

Chapter 1

They had no way out, so they did the only thing they could. They surrendered. The girls laid their weapons down, unstrapped their grenades and blades. Lunar looked very sour. Ana trembled.

But Nate was wrapped up and dangling. They were surrounded.

They had no choice. The Queen laughed. The bug soldiers grinned, their antennas chittering excitedly.

Nate worried they'd be killed on the spot, but the bugs had plans for them.

The Queen ordered them to be taken away and they were roughly pushed and prodded further down into the dank, dark bunker.

The smell was thick enough to choke them — rotting flesh, coppery blood. But on their skin, there was the slightest breeze and on their tongue, something salty. Water. There was an opening in this bunker. The water source they sought to poison, the beating heart of El Faro.

Only the Queen had taken their poison.

They were pushed into a large cell. Nate's stomach turned at the sight of it, for the occupants still remained.

Or rather, their remains remained. Bones being picked on by maggots, bug-eyes staring up lifelessly.

One of their bug guards grinned. "Those that don't obey quickly enough."

Nate studied him, always fascinated to see a bug speak. He knew, now, that the elite of the bugs could speak, but it was still a strange sight to see. Their jaws flapping unnaturally, the deep tone of their rumbles.

"Enjoy, my pretties." The leader of the bugs leered at the girls. "The Queen won't be kind and if she gives me the chance, neither will I."

The black-sashed bug laughed and tauntingly left their weapons and armguards outside of the cell, well out of reach.

Then, he tossed a bunch of water bottles between the bars. "Hydrate yourselves, fleshbags — we don't want you passing out too early." He roared with laughter as they left.

They were left alone.

The Lady growled and shook the bars. Cora tried to use her claws to cut through them, ineffectually.

Nate squeezed Ana's hand, his mind racing.

"Isabelle?" He said slowly. "I've got nothing."

“I’m sorry, Nate.” She said softly from his armguard, on the other side of the cell. “Talia is outside of the bunker, but I’m having trouble reaching her.”

“She’ll realize we’re in trouble. She’ll come for us.” Cora said confidently.

“How?” Sofia scowled. “She can’t get her meka frame through the doors, let alone fight through all these bugs.”

“We’re fucked.” The Lady summarized.

“Our Kyrios will figure something out.” Lunar smiled at him. “We have been in worse spots.”

Have we?

Nate gave her a tremulous smile. He was having trouble staying positive. Maybe they could escape. Maybe they could fight their way out. But they couldn’t retrieve the poison, couldn’t complete their mission. And on the other side of the bug-wall, the whole might of the Council threw themselves at the grinder, a distraction for a mission now failed.

It was a sobering thought.

Ana was silent, nibbling on her lip.

“We can kill the Queen bitch.” Cora clenched her fists, grinding her knuckle-claws against each other.

“Maybe.” Nate said doubtfully. “But we can’t kill her, get the poison, poison the well, and get out alive.”

“Maybe we don’t have to.” Ana said slowly, turning to him.

“What?”

“I think...I think we don’t need the poison.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about? We need to fuck up the millions of bugs that are being bred in those ships, the next generation.”

Ana pressed her forehead against his. “You need to trust me on this one. I think...I think we can use your cum.”

Nate gaped. “What the fuck—”

“What the fuck indeed.” The Lady echoed.

Her hands clasped his cheeks. “Your seed is special, Nate. We both know it.”

He flinched. “You told me you thought it just changed your appearance. Healed Cora. New organs, new cells.” Nate crossed his arms. “So why do you think that pumping my cum into the water is going to help?”

Ana winced. “Because...” She trailed off.

He didn’t let back. “Because you *know* it does more than that. You know it created a bond between us. Made you love me.”

“It didn’t make me love you.” Ana argued. “It helps me see you, helps me understand you, helps me love you.”

Nate looked at her flatly. “You’ve been lying to me.”

“You were so worried about what it was doing to us,” Ana protested. “And I wanted the best for you. And you needed more girls, more protection.”

“What the fuck.” The Lady muttered again.

Nate shook his head. “If it just did that, when why would piping it into the bugs help?”

Ana bit her lip. “If the bugs already have a psychology centralized around a single leading figure, the Queen, then destabilizing it even slightly could be ruinous.”

“By making them bonded to me. By enslaving them—” Nate felt sick.

“We’re not slaves.” Cora leaped to her feet.

Lunar scowled. “Our bond is far more special than that, Master.”

Sofia nodded. “I could never be enslaved, Nate.” She tossed her white hair behind her and licked her red lips. “Perhaps your bond is not so binary.”

“I...” Nate let his chin hit his chest. “What you’re asking me to do is so...it’s preposterous—”

“I’m just asking you to trust me.” Ana said encouragingly, lifting his chin to meet her eyes. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

Her hand slipped into his pants. “Then let us try this. What have we got to lose?” Her breath in his ear. “And if it doesn’t work, then at least we’ll have one last time with you.”

“I...” He sighed. “Okay. Okay.”

The Lady watched on with wide eyes. “I’m going to die surrounded by the insane.”

“How is one load going to help? It’s like pouring a soda bottle into the ocean.” Nate frowned.

“You’re forgetting what General Kanu told us. The water is sentient. It’s a being, like any other. And if we add your seed to the source of it, just like you put your seed into our source...” Ana trailed off.

Nate hesitated. “Even if it does work, one load wouldn’t do it.”

“One big load might.” Ana rolled a pill between her thumb and finger. “I bought a load of sex stuff on Sapenza, including an enhancer. I thought you might need it for the after-mission celebration,” She blushed. “Since your harem is so big now.”

Nate stared at her, struck silent. Could this really work? It sounded like madness.

She placed the pill on his tongue and watched him swallow. Lunar was pouring out the water from the bottles.

“I was actually thirsty—” The Lady trailed off.

Cora was behind him, drawing his pants down. “It’ll have to be a quickie.”

“Is this really happening?” The Lady muttered, feeding a thick tousel of her red hair into her mouth to bite in exasperation.

Ana stripped herself off and used the jail bars to brace, looking over her shoulder. Lunar swallowed his cock adeptly, forcing her throat up and down his cock.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t be looking for an escape—oh, fuck—” Nate groaned as he was fed into Ana’s tight cunt by Lunar’s hand.

Cora lapped at his nutsack. “Come on, Sofia.”

“I...fine.” Sofia sighed, but her tongue was equally eager, her hands pushing on his ass to force him deeper into Ana’s pussy, his groin pushing into the Princess’ ample behind.

What followed was far from sexy.

Nate tried his best to get off, but he couldn't think of much else but their gross environment, their impending deaths, the stomach-sinking mind-clouding stench of failure. All the deaths they'd caused by flag-waving support for a failed mission.

The girls tried their best.

Ana thrust back at him gamely, her clapping ass louder than the metal shrieks of the shaking bars. And when her cunt wasn't getting him off, Lunar repositioned him into Ana's tight rosebud. But even the sheer heat tightness of his girl's ass wasn't getting him to boiling point.

Sofia and Cora slobbered over his balls. Lunar shook her tits in his face. Ana begged him to fill her ass.

But he couldn't get off, no matter what they did.

"Oh, for the love of—" The Lady huffed in frustration. "Do I have to do everything myself?" She talked in front of him, scowling, her eyes narrowed through her deep red hair. She put one hand on the hip of her tight black bodysuit, and with the other, drew down the zip of her chest. Slowly, teasingly, until her full milky tits were unveiled, perfect, creamy, and tipped with hard pink nipples.

"Cum for me." She commanded, shaking her breasts. "Cum for these tits."

Nate groaned and spilled into Ana's ass, rocking up against her pillowy asscheeks, leaning over her sweaty body as he spurted rope after rope.

"That's right." The Lady said triumphantly, jiggling her chest. "Fill the whore up."

His girls suckled his lightening balls as their heavy load was lessened, Nate's breath coming out in short sharp gasps as he finally found relief. Ana squealed and trembled underneath him, her thighs wet from the juices of her cascading cunt.

Her pill did the trick — his load was huge and he couldn't stop cumming, not when his cum was trickling from her cock-sealed ass, not when Lunar pulled him out and he painted her face, not when she aimed him at the empty water bottles they'd been given.

Nate just groaned and shook, holding onto Lunar as he was drained dry, filling the bottles.

Ana moaned, smiling back at him. "Thanks," She said to The Lady.

"I didn't do it for you, but you're welcome. I don't know how you take that thing up your behind." She shook her head, grimacing. "Do you really think this will work? Does Nate really have—"

"He does." Sofia said flatly, wiping her lips. "Try not to think about it."

Nate inhaled several deep breaths, feeling faint, his legs shaky. "Now what?"

"Now we wait for our opportunity." Cora said firmly. "When they come for us, we'll need to make our move. Find the water source. Poison it. Get the hell out."

"You make it sound so easy, sister." Lunar smirked.

"We could be waiting a while." Cora hummed, looking down at Ana, who'd sank to the ground, on her knees, Nate's thick seed seeping from her behind.

"Perhaps we can pass the time somehow." Lunar added, seeing her gaze.

Sofia glanced red-faced at The Lady, meeting her eyes. "I'm...I'm not proud."

Together, the three girls sank to their knees, parting Ana's asscheeks, their tongues extended.

"Fuck me." The Lady exhaled.

Nate chuckled. "You get used to it."

###

Dean groaned as their drop-pod shook violently. The sweet sound of silence and then a thunderous smash — their pod crashed through the bridge window, thumping a pilot underneath. For a moment, the bugs stood in shocked silence, and then every weapon raised.

From the window of their drop-pod, Dean and his new friends looked out at certain death.

But then another drop-pod projectile-fired through, and the security team of bugs were suddenly gone. Their insides were painted on the wall, their bodies pasted around another drop-pod.

Dean grinned, waiting for the pod latch to open, weapon at the ready.

The bugs weren't expecting the frankly insane drop-pod torpedo strategy, because it was dumb as hell. Through the broken bridge window, he could see drop-pods were hitting the ship and falling away to float aimlessly in space, or worse, exploding. Some were burnt through and riddled by the bug ship's turrets.

The window showed a chaos of orange and red, a cascade of fuselarium trails and blurry drop-pods.

Enough got through. Enough to make the bugs not know where to defend — they could no longer concentrate all their defensive boarding action on the hangars.

Dean could see the ship's commander, see the fear in his gleaming bug eyes. He didn't know what to do.

The ship was shaking.

The light of their drop-pod was ticking down. The latch was about to open. He flicked his safety off.

Once they had this ship, they'd show that it could be done. A bug ship could be forcefully taken, just like Nate had done. They could wreak havoc on the other bug ships, so that none of them knew if their allies could be trusted.

And they could keep going, pushing further into bug space.

Dean grinned to himself. Nate would be proud.

The Lunari soldier by his side bumped his shoulder. "We can do this." He whispered.

"We can." Dean agreed. He clutched his rifle as the pod begin to open. "And we're not stopping until we're pissing on the Queen's fucking throne."

###

It wasn't long before the bugs came back for them. It was that arrogant black-sashed

bug again, but his black sash held red stripes. His chattering mandibles commanded his underlings to open the jail cell and he snapped his fingers.

“Come, honored guests.” The bug bared his open mouth. “The Queen wishes to record a video of your downfall.”

“She can record a video of you getting your head blown off, how about that?” Nate snapped.

“Such courage, just like your forces that attack right now.” The bug shook his head mockingly. “All the Council members have brought their forces together, such unity. But how strong will their hearts and minds be when they see you and the Princess, broken and bested?”

Nate shared a glance with Ana as they were forcefully pushed and pulled out of the cell. Through the bunker corridors.

They each had a bug captor, a barrel in their backs, a personal prison guard.

They had to time this right.

But the bugs were numerous, and the corridors were tight. There wasn't any room for fucking this up, not when he had a hot plasma barrel in his spine.

Nate stewed.

I'm not seeing a battle simulation where the losses are acceptable. Isabelle surmised.

He needed to change the environment, to add an unexpected variable.

But how?

All the girls were behind him, equally helpless.

All of them...except Talia.

She was still outside the bunker, in her meka frame. She'd know something was wrong by now, but she wouldn't know what to do.

He needed to get her a message. But how could he, separated by space and stone?

The same way you talk to me, love. Ana's voice said in his head.

But you, you're different. He protested.

How? Ana said simply. *She is yours. It doesn't need to be a conversation, or a sentence. Just give the emotion. We can *feel* when you're hungry, when you're horny. Why wouldn't we be able to feel when you're in need?*

Nate drew a long breath, clenching his fists. The bug shoved him forward hard, smacking his shoulder into a wall.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine his meka pilot, her long brunette hair, her white meka frame, her plasma cannon and her energy sword. Talia.

He tried to transmit a single word. *Fire*. He tried to imagine her bringing her plasma cannon up at the bunker, taking aim, firing.

Nothing.

Nate opened his eyes in disappointment. He couldn't do it.

But then the bunker shook, dust kicking down from the stone. The bugs lost their balance — and Nate and the girls took advantage.

Nate whirled around to push aside the barrel in his spine, just before it fired. Behind

him, The Lady stomped her foot into her captor's knee, so hard he heard a crunch. She wrenched the bug's weapon free and shot Nate's captor, more by accident than design.

And behind them, Lunar snatched a blade from a bug's hip and launched herself at the wall. Her legs on the corridor wall had her suddenly above the bug. When she landed, the bug landed with her, only his neck sprayed a nasty gout of blue.

Cora had foregone her knuckle-claws — the loud *schwing* of her pincer blades extending from her forearms, a quick unfold of razor sharp blades. Each arm rapier soon extended through the bug's eyeballs, like cybermodded eyes gone wrong.

Meanwhile, Sofia had simply slipped around her bug and fed on his neck, too fast to be captured.

That left only Ana, who had done nothing. She just stood there in the tight corridor, ensuring the bug soldier that followed her could not fire past, because he was under strict orders not to hurt the Princess. When he got frustrated and shoved her down, she ensured her legs tangled up with him and brought him down with her.

Eventually, Cora stabbed through him and helped her friend up to her feet.

They were free. But the bunker was a deafening cacophony of bug shrieks and pounding alarms. The building itself was shaking — Talia was causing a scene out there.

“Double back, get our weapons. We haven't got much time.” Nate declared urgently. “We need to get to the water source.”

Sofia's long red tongue extended into the air as she sniffed. “Salt. We need to go deeper.”

They collected their weapons, blades and grenades.

Lunar shivered with delight as she recovered her gunblade, holding it with both hands.

Nate smiled. “It's not over until it's over. Let's get going. Sofia, take point.”

She nodded firmly.

Nate trailed behind his girls, letting them lead their way as they descended deeper into the bunker.

They were a sight to see, as they made their way through the squads of bug soldiers. Individually, they were amazing, but together, they were unstoppable.

Sofia's Voor strength was amazing — she could launch Lunar into the air, and the warrior would scythe five bug heads clean off before firing her gunblade into the head of the sixth.

Cora's frightening forearm-blades sliced and diced through the bugs, perfect for close quarter use, but as she whirled, Ana shot over her shoulder, picking off the long-range bugs.

The Lady had to settle for protecting Nate at the back, as the girls moved too quickly, but she had her own tricks. When one bug came from behind, electro-probes shot from her bracelet, frying a bug so hot that Nate could smell his cooked flesh.

He let himself be carried. This was what he'd built. He was just a normal guy, but somehow, he'd surrounded himself with incredible women.

But when the corridors descended even lower, as the salty taste on the tongue grew,

he knew he'd have to get involved himself. The tight corridors expanded until they were in a natural cavern, the rocks tinged with glimmering blue, a blue that glimmered up the many cave pillars and reached the ceiling itself.

A blue from the reflection of the water's source. That magical, sentient lifesource, the gloopy water that wasn't water, sitting peacefully in a lagoon. It was glowing bright, a teal blue, deep and wide and disappearing around the bend.

They could feel the power in it, feel the notion of something ancient, something powerful. More than ever, Nate understood that this was not just rejuvenating water — this was an alien being.

But on the bank of the lake, shielding the water from view and casting a large shadow on it, there she was. The Queen, standing between her row of bug soldiers, her guard.

She trembled with glee as she saw them. "It's over, Nathan Clancy. Your heroics have gotten yourself nowhere." She hissed. "I'll show your severed head on your holonet. I'll have your whores bulging with my babies, for all to see. You have delivered yourself into my embrace." Her legs drew up, so she was at her full size, her head almost touching the tops of the huge cavern. Her thick carapace shell was an unearthly black, like there was a fabric of space itself that blocked the water from view. And from the shell, her humanoid torso stretched, only somehow when she stretched with her arms, her torso-shell extended with her, so her body split into two, revealing a mouth in her shell, a second mouth.

Only this mouth was a horrifying maw, a viscous black gash in the flesh. As it opened, it revealed little spidery creatures that flopped out in a flood of amniotic yellow fluid. And behind those creatures, teeth, tinged green with acid. Behind those teeth, sharp pincer-style mandibles, only they weren't hard or rigid but soft and swaying like tentacles.

Nate gulped. She was a monster in every way. Her red eyes glowed.

"Are you ready, *Naaathan Clancy*?" Both mouths slithered. "This is the end."

He put his back against a cave pillar and looked askance at his girls. "Okay, ladies. This is what we've been training for. Keep to cover, keep her guard of bugs back and busy."

"Nate—" Cora said, and he could see the fear in her eyes.

"We're gonna be fine. Keep to suppressing fire. The Queen will come after me, which means you need to keep her bug-bitches busy while I think of a way to deal with her."

"We can fight together." Ana said desperately.

"I am your blade." Lunar insisted.

"If we fight together, her soldiers wrap around us." Nate pointed out. "We need to keep this lined up like a chessboard opening. Don't let them flank, don't let them rout us."

"Please, Nate." Ana begged, her eyes glassy.

He grasped her hand, then her chin, then kissed her hard. "I'm not playing the hero. We don't need to kill the Queen bitch, we just need to poison the lake and escape."

“Be careful.” She sniffed, wiping away her tears.

“You too, all of you.” Nate checked his weapon. He flashed her a smile. “Don’t worry. There’s only room for one member of royalty on this rock, and that’s always gonna be you, baby.”

He shifted his weapon to the side, took aim, and fired.

With one plasma blast, the battle began.

The girls stuck to their cover, firing short accurate bursts around the pillars. Quickly, they all realized the rock columns meant they were pinned down too easily, but The Lady had fought many a battle. She shot up into the cavern rocks, her shrieking rifle pulsating as she fired in a neat line.

And with her fire, the cavern rocks fell, the cavern itself shaking and rumbling, a dust cloud descending. The cloud was helpful, but it was the large falling boulders that let the girls dive to cover. Now they had their trench, they could fire and move at will.

The Lady wasn’t done, though. To their surprise, she snatched Ana’s hookgun from her hip and aimed it at the back of the cavern, where the lake disappeared around a bend, the light pouring in suggesting freedom. The cables shot out and pulled her away, over the waters, rocketing her away from the fight.

“What the fuck?” Cora snapped.

“That traitorous bitch.” Ana snarled. “I knew she was a coward!”

Nate watched on, his head heavy. Would she take the ship away too, leaving them stranded?

He couldn’t think of her now, nor the plight of the girls. He had to pay attention to his own fight. The skittering baby spiders crawled towards him, but Lunar took care of them with ease.

He shifted from pillar to pillar, getting closer to the Queen. Not because it was smart, but because he needed to see what her method of attack was. Only then would Isabelle be able to run through her battle simulations.

Two of her large raised pincer-legs were high, raised like a rearing horse, and she shot ghostly webs from the end of her pincer-legs. The shimmering webs stuck like goo to each pillar.

She’s making web traps around each pillar. Nate realized. *Reducing the amount of cover I have.*

Adding to simulation. Recording each non-functional pillar and coloring them red in your vision. Isabelle said robotically, all trace of humor gone.

When he got closer, her torso-mouth reared open again. Only this time, instead of spilling her spider-babies, her black gloopy flesh flashed a dark green, like a lightning strike seen through the leaves of the jungle.

Out of care, Nate dove to the side, just as a hissing mortar-spray of acid sizzled into the ground, eating away the rock. It spread like a pool, bubbling.

This acid is highly toxic — I believe it would burn through your flesh in mere seconds. Isabelle chimed. *Analysis suggests it is also extremely flammable.*

“Stay away from acid, got it.” Nate peered around the pillar to see the Queen’s

human torso cradling a rifle, her human arms looking almost comical above the mighty torso, as she worked a rotating-ring plasma rifle.

“Wait, is she—” Nate took off at a sprint as she took aim, running desperately away from the pool of acid.

BOOM!

The sheer heat of the shockwave sent him spinning through the air and smacking into another pillar. His head split open, but he frantically patted his back. He still had his clothes, which meant he still had his skin. But behind him, the acid pool had exploded into fiery globs of acid flame, spitting through the rocks themselves.

As I said, highly flammable. Isabelle said flatly.

“Thanks.” Nate held his head and stumbled to his feet. He couldn’t let her do that much more — he needed to go on the offensive.

Time for a grenade.

Negative. Isabelle played a simulation in his mind.

Simulated-Nate swiped a grenade from his belt, flicked the pin and threw it at the Queen — only her web-shooting hands caught it easily and threw it right back.

“Good shout.” Nate muttered. Instead, he threw the grenade at the cave pillars beside the advancing Queen. The blast shook the unstable cavern even more, but while Nate had hoped for a rock-fall onto the monster, he got only a falling pillar. That pillar was webbed up quickly, and in the web of her pincers, she carried it like a horizontal baton.

Her own baby spiders were crushed under it as she thumped it on the ground in demonstration, the waters of the lake shaking behind her.

The Queen laughed hysterically as she reared back and threw the pillar at him, but it clipped the edge of a rock and lost its force. It ended up being a great bit of horizontal cover for him to peek over, firing his rifle ineffectively into her shell.

Nate snorted. “Silly bitch.” He wasn’t laughing when another pool of acid shot over the cover. Only, this time, she couldn’t light it so easily, her plasma bursts sizzling into his cover.

Isabelle played a scene in his mind.

“Will that really work?” Nate frowned.

There is a scientific probability. Isabelle answered.

“Good enough for me.” He drew his knife, wishing he had something longer and cooler, like Lunar’s gunblade or Cora’s extending arm-rapiers. He dipped the blade in the bubbling acid, letting the gleaming silver turn to a nasty green.

For this to work, he’d have to get close. But the path ahead to the Queen was riddled with acid and web-traps. He needed a distraction to her, and his girls couldn’t help, busy keeping the Queen’s soldiers at bay.

The shakes of the cavern from his grenade hadn’t ceased. It rumbled hard, debris falling continually, so much that even the Queen stopped to look up.

Nate frowned. He knew what it was. He knew *who* it was.

The cave roof split, and glowing plasma sword in hand, smoking cannon in the other, in dropped Talia, her meka frame bloody and dusty.

“Having fun without me?” She called, but she didn’t hesitate. Her thrusters burst in a fiery blue as she shot towards the Queen.

Nate’s heart stopped as the Queen spat a broiling ball of acid at Talia, but his girl only raised her cannon and fired. The cannon that should have expelled plasma instead fired a *whump* of torrid concentrated air, a visible haze that pushed the acid-ball back at the Queen.

The spider monster was splashed with acid, but she seemed unbothered.

Talia’s plasma cannon has overheated, that’s why it’s shooting only air. Isabelle realized.

Just like a plasma rifle. Good for her. Nate thought — otherwise a plasma blast would have lit the incoming acid up, making things worse.

Talia hadn’t stopped, even with her overheated cannon, she was slicing away with her vast sword. The Queen’s legs were dancing in retreat as she tried to save her limbs from dismemberment, but she was distracted enough.

This is your cue! Isabelle called. Nate was already running, feet pounding on the rocky ground. The soldiers took potshots at him that soared overhead, while his girls tried to cover him with suppressing fire. He kept his own finger on the trigger as he ran, spraying the bug guard mercilessly with his plasma rifle, if only to keep them from putting him in their sights. Three cycled bursts of *perr-hew* rasping noises, again and again.

He was getting closer, and only up close could he fully realize how huge the Queen was, larger than Talia even in her meka frame.

He slid to the ground to avoid a stabbed down pincer-leg, leapt over a waiting web-trap, kicked down on a baby spider’s squishy-skull, and then he was in the Queen’s shadow. Underneath the thick carapace shell.

But, as he tried to get behind her, he made to take a step and realized his leg wasn’t on the ground. It was behind him, hooked by a single silver thread, caught by the thin string that hung like a strand of a curtain from the Queen’s humanoid hand. She shrieked with laughter as he rose up, dangling, a big fish on a small hook.

Talia tried to fly closer, but the Queen was retreating quickly, back to the safety of her soldiers, back to the lake, her many legs shooting webs to stop the meka pilot.

Nate could only watch as he was brought closer to the Queen’s mouth — not her humanoid mouth, but her hideous torso-gash, the flesh itself hot and sticky, the sulphuric and rotten stench forcing its way down his throat.

She brought him so close that he could see the little egg-sacs that lined up along her huge ivory teeth, such that anything she bit would drizzle down her teeth and permeate the egg shells to feed her babies.

So close that he could see the core of her maw, the center of her torso, a fleshy ball of green and raw red, the acid-producing belly of the beast.

“Do you see your demise?” She rumbled, each word hitting him like a strong gust of revolting wind, his skin drying out.

But as she spoke, her torso-mouth opening wider, she’d lost sight of him through her

many eyes, as he was almost enveloped.

Lost sight of how close he was to her flesh. Lost sight of his acid-tipped knife in his belt.

His core burned as he reached up to cut himself free of her thread, but then he was inside her maw, enveloped all around by the belly of the beast. He had only seconds before she'd snap her mouth shut, but it was time enough.

To torch her from within.

His plasma rifle came up.

He grinned and took aim at her center, at the acidic ball of green and red.

And fired.

His plasma rifle let out a whimper of air.

"No!" He swore, checking its gauge. It had overheated.

"Fuck it." He dropped the gun and jumped free of her belly-mouth just before it snapped close in a loud clap of fangs, but he'd made sure to throw himself across her body, rather than away.

Close enough so he could dig his acid-tipped knife into her shell, a mountain-climbing spike into the divot of her hard carapace. He hung there, barely holding on, screams and shouts echoing in his ear.

Get moving, Nate. Isabelle reminded him.

He jerked his knife as he climbed around her torso, more flailing than climbing. She was trying to find him, but Talia was keeping her legs busy with her energy sword, and the webs she shot at him were helping more than hindering — they let him jump across her torso and use their stickiness to hold one hand in place.

Slowly, he rose up her black shell, trailing his acid-knife all over her like a glistening green snail-trail, until finally he stood above her torso, facing her humanoid body at its top.

He charged, knife in hand, but she simply held out her hand and snorted. A ball of web sought to toss him away, but he side-stepped once, twice, and then dove under the last. Finally, he was next to her, and he could angrily slash his blade through her flesh, slicing up her abdomen.

He could only get one slash off until he was thrown away bodily — a hand on his throat, a web on his ankle, and the air whistling through his ears as he sailed back and landed with a nasty crunch.

He looked up through blurry eyes.

The Queen peered down at him with sheer contempt, her shell lined with trails of the acid he'd left, her own torso slashed with green. "Did you *really* think I was susceptible to the very venom I produce?"

Nate stumbled to his feet, feeling the bond to his girls in his mind. "No." He said. "I was just placing the matches."

Ana snapped her plasma rifle up. "And we're just lighting them." As one, all his girls fired — even Talia's cannon. Every plasma blast hit the acid trail he'd left. It was like the air had been swallowed from the cave. The Queen lit up in a boom of acrid flames, her

whole monstrous frame covered in a glow of orange, too bright to look at.

The smell of sulfur spread, the smoke filling the cave, and her shriek was piercing. Through the flames, they could just barely see her figure, jerking and lurching. Even her own soldiers had stopped to look in horror, unable to comprehend their Queen in pain.

But she wasn't dying.

"Time to go, girls." Nate roared.

"Look!" Cora pointed at the lake, where the water sprayed high, as some black shape came closer.

"It's...her." Ana's mouth fell open.

The Lady, on her jetski, with another two chained behind it. Her red hair whipped behind her.

"That tricky bitch." Cora admired.

"Talia!" Nate yelled. "Buy us a path!"

She saluted with her meka arms, and her plasma cannon began laying down a lot more than suppressing fire. The bug soldiers threw themselves aside as her huge cannon blasts cratered their line.

Sofia led the way, firing as she ran, while Nate hobbled to the waterfront. Lunar had to literally pull him out of the way of a stray shot, and he felt another singe his hair, but finally he was being pulled across a jetski seat.

"I am in control of this contraption!" Lunar declared, as if shouting it would make it true. But all the same, she revved the throttle and they took off along with the other girls, spraying the cave behind them as they jetted away.

The Queen wailed and screamed as the flames began to die down, but her orders were incoherent.

Ahead of them, Nate saw Ana and Cora emptying his bottles of seed into the water, the thick white mixing into the teal blue, and it struck him as absurd. Could his seed really do anything?

More than anything, it mattered that they'd escaped, as they turned the bend of the cavern's end and saw only the brightest of blues.

The vast pipes above the planet were in action once more, with the eclipse past, thrumming as they pumped the water into the breeding ships above.

They hadn't escaped yet, Nate corrected himself. They had to get back to Council borders, which seemed doubtful, now the bugs knew where they were, and given they were so deep in bug space.

But they lived for now. And if Ana was right, if his seed in the water could have a mind-altering effect, their heroics might have changed everything.

Talia flew above, waving down at them, leading the way.

The jetskis drew up alongside each other.

"Didn't think you'd come back." Ana shouted over the whipping wind and the water spray.

The Lady shrugged from her ski, Sofia's arms around her waist. "Thought about it, but decided I needed someone to cook for me." She smirked.

“Are you sure you didn’t come back for Nate, now you’ve seen *all* he can do?” Ana said.

“Please.” The Lady sniffed. “If I wanted a big thing to tear me apart, I’d be working for the bugs.”

Nate snorted. He looked over at Ana, who winked back at him.

She mouthed something at him, and he couldn’t hear it, but he could hear her voice in his head. *That’s what they all say at first.*

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The Queen seethed as her worthless slaves bathed her in the healing balm of the planet’s water. They stood on each others shoulders to reach all of her, rubbing the salve of the teal blue liquid over her burnt skin.

She was hurt, her skin blackened and breaking.

It didn’t matter, she decided.

Because she’d protected the magic of the waters here, that which healed, that which strengthened the next of her hive, that would make her the mightiest Queen of all, the last Queen that her people ever needed.

Just by drinking it, she could recover. She opened her mouth and her attendant poured another flask of the beautiful blue down her throat.

She smiled. It tasted better than ever.

She closed her eyes. She could feel all of her hive, across the galaxy.

Her mental network was stronger than ever, while the old Queen was barely holding on, her body fading, her mind fractured. Every day, more defected from the old hive to the new, to her own.

The Queen smiled and took another gulp of the waters, feeling the psychic connection to the bugs near and far. Those that were far were struggling with the Council push, dying in surprising numbers.

It didn’t matter. Once she had chased down Clancy and the Princess, the war would end. That was the weakness of the humans, the Lunari, all of those fools. They needed heroes to believe in, while her people only needed their *Queen*.

Once she made their heroes break, so would their resolve.

With a single thought, she sent more of her people to battle the invading Council armada. With another, she set up a blockade to fence in Clancy’s path to safety.

She opened up her mouth once more to receive the healing waters, smiling, even as the waters dribbled down her mouth, falling onto her chest.

Yes...there was no escape for him. It was only a matter of time before she paid him back for this humiliation.