

The Tunnels

Part 1.

Prophet sat in his cabin, hunched over a small flatscreen display. He was analysing the latest data streams being broadcast by the CoZ's armada of vessels.

Lupines, Vampires. He had jacked in earlier to take care of some routine missions and found a large number of lupines dead on the ground. He had missed the battle - for better or worse - and only witnessed the carnage after it.

His concentration on the data lapsed; he was tired. A couple of days running missions through the Matrix could take it out of you sometimes. He lay back on his bunk and closed his eyes.

thud

Eyes snapped open in the darkness.

clang!

"What the hell .." Prophet swung his legs off the bunk.

CLANG! CRASH!

Prophet was forced to swing his body off the bunk, onto the steel floor. He clambered to his feet, and tried to turn on the light. It came on for a second, then went off. It was replaced by red warning lights, and klaxons. It suddenly felt very much like the ship was ... falling.

A voice came through the comm panel by the door.

"Sir we need you up here NOW."

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Prophet arrived in the nav pod breathless.

"What the shit is going on?!" he demanded, looking out of the windows at a blur of torn metal and pipes.

"We're in freefall, I don't know how. One minute we were passing over this tunnel, the next thing I know, the engines have cut out and we're falling!"

"Pump the igniter?!"

"Some sort of dampening field. I can't start her sir."

"Keep trying. Brooch, see if you can bring up holographics on backup power, give us an idea what we're in."

He clicked one of the many overhead switches and addressed the crew.

"This is the captain speaking. We apologise for the turbulence you are currently experiencing. I request that you all stay calm, and man the turrets!"

"Prophet," Brooch began, pointing to the holographic station, "I think we need to stop first."

The holographic imaging system was having trouble keeping up with their surroundings with the rate of descent.

Suddenly there was a clunk, followed by the sound of the pads powering up.

"We're almost at full ... god dammit! We're losing matrix integrity in the aft section ... hang on!" Cel shouted as she frantically wrestled with antiquated control systems.

The front end of the Cerberus hung still in the tunnel. Unfortunately the rear section was still losing power, and exhibited a strong desire to marry itself to the steel pipes and girders below. The vessel snapped round at ninety degrees to point the way they had come.

Inside, Prophet was beginning to wish he hadn't skimped on the wall insulation. He lay sprawled against a bulkhead as the others sat buckled safely in their seats. "I'd appreciate it if you could fix this issue." he muttered.

Cel pumped the igniter again, played around with some switches, and the Cerberus slowly returned to a horizontal position.

"Seeing as whatever is up there caused this problem, I suggest we proceed downwards ..." Prophet advised.

TBC ..

Part 2

"Set her down, slowly ..."

The Cerberus touched down at the bottom of the tunnel, its weight shifting as the huge feet compacted the metal shards beneath.

"Holographics?"

"Sir, you're not gonna believe this ..." Brooch whispered hoarsely.

Prophet looked at the display and gaped. If it was correct, they were surrounded by ... pods. The same pods that had imprisoned them for years.

"That's impossible ... switch to cameras."

The panels directly in the center of the cockpit fizzled with static, but displayed the same horrific images that each redpill struggled to wipe from his or her mind.

"Are there ... people ... in them?" Cel asked quietly. The cameras couldn't pick it up.

"We'd better take a look. Brooch, round everybody up. Meet me at the weapons locker."

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The air outside was slightly warmer than he expected. The violent thrums, snaps and crackles of energy bouncing off parts of the pods shook him to his core. It was the first noise he ever heard when he awoke.

The Cerberus' crew walked out from under the bulk of the ship towards the pods. They didn't totally circle the walls - the front windows of the vessel pointed to blank wall - but there were enough for several hundred people. And there were people.

Prophet recognised the first pod he looked into - he'd met him in Zion. Arrogant, really. Sneered at Zion and the people in it. A real "Cypher".

The sound of machinery whirred and the group turned as one, pointing their weapons in the direction of the noise.

A row of pods was sliding around the tunnel. It stopped, then descended to floor level, next to a small tunnel. They heard footsteps. And ...

"Sentinels!!" Prophet hissed. Snap judgement time. They were too far away from the Cerberus hatch. They ducked behind some piles of metal, and watched. Luckily the Cerb had its pads powered down. Despite obviously being there, historic evidence suggested it would be ignored.

A naked woman walked from the tunnel. Either side hovered what looked like modified sentinels. Not quite as lethal-looking as usual. The woman got into the first pod. A sentinel hovered above, its 'arms' reaching down and connecting up the sensory jacks. There was an audible sigh as the neural jack was connected, and she lay in the pod. The machines hummed and hovered for a moment as the breathing apparatus was connected.

A low *thwump* noise signalled the pod filling with ... whatever they filled it with. In seconds the woman was submerged. The sentinels seemed to emit some sort of electric field over the pod; the top of the goo hardened over to form a protective layer.

The pods then moved back to their original place on the wall, and the sentinels left.

A few minutes passed before anyone dared to speak.

"We have to go in there, it might be the only way to turn off the dampening field to get back out again."

"But ... what are they doing in there? Experiments?? Capturing freed humans? They're breaking the truce ..." Jags said quietly.

"I think there's more to it than that," Prophet replied, "maybe we'll get the added bonus of finding out as well as getting the hell away from here."

TBC ..

Part 3

The crewmen edged towards the tunnel entrance slowly. When they arrived, they found that it had definitely been purpose built - its edges were perfectly smooth, built with a clinical precision.

Prophet turned to look at the faces of his colleagues. Their grim expressions mirrored his own feelings.

"Let's go."

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They passed through the tunnel without incident, thankfully. It opened up into a huge cavern, with a large flattened area in the middle. Gantries criss-crossed cavern (with a space above the flattened area), and long wires, arms and tubes snaked downwards from them.

As the crew hunkered down behind some rocky outcrops, the roof began to slide open. It was becoming clear that this was an incredibly big find.

Prophet looked at the switchgear opening the roof. It looked like Zion tech. But how??

Unfortunately, it was about to get a whole lot weirder. As the roof fully opened, flashes of blue appeared.

The tell-tale pneumatic whine filled the air as the hoverbarge rotated its pads into a landing configuration and extended the landing gear.

"What in the hell ..."

Sentinels appeared as if from nowhere, flying slowly around what was obviously the landing pad in a holding pattern. As it set down, they attached themselves to the pads.

Hatches opened, people came out. The sentinels seemed to pulse with energy.

"Hey ... hey! What the hell are they doing?!" screamed one of the passengers in a scared outrage.

There was a loud *thwum* sound from the barge, and the pads went dead. The lights inside ceased to shine. They had overloaded the power grid.

Prophet made another snap decision. He stood up, and walked towards the group of people. The sentinels ignored him.

"I am LostProphet, captain of the Zion ship Cerberus! Now just what is going on here?" he called out in a commanding voice.

"Mutiny," a man muttered under his breath, "God damn machinists on board, we never realised. They took over the ship and brought us here."

"And what is here?"

"Where all machinists go. The damn squiddies don't want their plans being leaked to Zion, and they certainly don't want their operatives being offed in the real world. They've built these places where "their people" can be plugged back in. In the Matrix without being in the Matrix, if you get me."

Prophet reeled from the news, and the fact this man knew so much when he knew so little.

"What about you? The people that want to stay out or can't go in at all?" he asked.

"They let us go. At least, they let the others go. But they just overloaded our ship ..."

"Yes. The data banks contain sensitive information. We ... they are keeping this one." said another man brusquely, walking towards the small group, "You. How did you get here?"

"Our ship fell though some sort of dampening field. We need it deactivated so we can get back out of this god forsaken place." Prophet replied through gritted teeth. He was talking to a traitor. He wanted to smash his face in.

"You've seen too much. We might have to ... dispose of you."

"I wouldn't," Prophet snarled, lifting his weapon, "Because once I've fried you, we'll detonate our EMP. Not only will your little squiddy pals be nothing but a bunch of dead processors, but all your lovely operatives will be floating dead in their pods. And don't think I wouldn't. You traitorous scum don't deserve to live."

The man's face contorted as he dealt with a range of emotions, most of them extremely angry ones.

"Alright. You can take these pathetic creatures here with you. Don't send anybody back this way - we have methods of protecting ourselves."

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As the Cerberus accelerated rapidly back up the tunnel with the dampening field disabled, Prophet wondered how the hell he was going to explain it in his scouting report.

Commander Lock wasn't going to be happy.