

Episode Nine:

Citadel Gates

“Our success at the Köln hive was instrumental to the successful completion of the mission in many respects. Firstly, [the hive] was a major barrier in the way of vast numbers of East European resistance forces that were trying to destabilize the Invid occupation. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it was our most ambitious adventure to date. The lessons we learned from this mission were key in our later battles: at Atlantis hive, and at Reflex Point. . .”

-Admiral Michael Austin, in an interview on the public television program, “The World in Hindsight”.

1 March 2043

Jeanne lowered Michael’s optical enhancement goggles, and silently entertained dark thoughts. After noting the frequency of patrol activity of the five-hundred meter radius hive in front of her into a small notebook, she turned from the gigantic yellowish geodesic dome and walked slowly back to her companions. The group had spent several weeks gathering intelligence on this small hive, as soon as the spring thaw had started to remove the winter’s bleakness from the landscape. Michael and Jeanne had actually entered Cologne’s ruins, hoping to get a better view of the hive from the top of the tower of the old Gothic cathedral there, and the trip was quite helpful in planning the raid. By some providence, that church, the Roman-Germanic museum across the plaza, and several abandoned shops were all that remained of the desolate inner city.

The time had recently arrived for the group to move out of Blake’s family’s house in Bonn, where they had wintered and nursed their wounds after Kane’s attack the previous December, but Jeanne was unsettled by something other than having lost the comforts of home. The plan to attack the hive was not what bothered her as much as what response might follow from the local overlords. Jeanne set herself in a camp-chair she’d removed from the hovertransport, hidden on the outskirts of the woods nearby. *Maybe it’s just that I’m tired. This routine is killing me.* She closed her eyes for a moment,

focusing on the task at hand, trying to pretend that all the things that could go wrong couldn't.

"You okay, Jeanne?" she heard Michael ask her assuringly, feeling his massive hand come to rest on her shoulder.

"Yes. I'm just feeling a little tired and overworked, what with the preparations and all. I haven't gotten any sleep at all the last three nights."

"Me either. I always worry too much before I go on an offensive. How does a back rub sound?" the expressive and sympathetic voice offered.

"That sounds wonderful. I'll return the favor sometime."

"The mind reels to think how," Michael teased.

Jeanne felt his masterful fingers caress her aching shoulders, working their way to the vertebrae of her neck and then down the spine, and back up again. *At least I get you to myself for these few minutes.* "Michael?" she whispered disconcertedly.

"That's me."

"Do you know what will happen if we're successful?"

"Exactly what are you referring to, Jeanne?"

"There's a good chance that the Invid high command, upon hearing about the attack, will send troops to slaughter half of the people in the nearby towns, to make sure that others who hear of the massacres will - in the future - turn any resistance members. They'll think that will prevent attacks like this from happening again. I'm terrified that I may be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. . ."

She felt Michael's arms move forward to encircle her middle. He pressed his chest hard against her back, resting his stubbly chin on her left shoulder. She gasped suddenly in surprise, and then yielded more than willingly to the embrace, gently nuzzling her head against his.

"Don't let it bug you too much, kid. That's the sort of thing you just can't dwell on too much when you're at war, because if you do, you go batty. And quickly at that. The Invid are the ones morally responsible for any reprisals against civilians, not you. Try to remember that. Just trust in what you're fighting for, and try to pretend that's all there is to it."

"That still won't save those people's lives."

"No, but it'll save **your** sanity," Michael replied.

"I'm serious, Michael."

"So am I. Trust me on this one."

Jeanne gathered up her courage, and began, "Michael, I. . ."

“Commander Austin!” Roger’s voice echoed from off in the distance. Michael kissed Jeanne softly on the back of the neck, just above the nape, and released the embrace.

“Duty calls, kiddo.”

“Michael, could we take a walk together later on?”

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me away,” he replied in a dramatic grin, and left in a brisk walk.

* * *

The planes were hidden some three hundred meters away in a clearing in the forest, but the rebels had assembled a makeshift forest canopy with a thin net and quite a few branches, effectively creating a hangar in which they could maintenance the two Alpha Fighters.

Roger was restoring a component in one of the main engines in Michael’s plane, carefully adjusting the controls that optimized the output of superheated air from the exhaust, and prevented the plasma temperatures inside the engine from reaching the point at which it would overcome the magnetic bottling inside the vehicle’s main turbines, causing the disintegration the aft section of the vehicle. Michael had been complaining that the engine had been running a little hot, and he thought this an optimum time to fix the glitch. There was plenty of heavy water left in the fuel tanks for the fusion reactors, and the protoclulture cells were fresh from the hovertransport’s cargo area. Unfortunately, the D₂O wouldn’t last forever, and Roger was already trying to think of how he could procure more.

Michael finally appeared per Roger’s summoning, and proceeded to inquire for what purpose he had been called.

“I wanted you to help me with these last pre-launch checks before we have our final strategy session,” was Roger’s reply.

“No problem, Rog. So how’s our ordnance stockpile holding up?”

“As well as could be expected. I’ve got 8000 35mm rounds for your gun pods and six dozen Hammerhead SRMs in the transport’s trailer. That doesn’t include the stores in your ships. Both fighters are fully loaded at this point.”

“That’s not good. I’ll tell Laurie to stick with the cannon if possible, and even then to use bursts conservatively. Where do you think we can get more?”

“Salvage it from wrecks, of course. That’s our only viable option at this point.” Roger shrugged in response to Michael’s scowl, and got back to the engine.

“I’ll run the checks from the cockpit. You got the terminal?” Michael asked.

Roger responded by handing him a computer keyboard attached to a short cord, which Michael took with him into the cockpit. Roger placed the communicator on his head and waited for Michael to check in.

Michael switched the plane’s radio to Roger’s headset’s frequency, and asked, “All right, what do we do first?”

“Run a diagnostic check on all systems, requesting a listing of all anomalies.”

Michael plugged the keyboard into an outlet located towards the bottom of the control panel, and typed in his authorization codes, ordering a full diagnostics sweep of the plane’s systems.

“The program’s running, Roger. The computer estimates it’ll be around two hours before it’s done. Let’s take a break while we wait.” Michael suggested, climbing down from the cockpit and leaping to the ground with a loud ‘thud’. Roger nodded in acknowledgment, and the two headed back for the hovertransport.

“So, Michael, do you think that this plan of Jeanne’s will work? It seems a bit risky,” Roger asked of his commander.

“Well, the basic strategy is sound; any REF operation would do it the same way. Take out the Hive Brain, Stasis Chambers, and the Power Core, in that order, and you’ve got the hive out of commission. I used a variant on their base at Chrysid, but that was a much bigger hive, so we had to use a couple of hundred infantrymen and a whole wing of fighters. I think that, considering the hive’s size, and our assets, we should have a good chance of crippling the base. Jeanne estimates that only five hundred Invid mecha operate there, and most of those will be on patrol when we hit it. Since only a nuclear explosion can knock down the main force shield, should they choose to erect it, we’re better off attacking the thing from the inside. Besides, Jeanne’s coordinating the attack, and she’s a genius at this sort of thing. “

“I sincerely hope so, Commander. None of us signed on with you so we could be slaughtered,” Pike offered.

“Good. I like my troops with their mental stabilities intact,” Michael joked. “Finish up here, and meet me at the transport in two hours. I’ve got some business to attend to.”

* * *

Across the valley at the boundary of the thick wood that encircled the domed hive, two figures silently completed the final preparations for the diversionary tactic

Jeanne had concocted for the offensive. The small apparatus consisted with a matrix of nine tubes, each with a six-inch diameter, into which would be placed one Hammerhead SRM each. A primitive electrical firing system had been rigged to each tube; the power source would be a electrochemical cell that was as of yet unconnected.

“Laurie,” Blake grunted as he tried to tilt the heavy rocket battery such that it was aimed directly at the hive’s main entrance. “You’re supposed to be helping, you nitwit!”

Laurie started, as if shaken out of a daze, answering, “Oh, yeah. What do you want me to do?”

“Well, you can start with hooking up the radio receiver. Each of the red wires should go into a separate port and all the black ones should go parallel into the common port on the unit. Hook the power supply into the receiver, black to black, red to red. Then extend the antenna, and turn the unit on. As soon as I get this thing aimed, I’ll check the circuitry.”

Laurie began to fiddle with the wires on the homemade launch system, and then asked Blake, “So, what do you think of everyone so far?”

“What do you mean,” Blake said, releasing the launcher and digging through the near-by tool box.

“You’ve been around the group for a couple of months now. What are your impressions of everyone?” Laurie said, breaking out a soldering iron and attaching the first few wires to the device.

“Well, Michael is okay, but he seems always busy. I don’t think he takes me seriously at all. I don’t really like Milo. He’s rude, and treats me like a kid.”

“Milo’s like that with everyone,” Laurie interjected.

“I like Jeanne a lot; she’s quite smart. She was telling me about all the stuff they got to do in the spacefleet not long ago,” he concluded, emerging from his search with a voltmeter in hand.

“How about Roger - ouch!” Laurie exclaimed as a stray finger touched the iron.

“Burn yourself? Here, try some of that cream I keep in the tool box. When I was teaching myself electronics I used to do that a lot. As for Roger, I don’t know. He treats me better than anyone else here, and he reminds me so much of dad. . . well, what about you? You’ve been with them longer than I have,” Blake rambled as he checked the connections of the circuitry.

“Roger’s okay, and Jeanne - she seems. . . well, something about her rubs me the wrong way. As for Milo, I just don’t like him. He makes things so difficult here, and with that attitude of his. . .”

“What about Michael?” Blake added.

"I don't know. . . he's a hot shot, but he is gorgeous!" Laurie lauded, more to herself than Blake.

"Boy, that's a change! He's not a bit like Richard, so I figured he wouldn't be your type," Blake teased. Laurie stood up abruptly, and gave Blake the evil eye. Blake capitulated: "I'm sorry. I was out of line."

Laurie went back to her work without a word until she heard Michael calling from a distance. Blake told her, "Go on. I can handle it from here."

Laurie thanked him and made off at a good pace for the source of the voice, finding Michael leaning nonchalantly against a large pine. "Good to see I still can get 'em to come running," he joked to her as they took hands and headed much deeper into the forest.

"So what brings you in to this part of the woods, handsome?" Laurie asked him gleefully.

"Roger's running a diagnostic on my plane, and it'll take two more hours to complete. That's two free hours in this hectic schedule. So I came to tell you to conserve ammo in the fight. We've got 8000 rounds and seventy missiles plus our planes' stores left, and Roger's on a conservation kick."

"How noble," she teased. "And I thought you'd want to see **me**."

"Must all my motives be so totally one-dimensional? You do truly underestimate me, Laurie."

"Not at all," Laurie kidded, lowering herself to the ground and dragging him on top of her. "I have the highest estimation of your capabilities," she whispered before planting a kiss on his lips.

"Do you think they'll miss us?" Michael asked her in a tone that bordered on nervousness.

"They're all too busy to stop to think about us. And you said yourself we had two free hours. I say we make the most of the time, unless you're backing out. . ."

Without responding, Michael began to peel Laurie's jumpsuit off of her, and Laurie returned the favor by proceeding to remove his indigo-blue REF uniform, lazily setting it nearby. Their raiment safely discarded on the forest floor, Laurie pulled the pilot again atop of her naked form, and wrapped her arms around his sweaty back, lifting herself up to hold him tight against her breast. Michael kissed Laurie softly on the front of the neck, just above the chest, and tightened the embrace.

* * *

“Jeanne, how are the preparations on the ground assault going?” Roger asked as he approached the hovertransport from the Alphas.

“As well as could be expected. I’ve got Milo fueling up the Cyclones and checking the armaments on each. He can easily do that with one hand. Poor guy, I wonder how long it’ll take for his arm to heal up.”

“Some time, I expect. You seen Michael? I’m just starting with Laurie’s plane, and as soon as the diagnostic gets finished, I want him to help me tune the magnetic bottling. This hot fusion is a temperamental thing, and one system failure. . .”

“I saw him take a gun and head off into the forest. I think he may have decided to scout the area.”

“Well, I hope he gets back soon. He’s sure been acting strange lately; I don’t trust that perpetual smile on his face.”

“I never trusted any smile on Michael’s face,” Jeanne retorted. “I’ll go look for him if he doesn’t show soon.”

* * *

Michael looked at his wristwatch, thinking, *Good Lord, I’d better get back to Roger before they notice I’m missing.* The two hours he had earlier reserved for himself and Laurie were almost up, and he rationalized that the group would become suspicious if he was unaccounted for in even the slightest interval, and furthermore, the needles on the forest floor had been a mild irritant to his back for the last thirty minutes or so. Austin looked at his lover. Laurie’s tanned and shapely body was dozing lightly on top of his in a blissful afterglow. Her blonde hair was randomly spread across the right side of his face, and her head rested on his right shoulder facing to his left. Michael whispered “Laurie, we’d better go back,” into her left ear.

Laurie stirred, and rolled off of Michael, and began to brush the needles out of her hair. Michael sat up, reached for his clothing, and began shaking out the bits of forest debris that had stuck to it.

“Michael,” Laurie called softly. Michael did not respond, but turned quietly to face her, whereupon she continued, “I’ve been devoted to the cause one hundred and ten percent for these last few years, doing what I could for the movement. But I didn’t like the way the resistance was behaving. It was a joke - they were all either criminals, or incompetents. After I ended up with that fighter seven months ago, I had to leave my group, and I’ve stayed away from the resistance groups, until now.”

Laurie paused, while Michael, still silent, finished dressing himself, and was edging back to the camp. "I joined you, Michael," Laurie resumed. "Because I discovered that I can't live on my own, without a purpose. I need your cause. . . I need **you**."

Michael nodded and muttered, "I . . . gotta go back." He turned away, and returned to the other men and Jeanne, leaving Laurie in the forest, alone and half-naked.

* * *

Milo closed the access port on his Cyclone's front-mounted grenade launcher and languidly replaced the protoculture cell in the red-painted mecha. His brow was sweaty, as the transport's air-conditioning unit was at present shut down, and he would loudly swear from time to time whenever he would inadvertently brush his injured arm against something. His assigned duties completed, he climbed slowly out of the transport, and greeted Roger and Jeanne in the characteristically silent manner to which they had all become accustomed. Jeanne smiled, and said, "How's your work coming, Milo?"

"I'm done for the time being," Milo replied. "All that's left for me to do is to calibrate the gunsights on the hovertransport's plasma turret."

"Good work, Milo. Take a break for a while, and get some sleep. You look beat," Jeanne ordered. Milo nodded, and with a soft snort, climbed to his sun deck atop the hovertransport. Jeanne returned her attention to Roger, saying, "Anyway, if all goes as planned, we should start the attack at 0700 hours tomorrow, halfway through their first daily patrol. Now, if that slob Michael would only show up--"

Roger motioned a finger at the winded figure running towards them, and spat out, "No need to wait; here he comes." He then rotated slowly about, and commented halfheartedly to the girl, "I'll be working on the planes if I'm needed. I'll let you handle him."

"Thanks a lot," Jeanne choked as Roger walked away. She swallowed; something was irritating the back of her throat, and it only grew worse as the group's delinquent leader approached. She had wondered where he had been, and although an unpleasant scene was not called for at this particular moment, but she had no desire at all to restrain herself.

"Welcome back, Commander Austin. I hope your break was enjoyed, because all of us were working our tails off. I thought you said you would help out."

"I was patrolling. I didn't think it would be smart if we let the Invid sneak up on us before we got them," he replied, panting.

“So what happened to our walk, then? I’m not sure I can trust you to remember anything, can I?”

“Sorry. I promise to make it up to you tonight. Before we all turn in.”

“I’ll consider it. Now, let’s get to work.” Jeanne turned around, and headed back to her duties, leaving Michael alone in the clearing. He paused, and walked over to join Roger.

“Roger, how’s it coming?” Michael asked upon arrival.

“Slowly; I’m getting behind without help,” was Roger’s curt response.

“No thanks to you,” Jeanne interjected from afar.

“I detect a conspiracy here. And a mass attitude problem. I offer my apologies that I was delayed; yes, I should have stayed around here instead of gallivanting off.”

“That’s for sure-” Jeanne began.

Michael rose his voice, cutting Jeanne off, and shouted, “But that doesn’t for one **minute** give you an excuse to challenge **my** authority! I don’t like the attitude that’s crept up around here, and I really don’t like your insubordination! If you want out of this outfit, Lieutenant Ducasse, say the word, and I’ll throw you out on your ass! Until that time, **I** give the orders, and **you** take them! Is that perfectly clear?!”

“Yes, Sir,” Jeanne replied quietly.

“I can’t hear you, Lieutenant.”

“**Yes, Sir!**”

“That’s better. Jeanne, take five and cool your jets. I’ll be in the transport to talk to you in a moment. Roger, let’s get this plane finished. What did the readouts say?”

“Commander, the magnetic bottling on the starboard engine is running at eleven percent less power than it should. It’s still not critical, but I’d like to take care of it. Still, I can’t figure out what’s causing it. I’ve worked on Pratt & Whitney JG90-series engines before, but this stumps me.”

“Which make are you used to servicing?”

“Mostly the Southern Cross JG95B for the AJACS plane. They never had trouble with the bottling systems.”

“No wonder. The REF designers dumped the JG95’s in the more recent upgrades of the Alpha, and upgraded it to a JG97M. The change gave the plane two kilonewtons of thrust per engine more than the earlier designs, but they didn’t bother to completely redesign the bottling systems to accommodate the greater power. The resulting thermal stress tends to degrade the system’s sensors over time. Eventually, the sensors are telling the bottling system that the engine is at 75% throttle when it’s really at full thrust, and the

bottling system can't possibly work at full efficiency if it's told not to. Replace the sensor, and it's likely you'll fix the problem."

"Thanks. So, where does a pilot like you learn this?"

"Fraternizing with the enlisted men, contrary to regs at that. I used to drink a lot with my squadron's chief mechanic, Chief Petty Officer Dan Hurley, and after a few beers he'd always bitch about the planes' problems. What else?"

"Other than the insides of your gun pod being filthy, that's it for your plane. I've already started a diagnostics check on Laurie's fighter."

"Good. I'll go talk to Jeanne, and then clean the barrels of the gun. Got that kit nearby?"

"Back of the transport. See you in a few minutes, Commander."

"Yeah, catch ya around."

* * *

Michael cautiously entered the transport's cargo area where Jeanne had been awaiting him for the last few minutes. She was sitting atop one of the shelves on which rest dozens of dusty spare parts for the various mecha, all cannibalized from wrecks and battlesites. Her eyes were gazing at the ground when he arrived, and she did not bother to look up at him when he sat across from her on one of Roger's camp stools.

"So what's with you today, Jeanne?" Michael asked. "I've known you for seven years, and you've never once acted like this. I never dreamed I'd have to pull rank on **you**; maybe Milo, but not you. I like to run this group democratically, but I am still the boss, and I can't let you or anyone challenge that. We can't allow ourselves to dissolve into bickering and fighting; it's counter-productive and you know it. What's your problem?"

"I don't know, Michael. I'm feeling a bit anxious, I guess. And tired."

"Tell you what. It's 1835 hours. Catch a few hours of sleep, and I'll get you up to relieve my watch at 0130 hours tomorrow morning, okay? We'll take our walk then, and then I'll get some shut-eye before the operation. Do you agree?"

"I can't. I still have to take care of the intelligence data."

"I'll have Milo do that. You get some sleep, so you'll get up bright and cheery, ready to kick some Invid tail. I'll help you set up your tent. C'mon."

* * *

Michael had just dismissed Milo and Blake to retire for the night, and was beginning his guard duty of the camp perimeter. Roger and Laurie were still at work on her plane, and Jeanne had been asleep in her tent for nearly three hours. Michael checked the power supply on the Gallant rifle he was sporting, and, satisfied with the size of the charge, returned to the coffee pot that was brewing on the kerosene stove Milo had acquired in Bonn. Michael poured himself something to drink, adding a few traces of the artificial sweetener he kept among the kitchen supplies, and a little milk Blake had bought off a local farmer. He returned the bottle of white liquid to the small refrigerator in the transport, and returned outside to the camp chair he had set outside for himself.

“Hello, there,” Laurie said, appearing from the area where the planes were hidden.

“Hi. You and Roger done with your Alpha yet?”

“Pretty much. I’ve got to load a couple of the missile launchers yet, but I can get that done in a few minutes. I’m glad I found you people when I did; that old wreck of mine was about to fall apart before Roger got his hands on it.”

“I think that was Roger’s appraisal of your mecha when he first saw it. If I remember correctly, he fainted in terror when he started to work on it,” Michael teased.

“You think he was frightened? I always thought the thing would shut itself down or fall apart while I was twenty thousand feet up.”

Michael chuckled, and returned to his coffee. “Oh, want some?” he asked Laurie. “I made myself a pot, and it’s really good. Roger bought it at a ruin-mining town a while back.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she said, pulling up a chair for herself.

“Milk’s in the ‘fridge,” Michael said between sips.

“I like it black.” Laurie watched Michael’s eyes for a moment. The blue spheres were troubled, and as he turned his head toward her, she saw that he looked straight through her. His mind was somewhere else tonight; it didn’t belong to her, and she didn’t like that. “What are you thinking about, Michael?”

She had obviously startled him, as he stammered for a moment before responding. “Nothing important.”

“But obviously something. Tell me.”

“Later.” Michael got up, and walked a short way from her, examining the forest in front of him. It was like a dark inkblot, set off by the occasional faint vertical pole that was one of the few visible trees. There was so much there, as he had seen in daylight, but now it seemed so empty, like a giant void. He felt Laurie caressing his shoulder, and

turned to face her. She embraced him loosely and lightly kissed him, saying, “Want to go somewhere that we can be alone?”

“No.”

“That’s it? Just a ‘no’?”

“No.” Michael repeated. “It sounded clear enough to me.”

“Anything wrong?”

“Not that you should worry about. Go to bed; I’ll still be here in the morning.”

“Okay. . .” Laurie started to walk towards her tent, and said, “Good night, Michael.”

“Sleep well.”

* * *

Michael had just finished affixing his battle armor to his body and was now taking care of the last few orders he planned to give before the attack began. “Blake, take the driver’s seat on the hovertransport. If you need mecha, use my Cyclone. I assume you know how. . .”

“Yes, Sir. Roger checked me out on it. He’s even calibrated a personal transformation chip for me, so the thing will fit right.”

“Good. Milo, you feeling all right?”

“I could use a replacement for the arm, but I’ll be able to handle the hovertransport’s guns, no problem.”

“Excellent. Roger, Jeanne, are you ready to go?”

“Yes, Commander,” Jeanne replied. “All the preparations are complete.”

“Perfect. Be careful, everybody. I want to see all of you and all of your mecha intact when this is over. I’ll be at the planes. Keep radio contact with us,” Michael said excitedly.

“It’s 0645 hours, people. Let’s move!” Jeanne ordered. Roger and Milo boarded the hovertransport, and Blake climbed in the cab, leaving Michael and Jeanne alone.

“Thanks for spending the morning with me on my watch. I know how much you needed to get some sleep, and. . .”

“I never complain about spending time with my friends. Besides, I couldn’t sleep. I made the mistake of drinking four cups of coffee last night.”

“I hope you’ll be okay, and not start to doze off. . .”

“I’ll be fine. Remember what I said about the inside of the hive. Don’t let its appearance unnerv you.”

Jeanne nodded. “I love you, Michael.”

“I love me too. Now get moving,” Michael teased.

* * *

“Four minutes to go, Mason,” Michael reminded Laurie through the tac-net. “Start warming up the engines.”

“Engine power building to max idle, Commander. Arming all weapon systems.”

“Copy.” Michael began to pressurize the flightsuit under his armor and lowered the helmet’s face plate. It would be the second time he had flown with Laurie in combat, and he wasn’t quite used to her as his new wingman. *How will she perform*, he asked himself. *Will she respect my authority? Will a civilian combat pilot jeopardize the mission? There are too many variables for my taste.*

The engines on his plane were running at maximum idle now, and the plane’s chronometer read 0658:32. *The Intermix Chamber’s temperature is normal. Looks like Roger fixed the thing.* The plane began to vibrate softly, and Michael’s hand went for the throttle. “Viking two, this is Viking one. Ducasse’s party is at the hive by now. Remember, you keep the Invid off my tail, and I’ll attack the hive center. Keep a bit above and behind me at all times, Laurie. Got that?”

“Clear as day, Michael.”

“Good. Let’s go. Take off and follow me!”

Michael pushed the throttle to 80% power, feeling the rapid acceleration press on him as the Guardian Veritech made its vertical take-off. The image in the side mirror showed that Laurie was right behind him by the time his craft’s altitude reached 1200 meters.

Why did I let her get to me like that. I’ve got more important things to do than get involved with her. “Engage Fighter mode and follow me to the hive.”

“Wilco, Commander. Changing modes.”

* * *

Encased in an extra suit of battle armor, Blake planted his foot firmly on the hovertransport’s accelerator, but as the glowing barrier that covered the entrance to the

hive grew nearer, he forced himself to suppress the desire to turn around and avoid the invisible wall.

“Range: 102 meters. Milo, launch the missiles now!” Jeanne barked. In response, Milo slammed his fist on the ‘FIRE’ button on Blake’s homemade transmitter. The device sent out a faint radio signal to the launcher hidden at the edge of the forest, ordering the nine missiles nestled in their tubes to launch. The rockets took flight and, in a matter of six seconds, slammed into the wall of the hive. Though the damage was negligible, the blast alerted the living computer inside the complex to the reality that the hive was under attack. *All remaining **Iigaa** and **Gurab** exit and defend the hive. Crush the insurgents*, it commanded the six dozen mecha still in the giant dome.

The first wave of four Shocks Troopers and eight Scouts were at the main gate instantly, and as the brain deactivated the barrier in front of the passage, a volley of cannon fire struck down the lead mecha and a salvo of sixteen missiles crippled three and destroyed four more of the Invid battle armors. Before the smoke could even clear, a massive vehicle crashed through the wreckage of the destroyed mecha and slid to a halt on the tunnel floor inside the gate. Jeanne and Roger leapt out of the hovertransport, and as Milo brought the plasma turret to bear on the survivors, the Cyclone riders opened fire on the startled Invid mecha. The remaining four couldn’t put up much of a fight before the combined weaponry finished them.

“Austin, this is Ducasse,” Jeanne cried jubilantly into her radio. “We’re inside!”

* * *

Michael acknowledged Jeanne’s achievement. “Good. Now get the Living Computer before it realizes that and shuts the hive entrance. Ten to one it’s already recalling the patrols.”

“Michael, how will we know if they’ve closed the barrier or not?” Laurie asked.

“When my missiles explode as I fire them in. If that happens, pull up and help me keep as few scouts as possible from re-entering the hive.”

“I copy.”

Michael took silent note of the thick layer of thunderheads rolling in from the east and replied, “In any case, we should. . . Oh, shit! I’ve sighted a squadron of at least fifteen *Iigaa* coming in at 300 knots at 5 O’clock high! Range is 20 kilometers.”

“I can’t get a fix. . . Oh, there they are. Looks like we’ve got our hands full.”

“Don’t we always? Kick in afterburners and prepare to engage. Let’s make this quick! Jeanne, we’ve run into some trouble. Get the computer and get out. We’ll be there soon.”

“I read you, Commander,” he heard Jeanne’s voice reply. “Good luck.”

* * *

“Christ, this is weird,” Milo mumbled as the plasma turret’s targeting screen projected the scene to him. Milo activated the hovertransport’s motion sensors and stretched his legs at the cramped weapons console in the huge vehicle. Jeanne and Roger had already reloaded the hovertransport’s missile tubes, and now the party was traveling down the immense halls of the hive interior.

“Sure is. . .” Blake replied from the driver’s seat. He’d slowed the transport significantly, allowing Jeanne and Roger to keep up as their Cyclones’ jets propelled them two feet off the jet-black floor.

“It’s like a . . . bee hive,” Roger said dazedly as he examined the ribbed walls and faintly glowing patterns of hexagons that covered every surface of the hive.

“Give the man a cigar for his brilliant observation,” sneered Milo.

“Shut up, Swift!”

“All of you be quiet,” Jeanne ordered.

An eerie silence fell over the glowing yellow and orange-brown passageway as Jeanne tried to navigate the maze of corridors in the giant dome. The whine of the Cyclones’ jets and the transport’s fans were the only noises to be heard in this hall, which was at least fifty feet high and twice as wide.

If Michael’s instructions were correct, then we should reach the Living Computer in a few minutes, Jeanne thought. But where are the guards he said we’d have to fight our way through? “It’s too quiet. Keep alert in case it’s a-”

Jeanne was nearly deafened as the first plasma globes blew up the floor and walls near them. More fire was coming from the inky darkness in front of them, at the far end of the hallway.

“A TRAP!”

* * *

“What do you mean, ‘in trouble’?” Michael exclaimed as he brought his fifth target into the kill square on the HUD. The screen indicated that the *Iigaa* was in range,

and Michael pumped a short burst into the small red craft, holing it in several places. The Invid mecha caught fire, and spiraled towards the ground.

“A mixed group of mecha pinned us down in front, and we. . .”

“Okay. Jeanne, don’t retreat. The Hive Brain will send a force twice as large to cut you off from the other side, counting on the fact that you’ll run away. If you turn and flee, you’ll be surrounded from both sides while the Computer waits for reinforcements to come and help finish you off. Try to charge the troops in front of you, turn around, and get **them** from behind. As soon as you can move, get to the Central Hub. We’ll be with you as soon as we can.”

Michael fired a salvo of missiles at a group of three mecha that were bearing down on Laurie, and said, ‘We’d better hurry up here, Mason. The plan’s falling apart, and we-’

Michael paused to revel in the three Invid’s deaths as the missiles struck their targets, and then resumed: “We need to get in and patch everything up.”

“Thanks for the help,” Laurie replied. “Austin, watch your flank!” she shouted as another Armored Scout opened fire from Michael’s blind side.

“I see him.”

* * *

Jeanne continued to fire her Cyclone’s particle cannon in bursts at the *Gurab* that flew at them until the purple giant listed and fell to the ground, leaking the noxious mixture of hydraulic and nutrient fluid, and the pilot’s blood. Roger was concentrating fire from his Gallant on the six gray-black *Malar* hive guards that were charging from the darkness. The eight-foot tall power suits had been armed with a heavy rifle, mounted on the right arm, and a large armored buckler on the left. Several additional mecha were still blocking their passage, and the sounds of dozens more of the marching Goliaths could be heard from behind.

Blake turned the hovertransport sideways, and was climbing to the heavy pulse laser mounted on the vehicle’s top side. He grabbed the controls of the weapon, and swiveled it around to face the Invid. After flipping the power switch, Blake waited several seconds as the capacitors charged. He then opened fire at the Invid troops.

“We’d better hurry,” Jeanne shouted over the din of the explosions of the fire fight. “Their reinforcements are already trying to attack us from the rear, just like Michael warned. If we don’t finish this group soon, we’ll be dead for sure.”

Roger nodded, and converted his Cyclone back into motorcycle mode. “How far would you say they are from us?” he asked Jeanne as he straddled the motorcycle. Milo and Blake were keeping up the barrage, and Jeanne was trying to line up a trooper in her sights.

“Sixty-five or seventy meters, tops,” she replied before firing.

“Good. Cover me!” Roger revved Milo’s Cyclone’s engine and shot off toward the Invid line as fast as the vehicle would take him, swerving to make himself a more difficult target.

“Good luck,” Jeanne yelled as she nailed a *Malar* that had come close to shooting Roger off the Cyclone. The wounded pilot of the dark-colored mecha fell to his powersuit’s armored knees, and before the pilot died, it sprayed the area with a prolonged burst that pocked the floor, traced a series of blasts on the hovertransport’s hull, and then discharged harmlessly into the thick ceiling of the passageway.

The concussion rocked the vehicle, and knocked a surprised Blake off the roof onto the floor behind the transport. Blake cursed his misfortune and climbed back into the driver’s seat to nurse his many bruises.

Roger closed fast on the Invid, and began a quick count. *Nine. . . ten. Good, not many left.* Four of the mecha had noticed him and concentrated fire on the motorcycle, the remainder keeping Jeanne and the others busy. The cannon fire directed towards him was intensifying, when he selected his target. An armored *Gurab* loosed a cascade of plasma fire at him as he sped for the narrow space between its legs. *If it doesn’t smash me with one of those claws,* he reminded himself. Milo’s latest volley had impaled an *Iigaa* nearby just as Roger reached the Invid. *There goes its claw. And now the downswing,* Roger thought as the pilot flung its mecha’s purple two-ton servo at him. He squeezed the brakes and ground to a near halt, keeping his head low. The momentum of the elliptical arm prevented the pilot from adjusting his aim in mid-swing and propelled the three claws harmlessly into the ground in front of him. Roger started the vehicle again and sped behind the Invid, ignoring the sound of two more *Malar* crashing to the ground, their armor pierced by Jeanne’s and Milo’s weaponry.

Roger hit the transformation switch on the Cyclone, and spun around in mid-transformation, landing softly on the black floor in the Cyclone power armor. On a vocal command, he opened the targeting sensor and the two plates that covered the twelve rocket-propelled grenades stored in the Cyclone’s chest launcher. He ordered the mecha to fire, and in response a dozen red-tipped canisters leapt from the Cyclone, spiraling into the Invid. Roger watched the smoky contrails cloud his field of vision, and then heard the deafening crashes as his missiles found their targets. The two that survived the barrage

were quickly taken down by Jeanne and Milo. Roger increased his jets' thrust such that he floated slightly above the ground, and he laughed as Blake drove the hovertransport forward through the rubble to catch up with him.

Jeanne floated towards him on her Cyclone's thrust, and smiled. "Gutsy maneuver back there, Captain. Good job."

"Thanks for the cover, Lieutenant."

Jeanne stopped to listen to the sound of the stream of Invid mecha approaching from behind, and said. "Let's get out of here before we let that other group catch up to us. The access tunnel leading down to the Central Hub should be right ahead."

* * *

Laurie's targeting system had finally locked onto the elusive Armored Scout, and she grimaced as she eased her plane's nose up to place the last mecha back in her sights and opened fire.

"Good shot, Mason," Michael exclaimed. "Now let's get into the hive and help Jeanne out. If the Brain has sent out a general alert, then the local troopers will all be returning, along with reinforcements from other hives. That gives us thirty minutes at most to blow the thing."

"And then what?" Laurie asked.

"We hide in the forest for a few weeks until the heat is off. Now follow me in, and keep the Invid off my back."

* * *

"Are the recorders getting all of this?" Jeanne said to Blake as the troupe began to examine the brightly-lit room. For the most part, the chamber was a dome with a sixty meter radius, and four mecha-sized exits lined the walls. Stacks of oddly-designed machinery lined the walls, including an extensive array of alien control consoles. The ceiling was organic-looking and ribbed, and at its apex loomed an black hole of indeterminate size that presumably lead into another room. At the center of the dome was a three meter tall vat that bubbled with a translucent liquid. Inside was suspended a giant pinkish pulsating mass that more than vaguely resembled a cerebrum.

"What the hell is that?" Blake yelled from the safety of the cab. The floating brain seemed to glow for a second, and everyone heard a strange voice ring as if came out of the walls, and from all directions at once: *Why do you attack my home?*

“Who said that?” Milo demanded.

“No one,” Jeanne replied. “The Hive Brain. . . or the Living Computer, as the Invid call it. . . thought it.” Jeanne moved her Cyclone to the huge vat and scrutinized the creature.

Lay down your weapons and submit to interrogation, it thought. Surrender, and some of your lives might be spared. Resistance against my people is futile. Disarm and await your captors.

“This organic computer is probably an evolved Invid,” Jeanne announced. “Some think these things are in constant contact with the Regis herself. Either way, they control the routine operations of their hive. Knock it out, and we cripple the hive’s effectiveness until they can replace it. Watch out, because these ‘brains’ usually heavily guarded, and I’ll bet there are at least twenty Enforcers within striking range of this room.”

Destroy the Invaders, they suddenly heard inside their heads. Eliminate them!

“Kill it, Milo! Fast!” Jeanne cried.

Before Milo could sight the giant Living Computer in his targeting sensors, a series of explosions rocked the surface of the hovertransport. The blasts severely weakened the thick armor, but it was still holding by the time the two-dozen *Malar* power armors managed to step into the chamber and opened fire on the Cyclones.

“Christ!” Jeanne exclaimed, blowing an immense hole in the lead Enforcer. “Milo, get the brain, and let’s get out of here!”

Milo hit the “FIRE” button on the turret controls, and watched silently as two bolts of white light burst from the hovertransport’s turret and slammed into the pink blob, causing bits of its mass to explode all over the room. The remains of the Living Computer slumped over in the shards of the broken vat, and as the nutrient fluid spilled over the rough floor.

Jeanne took off down one of the exits, beckoning the others to follow. In the course of their flight, Roger observed that fewer than half of the Enforcers were firing at the retreating rebels. *Killing their leader must have confused them. Hope that gives us enough time to get out*, he thought.

A stray shot slammed into the hovertransport, and the shock knocked Milo’s head into a panel on his left side. Some circuitry sparked and fizzled, and the turret’s cameras and targeting system went dead. *Roger’s gonna kill me*, Milo thought.

Trying to recall the verbal description of the typical floorplan of an Invid hive that Michael had given her, Jeanne led her group through a tunnel that spiraled upwards until she reached the ground level, a couple hundred meters from the main hive entrance.

“What are you looking for, Jeanne?” Roger asked, catching up to her Cyclone, racing down the hall.

“The main stasis chamber. It’s where they keep most of the pilots in hibernation.”

Blake’s ears had caught Jeanne’s comment over his radio, and he asked, “What do you mean, ‘pilots’? I thought those giant things **were** the Invid.”

“No,” Jeanne replied, taking a sharp turn. “They use mecha, just like we do. The Invid are really flesh and blood creatures like us.”

Roger pointed at two huge shapes rapidly approaching them from the other end of the tunnel. Jeanne slowed her Cyclone, and Blake exclaimed, “The Alphas!”

Michael switched his fighter into Guardian mode, and made a rough vertical landing on the hive floor, twenty meters or so in front of the Cyclones and the hovertransport. “Did you get the Hive Brain?” he asked through the cockpit’s radio.

“Yes, but we haven’t found the stasis chambers yet.”

“Forget them,” Michael ordered.

“But Michael, If we don’t-”

“We don’t have time. The Brain recalled all the troopers in the vicinity and they’re all headed here with vengeance on their minds. You need to get out of the hive, and hide at the rendez-vous point. Laurie and I are going to try to take out the central power core. If we can get that, the hive’ll be nothing more than a burnt-out shell when it goes up.”

“Well, you heard the man,” Jeanne told the others. “Lets **move!**”

* * *

“All right, Laurie, we’re almost at that access tunnel. When we get under it, kill your forward velocity with your airbrakes and switch into Battloid mode,” Michael hurriedly ordered. “Keep your gun pod pointed down, and watch for any bogies; I’ll take care of any in front of us. We’ll descend two levels and make our way to the top of the power core. Got it?”

“Just like in the movies, eh?”

“Cute,” Michael snorted. “Now let’s get in-”

The sight of Invid cannon fire slamming Michael’s Battloid into the wall of the hive startled her for a second, but she quickly recovered and perforated the offending Gurab trio with twenty rounds from her gun pod to each mecha. In a billowing plume of smoke, the three Invid collapsed.

“Michael, are you all right?” Laurie demanded, watching Austin’s Battloid struggle to its feet.

Damn careless of me, Michael thought.

“Yeah, but my sensor package took a beating. Most of my passive sensors are out. Never mind that; let’s get up that tunnel. C’mon.”

Michael pushed up the throttle on the Alpha’s main engines, and the turbines’ exhaust lifted the nine-meter tall Colossus into the dark shaft. Laurie hesitated, and reluctantly followed him downwards.

“Michael, my motion detector’s just gone crazy! I confirm at least fifty targets bearing down on us at high speed. Looks like they’ve found us!”

“Not yet,” Michael snorted. His Battloid took flight, and Laurie found herself struggling to keep up. She watched Michael’s mecha come to a huge chasm in the center of the hive and without hesitation Michael dove in, beckoning her to follow.

Laurie found herself inside an immense spherical chamber. The orange-brown glowing walls were lined with alien protuberances, and several more tunnels led into the area. At the center of the hollowed-out chasm was another sphere, and this brightly-glowing object was connected to the walls by the several thousand thick fibrous cables that held it in place.

“That giant ball is the central power core, sort of a giant protoculture generator. All we need to do is find the control panels and destroy them. The protoculture will produce heat at an uncontrolled rate until the thing blows up. Not too much of a chore is it?” Michael remarked, scanning the generator.

“Michael, I’ve got a fix on a huge group of Invid converging on our location. I’ll keep them pinned down while you get those panels of yours,” Laurie announced, speeding off in fighter mode to engage the Invid troopers that had entered the core chamber.

“Great! Go on, and have all the fun,” Michael teased as she left. “Now, let’s see. Ah ha!” Michael armed the remaining missiles in his plane, and locked onto the main panel and its two back-up computers. His hands were sweaty inside his flightsuit, though that didn’t in the least impair his ability to press the fire button on his control stick. The twelve missiles found their targets, and Michael shouted, “All right, let’s get out of here!”

* * *

A trail of airborne pine needles betrayed the hovertransport’s trail as the huge vehicle made its way back to the meeting point Michael had selected. The site was some

ten kilometers away from the hive, and, except for the small patrol of six *Iigaa* they encountered, Jeanne's group had made it there without incident. The area was deep in the local woods, fifty meters from a steep cliff that overlooked the Rhine. The four of them had removed their battle armor, and the Cyclones rested safely on one corner of the hovertransport's cargo area.

Milo escorted Roger to the hovertransport's turret and showed him the damaged targeting circuits. Roger tested the systems with a voltmeter for around ten minutes and announced, "Looks like the whole system shorted out. What happened?"

Milo pointed to the dent in the access panel that the side of his head had made and stammered, "The recoil knocked me into it." Roger cursed and sent Milo on his way.

Meanwhile, outside of the hovertransport, Jeanne and Blake found themselves exchanging compliments on each other's performances during the fight. Jeanne looked back toward the hive, and muttered, "I wonder how Michael and Laurie are doing?"

Before Blake could speculate, a brilliant flash of light lit up the thick canopy of dark clouds that floated in the east, over the distant hive. In a few seconds, a loud "Crack" filled the air. Two Alpha fighters appeared through the flash, and the lead plane set down in Guardian mode a short distance from the hovertransport, the red wingman landing her plane next to her leader's. Jeanne gleefully dashed to Michael's veritech, and chuckled. "Either you blew up that hive, or we're in for some nasty weather."

"Both, kid." Michael hopped out of the Alpha and removed his helmet. "We saw a huge front moving in, and a big storm is threatening. Let's get these planes covered and get some shelter."