"

Briggs gave two rapid strokes on the fetid cigar but otherwise ignored the comment. "That scanner can look clean through the truck, it'll even spot cracks in the tank wall. Better to know out here before we haul this thing into the shaft. Last time we had a leak was when some idiot opened the pressure valve on the input line without checking to see that the backflush had been set." Briggs paused, watching Jenner process the information. "You wouldn't happen to know what happened next, wouldja?"

"No backflush," Jenner chewed his lip and squinted. "Well, the Hex would have run through the lines under pressure, but instead of flowing into the tank it would have bounced at the backflush valves and routed into the overflow tank."

"Yeah..." Briggs coaxed.

"At normal line pressure the overflow tank would have maxed out pretty quick. The extra would have nowhere to go but out, and end up as spillage." The private looked up to see Briggs staring blankly. Jenner grimaced, wondering which part of the process he had botched.

Before Jenner could utter a retraction, the grey stubble on Briggs' craggy jaw parted. Slowly, unbelievably, a grin crawled across the sergeant's face. "Well I'll be damned son, you go off and read a book or something when I wasn't looking?"

Jenner exhaled fully and smiled in return. “Nah,” he replied off-handedly, “I’ve got a hardass boss who beats this crap into my head.”

“Wha-- Oh, hardass is it?” Briggs snorted in mock anger as he snatched the cap from his head and swatted Jenner’s chest with a lazy backhand smack. “Well it damn sure would take a hardass to pound some sense into that thick skull of yours!”

The rough camaraderie came as close to a genuine moment of friendship as Jenner could recall, and he liked the feeling.

Brilliant light flared at the truck’s two forward corners, drawing closer as the scanner units crawled down the length of the truck in tandem. As the glow intensified, Jenner noted a foreign sound over the gusting wind, a whistle that grew deeper and louder.

Briggs snapped around, his eyes flared wide. “INCOMING!”

The whistle stopped abruptly as the base of the western guard tower exploded. Huge chunks of shattered concrete skipped across the tarmac as another descending whine cut through the thunder.

“Punch it!” Briggs screamed, stabbing a finger at the elevator.

As a second explosion thundered somewhere astern, Jenner shoved the truck’s throttle into overdrive. The invisible gravitic cushion swelled abruptly, rolling over one of the scanners and stamping it flat into the tarmac. Technicians scattered as the truck lurched forward.

A third round slammed high on the stone wall, blasting rock from the face of the mountain. Granite hail rained from clouds of smoke.

Briggs jerked around in his seat, eyes fixed on the wounded guard tower. With a groan, the structure leaned unsteadily. Briggs’ fist beat madly on the dash as he shouted, “Go, go, go!”

Darkness swallowed the truck as it lunged into the elevator. Jenner was thrown forward as the nose slammed into the far wall, but his eyes remained glued to the rear-view screen. The ponderous doors closed all-too-slowly.

Another descending shriek was punctuated by concussion as a starburst of white heat blotted out the fuel depot. Jenner barely had time to blink before his entire world was absorbed by a ball of blinding light.

★ ★ ★

Jenner hung somewhere between consciousness and coma. Throbbing pain wrestled with oily nausea for control of what little feeling he had left. Somewhere in the distance, a dull grinding sound echoed unevenly, displaced and intangible as though underwater.

The windshield screen was cracked and lifeless. A sharp tang of ozone clotted the air, mixed with the acrid stench of burned rubber. Half the circuits in the truck had likely fried.

Still, he noted vaguely, another smell permeated the darkness, an odor that he knew for some reason should be important. Dull, coppery; a familiar smell.

With great effort, David Jenner raised a trembling hand to his face. The fingers came away streaked with blood. He stared blankly at the red sheen, unable to divine a reason for its presence. Half-closed eyes swung downward in detached curiosity, trying to see if more of the stuff was oozing from his chest or legs.

The search was purely mechanical, the act of a brain on autopilot. Past fear, past pain, Jenner tried to grasp what had happened.

Depot blew, he remembered, big fuckin' explosion.

While the doors had blunted much of the blast, the air pressure in the shaft had spiked with a terrible violence, popping rivets and blood vessels alike. *Might have even popped welded steel seams.* A wave of fear-driven nausea rippled through Jenner's core as his mind latched onto the implications.

A distant buzz droned angrily from the damage control screen. Hanging askew on a cracked mount, the flat panel flickered

sporadically. Through one eye Jenner made out a fuzzy schematic of the truck splattered with red lights. At least three gravitic coils were dead and one section of reactive armor had cooked off.

It hurt like hell to focus, and for a moment Jenner let the eye close once more. A moment passed as he drew a deep breath through clenched teeth. With a grunt, Jenner opened his eye again and struggled to bring the display back into clarity, his fear of a damaged tank increasing.

He fumbled with a series of buttons in an effort to cycle the display modes, but the procedure seemed mired in mental amber. In frustration, he banged the display with a blood-slick hand, adding several more spots of red to the image.

“She held.”

Jenner’s head swiveled around at the sound of Briggs’ voice. The sharp movement invoked a fresh wave of nausea.

In the dim glow of flickering monitors, Jenner could see the sergeant slumped against his chair, head lolled back at an odd angle, eyes closed. A meandering red stream oozed quietly from Briggs’ right ear. His skin had lost most of its tanned-leather hue, faded now to a shade of dusty grey. He looked dead.

“If she’da blown,” Briggs’ slurred loudly, as though unable to hear his own voice, “mosta th’ cab would be dissolvin’ right now.”

With a charged hum, the damage console flickered again. Static writhed across the screen before it dropped to black, then blossomed back to life. Slowly, a set of familiar gauges began to resolve from out of the video noise. Clearer now, readable. Structural integrity was intact, volume was solid, internal pressure right on the mark.

Damn, Jenner marveled. She had held together.

The private leaned back and hissed a long, slow sigh of relief. Even breathing hurt, Jenner noted sourly, but it beat the hell out of the alternative.

For several long moments the two men sat like the dead and listened to the metallic groans of the platform as it dropped

deeper and deeper into the mineshaft. The normal drone of the elevator was creased by a high-pitched squeal of metal dragging on metal. A discordant vibration rattled the elevator car.

“Lift musta been damaged by the blast,” Jenner mumbled. Maybe the plate of reactive armor that fired off had gotten wedged between the elevator and the wall and now dragged against the stone surface like a fingernail on an oversized chalkboard. Whatever it was, Jenner prayed that the elevator would hold out until they reached the bottom.

The truck lurched hard and the ring of steel on steel shuddered through the cab. Jenner sucked in his breath, a fresh stab of fear piercing his heart. Motion stopped. A series of smaller clangs followed in tight sequence as pneumatic clamps locked the elevator into place.

Jenner exhaled a long overdue breath. *We made it.*

He fumbled for the seatbelt latch but his left arm failed to work properly. Pain lanced up his entire left side as his weight shifted. In growing frustration he dragged a trembling right hand across his body to reach the aluminum clasp, which popped open with a sharp click. Jenner turned to paw at the door handle when a flashing screen caught his eye.

“Huh?” Jenner’s hand froze, fingers brushing the door latch.

“What?” Briggs’ lips moved, though his eyes remained closed.

“Sensors. Somethin’ in the tank.”

Jenner cursed quietly and blinked hard, trying to clear the cotton from his mind. He reached out with his right hand and tapped a command on the console. Glyphs skittered across the screen.

Briggs opened his eyes and with a wheezy groan leaned across the center console. “Dammit boy, it’s just--” Briggs’ words trailed into silence. Vibration patterns emanated from inside the tank, distinct patterns. Jenner watched as the computer filtered for echo and reflection, resolving six rough forms in the center of the disturbance. Forms with arms and legs. Jenner saw Briggs’ eyes go wide.

“Briggs?” Jenner’s voice was hesitant; the warning light in the back of his mind had already kicked into overdrive. “Briggs, what the hell is that?”

Briggs’ left hand slammed against the dash and the cab’s rear door slid open. “Get in the back!” he shouted as he grappled with his seat restraints. The voice carried a ragged note of terror.

Raw fear burned bright in Brigg’s eyes. In the space of a single heartbeat, that fear jumped across the cab and buried its frigid claws along the length of Jenner’s spine. The icy touch was numbing. No thought, only the need to move.

Jenner’s broken left arm folded back under his weight as he scrambled for the open rear door. He pitched forward and his head crashed with a thud between the seats. For a moment he was wedged in a ridiculous, face-down posture. Panic-driven limbs flailed madly and somersaulted him through the narrow doorway. He hit the base of the gravitic couch with a thud.

“Help me!” The ragged timber of Briggs’ voice spiked as he shouted from the cab. “Dammit boy, gimme a hand!”

Jenner flopped to one side and looked through the door, past Briggs. Across the cab a brilliant flash of red pulsed angrily:

WARNING

The dash seemed to draw away as Jenner’s world stretched out into an edgeless blur. A hand beckoned with surreal slowness. Eddie’s fingers-- no, Jenner shook his head, Briggs, Briggs’ fingers dripped with dark blood. The old man’s face looked back, eyes wide with terror as the claxon droned.

WARNING WARNING WARNING

Jenner banged the switch and the compartment door slammed shut. Tears ran down his face as he fell back into the darkness, away from the screams and the pounding at the door. When the explosion tore through the heart of the truck, even the screams were lost.

The squeal of failing metal mixed with the moans of the dying. In the darkness overhead, a transformer blew out with a shotgun report and sparks rained down through the catwalks. Somewhere in the distance a siren howled mournfully.

The truck lay dead. Strips of linear shaped charge inside the tank had cut an instant doorway through her side, the edges of the gaping wound curled back like bits of torn paper.

Steam parted as an armored form emerged through the hole, oblivious to the Hex that streamed off of grey armored skin. Dan Ridgeway climbed out of the wreckage and fired a brief glance toward the front of the vehicle. Hex-laden sludge hemorrhaged from buckled seams, thick with dissolving electronics and upholstery. Some of the runny clumps oozing to the floor would doubtlessly be the driver.

Turning quickly, Ridgeway's attention swept the loading bay. Everywhere he looked, walls and equipment were pockmarked with smoking holes. Shrapnel from the blast, every scrap coated with Hex, had riddled the area. Anyone caught in the open was already dead or dying.

A sea of liberated Hex now churned in a knee-deep pool that stretched across the sunken floor. Dark fumes boiled from the

surface, forming a brown, corrosive fog that crawled steadily outward. With a loud crackle, power cables dissolved in the caustic haze, spitting blue-white ribbons of voltage. Hissing madly, severed hoses thrashed like beheaded snakes.

But on the fringes of the disaster, Ridgeway could see training take hold. A response team appeared at the far corner of the loading bay. He counted a dozen figures in rubbery suits as they raced across the overhead catwalks, bold Hazmat symbols prominent on their blaze orange helmets.

Almost a hundred yards away, a pair of huge steel doors parted with a pneumatic whine, clearing the way for a bright yellow maglev. HAZMAT-4 appeared along the curved skirt in day-glow lettering. The sled oozed toward the acid lake on a cushion of magnetic force, flanked by yet another column of responders. Twin chrome barrels belched streams of thick white foam.

For a brief moment Ridgeway was impressed. Faced with an immense crisis, the Rimmer responders fought back with courage and discipline.

A good way to die, he thought as his right hand chopped crisply in the direction of the nearest team.

In response, Monster's Gatling gun spun into motion. Flame roared from the muzzle with a howling scream as an incandescent finger reached out to the tightly massed responders. They disintegrated under its deadly touch, bodies churned into bloody bits by a withering hail of ammunition. A helmet burst into fluorescent shards while an air tank skipped across the metal floor, driven angrily by gas venting through its punctured shell.

The fiery stream swept left and came to bear on the maglev. Amid the staccato pang and whine of bullet hits on metal, ragged holes appeared across her hull, widening rapidly. Ridgeway watched the brilliant discharge of covalent ammunition as the onslaught ripped its way to the vehicle's heart.

The gravitic core breached, incinerating the hapless souls who had scrambled behind the vehicle for cover. The powerful blast filled the air with white-hot frag and vaporized Hex.

Thunder echoed through the cavern as Ridgeway scanned the aftermath. The explosion had gutted an area almost twenty meters in diameter. Behind his impassive mask the marine grinned; *gravcore failures were always dramatic.*

Sections of catwalk hammered by the blast hung down from the ceiling in broken tatters. Fires burned by the dozen. A broken pressure line hemorrhaged compressed gas that added to the growing cloud of smoke and acid fumes. Nothing human moved amid the carnage. Ridgeway's right fist snapped up.

The spinning barrels of the Gatling stopped with a metallic click and the soft curl of rising smoke. Monster jumped down to the concrete floor and splashed through the acid with evident purpose. The rest of the RATs quickly followed.

Ridgeway cursed inwardly as he checked his mission clock. *Behind the pace already.* The elevator had descended far slower than projected and any margin for error was now gone. What had been a narrow window from the onset had become a flat-out race against time.

Ridgeway bolted forward, mechanized legs driving him through the knee-deep acid in a blur of acceleration. He hooked past the smoking crater left by the maglev's detonation, confident that nothing in his path had survived the initial room-clearing.

With his head encased in an opaque shell of carbonite, Ridgeway relied on synthetic vision pumped straight to his optic nerves. The days of laser-scorched retinas had long ago made clear visors obsolete. Multi-spectrum data gathered by each suit of armor was transmitted to the others, providing a shared tactical awareness. The TAC system resolved these streams of data into graphic icons and color-coded vectors.

As Ridgeway sprinted, Taz fell in on his heels. Darcy was moving to high ground, climbing a thin tensile grappling line to the catwalks above. Monster had broken right with Merlin and Stitch and now thundered across Cathedral on a direct line to the reactor. Ridgeway watched as the TAC displayed a series of threat indicators in Monster's path. Just as quickly as they appeared, they winked out.

In full stride, Ridgeway hurdled a steel rail. Ahead and to the left, a wide metal staircase led downward. The yellow and black sign on the wall read SECURITY with a prominent arrow pointing down.

Launching himself from the top of the stairs, Ridgeway hurtled through the air and landed with a bone-jarring slam on the grated steel walkway below. His inertia carried him into the midst of a Rimmer response team massing frantically.

Powered forearms hooked viciously to the sound of snapping bones as he drove through the crowd. A second heavy shudder told him that Taz was right on his tail. The two Marines carved into the security team like a pair of chainsaws.

A door slid open on the right side of the wide industrial hallway as a tyvek-clad engineer appeared in the portal. His squad number, 62, gleamed on both helmet and airpack. Ridgeway saw the eyes behind the respirator flash wide with last-second alarm as an armored gauntlet slammed into the facemask with the force of a sledgehammer.

Taz blew by as Ridgeway cut hard and spun through the still-open doorway. Inside, Alliance responders were in chaos. Hands grappled with hazmat suits and snatched at equipment as an orchestra of sirens blared at a deafening level. Reacting to a soundless cue, the Rimmers turned in stunned confusion at the dark metallic form in the doorway. The figure raised its armored hands, palms turned up as if in bloody supplication.

With a practiced mental command that had long become second nature, Ridgeway triggered the weapons mounted in his forearms and a dull roar whooshed from the compact flamethrowers. Twin streams of liquid fire swept across the writhing mass, igniting flesh and clothing alike. Thick with magnesium-phosphorous particles, the incendiary flared many times hotter than conventional fuel. Even the metal bunk frames began to burn.

Seven seconds after entering, Ridgeway backpedaled out of the room. The twin doors slammed shut with a sharp bang. He left the raging firestorm to quell any lingering screams.

Squad 62 will not be participating in the remainder of today's exercise.

Resuming his charge down the hall, Ridgeway scanned the TAC. The mission clock ticked incessantly near the bottom center of his visual field, its numeric display enhanced with a steadily diminishing time bar.

Three minutes, sixteen seconds. The first wave of Marine Firehawks were already burning in through the upper atmosphere.

Just ahead, another set of doors slid open. Smoke and flickering orange light broiled angrily into the corridor, perforated by sporadic gunfire. Taz burst from the inferno and flashed an upraised thumb as the doors slammed shut behind him. The TAC noted scattered damage across the aussie's armor, but nothing of consequence.

Storming down the hall in tandem, Ridgeway called up a tactical map and a crisp wireframe materialized across the upper portion of his visual field. Refined to minimize clutter, the display gave Ridgeway rapid access to the condition and location of each Marine. One floor above, Monster's squad had reclaimed nearly a minute against the clock.

Ridgeway broke into a dead run, electroactive polymer muscles driving his legs like pistons. He broke left at a four-way junction and bolted across a cluttered machinist's bay.

The TAC scoured the path ahead, analyzing not only visual data but heat, acoustics, even the faint fields of myoelectric current generated by living flesh. Translated into a constant stream of EAD, expanded-awareness data, the heightened perception could give the Marines a nearly supernatural sense of a battlefield. Sometimes it simply gave him a split-second edge.

The sudden red bracket framed the corner of a black riot shield wedged hard against an oil-streaked air compressor. A short-barreled carbine rocked up and leveled at Ridgeway's chest.

"Break!" Ridgeway barked, twisting his torso as the carbine fired.

The world slowed as Ridgeway's enhanced nervous system kicked into overdrive. Combat noise pulled back, stretching as it faded into a hollow, cavernous echo. The image before him refined into crystal clarity.

Muzzle flash. White cloud of vented gas as the carbine cycled another round of caseless ammunition. Flash again, angry yellow-orange.

Ridgeway felt a string of impacts pound across his ribs. He felt pain as well-- something better given than received. A snarl boiled in his throat as the space between the combatants evaporated.

At full run, Ridgeway uncoiled with a vengeance and swung at the center of the shield. The smooth kevlar panel shattered like balsa wood. His gauntlet drove the Rimmer's sternum violently against his spine, bursting the organs that lay between. The body dropped to the floor like a stringless marionette.

With elastic suddenness, Ridgeway's perception snapped back to normal. The angry buzz of damage control led the way, shifting from dull to prominent. Points of orange blinked rapidly in a line that angled across his ribs. The shots had been well-aimed, only the severe rotation of his body had caused them to strike at a glancing angle. Still, at point-blank range the heavy rounds had inflicted damage; a cracked rib at the least, and several pitted dents across the armor plating. Durable did not mean indestructible.

Screw it, Ridgeway growled inwardly. In about three minutes a cracked rib would be the least of my problems. He pressed on, driven by mounting urgency.

The two Marines ascended a flight of stairs in powerful strides and cut back towards the reactor, scanning for anything that could pose a threat to Monster's squad. The rapid search produced no candidates. From the looks of things, Rimmer resistance had evaporated. The entire corridor stood empty.

Just as well. The time bar on the TAC was also vanishing, and now stood below three minutes. Monster's team should have the Detonex in place by now. Barely enough time to--

Ridgeway braked hard, his boots skidding on the metal floor as he stopped just short of the huge steel door that slammed down from the ceiling. An oddly flattened shout passed through the wall-mounted intercom. "I got you, motherfucker! Hey guys, I got 'em. He's stuck behind the--"

The sudden high-pitched whine of the Gatling was unmistakable, even through a foot of steel. The energetic voice cut off abruptly as Ridgeway watched a swath of bulges ripple across the metal door as though someone beat the opposite side with a million ball peen hammers.

A deep metallic thunk preceded the ascending whine of hydraulics as the door rose. Blood drooled freely from its lower edge as it withdrew into the ceiling. On the other side, Monster stood framed in a swirl of smoke.

Ridgeway stepped through the door, oblivious to the steaming slick of human mulch. "We good with the charges?"

Monster's gravel voice was firm. "Roger that, six in the green."

Ridgeway glanced at the mission clock. Just two minutes and twenty-eight seconds before the powerful Detonex charges would turn the nuclear reactor inside out. The explosion to follow would reduce most of Cathedral to a subterranean slagheap, a party his Marines would just as soon miss.

Ridgeway stabbed a finger in the air, pointing down the hall that led back to the loading bay. "Marines! We are out of here!"

Like a pack of armored wolves the Marines fell into formation and swept down the corridor. They ran flat-out, their charge marked by only token bursts of weapon fire.

According to the TAC, they had thus far escaped serious injury. A dropship rigged with decon and medics would be poised at the top, more than enough to deal with the lingering hex and the smattering of wounds. All Ridgeway had to do was get his team out of this damned hole.

He prodded the TAC for a status on the Cathedral. The response was sorely lacking. While the facility map was clear and vivid, the TAC disclosed no data on enemy troops.

"It's the shielding for the reactor," Monster barked, anticipating Ridgeway's move and matching it. "We're still inside the containment vessel; it's playing hell with scanners and comm."

As if in confirmation, Ridgeway caught the broken fragments of

a garbled ComLink. Darcy's voice crackled in his head, her tone thick with urgency. "Tango char...ull platoon... ..repeat, Condit-- Re..."

"Say again!" Ridgeway barked as he rounded a huge block of transformers that hummed with voltage. At a dead run, the Marines hurtled from the hallway into the wide expanse of Cathedral-- and into a meat-grinder.

The TAC went berserk as the first cluster of heavy shells chewed into the wall above Ridgeway's head. A hail of small-arms fire erupted, filling the air with the neon streak of infantry lasers.

The Marines fanned out in headlong dives for cover. Ridgeway rolled hard, his armored mass slamming into a stack of blue industrial drums. Several of the cylinders bounced away like oversized bowling pins. A trail of cannon fire chewed at his heels, blasting the containers apart into clouds of chemical mist.

"Delta three! Delta three!" Ridgeway shouted over the slap of bullets on steel. His right arm reached for the Covalent Assault Rifle holstered in the backpack section of his armor.

All right, Ridgeway snarled, *No more Mr. Nice Guy*. The CAR gave off a sharp whine as protocol Delta Three went into effect.

On cue, Monster's huge right arm curled over the cab of a forklift and the Gatling blazed a vicious arc of suppressing fire. Incoming fire stuttered abruptly as Rimmers frantically scrambled for cover.

In the momentary lapse, Taz and Merlin bolted forward on the edges of the skirmish. As they ran, the charging forms suddenly became indistinct against the background of machines and electronics. Cloaked in active light-bending camouflage, the two ghostly forms blurred through the maze of smoke and tracer-streaks.

Stitch opened up on Ridgeway's right, adding the distinct, full-auto bass of exothermic fire to the din. The medic had disengaged the MP17's silencer, wringing out every bit of velocity the subgun could produce. A tongue of flame licked out from the muzzle.

The TAC devoured acoustic and visual signatures, plotting points

of origin. Ridgeway quickly saw that the large gun was an Oerlikon 30mil on a mobile platform.

“Big bastard,” he grunted, knowing that easily four centimeters of armor plate surrounded the gunner. The Oerlikon was a heavy-hitter designed to anchor a defensive line in the midst of a shitstorm. *And doing a damn good job at the moment.*

The Rimmers had bunched up around the Oerlikon, using the heavy gun for fire support and cover. Judging from the sand-colored BDUs and light ballistic armor, Ridgeway took the Alliance troops for regular army, probably a detachment from an upper level that had the brights to double-time it down here when the first sirens went off. *Gung-ho types.*

The TAC counted some fifteen guys to the left of the cannon, another ten to the right. At least six of them carried squad automatics, accounting for a lot of the Rimmer fire.

A lance of ionized air streaked in from the distance as the hypersonic bullet punched a fist-sized hole through the Oerlikon’s gunner compartment. The cannon fell silent as a thunderclap rolled in from somewhere high in the Cathedral catwalks. A familiar female voice echoed in Ridgeway’s ear. “Hammer time.”

Ridgeway suppressed a grin as he rolled to his feet. The Covalent Assault Rifle roared, blue-white plasma flaring from its muzzle. The Rimmer line was pounded with a stream of charged covalent rounds that flared with cyan light on impact. The very fabric of matter destabilized by the disruption of covalent bonds, soldiers literally unraveled at the seams.

The CAR’s underslung launcher barked sharply, lobbing Thermalite grenades over the massed opponents. Four airburst detonations thudded down the enemy line, white-hot flashes invoking a new wave of screams.

To either side, a pair of phantoms coalesced as Taz and Merlin raked the enemy flank with flamethrowers. Tongues of searing heat licked through the troops, withering skin to a blackened crust. Burning figures flailed on the ground, wrapped in shrouds of dull, flickering orange.

A game Rimmer with Lieutenant bars on his collar tried to rally the survivors. Shouting commands over the roar of battle, the young officer struggled to shore up the center of the line. Driven by his commands, one squad automatic came back online before the Lieutenant's tan ballistic helmet launched in a burst of crimson mist.

People with rank insignia shouldn't wave their arms in combat, Ridgeway sneered as he saw the cloudburst of red. Dumb bastard might just as well have worn a bright yellow T-shirt that read SNIPER BAIT.

Any lingering shred of Rimmer discipline came apart like the Lieutenant's skull. With fire closing in from either side, the middle of the Alliance line bunched together. But in drawing away from the flames, they also backed away from cover.

Stepping out from behind the forklift, Monster brought the Gatling to bear and an incandescent stream of bullets carved through the exposed throng. Chunks of flesh, bone and kevlar sprayed wildly.

The battle ended as abruptly as it began. Surround, divide and destroy; thirty-four seconds to chew an enemy platoon to shreds. From each corner, Marines swept the kill zone. Nothing survived.

Ridgeway snapped a glance at the chrono. Detonation in one minute forty-six; no chance of making it to the surface. Their only hope was to get as far up the elevator shaft as possible. Ridgeway barked, "Marines, double time! Darcy, torch anything between us and the elevator!"

As the RATs bolted for the exit, a sudden chain of thunderclaps echoed ahead. The Marines abandoned everything in the name of speed. Nearing the gutted maglev, Ridgeway checked the time.

One minute.

The elevator shaft extended straight up the far wall and out through the ceiling. The way home. At nearly 40kph Ridgeway's hurtling form reached the--

crater?

The damned hex, Ridgeway realized. Trapped in the sunken floor of the loading bay, the insatiable acid had attacked the concrete with unexpected effectiveness. The fuming surface of the corrosive lake still boiled, but now some ten meters below floor level.

Reflex kicked in as Ridgeway hit the edge of the jagged pit. Synthetic muscles launched him over the gaping hole.

The far wall came up fast. A subconscious neural command flashed, survival reflexes firing madly. Bayonet-sized blades recessed along the outer edge of both forearms hinged at the wrist, pivoting ninety degrees to the axis of Ridgeway's arm. They locked into place just as he slammed into the wall. Even through the armor, the impact rattled his teeth.

Sucking for air, Ridgeway hung from the spikes buried in the wall. He looked down to see the steaming hole that yawned beneath him, its sides porous and crumbling from the caustic excavation. The truck lay crumpled at the bottom, only the front sections of the tank and cab still recognizable above the bubbling surface.

Dozens of red brackets filled the TAC, converging on the Marine's position. At the edge of the pit, Monster unleashed a wide arc of suppressive fire. Stitch spun back to back with the gunny, firing the MP17 in rapid, accurate bursts.

Merlin and Taz sprinted by and leaped over the smoking hole in a mimic of Ridgeway's lead. Better prepared to hit the wall, they immediately began a hand-over-hand ascent. Powerful arms drove their own blades deep into the rough concrete.

Ridgeway pulled himself onto a narrow ledge. A deep gurgle belched up from the acid pool as a massive bubble broke across the steaming surface. The Hex dipped noticeably, drawing back from the edge like a caustic tide. As it did, the rearmost section of the truck settled with a low groan.

A garish warning tone snared Ridgeway's attention. Flaring madly, a bright red bracket appeared on the left edge of his vision where the ugly nose of an RPG peered up from within a doorway. The conical head of the rocket-propelled grenade leered malevolently as Ridgeway perched on the wall like a fly. With almost a kilo of high explosive and a sleeve of titanium flechettes, the OG-9 would make one hell of a swatter.

Ridgeway flattened against the wall. The grenadier was tucked in tight, using the doorframe and wall for cover. Only the outer edge of his shoulder was visible, pathetically little to target.

The ionized wake of a railgun bullet punched through the metal doorframe like rice paper, blasting through the grenadier and into the concrete floor. Unfired, the launcher bounced once and clattered into the crater.

Forty nine seconds. *We aren't gonna make it.*

A 40mm grenade slammed viciously off Monster's chest, caroming only an arm's-length before it detonated. The concussion knocked the big man sprawling. His icon flashed furiously on the TAC.

From the walkways above, Darcy's rifle thundered in rapid succession. A string of white-hot concussions burned a swath through Rimmers that tried to close on Monster's position. The sonic boom was sharper now, explosive, telling Ridgeway that the sniper had spun the railgun's velocity to max. Uranium projectiles left the barrel so fast that air friction melted them into bolts of superheated plasma.

The gurgle of Hex suddenly amplified, a sucking roar that sounded like a jet intake. The churning surface bowed inward and twisted into an accelerating spiral. With an abrupt flush, thousands of liters of hydrogen hexafluoride drained from sight, dragging the dead truck in its wake.

Ridgeway blinked twice. The smoldering crater had become a tunnel shaft that ran deeper than the eye could see.

Another cavern? The idea flashed through Ridgeway's mind as an image more than as words. *How far? No way to know. Big hole, big enough for a truck. But to where?*

Ridgeway's damage control screamed as machinegun fire chewed the wall around him. Sound flattened as the hammering noise slipped out of sync with reality. He caught a distant CRUMP and saw a huge black-orange fireball roll across thirty meters of Cathedral floor.

Thirty seconds. No time left. Ridgeway made the call.

“Down the hole. Move!”

Without question Merlin and Taz pushed back from the wall, tearing their climbing blades out of the concrete. The Marines plummeted feet-first into the crater, glanced roughly off the uneven slope and tumbled out of sight.

Ridgeway looked up to see the sniper holding ground on the catwalk. Ferocity tainted his voice as he screamed, “Darcy - get out of there!”

Ripping off two final shots, Darcy ducked for cover and snapped the rifle into two sections, slamming them into their backpack compartments. In a sudden burst she vaulted the railing and dropped to a lower catwalk. “Inboun--”

Through the ComLink, Ridgeway could hear the erratic percussion of metal on metal that played sharply over the wet gush of air driven from human lungs. A sudden hail of sparks appeared across the sniper’s form as she was knocked off her feet.

Ridgeway tracked left; a fire team of at least eight Rimmers massed at the near end of her catwalk, pouring fire on Darcy’s position. The sniper rolled frantically, scrabbling for cover as Ridgeway’s CAR fired a five-round burst into the lead Rimmer. One squad automatic dropped out of the fight, but seven remaining weapons chattered ceaselessly.

Staggering to his feet, Monster took the wholesale approach. The beefy Marine swung the Gatling straight up, vectoring in on the Rimmer team some fifteen meters overhead. The multi-barreled gun howled.

The first two hundred rounds tore the Rimmer stack to hell. But the Gatling continued, attacking the catwalk itself. Eroding metal burned with the electric fire of covalence gone awry and the hanging sidewalk parted with a metallic shriek. With the growing crash of chain-reaction failure, the length of catwalk succumbed to gravity amidst the whip-like crack of snapping guy wires. The end of the walk pitched down to form a long ramp with Darcy at the top.

Her flailing body skated down the sudden slope. A trail of sparks framed her descent as armor scraped along grated metal. With tremendous speed she plowed into twisted wreckage at the bottom.

Ridgeway struggled to maintain cover fire as Monster grabbed the sniper with his left hand and hefted her from the wreckage like a rag doll. Shielding her with his own body, Monster staggered straight for the gaping hole. He hit the edge without slowing and dove over the rim amid a flurry of red streaks.

A rapid series of powerful thuds echoed from the far side of the cavern. Ridgeway didn't need to see the bright 0:00:00 flashing on the chrono to know the source.

Stitch screamed "Fire in the hole" and dove into the crater.

Ridgeway jumped. Somewhere in the distance, a huge gong reverberated. The sound was beyond all proportion to the noise of battle. Some eight hundred meters away, the south wall of the Cathedral bulged, shattering into a billion pieces.

Dan Ridgeway had a brief impression of sunrise shining through the cracks before the crater's darkness engulfed him.

“Dammit Merlin, can you get it running or not?”

Ridgeway slammed his fist down on the smooth console and a spider web of cracks fanned out across frost-covered plexan.

“Shit,” he snarled, immediately regretting the outburst. He side-stepped across the sloped floor and looked out through the gaping hole in the wall of the Tower. Merlin was somewhere between the Command Deck, where Ridgeway now stood, and the surface of the lake some sixteen floors below.

A hoarse cough drew Ridgeway’s attention and he turned back into the room. Darcy was slumped on the floor, the front of her armor gaping open once more. Steam rose from her body and curled in the frigid air. Stitch kneeled beside her, trying to offset the bleeding that relentlessly filled her lungs.

There had been no emergency sickbay on the command deck, only a small eyewash station and a first aid kit whose contents had long since been removed. Thus far the Marines had found no medical supplies at all.

Just beyond the recumbent sniper, a pair of mangled turbolift doors lay on the floor. Taz had ripped them out of their frame, using the elevator shaft as a faster route to higher floors. His trail wasn't hard to follow.

Although the room was just as cold as the rest of the cave, the volume of ice had decreased dramatically. A layer of crunchy frost coated most surfaces but this could be swept away with a pass of the hand. Sealed from the Lobby environment, at least until Taz carved his own doorway, the Command Deck had resisted the glacial progression seen outside the Tower.

Ridgeway could hear Taz moving above. The aussie's search method had eroded to charging down one dark hallway after another, kicking frozen doors out of the wall. They had run out of time for finesse.

He glanced at the chronograph that ticked relentlessly on the TAC. Almost four hours had elapsed since the Marines had entered the ship and they were still without power or sickbay.

Leaning forward, Ridgeway looked out the window and made a routine check on the figure in the orange suit. The Alliance driver lay in a heap on a retractable section of catwalk that extended no more than ten feet from the tower. On what amounted to a short plank high above the surface of the pool, the now-conscious trucker had nowhere to run. Not that he could run far on broken legs if he tried.

A mournful plea for help echoed for the hundredth time from outside the window.

Suck it up, pal, Ridgeway snarled inwardly. The incessant whining grated on his nerves. For the hundredth time he questioned the decision to drag the Rimmer along. A dubious source of information at best, the broken trucker had already proven to be a bothersome parasite. As the wails droned on, Ridgeway found himself sorely tempted to toss the orange-clad figure over the ledge.

He shook his head and shifted his attention to a neural switch. In a sudden blur, telepresence took him to a dark room where Merlin struggled with a tangle of equipment.

Through borrowed senses, Ridgeway assessed the scene. The cramped engineering room lay somewhere in the belly of the ship, its walls encrusted with switches and valves scattered among a tangle of heavy pipes. Ridgeway could see breaker boxes, fire extinguishers and a wide control panel. Glistening condensation beaded on every surface and droplets of water fell through the room in a slow, erratic percussion.

Water, Ridgeway realized, *not ice*. The room was warm.

As if they were his own, Ridgeway watched Merlin's hands rapidly splice paired wires pulled from a thick trunk of cable. Muttered curses drifted to Ridgeway's ears. "Come on you sonofabitch!" Merlin coaxed as his armored fingers moved with amazing dexterity.

"What've you got?" Ridgeway asked quietly.

"It's coolant Major, the damn lake is coolant." Merlin began to reel off his discoveries at an accelerated pace, the words racing as fast as the young engineer's mind. "Whatever punched through the hull tore open the coolant reservoir for one hell of an engine. We found signs of at least five different attempts to re-seal it, but they all crapped out for one reason or another."

The grey-armored hands snapped a series of fiber-optic cables into a translucent coupling as Merlin continued. "Loss of coolant would have left the crew with two pretty crappy choices; sit offline and freeze to death, or run the drive till it overloaded and things got toasty warm, to the tune of a million degrees or so."

With the destruction of Cathedral's reactor still fresh on his mind, Ridgeway was clear on the latter implication.

Merlin continued to ramble while he worked. "But these bastards were clever, oh yeah, real brainy little fuckers. They couldn't maintain a frigid containment inside the ship, but they had nothing BUT cold outside the ship."

"So they routed the coolant through Papa-Six and used the cave floor as a giant heat-sink?"

"Bingo!" Merlin confirmed as his left hand fished among a set of

relays. “The engines didn’t need to push the ship through space, so they probably had voltage to spare. For some period of time, and I am talking a long while based on the wear and tear down here, this baby cranked out amps like there was no tomorrow. Then the shit hit the fan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for some reason--”

A loud bang echoed in the room and Merlin’s view spun to the right. Riding his gaze, Ridgeway saw Monster lug a refrigerator-sized piece of equipment through the door. Tentacles of wire hung from its base, dragging along the steel floor.

“That’ll do.” Merlin motioned with a short wave. “Set it over here and start pulling the main fiber trunks. No, just the 4-gauge, yeah.”

Merlin’s attention swung back to the wires in his hands. With scarcely a moment to shift gears, he resumed his narration. “For some reason the crew needed to bug out, and from the looks of things, it wasn’t an orderly evac. Just about anything that could make or store power was ripped out by the bolts. Generators, batteries--”

“APUs,” Ridgeway injected.

“Right again,” Merlin said with a nod. “The whole game is action and reaction. An antimatter drive can produce a ton of power, but if it shuts down, you need some tiny source of power to fire it back up. Without a kick-start, the next time the drive system scrambled, it was down for the count.”

“I’m good so far, but if the core’s been offline, what’s heating up the coolant?”

“Latent antimatter reaction. These puppies never really die unless you flush the core into space, and that didn’t happen. If you ignore one long enough, it’ll back off to near-zero production; the equivalent of shifting into idle. The core is designed to crank out just enough juice to maintain its own containment field, otherwise matter and antimatter meet and, well, that gets ugly.

It's been a fundamental safeguard for years now. We're not talking much in terms of power, but it generates a bit of heat along the way.

"And there's our fog." Ridgeway said, grateful that at least one of a million questions had been answered.

Abruptly, Ridgeway's second-hand gaze snapped to the right. He listened as Merlin directed Monster to connect a series of couplings that ran between the growing collection of parts. "Just follow the color code, blue to blue, red to red. They've got to be in the right order."

A convoluted assembly lay strung out in Rube Goldberg fashion across the sloped floor. Ridgeway remained silent as he focused on the odd chain of components cobbled together on the floor.

The largest piece was a field-grade Auxiliary Power Unit; a small, self-contained generator. Trails of soot marred the dull red sheet-metal sides.

Tracking along the path of tangled cable, Ridgeway followed through a series of jury-rigged amplifiers, a heavy surge suppressor and a compact step-up transformer that for some reason preceded the APU in the chain.

"What's with the transformer?" Ridgeway was no engineer, but clearly the component was out of proper sequence. Everything should start with the APU and go up.

A trace of hesitation suddenly tainted Merlin's reply. "Well, the only APU we could find is frapped. It looks like somebody smoked the capacitor array."

"In English, Merlin."

The younger Marine paused for an instant as he spliced the last wires into a power connector that struck Ridgeway as oddly familiar.

"I told ya Major, it's always the same game. Even an APU needs a good kick in the butt to power up. Normally, it'll charge itself with a trickle of current over time. The juice is stored in an array of capacitors that can be discharged in a single jolt. That jump-

starts the APU, which in turn starts the core.”

Ridgeway’s attention was glued to the connector in Merlin’s hands, the familiarity nagging. “So what did you find to replace the cap array?” An odd sense of foreboding crept up his spine.

“Not a damn thing, Major.” Merlin’s voice was stone cold. “Anything on this ship that had a prayer of firing the core is long gone. The Lieutenant is out of options, so it’s time to improvise.”

Ridgeway’s gaze was pulled down to the open access panel on Merlin’s breastplate. The engineer held the connector up for a final inspection. In that instant, Ridgeway realized where he had seen it, or at least one just like it. Marine issue; a charger interface for juicing armor in the field. Before he could speak, Merlin snaked it into his own armor and pressed firmly. It seated with a distinct click.

“Merlin, what the hell...?”

The corporal reached over his shoulder and pulled the CAR from his back. The covalent rifle surged to life, pulsing with its own power. Merlin tightened his grasp on the pistol grip where control and feedback contacts met those in his glove.

The powerfeeds meshed as well. While the rifle would normally draw power from the armor, in a pinch the flow could be reversed. Merlin threw a switch and with a sharp descending whine the CAR flushed its entire charge back into the Marine’s armor. The power readout on Merlin’s TAC spiked almost fifteen percent, cresting past one-hundred and into the overload range.

“Needed a last bit of juice to max out,” Merlin explained mechanically, “we only get one shot at this, and Monster had given me everything he had.”

Sweeping through a blurred arc, Merlin’s view settled on Monster. The huge sergeant was braced against the sloping wall, a makeshift control box in his hand. Ridgeway did not need the TAC to know that Monster’s armor, as well as the Gatling, were all but drained of power.

Ridgeway heard Merlin's voice, flat and detached, utter the single directive. "Hit it."

Somewhere to the right, the APU hummed, awaiting the surge of power from Merlin's armor that with luck would breath life into long-dormant wires.

Or burn them out completely.

Ridgeway shouted at Merlin to stop, knowing he was already too late.

With a fierce "Semper Fi," Merlin threw the switch.

Given a choice, Ridgeway mulled, I'd say screw the bugs, the repairs, all this shit and leave this wreck like we found it. Reality offered a different perspective; they were stuck and had to keep the lights on until something showed him the way to the door. “Any sign of Jenner or an evac team?”

Merlin shook his head. “Nada.”

Before Ridgeway could utter the invective that pushed to the front of his mind, Darcy’s voice crackled over the ComLink. “Looks like I’m not crazy after all.”

“Good to know,” he murmured as he stepped away from Merlin. “What have you got?”

“You’ll have to see it to believe it.” Darcy’s voice held an odd edge, her tone vaguely triumphant. A small icon blinked on Ridgeway’s TAC, the announcement that Darcy had had queued up a telepresence. Ridgeway initiated the link and stepped into Darcy’s world.

In a blur of shifting perspective, Ridgeway found himself in a narrow compartment. He followed what was then his own arm as it pointed to a mangled piece of equipment hanging from the wall. Darcy’s voice floated in all around him. “That’s no fucking delusion.”

Ridgeway’s eyes flashed wide behind his faceplate as he looked at the severed arm. Half a dozen heavily-clawed fingers were buried in the composite wall, anchoring the limb in place. With a grunt Darcy pried the fingers loose one at a time. Dark fluids dripped freely as she wrenched the arm from the wall. The sniper’s senses pouring into his own brain, Ridgeway could feel the arm’s weight as it flopped in her grasp.

He felt it twitch as well.

“Shit!” Darcy cursed as the multi-fingered claw snapped convulsively. She dropped the limb on the floor and lurched back, drawing her sidearm in a sudden blur of motion. The front sight hovered on the writhing appendage. Ridgeway could feel her finger draw slack from the trigger, holding just shy of the break-point.

“Sonofabitch isn’t dead yet!” Darcy snarled.

Judging from the arm’s motion, Ridgeway could only concur. He knew the sort of random, post-mortem spasms that a body went through when its head was blown apart. That dance was random and chaotic, a freeform performance triggered by the discharge of whatever nerves were still hardwired to the rest of the body. This was methodical, Ridgeway realized with growing concern. The hand clasped and opened as the wrist rotated through a full arc of motion.

While clearly an arm, Ridgeway had no clear sense if its origin was mechanical or biological. Skeins of what appeared to be living tissue stretched in and around a mechanical construct. The hand itself looked to have been some kind of complex Hurst tool, the kind of device designed to cut victims from badly wrecked vehicles. Crescent claws gleamed in the darkness like slices of a stainless-steel apple.

Ridgeway followed Darcy’s front sight as it tracked down to what would be termed an elbow. There the limb ended abruptly. Shredded flesh and torn wires marked the traumatic amputation. Fluids oozed steadily from the mangled stump.

“Son of a bitch.” Ridgeway muttered as the arm slowed to a stop.

“Damn straight,” Darcy huffed, breathing hard. She holstered the pistol slowly, but kept her right hand firmly on the grip. “I built this hide just a few hours ago and left a Claymore here to watch the door.” She nudged the severed arm with her toe, “This is what was coming in when the doorbell rang.”

A long moment ticked by before Darcy added, “Remember when I told you something was coming? Well, it’s here.”

“Roger that,” Ridgeway said softly, his mind racing. “Do you have any idea where it went?”

She had clearly given that point careful thought. “Whatever the fuck this thing is, it ate a Claymore right in the face. It lost one limb, there’s no telling how many other parts came off. If we’re lucky, the rest of this thing is chunks spread across the Lobby.”

“Can’t make that assumption.” Ridgeway was firm. “We’ve got to operate on the basis of at least one wounded and who knows how many others. Do you have any idea which way they went?”

The sudden nausea took Ridgeway by surprise. Telepresence was still an emerging science and the tricks used to transmit perception were sketchy in places. Amid the tremendous mass of data that defined the five basic senses lay an undercurrent of less-understood feelings, that region where memory and emotion blurred what was real and what was imagined. Living as he was in the envelope of Darcy’s senses, Ridgeway felt a sudden chill in his guts that he knew was not his own. It crept up from the pit of his stomach and wormed it’s way into his chest.

His reflex was to pull back, but Ridgeway recognized the sniper’s unspoken distress. He breathed slowly and reached out, opening himself more fully to the transmission. As he did, even peripheral sense of his own body diminished. With each second, he melted more and more into the fabric of Darcy Lonigan.

Darcy’s eyes had returned to the arm, her focus riveted on one of the wounds. Bright edges of metal curled back from a jagged hole made by one of the Claymores numerous flechettes. Strips of meat and cloudy plastic tubing lay tangled in the chasm. The wound glistened in the darkness as tiny starbursts of orange light played through the sheen of silver sand. The creature was full of nanites, Ridgeway realized with a start. The same shimmering nanites that flowed in Darcy’s veins.

Oh my God.

Darcy looked down at her own hand and flexed her fingers slowly, her voice inexplicably soft. “Guess we know why I’m getting a sense for these things, huh.” Her gaze swept beyond the tunnel entrance and climbed high to the air ducts that criss-crossed the ceiling. Her voice carried a distant note of urgency. “They’re close, real close.”

“Get out of there Darcy.”

“Not close to me Major.” Darcy turned aft, her voice suddenly sharp. “Close to you.”