

Wednesday

"You were supposed to bring me five fuckin' kilos of coke, you son of a bitch! What the FUCK is this little bottle!?" The larger, darker skinned black man held his "friend" by the shirt collar up against the cinder block wall of the largely empty room they used for packaging and selling drugs. "And why the FUCK did it cost as much as five fucking kilos!?"

The smaller man was visibly terrified of his boss. "Look! Look look look, I got this from the aliens. They told me all we have to do is inject it, three times a day, for three days, and it'll make us stronger. We'll be fuckin' bullet-proof, man! We'll own this city!"

"You expect me to believe that?"

"They told me its the same thing the Velorians do. They can make people stronger so they can help them out. They want to do the same thing with us. And we'll never have to worry about the fuckin' pigs again. They won't be able to lay a hand on us. And we'll never get sick. And we might even live for a couple hundred years."

"That sounds way too fuckin' good to be true. There's some kind of fuckin' scam going on here. Chris, give this soon-to-be dead man an injection. We'll see if it's okay."

Chris ripped the shirt sleeve from off the terrified man, plunged a needle into the bottle, and drew out a little of the liquid. "Ready or not..." The needle bit deep into the squirming man's arm, and the liquid was injected.

"Now we wait, and we see what the fuck happens to you. Tie 'im down."

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Warrel and Ardy met back at the shuttle early morning. "Briefcase delivered."

"Mutagen sold. What do I do with this paper?"

"Trade it for just about any goods or services on this mudball. Sometimes it comes in handy. I told LA base about the motorcycle, they think its connected to Gart's death. We're supposed to check out a possible connection now."

"Speaking of Gart... he's still in the cargo hatch."

"Have *you* had any time to dump him somewhere?"

"Well, no."

"Then... hey look at that." Warrel spotted a group of motorcycles just like the one he saw yesterday headed back the way he came, in the direction of LA base. "Those are the same damn motorcycles! Come on, we'll finish this with them!"

"*Oh no you won't. Hands in the air, this weapon can kill even you two. Don't move a muscle.*" The voice came from behind and above them, as if the intruder was standing on top of the shuttle (which still looked like a garbage dumpster). And it spoke reasonably clear Arion.

Warrel turned around, hands in the air. "*Who the fuck are you?*" He saw a man standing on the dumpster-shuttle pointing a wrist-mounted weapon at them, one that looked like it might be a tiny cannon. "*And where the hell did you come from?*"

"I'm an Altutian, you Arion bastard. Your people destroyed my planet, remember? It's payback time." A bright violet beam shot from the weapon and landed in the middle of Warrel's chest, then began to change colors, looking for a frequency of light or energy that would do damage to his invulnerable flesh. "This is the tracer, and you're locked in. One twitch and there'll be a hole in your chest big enough for me to pull your heart out of it. I followed you to the Arion base and told my buddies about it. They're off to get that briefcase you dropped off there, whatever the hell is in it. It was registering huge power though, what is it? Some kind of battery?"

"Hold on, if you're Altutian, where'd you get the Vendorian weapon?" Warrel demanded.

"I'll ask the questions here, mother fucker! Now what was in the damn briefcase!?"

Ardy took advantage of the intruder's concentration on Warrel to act. He hit the remote for the shuttle, changing it back from its dumpster disguise. He was caught off-balance for a split second, long enough for Warrel to draw his pistol and fire.

The Altutian dove for cover to the side of the shuttle, and suddenly was gone. Warrel and Ardy check the area with tachyon vision, but could find nothing. "Where the hell did he go?" Out of the corner of his eye, Warrel saw a section of the brick wall of the alley peel away from the rest of the building, and morph back into a human shape. "Aha!" He turned and unleashed his heat vision at the intruder, but the beam stopped as if it had hit an invisible sphere surrounding the Altutian.

The Altutian fired at Warrel, knocking him against the shuttle with the powerful blast of the miniature cannon. *"Fifth dimensional heat sink. Same stuff you guys use on your ships to drain heat from the fusion core. The Vendorians figured out how to use it against you assholes. Your heat vision can't touch me."*

Ardy drew his pistol, but the Altutian disappeared into the wall again. *"How the hell do you do that?"*

"Hologram Optional Reconnaissance and Surveying Self-applied Hypodermically Implanted Technology. H.O.R.S.E.S.H.I.T. We, um, didn't stop to think about what the acronym would stand for in Terran English before we started..."

"Warrel, are you okay?"

"I'm gunna be bruised but I don't think any ribs are broken. He was bluffing, but I think the gun could be lethal with a few more shots."

Meanwhile Dolo, the leader of the Altutians, was well on his way with the other bikers to LA base. When they made it there, they drove their bikes right through the plate glass windows and drew their laser swords. *Ali tachin wah noni. Woma thensen con duma ya!* Then he pointed at two of his men. *"Ani denshan con dendi wah. Ani! Ani! Ani!"*

The Betas recognized the language immediately.

"That's fuckin' Vendorian they're speaking! They're fuckin' Vendorians!"

Two of the bikers rode up the stairs while the rest began wrecking havoc on the foyer. First they destroyed the Arion's weapons with their laser swords, then started working on the Betas themselves, who quickly found that their heat vision was useless, stopping inches from the intruders. "You're half right. Some of us here are Altutians." Dolo spoke up, in Terran English this time. "We ran into each other after you bastards destroyed our planets. Now we both want your heads on a platter. I sent two men up to get that briefcase we saw come in here. What was in it?"

By this time, the bikers had slain three Arions and had the remaining four rounded up in a corner. The foyer was a mess, tire tracks ripping up the carpet, plate glass windows broken, tables and chairs shattered or tipped over, and the front desk neatly cleaved in two. Broken weapons littered the floor. The room attested to the chaos that ensued just seconds ago.

Dolo had his laser sword so close to the Arion that he could feel the heat it generated. "If I tell you anything I'm a dead man."

Just then they heard an explosion from upstairs, followed by yelling and what sounded like two people on motorcycles jumping out a window. Dolo turned to his Altutian and Vendorian friends. *"Kill everyone, find the briefcase."* The instructions given in Vendorian were incomprehensible to the Arions, their deaths came without warning. The bikers headed upstairs to see the room half demolished by an explosion, and a Prime and the two Vendorians sent to get the briefcase from him racing down the sidewalk at breakneck speeds. *After them! Get the briefcase!*

The remaining five bikes sped out the second-story window, landing hard on the crowded sidewalk beneath them, racing after the three in front of them.

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"Shit, that explosion came from LA base." Warrel commented, pistol at the ready but Altutian still out of sight. "Ardy, stay here and take care of the Altutian. I'm taking the shuttle to help guard the briefcase. Good luck." He hesitated.

"Just go, that briefcase is more important than this fucker. Go!"

Warrel jumped into the shuttle and began to take off. Just then the Altutian de-cloaked again and fired at the shuttle, rocking it badly and doing some minor structural damage. Ardy turned and fired in one smooth motion, hitting the Altutian square in the chest. A shower of sparks gave evidence that something electronic had been hit, but it obviously wasn't the mini-cannon. The Altutian fired again, this time at Ardy, knocking him down and sending him sliding down the alley. By then the shuttle was well on its way down the street, several feet above the cars and their panicked drivers. The Altutian scrambled out of the alley and melted into a crowd trying to run from the alien shuttle. "Must've gotten his cloaking device." Ardy guessed.

He got up, brushed himself off, and checked himself over. That shot hurt. A lot. He decided to check out LA base and wait for Warrel there.

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The Prime with the briefcase ran down the street as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough. Seven motorcycles caught up with him easily, and he couldn't dodge their laser swords forever. The first swing he ducked, but the second brought him to his knees. From there it was a slaughter. Slowly, painfully, he was burned and slashed again and again, until his body could no longer take the pain. In agony, he dropped the briefcase and fell backwards. A slash to the neck finally ended his torture. *"We've got it! Let's go!"*

Just then Warrel's shuttle closed in on Dolo's bikers. It fired its forward lasers, sending them scattering. *"We can't stay here, Terrans will be killed. Take this to the highway!"*

The bikes raced as fast as they could safely go down the crowded downtown streets, pursued by Warrel who had no traffic problems in the air. They made it to the much less crowded highway and opened up their throttles, hoping to outrun the shuttle. Turning and swerving down the highway, they barely avoided blast after blast from the shuttle. Finally, Warrel made contact, sending a biker tumbling down the highway with the powerful beams. "Yes! Got one!"

Dolo decided that they had to make a stand here, or risk losing everything. "Pull over and take up defensive positions. Two rows, get ready for a strafing run!" crackled over the radios in their helmets.

Warrel's shuttle flew past them as they made a sudden stop and pulled onto the shoulder of the highway. As he circled around for another pass, the small motorcycle squad dismounted, flipped up their seats, and swiveled small lasers concealed underneath them into attack position. Every man was crouched behind his motorcycle, using it as a shield while aiming the weapons mounted on top.

By the time Warrel was able to begin his attack, the squad had finished getting ready for him. His twin blasts were met with a volley of laser fire from the defenders.

"Computer, damage report!" Warrel's shuttle was rocked by the small explosions from the deceptively small but powerful weapons.

"Hull Integrity down 46%. Weapon Systems down 25%. Atmospheric Capability down 23%. Power Systems down 52%." The bad news kept pouring in. "This unit is no longer capable of sustaining life support in a vacuum. This unit is no longer..."

"Okay computer, I get the picture. Shut up." Warrel gripped the controls with desperation as he tried to maintain a steady flight course. "I'm not coming out of this empty handed though." Before Dolo knew what was happening, Warrel had landed his shuttle about a mile and a half down the highway, near their fallen comrade!

"Shit! He's after Mallek! Yallen, Tetsev, put up cover fire, the rest of you follow me!" Dolo hopped back on his motorcycle and followed by all but two of his men, they rode after Warrel's shuttle.

But they were too late. Warrel had dropped Mallek's body in the cargo hold and was climbing back in the shuttle by the time Dolo got to him. Even with the cover fire, he managed to escape with only a few more hits to the shuttle. "*Ahlen Talsima!!!*" Dolo pounded his fist on his motorcycle. "We'll get you back Mallek! I swear it!" Dolo dropped his head for a moment, then turned to his squad. "At least we still have the crystal, whatever it is. And the Arion left Mallek's crotch rocket here." Dolo tapped the communicator on his handlebars. "Malohr, come in. It's Dolo."

"Malohr here. What's your situation down there?"

"The Arions took Mallek, they left his crotch rocket though. We don't know if he's dead or just unconscious. We got the item we came for, turns out it's some kind of power battery for a weapon they're designing. I'll give you a full debriefing when we transport aboard."

"Understood. We're coming back into the real dimension, prepare for transport. Malohr out." Seconds after the message came over the speaker, the squad seemed to glow bright yellow, and at the speed of light they were gone.

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"Sir! I have something on the scanners, it came out of nowhere! It's big, probably a ship of some kind."

Captain Thesan approached the Beta manning the scanner console. "Try to find out what it is; helm, take us in for a closer look, I want it on visual."

"The object is absorbing some kind of energy from the planet's surface, Captain. I don't know... hey, now it's gone again. The object vanished from the scanners."

Thesan looked hard at the console, trying to figure out what happened. "Well, keep an eye on those coordinates. If it comes back, I want to know the instant it happens. Meanwhile, take us within 1,000 of where it was and get the science team in here to start trying to figure out what it was and where it went. *

Back in the alley where Ardy had fought the Altutian H.O.R.S.E.S.H.I.T., Warrel's shuttle came to a rough landing. "Yow, what happened to you?" Ardy took a good hard look at the damage and burns on the shuttle.

"The Altutians have some pretty heavy weapons, they nearly fried the shuttle. It still flies, but it's a bit rough, and if we go back into orbit we'll have to hold our breath. I got one of them though, he's in the cargo hatch..."

"With Gart?"

"Yes with Gart. I haven't dumped the body yet, okay? Anyway I got one of the Altutians in the cargo hatch. He's alive but just barely. If we want to question him we're going to have to get him some medical attention fast. What happened on your end?"

"Well, when the H.O.R.S.E.S.H.I.T. guy fired at you, I got a shot off and I think I damaged his hologram generator. He hit me with that microcannon and ran off. You're right, that thing hurts. I've been waiting here ever since. Now you said the life support was down on shuttle, so how are we going to get the Altutian back to the ship?"

"Oh, um... I don't know... Do you think that if we welded the cargo hatch shut with our heat vision, it would hold enough air and pressure to get back to the ship?"

"I dunno. But I'm willing to stake *his* life on it."

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Laura and Chris were still waiting for Fairchild to wake up. The mysterious green gem that had apparently been feeding her energy had shrunk noticeably in the past two days, but it was still glowing and pulsing.

"Chris... Chris I think I see her breathing, and her heartbeat is going weak but steady. Chris she's going to live!" Laura couldn't contain her joy; her friend, her lover, Earth's mightiest Protector, was going to be all right after all. She and Chris hugged each other quickly, and Laura bent down near her sleeping lover. "Fair, Fairchild, can you hear me? Wake up Fairchild, it's Laura. Come on, girl, wake up!"

Slowly, Fairchild's eyes started to open. "Laura? Laura! What happened, I feel like I've been dead for three days. I feel so weak. The last thing I remember was this vice grip on my heart, and then pain. It was an Arion... and some kind of sick death ceremony. What's been going on?"

Laura looked at Chris for a second, then back to Fairchild. "A lot. Kayne almost killed you, and tried to suck out all your energy. He couldn't take that much though and it almost killed him. I knocked him into space and I'm pretty sure he's dead now. And speaking of dead, Raymond..."

Fairchild was still groggy. "Raymond, right, the armor." She sat up and looked around the room. "Raymond! What the hell is **HE** doing here!?" She demanded, seeing the armor in the corner of the living room.

"No, Fair, Raymond is dead. That's just the armor." Laura walked over to the armor and removed the helmet. "And it's empty. Wow, I didn't think the metal was that strong. Raymond didn't know that the metal the armor's made of needed to absorb some kind of nutrients, or it dies or falls apart or something. Well, he wasn't feeding it so it started absorbing him, and eventually killed him for the nutrients it needs. Last time I looked his corpse was still in here though. We couldn't take it apart to get him out. I guess it just finished absorbing him while you were out. Kind of sick, actually."

Fairchild rubbed her eyes sleepily. "He could have been a powerful ally, too. Well, he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword. How did you know how to get me out of the coma?"

"Well, we didn't, actually. First we tried to look for your scribe but we couldn't find her. Where is she?"

"She said she was going to visit some place called Earth/3 for a while, and just kind of never came back."

"Oh, well that explains it. Anyway like I said, we didn't know how to revive you. We found this green gem in your room though, and Chris kind of tossed it on you for good luck. Then it started glowing and it's been a few days but you're up!"

"Hey, this is the gem that Seth gave me before he left. He told me it was a kind of crystal battery, but I just thought it looked pretty. I guess Seth saved my life."

Chris jumped in at this point. "Now I thought Seth's creations faded out after a while. How come this stuck around?"

"He can make something permanent, but it takes a lot out of him and he can't do it very often. I guess I just meant enough to him that I was worth the effort it takes. So what have the Arions been up to lately?"

"They've been pretty quiet, actually. I don't know."

"Well, if we're going to find out, I think I'm going to have to teach you how to get me out of a coma, Laura." Fairchild smiled at her. "Besides, I need you to replenish my energy reserves. I'm not used to my chest being this flat."

"With pleasure, girlfriend." Fairchild got up and they kissed each other for a long time, and headed down to the lava pool in the basement.

"Um, sure. I'll just, you know, stay here and keep an eye on things, I guess." Chris felt left out, he couldn't take the extreme heat of a molten rock. "I only helped save your life. No big deal."

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Back on the Altutian/Vendorian Alliance ship, the technicians were just finishing up a few alterations on a military style jeep. "That crystal your guys brought back solved the power problem we had with the jeep, Dolo. I can't believe how much power that thing can store. We even upped the torque on the connectors a bit and it's still testing out fine. The jeep's almost ready."

Dolo replied, "The crotch rockets lived up to their battle expectations and then some. We're ready on our end. If you guys did half the job on that jeep that you did on the bikes, we're in business and those Arions are in some deep trouble." *

Chris was feeling sorry for himself and terribly ignored. Fairchild and Laura were still in the basement, the crashing and shaking sounds filling his imagination with visions of what could be going on down there. He had a pretty good idea. And it made him feel worse that he was left out.

Then he heard something above sounds of the two superwomen downstairs shaking the island with their lovemaking. The sound of powerful engines flying overhead; engines too powerful to be Terran design.

He rushed outside and saw an Arion shuttle, one of the big, saucer shaped ones, land practically in their front yard! "Oh shit! I've gotta warn Fair and Laura!" But even as he turned to race into the house, a small group of Betas swarmed out of the ship and began closing in on the house.

Chris had just gotten back through the door when he felt a sharp pain in his back. He reached back and felt the spot and it hurt. When he pulled his hand back he saw that it had blood on it. He'd been shot! Shot by something powerful, ordinary bullets couldn't penetrate his enhanced flesh. He turned around and put up his hands. There were too many of them, and they were too well armed. "Don't shoot, I surrender!"

Chris was surrounded. The leader of the Betas approached him. "Put your hands on your head and lay down on your stomach. Beena, go in there and get the gem. And be careful, it feels like this island isn't very geologically stable. Senzen, how many others are on the island?"

"Just us and this guy. I'm not getting any other life signs, so unless someone's hiding in a lava pool somewhere, we're alone."

Then he turned his attention to Chris. "All right, where are the rest of the Altutians and Vendorians? Why are you here alone?"

Altutians? Vendorians? Who? Chris had no idea what they were talking about. But at least it didn't sound like they knew who he was. Even better, it didn't seem like they knew that they were standing on the front lawn of their most powerful enemy! "Come on now, answer me. Where is everyone? We know the crystal is here, we picked up a major energy source here. Beena will be out in a second with it, so you may as well spill it."

Just then the other Beta came back out from the house. "Weird, it doesn't look very Vendorian in there. It's nowhere near spartan enough, all those cushions and the bright wallpaper..."

"Probably Altutian influence. You have the crystal?"

"Right here." Beena held out the green gem that Seth had given to Fairchild before he left, the gem that had brought Fairchild out of her coma. "It's putting out some major energy, I'm sure this is it."

"That's strange, they didn't mention it was bright green. I just kind of assumed it was clear. Anyway take the hostage and bring him aboard the shuttle. We have what we came for. Move!"

And all the while Fairchild and Laura, too distracted and making too much noise to hear anything that happened on the surface, went on making love to each other as Chris and the gem were carted away by the Arions. They went on and on until they could go on no more, and fell asleep half-buried in molten rock.

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