

## Chapter 10

The Royal Place and grounds were now a fractured and burning landscape. While the freshly unveiled Unity Sculpture stood pulsing with an unreal glow within the massive depression that was the Royal Gardens. Ph'avell had been to the gardens before, working close protection for some Union dignitary. The richly planted terrace had collapsed into a flattened black slab, wreathed in flame. Down there was the epicenter of the destruction and the only living being for kilometers. Ph'avell scanned for a landing spot amid shimmering plumes of invisible gas, raging fire, and magma jetting from myriad deep clefts in the blackened ground.

Captain, another message has appeared.

Celia hadn't moved or spoken since she gave the order to investigate this location. Ph'avell tapped on the Major's control bank and nodded. There was a flow of symbols and dashes, then the message appeared.

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_--Δ...Δ..●●●C--stay AWAY from _-Π-.. city-they haven't stoPPed--leave  
†eRRa--don't woRRy about me--find somEwhErE safe oFF-world--- @RAdVickers
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The feed returned to dashes as before, and the Major killed the link.

Ph'avell promised to keep the old man's kid safe in the event of a problem, but he had no idea it would be anything like this. He knew a place they could hole up, but they needed to get off the planet before it devoured them. And still, there was the matter of who was down there. Celia had the bit in her mouth, and Ph'avell was right there with her.

"Who's they? And if your father's not down, then there, who is?" Maxtron queried.

Getting the rug pulled out from you was standard fare in the teams; it forced improvisation.

"Good questions; I plan to find out the answers." She turned to the XO, "You were right about my father; sorry I didn't listen to you."

Maxtron waited for the penny to drop.

"I'd do anything for my dad, too," Maxtron avoided eye contact.

A safe landing zone was located, and the Dragonfly landed atop the sea-water quenched surface in a cloud of steam.

"That won't keep things cool for long," Hamilton said.

The crew grabbed their helmets and left Jacey at the helm in case they needed an emergency evacuation.

The hyaline surface cracked under the cargo ramp's weight as the five paused at the edge of hell personified. A blocky rise framed by two massive plinths of scorched travertine stood less than two meters away—a carbonized remnant of the Royal House of Charion. It would take a miracle of the Gods to bring this monarchy back. Ph'avell wondered if the King was paid up with the Universal Church on whatever tithings they demanded.

"We need to keep moving." Major Skandii's giant eyes were visible in the fiery light.

The shiny surface crunched under their boots.

"The ground is covered in glass." Maxtron used the pry bar as a walking stick.

"Actually, the surface material was fused into glass from the heat." Hamilton looked toward the epicenter, "I'm not sure how long these suits will stand up if things get hot again."

The going was treacherous as they descended toward the target. Everyone, but the Major and Ph'avell, slipped a few times as they descended the mini plateaus. And soon, the outer surface of each enviro-suit was nicked by the razor-sharp edges everywhere.

"...didn't sign up for this. I should be in a lab, not skating in a furnace." Hamilton's grunts and grumbles became the soundtrack as he struggled with the perilous climbs and movement.

"Stonegate is gone, and so is your lab." Ph'avell looked back to the Gurch.

Hamilton looked gobsmacked.

"Whatever was yesterday is gone. There's only today, and we all have to fight to make it to tomorrow." Ph'avell thumped Hamilton on the shoulder.

All complaining ceased, and the team developed an awkward rhythm for the plateau descents. Celia's boot landed awkwardly on some shards, and her leg kicked out from below her. She fell back, slammed her helmet into the fused silica with a hollow thunk, and slid toward the next edge. Major Skandii leaped down after her, gripped a fissure with two hands, and grabbed the Captain the other two.

"Let's take care to not lose you." Major Skandii's emulated voice echoed against the stone.

"How are we going to get back?" Maxtron looked up the rises.

"Let's focus on getting there in one piece, first." Ph'avell landed next to the XO.

The drops grew taller, and Hamilton became their best bet to avoid slicing themselves or falling into a glowing crevasse. The team knocks away the sharp edges and helped Hamilton lower himself to the next level. Hamilton helped each person down to the next that level. The additional work was a tremendous strain on the Doctor, and Ph'avell heard Hamilton's deep, gasping breath in his helmet. He needed to rest. Then the Unity Sculpture flickered.

Another surge is imminent.

The obsidian depression flooded with a multi-hued light, and Ph'avell's heart raced as he stood transfixed.

"My hands are buzzing." Maxtron thumped his chest, "Gods, it's hard to breathe."

"Tell me you know what this is, Doc. Because..." Ph'avell turned to see the science officer laying in a heap against the rise, "Doc!"

Things moved in slow motion as Maxtron watched Ph'avell shift the Gurch's body into a recovery position as light pulsed from the Unity Sculpture.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"Cider House, Cider House. Prep for EVAC, man down. I repeat, man down. " Maxtron called over the comm channel. "Cider House? Jacey?"

Maxtron noticed the others speaking as well but couldn't hear them. He tapped the side of his helmet in a reflexive attempt to fix a faulty circuit when Celia's grabbed his arm. She pointed to her ears, then slid a flat hand across her throat. Major Skandii remained motionless with two pry bars in her hands. The surge killed comms and everything that kept them from dying in this oven. Maxtron began to feel the heat come through the enviro-suit's passive insulation. There was no way he could scale the plateau without the Gurch's help or get back to the ship before he ran out of oxygen. *I'm going to die out here for nothing.*

Exactly twenty-two humid breaths later, the sculpture's scintillating lights faded, and Maxtron's wrist readout rebooted. He focused on the system status bar, straining to hear the completion tone.

"...am restarting the drives to come to you. Respond." Jacey's voice was the first thing he heard, and he was ready to light his signal light when another voice cut in.

"We read you, Cider House. Stand by," Celia said as she knelt next to the Gurch.

"What happened to you?" She looked into Hamilton's eyes.

"Not sure; I was catching my breath when I spotted the colorful lights, then everything went dark. I must have passed out." Hamilton said.

"His vitals are solid." Ph'avell lowered Hamilton's arm.

"Aside from a whopper of a headache, I feel fine." Hamilton gave a thumbs up.

"Can you make it back to the ship?" She motioned to the plateau.

Maxtron seconded this course of action, and he felt he was the ideal candidate

to escort the Doctor back.

"I want to go on." He began to stand, "We can't turn back now."

"We won't, just you." Celia looked at Maxtron, "Can you get him back?"

Yes.

"Uh, sure," He wanted to be a thousand lightyears away but would settle for the ship until then. "Will you be all right without me?"

"We'll manage; just make sure the big guy gets back safe." The Thandarian's smiled made Maxtron feel like dinner being sized up.

"I'm not going back without you," Hamilton closed his eyes, "That's a forty-percent reduction in manpower. Factor in my carrying whomever we find over there. Not to mention, my being the only one able to climb up these rises, and mission success reduce another forty-seven percent."

The team stared at Hamilton as Maxtron tried to absorb the numbers.

"If you're sure," Celia offered a hand, and the Major offered four more.

Maxtron wasn't sure, but he couldn't order anyone to do anything, and he had no way of climbing back up without the Doctor. So Maxtron knocked off the razor-sharp edge of the final plateau with his pry bar.

"Lava fountains are appearing all around the area." Jacey's voice came in.

"Kid, let me know if they get within fifty meters of our position." Ph'avell pressed his helmet against Celia's, "Cap'n, if I call *abort*; we all leave. Understood?"

"Copy." Celia followed Hamilton down.

The bottom of the depression was a thirty-meter, oblong flat with the Unity Sculpture standing on an odd rise in the center. It was much taller than the images of it covered up had shown. As if only a tiny portion of it was visible above the surface, like an iceberg. It seemed to glow from within, leaving the edged dark. The large hummock at the bottom was easier to see at this angle. The circular opening drew closer as they moved toward it. Maxtron felt the weight of Hamilton against as they moved along the slick surface; apparently, they were

now partners.

“It’s like black glass.” Major Skandii multitude of arms served as a counterbalance on the treacherous surface.

The surface below their feet looked like a wobbly black mirror with areas of a dull orange light pressing through.

“Unbelievably, it’s obsidian.” The big Gurch gripped tight onto Maxtron’s shoulder, “The heat needed to create this has destroyed everything.”

“Then how is that sculpture still there, and someone is alive?” Maxtron tried to shove the scientist off.

There was a deep, muffled pop, and the plain pitched in their direction.

“The crust has broken free from the plateau.” Hamilton struggled to keep his balance like a bear on a unicycle.

Molten lava sputtered from the rim as ejecta fragments landed like artillery rounds around them. The five sketched toward the mound of glass slag below the sculpture, and Maxtron wished he had lobbied a bit harder to return to the ship.

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Jacey kept an eye on the team as they struggled closer to the target. He ran every option through his head with every variable he could imagine. But in the end, he concluded the Dragonfly couldn't land down there. That left the rescue winch, but it couldn't lift all of them to safety at once. He calculated how long it would take them to get up the rises and back to the ship; he didn't like those numbers either. The timeline had grown shorter between black-out events, and if they took too long down there, they might not make it back.

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The pitching and yawing diminished as they drew close to the Unity Sculpture. What was evident was a four-meter obsidian hemisphere that encased the base of the sculpture. Ph'avell spotted the circular opening close to the edge of the monolithic statue above. If the Doctor's readings were correct, the only remaining life form was in there. Ph'avell checked the ambient temperature and wondered how anything could be alive down here.

The towering monolith was more than twice the height shown in the official Unity Day information. From this vantage point, Ph'avell swore the Unity Sculpture moved like a jungle insect sucking blood. He estimated it was over twenty meters tall. The hexagonal spire had six flutes that ran from the base to the top, terminating in a cradled sphere that crackled with energy. Ph'avell watched Hamilton hold his scientific devices toward the sculpture in befuddled awe.

Each fluted ridge was scalloped near the base and zenith as if a giant had taken six symmetrical bites at each altitude. Between each flute at the spire's basal were large oblong spheroids that disappeared into the obsidian ground. Each spheroid glowed with a fury that seemed to radiate pure despair to Ph'avell. The obsidian hemisphere that contained their prize enveloped the majority of the base. Similar spheroids repeated further up, halfway between the giant scallops. This looked like the Unity Sculpture's previous base before it grew, or the ground fell away.

Ph'avell leaped up, pushed off a surface deformation, and grabbed the rim of the opening. Now next to the monolith, he saw the surface seemed alive and remained unaffected by the day's destruction. The unfamiliar dark stone had complex geometric lines, and indecipherable hieroglyphs etched into its surface. These geometric shapes shifted and jumped across the surface like a living machine. It took the sum of his will to turn from the sculpture and look into the circular breach of the obsidian hillock. Under the circumstances, Ph'avell wasn't sure what to expect, but what he saw wasn't an option.

"You need to see this," Ph'avell called down.

The remaining four chipped foot and hand-holds into the glass with the pry bars and clambered up to the meter-wide opening. Unlike the orange and yellow visual chaos reflecting off black obsidian, the interior was a flat-white perfect

sphere; laying in the spheroid was a motionless terranoid figure.

“So, *this* is our perpetrator?” Ph'avell looked at the stranger's odd clothes.

“Not exactly what I was expecting.” Maxtron leaned in.

“We must proceed with caution.” The Major held her hands out.

“Is it... alive?” Celia looked at Hamilton.

“All the energy this thing is kicking out is interfering with the scanner, “ Hamilton looked at the white cube with a cocked brow, “but there *are* life signs. “

A shard of black glass fell in and chittered around the sphere a few times before settling against the figure.

“Well, the meter's running.” Ph'avell leaped into the hollow.

The roar of hell was gone in the silent sphere. Ph'avell checked his system readout and retested the readings.

“It's cool in here. Like, whatever's happening out there, isn't happening in here.” He kept a wary eye on the figure.

“Warrant Officer, something doesn't feel right; we should leave.” Major Skandii spoke up.

“Cool your jets, Major; I'm just looking,” Ph'avell called back.

“We have no idea what your presence may do.” The vocalizer distorted.

There was nobody better than to push Ph'avell's buttons like a professional button pusher, he opted to kick it up the chain of command.

“Orders, Cap'n?” Ph'avell cocked his head as much as the helmet allowed.

He didn't mean to put Celia in a bind, but beancounters and bureaucrats tended to gum up fieldwork.

Celia looked down at his then set her eyes, “Let's gather what we can.”

Ph'avell couldn't have been more proud of her.