

Grounded

"We're taking heavy damage!" Cel hollered over the sound of rending metalwork. The machines had already broadcast an emergency message, but it was too late. They had entered an un-networked trap, left over from the war. Automated kill machines were on their tail, and Cel wasn't losing them easily.

The Cerberus twirled and bucked as it spun through the huge network of sewers, its ancient gatling guns having no real effect on the small, agile machines.

"Goddamn sentinels were easier to kill than this!" Prophet muttered through gritted teeth as he squeezed the triggers again. He looked over at Orezoen in the chair next to his. Not great for the first day in the job. Prophet thought of his new first mate.

As the gunners fought, machines broke from the edges of the attacking fleet and vanished from the scanners. The gunners didn't notice until it was too late. A laser cutter could be heard directly below Prophet. He shot a glance at Orezoen, as the floor beneath his seat began to vibrate, getting more intense every second.

"Time to go ..." he said as he began unbuckling himself. As the last catch was coming undone, he grinned. "Eat that, you son of a bi....!!"

The floor section gave away and the chair fell backwards. Prophet grabbed out at a monitor, which ripped away from its mounting. Chair, monitor and man shot through the opening together as the Cerberus continued its bumpy journey.

The crew gawped at the open space where LostProphet had been sitting a moment ago. No machine came through it. Through a stroke of luck, Prophet had managed to clobber the machine with the monitor as he fell from the ship, and it was currently spinning in circles way back down the tunnel as it tried to realign its gyrometric systems.

Orezoen was now in command - total command. His first day in the job. He looked again at the onslaught of killing machines. Picking up an intercom, he made a decision.

"Cel, prime an EMP bomb."

"We haven't tested them yet! I don't know if I can keep us out of the shockwave."

"Then send out a mayday on all channels and cross your fingers."

"Where's the captain?"

"He's gone. No time to explain just DO IT now. Trust me."

There was a moment of silence.

"Alright, it's primed."

Orezoen gritted his teeth, took one more look at the red symbols on his screen. "Do it."

A few seconds later there was a muffled thud outside the ship and a shockwave rocked them. But Cel had kept momentum up - they were clear of the EMP.

The red symbols vanished from the screen.

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There was a 'crump' noise as the bomb detonated, then a roar and a whoosh of wind. Prophet hung on even tighter to the hull, the jagged ancient metal cutting into his hands and chest.

He smiled to himself despite the pain. Orezoen had made a good call.

Now to the task of getting back inside the Cerberus without being killed. He had fallen from a side pod, but as the ship twisted and writhed he landed on the underbelly. But he was wedged next to a pad, which would be hot. The ancient technology was scoured off an old military transport, and the pads were not designed to be the cool running, safe inventions that had graced the Versatran skycars which were well known (if you'd read the Zion Archives); the damn things would probably electrocute him as well.

He scabbled around for smoother metal, found a slightly better spot and hung on for dear life - literally - as the Cerberus found her way home.

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The aft bay doors opened and the weary crew exited into Zion. Repair crews were already hurrying towards the landing pad, along with Lock himself.

"We received your distress calls, is everything OK?"

"Sir we survived an automated attack that the machines could not deactivate, you'll have the full details in my report." Orezoen told him.

"Your report? What about LostProphet's report?!"

"Sir ... we lost him. The floor section he was on was cut away ..there was nothing we could do."

The silence that followed was broken by a weakened call for help, and a thud. A body lay under the Cerberus, and the crew rushed to it.

"I'm sorry Commander, but Orezoen here will have to be debriefed in my place." Prophet murmured as he looked up at the faces around him, his eyes slipping closed.

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The diagnosis was better than some expected. Injuries were superficial, with no major damage done. He was ordered to relinquish his duties for a week or two, but Prophet knew a week would be all he needed.

Nothing like a baptism of fire for the making of his new first mate, he reflected with a wry grin.

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Prophet stood shakily on the dock as the Cerberus lifted off, its repairs completed quickly. He would not be going with them this time.

The air popped and crackled as the pads ramped up to maximum power to keep the huge beast in the air, and then it was gone, through the gaping hole that used to be Gate 3 - the majestic final entrance of the Mjolnir, from which the Cerberus had been partly built.

"LostProphet, I'd like to test out your neural interface whilst we're here. It's been months since we last tested your capacity." the doctor at his side said softly.

Prophet sighed. He hated tests, especially regarding his frail neural interface. Not much choice now though.

"OK. But let's do it quickly."

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Prophet sat back and winced slightly as he slid his head onto the spike that protruded from the bed. A second later his vision jerked, and he was then in a construct.

His freeborn doctor spoke to him via audio only, the ethereal voice floating out of the white blank space.

"I'm loading up the testbed now."

The surroundings changed to a dojo. A simulacra spawned in front of him. Prophet dealt with him easily.

"Seems things have changed." the voice said.

A new opponent. Harder this time.

They continued this way until the voice told him that enough data had been gathered.

Next was the jump program, with distances growing until he eventually splattered into the road below. The safety protocols were on - he didn't feel it in that world or the real world.

As the real world floated back into focus, Prophet was instantly alert.

"How am I doing doc?"

"Well, it's good progress. Your neurokinetic readout is stable and normal. You still aren't achieving your full potential - or what we know to be your full potential - but you've come a long way in short time. I would predict a full recovery on the cards."

"What about beyond that? I know I could have learnt more before my accident."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Once you've met your previous level of performance, we'll take it from there one step at a time."