Jonathan Carpenter About 9000 words

# Fog of War: Echoes of the Past

by Jonathan Carpenter

Chaos. All around me were cannons singing their cacophony of doom, automatic weapons chattering their staccato of death, the whine and crack of railguns and energy weapons, all muffled by distance, their accompanying visuals often obscured by the fog of war. Acrid fumes, smoke, and the smell of ozone choke the artificial atmosphere, their lingering odor a struggle for any filters to manage. In my hands, the controls of my machine, a fully articulate, bipedal war mech, my Aurora. In this, I towered above the battlefield at least twenty feet. It was enough to make me feel inhuman, like the giants out of myth and legend. Rifles do no more than tickle and prick the alloyed hide of this beast.

However, the forces we face have giants of their own, powers well beyond that which ordinary infantry and armor can handle. Ahead, visible through exterior cameras, about fifteen klicks out, is our objective: The Nexus, the central hub of the New Europa Conglomerate's AI military drone network, a key strategic target if there ever was one. The briefing made this op sound so damn simple. Get in, sabotage, get out. It's never that simple….

'This is a dream,' I thought, 'Or a nightmare…'

"Hey, Migraine! Come on man, get your head in the game!"

A voice on the shortrange comms, familiar, an old friend. Matthew Harper, young, not even thirty yet. *Migraine* was his ever so jovial nickname for me. It had evolved into a callsign. I pan the camera right. His mech is good to go, and I can see his face on the comms panel of the HUD. He looks ready and rarin' as always. His mech is a Constellation Class, like mine. The Nebula. It towered about the same height as mine, painted with bright digital arctic camo. The mech had smooth armored surfaces, double jointed legs, a wide and flat torso that deviated from the humanoid form, and it was bristling with firepower. Matthew was equipped for long range too. Just like him to always be covering my rear.

"Same to you Matt," I hear myself say. It sounds so distant though, so unreal. "How far along are the other units?"

"Moving to phase two now," he replies. He sounded eager. Don't jump the gun buddy. "If we don't move our asses, we're gonna be left behind."

"Let's move out then. Next checkpoint is ahead."

Feels like I've done this a thousand times. I take the controls, guide the mech forward, pick up to a run, kick off the ground, fire up the antigravity drive, fold up the legs, and we cruise along. Terrain here was broken up with plenty of places for cover, so we stay below the hills and

crags, out of sight while the main force draws attention. Everything was a blur as we sped along. I can still hear their guns. Other mech groups are relatively close by too. I hear energy weapons and chatter on the comms. They're engaged.

"Sounds like the others ran into a tough spot," Matthew says. "Sure hope they're okay."

"Could be a sign of trouble ahead. Eyes open, head on a swivel."

"Solid copy Migraine."

I couldn't help smirking just a little at the nickname as it brings back a few memories. I push that away for now though. We had a mission. Hopefully the last mission of this godforsaken war.

My chain of thought is broken when we round the next bend. My mech's shields flare and I can hear the pinging of several heavy hits. I throw it into reverse, Matthew right beside me, the inertial dampeners barely compensating for the G-force. We redeploy the mechs' legs and touch down, taking cover behind crag walls and rock formations. Going above the crags would be suicide with all the triple-A blanketing the area. I can just make out the enemy up ahead as I peak a camera around our cover for a moment. Machines, with some elite infantry and fortifications. Heavy autocannons lined a large wall ahead, with their larger, auto-loaded cousins interspersed between them. It was a kill zone. The Europans knew we'd come this way then? A trap?

"Migraine!"

Matt's warning reaches my ear easily enough, but my response feels sluggish in the moment. We turn back to witness our only escape route closed off. Machines were coming at us from that direction too, out of hidden exits along the crag walls. They were smaller, four legs each, like bugs, but still larger than tanks. The way they swarmed was like ants reacting to an

attack on their hill. The sharp edges of their armor made them look all the more disturbing, like a swarm of razorblades. Their main bodies looked near-flat and angular, tapering off to a point at the front end. They had sharp jagged edges, underneath which were hidden heavy plasma cutters and burst cannons, inlaid like the points of pincers. They reminded me of scarabs.

I hear a cry of alarm and look to my right. Harper's mech is being swarmed close range as he opens up with the left arm's rotary guns.

"Matt!"

I begin to react immediately after I had registered his distress, but my movements become sluggish as I try to engage my mech's energy projector. Time seems to slow and the sounds of skittering mechanical bugs, their energy weapons chattering, all seem to echo distantly around me. I can still hear his shouts of frustration as he tries to fight them off. I try to charge in as the world begins to fade away around me, melting into a black void. The last sights to go: my friend's mech being torn into by skittering swarmers as we try to gun them down, my energy projector igniting a blade of superheated plasma, and our rotary cannons roaring. My war cry echoes in my ears…

#

I shoot upright with the war cry on my lips, the sounds of combat still ringing in my ears. It takes a moment to get my bearings. After casting my frantic gaze about the room, I begin to realize where I am. There's the door, bedside lamp and table, fan and light. There's the dresser, and my duffel right next to it. Right. I'm not in the field anymore. It was just a nightmare…. Or a memory…. I can still hear my own heavy breathing.

I can't help but chastise myself. 'Damnit Nico, get a grip.'

After a few seconds, I manage to calm my breathing, but my heart is still hammering in my chest. I turn my gaze to the right, towards the bedside table, specifically to a photo sitting next to the lamp. After taking another deep breath, I pick up the photo to take a closer look. It's the old crew. There's me, Nico Valdez, messy brown hair and piercing emerald eyes. There's Matthew. Short black hair, brown eyes, his arm around my shoulder. We were holding our helmets and dressed in our mech pilot plug-suits, definitely geared up to deploy, but at the time this photo was taken, we were laughing. Two wingmen, brothers of the battlefield, surrounded by our friends and comrades.

To the right was a woman, about our height, black hair tied into a bun, her emerald eyes mirroring my own, intelligent and full of life, her bewildered smirk immortalized in this photo. Hannah Melody, our engineer at the time. To the left was Victor Shore, aka Bear, a mountain of a man. He too was in a pilot plug-suit and appeared to have a fatherly disposition. His naturally grey hair was trimmed very short, and his blue eyes still had a warmth behind them, seemingly accented by the early signs of aging. Finally, next to Victor stood another woman, also in the plug-suit of a pilot, her blonde hair was cut short. Melissa Harvey had been our squadron leader. Her amber gaze was penetrating, but she had the ghost of a smile in this photo, one of the few times she let that ever so serious façade of hers falter.

This had been my family back before and during the war. These four souls had kept me grounded. I found myself wondering what they were all up to right now. All except for Matt…. I knew where he was right now. I would see everyone else soon enough though. After letting out another sigh, I got up to get ready for the day. It was the anniversary of our academy graduation after all.

#

I walked in silence as I made my way towards our meeting point. Above me, the blue sky visible now might have been no more than a pipe dream over a century ago, but it was the most comforting part. In the distance, the towering height of Olympus Mons loomed above the Martian capital city of Horizon One, what had grown out of the first colony to be established on Mars. The gargantuan mountain was now capped with snow, with verdant green all around it, again a sight once thought to exist only in films, games, and dreams. The glinting hulls of sky-cars in the air and elegant skyscrapers and cityscape somewhat off to the right of that served to complete this soothing landscape visual. Oh, the wonders of terraforming. I almost felt like I was back on Earth. One might almost forget that our small side of the galaxy had been at war just a couple years ago.

And yet, this was the most somber stretch of the trip. Immediately around me were the graves of many of those who fell in the Battle of Europa. There was one grave in particular I was here to visit. Up ahead, I could make out three individuals. I could never forget their faces. Hannah ran up to meet me halfway.

"Nico! Took you long enough," the younger woman said. She wore a playful smirk, as she poked my side. Her eyes were still as bright and full of life as ever.

"Sorry. Air lanes are pretty blocked up today." I wore a sheepish grin. It wasn't the worst excuse in the galaxy.

The pout she gave in response was, to be blunt, adorable and amusing.

"That's no excuse! Today's a big day you know. Don't want to keep Matt waiting, do you?"

"Well, when you put it like that…" My chuckle was as sheepish as the smile on my face.

We approached the other two in our group. Melissa and Victor, their expressions, and their eyes especially, matched to the melancholy weight of the air around us. They were clearly happy to see me, but they too felt the depth and intensity of the moment. A quick glance to my right confirmed that Hannah felt the same deep down. She has such honest eyes… I knew why. No greeting or explanation was necessary. I turned my gaze to the grave.

Here lies Staff Sergeant Matthew Harper, a protector, a patriot, and a friend. Just like that, I felt the gravity pressing down on my heart amplify. It was always like this whenever I saw his grave. I turn to face the others.

"Did you guys bring it?" I ask. My throat felt a little dry now. It sounded like I had choked up a little.

Victor directs a simple, sad smile at me before nodding. "We did." He held up a small bag.

I wondered how I didn't see it before, but then again, I was focused on them, and on the grave. He had probably been hiding it behind his mountainous figure. I reach up to take hold of the bag when he offers it to me. I pull out the contents: five shot glasses, and a bottle of earth-made whiskey from Ireland, an old favorite of Matt's. I knew why he was letting me do it. He told me last year.

"*He was closest to you kid,*" Victor had once said.

I lined the shot glasses up on top of Matt's grave and uncorked the whiskey bottle. As I poured the first, I remembered when we had first met.

#

*Twelve Years ago…*

Pilot academy, day one. It was an exhilarating feeling, walking through the campus gates of the Olympus Mons Military Academy. People came here for many different reasons, some to make ends meet, others to find their way, others still to learn. Those who made it became legendary in the public eye. Me? I came here because I want to help people, I've always had a proficiency with operating machines, and I'm something of a fighter.

"Heeeey!"

My thoughts are disrupted by the shout, and I look to see the smiling face of a very energetic young man on approach.

"Can I help you?" I ask. I tilt my head slightly, confused as he stops right in front of me.

"You're Nico Valdez, aren't you?" That jovial air he gave off never seemed to diminish.

"Yeah." I was totally confused. This felt a little random.

"I heard about you. Kind of a vigilante type, right?"

I can't help the deadpan expression that appears on my face. This guy is a bit forward, and doesn't have much of a filter. Where was this going?

"I guess you could say that? I don't like bullies. Figured it better to stuff the bully in a locker than let him do it to the kid he's trying to steal lunch money from…"

"Heard you got in trouble a lot doing that." The young man grins widely. "I like you already. Sounds like your heart is in the right place."

That made me pause and just stare. He caught me off guard with that rather forward assessment of his. I have to take a few moments to recollect my thoughts, and I can't help raising an eyebrow at his peculiar manner. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, sounds like you're the type who stands up for the little guy. Heard a good bit about you back during school, but we never got a chance to meet until now. You did save a friend of mine once though, so I wanted to thank you personally. Now I can."

I blink a few times at that, as if I were a computer, struggling to calculate a response. It takes me another minute to regather my faculties. "Wait wait wait, you're wanting to thank me for something that happened during grade school? Who did I save?"

"Do you remember a girl, Hannah Melody? Real grease monkey type, bit scrawny but a good kid. You protected her from a bigshot that was pushing her around. She became a good friend of mine not long after that."

That rang a bell. I remembered her. Covered in oil spots, definitely a little thin. I remember her being shy too. She was fond of mechs as I recall. I can't help a small smirk as the memory returns. ""Yeah, I know her. How is she?"

"She's doing great! Really opened up after you got that jackass off her case! Thank you by the way. She's actually taking a mech engineering course at this academy!"

That jovial air about him seemed to intensify a moment, and it was a practically contagious. He seemed to gesticulate a lot as he spoke, his arms and hands constantly in motion. I couldn't help laughing a little. "I'm happy to hear it." I then pause as I remember that I just met this guy, finally thinking about introductions. "What's your name?"

"Matthew Harper!" He extends his hand. "Nice to meet ya!"

"Nico Valdez." I accept the handshake. Firm grip this guy, full of life and energy. His brown eyes had a fire behind them that I doubt would be easily extinguished. I decide that I like him.

"Wanna be friends?"

I'm blindsided by the question. I'd be lying if I said I didn't entertain the idea though. Good friends are hard to come by. Even at this academy, having even one would help a lot. Better to fight together than to fight alone, right? "Sure. Why not?"

"AWESOME! Hope we get teamed up after we graduate here! Heh, bet you'll be as much of a migraine for the bad guys as you were for the bullies and the teachers back at school!" He pauses a moment, and a thoughtful glint appeared in his eye for just a moment. "Hey, that's not a bad nickname. Mind if I call you Migraine?"

I can't help freezing and giving him a bewildered look. Nicknamed already. Well shit. If that becomes my callsign, I might have an aneurism. Little did I know that it actually would…

#

*Present Day…*

I can't help the pang of sorrow I felt at the memory. It was such a simple first meeting, awkward but good-natured. Little had I known at the time that it would be the start of a wild few years, and a lasting, meaningful friendship. If only a tragic loss hadn't followed so suddenly years later... The expectations laid on all of us during that final battle were excessive, to say the least. I poured the next shot as I then recalled when we reunited with Hannah at the academy. I glanced her way and caught her eye. The sorrow in those life filled eyes of hers spoke volumes, and yet, there was a fondness too. I could tell she missed him just as much as I did, and I knew that she remembered that day years ago when we finally reunited with her. Even now, it's still such a warm memory…

#

*Twelve Years ago…*

We had been through about a month of basic now, conditioned quickly and hand-picked for training by a local PMC Captain, a man by the name of Victor Shore. He had the nickname *Bear* because he could be a gentle giant at times, but a terrifying hard ass at others. Matt and I had both agreed that the nickname suited him just fine. Now that the pruning period was over though, we had a couple days to ourselves and we decided to do a little exploring throughout the campus to start. Matt had the bright idea to check out the engineering hall, see if we could catch sight of an old mutual friend.

"So, this is the engineering building." Matt cast his gaze about, soaking in every detail. He paused when he stepped in front of a gargantuan statue of a mech, one-to-one scale. It had four legs, heavy armor, and a very devastating arsenal of railguns, rockets, and energy projectors. It had a blocky, utilitarian aesthetic, and was a veritable tank on legs. He let out a low whistle as he looks it over.

"Think we'll end up in one of these?" He turns his gaze to me, smirking as he waits for my input.

I decided to humor him. "Beats me. Guess it depends on what we're most proficient with. Ultimately, it's up to the guys up the chain of command, right?"

"Aw come on. You gotta admit, it'd still be pretty cool to get behind the wheel of one of these!"

Did this guy ever lose his positive energy? He was like the old Energizer Bunny, never stopping. That said, it's not like I could disagree. I cast my gaze over the statue, taking in each detail. It was definitely a remarkable piece of machinery they had depicted here.

I couldn't help chuckling a bit. "Alright. I admit, there's something thrilling about the idea of piloting that."

"I knew you'd see it my way." He grins cheekily and roughly punches my shoulder.

I can't help but roll my eyes with my increasingly signature amused smirk. He was like a childish kid brother sometimes, but I couldn't really complain. It's refreshing to see someone so upbeat. There were a few times that positive and curious attitude of his kept me from giving out during our first month here. From what I can tell, he seems to look up to me in turn, and pushes himself to keep up with me. I catch myself hoping I can live up to his expectations when we hear a young woman's voice calling out to us, interrupting my thoughts with a rather condescending tone.

"You two lost? Mech range is that way."

We turn to face her. She has short black hair, and a familiar, piercing emerald gaze. She seemed familiar.

"Actually, we're here looking for a friend. Turns out she's going to the same academy as us." Matt doesn't skip a beat, does he?

"Really? Your friend in engineering?" A curious gleam appears in her eye, replacing the slight annoyance. Guess it wasn't common for mech jocks to come around here with such innocent intent.

"She sure does. Kinda looks like you actually, bit on the scrawny side last I remember, her name's Hannah Melody."

I notice a sudden glint of recognition in her eyes as she freezes and stares at us a few moments. "My name is Hannah Melody…" She goes wide eyed as the recognition sets in completely. "Wait… MATT!?"

"Holy shit, Hannah!? Damn you got some muscle girl! Really filled out in all the right ways!"

I can't help snickering a little bit as she lands a closed fist a little roughly on the top of his head.

"Don't get any funny ideas jackass." She sounded a little annoyed at first before smirking at him. "It's good to see you."

He's rubbing his head whilst grinning coyly. "Heh, good to see you too." He then gestures to me, his playful expression replaced by his usual brand of excited energy. "You remember Nico Valdez, right? This is the guy who shoved that bully off your case back in High School!"

She pauses and looks me over a minute. It takes her a few seconds until her gaze meets mine. That glint of recognition appears again as she lets out a small gasp. "Oh my god. Nico?" Her eyes again go wide, shocked to see me here.

I can't help the soft smile that appears on my face, a warm feeling racing through me. "Hey Hannah. Been a hot minute. You grew up a lot since we last met."

"I could say the same to you!" The previous annoyance and shock were completely absent. In its place was mirth and remembrance. "I can't believe you two are both here! It's so good to see you! Oh, I never got a chance to thank you Nico, I'm sorry for not saying anything back then."

I wave it off. "Think nothing of it. Besides, I kinda got detention for the way I handled it. Don't really want congratulations for that kind of thing."

"Aw come on Migraine. Don't be so modest!" Matthew laughs and punches my shoulder lightly.

"Migraine?" Hannah lets out what sounds like a chortle upon hearing that.

Somehow, I knew she'd react like that. I let out a sigh and give Matthew a slightly annoyed, deadpan look. "His new nickname for me. I can't believe it, but it's sticking back at the barracks."

At that, Hannah covers her mouth in a vain effort to hold in outright laughter. It's not long before she's doubled over, guffawing openly.

"WOO! Victory!" Matthew pumped his fist triumphantly, earning a bewildered look from me. "We got her giggling man."

I just roll my eyes once more. I know for a fact now, that's going to be a common gesture from me.

Hannah soon calms down, but the smile on her face doesn't fade one bit. "I'm really glad you two are here. I didn't think I would see any familiar faces on this campus."

"I hadn't expected it either when I first arrived. Matt shook that expectation up real fast with this."

I couldn't help but look back on our grade school years with a growing fondness. To think a reunion like this could come years later. Small galaxy.

"How bout we all talk over lunch?" I offer. "You free right now? I'm buying."

"Hell yeah! I wanna hear what you guys have been up to!"

"Reunion party!" Matthews childish exclamation earned another laugh from Hannah and I both as we start for the door…

#

*Present day…*

I feel a hand on my shoulder. I look back to see Hannah meeting my gaze, still wearing that melancholy smile. At least we still had each other. We had Matthew to thank for bringing

us together. She kneels down next to me and takes hold of the whiskey bottle in one hand, resting her other hand in mine as she pours the next glass. I turn my gaze down to her hand, and I feel a warmth well up in my heart as I set my eyes on the engagement ring she wore.

"I finally asked her Matt. How long were you pushing me to ask her….?"

She turns her gaze back to me, wearing a small, amused smirk. "Almost three years, was it?" She pokes me a little playfully. "Your wingman always had your back, didn't he?"

I respond with quiet laugher, and the remark earned chortles of amusement from Victor and Melissa beside us. "Yeah." I turn my attention back to the grave, feeling a the strong fondness I felt for my old friend surge to the forefront again. "He was always looking out for me…"

One day in particular stuck out to me as I made another recollection of the past. I stared at the third glass as that silly, but warm memory replayed in my mind.

#

*Nine Years ago…*

Today could be considered a generally good day. It's comfortably warm as the sun shines down on us, there's a nice cool breeze that perfectly contrasts with the radiance of the sun, and we've been very productive today too, from our morning exercises to the training routines we carried out on the mech range. And then, we were all told to take a few days off while the officers and trainers take care of some important business. All in all, it's a great day… Except for one small issue…

"Come on Migraine, you're not gonna get anywhere if you wait around!"

Please shut up Matthew.

"Dude she's perfect for you. You both love engineering, and you really mesh well together overall!"

Please shut up Matthew.

"I could set up a little get-together for you two. Come on man, how 'bout it?"

I stop walking. One moment I had been heading for the cafeteria, hungry after a hard day's work. Now I'm just trying not to snap at my best friend to shut the hell up. Thankfully, he picked up the signal and stopped talking, letting me recollect my thoughts. I take in a deep breath, then slowly let it back out before I turn to face him.

"Okay." I begin to spell things out, making damn sure I don't raise my voice at him or come off as irritated. "One, I'm perfectly content being friends with her. We already have a good thing going and I don't want to push her in a direction that jades her to my very existence."

Matthew stays quiet as he hears me out now, attentive this time. Good. I'm glad he knows when to let me get it off my chest.

"And two, I'm still not confident that it would be smiled upon for me to form any kind of romantic relationship while a member of this force, in training or otherwise."

Matthew hums and nods as he considers my words. He appears thoughtful about it at least. "Alright, alright, good points, but, consider this…"

I let out an annoyed groan. "Oh, come on Matt!"

"Hold on, hold on. One, the enforced regulations against it were rewritten to make significant allowances over half a decade ago, and standardized internationally less than a year later, so you shouldn't worry about what others think." That gets my attention as I shut up, perk up, and listen. "Two, I can tell she likes you man. We've all been hangin' out for what, almost three years now? More? She's got eyes for you man!"

I let out a sigh at that and shake my head. I'm not so sure about that. "Matt…"

He holds up a hand to interrupt me. He wasn't done, and now I could tell he was calmer, being more serious than usual. "Three, we're not getting any younger Nico. You really want to wait until you're retired to find out? You're not gonna know until you try, and I can tell you like her."

It wasn't like him to use my first name with such a serious tone of voice. The rarity of such made it a strong indicator. It only occurred when he was seriously committed to something. When you get down to the nuts and bolts of it, it sounded like one of those *somethings* was looking out for his best friend. It gave me pause and made me put serious thought into what he was saying.

"He's right you know."

That voice was familiar, calm and gentle at the present moment, but we also knew what it sounded like when its owner got strict during our training. We turned to face Victor Shore. Where had he come from. I blink a couple times as I process what he had said.

Then it hits me. "Wait, you heard all that!?"

The older pilot just chuckles. "Sure did kid. Relax, I'm not going to get on to you or anything."

That was enough to silence me out of pure surprise alone, and Captain Shore took that as an opportunity to continue.

"I can't stay long. I'm on my way to meet up with the other officers. Some interesting things brewing…"

That snapped me out of it like a bucket of ice water, and I could tell Matthew's interest was piqued when his focus on the Captain became more razor sharp, the fire behind his eyes burning a little brighter.

"Something we should know Captain?" he asks.

"Nothing that concerns you right now." Shore raises his hand placatingly. "For now, I would like to offer a little advice of my own." He turns to face me. "Nico, your trusted friend is taking the time to look out for you. Take it from me. Listen to the guy." He smiles softly. "You're a gifted pilot, and you work hard day and night to turn aptitude into honed ability. You're a model student and soldier, and perhaps one of the best damn pilots I've ever trained. I'd say you've earned a win, and true to Matt's word, the regulations don't restrict dating as much as they used to. As long as you exercise a little restraint, and remain honest during your psych evaluations, there will be no issues on the Academy's end. Understood?"

I stare at him for a few moments as his words sunk in. I still felt surprise at how relaxed he was about this, but I also couldn't help but feel grateful. I hadn't known it until now, now I feel like a massive weight is lifted off of my chest, one that had been there, hiding behind my personal doubts the whole time. He just chuckles, obviously reading me like an open book. I know he's amused. He snaps me back out of my thoughts as he continues.

"Just be ready when training resumes. I'm going to work you kids hard for the final stretch of this term."

Matthew and I both salute him, realizing he was speaking as our commanding officer now.

"Sir, yes sir!" Our reply was practically in sync.

He nods, satisfied with our response. "I assume you two are talking about miss Melody?"

"Yes sir." My answer had been automatic, before I realized that his air of authority had diminished again.

He adopts a rare smirk. "I believe I saw her at the overlook. If you're going to ask her out, that would be an ideal place to do it. Don't keep her waiting son. Dismissed."

"Sir." I salute once more before standing at ease, then turn to depart.

Matthew follows suit, clearly as surprised as I still was. It takes us both a moment to regain our faculties. We glance back almost in sync to see the Captain continuing on his way, then look back at each other.

"Did that just happen?" he asks

"I think it did. Do you think something happened…?"

"Hell if I know. Still, he took the time to reinforce my advice to you. If he's doing so…"

"I know, I know…"

Despite knowing, I was still nervous about doing things right. This is Hannah we're talking about after all. I don't have long to think about it.

"Hey."

Matt draws my attention back to him. He's pointing out the overlook. There she is, staring out over the forest and the distant mountain that was the academy's namesake. The Captain wasn't kidding. It would be a perfect spot for it.

"Word of advice pal," he says, "be yourself. It's you she likes, not some invented version of you."

I nod to him, acknowledging the advice, and I couldn't help but smile at him. He really was looking after me, a lot like a brother would, or hell, should. A small part of me wondered why the Captain had stepped up to give me a push too, but he wasn't here for me to ask him. Maybe I can question him about it later.

"See you later?" I ask.

"Yeah. Get on up there. You two can tell me all about how it went when we meet back up."

"Will do buddy."

With that, I continue on without him as he waves me off. As I reach the top of the stairs and begin my approach, she hears my footsteps and turns to face me. That warm smile of hers was the last push I needed to take that leap of faith.

Matt, thanks for the advice brother…

#

*Present day…*

I can't help another quiet laugh as I finish reminiscing.

"I couldn't have imagined then that it would turn out like this," I say. "I'm glad it did though."

Her expression gains a new layer of warmth at that, and her eyes shine just a little brighter, if such was even possible. Although there was still that melancholy gleam behind the piercing emerald, there was joy and love also. Gratitude followed as she turned her gaze back to the grave.

"You and me both," she agrees, her voice almost a whisper.

We hear a pair of high heel footsteps approach from behind us and turn to face Colonel

Melissa Harvey. Her expression is as close to neutral as it gets… yet her eyes are all too honest in the moment, speaking volumes. There was a crack in the usual poker face. It was almost like she was a mother in mourning… It made sense. Her pilots are her rosary beads, her kids. She never made an overt show of it, but I knew that she counted them before every mission, and hated herself for it. Every life lost under the Colonel's command was a blow that struck deep for her… And she would always repay the enemy tenfold in the most efficient manner possible, a debt often paid in blood.

"May I pour the next one?" Her request was punctuated by a reserved tone that weighed heavy on those who know her.

I nod and pick up the bottle to hand it to her. She takes it before approaching the grave, then pours the next glass.

"You know… he was always such a wild young man, somewhat childish and implacable. Got on my nerves sometimes. But he was a dedicated student and pilot. One of our best and brightest. As one of his instructors and commanders… I can't help being proud of how far he came." She lets out a soft sigh. What followed was something I never thought I would see from her… She let a tear fall. "I wonder if he knew what was coming, before the war actually began…" She glances back at us. "As carefree as he was. He was always so observant. Wasn't he?"

I quietly nod to her, affirming that he was. A casual observer would never have noticed then. And yet…

#

*Eight Years ago…*

Matt and I had been spending the last couple months with Colonel Harvey to polish our ability to coordinate in the field. The vast mech ranges were an excellent place to carry out simulated war games. Our opponents were often either automated mechs or squads from rival PMCs under the Martian Government's employ. Neither were very lax, giving little room for error on our part. But we had been training for nearly four years up to this point. We were in our newly assigned mechs: my Aurora, Matt's Nebula, and the Colonel's artillery focused Pulsar. It was one of the first weeks we had them, and their imposing presence, even on the inside, had yet to lose its impact on us. I doubt it ever will. Controls were similar to the standard training units, but where the similarities ended was where we had to start adapting to our new machines. These exercises pushed us to adjust quickly, calling upon all of our prior training.

"Come on you two, focus!" Even over the comms, I could hear the stern weight in Harvey's voice. "We don't have long before the next round. Let's get to the gantries."

"Roger." Matt and I were again in sync in the wake of the recent mock battle.

We turned towards our side of the wargame zone and headed for the field gantries. Behind us, three autonomous mechs were frozen after having long since registered what would have been fatal hits from our own weapons, had this been a live fire exercise. In the distance ahead, as I zoomed in with an external camera, I could make out Hannah waiting for us with the engineering crew she had been assigned to lead. I could make out a slightly impatient look behind her eyes despite a stoic expression.

"Uh oh. I think Hannah's gonna be scolding one of us again," Matt said.

I shoot a deadpan glare at his video portrait in the HUD. "Don't look at me. You're the one who pulled that hairbrained jump."

Harvey gives a similarly stern glare. “You’re usually not supposed to push your mech like that.”

He freezes up slightly. “Right. Apologies ma’am.”

She just sighs. “It’s no matter. It did earn us a victory, and the team is coming back alive. While an improvement, I expect you to keep working on your situational awareness and battle tactics Harper.”

“Understood Colonel,” he replies smartly before he visibly pauses. His mech stops moving, standing still as I catch an indication that his attention had been drawn by something.

I halt my own mech, followed shortly by the Colonel. “Matt?”

For the moment, he’s unresponsive. I look to his main camera node, and follow where it’s pointing. It takes me a moment, but I’m then able to make out Victor in the distance. Seemed he was meeting with some of the top Martian brass.

Something immediately catches my attention once I’m visually zeroed in. “What the hell is a four-star doing here?”

Melissa follows our camera headings. She maintained her poker face as she watched with us, giving zero indications over the vidcomm of what she might be thinking. Matt’s another story. Though his expression is neutral, his eyes were very forthcoming. I could tell the gears were turning in his head. I couldn’t help wondering what he was thinking in that exact moment…

Harvey is the first to move or speak. “It’s none of our concern right now. Come on. We still have five more rounds today.”

Matt doesn’t react right away, remaining still. Until I call out to him that is.

“Yo, Mars to Matt!”

That snaps him out of it as his gaze turns to me on the vidcomm. "Huh? Oh, right, sorry 'bout that."

"Apologize to the Colonel, not me. Come on man. Think on it later. We got training to finish."

"Right behind you, Migraine."

The three of us arrive to find Hannah tapping her foot a little impatiently, with her arms folded across her chest. Right. Not smart to keep an engineering chief waiting, even if she is your girlfriend…

*Well, we're in for another scolding…*

#

*Present day…*

I once again found myself staring at Matt's grave as I thought back on that day. Back then, it hadn't quite registered for me what he might have been thinking. Looking back now, it's almost a trivial matter of educated guesswork. Matt had always been observant, but what few knew then was just how observant he really was. He could pick up on the finer details, and look at the big picture. On the surface, he was often childishly excitable, like a playful kid brother. Deep down though, he had a profound and complex mind even I can't claim to have ever fully understood. He had been thinking about the future then. He had paid attention to the subtle signs. It wasn't a stretch to think he had already guessed the war that had followed a year later was on its way…

I turn my gaze back to our Colonel. It broke my heart to see her usually calm, stoic expression falter in the way it was now. Her eyes were moist as she struggled to prevent further tears from falling. At the same time, this confirmed for me that Matt had more than earned her

respect, and had been counted among her kids well before we graduated. I guess the deepest scars left by war could chip and crack even the strongest of wills… No. I know they can. I nearly broke under their weight too.

I watched on as Victor approached, resting a firm hand on the Colonel's shoulder. It had a stabilizing effect on her as she sucked it up, then offered the whiskey bottle to him. He glanced my way, as if asking permission. I nod to him, and he takes it in hand, still keeping a firm and stabilizing hold on Melissa's shoulder as he pours the last glass.

"He won't want us to mourn forever you know," Victor says. "You all know how he was. Kid was always spirited and strong willed… He always thought about others before himself."

He picks up the cork, which I had left sitting atop the gravestone among the glasses, then seals up the remaining whiskey and lets it hang at his side, the neck of the bottle secure between his fingers. I can tell he's thinking carefully about his next words as he maintains a silent stoicism. During those quiet moments, I observed the expressions of Melissa and Hannah. They each had adopted the same hard gaze as the Captain. I realized I was doing the same as I stood up and followed their gazes back to Victor.

"Thinking back," he says, "he was always watching our backs, on and off the battlefield. I can't remember a time when he ever expressed a selfish desire, save one…"

#

*Two Years ago…*

Five years… five long years. Every time I take a pause to think about what's coming, I always find my mind wandering back to how long it took us to get here. Here we are, all sitting in the ready room just off of the mech drop bay. Four hundred kilometers below us was Europa.

The Martian and Earth Navies had done a stellar job punching a corridor for the flagships of five different allied PMCs, including our own, to move in to drop position with the rest of the two navies' dropships. No one said a word. The briefing was long over, and the mission was all that lay ahead now. All we waited for was the order to mount up for the drop. I absently noted Hannah's hand on my shoulder as my mind wandered into the past, reflecting on the time it took us all to get to this point. I couldn't take my mind off of those five grueling years of an interplanetary war that, shockingly, had completely divided the Sol and Alpha Centauri Systems.

The war had taken everyone by surprise. The Europan Alliance had attacked before making any official declarations. Several key star port cities on Earth and Mars had been devastated at the onset, only a few escaping the wrath of the Europan forces thanks to the quick and brave efforts of the two worlds' respective navies and their PMC allies. At first, it was thought to be a violent attempt at breaking away and gaining independence. War was not wanted on our end. Negotiations never got off the ground though, and it quickly became clear that the Europa Alliance was out for blood, their radical ideals growing and festering out of the distance between them and the core worlds. Since then, one uphill battle after another, we retook city after city, severed the Europan supply lines from Alpha Centauri, negotiated alliances with other star systems, and dismantled their AI military drone network one node and hub at a time.

All this death and destruction, and for what? Some misguided sense of superiority? I could feel a sense of anger welling up within me.

"Hey, Migraine."

I look up to find the smiling and confident gaze of my best friend directed at me. I feel a hand squeeze my shoulder and turn my eyes towards Hannah, still there to support me. I could

detect the worry in her eyes, but there was an unmistakable warmth as well. The anger I had felt welling up within me began to fade as I nodded to each of them, letting them know I was okay.

"There he is. Back in the present?" Matt chuckles softly, wearing a cheeky smirk. "Good. Not gonna get very far without my wingman."

"I should be saying that to you," I quip right back at him. "You sound ready to kick some ass."

"Ready to end this fucking war. I'll be watching your back down there, so don't you worry 'bout a thing."

Hannah laughs softly as she punches his shoulder. "You better damn well bring my boyfriend back." Her expression hardens after another moment though. "You come back alive too. You hear me?"

He nods affirmatively. "I hear you. I'll buy out a damn bar for us all when this whole shit show is over."

"I'll hold you to that pal," I say. I catch Hannah smirking outside my peripheral vision.

Our little pre-battle pep talk is interrupted when the ready alert starts blaring around us, the klaxon to tell all pilots to mount up for the drop. I knew this tune like the back of my hand. Cue the spinning lights, their fiery shine reflecting off of the glossy sheen of our freshly repaired plug-suits. The doors at the back of the room hiss open, and in steps Captain Shore and Colonel Harvey.

"You know the music kids," the Captain says. "Mount up!"

Matt and I share a look and nod to each other before putting on our helmets and starting for the airlock to the drop bay. I glanced back to see Hannah waving to us as our CO and XO enter the airlock behind us. It was the last I would see of her before the drop… The doors

behind us seal, obscuring her warm eyes from view, and the airlock begins to cycle as I turn my gaze forward again. I know this feeling well. Trepidation, nervousness, anxiety, and a slight shift in the gravity and pressure.

*Fear is only an advisor,* I remind myself.

The sound outside our suits becomes dull and muffled. I can hear my heart hammering between my ears. Same old song and dance. Inhale. Exhale. Take a breath. I feel a slight impact and my right shoulder jolt forward a moment, then look to my right, finding my partner grinning confidently back at me.

I hear the comms beep twice as Matt opens a line. "Don't forget pal. I got your back down there. I promised Hannah I would get you back alive," he says. I feel calmer already. His grin turns a little playful. "I wanna be the best man at your wedding after all."

That gets me to roll my eyes as I bring up a fist to gently thump his armored shoulder. "Shut up man. Head in the mission."

He just laughed. "Alright, alright."

We fall into a companionable silence after that. It felt like hours as we waited for the outer doors to cycle open. In reality it was about another minute as the drop bay beyond shifted to a fully depressurized state in preparation to unleash us on the Nexus below. The door then splits open, its heavy armored segments sliding ponderously to either side as it reveals our mechs in the drop gantries ahead. We step forward and make our way to our positions. As we make our way out, I cast a glance over the railing to the vast stretch of distance between us and the icy moon below. I can make out the flash of cannon fire, the eerie glow of missile engines, the brilliant lances of light from laser weapons. Despite the frigid temperatures of the world below, fuel and munitions burned hot enough to be visible from orbit. The punishing fire of the

warships in view was eerily silent in the vacuum.

"Hey." I turn my gaze to Matt as we stop between our respective mechs. His hand is outstretched, fist closed. "Once more unto the breach. Ready for our final run?"

I meet his closed fist with my own and nod to him before patting his shoulder. "You know it. Let's make it count."

His smirk widens into a confident grin as he nods, that ever-present fire in his eyes burning a little brighter.

"See you in hell."

With that, he turns to board his mech.

My last reservations are squelched, my confidence restored to full as I board my mech for the imminent drop. As the hatch seals behind me and I take my seat, I reflect on one more constant that had stuck with me throughout this damn war.

It's the main reason I'm still alive today…

#

*Present day…*

It finally hits me what Victor meant, and I can't help laughing just a little, drawing the gazes of the rest of our little party.

"Caught on, did you?" The good Captain wore the ghost of a smirk.

I nod somberly, letting out a melancholy laugh. "Reckless fool wanted to be the best man at the wedding." I wipe away a tear as I eventually calm down and catch my breath, then I step back up to Matt's grave. "Bet you anything he wanted to be where he always was. Right at my back… my own guardian angel."

The emotions boil back to the surface. I can't even name them all. Anger, grief, sorrow, love… It's such a complicated mess, roiling like a maelstrom within me. The laughter returns again, bubbling up from deep within, so contradictory of the sorrow I felt as I again find myself wiping away tears.

"God damn fool… Your one selfish wish, and I can't even grant it 'cause you were too selfless for your own good."

I feel Hannah's hand on my shoulder again. It's the strongest anchor I have as I let tears fall for… I don't even know how long. Eventually, it's enough for me to pull myself back from that tumultuous sea of grief. I feel her arms wrap around me from behind. Her voice is as soothing as her embrace.

"I know how you feel Nico. We'll do our best to grant his wish though. He may not be with us physically, but he'll always be with us in spirit. You know that. You said it yourself. He's a guardian angel." I glance to my right as she rests her head on my shoulder, and see the warmth in her gaze, her eyes locked on Matt's grave.

Her words struck a chord deep within me. It takes a few palpable moments for it to settle in before it hits home. She was right. One glance to my left and I knew Victor and Melissa were of the same mind. They both were smiling softly as Hannah's words sunk in for them. It's enough for me. The tears slow, and the complex tempest of grief slowly begins to subside.

After another moment's contemplation, I pick up the first of the shot glasses. Hannah picks up the second. Victor and Melissa pick up the third and fourth. The fifth remains, sitting in the middle, a glass of whiskey for our fallen brother, our pillar of strength, our bastion… a glass of whiskey for a guardian angel. One by one, we raise our glasses, and down our shots of

of the smokey spirit. We then begin to pack up, leaving the one remaining shot of whiskey where it lay. We would come back later.

We then turned to depart, ready to carry out the rest of the Graduation Anniversary. Matt would want us to celebrate after all. As we continued on, I felt an inexplicable warmth wash over me just before we crossed the threshold to leave the graveyard… It was reassuring, even jovial.

*Soldier on Migraine.*

I whipped around, locking my gaze on Matt's Grave.

"Nico? Is something wrong?"

I look to Hannah to see a hint of concern in her eyes. "No, I…" I hesitate a moment before looking back to the grave.

The lone glass of whiskey reflected the light of the sun in such a way that it shined like a lone star. That jovial warmth still remained. It stuck to me, like a shield against the grief. I can't help the equally warm smile that plays across my lips.

"It's nothing. Just sayin' one more goodbye…"

*Fin*