

Chapter 1

“I’m glad we decided you’d go last, Nate.” Ana watched with wide eyes as Sofia nibbled on his neck, injecting the blood from their captive bug into his bloodstream. Nate reclined, just holding his Sofia tightly as she went wild. The Voor beauty moaned and writhed on his thigh as she bit into his neck, blood streaming from her fangs.

“She did warn us that this process was very intimate for the Voor.” Lunar said fairly.

“Intimate?” Cora snorted. “She’s stained my skirt.” She said, holding her neck.

“She might have passed out if Nate went first.” Talia giggled, watching Sofia writhe and vibrate.

“I think she’s orgasming.” Lunar observed.

“She’s been cumming this whole time.” Cora took a few steps back as Sofia squirted on top of Nate, wary of getting her shoes dirty.

The Lady’s usually unflappable demeanor had fallen away, but she only gave it away with a raised eyebrow. “I knew you and Nate weren’t at all normal, but I thought it only extended to polyamory, not this...whatever this is.” Her own neck was punctured, since Sofia had already transferred the bug blood to them all.

“We don’t do such labels.” Ana held her nose up. “We just love Nate and seek his pleasure in all things, and share a bond from having that in common.”

Nate squeaked as Sofia rubbed herself over his pant-clad cock. He wished he’d got naked — he could already feel his clothes staining.

“Yeah, that’s much more normal.” The Lady said sarcastically. “What would the people of the Federation think to see all this?”

“It doesn’t matter, because they’ll never know.” Ana said sharply. “Nate takes his reputation seriously.”

Nate wasn’t sure that was quite fair — he’d had to enlist both the Federation higher ups and the unexpected kindness of the Lunari Empress in order to wipe the footage of his public pounding of Sofia from the holonet.

“Relax,” The Lady held her hands up. “I’m a spy, remember? Discretion is the name of the game.”

Sofia let out a keening wail, passing out on top of him, her mouth a messy red, her thighs glistening.

“Get her off.” Ana ordered.

“I think she’s done that plenty.” Cora snickered.

“Get her off him and clean her up.” Ana corrected. She stared at the hard bulge in his pants. “I’ll...clean things up here.”

“I’ll help.” Talia chimed in.

“And I.” Lunar straightened.

“You may wish to leave.” Ana looked at The Lady with a hard gaze. “We’ll be testing your ability to be discrete.”

Isabelle kicked her legs as she sat on the ship console, dressed in her non-standard Federation uniform, with a skirt smaller than some belts. “You’ll need to be quick. We’re running out of time.”

At the bridge’s front, the window showed the blue sphere of El-Faro as they neared it. And, around the planet, dozens of streams of dissipating fuselarium, the evidence of the ships that had been here. They’d all left to join the fight Kanu was bringing.

Nate grinned at the sight and the simultaneous sensation of the girls cleaning him up. Talia looked over her shoulder as she sank down on his cock, her lip bitten, her eyes lidded.

The planet’s protective convoy was gone. The way was clear. Above the blue miracle waters that they aimed to poison, the bug breeding carriers sat above the atmosphere, enormous sucking cables drinking in the waters to feed their next generation, to make them stronger, faster. Nate was going to give them an unpleasant surprise — like curdled baby milk.

Already, El-Faro’s moon was beginning to block the sun. The eclipse was beginning soon. Under Isabelle’s stewardship, they raced towards the planet.

“Girls, I need to get ready, we haven’t got time—”

“Relax,” Ana smiled as Lunar and Cora attached their eager tongues to his heavy balls.

“But I’m not close—”

Ana wiped his neck clean of blood and stroked his hair. “I know. Don’t worry, I’m an expert in making you cum, Nate. I know how to get you off.”

Nate smiled at his blonde beauty as she lay against him, watching the debauchery below the waist. Talia’s perfect peach of a bottom bounced on his cock while she held his hands for support. Her ample ass was gleaming — had she *oiled* it?

“Yeah, what do I need?”

Ana smiled mischievously. “You need something...new.”

At her words, Talia rose up enough for his cock to fall out. Cora held his shaft as she sank down again slowly — only this time he was in her virgin asshole. Her puckered hole reluctantly enveloped his member, his cock disappearing inch by inch as Talia looked over her shoulder, through her hair, her mouth split by a silent scream.

“Oh, fuck.” Nate gasped.

“What do you think, girls?” Ana teased. “Have we got time?”

Lunar detached her mouth from his balls, a saliva string connecting to her pouting lips. “I sense imminent projectile release.”

“I can feel it boiling.” Cora said, her words muffled.

“Yes!” Talia squealed. “Cum in my ass, make me just like the other girls.”

Ana sighed happily as Talia rode him, stroking his hair. It wouldn’t be right to begin

their final mission without relieving him — after all, when would they next get a chance? That snobby woman, The Lady, had left them alone. It didn't matter. Nate had all he needed, right here. Ana rubbed her tits against his arm, pressing kisses to his neck. She wondered idly if Kanu was having as much fun as they were.

###

“She’s gonna be fine, Captain.” Mitsky put a hand on his shoulder as Dean watched Clara’s meka frame rise up out of the hangar and dash into the battle outside.

“Yeah.” He said quietly, his stomach rolling. She’d be fine — she *had* to be.

He couldn’t afford to worry — he had his own battle to fight. Clara and co would keep the bug fighters while the infantry of the Destiny boarded the bug carrier.

They had one mission — take control of the bridge, at all costs.

The Council armada’s initial hit had gone well. The bugs hadn’t expected such a large force, and Kanu’s organized punch hit hard and deep into bug territory.

Dean had spent the last few hours cheering and clapping, rather than worrying. The Voor were fast fuckers, punching little flickers into the bug shields, flickers that the Federation and Lunari ships took advantage of easily. Meanwhile, the Reverts tanked almost all of the answering fire.

But now, the bugs were re-positioning. Reinforcements were streaming in, too many to count.

Kanu had told them that speed was the name of the game, so they had to keep pushing forward. The General’s face had appeared on every screen — the respected general had barely broken a sweat. He told them that he didn’t want a traditional space battle, a back and forth of shield-targeting, rotating their ships to present their hardest sides.

“A normal battle is a slow battle.” Kanu had said. “So instead, we’re fighting like they do in the holomovies. Hard and fast, ramming maneuvers, losing a lick of paint here and there. We’re going to do everything to let you boys board their ships.”

The roar of the boys had almost deafened Dean.

Kanu grinned. “Some people think the infantry is the fodder. The rank and file. You and I know differently. Nate Clancy knows differently. You know what I want from you. Get to the bridge, capture their ships. Let’s make our armada even bigger, push harder, faster.”

Dean pinched himself to stop his hand shaking as he checked his rifle and grenades for the tenth time.

The hangar was a discordant mess of drop-pods lying on their side. Kanu had told them that they would be shot directly into the bug-ships, fired like torpedoes. Not so much a boarding action as a projectile parasite.

This whole mission seemed to be Nate-inspired — the endless holospecials on Nate’s heroics and Jarek’s deviousness meant that Dean knew every step of what Jarek had tried

and how Nate had foiled it. Judges operated on a whole different level, which meant Dean had big shoes to fill.

Once again, Dean wondered where his old friend was. In the thick of the action, no doubt, deeply embedded.

Dean took a deep breath. “Alright, lads—”

“And lasses.” Mitsky complained.

“Lads and lasses.” Dean corrected. “Form up. Orders are in. We’re loading up on the drop-pods to board the bug carrier. At the moment, we’re about to grind some paint with those fuckers. So we need to load up, on the double. Your armguard has your pod number. A fight this big, we’re gonna be fighting with some unfamiliar faces. Keep it simple. And remember—”

“Cover is your mother.” They chanted it reply.

Dean grinned. “You got it. Let’s go.”

He flicked his armguard to send them their pod instructions and then found his own pod. The hangar was a mass of shouting voices and soldiers running every which way, but war was never going to be peaceful.

He stepped into the pod’s open latch and then laid down, letting the restraints settle down over him firmly and click in. Across from him, he was surprised to see a Lunari soldier frowning. To his left, the floppy ears of a Lops looked very incongruent with a grizzled face of a soldier. The fourth slot in the pod was filled by a pale-skinned Voor.

“Uh, am I in the wrong place?” Dean said unsurely. His armguard chimed. He checked in to see new instructions.

You are to join a special operation. We will be trying to fire your pod directly into the bridge itself, for high-impact high-risk ship takeover. We have assigned you with a spec-ops infantry team made from across the Council members.

Dean blinked. That was a late notice way to be told you were going to do some risky shit with strangers.

He’d be angry, but this was exactly how Nate operated too.

The Lunari man sniffed. “I did not expect to be alongside a Federation boot on such a mission.”

The Lops soldier barked a laugh. The Voor soldier’s lips thinned.

Dean held his head up. “I fought under Nathan Clancy himself. I was his number two.”

The Lunari stiffened. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean saw the Lops soldier’s ears prick up.

“Forgive me.” The Lunari said stiffly. “My mistake, I meant no offence.”

Dean grinned toothily. “It’s fine. Anyone who is ready to mow down some bug fuckers is a brother to me. I’m Dean Pelridge.”

“Lazaroth Adren. I am honored to fight alongside a brother of Nathan Clancy, he who works with our Princess to defeat the bugs.”

Dean nodded, holding onto his restraints as the pod latch closed. “Let’s take this ship over and then I can introduce you to them both. Ana’s a real sweetheart.”

Lazaroth's eyes widened. "You know Princess Anariel personally?"

"Sure." Dean shrugged. "I've had a few drinks with her — she can't handle her alcohol at all, bless her."

Lazaroth's grip tightened on his weapon. "Let us rain down the blood and bones of the bug abominations."

Dean laughed. "I like your style. I usually just say 'let's shoot their heads off'."

The Lunari bared his teeth. "Should we find a weapon capable of such decapitation, I should gladly use it."

"You're alright, Lunari." Dean smirked. "You're alright."

###

Nate held his breath. It was the moment of truth. Their ship passed through the shield of the planet, the fizzling blue that circled El-Faro, the shield dotted with electro-prism balls. If they didn't pass as bugs, to the scanning sensors, those prism balls would light up in a sizzling arc. An arc that would lightning-strike their ship into pieces.

The ship's bridge was completely silent.

But as they passed, they each exhaled slowly. They each wore their tight armored battle suits, though Talia was in her meka suit.

"It worked." Ana whispered.

"Why are we whispering?" Talia murmured.

Nate snorted as Cora led them down into the planet's atmosphere. The planet was a landscape of still blue waters, but the light of the waters was surreal. A gleaming bioluminescent water — Kanu had said these waters were sentient, in a way, alive.

Almost gelatinous, its glow was hypnotic. Around the waters, the land was sparse. It was black rock, like sulphuric volcano rock, craggy and ominous, so sharp that the rock almost seemed like a pen to hold the water in.

"Everyone got their weapons?" Nate checked his belt. He had grenades, he had his knife.

"I miss my plasma rifle." Cora complained.

"Too colorful in the darkness of the eclipse." He told her. "Silenced bullet rifles are the order of the day."

"This is brand new, barely fired." She grumbled. "I can't trust it."

"We've been outfitted with the best equipment." The Lady commented. "And don't worry, I tested them myself. Even the grappling hooks."

Nate rested his hand on the hook-gun on his hip. That was the first of the gifts that he'd requisitioned from the Federation. It would apparently let them climb high and *fast*.

"It's like the CastingKing AutoReeler you used to rescue Ana, remember?" Isabelle grinned.

"I can't believe you rescued her with a fishing rod." Talia said.

"The good old days." Nate mused. "Just an ancient AI in my head, a Princess to rescue and bugs to shoot."

“We still have to talk about this AI.” The Lady said darkly. “I don’t know how I’m going to keep *that* off my report.”

“You worry too much.” Ana said cheerily. “Izzy’s a sweetie.”

“Advanced AIs don’t have the best reputation in the galaxy for a reason.” The Lady muttered.

“Izzy would definitely never go on a rampage and commit genocide, right, sweetie?” Nate winked at his projected girl.

Isabelle held her hands behind her innocently. “Only if I get hungry.”

“Oh, she’s got a sense of humor, that must mean she’s safe.” The Lady said sarcastically.

“Trust me, if not her.” Nate promised. “Izzy’s been my side the whole time.”

The Lady shrugged, tousling her red hair. “I can’t argue with your results, I suppose.” She surveyed Isabelle as she fluttered her eyelashes. “What happens when you piss her off? She might find a new...host.”

Isabelle smirked. “I’m Nate’s and Nate’s mine. Forever.”

“And if he dies?”

Isabelle scowled. “Nate doesn’t die.”

“Oh, he’s immortal now?”

“If Nate gets hurt, I’ll destroy his enemies.” Isabelle promised. “I’ll pull from the hidden banking accounts I have been using to accumulate funds, bankrolling a mercenary army, activating blackmail I have found on the holonet against a variety of high-ranking politicians and influential celebrities. This mix of social, political and military power will be used to eradicate his enemies.”

The group was silent for a long moment. Nate stared with wide eyes at his AI girl, before she giggled and shrugged her shoulder.

“But Nate’s not going to die. I’m protecting him.” Isabelle said happily.

“For fuck’s sake.” The Lady uttered under her breath.

“In fairness,” Ana said thoughtfully. “She’s not doing anything I wouldn’t do if Nate got into trouble. I’ve already begun funding some revolutionaries on the Lops planets as a punishment for their King being involved in hurting Nate.”

“You have?” Nate said blankly.

“Fantastic.” The Lady sighed. “The galaxy’s politics and powers are being set by the whims of your obsessive crew, Clancy.”

“We prefer the word harem,” Ana said slyly.

“I am *not* a part of a harem.” Sofia growled.

“I kinda like it.” Talia giggled.

“Of course we are all harem-sisters in thrall to our mighty Kyrios.” Lunar said, frowning. “It is only natural to protect and serve the leader. How else could we exist as an efficient battle unit?”

Cora shrugged. “Nate doesn’t really give us much of a choice. If he says we’re his harem, then that’s what we are. What do you think, Nate?”

Nate cleared his throat. “I say *my* harem needs to focus on our mission.”

Cora flew them far from the bug garrisons — even the sight of their ship would set off alarms, because the bugs left their ships above the atmosphere. They had to — the water could not be tainted by electricity or fuselarium. It would turn black, dull, dead, useless.

“Careful, Cora.” Nate ordered. “Can’t skim the water — if it turns black before the eclipse, it gives us away.”

“I’m landing on the rocks, don’t worry.” She answered distractedly.

She flew the TRYSTA to the flattest part of the craggy black rocks and settled them down carefully. The ship wobbled as the supporting legs extended, and they ended up at an odd angle, but the ship was down.

But when the ramp extended and they walked down, they realized the water was already turning black. The moon was passing in front of the sun. The eclipse. As the sunlight was blocked, the glowing waters turned black, and the planet itself darkened.

“Move, move, move.” He declared. As one, they hauled crates out of the ship. The Lady tapped her armguard and each side of the crates thunked down.

Nate grinned. The Federation had come through with his request for the best of equipment. No longer was he going to be on a mission with barely a pistol to his name.

Three gleaming jet ski’s sat, painted a midnight black.

Cora whistled. “Now, ain’t they pretty.”

“No time to play.” Ana said. “Let’s saddle up.”

The ship’s ramp thumped as Talia walked down in her meka frame. “I’ll be watching from above. Good luck, you guys.”

Ana blew her a kiss. “Don’t mess around up there.”

“Keep to the clouds, sweetheart.” Nate told her. “Until it’s absolutely necessary.”

As her thrusters burnt into the sky, they climbed onto their jet skis, two to a machine. Nate had to pry Lunar’s hands away, so tightly did she squeeze his ribs from behind him.

“You nervous?”

“I have not been on one of these water contraptions.” Lunar muttered. “I don’t trust them.”

“Honey, we skidded down a snowy mountain on a drone.”

“A drone is a shield with more technology.” Lunar dismissed. “This device is much more unnatural.”

Nate revved the engine as he slid the ski into the black water. With the water dull, it was safe to use powered machines.

“Lights off.” Nate ordered. “Follow me, but if it gets too dark to see me, Isabelle will chime your arm-guard with different sounding beeps if you need to go left and right.”

Lunar squeaked as he led the way. They cut through the water, the ominous black fluid spraying up in a fine spray. The engines were quiet, but in the silence of the eclipse, they sounded like an animal roar. Nate nervously waited for the bugs to hear them, but there was no one around.

The bugs were not around, but ahead. They needed no direction, because the enormous water-vacuuming cables stretched from the planet, like IV cables the size of a

city.

And at the base of the cables, a dam, a wide black bob in the horizon, surreal because of its scale. Nate and the girls skimmed closer until the blob had become an identifiable shape. A large stone dam, like a prefabricated military building plunked down on the volcanic black rock. At either end of the dam, two gray bunkers, homes for the bug garrisons stationed here. Watchtowers on either side, and a patrol that undoubtedly walked the dam.

The sheer blackness allowed them to settle at the bottom of the dam, and only right alongside could they fathom how large it was. The dam was still and silent — Nate imagined that when the water was alive and blue, the dam would be thrumming from the machinery within that forced the water into the sucking cables.

This was where Kanu had said that his sensors were off the charts — inside would be where they needed to poison the water source. Nate thumbed the black case on his hip — he held the rare gelatinous green poison cocktail, an acid from the swamp planets of the Lunari. The weapon that could change the fate of the galaxy.

First, they had to get to the top of the dam, and get through two garrisons, two bunkers, to the entrance into the dam itself.

The Lady clicked her fingers. “Our intel says the left bunker is the dorms, the right is the control center. The control center has the access route into the water source, but we hit the left bunker first, because we can’t leave them behind us if things go wrong, or we’re dead meat in the sandwich.”

“Are we going all the way up there?” Ana said, leaning back to try and see the whole dam.

“Watch and learn.” The Lady told them firmly, aiming her hook-gun up at the dam. “It’s a double-hooker dig-and-hold for extreme climbing. Hope you’re not afraid of heights.” She fired. A chrome hook shot like a bullet, whistling into the air — not into the dam, but straight up into the sky. Once it reached its max height, it hovered for a moment and then, with a propulsive push of thrusters embedded in the hook, it smashed firmly into the stone of the dam, roughly half way up the enormous dam.

“See you up there.” The redhead winked and with a pull of the hook-gun’s second trigger, the black cables pulled her violently up. One second she was in front of them, the next she was reeled high into the air. She hung there, in the middle of the dam, holding onto her hook-gun.

“Uh, what’s the next step?” Ana wondered out loud.

Nate had seen these before, though he’d never used them. “The hook flattens once embedded, so it’s like a platform you can stand on. That’s why they call it a double hooker — you stand on one hook and you use the second one to go higher.”

“I do not trust this contraption either.” Lunar scowled. “I could climb safely with my gunblade.”

“We haven’t got time for that, Lunar. Come, you can come with me,” Nate took his own hook-gun, wrapped his arm around Lunar and fired high into the sky.

Once the hook embedded, he flew into the sky, his stomach sinking, bile rising up to

his throat. “Don’t look down.” He muttered to himself, but he couldn’t help himself as the ground vanished away, his girls turning to miniature figures.

His vision swam until suddenly he was standing with wobbly feet on the chrome hook, which had extended to a sword-like blade. He glanced over his shoulder to see the long black waters and the horizon behind them. The rim-light of the sun behind the moon.

“Invigorating!” Lunar laughed, holding her chest. “I should like to do this again, my Kyrios.”

“You’ve changed your tune.” Nate held his stomach, willing himself not to throw up.

Once the girls had all joined him, Nate held his gun up again to use the second hook.

His shoulder almost yanked out of its socket, his eyes closed in panic, the cold wind whistling through his ears, his neck-hair standing on end.

He never wanted to open his eyes, not until his stomach settled down.

But then the unmistakable chitter of a bug pierced his ears.

Lunar tapped his chin and held up a single finger. They hung on the dam’s edge, though this time, there was no hook to support their feet, so Nate just had to hold on tightly to his embedded hook-gun.

The chrome hook was hooked over the dam’s parapet edge, and though there was no light, it still gleamed.

Don’t see it. Don’t see it. Nate chanted in his head.

They couldn’t afford to have the alarm ring, not this early.

He couldn’t see the bug — but he could feel it, right above him. The moon was shifting — there was the slightest light, the slightest shadow.

The bug uttered a note of surprise.

Nate could do nothing — one arm held Lunar and the other held onto the hook gun. But Lunar could. She scrambled up his body and leapt from his shoulders.

“Oof!” Nate squealed — he could only stare up. The glimpse of Lunar’s panties under her battle-skirt as she flipped. Her hand reaching for her gunblade on her back. He saw no more, but he heard a slash and a wet squish.

A bug’s head toppled past Nate and fell to the waters below, before Lunar leaned over the dam’s edge, beaming at him. She pulled him up before he knew what happened.

“Blood to stain the blade, a promising start.” Lunar whispered.

At his side, the girls were climbing up, but Nate was already studying the crest of the dam. A bunker on either side, and the bugs that patrolled the walkway between them were quickly, silently dispatched.

Sofia dive-kicked the legs of one bug and sank her fangs into its neck — perhaps she’d gotten a taste of bug.

The Lady kicked off the side of the parapet in order to wrap herself around a bug’s neck. Nate heard the snap before she’d even hit the ground.

Cora, less graceful, used her knuckle-claws to separate a bug’s head into two.

That left the dam’s crest free, but there was still the watchtowers next to the dam bunkers. From each tower, a shining white light beamed, perhaps powered by a

generator.

They hadn't expected a floodlight, and the light from the left watchtower was scanning across the crest, moments from illuminating them.

Where's Talia? Ana frowned. *She should be taking out the tower.*

There wasn't time to wait.

Nate swore and grabbed Lunar's unused hookgun. As the white light blinded him, he aimed and fired, praying his aim was true. The line grew taut and the hookgun pulled him rapidly to the top of the tower — only when he arrived, he found his hook had buried into a bug's head. Impaled with each point of the hook trident, the bug's head had been peeled like an orange.

Nate tilted the large floodlight away from the crest, but now he was up on the watchtower without his girls.

Below the watchtower, the bunker, the one that The Lady said was the dorms, the one they had to clean up before advancing.

Nate nudged his foot into the bug's bloody head, trying to dislodge the hook.

Gross! Ana said.

"Guess I'm taking the ladder." Nate grimaced.

He descended quickly, until suddenly his hands were lit with a white light. Someone had seen him!

He looked over his shoulder to see a bug standing on the bunker's top — and behind him, the shadow of something larger. A white meka.

Nate only had time to take a breath before Talia ran her energy sword through the bug's torso. "Sorry I'm late." Talia's voice came through his armguard. "The dam had some anti-air turrets which I had to eliminate quietly."

"Thanks for the save." Nate said as he reached the end of the ladder, joining the group of girls.

In front of them, the bunker doors were large and metal. A blinking blue console-pad was embedded in the wall next to it.

"Nate," Isabelle buzzed from his armguard. "I think I can lock them in their bunker if you can transfer me across to Cora. If she uses her cybernetic claws to penetrate the console-pad, I may be able to route my way into their network."

"I...okay." Nate agreed.

Cora looked skeptical/ "You really think this will work?"

"Isabelle does." Nate shrugged. "And that's enough for me. Izzy?"

"Press your armguards together." She chimed from his armguard.

He pressed it against Cora's.

"Transferring self." Isabelle said, her voice strained with concentration.

"Miss you already." Nate told her.

"Alright, give it a try." Isabelle said, but this time her voice came from Cora's armguard. It felt odd.

Cora shrugged and stabbed her metal knuckle-claw into the blue console-pad.

"Yes," Isabelle gurgled, her voice dizzy. "New languages, strange programming. The

protocols are interesting, advanced in some ways, primitive in others. I can see the similar technology to the stealth ship we stole, Nate. Brushing away security firewalls, searching for communication protocols, la-la-la—”

“Have we got time for this?” The Lady said impatiently.

“Here we go.” The stabbed console-pad lit up in a bright red. “Activated lockdown procedures — nobody is getting in or out of this bunker.”

Nate tried the doors to test it. He grinned.

“Izzy, you’re the best.”

“Well, I do try.” She said modestly. “Now give me back to Nate, I don’t like it here. No offense, Cora.”

Cora snorted. “Some taken. Here you go, Nate.”

Nate stared across the dam crest. “One bunker down, one more to go.”

“We’re running out of time.” Ana fretted, looking up at the moon. “The eclipse is passing.”

“Double time, then. We still time to escape.” Sofia growled.

They sprinted across the crest walkway to the other bunker, but the dam was long, stretching wide. And at the other side, it had another watchtower, another floodlight.

This time, they had Talia. They waited as her white meka frame rose into the sky.

“The tower’s empty.” Her voice called urgently.

“Fuck.” Nate snapped, his head whipping around. Where were the bugs hiding?

It didn’t take them long to find out. A group of bugs chittered around a fireplace next to the bunker door, glass drink bottles at their feet. They were throwing stones into a large bowl — some sort of game.

“There’s six of them.” Ana worried.

Lunar drew her gunblade. “I have them.”

“Not if I get them first.” Sofia declared.

“Let’s work together, girls.” Ana reminded them.

Nate nodded. “What she said.”

Lunar paused, glancing at Nate and then the Voor woman. “I...can give you some height.”

Sofia bared her fangs. “I’ll need some assistance, I suppose.”

Nate barely got a moment to open his mouth before the two women were charging at the gang of bugs.

They were a work of art — Sofia in her tight battle-suit, white hair a beacon in the darkness, with Lunar in her golden armor and battle-skirt.

Lunar slid to the ground and held her gunblade out as the bugs shouted in surprise. Voor gracefully jumped onto the Mediator’s blade and flipped high above the bugs. She drew daggers from under her robe, holstered to her thighs, and embedded them into a bug’s neck.

Lunar scythed a bug arm off before it could draw up a gun, cut another’s head off, and then kicked the logs of the fire into a third bug’s chest. A burning prelude to the blade that swiftly followed.

Sofia, meanwhile, had drawn her daggers from her first target and thrown them like darts into the eyes of another victim.

She didn't have a chance to kill a third, because Lunar had jumped on top the bug's unsteady shoulders, her bare thighs squeezing tightly. The Mediator beauty stabbed her blade into the stone of the bunker in order to support herself as her strong thick thighs slowly strangled the bug to death.

The six bugs defeated, the two women brushed themselves off as Nate and company approached.

"I thought only Nate got between your thighs, Lunar." Ana's lips twitched.

Lunar looked at him with panicked eyes. "Forgive me, my Kyrios, I did not think—"

Nate snorted. "It's fine, Lunar, it's a good tactic. Hopefully, the last thing *I* see before my demise is what's between your thighs."

"Can we please focus?" The Lady clenched her teeth.

Nate nodded. "This bunker should have the access route to the water source. We'll need to fight through the bug garrison, but hopefully we can still do things quietly. We can't afford to have them call reinforcements or our way home is going to get real bumpy."

"We need to go fast." Ana said, watching the light of the sun appear behind the moon. The eclipse was passing quickly.

"Let's go already." Cora picked up the bug arm Lunar had chopped off and pressed the fingers of the bleeding appendage to the console-pad of the bunker doors.

The doors slid open.

A black void awaited.

"Looks like a good time." Cora groaned.

"Behind me." Nate pulled his rifle, flicked the torch-light on the end of the barrel, and led the way into the darkness.

Soon, the blackness changed. On the ceiling, the bulbous purple sacs shone an eerie light. Their feet crunched against the dirt floors.

They each walked slowly, checking their angles.

But as they descended into the bunker, they found the dirt beneath was bloody.

"Something is wrong." Nate murmured. His foot snapped a bug-bone and his rifle light illuminated a bug body. *Half* a bug body.

The girls' guns lit the room, revealing dead bugs — their bodies chewed and pincered.

"What could do this?" Ana exhaled.

Nate gulped. The galaxy was full of alien beasts and monsters, so in theory, this planet could be no different. But a monster able to attack a whole bug bunker, a bunker of soldiers? A shielded, protected bunker? It made no sense.

A chill ran down his spine.

What monster could feed on a bunker's worth of bugs while the bugs above, on the dam, cared not a damn bit?

There was only one.

“Oh, fuck.” Nate whispered, his face pale. “It’s a qu—”

Something hooked around his feet, up-ending him ass over head as he was lifted into the air. The shadows shifted. Pincers snapped together.

The girls screamed and opened fire, their muzzle-flashes lighting up the darkness.

Revealing a bug queen. She was huge, eight spindly legs stabbing down into the ground. The thick carapace hide of her bulging body just brushed off the bullets, as she laughed, a humanoid torso stretching from her shell, her clustered eyes gleaming and reflecting the orange flashes. And with her humanoid webbed hands, she pulled the webbed strings that lifted Nate into the air, and held him like a child’s doll, dangling him.

His gun fell to the ground.

“Nate!” Ana screamed.

“Let him go!” Cora snarled.

The shadows shifted around them once more, revealing bug soldiers, the Queen’s guard. These were no ordinary bugs — they were large, musclebound, taller than any he’d seen. They wore black sashes and carried rotating-ring laser rifles.

The bug queen spoke with a whispery voice, but it was loud enough to feel like she spoke directly into their ears. “Nathan Clancy, the hero of the fools yet to fall. And Princess Anariel, she who kneels for a human’s seed.”

Nate swallowed helplessly as he was brought closer to the frightening monster.

What was a *queen* doing here? Queens were kept far, far away, deep in bug territory, untouchable rulers. They were fed a diet of human colonists, because their hunger was insatiable, as was evidenced by the dead bugs around them.

Nate thought back to Jarek’s words to the President, as the queen turned him slowly, studying him while his girls could only lower their weapons, surrounded as they were.

Jarek had said the bugs requested their outer colonies, a few more planets. He’d said the bug’s hive mother had birthed a new queen, outgrown their resources, needing more sustenance to feed the new hive. The old hive mother would pass soon, he’d said, and they needed more food to sustain two Queens until the old one died.

This, Nate realized, was the new Queen.

The only reason she would be here was to...feed. To grow strong on the miracle water of El Faro, because Nate had denied her and Jarek the ease of a quick victory over the Council.

Or was it because this was a trap?

“Such a delightful gift, both of you.” The Queen said silkily. “But,” She brought Nate so close that he could see himself reflected in her many eyes. She took a long, deep draw with her sunken nostrils. “I can smell the stench of something foul.”

Nate struggled uselessly against the web that wrapped around him. To his horror, the Queen reached out and took the case from his hip, the case that held the poison cocktail.

There was nothing he could do — she took away the only weapon he had, the whole reason for their mission.

She sniffed it experimentally. Her face contorted with rage. “You are here to poison these waters, to taint and destroy our beloved children, our most sacred vessels of new

life!”

Her jaw opened, a jaw so large that it was like half her head opened up, revealing trembling mandibles, mandibles that crushed together. Her many eyes glowed red. “And you think *we* are the monsters?”

Nate swallowed as he was spun around dizzily. He saw every angle of the room. The purple sacs on the ceiling flickered with light, illuminating their inescapable fate. The vast bug Queen, almost as large as their ship. Her guard, surrounding the whole room, antennas vibrating with excitement.

His girls, armed but unable to do anything against the shell of the Queen. And him, webbed and upside down, robbed of weapons and his poison vial.

He had grenades and a knife on his belt, but he couldn’t reach them, wrapped as he was. And the girls — they could throw a grenade, but any explosion would blow *him* up.

“Nathan Clancy,” The Queen shivered. “The monster of the Federation, icon to the Council. My mother shall fade soon, but you have gifted unto me my greatest wish. I shall surpass her in strength and glory, now I can conquer *every* planet that remains.” Her mandibles clicked together. “I wonder, how bright the strength of your allies will burn, once they see your Lunari Princess, her belly large with the next of *my children?*”