

Hunched

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It stood, hunched in the shadows of desolate buildings. Torso swiveling left, then right, and back again. Lights skipping from one window to the next, its dully flashing sensors skimmed. Still and quiet, an empty street but for the behemoth, upper shock strobe flashing, off, on, off, on, blasting each window with dazzling light. The colossus worked its way up and down the building with its lights and sensors, legs unmoving. It was a man with no head, a chicken with stubby arms, a 45-ton warmachine. Streetlights automatically switched on in their endless rows as the day surrendered its watch. A still city and a lone machine. As the body turned around again its cockpit was clearly visible, nosing out of the armored mass at its very crest. Back it swung again, a concussive roar shattered the night, right 90mm autocannon coming online. Spent casing cascaded down and danced in the road among the streetlights. Shells tore through a single window with accuracy that would have made the best newball player jealous. With a base thump its underslung heavy grenade launcher opened up, a single round spun through the ruined window and detonated inside, bathing the war machine in heated light as that floor's closed windows burst outwards from shock and overpressure. A waterfall of glass poured down, and the machine's legs began to move. Swiveling once more the cannons raked the building side to side, forgoing accuracy with maximum destruction. Its gargantuan feet lifted up and moved forward while the other grounded one compensated automatically for the weight. Feeling secure it ceased fire and started sweeping the building with its lights. I watched, prone from a runoff just on the other side of the road.

Clutching my standard issue service pistol I huddled against the ground as it moved passed. It took no not of me, beneath its titanic bulk, and marched on into the growing darkness. The night was quiet once more. Getting to my feet and brushing off accumulated grit I scuttled into the nearest building, through a shattered window. Bits of plasti-glass cracked beneath my worn boots. It was once a cafe, bits of splintered wood and limp tablecloths littered the floor adorned tipped tables. This place hadn't seen serenity in a long time. Behind the counter I found little of value; unfortunate, as my own rations were long gone. Following my stomach I tried the stairs, behind an open door. Each floor was a set of apartments. Here I found my first spoils, all the fruit was black with rot, but encased in plastic were many meals. They would do. On the sixth floor I found a particularly appetizing boxed meal, and sat down on an abandoned sofa, its owners long ago fled, leaving it only with a table and cup-boards for company. It had a view straight out the window, overlooking the road. From above I could see my former position. My eyes wandered up the building recently stricken by autocannon fire. Into the wreck I could only see darkness. A few curtains blew gently in the evening breeze. The meal heated itself

upon opening, and its smell began to waft through the room. My shoulders, tense for days relaxed and sank into the sofa. A gentle pounding could be heard in the distance, the fight continued ever on.

Without realizing I had fallen asleep, the warm meal and soft couch had overwhelmed my body and dragged me to dreams. They were restless and full of lies. I saw the city engulfed in fire, I saw a beautiful woman lost among the buildings. I saw the mech, with a quiet whirl of its internal machinations level its weapons and fire. I saw pillars of light descend from above. Then it stepped on me. I woke up with a start, hear pounding and beads of sweat running down my neck, shirt stuck solidly against my chest. The room was filled with beams of sunlight, my eyes adjusted and I stumbled up, leaning against the window for support. Outside the terrain had changed once more, it must have rained earlier, as mud and dirt now occupied the drainage lanes flanking the road, bits of flotsam from up the street had washed down to this lower point, bits of combat gear, a weapon or two, empty cartridges, twigs, sticks, and what was almost certainly a small bookcase now lay strewn about on the peripherals of the road. Little else seemed to have changed, the streetlights were off again, and upon cracking the window open a wet warm morning air washed in, laced with traces of the smell of fire.

Internally the scene had changed drastically, in the faltering twilight of last night I could not see anything identifiable among the bulk of angular shapes. Now I could see hanging pictures on the wall, a few toys strewn on the floor, and the crumpled remains of what was once a beautiful bouquet, dried petals rested along the table's edge and congregated among the table's legs. A new wave of depression swept over me, this had once been someone's home, and now it was simply a piece of cover, and a quick source of supply. With intensity I picked the petals off the floor, righted the vase and placed the dead stalks in the refuse chute. I then closed the curtains and found some sheets, with great care I covered the furniture in what I assumed was a living room and kitchen. I ventured deeper into the apartment, found the bedrooms, and made the beds, it wasn't difficult, the sheets had only been rustled as their occupants left. Finding paper and pen I wrote a quick message, thanking them for the use of their home, and asked for them to forgive my trespassing. I then took stock of my own supplies, and placed my new found food stores into a permanently borrowed backpack found on the third floor. A first-aid kit and thermal blanket joined the foodstuffs.

This morning was surprisingly quiet, no explosions in the distance yet. I knew they would come. Rather than leaving out the ground floor I climbed the stairs to floor twenty-two, and there I found the roof. It had once hosted a pool, but now it was only serving as a shaped indent into the building, curved sides and deep bottom like a volcano's caldera. From this new vantage I could see across the district, and beyond towards center-city, were pillars of dark smoke continued to rise. Above the sky is clear, with only a few drifting clouds lazily crossing. A pair of ground attack craft buzzed by a few blocks over, rushing above the buildings. Their air intakes gulping the morning air like a swimmer after a long immersion. Long, shaped wings coming clear as they banked away, towards another district, as they turned their payloads glinted in the light, missile after missile, pointed evil noses with jagged camouflage painted on winked at me as they gripped their mother and sped away. The single tailed craft themselves bore a similar jagged and boxy scheme with a variety of dark greens and black, they likely operated from concealed forest bases somewhere far away, flying in on the whims of some local officer, pinned down and dying among the building's shadows.

I watched the pair run off, until they disappeared into the distance. Then I took a greater survey of my immediate surroundings, a communications array on the next building over caught my eye. It looked serviceable and based on the size of its antennae I guessed it could broadcast a fairly powerful signal. It became my new priority. I had to reach it. The array was easily a further 20meters above atop the tallest building on the block. Luckily it was not a simple rectangle, but its upper levels gave way to

a shapely rising glass wedge, with a small platform hosting the array at the very top. My current roost was only separated from the next building by a few meters. Rather than try and jump though, I hefted a reclining poolside chair across the chasm. The chair was barely large enough, but it worked, at a slight angle against the taller building's gently sloped side. I lightly moved across, and scrambled my way up the glass. Unfortunately one of the windows was weaker than the rest, and when my weight came onto it it swung forward and deposited me on the floor below with a bruised leg. Cursing quietly of my misfortune my mind wandered back to the two warplanes, and to my own past. I had been one, a pilot, not for their side, but the other. I basked in the light of many dawns, speeding along above the clouds in Leto, my interceptor, with her smooth curves and blue/black color scheme, she was my pride and joy, flying high-altitude air-superiority was my purpose, Leto and I did it well.

From within Leto's cockpit I could see the world's curvature. Beauty and grace were seen by my eyes every time I flew. Grace and beauty always juxtaposed with the scorched land below, black chalk marks left from the brilliant white light of orbital bombardment. Countless wrecked and forgotten tanks, strewn across flowing plains with little regard for the local environment. Twisted and sheered buildings, torn and crying banners blowing listlessly from flag poles grasped by dead hands or cold metal. Leto and I saw all of this, our powerful cameras picking up the smallest disturbances, a boy playing in the gutted remains of a vehicle, a grazing herd sifting between the shell craters, a bird roosting in the barrel of a long quiet artillery piece. All these moments would be taken and sorted through by vast super-computers by the orbiting behemoth warships, scrutinized and analyzed by an army of intelligence officers. The war hadn't been going long on this war, and it was only my second campaign, but in a short month, the fighting on the ground had reached a frenzied climax, and the resulting desolation tore my heart asunder. Only up high with Leto was I able to piece the parts back together, watching the little vignettes of life play out beneath me.

When ejecting at high speed, a pilot is subjected to such intense force, that he or she actually physically compresses, and becomes a few centimeters shorter permanently, as a result of the crushing buffeting of harsh G-forces. We pilot jocks lightly called this the shrinksy-dinksys, the effect is also potentially fatal, depending on the speed of ejection and atmospheric/debris conditions. When the missile tore through Leto's perfect belly and shredded her engines I bailed. As the canopy blew up and away I lifted forth from the cockpit. Simultaneously Leto's reactor went critical as secondary explosions blew apart every safety seal and fail-safe she had. It was then that I blacked out. The 1st thing I remember was seeing the contrails of the enemy interceptor curve upward in a wide loop to shake a missile from my wing-man.

Now here I was, among those little vignettes, feeling extremely vulnerable I moved forward, the building was fairly well lit, sunlight poring through the glass ceiling which failed to bear me to salvation. This building was once office space, chairs and desks stood all around, ever waiting for their long gone masters to return and finish filing that last report. Among them I slunk, staying low, peeking around corners and sneaking down corridors. I found a flight of stairs, climbing up, they led to the roof. The door was locked. With few good and reckless kicks the door gave way, and I moved onto the roof. Directly in front of me lay salvation. Below me I could see a massive hunched figure moving down the street, its comms array hosting a gaudy group of pennants. Its arms hosted 90mm autocannons and under-slung grenade launchers. Among its feet moved a mass of clocked and battle-armored infantry, black laser rifles on their backs or in their hands. Looking out above them I heard artillery go online, and saw the fiery streak of rocket-assisted munitions arc high into the sky. An offensive was opening somewhere, more of the city would lay ruined at the forceful behest of generals and their soldiers.