

## Prologue

I came to strapped to a board in some dark room, a cacophony of electrical buzzing and distant voices roused me from a feeling of induced catatonia. What the hell was on my leg? What the hell happened to me? I struggled to account for all of my faculties through the— was that blood? There seemed to be shocks of pain pushing through my body, and my mind was absent, a cloudy mess of abstract nothing in its place. The phenomenon was overwhelmingly disconcerting. I remembered who I was at about the same time I regained the ability to operate my muscles. Holy hell. I'm a military man. Sergeant? Sergeant Marvin Reynold Williams. Why was I here? The buzzing grew louder, and my mind was buzzing with it. I opened my eyes after a while— what a strangely strenuous task it proved to be. The first greeting I was met with was the bright lights and screens that flanked me— was I in a hospital?

My stomach dropped. I felt as if my dread would have palpably manifested itself were there anyone there to witness my moment of realization, strapped to some cold bed (if you could even call this awful metal contraption by such a comfortingly familiar name) in some dark abandoned room. There were what I could only assume to be sensors attached to me, I couldn't move anywhere near enough to explore my current situation much more. I managed to strain against the strap that was firmly around my chest to convince myself by some means of observation that I was only recalling a terrible dream. I must have been in an accident, maybe an attack, my psyche was unable to accept who I had become, what I had done. No. It was true. The robe I had been put in dropped sickeningly below my left knee. I struggled to maintain consciousness, a nauseating vertigo enveloped me. This couldn't be happening.

The door of the room opened. It was a large metal object, beyond the useless strain of human efforts. I was mobile, then. This was an interplanetary vessel. The face behind the door was familiar, but I couldn't quite navigate my memories well enough to come up with a name.

“So you've decided to join us, have you, Sergeant?”

The voice cut into my mind and a clarity dispersed my mental cloud— the man was General Valbrook, commander of the Eta Soli theater, my highest ranking commanding officer save for the bureaucrats on the Council. I couldn't even formulate a proper sentence to address him, and I'm not entirely sure if I was even articulating my facial expressions as I thought I was. I never thought I would have rather been accompanied by machines alone.

“I see you're still too doped up to understand me. Maybe you aren't, maybe this is getting through to you somewhere in there, but that doesn't really matter at all to me, you see—”

My eyes must have grown wider because, for all of his military training and strict, emotionless decorum, the general smirked at me. What a sadistic son of a bitch. He strolled closer as he spoke, malice tainting his speech.

“—you fucked up. You crossed the wrong species, and we humans, we're pretty

sensitive to betrayal.”

The grin had melted off of Valbrook’s sharp features, revealing his dark, focused eyes and resolute lips. He was at my side now, grappling the rail along at the side of my bed so severely that his knuckles strained, sinew and bone pushing his pale flesh taught over his nearly quivering hands. My heart was racing, echoed by those god damn machines. Valbrook leaned over me, I could no longer convince my body to struggle against my restraints.

“You should know I have no intention of allowing you to make it to your court-martial.”

The hulking man grasped my throat, his grip immediately produced shocks of pain that spread to the entirety of my being. Fuck. This was how my story was to end, vigilante ‘justice’ served by a bloodthirsty killing machine. That’s the strange thing about humans: along the path of our evolution we perfected our predatory instincts and methodology. It became so refined that the only satisfactory subjects of our evil intents were other humans. Humans are one of the few predatory species that preys even on itself.

## **Part 1**

A small point of light appeared in my vision. The wretched feeling of Valbrook’s fingers around my throat seemed to slowly lift away, and I was weightless. The light overwhelmed my sight. What was happening? My feet felt solid ground, as though I had been gently set down. My feet? Shit, I had both feet. I blinked and the light seemed to begin withdrawing.

“Sarge? Are you okay?”

I jolted to alertness, looking for whoever had addressed me. I was standing at the end of a landing ramp, we were in the clearing of what appeared to be a forest. A familiar line of tangled foliage rose up in front of me. The idling engines of the craft I had evidently just departed from created a rough din that seemed to amplify the sweltering climate. I was on Ruff, we had our orders.

“Sarge?”

I turned to the young man at my side. His uniform hung rather loosely from his small frame, the dark green fabric contrasted his pal face, topped with an equally odd-fitting helmet. I remembered, his name is Ralmund, Ralmund Carrol, one of those nosy scientists the Federation had mandated to accompany all missions to new candidate celestial bodies. Earth was quickly becoming history. The human race had grown too large and too ambitious to be contained by the planet of our origin. Technology quickly met the human demand for expansion. Everyone learned about the original migrations growing up, the parallels had been drawn to former champions of human exploration—Columbus, Armstrong, Hawking— and we now held the reins. I decided I needed to clear my head, the proceedings to establish a base camp would go along fine without my presence.

“I’m fine. You should go oversee the unloading of your equipment, I’m sure my men won’t be nearly as deft as you’d like them to be.”

I hurried to dismiss the scientist, hoping that my attitude wouldn’t offend him. No one knows how long we would be stuck on another one of these awful rocks with each other, souring relations would only compound the hostilities we might face.

“You don’t think they’d break anything do y—”

He was stubborn. Damn.

“I can’t make you any promises, Carrol.”

The young man understood and began his departure. He seemed relatively irritated, but he would get over it. No more than six paces away, Ralmund halted and turned back to me.

“Before I go, sir, I should advise you that we received a few initial reports.”

I wearily faced him, no longer masking my distaste for his presence. Evidently he understood and made his briefing short:

“Command sent in some analyses of the orbital scans, they confirmed the presence of Bombs—”

Dammit. Bombs. Bombs were the latest obstacle for the United Human Federation’s expansion efforts. The name was a bastardization of their scientific name: *Bombus Erectus*. As far as we understood these bipedal insectoids were just an advanced pest problem. Somehow they were present on every moon and planet deemed inhabitable in the Eta Soli system. Some reports indicated that they may have been present on inhospitable planets, but it was inconsequential.

“— so we may need to establish guards as soon as we can.”

Dammit. This meant fighting. This meant extermination. This meant the loss of good, strong, human men. I assured the young scientist that I would post a guard immediately, but he still hesitated to leave. Damn, he was persistent, and that isn’t conducive to the job we had ahead of us.

“Sir, I don’t think we have to kill them off. I’ve never gotten to study a living bomb, and I think we could make advancements in a lot of fields if we just—”

What a limp-wristed bastard.

“Go attend to your equipment, I’ve heard enough. You aren’t calling the shots here. I’m not even really calling the shots. You want a living bomb? Go call up General Valbrook and have him send me the order.”

Ralmund was shaken, perhaps I had made a mistake. These science boys weren’t as thick-skinned as the soldiers I was used to dealing with. Regardless, my terse outburst seemed to

be the cost of peace. The scientist sauntered off with his shoulders slumped in defeat. What was he talking about? A living bomb? He wanted us to capture one of those freakish bugs? I don't know what he expected to find from it. There was no communication between our species, the bombs communicated through pheromones. We knew this much from autopsies. There are no vocal organs in Bombs, not that we knew of, and I had fought the bastards before.

Being a simpler life form, the bugs had no concept of conventional weaponry in relation to chemical and biological warfare. They were like savage animals, hiding in trees and tunnels, only to pop up and rip a soldier in half or jam a stinger through his chest. That was their *M.O.*, literal biological warfare.

We knew nothing of their origins, and there were plenty of theories thrown around in the scientific community that I was only made aware of because of the mandatory scientific facet of every exploratory mission. This wasn't an exploratory mission, though, this was an extermination mission.

## Part 2

The clearing began to wear on me, the boxes and bags being dragged off the ship seemed to be endless, and the men who were unfortunately low ranking enough to have to unload were beginning to slow down and wander off in search of water.

It must have only been a couple of hours after landing before I took off, preliminary tents had been erected in anticipation of the construction of our base camp. Tedious. I was fairly confident that I wouldn't run into any native fauna within a couple kilometer radius of the landing point, Federation ships were large, powerful, they tended to clear areas well.

The ground was surprisingly hard for what we might call a jungle floor, minimal ground vegetation and harsh sunlight must have shaped this moon. I had to wonder what nights must be like. On some reasonable planets and moons night wasn't much of a problem, positioning and atmosphere regulated their climates. On some celestial bodies you would be hard-pressed to survive without shelter of some kind. Then again, reading the briefing documents of my last few deployments hadn't been a very high priority, this moon may not even have nights.

One of the strangest things about foreign planets was how congruent the plant life seemed to be. Evidently evolutionary pressures were decently consistent across the universe, the most major changes were scale.

There were trees in this jungle. Massive, but thin, about the width of a human or two, but easily the height of twenty. The canopy was relatively sparse near the clearing, but in the span of a ten minutes walk it grew thick and lush, allowing only slight slivers of light to shine unaffected onto the ground, the rest of the light was diffused, dimly illuminating the rest of the jungle.

I had never been one to care about plants, flowers, anything that grew from the ground. Most people weren't anymore, everything was artificial and we liked it that way. Growing up

we were taught that the natural world was once revered by humans, even feared by some primitive cultures and civilizations. None of that really mattered much to me, but I found myself thinking about it when I found myself walking into another clearing, much smaller than where we landed.

The air felt thick at first, I felt my lungs working harder to pull in breath. Then my eyes adjusted—I was standing in a yellow cloud, my throat burned as I gasped like a damn fool.

I panicked a little bit, there was no telling what just happened, what strange foreign substance did I just inhale? I had to rest for a moment after jumping out of the clearing. My eyes wandered to the ground where several bulbous mounds rose up from the ground, spewing the yellow gas into the air. It dawned on me then, the connection reached back into some deep recess of knowledge I possessed—this was fungus, and that burning in my lungs must be my body coping with the inhalation of fungal reproductive matter. Shit. I had to find Ralmund, maybe he had read the briefing, maybe he would know what to do.

### Part 3

That's when my vision began to fail, the world around me seemed to melt, leaves melted and dripped down the trees into pulsating puddles on a glowing ground. I watch beams of light expand and contract as though the forest was breathing, and I realized I no longer felt my body.

There wasn't much drug use in the colonies, or at last none that's advertised, but we weren't ignorant enough to not know about them. LSD, DMT, psilocybin, they were all well-known, well-researched, occasionally found off-Earth. I knew what was happening after floating around the jungle in a confused state for a bit. I understood why some people would think this effect fun for recreational purposes, but reconciling the pleasant confusion imposed upon me with my normal strict, logical self was difficult to say the least.

I think that was my problem, I felt the need to reconcile everything I felt with who I felt I should be, I sought issue with the experience and in the end that's what began the spiral. I remember the thought clearly—*is this safe?* I realized again that I had just inhaled alien fungus spores, I had no idea what the effects could be. The forest grew darker, trees began stretching towards the sky, higher than I could even comprehend, then came the buzzing.

I looked down to see what was causing the sound—what a stupid idea. There were bees, hundreds and hundreds of bees, crawling up my legs. I froze. No one had ever told me how to handle this, how to handle bees, we didn't have bees in the colonies, we knew how to pollinate our own flowers.

They reached my knees. I began to panic, I could feel my heart pounding through my entire being. They were up to my waist. It seemed like an endless stream of them were coming up from the ground, they completely covered me, I was never so terrified. Then it all went black.

## Part 4

I don't remember anything after the bees before I awoke in a strange chamber. The walls were obviously hewn, but skillfully. They were smooth stone, with only mineral indications that they were not mined and placed somewhere. I was underground.

It's difficult to describe how a human will respond to rapidly repeated stresses, especially when dealing with how it varies. Some people faint, some people cry, some completely obscure their reactions. I froze.

A bomb walked into the room. It stood probably a meter and a half tall, a black and yellow carapace encompassed its form, like some sort of armor. The two antennae twitching around above its huge black eyes nearly made me lose my composure to wretch. Had I looked down immediately I would have seen its large tail and lost more than my composure, but I was worried about more immediate danger than being sick.

The bomb didn't move towards me at all, though. After a few moments of staring at me—an action I willfully returned in full—it held up a small black box.

I don't know if I was just too shocked to react or if the spores had taken some hold of me, but I waited to see what the alien would do. To my surprise the box suddenly erupted into English—

“Do not fear me, outsider, we meet on equal terms.”

I was not ready for this. I didn't believe it.

“Where the hell am I? What happened to me? Who the hell are you?”

There was silence. I should have known, this was some sort of rudimentary deception. But that box, it was technology. The bombs had technology? There was no way, they were too primitive, we weren't even sure they were entirely sentient.

“You are in the hive of Queen Sillithate. I found you on the surface, it seemed you experienced the waking dream. My name is unimportant. You are one of the destroyers yet you bear no arms and have not attacked me yet, I do not understand”

I didn't know how to respond. What did it call me? A destroyer. Of course. Bombs are sentient. How could I have killed them without realizing? Had the difference in genes really made us so different that we couldn't understand each other? I was a murderer now, I had participated in genocides without even knowing the depth of what was happening.

“Have you lost the ability to speak?”

I realized I hadn't said anything yet, my mind was swimming with new realizations and horrific epiphanies.

“I'm sorry”

The words sighed out of my mouth, I didn't know what else I could say. Bombs were intelligent, they knew what we were doing, and worst of all, they had the ability to communicate with humans and we still slaughtered them. Why did no one know about this? Had there even been attempts at diplomacy? I had to wonder if Ralmund knew anything about this. Wait. Fuck. Ralmund. I had gotten so involved in my current situation and repentance that I had somehow managed to forget that I was here for another genocide. I couldn't let that sit on my conscience.

"I think I understand what you mean, but have you wronged me?"

The box again. I snapped back out of my head.

"No, no, it's not worth explaining. Look, I don't want to hurt you, I don't want anyone on this moon to be hurt, but we have to act soon if we plan on stopping that."

The bomb seemed to have expressions, I don't know how I could tell, but some sort of emotion was conveyed. It seemed to give me a knowing look, one of moderate disapproval, but with undertones of concern.

"You require nutrients before we can discuss this. The Queen's guard would like to speak with you as well."

Perhaps the food took to the forefront of my mind, but I was not concerned with meeting the Queen's guard. I could help them resist, I had to. But first I needed food and water. The bomb led me out of the room, I realized I had none of my gear, only my clothes.

After walking through a few corridors, all mined with the same precision as the room I was originally in, we came upon a large hall filled with the creatures that all seemed to notice my presence immediately. The crowd dispersed as my guide led me through to the other side of the room where some bombs were handing out what appeared to be fruit of some kind.

"You will only require one milla, they are nutrient complete and contain enough water to replenish you."

Milla. Odd name. I took the fruit from my guide, nearly touching its fingers in the process. I shuddered slightly and turned away, ashamed of my ungrateful behavior. The thought was quickly replaced by the ache in my stomach, to which I could only reply by taking an adventurously large bite of the milla. The consistency was extremely fruit-like, skin and flesh of the dirt, but the taste was wrong. There was a bitterness to it, and unlike most human cultivated fruit, milla was not sweet at all. Luckily it was far from the worst thing I have had to survive on. Upon finishing the milla, I felt refreshed and aware. The hall was magnificent, the ceiling alone was probably twenty meters high, and the hall stretched to the length of a Federation ship's cargo hull. It dawned on me, the lighting seemed natural. I turned back to my guide, who seemed to be waiting patiently for me to say something.

"How is this room so well lit?"

The bomb seemed surprised that I would ask such an irrelevant question, but a human having a nonviolent interest in his home must have been exciting.

“The light of Sill permeates some veins in every planet in this system. We have made use of this rock since our civilization was created, it grows our crops and allows our eyes the proper support. You will see the rock inlaid around the ceiling.”

I looked up, and there it was. It was amazing, the light was perfect, it seemed. There could have easily been no ceiling and the sun would have illuminated it only as well as this mineral.

“The Queen’s guard awaits.”

My guide began moving before I could tear myself away from the glowing rocks, and I had to run to keep up. All of the bombs looked similar, but size differences and mannerisms seems to keep them distinct. In what I could see they were a wholly selfless race, sharing milla and assisting the elderly bombs who hobbled into the hall.

The walk to the Queen’s chamber took longer than I would have expected, the expanse of the base had been larger than I had assumed when we had only made it halfway there. I was told I would not be permitted to enter the Queen’s main chamber, and understandably so, she was their most valuable asset. To allow me, a destroyer, into her presence would be foolish, I had no complaints.

As soon as I was led into the Queen’s guard chamber, the brilliance of an intricate stone inlay across the entire perimeter of the chamber nearly blinded me. The glowing rock made up complex patterns and glyphs that covered half of the walls, much more than in any other part of the underground city I had seen before. Three tall bombs stood at a large stone table, various documents and maps laid before them, a black box set along the edge of the table, presumably one for each guard. These guards didn’t look quite like other bombs, they were taller, broader, I noticed their stingers, adorned with metal ornaments, and their carapaces were painted with vibrant colors. These were the bombs we had always been told to avoid, they could easily kill a platoon by themselves given the opportunity. I grew uneasy as the stories played over in my head, until my train of thought was broken by a deep and commanding voice from the box on the middle of the table.

“You come to us with no apparent intent of harm, and you have participated in the sacred walking dream, we believe you should have an opportunity to make your mission clear to us.”

Again I was lost for words, what do I tell the elite of a species whose brothers’ corpses I built a career on. After some thought I laid my experience out for them, doing my best to avoid mentioning anything that might offend them. My intent at this point was to assist the bombs against the newly landed human invasion crew, but I begged them to engage in sabotage. I couldn’t afford to be considered a traitor. The measure of the law applies more harshly when



you live your life away from the communities and people you grew with. All laws do, really. Nature will kill you alone, humans will see that you die alone, it's unwise to cross either without serious recourse.

The guardsmen seemed to agree with me on all fronts, including my concern for being captured and arrested. I couldn't tell whether bombs were strangely empathetic or if all they were just all too familiar with the wrath and violence I would face by my own species.

We felt that we had little time, I had been missing for, as they put it, almost an entire human day. They knew our time measurement system. It seemed that at every turn the bombs would humanize themselves and my stomach would wrench with the further realization of my actions. I must have been a walking face of concern and disdain. The guardsmen agreed to have a squad escort me closer to my landing base, and we departed within minutes.

The jungle was denser than I had remembered, but the familiar thin canopy materialized over us as we continued, I would be back to base soon, I could speak to Ralmund, this could still end well.

And the ground shook.

## **Part 5**

They had begun the gruesome tactic that had been employed dozens of times before. Deep holes would be drilled near the suspected bomb lair, and explosives would be dropped into the ground, detonated in an attempt to collapse tunnels and kill as many bombs as possible before exterminating the rest above ground.

We had to act quickly, we bounded for the clearing ahead, but the bombs were more intelligent than myself. I was grabbed and pulled behind a tree, and to my relief recognized the hum of what I had been saved from. Supercapacitors charging, ready to deliver a beam that would destroy chitin and flesh alike. They were waiting for us, they had found out somehow. Evidently I was the only one out of the loop. The soldier that pulled me aside made one gesture and at least fifty new bombs stepped out from behind the trees, some descended on vines, then came the guard. He had been in the middle of the table back in the base, I recognized the long purple streaks across what a human might consider his chest.

Evidently the retaliation had been planned, my weapon had been returned to me, and the guard informed me that they were aware of my history. There was no mistaking that the number of deployments I had been on garnered a reputation of sorts. This meant that the bombs had methods of exchanging information across solar systems. I was disoriented again, the situation was absurd to me. I was to lead an assault against my own species, and if I refused I would probably be given whatever death penalty the bombs had. How could I not? In their eyes I was a mass-murdering war criminal.

None of it mattered anymore, at this point death would be my freedom. It was the best

option. I would redeem myself with a people I had slaughtered, and I would never have to face the consequences when the next Federation ship landed to investigate the communications silence. I was screaming, things were a blur, my rifle was charging, the clearing was up ahead. I could only assume the bombs were following behind me, silently as they do, I had gone mad.

Then an explosion. The pain was jolting, my scream caught in my throat and I fell to the ground at the edge of the clearing. Darkness folded in around my vision, I struggled to remain awake as the horde of bombs rushed into the clearing from all sides, there were shouts as human soldiers were brutalized, and the sounds of rifles firing through thick exoskeletons. The last thing I remember was a familiar face dragging me further into the clearing before everything went black.