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## ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

*Michael Osadciw*

"This job is not worth forty-five grand a year," Captain Arliss Reed thought glumly.

The thin air of Evance's upper atmosphere whipped with a mournful howl into the open cabin of the transport craft he rode in. Despite the environmental containment of his armor, the harsh cold could still be felt through its many protective layers of ceramo-alloys.

Reed could make out the retreating form of the Terikor, an Eridani atmospheric dropship, that had dumped his and eight other LS-801 assault transports into the cold early-morning air. The LS-801, or "Flying Lunchbox" as its crews called it, was giving its heavily armed passengers a smooth ride at the moment. Reed knew it wouldn't last, as they fell deeper into the lower atmosphere's more turbulent air.

"A week ago I was knee deep in Zendareans on Hell's Point. Now look at me," he mumbled to himself.

On R&R for the first time in two years, Reed had been enjoying his two weeks off from the service of SSDC as a merc computer tech. He and the rest of his team had been given a nice vacation after a very successful espionage mission. Life was good, but it just wasn't meant to last. It never was.

On the third day of his stay on Hell's Point, Reed received a priority message from SSDC sector command: all corporate mercenary units in the area had been ordered into immediate service and would be attached indefinitely to a local Alliance military task force. Evidently the civil war on Evance had escalated when a large rebel force had used the conflict as an opportunity to occupy the strategically important food-producing planet. The Alliance needed to deal with the problem immediately, before the rebels could gain a strong foothold. Unfortunately very few regular Alliance military units were available in the sector on such short notice.

Enter the Mercenary Reserve Act. This little bit of legislation allowed the Alliance government to call up corporate paramilitary units in the event of war, natural catastrophe, or civil unrest. The government rarely used it, but when they did, the mega-corps were required to assist—their Alliance tax breaks and kickbacks were forfeit if they didn't.

Reed and his team of four were on the next shuttle off of Hell's Point, and found themselves

on an Eridani troop transport heading to Evance before they knew it.

The mission briefing had been quick and dirty. The division Reed had been attached to had been tasked with securing Port Charleston, the second largest spaceport on Evance. Resistance was expected to be light, as there had been few reports of rebel activity in the city. The weight of the rebel assault had fallen on Evance City and heavy fighting with Alliance advance units had already begun there.

Reed was worried. The intel on this mission was sketchy at best. The generals expected little resistance and had done very little recon. This mission was obviously hastily assembled and planned. Their small attack force of a reinforced Marine company and an Armored company was tasked with securing the spaceport and preventing any local rebel counterattacks from retaking it. If the rebel forces were any stronger at Port Charleston than they were led to believe, they were in trouble.

Reed was especially worried about himself and his own team. He knew they were not trained or equipped to handle heavy combat. They had been included in this mission because of their computer skills and demolitions abilities. Their main task was to gain control of the spaceport's automated landing facility, or repair it if the rebels had sabotaged it.

Arliss regarded his body computer in its protective sheath at his side. He hoped that was the only piece of equipment he'd have to use on this mission.

Reed looked around the cabin of the freezing LS-801. The early morning light finally allowed him to make out the familiar faces of his squad without using his helmet's optics. Shanus Fren, his Orion Rogue demolitions expert, was sound asleep next to him. His still burning Glip cigarette, in between two of his fingers, was blackening a burn mark on his gauntlet. Shanus loosely clutched his Arrow LOSN laser; his enormous backpack full of demolition supplies made Reed glad his tools of the trade were nice and small.

Kol-idan was sitting next to Shanus, talking to the Eridani crew chief in their native tongue. Kol was the team's muscle, and he looked the part; tall and lethal, he wore his armor and weapons with the assurance of someone bred for combat. Outfitted with arm rockets, grenades, a pulse cannon, and the ubiquitous light sword, Kol packed the biggest punch of the four of them.

Last was Queemis, his Mutzachan comput-

er tech. He looked positively terrified as he clutched the edges of his seat. Reed knew Queemis was deathly afraid of heights, so this trip must be agony for him.

"We'll be on the ground soon, Queem," Reed shouted to the Mutzachan. Queemis nodded but still kept his eyes clamped shut.

"Five minutes to LZ," shouted the crackling announcement over the internal comm. Reed began to check over his gear and ordered his group to do the same, giving Shanus a swift kick to wake him up. He could see the ground rushing up outside now.

Reed took the time to check out the rest of the cabin. The long open sided troop cabin of the LS-801 was crammed with soldiers in various levels of gear. The majority of them were Alliance regulars, outfitted in well-used suits of Kodiak armor carrying beam or pulse weapons. All were Python Lizards, with the exception of one Chatilian, and an Ashanti. Reed had never met an Ashanti before. He doubted he'd get to meet this one either.

Sticking out like a sore thumb in the cabin was a Phentari sniper from Danstel Corporation. He had been attached to this mission at the last minute, as some added backup. Reed didn't much care for Phents, but he had to admire this guy's equipment. The gear he carried probably cost more than the transport they were flying in. One tentacle cradled a long and sleek Gauss Rifle, while the others seemed to be constantly adjusting, even preening, the fine suit of MBA armor the Phentari wore. Herrassarrrious Phentari nodded to the human as if to acknowledge Reed's longing glances at his armor. Reed managed a flicker of a smile in return. The Phent had to sit well forward in his seat to allow room for several missile racks, a Thunderbolt generator, and a host of grenades and other tools of the trade. Arliss fingered the FN P90 slung across his chest.

"A little late to worry about whether you're packin' enough heat, Arl ol' pal," he thought.

In each open side of the cabin slouched a human door gunner, one lazily fingering the grips of the laser machine gun mounted to the side of the "Lunchbox," while the other was watching Zendarean porn displayed on the inside of his helmet visor. With their weapons' Flux shields off, the wind really screamed into the cabin.

"Great," Arliss mused sarcastically, "these guys are ready for anything."

Another LS-801 could be seen through the open door, flying about 150 meters away.



"That'd be Chibo group's cover and reserve force," mused Reed, "Krelinn's Marauders, a merc group from AMC caught up in this just like us."

"Four minutes," came the call from the pilots up front.

The Eridani crew chief let out a loud curse. This brought everyone out of their reverie.

"What?" yelled Reed and Captain Gurnt simultaneously. Gurnt, a grizzled Python Lizard, was the leader of the Alliance troops in this ship and the overall commander of the spaceport operation.

"Our armor backup was attacked on their transport just inside the atmosphere by a suicide hopper. The *Vidgain's* drop cranes are wrecked so they can't offload the tanks. They've returned to orbit to see if they can get the armor onto another transport."

Gurnt grunted, "Looks like were doing this the hard way. Chibo Lead to Chibo Group. Our armored support ain't coming. I know it sucks, but we'll make it happen. Prepare for insertion, new tactical feeds will be uploaded soon. Herrassarrious will drop at LZ minus one. Chibo 3 and 4 will remain airborne to provide cover fire as the rest of us land. Once we're down, 3 and 4 can offload. Chibo 6 will act as Med. Got that Dellarus?"

"Happy to serve, Captain," came the soft reply over the comm.

"A Zen. Thank God," thought Reed.

Almost as soon as Gurnt stopped talking, a new operation plan diagram began scrolling across Reed's helmet visor, taking into account the loss of armor support. Reed's mission remained the same, but he noticed that his supporting elements were much thinner, now down to one Phentari. Shit. "This is getting better every minute," Arliss remarked.

"Arliss to team, you heard the man. This just got a bit harder. That Phent sniper is gonna be covering our ass. Kol, keep the cursing and oaths down until the squid actually screws up. Queemis, start prepping your pAI to try and take over the port's systems remotely the moment we touch down. If we can gain control of the port immediately we can lock the place down without having to assault the control tower. Shanus, ready some surprises for unwanted guests, once we take over."

Shanus smiled and patted his backpack. "All set, Arl."

"Three minutes to LZ"

The screaming wind suddenly died to a dull roar.

"Quiet at last," sighed Queemis.

"Crap!" Reed shouted. No wind meant the

door gunners' shields had gone up. He snapped his head around to look at the gunner closest to him. The trooper was standing and wheeling his weapon around. At that moment he let out a cry and squeezed off a long burst from his weapon.

"Hold On!" came the call over the comm as the ship lurched sideways. A trail of white smoke shot past the door. SAMs!

The rolling craft made everyone inside grab onto their seats. Queemis began to whimper again, though it was drowned out by the shouted directions of the two door gunners. Both of them were lighting up targets below and in front of their craft.

"If you haven't guessed," Gurnt bellowed, "we're heading into a hot LZ. Once we touch down, get out as fast as you can and head to your objectives. The transports will circle and try and cover you. Watch display number two on your helmets for estimated enemy force concentrations. Herrassarrious prepare for drop. We're gonna drop you early."

The Phentari lurched to his feet and began to move toward one of the open doors. It was then Reed noticed he had a short range flight pack attached to his armor.

"Go!" yelled Gurnt.

For an instant the door gunner's shield

dropped and the Phentari leaped out into space, his flight pack firing immediately. For a moment he was silhouetted against the dull dawn sky, and then he disappeared as his camo unit was activated.

"I hope he makes it down," thought Reed. "We'll need the help. Heh, I never thought I'd be wishing Godspeed to a Phentari."

The LS-801 lurched again violently as another supersonic missile streaked by. A thumping, sizzling noise began as ground beam fire began to slough off of the ship's Flux shields. Flickers of blue and orange light played across the faces in the dark cabin.

The door gunners seemed to be firing continuously now. The passengers could see the treetops zipping past them, about one hundred meters below. Arcs of light reached up to their ship from several points in the forest. The rebels were all over the place!

The transport lurched again, but this time it was followed by a large bang and smoke began to billow into the cabin. Someone was yelling.

As the smoke quickly cleared, Reed could see one of the Python Lizards lying on the deck holding what was left of his left leg. A large hole in the floor next to him was still sparking and smoking. One of his comrades reached down and activated the standard issue Auto-Doc on the Lizard's armor. He went limp and was quiet.

"When can we get out of this death trap?" yelled Arliss. Queemis' cries echoed his sentiments exactly.

"One minute," came the human pilot's voice. "Prepare for debarkation. Pete! Tare! Get ready to lock those weapons out so everybody can get out quick. Looks like it's..."

The cabin lit up with an orange light and rocked violently as a roar filled their ears. Everyone got a glimpse of the transport next to them exploding into a yellow and orange fireball, pitching over away from them. Dark figures thrashed inside individual torches as they tumbled out of the rapidly disintegrating transport. Then it was gone, only a few pieces of sparking debris flying through the cold air to mark where the "Lunchbox" had vanished.

"Poor devils," someone mused over the comm. "Their armor probably protected them long enough so they wouldn't die until they hit the trees at 300kph." So much for Krellin's Marauders. And the Chibo Group's reserve.

"Keep it together folks. Here we go," came the calm, gravelly voice of Gurnt.

The transport went into a steep bank and

turned left. The spaceport was visible below, just past the treeline. A large column of greasy smoke rose from the destroyed remnants of a huge bulk freighter, lying in pieces on the main landing area.

Arliss spotted the control tower, off to the right of the main complex of buildings. It still looked intact. The spaceport sprawled over five square kilometers of real estate. Arliss hoped they got put down close to their objective.

"May the blade bring swift end to the unworthy. May battle cleanse me of all impurities and leave only the spirit of Eridine," Kol mumbled to himself as he shouldered his M-20.

"Queemis, we've got line-of-sight! See if you can jump into their network and get control from here."

Queemis absently nodded to Arliss as he was already working on his body computer. Good man.

"Ok, team; we're hittin' dirt in 20 seconds. Kol and Shanus, provide cover for Queemis and me. When we hit, we're all sprinting to the low wall just below the control tower. Speed is paramount; we can't get caught in the open. At the far end of the wall should be the entrance to the tower. Queem, any luck?"

"Negative, Captain Reed. My pAI is finding it extraordinarily difficult to lock into the spaceports standard Nav-Net system. It has either been shut down or has been hijacked by a Terroroid. Perhaps if I could..."

"That's fine Queem." Arliss cut him off. You never wanted Queemis to get going.

"Shut down, and we'll try it in the tower. Hold on!"

The transport dropped quickly and hit the ground with a lurch. During the drop the door gunners had swung their weapons out of the way just far enough for the passengers to exit.

Gurnt and the Pythons launched themselves out of the right side of the craft and began to fan out. Arliss looked away. They could take care of themselves.

"Now!" Reed yelled as he leaped from the Lunchbox, gripping his P-90 a little too tightly.

He sprinted toward the wall, not looking behind him. Reed trusted his team to follow orders. If they weren't behind him, it would mean they were down, in which case it didn't really matter.

After what seemed like an eternity he reached the wall; crashed into it really. As he hit, Reed dropped to provide covering fire, such as it was, for the team.

Kol was already at the wall and sweeping

his pulse cannon around. Queemis and Shanus were there right behind him.

Arliss looked over to where the Pythons had exited. They were catching hell. A missile streaked from a nearby rooftop toward Gurnt's position near a low maintenance shed. The missile exploded harmlessly behind the Pythons. Whoever was firing those reflex missiles had been effective though. The smoldering jumble of equipment and body parts lying on the tarmac that had been a Python trooper was testament to that. A loud crack was heard and a small explosion blossomed near where the missile came from.

"You may proceed Captain," was hissed over the general Chibo group comm. Unmistakably Phentari.

Herrassarrious was covering our ass, thought Reed.

That was the cue for Reed's team as well.

"Let's move it guys. Down the wall there should be a doorway."

Kol trotted off, crouched low. He stopped, peered at the door, then waved the team on.

The door was locked.

"No problem, Arl," Shanus said with glee as he worked his magic over the Securepad. The door hissed open and Shanus staggered back from the opening doorway, uselessly grabbing at the series of smoking holes stitched across the front of his armor.

Kol spun around and let loose a volley from his cannon as Queemis and Reed dove aside. Reed rolled and came up with his weapon aimed into the darkness beyond the open door.

A hole appeared in Kol's thigh armor as he raised his arm and let fly a salvo of arm rockets. The Eridani then ran into the room as his rockets detonated.

Arliss took the opportunity to look over at Shanus. He was lying still on the ground. The Auto-Doc on his armor showed a steady blue light; his Cryo-Injection had been activated. Shanus was out of this one, hopefully not for good.

"Queemis, help me get his pack off of him. We may need the explosives."

A series of explosions rippled through the room beyond the door.

Queemis crawled over and began tugging at the huge pack's straps.

Arliss heard the unmistakable sizzle-hiss of a light sword, then saw the Eridani trot back out to the door opening.

"These rebel filth are quite well armed,

though their tactics are very amateurish. Can you believe that the insect in there actually cried for mercy? Worthless!"

The Eridani's armor was blackened from fire with one hand clutching his activated Light Sword. His arm rocket rack was empty too.

"The way is clear Captain. An elevator to the tower is at the far end of the room."

"Good work Kol. Queemis, give me that pack, I'll carry it. Kol, cover our backs, Queem and I are heading upstairs."

Arliss shouldered the pack as he trotted into the room. He felt bad for leaving Shanus' Arrow rifle, but he needed to move fast, and besides, he didn't know how it worked anyway. The sounds of the firefight over near the Lizard's last position deadened as they entered the building. The stench of death hung in the air. Queemis gave the two smoldering bodies in the center of the room a wide berth.

"Reed to Chibo Lead. We are at our objective. What is your situation?" Reed called to Gurnt over his comm.

"We're moving into the main port complex." Gurnt sounded calm, almost happy. "Still meeting light resistance. We're gonna set up the CP in the Security Office and try and get the Securecams running from there. Advise when you gain control of the control tower. Chibo 3 and 4 are setting up a perimeter around the tower complex now. Out."

"Let's go." Reed led them to the emergency stairs next to the powered-down 'vator.

Kol jumped ahead and went right up the stairs, neglecting to check for hostiles or boobytraps; perhaps on purpose. At least the arrogant ass was good at what he did.

Reed and Queemis climbed the stairs behind him, their path lit by the flickering light of Kol's lightsword. The firing outside seemed to be picking up, but it was hard to tell in the narrow confines of the tower.

Reed heard a clatter of equipment from just above him and flattened against the wall. The clatter was followed almost instantly by the sizzling "thock" sound of a lightsword biting through armor. A partially headless corpse tumbled down the stairs in front of him, still twitching in its final moments.

Kol sneered, "Only one vermin in the tower. Consider it secured, Reed."

"Excellent. Queemis, get in here and let's see what we can do."

The control room looked pretty normal. Mostly new equipment and reasonably well tended, except for the scorched ruin that used

to be the Nav-Net system's terminal.

"Crap. Queem, I'll try and bypass the power relays to get some juice up here. See what you can do with the Nav-Net," Reed said as he set down his weapon and withdrew his computer from its case at his side.

Hacking into the power net was easy. These frontier folk could learn a thing or two about security. Right now he was glad they didn't know much. Anything that helped him get his job done and get out of here quick was fine by him. Only two minutes after he started, the lights in the tower flickered back to life.

"There you go Queem, what have you got for me?"

"My pAI is currently building itself a low level Nav-Net duplicate to take over control for the destroyed components. What I need is a transmit conduit node to amplify my commands... Hmmm. Arliss, hand me that power shunt from Shanus' pack."

Reed did so, and handed it to Queemis, who immediately placed it on the floor and stomped on it with his foot, breaking the outer casing to pieces. "There it is," he said after a few moments searching through the debris. Queemis picked up a small bit of the device and held it to the side of his Bypass module. The Mutzachan's eye's fluttered for a moment as he used a few precise Finger Laser blasts to weld the salvaged bit in place. He then hooked his bypass cable from the wrecked terminal to the newly "redesigned" component. A smile crept across his face as he peered at his computer's display.

"That was successful. The Nav-Net controls are back online. I have complete control of the 'Net and its tractor/repressors and landing grids. Nothing is flying in or out of this port without my ok," Queemis stated with barely hidden satisfaction.

"I knew that big head was good for something," Arliss grinned. "Reed to Chibo Lead, tower is secure and the Nav-Net is in our control."

"Excellent," grunted Gurnt, the unmistakable sound of rapid-fire pulse cannons loud in his transmission. "We're mopping up here, stay there and maintain control, we'll..."

The transmission ended with a short roar and static.

"What the hell was that?" yelled Reed.

"Uh, Arliss?" mumbled Queemis. "I think you'd better look out the window. The building with the security office in it, the one with Gurnt, just blew up. I think that is why."

Queemis was pointing out the window to the wrecked transport.

Arliss and Kol wheeled around just in time to see an a-grav tank crashing through the debris of the transport, launching several more missiles at the smoldering ruin of Chibo Lead. It looked like an old model, but plenty capable of chewing up their small group.

"This just keeps getting better," grunted Reed.

"Chibo Four to Chibo Group, this is Captain Multanus. I'm in command now," came the icily cool tones of the Ashanti captain.

"We are falling back to the customs building at grid 118. We are trying to formulate a plan as we move. Be warned, the tank is supported by a small squad of infantry who have infiltrated the perimeter." The sound of Multanus' running came over the comms.

The loud report of the tank's plasma cannon, followed by the rolling crash of the shot hitting the security building, echoed through the spaceport. Reed could barely make out through the smoke a few armored figures jumping off the back deck of the tank and moving into the rubble. They looked like a Phentari and a couple of humanoids.

Crash! One of the windows of the tower exploded as Kol blasted it away with his M-20. He then leaned out of the window aiming his weapon at the tank.

"Kol, what the hell are you doing? You'll give away our position!"

"Perhaps I can damage it from here. I have two reflex missiles..." The words barely left his mouth as the compressed air in his rack popped the missiles out of their den on his back, their rockets firing moments later just outside the shattered window.

Reed could see the exhaust trail snake toward the tank. It was so close, the missiles barely had time to arm themselves. Still, they hit their mark. Bright eruptions of flame and smoke exploded from the top of the tank. Equipment and tools that had festooned the turret flew away in all directions in burning chunks. The smoke began to clear; just in time to see the turret tracking toward the tower, and them.

"Get down!" screamed Reed as he dove below the window frame.

A loud blast rocked the tower. Dust fluttered down from the ceiling as another explosion shook the building.

"The fools can't raise their weapon enough to touch us up here Arliss," yelled Kol as he was still standing, leaning out of the window.

Reed peeked over the edge and saw that the tank had returned to its previous business of reducing the security building to a pile of scrap.

"Kol, what the hell is wrong with you? We aren't armed well enough to take on armor; stealth is our game! We could've..." Reed broke off as the comms crackled to life.

"Chibo Four to group, we believe we have a unique tactical solution to our dilemma."

"Mercenary Queemis, if you would be so kind as to attempt to stop the tank with the Nav-Net tractor/repressors. Perhaps if it was slowed, Chibo 6 could get in position to use its remaining anti-armor missiles."

Queemis shook his head as if to wonder why he didn't think of that. "That's a great idea. Perhaps I could..."

The tower shook from a massive explosion near by.

"Please expedite Master Queemis. It just destroyed most of Chibo Three."

"Right." Queemis got to work. It took him but a few moments of reprogramming to direct the powerful tractor/repressors of the spaceport's cargo tower cranes toward the oncoming tank.

As Arliss watched the tank suddenly slowed to a crawl. Even from up in the tower you could hear its motors screaming trying to break the grip of the cranes.

"Chibo 6, commence." came the calm tones of Multanus.

From the height of the tower it was easy to see the Lunchbox that held Chibo 6 wheel around as two trails of smoke made a beeline from its underbelly to the stricken tank. An instant later the tank burst open in a flaming wreck as a foul toadstool of rising flame, smoke, and debris marked its passing.

"Excellent. Chibo Four will secure the perimeter of the base along with the remnants of Chibo 3. Chibo 6, maintain air cover and look for any remaining resistance. Herrassarrrious Phentari will maintain his vigilance. SSDC Team, lock down the tower and proceed to the new CP in the main concourse," the new coordinates began scrolling across their visors.

"Queem, you heard the Captain. Encrypt it all and let's motor."

"Hmmpf," came the Mutzachan's muffled reply as he began his work on his body computer.

In a few moments they were all heading down the stairs on their way out of the tower. The muffled crack and sizzle of small arms fire

could still be heard occasionally outside. It was still a little hot out there, thought Reed. Shanus' pack is damn heavy too.

Arliss exited the stairwell first, and out of the corner of his eye spotted a flicker of movement. "Down!" Reed yelled as he whirled, bringing up his P90 and thumbing off the safety in the same motion.

The small weapon erupted in his white knuckled fist, nearly emptying its entire magazine into the small hovering sphere that had appeared from the darkness. The first few rounds bounced off a small Flux shield, but the rest tore the small globe apart. A few instants after the first rounds struck, the sphere's a-grav unit was destroyed and the remains of the device crashed to the floor.

"K-sat!" roared Reed as he dove and rolled to let Kol enter the room behind him.

A figure appeared out of the darkness behind Kol! Reed fired the remaining three rounds into the center of the figure, only to see them rebound off a PDS field.

"Relax! I'm with the Press!" came a yell from the shadowy figure.

Kol spun around and brought the crackling point of his light sword within an inch of the reporter's head. "Be still mudig, I do not wish to exert myself unduly with your extermination."

"Whatever, skinhead. The pen is still mightier than the mohawked fascists! Is that how that goes? So what. So tell me Captain Reed, how's the operation going so far? Channel 780 viewers need to know." Reed heard some theme music leaking out of the reporter's earpiece when he mentioned his station.

"Wha?...?" Reed mumbled trying to collect his thoughts. "How do you know my name? What the hell are you doing here?"

"You mercs always have easy coms to crack; took my pAI less than thirty seconds to nuke. So, are the rebels putting up much of a fight? That tank sure caused some trouble. Tell me about it."

A small microphone extended from the thumb of the reporters outstretched hand.

"Well, we were able to stop it using the port's tractors and then... why the hell am I talking to you! This is a freakin' war zone! Get the hell away from me. Kol, Queem, lets move out."

"See ya later, corpses. By the way, here," the reporter flipped Reed a data wafer. "Here's the receipt for my cam-studio sat you wasted. Channel 780 expects payment in thirty days. Later."

The reporter trotted off, the faint glow of his PDS retreating with him.

"Pity I couldn't have chopped off one of his limbs. Reporters always scream the loudest," mused Kol as he hefted his pulse cannon back to a ready position.

"You would have had to stand in line for that pleasure. Let's head outside and get to the damn CP. What is that thumping sound outside?" Arliss queried as Kol opened the door to the street outside.

"Chibo 6 to Chibo Elements! There's a..." came the startled cry over the comms.

Reed caught a glimpse of the Eridani silhouette against the door opening before a loud hammering sound and blinding flashes from outside lit up the darkened room they were in. Plasma blasts tore the door apart and most of the wall around it where the Eridani had stood a moment before. The sword saint had been reduced to a jumbled pile of ash and blasted armor almost instantaneously; parts were still tumbling away from the door.

Reed instinctively ducked and rolled away from the incoming fire. Fire from what, he could only guess. As if from a distance, he could hear Multanus yelling into his ear, asking what was going on.

"Kol is gone. Something just tore up the tower entrance. Need assistance now!"

Reed began scrambling on the floor back toward the open staircase, when he heard a loud crash behind him.

A quick glance backward told him to run faster.

Two large cannon barrels poked into the blasted opening, with smoke curling out of their muzzles. The cannons were attached to armored articulated arms, arms that were the main means of violence of the two-legged mechanical beast that strode into the room.

"HD, HD!" screamed Reed as he flung himself up the stairs, a call echoed by the air-borne Chibo 6 over the comms.

"Very unfortunate," came the cool response of Multanus, which Reed could barely hear over the sound of his heart. "Our heavy weapons capability has been drastically reduced. Team leads, please submit ideas for dealing with this new threat."

Reed was too busy running up the stairs to follow that order. He barely saw Queemis crawling up the stairs ahead of him in time to avoid a collision that would have sent them both tumbling.

"Queem, move it, we've got to run! Humpty