

## Chapter 8

The Dragonfly hovered above the charred and shattered remains of an upscale residential area at the South-end of Great Park. Hovering ten meters above a clearing, Jacey released thousand of gallons of baywater that struck the surface like an egg on a hot pan. The team hopped off the ramp before the ship touched down. Celia looked into the uneasy pale orange sky and reminded herself it was just noon. The residential area was a part of the city's famed Royal Theater District. Despite living her entire life around Nueva City, the familiar and majestic buildings of the district had been transmogrified into a jagged mountain range of burning rubble.

"You'd think after four trips in this mess, we'd have a better idea of where the people were." Ph'avell looked around.

"You can't blame them for moving." Celia steadied herself with a long pry bar, "I have no idea what I would do if I was caught out here."

Hamilton gestured toward a precarious pass through the fiery chaos.

"Cider House, we're moving out," Maxtron said.

"Roger, Gardner Two," Jacey's voice echoed in their helmets.

Celia's brain knew this was Clarion Avenue, but it looked like nothing in her memory. It was now a pitted landscape, filled with fire and the broken remains of a vibrant neighborhood. No matter how good the enviro suit's air recirculators were, she could smell the burning world outside. How anyone was still alive in the heat was a miracle in its own right. They grew accustomed to looking up for falling debris every time the ground shook, and every step brought its own danger. They couldn't afford to be trapped when they were the rescue party.

"The conditions are growing worse every trip." Major Skandii relocated a sparking cable with one of her arms.

Amber day turned to night as blackness choked out all the natural light.

"Cover!" Ph'avell dove for a small ledge, and everyone pressed themselves into the nearest shelter as the air glowed with a superheated wind that roared through the ruined corridor. The noise was deafening, and Celia felt the heat

through the enviro suit's thermal barriers. *These are getting too close.*

“Why, exactly, are we out here?” Maxtron dodged an architectural column sliding loose from its pedestal.

Translucent green overlays denoted the location of the living, some twelve meters away. Ph'avell, Major Skandii, and Hamilton moved toward the area with their recovery equipment and medical supplies. Celia and Maxtron cleared the lane of egress with heavy pry bars. It was hard work, but they were saving lives; they were helping those in need. Celia was proud of how everyone refused to quit, especially Major Skandii, whose strength and endurance seemed bottomless. Today the Major earned her field rank with every person saved.

---

From the deformed roof of a delivery vehicle, Hamilton spotted the survivors. An odd shadow flicked across his visor moments before stonework and metal fragments struck the team. Hamilton scanned for falling debris to find nothing when they were hit again. He caught motion ahead and saw the survivors hurl whatever they could get their hands on toward them. The look of sheer panic in their ragged eyes broke his heart. In the past hour, the survivors' reactions had shifted from thankful appreciation to caution, and now to this. The crew raised their hands up to show they were unarmed.

"We're here to take you to safety," Ph'avell yelled over the tempest of wind and fire.

Still, they cast stone and dross.

“Please, we are here to help.” The Major reiterated in that artificial voice, now amplified like a megaphone.

Hamilton couldn't blame them. Seeing a giant Gurch, an armored Thandarian, and a six-limbed Protean emerge from the fiery horror would do that to anyone.

“Cap'n, We'll need you two up here.” Ph'avell radioed back.

With some effort, Celia and Maxtron mollified the survivors and lead them

out. The long-term exposure to the inferno took its toll. Some could barely walk, while the ones left behind had walked away from living. It was a constant struggle to keep them safe and moving in the tight confinement of the dreadful wreckage.

One man pulled a woman away from Hamilton and claimed she slowed them down. The man brandished a burning piece of metal and threatened everyone to move faster. The desperate man's hands smoked as he flailed words and the jagged metal about. Hamilton couldn't tell if he was young or old; the time in the disaster had erased those details. The man's eyes were wide and ringed with soot as his words grew incoherent before he ran back into the furnace of wreckage to join the countless souls strewn about the landscape.

Warning, tremor is imminent.

The crew hefted the less mobile and herded the rest the final fifty meters to the cargo bay's relative safety as the ravaged buildings collapsed around them.

Inside the cargo bay, Hamilton slumped against the bulkhead next to Maxtron in a cloud of ash as the ramp sealed shut. Hamilton looked at the traumatized survivors, each one unsure of trusting their luck. He was starting to lose faith in his own luck. Hamilton removed his helmet to an omnipresent sweet, metallic, and earthy odor. He considered what would produce such a smell and realized this smell would never wholly wash away from his memory.

The situation outside was deteriorating, and they needed help. Maxtron fruitlessly searched for reinforcements or emergency crews on each trip, but it was clear they were on their own and running out of time. Hamilton watched Celia hand water bottles to the survivors.

"Good work out there." Hamilton nudged Maxtron in the thigh.

"What the hells is happening?" Maxtron blinked. "The entire world's on fire."

A large shingle of caked ash sloughed off Hamilton's shoulder onto his lap.

"Damned if I know." Hamilton looked at the ash and material packed into the buckles and folds of his boots.

The eleven people clung to one another in the waning terror as the Dragonfly rumbled toward the hospital ship across the bay.

“I get helping, but when do we stop?” Maxtron let out a long breath

“Something tells me we’ll know when.” Hamilton let slip.

Warning...

---

The cargo bay went dark, and everything shut off, just like on Cordia 6. There was a silence that Celia had never heard before, a hopeless silence.

Celia tried to stand but leaped from the floor when the ship lost altitude. Wails and shrieks of terrified people filled the cargo bay. Unknown body parts bumped her as she tried to guess where the cargo net should be and thrust her hand out. ‘Klam!’ Her fingers smashed against the metal hull. Celia’s hands flailed about until they closed around the webbing as stabs-of-pain shot up her arms. There was a groan and a shift, then her feet found what she hoped was the floor. Celia pulled herself toward the airlock as the unmistakable sound of a prybar clanged past her into the ship. *So much for, not a scratch.* The netting ended, and she knew there were two meters of wobbling blackness between her and the doorway. A tentative step, then another shift, and she smacked into the door jamb. Her cheek throbbed, but she was headed in the right direction. Her hands painfully grasped anything stable as Celia stumbled toward the stairwell, following the bridge’s outside light—like the North Star. Gravity returned, and the interior lights flickered back to life as Celia scrambled up the final stairs.

Celia dropped into the gunner’s seat next to Jacey. They had power, but the ship was still falling.

“Everything just cut out, just like on Marina.” Jacey’s eyes reminded fixed on the approaching water.

Celia gripped the console as if it would protect her upon impact when the Dragonfly climbed away from the bay, far too close for comfort.