Marooned

by Oblique Strategies (ObliqueStrategies), ObliqueStrategies

Summary

Post Jak 3. Not long after the three-way civil war, the people of Haven make a ground-breaking discovery - another city that has survived the Metal Head wars, far beyond the outer reaches of the Wasteland, that has remained hidden for generations. However, things go terribly wrong when they try to reach out to each other.
The spider settled itself under the shadows of a leaf, hidden from the fading sunlight. A quivering flower petal lay before it, coated with a fine misty layer of deadly silk, almost invisible to all but the keenest of eyes. Though the spider had eight, its vision was poor, and the world was only a cloudy blur of lights and shadows to it. But it did not need acuity of vision, for it could feel even the faintest vibrations through its eight sensitive legs.

A tiny touch upon the leaf, and it knew at once that something had landed very close by. A small bee had been drawn in by the fragrant scent of the flower, and it went crawling around on the leaf surface in search of the prize. The moment the spider had been waiting for had arrived, but it remained where it was, still as a stone, feeling every little movement and knowing the exact position of its prey.

The bee, feeling surer of its destination, lowered its defences and approached the flower. As soon as it set its legs down upon the rim of the first petal, they stuck fast. The spider felt the vibrations immediately and knew that its trap had sprung. Before the bee even had time to register its predicament, the spider struck, quick as lightning, lurching forwards from its hiding place, catching the bee with its two front legs, and pressing its whole body into the webbing.

The bee tried to flutter its wings in a getaway, but it was no use. In less than a second it had become completely immobilised and helpless in the strong clutches of its hunter. The spider mounted it and drew in more of the webbing from the petal with its other legs, embalming the struggling bee in a thick cocoon of wet silk, and fastening it all in place with fresh secretions of adhesive fluid from its spinneret. It whisked the bundle back under the leaf, and sat upon it as the bee squirmed inside and slowly suffocated, until there was no more movement. The spider was victorious. It had claimed another meal for itself, and remained the unchallenged predator in its small woodland home.

But then a noise came from above the canopy. It began quietly at first, but grew louder and louder, until it the ambient peace was destroyed and the branches and leaves were trembling at the force of the gale that accompanied it. The spider kept a tight grip on its catch as the world around it was buffeted uncontrollably, until with one great movement of the air, its leaf was overturned and both predator and prey were thrown down to the earthen floor below.

Overhead passed a great fleet of aircraft, each one painted cobalt blue, and emblazoned with the insignia of the Freedom League: two crossed swords beneath a silver shield and yellow sash. Piloting the leading Hellcat Cruiser was Ashelin Praxis, governor of the city of Haven. She was tall, stunning to look at, and an exceptional military leader. She had fiery red hair that matched her often
formidable personality, and her face was decorated with elaborate, faded blue tattoos, a grim reminder of her regrettable past in the Krimzon Guard forces of her father, the late Baron Praxis.

A tyrannical usurper, the Baron before her had controlled Haven with a strict and ruthless approach, bolstered by propaganda which concealed a risky agreement that he had exploited to stay in power. The name of Praxis still inspired fear, but Ashelin was determined to lead by a much more just example. Though a skilled fighter, who could be merciless to her enemies when she needed to be, she was also fair and benevolent, preferring diplomacy to the gun whenever possible. So far, Haven’s never-ending struggles had given her little opportunity to truly prove her capabilities as a peacetime ruler, but in the two years since her father's death, she had done an admirable job of leading the citizens of Haven through the bitter conflicts of the past many months.

Flying the cruiser on her left was the austere Torn, the highest-ranking commander of the city’s military force. Like Ashelin, he possessed a tactical mind beneath his dreadlocked hair, took his work very seriously, and had once served in the Krimzon Guard as well, sharing the same facial tattoos, but long ago he had deserted the forces after becoming disillusioned with their violent ways. From there he had escaped to the lowest slums of the city where no one would ever think to look for him, and became part of an underground resistance movement, intent on undermining the Baron’s increasingly unstable grip on the throne. Branded a high traitor by those he used to work with, he had been atop the Baron's wanted list for a long time, but he had never been caught, thanks in part to Ashelin who had helped to shield him from her father’s wrath. Even then she had not fully endorsed her father's oppressive dictatorship, and had secretly been keeping Torn's underground movement informed on Krimzon plans and movements, and together they had formed an unlikely relationship.

In the cruiser to Ashelin's right was Jak, a taciturn, light-haired, mysterious hero from a distant time, and a possessor of unrivalled fighting ability, to the point where he could pass as a one-man army. Even a team of Torn’s finest soldiers could barely contend with him without getting extremely lucky or unless Jak made a rare mistake. He had arrived in Haven City almost four years ago under strange and unexpected circumstances. Almost immediately, for reasons that he still did not understand, he was captured and subjected to inhumane, torturous experiments in the Baron’s cruel prison. Apparently, the Baron had aimed to create some kind of super-warrior that he could use to fight against the city’s enemies, and Jak, to his own misfortune, had been selected as one of his unwilling victims. But after two long and painful years in that prison, scarred but alive and full of anger and lust for vengeance, he escaped and found his way into Torn's resistance movement, fixated on pursuing his vendetta against the Baron. Even today, some years later, he still suffered from bouts of emotional volatility, albeit with a greater restraining hand on himself than he once had. In the end, however, he played a significant role in the exposure of the Baron's tyranny and the establishment of Ashelin as the new ruler, against whom he held no grudge, and since that time he had proved his worth to the city on many a dire occasion, fighting to protect his new home and friends.

Jak rarely went anywhere without his close friend and companion, Daxter, a small and orange talking rodent. Today was no different, and he was slouched in the second seat of Jak’s cruiser. Daxter’s story was a strange one, for he had once been human, just like Jak, but an unfortunate accident that had occurred before he and Jak came to Haven had resulted in him being transformed into his current state for eternity. However, his wild and uninhibited personality remained unchanged; he had a big mouth that often got him into trouble, a cheeky smile that could render instant forgiveness, and a roving eye for the ladies (even though there were very few who had an eye for him in return, as he had a strong reputation for being a yappy nuisance).

But together, Ashelin, Torn and Jak were a strong and powerful team, and as of today, they were the reason there still existed a city to call home. With Ashelin’s effective and decisive planning, Torn’s swift and expeditious reactions, and Jak’s invaluable muscle, they had saved Haven many times from the brink of destruction.
Behind their cruisers, a vast formation of military aircraft followed, loaded with enough explosive power to flatten mountains and vaporise lakes, and soon enough, that power was going to be used. As the fleet left the mainland and passed over the greyled coastline far below, Ashelin spoke into her radio and her message came across back to Haven, where it was received on a radio scanner in Freedom League Headquarters.

"Control, we are now over the ocean."

"Roger that," came the crackled reply from the city. "You'll be out of our contact range soon, so we won't know anything until you get back. But we'll be waiting for you. Good luck, governor."

"Thank you, control. We'll see you when we get back. Ashelin out."

Ashelin slotted her radio back into its place on the dashboard, and settled back into her seat for the long ride. It was a terrible mission that lay ahead of them, one that she wished she could avoid, but it was their only option left. This war had spiralled out of control and wasted so many lives needlessly, but after tonight, it would be finally over, albeit with a heavy price. Today they were to wipe their enemy from the maps with the great air force they towed along behind them. But their destination was far into the unknown, unvisited by anyone in Haven, and they were cruising straight into it with no idea of exactly what they might find there.

"Hey Ash," said Torn's gravelly voice through her radio, and she reached for it again. "What do you plan on doing once we've dropped the load and ended all this?"

"Take a long, hot bath," Ashelin replied with a weary, only faintly humorous smile. "But we should definitely start work on properly rebuilding the city soon. It's taken heavy damage all over during the war, and after everything the people have been through, I want to make sure the city will be a great and happy place to live again."

"And I suppose you want me to help with that then?" came Jak's voice. Ashelin looked to her right and saw him smirking in his boyish way through his cockpit window.

"Help if you want," said Ashelin, "But the people might think you've done enough for them already. You have no obligation to do anything more for the city than you already have, Jak." She spoke for herself more than for her people, but she truly meant it.

"Hey! What about me?" Daxter's loud and cocky voice cut in, barely before Ashelin had finished talking.

She could see the little orange character waving indignantly for attention through Jak’s window. Ashelin sighed and did not reply; it was a usual ploy of Daxter’s to try and claim more credit than he actually deserved, but truth be told, he had been a help in some small ways, and Ashelin recognised that. Still, she felt a bubble of good-natured camaraderie rise up inside her, and thought she would try to lighten the mood a little more at his expense.

"I was thinking of redecorating the Haven port at some point," she said to Torn, but it was heard in Jak’s cruiser too. "It could do with a new look. It's so dull."

Daxter was not impressed. He had a very nice pub in that area of the city, and as far as he was concerned — quite correctly in fact — that was the one thing that attracted people there. He wanted to shout another comment into the radio, but Jak would not let him.

After a bit of petty squabbling, Daxter gave up and slumped into his seat, bored already with the endless flight. He missed his pub and his booze and his amazing pictures of himself hung on the
walls, but what he missed most of all above everything else was Tess, one of the only women he had ever met who actually liked him as much as he liked her. She was an animal lover, and was looking after his pub for him while he was away on this mission with Jak. Due to recent supernatural events, she too was an ottsel like Daxter, and though unexpected, this transformation had made them both very happy, and they had started to spend more and more time together. Having each other close was part of what had helped the two of them to get through the terrible war with their sanity intact.

As Daxter slowly and sleepily sank into the world of daydreams, Jak glanced quickly out of the window to check he was still in formation with the rest of the fleet. Ashelin was still in sight to his left, and the great entourage ploughed along behind them all.

The long journey lingered on, over the wide and endless ocean as the land they called home disappeared at their backs. The leaders occasionally continued sharing their light and trivial conversations, discussing the city, the war, and what it would be like once it was all over, but soon they ran out of things to talk about. Each minute of travelling brought them closer to their target but further away from the safety of home, counting down the distance in between. Nobody in Haven’s recorded history had ever ventured out this far. Ashelin often checked her computer readings; it would not make the journey go any faster, but she always liked to know exactly how far she had left to travel. Over half way there, and the formation stayed fixed. Soon, they were flying into an early evening sun, burning yellow among pink and grey clouds, with nothing but the darkness of the deep ocean below.

But then, not long after, Torn noticed something. His radar was picking up movement ahead of them. On his screen flashed three grey triangles. But then they became ten, then twenty, then forty.

"Ash, you seein' this?"

Ashelin did, and they both looked out of their front windows to try and get a visual target. They had a fairly good idea what they were, though.

"Damn sun!" said Ashelin, shielding her eyes with a hand.

The bright light they were flying into made spotting things difficult, but then Jak saw them. About two kilometres ahead and flying several hundred metres lower, a squadron of dark grey aircraft appeared in large arrow formations, glinting in the sun and coming straight for them. It was a pre-emptive enemy attack force.

"We've got company!" said Jak, raising his voice, and every pilot in the vast fleet suddenly sat up with full attention.

"What?" Daxter had just woken from his dreamy fantasies and was trying to establish what was going on.

"Strap yourself in, Dax!" Jak warned him. "They're here."

"Commander, this is bomber FL-032," came the voice from one of the aircraft behind them. "We're seeing hostile aircraft coming up underneath us. Could do with some assistance!"

"Copy that, 032, we are aware!" Torn replied. "Man your underside guns."

Ashelin gave the next order. "Squadron, break off and destroy those incoming jets! Protect the bombers at all costs; don't let them fall!"

The escort of Hellcats pitched down towards the enemy aircraft, while at the same time, they aimed up towards the bombers. The bombers themselves kept going in a steady direction, but on each of
them, two turrets descended from the underside of the fuselage, each containing a brave man with a heavy machine gun. The Hellcats’ roof turrets burst into action, as round after round of heavy projectiles were shot at high velocity towards the incoming jets.

The jets performed evasive actions and dodged the incoming fire, moving apart so smoothly that it would have been mesmerising to watch were one’s life not in danger. But the beauty was momentary and soon descended into a mad flurry of firing and insane manoeuvres. The Hellcats were skilfully pursuing the grey jets as best as they could without carelessly flying into anyone else, but the skies were so crowded that it was only a matter of time before the first collision occurred. Try as they might, some bombers did catch fire and went down into the ocean, and the cockpits of the Hellcats filled with the screams of the dying pilots. It was a terrible thing to hear, and everyone tried their hardest to filter them out and keep their heads in the fight, doing all the more to prevent hearing it again.

Ashelin singled out a particularly troublesome jet that she had seen take down one of their bombers. She dropped in behind it and opened up a good round of fire to its tail fin, which sheared right off, sending it spiralling down, out of control, into the waiting mouth of the ocean.

Torn nearly had a collision with the jet he was pursuing when it unexpectedly pulled off an impossibly tight one-eighty turn and came straight at him. He had to pitch down very quickly to avoid a crash, and then found himself right in the middle of a cloud of smoke.

As for Jak, he was shooting down as many jets as he could possibly see. On foot or behind the controls of a vehicle, his combat prowess showed no weakness. He knew he should not be enjoying the destruction of human life like this, but the feeling he got when he caused an enemy aircraft to go down in flames was morbidly satisfying. His cabin and those of the other pilots were soon echoing with the triumphant cries of "Whoohoo! You did it, Jak!" as Daxter excitedly celebrated in his seat, punching the air with every victory. But then with a shriek he threw himself down as the cruiser started taking hits. Jak swerved and Daxter fell to the floor, but the jet followed him and continued fire.

"I can't shake him!" growled Jak through gritted teeth.

"I've got your back, Jak!" said Torn, and a round of fire suddenly tore through the pursuing jet's left wing, severing it clean off, and it went spinning away into oblivion.

"Thanks, Torn!" called Jak, levelling out the cruiser.

"You good?"

Jak checked his dashboard. "I took a few hits but I'm alright."

Daxter pulled himself back up onto his seat, trembling and his fur standing on end. "That was too close!"

But there was no time to relax. Another jet swooped in to take down another bomber, blasting the tops of the wings and shredding the ailerons. The bomber lost control and peeled off to the right and nose-dived into the water, the engines screaming in tortured overdrive.

Ashelin witnessed this murder, and in a burst of fury, mercilessly fired upon the culpable jet, right at the cockpit. The front window shattered and the interior splattered with blood, but it continued to cruise along in a slow descent, no longer under human control, until it crashed straight into one its unsuspecting comrades. Both erupted in a ball of fire and went down in six different pieces.
"Nice!" shouted Torn, who had just witnessed the whole thing.

"Thanks! Keep shooting and watch yourself!"

All the Hellcat pilots battled on bravely for many violent minutes. In that time, both sides suffered irreplaceable casualties, and the remaining ones had to increase fighting power to stay alive. Very soon, the trails of smoke and fire became indistinguishable from the blood-stained clouds around them. More jets went down all over the place, but so did a few Freedom aircraft. Ashelin couldn’t possibly count how many were left, but whenever she tried to check, it looked like they were wearing thinner.

"Don't let them take down another bomber!" she shouted desperately, urging her soldiers on, "Or we might not have enough left to finish the mission!"

The Freedom pilots kept at it, losing themselves in the fury of combat. They had suffered so much at the hands of this enemy, and boy, did it feel good to deliver some payback. But when it looked as though they were finally on the verge of victory, someone shouted, "Enemy reinforcements!"

A brand new squadron of jets had just appeared from above the clouds. They dived down, weapons blazing, and caught the Freedom pilots completely by surprise. They now found themselves caught right in the middle of a closing set of jaws, jaws that would surely crush what was left of them, and hopes began to fall.

"Where the hell did they come from?" screamed Daxter, but nobody knew. None of them had ever expected to encounter this many jets out here.

Ashelin had to keep her men moralised and confident, and was speedily forming a new plan of action in her mind, but Jak had already shot forward to intercept the fresh enemies. He brought down a small cluster of them right away, but the others kept coming.

Ashelin led the charge behind him with six more Hellcats that she had quickly mobilised, and they fired right into the middle of the group, setting some on fire and lightly damaging the rest. Another mad cloud of aircraft entwined as they each battled for supremacy of the sky. Then Torn joined the fray with more backup, and things seemed to be turning in Freedom's favour once again. But suddenly, an enemy moved in on Torn, and he received a heavy blow which knocked his entire cruiser off balance. His warning alerts kicked in and his vehicle became partially unresponsive.

"I'm hit!" he shouted, hurriedly pressing buttons to keep in control.

"Torn! You're on fire!" shrieked Daxter.

These words struck Ashelin hard, and as she risked a distracted glance out of her window, she could see the roof turret of Torn's Hellcat blazing.

"My guns aren't working! I need help!" cried Torn, with rare but recognisable panic in his voice.

Ashelin reacted at once, abandoning her current fight and swooping in to offer protection. There was genuine fear in her heart for the man who had sacrificed so much of himself to her cause.

"I'm here for you, Torn!" she called as she orbited protectively around his vehicle.

But Torn did not see her. He was busy wrestling with his control panel, trying desperately to get everything working again. He was losing both speed and altitude, and behind him, the heat was growing more intense. Smoke leaked into his cockpit. "Maybe I can put this fire out," he said, reaching for a small extinguisher kept under the seat.
But then, things got worse. One of the enemy jets spotted Torn's crippled cruiser and was now making a firm beeline for him. Ashelin saw at once and turned to intercept it.

"Oh no you don't!" she screamed as she opened fire. The jet went down, but he must have informed the rest of his comrades about what he had just seen, because a number of them were also closing in on Torn now, sensing easy prey. Very soon they would swamp him, and there were too many for Ashelin to take down by herself. She panicked, and couldn't think of what she could possibly do to save Torn.

But then suddenly, Jak came screaming in from out of nowhere, guns blazing, right into the heart of the jets. They scattered, but one could not get out of the way quickly enough, and the two aircraft clashed together. The underside of Jak's cruiser smashed across the roof of the enemy jet, and sparks flew as both aircraft caught fire and rapidly lost altitude.

"NO!" Ashelin cried like she had been stabbed. "Jak!"

Jak fought with the controls but he was going down fast, and nothing he did could make the cruiser right itself.

"AAAAHHHH! JAAAAAK!" screamed Daxter in a terrified panic.

"Daxter! Strap yourself in!" Jak bellowed over the noise. "We're going down!"

But Daxter either did not hear or chose to ignore him, and he was now throwing himself around the cabin, alternately looking for places to hide or a means of escape.

Ashelin's frantic voice called through Jak's radio, but it was lost among the blaring alerts in the cockpit. He had absolutely no control and was speeding towards the water head first, closer and closer with every second, and the engines were whirring into overdrive. He knew he couldn’t stop it. The only thing he could do was try to pull the nose of the cruiser up so the underside would hit the water first, to minimise the chances of it completely shattering on impact.

"Hold on, Dax!" he shouted, pulling back on the steering wheel with all his strength. The nose of the cruiser began to rise up slowly, and Daxter was now randomly gibbering from somewhere under his seat.

"Come on!" screamed Jak through gritted teeth. The nose was rising higher but the water was getting closer. Now he could see the waves pulsating over the surface of the ocean, and then with a mighty explosive splash, he hit the water. The front window shattered and the cold sea pounded in. The back of the cruiser sheared off and Jak's seat collapsed. Ashelin's voice called for him again, before the controls in front of him disappeared in the torrent. All of this happened in less than a second, and it was the last thing Jak remembered before he blacked out.
Six months earlier...

It had been a long day in Freedom Headquarters for Torn. Stacks of boring paperwork were piled high on his desk like a model fortress, many detailing the sheer extent of the damage that had been suffered in the civil war for Haven City, and what it would cost to get it all fixed. He was not looking forward to processing all of this.

As he idly flicked through one of these reports, his mind was partially elsewhere, unable to take in yet more columns of numbers at this point in time. He glanced over at the clock on the wall, and sighed when he saw that it was only just past midday. This morning felt twice as long as it should have been already, and he still had half the day ahead of him. He needed a break, and he leaned back in his chair, resting his feet upon the one space on the desktop not covered in papers, trying to let his overloaded mind breathe and clear itself for a moment, reflecting on the bigger picture.

Haven was in the wake of what had become known as The War for Haven City. Well, actually, Haven City’s entire history seemed to be nothing but war. As far back as their records went, an endless, ravenous horde of dark monsters called the Metal Heads had hounded its people. Only the impregnable Shield Wall that surrounded the entire city like a fortress kept them out, as if they lived on an island battered from all sides by a destructive tide.

But The War for Haven City had been bloodier and more dire than any battle in Haven’s long, violent history. The Shield Wall no longer functioned as it once did, and the streets themselves became a lethal battle ground as three factions slew each other for power: the desperate soldiers of the Freedom League, their forces divided and dwindling, hanging on to what they had left; the indomitable Metal Head horde, which had returned with a vengeance after the fall of their leader; and the merciless machines of the old KG faction, which had been resurrected with renewed thirst for destruction. Things had seemed bleak and hopeless on many an occasion, but if it weren’t for Jak and his irreplaceable heroism, the city would now be but a pile of smoking rubble, its only landmarks the mauled bodies of its populace. They had survived, but only just.

But despite the city-wide damage and the many losses they had suffered, things were now actually looking positive for Haven City, and Torn felt quite proud about it. The Metal Heads were gone, the KG Robots were all destroyed, and a new city council had been established to help restore life and glory to the city. This took some of the pressure off himself and Ashelin, who despite being at the peak of chain of command, no longer had to be the sole figures of authority. It was a big job, too big for the two of them to handle alone, and responsibilities had been divided amongst the council members. As a result, his job had become a lot easier and the Freedom League was running more smoothly than ever. Of course, there had been a few raucous parties that had got out of hand here
and there, thrown by clusters of citizens celebrating the end of the war a little too hard, but nothing more serious than that. However, he knew the work was not over yet. In fact, it had only just earnestly begun.

They were about a month in to what had officially been termed 'The Great Restoration', and already, the Freedom League was hard at work and had achieved a lot: mending roads, rebuilding homes, and so forth, and a dedicated team of architects were tirelessly designing the new layouts of the city districts. The hardest part so far had been taking down the KG War Factory, a floating fortress that had remained suspended above the city after it had been shut down in the latter days of the War. It had taken many engineers and a lot of heavy equipment to move it out of city airspace, and it was now lying outside the walls being slowly dismantled for scrap and reusable parts.

However, an even more complicated job lay ahead in the restoration of the old city gardens. These had fallen under Metal Head control during the war, and they had corrupted all plant life there until it became a stinking, festering canal of slime and acid, littered with infectious dark eco and living earth that would swallow anyone who did not tread carefully. And of course, there were the remnants of the Metal Heads’ enormous, organic tower that had set the limits of the city’s new skyline. A few brave men had already ventured in with chemical equipment to try and begin the healing process, but it would likely take several years before the gardens were recognisable again.

The people were also campaigning for the resurrection of the Mar Memorial Stadium, where the city's popular races used to be held. That still lay in ruins at the very north end of the city, a skeleton of its former splendour, and crushed beneath the Baron’s huge palace tower when it fell. The Metal Heads had taken up residence there too, but thankfully had not dealt it the same fate as the gardens, and everything was still salvageable. Broken and scarred, but salvageable. Torn was determined that the Stadium would rise again, but still, it would be a difficult and expensive job that would likely cause many a headache, and there were more vital things to be considered first.

That annoying rodent Daxter was also protesting for the return of his bar in the port. It had been used as a secondary southern base for the Freedom League during the War, and there were still a lot of important supplies left down there that needed picking up. Torn hoped to high heaven that the ottsel had not tampered with anything he shouldn't have done, as was his penchant.

All of these daunting tasks, plus a general repair of everywhere else in the city, would keep him, Ashelin and the new council busy for years to come. It was a global job that would require the cooperation of everyone, as everyone had been affected by the War; everyone had lost someone they knew and cared for, and many were without permanent homes now. No one had yet calculated the total number of casualties, and Torn doubted that anyone ever would.

He took another sweeping look around his office. It wasn’t really his office, but just a spare storeroom he had chosen to occupy one day so he could try to process some important documents in peace and privacy. Ever since then, others had treated it like his adopted office and had dropped off more things for him there, but it was far from the sort of state he desired for working in. He was the kind of person who wanted everything neatly organised in its rightful place, but these past few months he had been working in bureaucratic squalor. The papers on his desk were just the start of it. There were piles on the floor too, with the odd bullet casing or weapons crate or suit of armour thrown in for good measure. Cupboard doors and drawers were permanently clogged open, from which yet more papers and other Freedom regalia seemed to spill out. The window in the far wall, half-hidden by tall stacks of crates, looked upon the mountains bordering the west of the city, but Torn did not find it very interesting. He preferred to keep his attention on this side of the city walls, for now at least. First, fix the city. Then, if there was time, they could look further afield in the hope of expanding to new land, if they needed it, and Torn had a feeling that they undoubtedly would.
Then there was a knock on his door which broke his absent concentrations.

"Come in," Torn called, taking his feet off the table.

In stepped a Freedom Fighter, clad in his blue armour and carrying his helmet under his arm. Torn knew him by his round face and his blue eyes that matched his armour: his name was Olto, and he was a fairly new member of the Freedom League who had joined late in the war, and thus had had little chance to prove himself in the field of battle. However, he had since then been doing his utmost to complete his duties and follow the Freedom code of conduct, and was fast becoming a model soldier.

"Commander, I bring a message from the governor!" he said in his most official-sounding voice. "She wishes to see you as soon as possible in the Power Room."

"The Power Room?" said Torn, a little surprised by this unusual choice of meeting place.

Located in the city's industrial district, the Power Room was the heart of the city's life force, pumping eco and electricity to the four corners of the grid. Even though the industrial sector had been the scene of some of the heaviest fighting during the war, the Power Room had somehow escaped relatively undamaged, and it was a good thing that it had; if the city's power supply had been disrupted, the war may have ended very differently.

"Why does she want to meet me there?" asked Torn.

"She would not tell me, commander," Olto replied, "But she has asked me to convey the utmost urgency to you. I recommend you head there immediately, sir."

Torn was puzzled but intrigued. Whatever this was, he knew that Ashelin would not summon him like this for no good reason; it had to be important, important enough to discuss in person instead of over the communicator, and he was stirred into action right away. In fact, he was quite relieved to have an excuse to get out of this cluttered room.

"OK, thank you, private," he replied, standing up. "I'll head over there now. Return to your duties, and stay safe."

"I will. Thank you, commander."

Olto saluted, then marched off through the door and down the hallway, replacing his helmet as he went. Torn got to his feet, checked that his handgun was still in its holster on his belt, and then locked his room. He went the opposite way Olto had taken, into a lift which took him down twenty floors to ground level. All the way, he wondered what Ashelin could possibly want him at the Power Room for. He knew she had gone over there this morning to gain a detailed update on the city’s most vital generators, so maybe it was something to do with that. But he hoped not; that was the last worry he needed on top of all the other jobs he had.

A few dedicated technicians worked at the Power Room now, maintaining the city's Eco Grid and what was left of the Shield Wall system, as well as some communications hubs the Freedom League had recently set up. All of it was overseen by Vin, an intelligent but very frenetic technician who used to work for Baron Praxis, but at the same time had been secretly passing information to Torn's underground resistance movement, a position that had made him extremely paranoid. Somehow — Torn still was not sure exactly how — he had turned himself into a computer program, and now existed only in digital form. But that did not hinder him in the slightest; he still did a spectacular job of keeping all of the city's most important systems running at peak efficiency, and nobody knew the Eco Grid and the city’s power networks better than he did.
Soon, Torn had entered the hangar at the rear of the building, where a Hellcat Cruiser awaited him. This was one of the newly made V4 range, and it handled much better than the clunky old models used during the Baron's reign, the ones he had learned to fly in. Torn climbed in and switched on the engine, and the cruiser came to life. It hovered upwards, and Torn flew it out into the sky through the opening hatch in the ceiling.

As he cruised over the city on his journey to the Power Station, he looked around at all the areas that he had read about in his reports, viewing them from the sky to survey the damage for himself. The ‘New Haven’ district where Freedom HQ was located, though still bearing the scars of battle in places, had survived the War largely intact and still looked perfectly inhabitable, at least from this altitude. Quite pretty even, if he were a man to use such a word. The buildings were stylish and well-fashioned, and those who occupied them were generally the wealthiest survivors of the city’s enduring dramas. Waterways and fountains lined the streets, and there was even a tree growing here and there on circular plantations of grass on the corners and intersections, though some had been burned to black bone-like totems by the stray fury of the war.

The rest of Haven south of this district was an unattractive mess. Compared to the polished metal and stone of New Haven, the adjoining slums were grey and dull, both from lack of care and ashy smoke-stains. Well, this part of the city had never looked very pleasant to begin with; Torn knew this all too well, having spent a number of years living secretly in this very sector, where the old Underground movement's headquarters had been based. Nevertheless, he felt no special attachment to this district; it only reminded him of dark and difficult days. The buildings were ragged and lopsided, some looking so flimsy that they seemed to sway in the wind. The uneven streets wormed around them in no identifiable pattern of organisation, as if a child with a crayon had scribbled playful and ignorant lines on the city blueprints. Some essential repairs had already begun here however, and there were people carrying building materials around, small machines filling in the most hazardous craters in the road, and several Freedom Fighters supervising the entire effort.

As he entered the industrial sector of the city, he beheld a similar scene. As the city's most important district, it had received a high priority for repairs, and much had been done already. Nearly all the buildings here were generator hubs, factories or processing plants, which all seemed to connect together into one large mainframe of technology. But there were wide open spaces as well, courtyards and plazas of metal. The dominant colour scheme here was a grimy dark red and black, which only reminded Torn of the KG it still pained him to admit he had once been a part of. But in the approaching distance, he sighted the radar tower which now stood atop the Power Room, his destination.

Before long, he had arrived outside, and he parked his cruiser close to the wall where it was out of the way of the reconstruction work. Ashelin was already waiting for him at the door, and called him over the moment she saw him, an ambivalent smile on her red lips.

"Torn," she said calmly, placing a hand on his shoulder almost automatically. "Thanks for coming at such short notice."

"Ashelin, what's this about?" asked Torn, getting straight to business.

Ashelin looked around before answering, as if she suspected eavesdroppers. "I'll tell you inside," she said, typing the access code into the door panel. This made Torn even more curious, but he understood. Clearly whatever she wanted to tell him was not meant for public reception.

They entered the Power Room together, where several computer workers were intensively typing on keyboards and monitoring on-screen readings, keeping a sharp eye and ear on everything that was happening in the city. All around there were large towers of electronic machinery and computer
hardware, glistening with a technological blue light, and in the centre of it all was Vin, a large holographic head floating in mid-air, and spinning this way and that in response to unseen coded messages that were beaming between the servers. Numbers flickered in his eyes. When Ashelin and Torn stopped before him, he halted and gave his full attention to them.

"Torn. Long time, no see," he said in his synthesised voice, which scarily resembled his original. "How you doin'?"

Torn merely nodded in curt reply. He respected Vin's knowledge, his essential role in the city grid, and all he had done for the Underground back in the day, but he could be a real pain to talk to sometimes, due to his penchant to break into rapid, endless technical monologues. Therefore Torn was determined to keep the number of words exchanged between them to a minimum.

"Torn, Vin says he discovered a strange signal a little while ago," Ashelin explained, and Vin's head nodded proudly.

"Really? What kind of signal?" Torn asked.

"Take a look," said Vin, and his head threw up several digital maps and data screens. "I detected an anomaly outside the city on our long range scanners, way away from the walls. I triangulated its position to here."

A tiny dot appeared at the top of one of the maps, with the city marked as another tiny dot in the centre. The space between them did not look so significant at this resolution, but the scale in the corner showed that it was a distance of many leagues.

"What do you mean 'an anomaly'?" asked Torn.

"I mean nothing like what we usually pick up," Vin explained. "I couldn't I.D. it. All of our own vehicles give off data readings that allow us to see its registration and who's flying it and whatnot, but this one was giving off nothing at all. Nothing I could recognise, at least."

"Hmm... well none of our vehicles would be flying that far out from the city anyway," Torn said, inspecting the marks on the map.

"Right," said Vin. "Whatever this thing is, it didn't come from us."

Ashelin and Torn looked at each other, as Torn now understood the significance of his summoning. In the past, whenever strange signals such as this one were detected outside the city, it meant only one thing with certainty: Metal Heads.

"Could be another Metal nest taking shape," said Torn knowingly.

Vin gave a nervous twitch and he blinked out for a second. Even now, Metal Heads still terrified him.

"Probably just some stragglers trying to build up strength again," continued Torn.

"Wait," Ashelin cut in. "There's more."

Torn raised an eyebrow just slightly. "More?"

"Play the sound, Vin," Ashelin ordered, and Vin's head brought up yet more graphical displays all around him.
"Sound?" Torn enquired.

"Yeah, I reconstructed the signal into audio," Vin gibbered. "I've done the best I could. There's an ideal signal-to-noise ratio, you see, and if you go too far over then you lose quality. It's even harder with our long-range scanners that picked this up, because the signal's weaker and there's even more —"

"Just play the damn thing, Vin," Torn interrupted, suppressing his irritation.

"Oh yeah, right," said Vin, and the graphs around him started to animate.

Moving lines danced up and down, accompanied by the unmistakeable buzz of radio frequencies, as Vin intensively watched them. For the first few seconds there was nothing out of the ordinary, just background static, but then there came a loud noise like a sonic boom, and the sound lines went wild. Torn looked straight at Ashelin, who had uncertainty written in her eyes as she listened as well. When the boom faded away, it was replaced with a quiet humming noise that sounded suspiciously like an engine, before that too faded away into static. Then the recording ended.

"That did not sound like Metal Heads," said Torn with a hard look on his face.

"That's what I thought too," said Ashelin seriously. "But then what do you think made it?"

"I don't know," said Torn. "Vin, did anything else happen when it appeared?"

"No, and it was only there for a second," Vin explained, "But it was enough for me to notice. Usually I can identify anything beaming around the city right away, but I've never seen anything like this before."

"Is it still there now, or has it happened again since?" Torn asked.

"Negative to both," answered Vin. "There's nothing out there right now."

"Could it be something from Spargus then?" Ashelin questioned hopefully after a moment's silence.

Torn considered it. Spargus was a town that existed out in the Wasteland, populated and ruled by hardened desert-dwellers, many of whom had once been citizens right here in Haven until they were banished by Ashelin's father, the Baron. They had thrived and really made a life for themselves out there, and the majority of Haven's current populace were still not aware that they actually existed, for many of the Wastelanders were bitter from their exile and did not choose to involve themselves in Haven's affairs anymore.

"Could be," responded Torn, rubbing his chin, "But if it is, then what are the Wastelanders doing way out there?" It was a dubious claim, but possible. "Could you get anything else out of the signal, Vin?"

Vin shook his digital head. "For all we know it could have been some indigenous creature or a weird weather pattern. We just can't tell. Oh boy, I sure hope it wasn't Metal Heads." His image was trembling again.

"Are you sure you haven't just made a mistake, Vin?" Torn asked.

At once, Vin's head began shaking around angrily. "Mistake? Mistake? I don't make mistakes! What nerve!"

"Alright, alright," said Torn irritably. He had forgotten how sensitive Vin could be about his work.
"Ashelin, have someone get in touch with Spargus to find out if they sent anyone out there recently."

Ashelin nodded, and began speaking with one of the nearby computer workers. Even though she technically out-ranked Torn, the only person in the city who did, they shared a long working history and the two of them were near enough equals on a personal level. Therefore she had no qualms about letting Torn make the orders like this sometimes, because she knew that his decisions were sound and she trusted his judgements.

"Vin, keep analysing that signal, and see if you can dig out anything else from it," Torn ordered further. "And keep listening in case it comes back."

"You got it," said Vin enthusiastically, and his head returned to work.

The investigation commenced, and Torn remained in the Power Room for a while longer in case of any immediate developments. But nothing came up. He listened to the recording several more times, but still he could not place its identity.

Before he left, Ashelin took him aside for a word in private. "Tell me honestly, Torn, what do you think this could possibly be?" she asked.

Torn pouted in thought. He was a sceptical man, and did not like having to make guesses without firm evidence. "It's probably just stray Metal Heads," he said dismissively, but Ashelin was not convinced.

"It didn't sound like Metal Heads. You said so yourself. If you want my opinion, that noise sounded advanced and intelligent. It could be dangerous, and if it gets any nearer to the city, it could be on us before we even know what it's capable of."

"Nothing's going to happen," Torn tried to reassure her. "Vin's working on it and I'm sure he'll come up with something. You know how good he is. And we're still waiting for word from Spargus. Hopefully that'll give us some answers, and everything will be fine."

"And if it doesn't?" pressed Ashelin. "We need to be ready for any possibility."

"Then I'll look into it myself," Torn answered.

But Ashelin held him by the arm and led him around the corner, out of sight. "I didn't want to say this in front of anyone else, but this has made me worry. Every time Haven looks like it has a time of peace on the way, something else always jumps on us from out of nowhere and causes us more trouble. It happened with the Metal Heads; we thought we'd beaten them but they just came back. I'm starting to think this city's cursed. What if this is the next thing?"

Torn looked at her rationally. It had surprised him that Ashelin had even said this, but he cared for her, and always listened to what she had to say. She was right to be concerned about the city’s welfare in any case. He was too.

"Ashelin, you're worrying yourself too much. There's no such thing as curses."

"I know, but... something about this doesn't feel right to me, Torn. I can't explain it. I just feel like something bad's going to happen."

Torn sighed deeply. "Look, we've got a lot to deal with right now. We've just come out of a long war, and we're all stressed out, probably still imagining things. Let's just let the men do their work for now. If Spargus and Vin don't come up with anything, I'll start a proper investigation on this. I promise."
Ashelin seemed assuaged by his answer. For now. "You're right, Torn," she said with a tired sigh of her own. "We have been through a lot. I just want to be sure that the city'll be safe."

"It will be," said Torn confidently, and he held Ashelin by the hand. It was a rare display of comfort that he reserved just for her, and one that he hoped no one else ever saw him doing. "You just leave this to me, Ashelin. I'll get to the bottom of this, one way or another."

Ashelin nodded resolutely. "Right. Thanks Torn, but keep me posted. Be safe, and good luck."

Torn left the building feeling very conflicted. He stuck to what he had said to Ashelin, that this mysterious signal was nothing to be concerned about, but he knew that her instinct was often good, and deserved to be taken seriously. The last thing he wanted to accept, however, was that there could be yet another possibly hostile force out there, ready to bear down on the city before anyone was ready for it. They were in no state to face yet another war, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

As Torn restarted his cruiser and headed back to Freedom HQ, his tactical mind was already beginning to form defensive plans and strategies which he hoped he would never have to put into action. But he forced himself to wait until Spargus responded to their message before seriously considering any of them. Hopefully it was just a small, harmless band of Metal Heads just like he thought, or the Wastelanders doing a bit of exploring, and nothing more.

In all, this was not the end of the day he had been hoping for.
Jak awoke slowly, but the moment his eyes flickered open, he was met with a hot, painfully bright glare, and his vision was a white haze. It set his mind on fire and he buried his head under his arms, too much for his fragile senses to take. It held him down oppressively, and desperate to get away from it, he heavily clawed his way forwards across ground that was hot and unfirm, no idea where he was going, just hoping blindly that he would find some relief from it somewhere. All that mattered was escape.

At last he reached the coolness of some shade, and he collapsed face-down again, out of energy and breathing hard. When he was able to, he lifted his heavy head and opened his eyes a little. He could see nothing but dazzling colours swirling before him, but his hands found something hard and solid that offered some surety. He used it to pull himself up, and rested his back against it. His limbs were leaden, pain swelled inside his head like a balloon, and concentrating on anything was next to impossible. He felt sick, and several times he lapsed in and out of consciousness without realising.

At last, when his senses began to soften and he was able to stay awake for longer than a few seconds, he opened his eyes more fully, lucid for the first time. A beach of pale sand lay before him, pristinely clear except for a long, messy trail where he had dragged himself along. It led back to a wide, blue ocean, stretching all the way to the horizon that melted into the sky far away. Not a cloud was in sight. Looking straight upwards, he saw a broad awning of large leaves casting the shadows that sheltered him, and to his left and right, smooth-barked trees grew high. He was sitting propped against one of them. His ears slowly unclogged themselves, and they met with the peaceful sounds of the breeze and the surf.

Jak sat there for a long time, just looking around him and trying to understand what this all meant. His mind was still functioning very slowly, and try as he might, he could not deduce where he was or how he had got here. In his confused state, he even considered the crazy possibility that he had died, and moved on to somewhere else, some other life.

The more he pondered it, however, the clearer things started to become. He was starting to remember little glimpses and snatches of life which were falling together into something vaguely coherent. He remembered the long journey, red skies, the air battle, the fear and anger he had felt as he saw cruisers falling from the sky...

So much death...

Exactly what had happened to himself was still blurry, but judging from where he was now, he too must have crashed his cruiser, and had somehow ended up in this place. He was clearly in a bad way, his left side felt numb, and the confusion he had felt earlier must have come from a concussion. He hoped he had no serious internal injuries. The bitter taste of blood mixed with vomit was in his
mouth, and when he wiped a hand across his face, sand and flakes of dried fluid crumbled away from his skin.

He knew he needed help badly, so he called out the first name that always came to mind.

"Daxter?" he whispered.

But his shoulder was bare, and no voice answered him like it usually would.

"Daxter? Where are you?"

He searched all over himself and looked around frantically. His fragile emotions were building, and deadly panic set in. He remembered that Daxter had been in his vehicle with him during the battle, right up to the very end, but there was no sign of him anywhere here. He had to find him! He just had to! His friend couldn't be...

He did not want to believe the dawning reality of the situation, but it was growing ever stronger with every passing second. He tried to stand up so he could search for him, but the pain in his mind and body was too great and he slid back down the tree trunk again to his seat in the sand.

"Help!" he called tearfully, but his voice was no more than a weak croak. He called several more times as strongly as he possibly could, but there was never any answer. All he could hear was the gentle wind in the trees and the washing of the waves.

He took a few minutes of rest, and though his emotions and his body were still fragile, he forced himself up, biting back the pain. It was difficult, but once he was up, he limped heavily back into the burning sunlight on the beach, shielding his eyes with one arm, and took a full look around, searching for anyone, for anything.

The sea just a few metres away was flat and vast, and along the entire shoreline, dark shapes were lapped by slow waves. Sensing clues, Jak hobbled over to the nearest one, half-buried in the wet sand.

"Daxter!" he called. But when he reached it, he could see that it was not his small friend. It was in fact a large piece of recognisable blue metal, still bearing the shield emblem of the Freedom League; it was part of a Hellcat cruiser, possibly even his own, as big as he was. With an effort, he bent down and lifted it out of the sand, hoping that he would find Daxter hiding safe and sound beneath it. But there was nothing there.

More wreckage lay along the beach, and dropping the Hellcat piece, he moved as fast as he could to the next, checking every one. He searched until he was hot and tired and his head started to pound again, but he never found his best friend. The great sense of loss was starting to soak through his body. He shouted for help, moving erratically around on the beach first one way and then the other in indecisiveness. His vision was blurring with the heat and his tears, until he could not take it any longer and had to move under the shelter of the trees again.

He collapsed against the tree roots as terrible realisation crashed down on him. For the first time in his life, he did not know what to do, and he was afraid. His best friend was lost, he was alone and wounded, and there was nobody around to help him.

He remained by that tree for a very long time, languishing in grief and despair, unable to think or speak or do anything. But the longer he waited for death to end his misery, the more his thoughts began to evolve. It took a while, but new questions and possibilities were starting to materialise in his mind as more of his memories healed themselves.
What had happened to Torn and Ashelin? The last thing he remembered from the battle, Torn's cruiser had been on fire but still flying, and though he was a vulnerable target, Ashelin had been protecting him valiantly. Maybe he had managed to regain control and fight on...

Had they won the battle? Were there any other survivors? If so, then all might not be lost for him. If any had made it back to Haven with word of what had happened, then the city had to be doing something about it. None of them could be simply forgotten about and left for dead; there could be a search and rescue party being mobilised right this second, perhaps even being led personally by Ashelin and Torn.

It was enough of a hope for him to hang on to, and it stirred him into sitting up again, looking around in the clearing of the trees. All he would have to do is wait for them to find him.

His old survival instincts began to kick in again. After all, this was not the first time he had been thrown into an unfamiliar and hostile situation with no supplies or equipment; if he could survive the Wasteland, then he could survive here too.

The first thing he did was properly assess himself and his injuries. His left side still felt tender, and upon lifting his shirt, he found a large, ugly bruise growing from his ribs. There was another on his knee, but as far as he could find, he had no open wounds.

As he continued to search himself, he became aware of how little of his equipment he had retained from the battle. To his dismay, both his Jetboard and his Morph gun were missing. Two valuable and useful possessions lost. Most of his clothing was still intact, but his boots, his armoured shoulder pad, and even his signature goggles were all gone. Fortunately, he had kept his backpack, still strapped securely to himself, and that would surely come in handy for the trials ahead. Its contents, however, were all gone too, including his communicator.

So, he had no transport, no defence, and no means to call for help, but perhaps there were other things that had washed up on the beach that could aid him? He hobbled out onto the sand again, braving the heat and following the trail he had left, first back to the Hellcat wreckage. He lifted it up by one end, and gazed at the Freedom League emblem upon it, remembering everything he had fought for and all he had been through to achieve it.

"I will survive," he said out loud. "I've done too much to die here like this."

As he dragged it back to his spot under the trees, he took a good look around, knowing he would have to become familiar with his surroundings if he were to survive here. Squinting against the sun, he saw that the beach was long and empty both ways, running parallel to the trees that seemed to form the edge of a forest. They were the same kind all the way: tall, smooth and without branches until the very top, where broad canopies of leaves spanned outwards like natural sun shades. From the beach, he could see now that each of them bore a curious feature right at their tops, like a rounded sphere of bark sitting atop the leaves. What manner of strange trees were they? He had never seen their like before.

As he lay the cruiser piece upright against one of the trunks, he sat back down and stared at it for many minutes, as if it would strike some inspiration into him. Eventually, he decided that this little clearing on the edge of the forest would be his base of operations for now. He spent a while ambling back and forth across the beach, carrying back handfuls of wreckage which he deposited in a pile. But by the fifth trip, he was starting to feel exhausted and thirsty, and realised that it might have been a mistake to collect so much stuff before he had secured a supply of water. He quickly searched through what he had collected, knowing that every soldier in the Freedom League carried a water flask, but he found none.
There was nothing else for it; he would have to brave the deeper forest in search of fresh water.

After a short rest, he ventured in a little way, until the sand beneath his bare feet turned to grass. Before he had lost sight of the sea behind him, he had already encountered more varied plant life. The trees with the strange spheres on top only seemed to grow around the coast, while further inland the trees looked more recognisable. Some were spread out widely, while others clustered closer together. Among them also grew red bushes that sprouted five or six large leaves spreading out at ground level, thick and leathery.

Keeping an eye on the direction he was heading, he dived in a little further, and the forest soon became denser and wilder. Thorny roots now crawled across the grass, slowing his progress as he took care not to step on any. Heavy branches twisted down from the trees, creating difficult obstacles to climb around. He considered turning back before he risked getting lost or stuck, but then everything stopped, and he broke through into a large clearing. A tall hill was standing before him, blanketed in long grass.

"Aha," said Jak to himself. He knew that from the top of that hill he could get a full view of the surrounding landscape, and see where he really was. "Let's head up there, hey Dax?"

He stopped himself when he realised what he had just said. He was so used to having Daxter on his shoulder wherever he went, that he realised he would probably spend quite some time talking to himself from now on until he became used to his absence. Accepting that he was gone would be neither quick nor easy. Sadly, fighting down the emotions brimming up inside him again, he scrambled up the hillside alone, taking it slowly so as not to worsen his injuries or his thirst.

When he reached the summit several metres above, the first thing he found was a lone bush growing there, full and leafy. But what caught his attention most was that it bore plump white berries, a bunch around every leaf. These were a viable food source, and he was about to instinctually start gathering some, but then he remembered something that Samos the Green Sage, the closest person who he had ever had to a father figure, had taught him in his youth.

'Never eat unfamiliar fruits you find growing in the jungle, my boy. They could be poisonous.'

Jak hesitated. Though he was well aware of the risks, he had little other choice here. There was no village to return to where plenty of safe foods would be waiting; he had to take the chance or die out here. Cautiously, he pulled one from its branch, pressed it between his fingers, and then split it open. Nothing about it looked off, and it had almost no scent. With the tip of his tongue, he tested the juice inside. It had a unique sweet flavour, and he felt no immediate ill effects. Taking the chance, he gingerly popped one half of it in his mouth.

As he sucked on it slowly, he took a look around from the viewpoint. He was slightly above tree level now, and all around him the encircling horizon met with the sea, proving that he was marooned on an island. The trees stretched out to the beach in every direction, but were closest to the shore back the way he had come. There were no other landmarks that stood out; this could be the only high ground on the island.

"OK," he said to himself, feeling a little more in control now that all was laid out before him. "So I must have washed up here after the battle. But where in the world am I?"

By now the taste was gone from the berry, so he swallowed it, and still he felt no bad reaction. Assuming they were safe to eat, he now had a source of food, but he would need more than just berries to sustain him. Perhaps there were other foods or even wild animals he could hunt somewhere deeper in the woods. He took a moment to listen from the hilltop, but could hear nothing except the light breeze over the canopies, not even a bird.
"Wait," he said suddenly, and looking down the opposite side of the hill, he sighted something amid the trees, something shimmering. He made his way down to it curiously, and as he drew nearer, his suspicions were confirmed. He had discovered a small lake hidden among the greenery, cool and clear.

"Water!" he said, bending down and cupping some in his hand. It tasted fantastic and really helped to alleviate his worries and suffering. Even his injuries were starting to feel better. He drank as much as he could, washing out the nasty taste that still lingered in his mouth, and cleaned himself up a little bit, checking his reflection in the surface.

"So I've got food and water now," he said, feeling refreshed and much surer of his chances of survival. Even better, there were more trees nearby bearing much larger fruits. He helped himself to several, washing each one he picked in the lake and then placing them in his backpack, but he had nothing suitable to carry the water in. Maybe he could use something from the wreckage he had salvaged...

For the next couple of hours, he went back and forth between the beach and the forest's edge, collecting debris, and travelling back to the lake when he needed to drink. By now he was getting to memorise the way pretty well, and began forming a vague map of the parts of the island he had explored so far in his mind. Most of the items that had washed up on the beach were just pieces of mangled material, not much good for anything. However, he was very fortunate to find one of the water flasks he had hoped for, so at least now he could carry a small amount of water around with him. But the knowledge that it had once belonged to someone who was dead now, someone who he may have known, haunted him.

The berries and the fruits he had found were really helping him to get his strength back, and tided him over for the time being, but they were not fully ripe. Therefore he would likely have to wait several days until they were, and he would need an alternative source of food to keep him going. What he really wanted was some meat, but he had seen no wild animals that he could hunt in the areas of the island he had explored so far. But then he snapped his fingers. The sea, of course! He was surrounded by a rich breeding ground of life. Having grown up in a small coastal village, he had a fair amount of fishing experience, having once caught a whole basket-load of fish from a small river in the nearby jungle with only a single net. However, that was a long time ago and he had not exercised his skills since. Could he remember the techniques he had been taught?

"Worth a shot," he said. "Now let's see what I could use..."

With sharp pieces of Hellcat metal, and some stones and branches that he had gathered from the forest, he was able to create some primitive tools: a spear, an axe, and a small knife. He was planning on doing some further exploring of the island next, and hopefully put his new tools to use, but by now the sun had passed its highest point and it was just too hot to go walking around unprotected. So instead he chose to save vital energy by remaining under the shade of the trees, and reassess his situation. He had food, he had water, but now shelter would be his next priority. Sure, the trees offered him a little, but he would need something more substantial and protective than that.

However, he had never constructed such a thing by himself before, and was not quite sure of how to proceed with the materials that he had available. This would require some creativity. Using his intuition, he began by laying down a floor of the large leaves that were growing on the bushes nearby, and built upwards from there, experimenting and improvising as he went along. He was able to construct a loose frame of branches and some of the larger pieces of salvaged metal, braced against one of the trees, and dug it firmly into the sand. It looked flimsy, but by the time he was done, a rough tent-shaped construction sat before him, just large enough for him to crawl inside of and curl up.
"Well, it's better than nothing," Jak said. "Let's see how well that holds up."

He was sure there was a much better way of building such a thing, but for now, this would have to suit his needs. He had kept the Hellcat piece with the insignia on it propped against a different tree, somewhere he could look at it whenever he felt lonely or needed reminding that he had to hold on and wait for rescue.

The sun had passed over now, the shadows were longer, and the island was not so hot anymore. Jak took advantage of the late afternoon to finally do some more exploring. From the point atop the hill, the island did not seem too large, so he made the choice to walk its perimeter.

New spear in hand, he set off along the shoreline in front of his camp, following the edge of the wood. The view was much the same when he rounded the first corner, and the next. However, he did discover a rocky area on the far side of the island, where small rock pools lay in the shallows.

"Ah, this could be a good fishing spot," he said to himself, and he cautiously waded out to them. The rocks were slippery with seaweed, and at first he could see no signs of life among them. But after waiting patiently for a minute or two, small crabs started to emerge from hiding, and he was able to catch a couple on the end of his spear. He attempted to eat his first catch raw, right there on the rocks, snapping off its legs and breaking open its shell, and it reminded him of the crabs that used to live in the waters around his old village. At last, here was a familiar taste of home, and it did wonders for his morale.

The afternoon wore on as he continued on his walk around the island, and as the sun fell lower in the sky, it began to get noticeably cooler. When it touched the horizon, Jak knew that he would have to get back to his shelter before darkness fell, otherwise he might not be able to find it again.

He had had an emotionally and physically exhausting day, but before he crawled under the shelter and tried to sleep, he sat on the sand for a while longer, watching the last of the sun's rays disappear, and assessing his progress. For not really knowing what he was doing, he would say he had done a fair job surviving on his first day here, having secured a source of water and food, and he had somewhere protected to sleep. The pain of his injuries had almost subsided as well, but the pain of the loss of Daxter still remained, and now that he was thinking about it again with nothing else to do, it threatened to swallow him up once more. Even though he knew he should accept the fact that he might be gone, a stubborn part of him still refused to believe it, and held on to some non-existent hope. There might still be a chance, however. If he had washed up here, maybe Daxter would soon too.

He also thought about Ashelin and Torn, and how long it would take to get rescued. Was there even a rescue coming for him? If not, what then would he do? Keep holding on here, or try and escape the island himself? He knew that he had to prepare for the possibility of never being found, and if he had to get home himself, could he even manage it?

When the sun finally went down, the island was illuminated by blue starlight, and it was enough to bring Jak a little peace as he gazed upwards at the many beautiful constellations that were usually hidden by city light. At last, unable to keep himself occupied any longer, he crawled into his shelter and lay down upon the bed of leaves. Though they kept him off the sand, they provided only minimal comfort.

As he lay on them, contemplating his chances of finding sleep, his mind strayed often to memories of home. But there was one more person who dominated his thoughts most of all: Keira, the sweet and beautiful green-haired girl from his village. He remembered the last time they were together in Haven, and imagined what she must be feeling now when he had failed to return from the bombing run. It made him feel terrible to be lying here, miles away from her, and unable to tell her that he was
still alive. Worse, he had hidden feelings for her that he had never had the courage to express. Were they to remain forever unspoken?

These thoughts continued to plague and torment him as he lay still, listening to the sounds of the waves washing ashore in the dark.
Searching for Answers

Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the fourth guest who left Kudos on this story. Now I am putting up Chapter 4. Let's continue the success.

It was late at night, and Torn was back in his office again, distractedly trying to get on with his heaps of paperwork by the light of a single lamp on his desk, but he had not got very far. Speculations about the origins of that mysterious signal were growing inside his head, and the longer they stayed there, the more attention they consumed. Without the answers, he could not let it be. What had made that noise on the scanner? Had there been anyone there when it had happened? Why had they never picked up anything like that before? Where did it come from? And where had it gone now?

Too many questions.

Ashelin's words about it still reverberated around in his mind, and the possibility of it bringing more trouble was something he did not want to accept, not right after the end of the war. All he and everyone else wanted now was to settle down and live the peaceful existence that they had never been granted. But Ashelin did make a valid point, and it was worth preparing for whatever this unknown signal might present, even if it did end up being nothing at all.

Two days had gone by since his visit to the Power Room. He had already checked through the guard records, and as expected, found that all personnel who had been on duty at the time the signal appeared had been stationed at their posts and performing their duties as they should have been. No aircraft had even left the hangar on that day either, except for his own when he had travelled down to the Power Room.

The mystery only deepened when Ashelin contacted him again earlier today, with word from the Wastelanders of Spargus. Sig, the king himself, had personally confirmed that none of his men had made any far journeys outside of either city in the past few days, therefore this signal had nothing to do with them. Vin had come up with nothing new either, and nor had he detected anything remotely similar since, assuring that if it had appeared again, he would have picked it up.

Torn tried to stay rational and calm as he leaned against his desk, now completely abandoning the rest of his paperwork. The two most likely possibilities had been ruled out. He had tried to convince himself that it was nothing important, but as the man in charge of Haven City's defence, he knew he would pay a heavy price if he were wrong, especially if it turned out to be Metal Heads gaining power again. It could not be ignored now. He had promised Ashelin that he would start a proper investigation if nothing new was found by today, and he was a man of his word.

He had his next steps already planned. Tomorrow, after a good night’s rest, he would mobilise an armed scout force to search the area where the sound was detected for any signs of activity. If it did come from another emerging colony of recovering Metal Heads, as was his preferred guess, then they would put a halt to its growth at once, and he could finally be content with himself again knowing that he had quashed another potential invasion before it had started.
His last job of the day was to compile the list of soldiers he would take with him on the mission. He had a few sure choices, the best of the best, and Jak, of course, was top of that list.

"Wait a minute," Torn said to himself, remembering Jak's history. He had affinities with the people of Spargus and had thus spent a good amount of time exploring in the Wasteland. Therefore he would surely know a lot about what lay outside the city. Maybe he would be able to give some clue as to what had caused this, or at least help him prepare for what lay out there. On the other hand, he may just as clueless as the rest of them.

Well, worth a shot, Torn thought, as he reached across his desk for his communicator.

Meanwhile, Jak looked up from the broomstick he was holding. He was inside Daxter's portside pub, The Naughty Ottsel, cleaning up the stray mess that still littered the floor. Crates, bullet casings and discarded papers lay all around, while Daxter reclined lazily on the bar top, a drink in one hand and his other wrapped around Tess, who sat by him with a drink of her own.

The sight of the two of them together still looked odd, Jak thought. Only a month ago, those Precursor ottsels (or whatever they were) had granted Daxter his deepest desire: not to be returned to his original human form, as Jak had expected, but to own what he called ‘a snazzy pair of pants’, which he now never took off. They had also transformed Tess into an ottsel as well, completely out of the blue and a huge surprise to everyone, not least Tess herself. Though she was still getting used to her new body, she seemed to be adjusting well, thanks in large part to Daxter, who could hardly keep away from her now. Still, he had extra reason to be happy today.

Representatives from the Freedom League had come by earlier and officially returned the building to Daxter, but they had sure left a lot of their junk behind without bothering to clear it up. Daxter thus wasted no time in making Jak the appointed janitor for this evening, while he broke open the first remaining bottle of booze he could find and relaxed on the tabletop with Tess. He had already placed an order for a glowing new figure of himself to be set up outside, as the original had suffered an unfortunate accident and been blown to pieces in the war. He was so pleased to have the place back to himself. No soldiers, no explosives, and best of all, no Torn, cramping the style of the place with his never-ending mardiness.

"Hey!" he barked when he noticed Jak had paused in the cleaning. "No slacking!"

"Aren't you going to do some work too?" Jak retorted. "This is your bar, after all!"

"Sheesh, Jak! I've already done my part!" Daxter complained. "What more do you want from me?"

"All you've done is pick up one glass, which you still haven't put away yet, and now you're just sitting around like you own the place."

"Uh, hello? I do own the place," Daxter said patronizingly. "Besides, I'm takin' a break."

"Alright then, smartass, when it's time for my break, you can do some more work. OK?"

"Yeah, whatever!" said Daxter with a dismissive wave of the hand, but he didn't really care.

"Tell me more about your adventures in the Wasteland, Daxter," said Tess with a coo, tickling Daxter under his fuzzy chin.
Jak shook his head with a sigh and reluctantly returned to his sweeping. He knew what was coming next. Daxter was going to ramble on and on about something he had done, embellish it seven ways from Sunday, and claim it all in his name just to impress Tess.

*Is this what heroes become when all their work is done?* he thought to himself. *Just some story to be retold over and over? Oh well. Let Daxter have his fun. That's just what he's like.*

Suddenly, his backpack rumbled and his communicator burst out and hovered in front of his face like an oversized insect. He straightened up and paid attention immediately at this familiar occurrence.

"Jak. You there?" said Torn's voice through the object.

"What is it, Torn?" Jak asked, sensing an exciting distraction.

"I need to see you at Freedom HQ, about something important. Get here as soon as you can."

"I'll be right there," replied Jak, and the communicator whisked itself back inside his backpack. Daxter and Tess had both heard, and now sat there looking at him weirdly.

"What a waste of time!" said Daxter, throwing up both his arms. "He always does that. Why couldn't he just tell you what it is over the communicator, instead of making you go all the way to the other side of the city, just to —"

He suddenly halted mid-rant as he realised what this meant. Jak seemed to realise it too, because he was looking at Daxter with a smug smirk, a smirk that Daxter knew and understood the meaning of all too well. A look of dread appeared on the ottsel's face, and he shook his head with increasing vigour as if he could somehow ward off what he knew was coming next.

"Dax, I'm taking a break. Get to work!" Jak ordered, and then he deposited the broomstick leaning against a nearby table and left the building.

"Noooo!" moaned Daxter loudly. "I hate cleaning up other peoples' mess! Especially when it's in my bar!"

"Don't worry, Daxie, I'll help," said Tess, sliding herself off the counter and onto the floor.

"But this is gonna really suck!" protested Daxter. "Look at the state of this place! It'll take forever!"

"Well then, why don't we make the job a little more fun?" Tess purred suggestively, and she bent over slowly to pick something up, wiggling her newly-gained tail around in the air.

"Ooooooh!" said Daxter, his ears perking up and a mischievous gleam shining in his eye.

When Jak arrived at Freedom HQ, he parked his zoomer outside and went straight up into Torn's office. There, from behind the small wall of papers, Torn explained the situation and what had happened at the Power Room, and what he had already found out from his preliminary investigations. Jak was very interested to hear this news.

"I'm leading a team out there tomorrow," Torn explained. "Can I count on you to join us, Jak?"

"Of course," said Jak straight away. If he was honest, he had been rather bored since saving the
world (again), sitting at home with little to do but sweep up Daxter’s pub. He had broken and re-
broken his high scores in the gun course many times already since all the fighting had ended, and 
now it had become too easy and lost its appeal. But this, however, sounded like a fresh adventure, 
some place new to explore and a new mystery to solve.

"Good," said Torn. "In fact, your knowledge of the Wasteland could really help us prepare for this, 
Jak. Do you have any idea what it might be?"

Jak thought for a moment, leaning back in the spare chair, before voicing his ideas. "Well, the only 
intelligent life I’ve ever encountered in the Wasteland are Metal Heads and marauders," he said, 
"And neither of those are good things."

"Hmm," Torn grunted. "My thoughts exactly. We all know the dangers that Metal Heads pose, but 
we thought they’d be all gone by now without a leader."

"Never count out a Metal Head," Jak warned. "I’ve met some pretty tough ones in the Wasteland, 
you should be thankful they didn’t join in the attack on the city. They could probably break down the 
walls by just walking through them. But there might still be some hanging around. Maybe they’ve 
got together to try and repopulate."

"Let’s hope not," said Torn, grimacing with disdain. "We’ve all had enough of Metal Heads to last a 
lifetime, but at least we know how to fight them. The marauders we have less experience with. What 
can you tell me about them, Jak?"

"They’re a pain in the ass," Jak said immediately, remembering his seemingly never-ending battles 
with the barbaric desert dwellers. "They patrol the Wasteland day and night, and pick off anything 
that passes by. I’ve never known them to come so close to Haven, but they did try to attack Spargus 
in heavy numbers once. If they’re planning on doing something similar to Haven, then we need to get 
ready for them, Torn. Once they want something, they don’t know when to quit."

"OK," said Torn, taking some notes. "Then it could be bad. Thanks for your help, Jak. At least we 
have some idea now what we could be up against. But Jak, there’s… another possibility."

Jak leaned forwards in his seat and listened curiously as Torn continued speaking at a more hushed 
volume.

"What if it isn’t Metal Heads or marauders? This signal was like nothing we’ve ever heard before, 
and Ashelin was particularly worried about it. She’s afraid there might be something else out there, 
something new. If this is the case, then we really don’t know what to expect, and it could have huge 
consequences for Haven if it goes wrong. I want to get your thoughts on this, Jak. Do you know of 
anything else that could be out there? Anything that might even have survived from your own time?"

This suggestion intrigued Jak, and had him thinking far back to times he had not revisited for quite a 
while, before being sucked through the time rift that brought him to Haven.

"Lurkers maybe?" he suggested. "They're still around, and they used to be the major threat back 
when I was a kid."

"Lurkers?" said Torn in quiet surprise and disbelief. "But they’re not dangerous. Everyone in Haven 
knows that."

"Ah, they’re not dangerous now," said Jak, "But you never knew what they used to be like. They 
were pretty much the equivalent of the Metal Heads for us back then."

"Strange," said Torn ponderingly. "It’s hard to imagine them like that. They’ve always been pretty
harmless in Haven."

"I think the Metal Head Wars must have turned them around," Jak rationalised, remembering what
the Lurker Brutter had once told him. "United with us against a bigger enemy, I suppose."

"Probably," said Torn with a little relief. "Anyway, they're not hostile today. If it is Lurkers out there,
then it's likely nothing for us to worry about."

Jak nodded his agreement, remembering how friendly Brutter had been. He used to run a fish stand
in the city bazaar, and had asked for Jak's help on a few occasions to rescue some of his Lurker
brethren imprisoned by the Baron. But he had heard nothing of him since the Baron's fall from
power. He wondered where he was now...

"The old world must have been quite different to how it is now," Torn ruminated out loud, leaning
back in his chair and staring off into space.

"Oh yeah, it was," said Jak nostalgically, leaning back in his chair also. "It's changed a lot. The area
around Haven is actually the same place I grew up in the past. You know that old house out in Dead
Town? The Sacred Site?"

Torn nodded, remembering when he had sent Jak and Daxter out to that ruined and forgotten portion
of the city to defend it from the Metal Heads.

"That was where we lived in the past. But there were no big cities like there are today, only a
number of small villages here and there. We all knew each other, and our villages were connected
with warp gates that the sages looked after, so we could travel back and forth. We didn't know of
any other settlements past ours, and Daxter and I only ever travelled so far."

"But the signal we picked up came from much further away, far beyond the edges of the known
vicinity around the city," said Torn, refocussing on the present once more. "Do you think it's possible
perhaps that some of the residents from the old world moved on and established a new home further
away?"

"Nobody I knew ever went that far when I was still living there," said Jak. "But that doesn't mean it
couldn't have happened after we left, does it? You see, we found a room full of Precursor artefacts
on top of an ancient Precursor citadel, one of them being a rift gate. When we opened it, Metal
Heads swarmed out, not that we knew what they were back then, and me, Daxter, Keira and Samos
all got sucked through. That's how we arrived here in Haven, far in the future. At least I think that's
how it happened. It was all kind of fast and unexpected. But maybe some people did escape from the
Metal Heads and set up somewhere else, but I don't know for sure."

He reminisced about all the great and good people from his village. He had never learned what had
happened to them, and they, likewise, probably never found out what had happened to their sage on
the day they all disappeared through the rift gate either. They would have been right in the path of
the Metal Heads as they came swarming out, and would have had to face them alone. Jak sadly
accepted the very likely fact that they were the first casualties of the long Metal Head Wars. But had
any of the people he knew escaped and founded a safe place somewhere else?

"But what about Haven?" Jak asked Torn. "I still have no idea how our tiny village grew into such a
huge city."

"OK, well, the story goes that Mar built Haven City here as a last refuge against the Metal Heads,"
Torn explained. "Somehow he was able to hold them back long enough to get the shield walls up,
and all the people who followed him ran inside. Back then, everyone believed that they were the
only survivors left from the war. People were afraid to ever leave the safety of the walls, because back then, as far as everyone knew, there were only Metal Head armies out there, and nothing else. All the neighbouring settlements fell, and Haven was the last."

"But what about Spargus?" asked Jak. "That just goes to show that Haven wasn't the only one left, and I didn't even know about it until recently."

"I know," said Torn, remembering the desert town of outcasts. "They did well to keep themselves a secret from the Baron. But they've already told us they weren't the cause of the signal we picked up."

"Well then," said Jak, "How about this: if somewhere like Spargus can exist without Haven knowing about it for so long, why not somewhere else too?"

That was a big question, and Torn realised the perfect plausibility of it. After all, nobody had ever really confirmed that Haven really was the last survivor from the Metal Head Wars; they had never had the chance to go out there and check... until now.

"I mean, Mar must have had enough people following him to build a whole city like this," Jak went on, "And there were never enough of us in our villages for that. They must have come from somewhere, so there had to be other settlements in other parts of the world that all came together to start Haven. Keira worked that out in her research. Maybe it is possible that in all the fighting, some survivors did manage to get away and build up somewhere else. If that's true though, I'm afraid I can't tell you who they might be. This is further away than I've ever travelled before, and a lot can change over hundreds of years."

"Wow," Torn said finally. "I hadn't thought of that. If you're right, Jak, it could rewrite the history books. This could be big."

There was a moment's silence as they each took in their shared knowledge they had pieced together, and the implications that it held. Just what would they find out there tomorrow?

"Well, thank you, Jak," said Torn at last. "Your information's been really insightful."

"Any time," replied Jak. "So what's the plan for tomorrow then?"

"I'm going to round up a team of scouts, and fly them out to the location where the sound came from," Torn explained, bringing his thoughts back to what presently needed to be done. "I'll let Ashelin know as well. Make sure you're ready by morning."

"Right," said Jak. "I'll be there."

"Get some sleep. We'll all need to be as alert as we can possibly be for whatever we may encounter tomorrow."

"I will, thanks Torn," said Jak, before leaving the office and returning back to his vehicle.

He was both anxious and excited for the mission ahead. At last, here was something to alleviate his boredom, and possibly also answer some vital questions he still had about the past. He could not wait to get started.

When he stepped outside the front door of the HQ Building, standing in its bright light, he looked around and let out a sigh. His breath rolled out of him as a cloud, for the chill of approaching winter was building in the air, but this was not what had made him sigh. Why was it that whenever he parked a vehicle somewhere, it had always been moved by the time he returned to it? It was quite the unexplained nuisance. Regardless, he walked around until he found another, and then drove it back
through the bright streets of Haven, all the way back to the port.

When he returned, he parked his vehicle outside the pub door, fully expecting it to be gone again by the time he returned to it tomorrow, but he put that out of his mind for now, because before he opened the door, he could hear some very strange noises coming from the inside. What was going on now?

He entered the building, pushing the door open cautiously. Unsurprisingly, it was still a mess of papers, overturned chairs and military equipment. Daxter and Tess had obviously achieved very little cleaning while he had been gone, but neither of them could be seen. The strange noises continued, however, emanating from somewhere near the back of the room.

Jak walked quietly and carefully over to the bar table, being sure not to tread on anything that might give away his presence. The noises became louder as he drew nearer to the back, and then as he arrived at the bar table, he could definitely identify Daxter's voice mingled in among them, making all sorts of incomprehensible murmurings.

"Daxter!" Jak shouted, aiming to surprise, and very quickly slammed his hands down on the table and thrust his head over the top to see down the other side. But he nearly drew back again at what he saw: Daxter was staring up at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, with Tess lying beneath him. All of their clothes were off, scattered in crumpled piles all around them, and they both looked very ruffled and sweaty.

For several seconds, nobody in the room knew what to say or do, until Jak shook his head slowly, chuckled to himself and said, "I should never have left you two alone, should I?"

Together, slowly and silently, the two ottsels shook their heads in response to Jak's remark. Daxter's lip trembled in an attempt to speak, but the words never came out.

"Get to sleep," said Jak. "Forget the cleaning for now. We've got a bigger task to do tomorrow, and you'll need your energy for it. And put your clothes back on, for God's sake!"

With that, he walked away into the next room and prepared himself for the night, leaving the two breathless ottsels behind to recuperate and awkwardly pull themselves back together... or apart, whatever they had to do.
Jak did not sleep well that night.

The leaves and earth beneath him were growing more and more uncomfortable, the branches that made up his shelter rustled and let in a cold draught, and whenever he did eventually drop off, he would wake again soon after to the same problems, feeling little rested. He shifted around for hours, kept awake by the chill and the forlorn memories of home that would not leave his mind in peace. Soon he became hungry, but could not be motivated to crawl out into the cold and timeless night for his meagre food supplies. It was a terrible and frustrating feeling; he was so tired but could not sleep.

As the sky began to lighten and the morning drew near, Jak doubted he had obtained more than two hours’ worth at the most, and now it would be impossible to find more. At last, he gave up and depressively crawled out into the chilly morning. A new dawn now cast itself upon the beach, a gentle wind stirred the trees, and the sky was a beautiful shade between blue and red. The first thing Jak did, blinking tiredly, was reach for one of the fruits he had gathered yesterday to appease his hunger. They seemed a little riper already, and that at least gave him some extra energy and a little more resolve.

He sat down in the sand, looking out to sea as he ate this pathetic breakfast. There was no sign of any aircraft out there in the empty sky, nothing or no one to come looking for him, and he knew that he would likely have to prepare for another day of surviving here, even though he really lacked the energy and drive to even get up. He was not looking forward to it. However, more wreckage had washed ashore in the night and was lying spread out across the sand, just like yesterday. Maybe the ocean had provided more useful objects that could help him.

He assessed his priorities; once he was done eating, he would scavenge for more materials and food before it got too hot, and then use what he had found to keep him going and try to improve his shelter as best he could, make it stronger and more comfortable. If he ran out of energy, so be it. Maybe he would be so tired that he could finally just collapse and get the sleep he had missed.

When the time came, he pushed himself to his feet, picked up his spear and the water flask, and said out loud, "OK, let’s get to work."

He planned out his route: he would follow the coastline around to where the rock pools were, collecting up debris as he went, and bring back some fresh crabs if he could catch any more, and if he was lucky, maybe some fish too.

Stepping out onto the bright sand, Jak surveyed the strewn wreckage all down both sides of the beach, and his eye was drawn immediately to a particularly large piece about a hundred paces to the right. As he came near it, he discovered it to be a grey padded seat, and recognised at once that it had
come from another Hellcat Cruiser. It was intact and in good condition, and after his bad night of little sleep, this would be just what he needed to make a more comfortable bed for himself.

But what were those next to it? There seemed to be regular depressions in the thick sand leading away from the chair, looking suspiciously like footprints. At first he thought they must be some of his own from yesterday, but then he realised that the tide had washed them away in the night, and upon closer inspection, these looked fresher and deeper than any of his did. What was more, they led up the beach into a spot in the trees where he was sure he had not yet ventured.

Jak's heart jumped. Could it be...?

Someone else could have survived the battle and washed up here, and if they had arrived on a piece of a Hellcat Cruiser, they might even be someone he knew.

All tiredness forgotten in an instant, he chased the prints up the beach until the sand met the forest's edge, but there they disappeared in the undergrowth. If someone had walked through here, they must have gone straight into the woods, and might still be in there.

"Hey!" he called out as loud as he could. "Hey! Anyone here?"

The forest gave no answer, but the possibility of company was too great to ignore, and he had to find out for sure. Tightening his grip on the spear, he plunged into the trees, searching for any unnatural-looking disturbances in the undergrowth. Every few steps he would stop, look and call out, listening for any response or movement, but he could never detect any. If anyone were here, they were either too far away to hear or were deliberately trying to avoid him.

He trekked deeper still into the trees, and soon was at a part of the island he had not yet explored. The brush was growing thicker until he was wading through it at waist-height. He had no idea exactly where he was, or if his assumptions were even correct, but he was driven to not give up so easily, and searched on.

Suddenly he broke through into a shaded clearing where the trees were thick all around. A column of sunlight beamed through a single break in the canopy, falling upon another small lake, its surface still and calm. He must be right at the island's heart. This place felt strange and peaceful. Too peaceful. There were no signs of life or any movement at all, and not a breath of wind. Even the ocean waves could not be heard.

Jak called out one last time in the enclosed space. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

His voice broke the insulated silence like a gunshot, but the silence closed back in again. He waited, starting to accept that he might have let his imagination run away with him, and that he was still all alone here. But then a distant answer came.

"Hey! Who is that?"

Jak's heart leapt in his chest again. That voice was one he knew. "Torn?" he shouted. "Is that you?"

"Jak?"

There was a rustling off in the trees to the left, and then Jak caught a glimpse of a figure fighting through the leaves.

"Over here!" he shouted.

The figure followed his voice, and very soon, Jak was standing face to face with none other than
Torn. He looked bruised, his uniform was messed up and his skin was red with sun exposure, but the man was very much alive and broke into a relieved smile.

"Jak. It is you," said Torn, and they both clasped each other's hand, happy to see a familiar face again.

"In the flesh," Jak replied, smiling back and feeling truly optimistic for the first time in over a day.

"I saw you go down into the ocean," Torn said. "I thought you were a goner for sure."

"So did I, to be honest," said Jak darkly, "But it looks like we've both made it out alive. What happened to you?"

Torn tried to talk again, but his voice cracked dryly. Jak offered him his flask of water, and Torn downed the entire contents.

"Man, I'm dehydrated," Torn croaked.

"Drink up," said Jak, and the two of them took more water from the lake at their feet.

Once he had drunk enough, Torn looked all around him. "So where in the hell are we?"

"On some island somewhere," Jak explained. "That's literally all I know. I've been here for a day already, just trying to survive. There's no one else here apart from us, as far as I know."

"Damn," said Torn, slumping his shoulders. "So we're stuck here?"

"Afraid so," said Jak apologetically, "But I've built up a small camp back by the beach. Come on, I'll show you."

Jak led Torn back through the trees, searching for the areas he was more familiar with. The woods here were tangled and thick, and they had to force their way through in places. But soon the shape of the hill loomed up before them, they climbed it and Jak described the layout of the island, and where he had found supplies of food and water.

"Come on, the camp's this way. And tell me what happened to you after the battle."

As they descended the hill and pushed back through the dense woodland on the path to the coast, Torn told his story.

"You probably remember that I took a few hits and my cruiser caught fire," he began. "I'd lost flight controls, but you and Ashelin were doing a pretty good job of defending me, if I do say so."

Jak gave a proud smile to himself as this gap in his memory was now filled.

"But then I heard Ash shouting over the radio that you were going down, and I saw a glimpse of you falling through my window. We couldn't believe it had happened, but the enemies weren't letting up and we had no time to try and save you. They kept coming at us but my guns still weren't working, so Ash had to hold them off on her own. I tried calling for more backup but my radio cut out. I couldn't do anything. And then..."

Torn trailed away into momentary silence and came to a stop, finding it difficult to continue.

"What?" Jak prompted, turning back, but he could sense the terrible news that would come next.

"They got her," Torn said flatly. "Ash got shot down too."
They both came to a full halt. "No..." muttered Jak, as another heavy blow of grief struck him.

"I saw it," said Torn regretfully. "They blasted her right out of the sky, and she went down in pieces."

"Shit..."

Jak was finding this hard to process. First Daxter, and now Ashelin; two friends who he had never dreamed of losing were now gone. After everything they had been through together, how could they both end like this? This was just wrong. He looked to Torn, and could tell that he was making a great effort to keep control of his emotions. The two of them had been close, at least as close as he had been with Daxter, likely more.

"Torn, I'm sorry," he said simply.

Torn tried to shrug it off. "Yeah..."

The two of them stood in awkward silence beneath the trees for a few moments, deep in reverent thought and not knowing how to proceed.

"Then what happened?" Jak asked finally.

"They came for me next," continued Torn gloomily. "I was a sitting target, and it was all too easy for them. Luckily I was already losing gradual altitude and didn't have as far to fall. I survived the impact, but the cruiser had had it. It sank into the ocean pretty quickly, but the fire had melted the seat off its foundations and that somehow stayed afloat, so I held onto that. Then the tide took me away from the battle fast and I drifted through the night and all the next day, searching for Ashelin or you or anyone else who was alive. I couldn't find anyone... and this morning I woke up here."

He stopped, knowing there was no need to continue.

"Well, at least we're still alive," said Jak, looking to the positives. "But hey, if we made it then maybe Ash did too."

"I don't know, Jak. You didn't see it happen."

"But you know how tough she is; if there's anyone who could survive a battle like that, it'd be her."

Torn gave a mournful half grin. "Yeah, that's true. It'd be a goddamned miracle though."

"I know how you feel, Torn," Jak tried to say consolingly. "I lost Dax too."

"Oh man," said Torn, looking up directly once more. "Sorry."

Torn never thought he would miss Daxter, not after all the annoyance he had caused him, but now it had actually happened, he was surprised how much he did. Still, he kept his words about it to a respectful minimum; he had never been very good with the compassionate stuff, as everyone in his Underground movement, Daxter included, had made very clear to him on numerous occasions.

They resumed their walk in silence until they arrived at Jak's camp. Torn looked around the sparse area with a grim look on his face, especially when he saw Jak's flimsy attempt at building a shelter. He was not looking forward to having to live here.

"It's the best I've been able to do so far," Jak explained. "With that seat you brought with you, we can at least make things a bit more comfortable. I'll go get it. Make yourself... uh, feel at home, I
Torn sat down on the grassy sand with nothing to do, nothing but dwell painfully on the losses he had suffered, until Jak returned with the seat, hauling it into the camp and laying it down beside the shelter.

Torn doubted, even with this seat to lie on, that his nights here would be any easier. The loss of Ashelin still plagued his mood and brought him down, adding to the misery he knew he would feel for as long as he stayed here on this island, separated from his home and his people.

"Help yourself to some food if you want," Jak said. "I found some fruits that grow in the woods, and yesterday I caught some crabs in a rock pool on the other side of the island."

Torn picked up one of the fruits and sniffed it despondently, before putting it back down. Even though he had spent a whole day adrift at sea without food, he just did not feel like eating right now. Come to think of it, he felt no motivation to do anything, except for figuring out how to get home as quickly as possible.

"Alright Jak," he said, "I think it's time we asked the most important question. How are we going to get the hell off this island?"

"Straight to business as always, huh Torn?" said Jak with a small smile, but Torn was very serious. "Well, I'm hoping the city'll send someone out to find us. If not, we'll have to find our own way back somehow."

Torn grumbled, not pleased with these vague and limited options. "That's what I thought. Jak, I have no intention of ending my days here, but if we're going to sit around waiting for a rescue, shouldn't we have some sort of way of letting them know we're here? You still got your radio?"

"No, I lost it," Jak answered.

"Alright, that makes both of us. Guess we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way, and draw out a message in the sand. That way, any cruisers who come looking for us will see it from above and know we're here. Or we could put something on top of that hill."

"Or both," Jak added. It seemed obvious now, but these were things he had never thought of doing. Just like back in the city, Torn's quick mind was already searching for an immediate solution to their situation, and Jak was feeling very appreciative for his company already.

"Yeah, that'd give us a better chance," said Torn, "But it would take more work. Not only that, but we'll have to get more food for us both as well, and build up that shelter."

"OK," said Jak, impressed with Torn's quick initiative. "By the way, did you manage to keep anything useful after the crash?"

Torn responded by proudly drawing out his signature curved knife, strapped securely into a sheath on his back.

"Excellent," said Jak. "That'll really come in handy."

"I'll start work on restructuring the shelter," said Torn, sheathing his knife again.

"And I'll go round to those rock pools and try to catch some more crabs," Jak added.

This was good. They were already planning well together as an efficient, organised team. Torn's
military training had prepared him well for just such scenarios, and Jak was feeling a lot better about their chances of survival now he had someone to help him.

And so, Jak set off to do his fishing while Torn re-arranged and strengthened the shelter. He harvested more branches to build proper walls, incorporating segments of salvaged metal for rigidity, and stripped many of the large leaves to lay across them and fill in the gaps.

Jak too was having success over by the rock pools, for they were once again full of crabs; he speared many and brought them back to the camp to find a very impressive-looking half-built new shelter.

"Wow, you're really doing a great job," he said.

"Thanks," replied Torn. "They taught us survival skills back in KG training, in case we ever got stranded outside the city walls. Who'd have thought they'd come in handy now, huh? Besides, it would never last the way you built it."

"Just don't exhaust yourself," Jak warned. "It's getting hotter now, and you don't look like you could take much more sunlight."

Torn stopped briefly, a look of sad acceptance on his burned face. "How bad does it look?"

Jak tried to be polite, but Torn was already looking very red from his day spent exposed at sea. "Just try and stay in the shade," Jak advised.

For the rest of the day, they worked together to improve their quality of life on the island. Progress slowed somewhat as the sun was at its highest, but once it became cooler, Jak drew a large 'SOS' along the beach so as to alert any rescue vehicles who might fly over to their presence. Torn finished his work on the shelter as twilight loomed; it was now much sturdier and large enough to accommodate them both with room to spare. Torn had struggled with incorporating the Hellcat seat, however; in the end he had dismantled half the shelter and rebuilt it around the seat. Though it was large, there was really only enough room on it for one of them at a time, and its curved shape made any modifications difficult.

He discussed it with Jak before nightfall, and they settled on sharing it; both of them were tired and exhausted after their hard day of work and surviving, so they would split usage of it across the night. Jak let Torn take it first, as thanks for all the great work he had done on the shelter.

As the sun’s downward course was almost over, they spent the last hours of dying light eating crabs and fruits beneath the trees, reminiscing about their past and speculating about their future.

"What do you think's happening back in the city?" Jak wondered aloud.

"I hope everyone's coping without us," Torn answered distantly, staring out over the darkening waters. Even in the fading light, Jak could see just how shattered and sorrowful he looked. "It sucks, you know. I'm supposed to be the one protecting them. I hate being stuck here and not being able to do anything."

Jak could understand. As the frontman in charge of Haven’s defence, he knew how devoted Torn was to his duties; he prided himself on always having something to do and always seeing to it expeditiously. Being stranded here on this island must be more unbearable for him than he showed. Truth be told, Jak was finding it hard to adjust too. This island was just so empty.

“We’ve got to get back there,” Torn said with his trademark determination.

"I hear you, Torn," said Jak. "They've got to be looking for us."
"But that doesn’t mean they’ll find us,” said Torn more lucidly, casting an eye to the SOS message laid out on the beach with a new sense of futility. “Let’s be realistic, Jak. We’re in the middle of nowhere, even we don’t know where, and they might never even come close. We need to start considering our own escape plans, Jak. I think we should build a boat as soon as we can, because I don’t want to spend any longer here than we have to."

It was a rational idea and Jak agreed with it, but they were both too exhausted to delve into it earnestly right now. "Let’s think about it tomorrow," Jak promised. “It’s been a long day and we’ve worked hard.”

Torn nodded. “Yeah. It has been a long day.” He exhaled loudly through his nose and lowered his head. Jak could tell it was a gesture inspired not just by exhaustion.

“You holding out alright?” he checked.

Torn took a moment to answer. “Yeah, I’ll survive. It seems I always do. But still, even if we do get back to the city somehow… I don’t know how life’s going to be without Ashelin…”

There was another break of mournful silence, one which Jak was unsure of how to counter. He felt the loss as well. “Torn, I’m sorry,” he said again, but then he figured that what Torn needed the most right now was a moment alone. “Why don’t you try getting some sleep? You can take first go in the chair, if you like.”

Torn still frowned, his eyes down in the sand, but the day’s last light revealed a softer feeling on his face. "Yeah, thanks Jak. See you tomorrow."

With that, he crawled inside the shelter and tried to get comfy, while Jak stayed awake outside a while longer, moving further out onto the beach to watch the moon rise like a great pale eye over the sea. But he was concerned about Torn. The Freedom League commander was usually so focussed, driven and determined, but in his sorrow just a few moments ago he seemed lost and languished. Despite his tough and rugged attitude, Jak knew that he was taking this hard. Torn could be cold and stern, but he was by no means heartless. He understood his frustration and his impatience to get home, and he very clearly missed Ashelin, even if he wasn’t showing it as much as he should.

Jak missed her too, and he found himself thinking now about their most memorable moments together, the good and the bad. He had fought alongside her as an equal in many battles, watching each other’s back and kicking ass together. She had pointed a gun in his face out of moments of aggressive suspicion and mistrust, back in the tenuous context of the Metal Head Wars when all he’d really cared about was exacting his revenge on her father the Baron, in any way he could find. But once they had got to understand one another properly and cemented their allegiance and friendship, she had also treated him with respect and dignity, admiration and compassion. She had even fought tooth and nail to prevent his unjust banishment to the Wasteland, back when the city was looking for someone to blame for all the pain and conflict that was suffered, risking her own reputation and seat in the council. Even though she ultimately failed to stop it, she still saved his life, slipping him a tiny homing beacon upon his exile to ensure that he would be found. If it were not for her, he very probably would not be here right now, and his bones would be just another buried artefact in the desert.

With this realisation, he suddenly gained a much deeper appreciation for her and all she had done for him. But it hurt that he only saw this properly now she was gone and he was unable to express himself to her. She had certainly shown her appreciation for him on more than one occasion, most so in the brief, tender moment they had shared right after he had destroyed their final enemy outside the desert city of Spargus. He replayed the meeting in his mind, reliving the rewarding smile on her lips and the gentle touch of their faces.
Had she meant anything special by that at all? Or had it just been a spur-of-the-moment reaction? They had never really spoken about it afterwards, nor had she done anything like that since. It was tantalising, for now he might never know the answer. Whatever it had meant though, Jak still remembered it fondly, and it was one of his most treasured memories of her.

He lay down in the sand and looked up sadly at the emerging stars for a while longer.
Torn lay on his back, looking up at the branches interwoven above him.

Some time ago, Jak had apologetically woken him from his sleep in the Hellcat seat so that he could take his agreed turn. Torn obliged, but since then, he had lain on the leaves inside the cramped shelter unable to get back to sleep, listening to the sounds of Jak's quiet snores and the distant waves outside. He was chilly too, and no matter how many leaves he buried himself under, he could not stay comfortably warm. This was hopeless.

Just as the sunlight began to appear, he gave up and crawled outside, his itchy eyes squinting against the opening sky. The sunrise was evolving into another beautiful spectacle, but Torn had little interest in it. He stood up fully and stretched outwardly, feeling lethargic and miserable. He was hungry again, and ate another of the fruits from their gathered supply, slowly and deliberately, and washing it down with cold water. It was an unsatisfying meal.

He sat down with his back against a tree, still tired, bored already, and paying only minimal attention to his surroundings. This place was so empty, so remote, so lifeless. With nothing else to do, his focus turned inwards, trying to think of what else could be done to ensure their survival here. He figured it was the best use of his time. They knew where they could find food and water, check. They had somewhere to sleep (or try to sleep), check. The immediate priorities were covered, but what else could there be to do?

Fire. That was it. Fire would provide them both with warmth and a means to cook the food and heat the water that they found. But that would not be easy. Back home in Haven, he was used to having fire at the flick of a switch, but out here, everything that they took for granted had to be done manually, costing valuable energy. Reduced to such primitive methods of living, it was something that would take a lot of time to adapt to, especially for him.

Escape also came to the fore of his mind. Today, he thought, he and Jak should dedicate their time to working out a means to get themselves back home, whether that be through signalling their presence here on this island, or building some sort of boat that could take them back and braving the vast, open waters. Out on the sand lay their SOS message, though a good portion of it had been erased by the rising tide in the night. Torn felt insulted, as if the island itself were sabotaging their aspirations, like it wanted to keep them its prisoner. Even the early rising of the sun prepared to further torture his already burned face.

Though he was an intelligent and principled man, Torn could not ignore the doubtful feelings pressing down on him. But he kept telling himself stubbornly that if he could just keep it together, he knew he could pull through this. It would be a struggle though, especially after losing Ashelin. He still could not believe that she was gone. His partial night’s sleep had done nothing to heal the hurt. She was the one woman he respected and cared most for in the world, and there were still a lot of
things he needed to say to her. Things he needed her for…

As he contemplated sadly within the clearing, his eyes drifted automatically out to the growing light upon the ocean. At first, he did not register the dark shape floating around out there, and when he did see it, he thought little of it, for he knew it would only be another piece of wreckage from the battle. Parts were washing up on the shore all the time, and there was nothing he could do but wait until it reached the land. He hoped it was another Hellcat seat, so that he and Jak could both sleep more easily. But as the light grew and it drifted nearer, he realised that this was not just any old piece of metal.

Something in him yanked at his attention, the half-eaten fruit fell from his hand, and he leapt up to his feet with an energy that had not existed a few seconds ago. He strained his vision to make sure he wasn’t imagining it, but yes, he could see the unmistakeable forms of two figures slumped over that object in the sea.

"Jak!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

Jak awoke in the chair with a snort, and looked around suddenly. He could hear the urgency in Torn’s voice, but from inside the shelter, he could not see what the cause of it was. Was a rescue finally approaching? Or was it something else?

When he crawled out of the shelter, Torn had already run half way down the beach and was fast approaching the waterline.

"What are you doing?" he called after him.

"There’s someone out in the water," Torn shouted back. "Hey!" he called to the object in the sea. "You alright out there?"

No answer or movement came back, nothing to indicate a sign of life.

Jak, realising the possibilities that this could hold, scrambled up and hurried after Torn, who was now up to his knees in the cold water, wading out to whatever was drifting near. Jak followed him in, and they were swimming by the time they came within touching distance of the wreckage. Now they were this close, they could see what it really was, and it stunned them. They recognised the two figures. Clinging onto a large piece of blue metal was a Freedom Fighter, most of his armour stripped off, and the second was none other than Ashelin herself, still in her best military uniform. Both were asleep or unconscious, and looked to be very malnourished.

"Ashelin!" said Torn, shaking her by the shoulder as he tried to keep himself afloat. But she did not stir. Nor did the Freedom soldier.

"We’ve got to get them back to land," said Jak, fighting against the slow tide.

It took most of their energy to swim around to the other side of the wreckage and push it back to the island until it met with the sand. Ashelin and the Freedom Fighter, now recognised by Torn as a soldier named Olto, still had not awoken when they got there, and Torn was worried. He turned Ashelin over, and saw that half her face was crusted with dried blood from a nasty-looking cut across her forehead.

He shook her again desperately. "Come on, Ash! Don't do this to me!" He held two fingers against her neck. "There's still a pulse," he said with relief. "We can save them."

He summoned his last strength to lift up Ashelin and carried her protectively back to the camp, while Jak staggered along in his footsteps bearing Olto over his shoulder. Back at the camp, they lay them
both down upon some of the large leaves and tried to assess them for injury and further vital health
signs. Torn pulled off his soaking wet shirt and used a corner of it to dab across Ashelin's skin, trying
to clean up her wound. She groaned and moved her head unconsciously at the touch, but then her
eyes fluttered open slowly.

"Jak, she's waking up," Torn said. "Ashelin, can you hear me?"

The first thing Ashelin saw was Torn's concerned face coming into focus above her. She nodded
faintly in response to his question, groaned and tried to sit up, but Torn kept her on her back.

"Take it easy, Ash," he said quietly.

Then Ashelin's bleary eyes widened with recognition. "Torn...? You're alive?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Torn answered in a whisper of care, and he allowed Ashelin to grasp hold of his
hand. Her grip was weak, her usual strength and sureness gone, but there was a faint glimmer of
happiness on her face, happiness tainted with confusion.

"What's happened?" she asked weakly.

"I just pulled you out of the sea," said Torn. "Don't worry, you're safe now. But just hold still a
moment."

He very carefully dabbed at the gash across her head some more, making sure it was as clean as he
could make it, but Ashelin winced with every touch.

"That's gonna take a while a heal," Torn said grimly. "Might even leave a scar. Are you hurt
anywhere else?"

Ashelin tried to raise her other arm, but it felt heavy and inflexible. "My arm's a little..."

Torn held it delicately and tried to feel for any bones that were out of place. "I don't think it's
broken," he said, "But best to keep it still for a while, just to be sure."

She blinked heavily at him as she regained more of her senses, and Torn kept his eye on her. Though
her face looked beat up, just seeing it again was the greatest thing that he could have wished for. He
just could not believe, having thought her lost, that she was still alive, though only just. She and Olto
had clearly spent all the time since the battle adrift at sea without sustenance; that was three whole
nights and two whole days.

"Here, keep drinking this," he advised, and he fed Ashelin some water from the flask. She drank as
much as she could, but coughed up a lot. Her throat was so rough it felt like sandpaper, but the water
she swallowed washed that feeling all away until she could actually breathe painlessly again.

Then Jak's face loomed into view beside Torn's. "Hey, Ashelin," he said simply. "You feeling OK?"

Ashelin nodded bravely, but she was concealing the pain and disorientation that she truly felt. Then
she rolled her head to the side and found Olto lying there, making very slow unconscious
movements.

"Is he alright?" she asked.

"I think so," said Jak.

Jak moved back to Olto and gave him another check over, while Torn allowed Ashelin to sit up a little, pulling her by her good arm. She looked around, semi-lucid and confused, at the patterns of sunlight dancing through the trees, and the odd bits of scrap lying around in the white sand.

"Where... are we?" she asked.

"Uh, we don't really know," Torn answered spiritlessly. "Hate to break it to you, but we've been washed up on this island in the middle of nowhere. And we're stuck here."

"Olto's fine," said Jak. "I don't think he has any serious injuries, but we'll check with him when he wakes up."

Ashelin looked relieved. She was starting to remember their time floating together on the ocean.

"What happened to you both?" Torn asked. "I thought I saw you explode at the end of the battle."

"Uh... I don't really remember all too well," Ashelin said, contorting her face in concentration, "But I know the two of us were out in the ocean for a long time. Do you have any food? I'm starving."

Jak reached over and handed her one of the large fruits, splitting it apart for her. She bit into it, and felt its sweet juiciness in her mouth. It was so good to taste something again after so long, even if it was only basic.

Very soon, Olto was brought round too. Just like Ashelin, he was weak and confused, but was relieved when he saw her nearby, apparently well, awake and alert. Then his eyes found Jak and Torn.

"Commander," he groaned with a pitiful salute, still on his back.

"At ease, soldier," Torn said casually. "No use for formalities out here."

"What do you mean, commander?" he asked.

"Look around you at where we are."

Olto did, and groaned again. "Let me guess. Shipwrecked?"

"Got it in one," said Jak. "But are you feeling OK? Are you hurt?"

"Just a headache," replied Olto. "I've had worse. I'll make it."

Once both Ashelin and Olto were feeling stronger and clearer of mind, Torn and Jak fully debriefed them about their predicament, and the full weight of it all finally hit them. Though they had made it out of the battle alive, how would they fare here? What costs had their sacrifice had on the mission, and the war at large? Would the city be able to survive and carry out the final plans without them? It was a grim and uncertain prospect to contemplate, and having no way to find out made it all the worse for them.

For Torn and Jak, it was a great surge of morale to find both Ashelin and Olto alive and to be with them again. However, they also knew that this would mean a lot more work from now on; more food would have to be obtained now to sustain all four of them, and the shelter would again have to be further enlarged so there was space for them all.

Luckily, they now had just the thing that could help them do that, as they went and retrieved the large piece of wreckage that Ashelin and Olto had brought with them. It was an entire half of a
Hellcat cruiser, kept afloat by a pocket of air trapped inside, and it contained further useful equipment which had somehow survived the crash. For one thing, there were still seats attached to the underside, which could be made into extra beds for them all. There was also a small first aid kit, which would definitely be helpful. For the time being, Ashelin and Olto both took a painkiller for their injuries, and Torn applied some disinfectant and a bandage across the cut on Ashelin's head. She also revealed that she had retained her eco pistol, which remarkably still worked. Olto had held on to his pocket knife, and his lunchbox, which even though the contents were all gone, would still serve as a useful container for storing or carrying other supplies in.

Throughout the rest of the day, Torn and Jak got to work while Ashelin and Olto rested and recovered. Though they were both feeling stronger and ready to help after a few hours, Torn was concerned about their injuries, and insisted they remained comfortable. It was all they could do to pass the time by asking Torn questions while he worked on extending the shelter, such as what kind of things were on this island and what he could remember from the battle, piecing their memories together to complete the whole picture.

Meanwhile, Jak went around to the fishing pool again before midday, and was very fortunate in catching his first fish on the island. He brought it back and displayed it proudly, until Olto pointed out that they could not eat it raw. However, with Ashelin's pistol, they were able to use it to start a small fire, and Jak set about cutting the fish into pieces with Torn's knife so they could cook them properly. It was the first hot meal any of them had had in days, and it did much to replenish their strength and resolve.

As the afternoon progressed, Jak took Olto and Ashelin for a walk around the island, while Torn finished off the extensions on the shelter. He took them through the woodland to the hill, and showed them all around from the top, just as he had done with Torn. Then he took them to the site of the lake, pointing out the fruit bushes and the other sources of food, gathering some extra supplies while they were there. Lastly, he showed them the rock pools on the other side of the island, and how to use the fishing spear he had made.

Ashelin's and Olto's first impressions were not optimistic, and a little daunting. Like Torn, they were used to the busy life of running a large city, where there were always jobs to be done and people to manage, and especially in Haven's case, constant hostile threats to repel. On this island, however, there were none of those things, nor any of the comforts of home that they had become accustomed to. Even the pure, undisturbed silence felt unnatural.

But by evening, all four of them were gathered around a fire in their camp, tucking in to some freshly cooked crabs. They shared in the taste and the positive feeling that it brought, for a moment forgetting the despair that had hung over them all earlier. Coming together like this had strengthened them as a unit, preventing them from sinking any lower into depression, and they chatted with each other pleasantly over the food.

"You know, I've never cared much for seafood before," said Olto, "But this isn't bad at all."

"You said it," said Ashelin, who was also savouring every bite.

"It's great to eat this cooked," said Torn, "Because I don't think I could have coped with eating raw crab for much longer."

"You see?" said Jak. "What I told you back in Haven was true. If you want cooked food, all you need to do is find a woman!" he joked.

"Hey!" protested Ashelin, but she could not prevent herself from breaking into a laugh with the others.
An unspoken, shared realisation spread through the small group. Despite their bleak situation, against all odds, they were actually having fun here, and it warmed them more than the fire ever could.

However, after the laughter died away, there was a short moment of silence.

"But still..." said Jak in an entirely different tone, "...being stuck out here... it's still hard to take in, you know..."

Everyone else immediately understood. The enclosing dread of isolation kept returning, no matter how they tried to distract themselves from it. It was a heavy and powerful feeling that could not be put into words, being so cut off from home with no way of knowing what was happening there. As the governor of Haven, Ashelin was feeling it the most; she felt a duty to the city, and sitting here not doing anything to help or protect it felt like abandonment.

"Yeah..." said Olto slowly, resting back on his arms. "Can't believe this is happening to us. Sure is lucky we all ended up here together. Do you think we'll ever make it back home?"

"We've got to try," said Torn determinedly. "If a rescue never finds us, I'm sure as hell not going to sit around here waiting to die."

"Don't say that," said Ashelin strongly. "None of us is going to die here. We're gonna get off this island, and we're all gonna get back home, no matter what. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said everyone else, but Jak suddenly became very quiet and subdued. Ashelin's words had struck him more than she realised, and his head drooped low on his shoulders. Ashelin, who was sitting directly opposite him, had her attention drawn.

"Jak? You OK?" she asked. But then she realised something about him that had been staring her in the face all day, but she had somehow failed to notice until now. He looked... incomplete.

"Jak... where's Daxter?"

All happiness turned to sustained sorrow once more. Torn, who already knew the answer, looked anxiously to Jak, but remained silent, thinking that this was something that Jak himself had to answer.

"He didn't make it," Jak said sadly. Admitting it like this really seemed to make it all the more real, and it smothered the positive mood.

Ashelin anticipated that he would say that, but it still struck her hard to hear the words come out of his mouth. "I... I'm sorry, Jak... that's terrible..."

Just like Torn, she did not believe that she would ever miss Daxter that much if he were to disappear, but now that it had really happened, the power of her feelings took her by surprise.

"I remember him," said Olto reverently. "He always used to ride around on your shoulder, didn't he? Poor lad." Though he had not got to know the ottsel as well as the others present, he shared his sympathy with Jak and gave his condolences.

Another moment of sad silence fell among them, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the never-ending wash of the shore.

"I still don't know how they could have got the jump on us like that," said Torn, wisely trying to change the focus onto something else, and the battle was all he could think of right now. "It's almost like they knew we were coming."
"We lost so many people," said Ashelin. "Our people. I wonder how many made it back..."

They all sat in quiet contemplation for a moment, remembering the ones they had lost, and the ones who they may never see again.

"I miss my family," said Olto. "They probably think I'm dead. I wish I could tell them I'm still here."

"You will," Ashelin assured him kindly. "We'll get out of here, and you'll see your family again, Olto."

"Thanks, governor," said Olto with an appreciative smile. "But hey, we've still got each other for the time being, haven't we? I don't know about you guys, but I can't think of better company to have on a desert island."

The others looked at him, smiling warmly at his compassion.

"I mean, I'm just a grunt, but you three practically run the city, and we all look up to you in the ranks."

"Well, we're all equals out here, pal," said Torn. "Better get used to the feeling."

They chatted together for a while longer, managing to maintain steady spirits, until the sun went down. They sat there under the trees, red with falling sunbeams, and then stars appeared high above them, twinkling into existence one by one. Olto and Ashelin looked up in wonder as the night set in.

"Wow, look at this!" said Olto with wide eyes.

"I never knew there were so many stars," Ashelin muttered serenely. "We never get to see them back in the city."

Far from Haven's eternal light, the beautiful constellations were allowed to shine unimpeded, and as the night grew deeper, they only became more spectacular. It was like a whole other ocean existed above their heads, an ocean of faraway worlds that they could never know. But with the darkness came cold. Though the fire provided some warmth, the chill of the night could not be banished. They each had only the clothes on their backs and nothing else to change into. Soon they were shivering.

"We should get to sleep soon," Jak suggested at last.

"I wonder what the time is," said Ashelin.

"Let's just settle for late," said Olto. "I agree with Jak. Let's sleep. It's been a tough day."

Together, the four friends prepared themselves for the night and then crawled into the shelter together. Torn had done a good job making the whole thing big enough to accommodate them all, but despite how tired he was himself, he generously gave up his Hellcat seat to Ashelin, which she was grateful for. In fact, the other men chivalrously agreed that she should have it too.

And so together, they all tried to settle down for a good night's sleep, feeling secure and safer in each other's company. But they had only just begun to experience the full vigour of the mysterious island they occupied, and many more challenges awaited them in the very near future.
First Contact

Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

Chapter Notes

Author's note: More kudos means more chapters. Please keep them coming. Also, today happens to be my birthday.

It was early morning, and a dozen Freedom Fighters were standing to attention in the hangar, waiting for the arrival of commander Torn. They were part of a specially prepared scout force, and they had received orders to be ready for an important mission that lay ahead of them. The only sound throughout the room as they waited was the constant metallic hum of the Hellcat cruisers behind them, all prepped and ready for flying.

Then the doors at the end of the room slid open with a hiss, and Torn entered followed by the hero Jak, who would also be taking part in this mission, with Daxter on his shoulder as always.

Torn approached the waiting troops and walked up and down the line. "Men, you are some of the finest scouts in the Freedom League," he began. "That is why I have chosen you for this assignment. We are to embark on a journey far beyond the city limits, tracking an unknown signal, and it's uncertain what we may find. That's why you must all be prepared for the unexpected. Board your vehicles, and await my order for take-off."

The briefing was short and sweet, as was his style.

"Yes sir," the scouts said with a salute, and they all climbed into their Hellcats, two to each vehicle.

"Jak, you're with me on this one," Torn added, and the two of them boarded Torn's cruiser.

"Let's find out what this thing is," said Jak, feeling the pull of adventure and mystery once again.

Daxter, meanwhile, sat still and said nothing, much to Torn's approval.

"OK team, follow me," said Torn through his radio.

As they steadily lifted off the ground, the scouts below them began to do the same, one by one. Higher and higher they went, through the hatch in the ceiling and into the cloudy morning air, until they all zoomed off towards the north-western mountains. Beneath them the city half-slept. Torn looked out of his window quickly to check that all of his men were getting into formation behind him, and saw them arranging themselves into two lines of three, keeping straight and perfectly aligned.

"Ashelin, we're clear of the city," said Torn into his radio as the walls passed by beneath them.

Back in the command centre, Ashelin, who waited at the communications panels with a small team of technicians, received his message. "Roger that, Torn. Co-ordinates are heading your way now."

A few seconds later, the squadron received a set of digits on their screens, which were automatically implemented into their navigational systems. This is where they would be heading, straight to the
very source of where the signal was detected.

"Thanks, Ashelin," said Torn. "Co-ordinates received, and we're moving ahead with the mission."

"I'll keep tabs on things from here," said Ashelin. "Keep me updated on your progress. Good luck, guys, and be careful."

"Thanks," said Jak. "See you later."

Torn led his scouts out over the city walls and approached the mountain range in the near distance.

"Alright team, we're heading through the mountains," Torn said. "Stay vigilant and follow my lead."

A light layer of low cloud was wrapped in between the large and dominating rock formations, obscuring their path. Torn switched on the headlights of his cruiser and his team stayed close behind, for the visibility was so foggy that if they fell back by only a few metres, Torn's cruiser would be lost from sight. Torn took it slowly as he sought out and carefully manoeuvred through the hidden gaps in the mountain range. From back in the city, the Freedom HQ Building watched them disappear into the gloom.

Jak kept a look out from his seat, and Daxter too was paying more attention than usual to the situation. He was still feeling awkward and embarrassed about what Jak had caught him doing yesterday, hence his uncharacteristic silence, and he hoped that Jak was not going to bring it up during the journey for his amusement. Fortunately for him, Jak had no intention of doing so, and had his head firmly in the mission.

There was little to see. The fog was thick and sometimes great rocky walls sprang up on them suddenly, causing the small fleet to detour and find another way around. But Torn knew there was a passage through these peaks, and it was his job to find it and guide his men safely through to the other side.

After slow and winding progress, the team of cruisers broke through the cloud and emerged in clear air above flatter land. This was the first time many of them had ever laid eyes on the other side of the mountains, but the view was neither rewarding nor attractive. The land beyond the mountains was bare and grey. Dark hills coated with thin, wilted grass rolled far to the horizon, and here and there, dead trees clung weakly into the dry soil, so frail that the slightest breeze might threaten to uproot them. It was a desolate, lifeless expanse of nothing, as far as the eye could see.

But it was very clear to everyone in the squadron, even this early into the journey, that no Metal Heads had ever been here, because they knew first-hand what Metal Head infestations looked like, having seen it happen to their own gardens back in Haven City. The Metal Heads would corrupt the lands they conquered into a dank swamp of poisonous acid and dark plant life, making it impossible for anything but themselves to thrive there. This barren land clearly did not exhibit the same qualities, for there was nothing at all left alive, nothing to sustain even a Metal Head.

For Torn, this opened up eerie new possibilities. He confided his thoughts to Jak, radio off so the other scouts would not hear. "Jak, this place has clearly not seen Metal Head activity, at least not for some time. If they didn't make that signal on the scanner, then it had to be something else."

Jak agreed ominously, but they still had far to go yet. Who knew what else they might find?

Torn got on his radio again and sent a transmission back to the city. "Ashelin, this is Torn. We've made it safely through the mountains. Can you still read us?"

Ashelin's reply came back slightly fuzzy. "Copy that, Torn. But we're getting some interference. The
mountains must be partially blocking out our communications."

"We'll keep going," Torn continued. "We're over a vast wasteland now. It's completely dead. I'll update you when we come across something."

Then Daxter spoke for the first time since the start of the flight. "Sheesh, I wouldn't want to live out here. This place gives me the creeps!"

Nobody else said anything, but they all silently agreed with him.

They flew on steadily, the deadlands passing by continuously beneath them, every new mile indistinguishable from the last. None of the pilots, save Jak and Daxter, had ever known such emptiness before, and the featureless plains made time feel much slower. But after what had to be at least an hour, the earth gradually became lighter until the land ended with a coastline of black rocks, all piled up like a natural sea wall at the shoreline of a vast ocean. The water was grey and stagnant, and no waves lapped against the hard shore. Small clumps of vegetation also grew here, but they were withered and unhealthy, and as grey as the earth that held them. But still, the onboard computers directed the team further ahead, out over the flat, featureless waters.

"Team, halt here," Torn ordered, and the cruisers behind him slowed to a stop at the border of the ocean. A few of them looked back the way they had come, and the mountains looked like black teeth on the horizon, still blanketed in cloud.

"Ashelin, do you still read us?" Torn checked into his radio.

Ashelin's response came back even fainter than before. "I can only just hear you, Torn. Your transmission's getting weaker. What do you have to report?"

"We've reached the ocean," Torn replied, the great ocean that was just a story back in the city. "But our systems are telling us the source of the signal still lies far ahead. We've got to fly out over the water if we're going to find it."

"Over the water?" repeated Ashelin anxiously. Nobody in Haven's recorded history had ever crossed that vast boundary. This was a significant leap for the city and its exploration history, one that was daunting to take, leaving behind the homelands that were familiar.

"Affirmative," said Torn. "We'll keep going, but if this radio interference keeps up, we might fly out of contact soon."

"Are you sure you want to keep going?" asked Ashelin, and she suddenly sounded very reluctant. "Torn, I don't feel right about this. Maybe this whole thing isn't worth pursuing. We can call off the mission if you want."

Torn checked his fuel levels. There was still plenty left, and they had come this far already. "No, we'll continue," he said definitively, but he could feel Ashelin's concern. It wasn't like her to get cold feet like this. "I promised I'd get to the bottom of this, no matter how far it takes us."

Ashelin relented after a few seconds of silence. "OK, but please be careful, Torn. And you too, Jak. You're heading into the unknown now. Just come back safely."

Daxter huffed when he did not get a mention. "What does she have against me?"

Torn led his squadron bravely onwards again. For the remainder of the journey, they flew over deep and dark water, heading further out from the lands they knew and towards their mysterious destination. The mountains and the coast behind them slipped away deceptively quickly. The ocean
was quiet and still, and the water was so murky that they could not judge its depth or make out anything that might be even just beneath the surface. Jak looked down in thought. Could the signal have originated from something living down there? Some undiscovered denizen of the deep?

Nobody spoke while they were flying over the water, not daring to break the eerie, natural silence of the open ocean. Their flight controls revealed that there was still some distance to go yet, they were not even half way, but the further over the ocean they travelled, the less likely it seemed that Metal Heads were the cause of the signal. The figures on their dashboards counted down slowly, almost painfully with the suspense. Closer and closer they came, but still no change marked the ocean. No islands, no life, and no exit.

It continued in this way for what felt like an age of the earth. Then, long after the crew had stopped counting the distance, the control panels of every cruiser sounded a tone that meant they had arrived at their destination, and everyone was stirred back to attention. The vehicles automatically slowed to a halt in perfect synchrony, until they all hovered in their formation over the point on the earth where the co-ordinates had led them.

"We're here!" Daxter broke the long silence at last with his excitement, and he leapt up on the dashboard to look outside. "But… I don't see anything."

He was right. They had stopped right above an unremarkable spot in the ocean, no visible features around for miles in all directions. Even the mountains behind them had long disappeared into the haze of the horizon, and they were perfectly isolated in the middle of nowhere.

Torn tried to understand what this meant as everyone waited for his next orders. He had been sure they would find something here, some clue to what had caused that strange signal, some other landform at least. But there was absolutely nothing, nothing but unexplored water and sky. Had it really been some freak weather occurrence, or had whatever caused it moved on? If it was something living in the waters, they may never learn the truth.

"Torn?" Jak said, trying to get a response out of the commander.

But then, one of the scouts shouted out. "Sir! Down there!"

He was pointing down to the water directly beneath them. Something was down there, just below the surface of the dark water, shining with a weird green light. For a moment, everyone could do nothing but stare at it curiously, until Torn gave his order.

"Move down. Slowly."

As one unit, all the vehicles descended for a closer look, until they hovered just a few feet above the waves.

But then the object started moving. It floated upwards to break the surface of the water, as large as any of the cruisers, but everyone’s curiosity was shattered when it was revealed to be nothing more than a bioluminescent jellyfish, round and shiny and wet like a huge beach ball that was lost at sea. Then it deflated itself without a sound and sank down beneath the waves once again, disappearing for good.

"That's it?" said Daxter, feeling highly let down. "We came all this way and all we found was a stupid jellyfish?"

"Looks like it, Dax," said Jak with despondency. This new adventure that had promised such intrigue had been all for nothing.
Nobody could believe it, especially Torn. This had been a chance for answers, but now that chance had slipped out of their hands and sunk into the sea like the world's most valuable bar of soap, never to be seen again. What an anticlimactic ending to such a long, tedious mission. Perhaps they would never know what made that signal, and though he didn't want to give up, there was nothing else he could think to do.

"Should we keep looking?" suggested Jak.

Torn looked all around him to the unpromising leagues of bare ocean on all sides of them, empty and featureless. "No, let's head back home before we run out of fuel. There's no point in staying. It was a waste of time coming out here. Alright men, we're heading back to the city."

Everyone got back into their seats and prepared themselves to rise up, and as they re-ascended, Torn's feelings sank lower. He changed the dial on his radio and tried to send a message back to Ashelin to let her know that they were heading home again, but the only answer they received was blank static. They were too far away from the city, out of range of communication.

But then, something extraordinary happened. As fortune would have it, at this very moment of resignation, they unexpectedly found what they had been searching for, or rather, it found them.

Their ascent was forced to a halt as a bright flash of light suddenly tore the sky with a blast of harsh wind. It made everyone jump and momentarily dazzled them.

"Agh!" Jak grunted, shielding his face with an arm. "What the hell was that?"

Torn's eyes stung, but he blinked furiously to banish the painful gleam, his heart in his throat. He recognised that noise; it was the exact same sound he had heard on the recording. This was it! This was the signal they were tracking, and it was right on top of them! As his misty vision slowly restored itself, he could see something coming into focus through the pulsing colours and shapes. Hovering in front of them, where there had previously been empty air, were three silver aircraft. At first he thought he might be hallucinating, his senses deceived by that sudden flash, but everyone else could see them too.

"Uh... those aren't Metal Heads," said Jak slowly, still rubbing his eyes.

Daxter gulped and hid behind Jak's shoulder. "What are those things?"

They had a long, sleek shape and cockpits with blacked-out windows, two sets of wings along each side of them — one behind the other — and four cylindrical jet engines that shone with a green fire. Each had a huge fin on the back that pointed upwards, and from the front they looked like floating, metallic sharks, hovering perfectly still and glistening brilliantly in the daylight.

No one knew how to react. But then the three sinister vehicles descended slowly as one, until they were a few metres above and in front of the Hellcats, like they were coming in for a closer look at them, just as the Hellcats had done to the ocean a few minutes ago. Torn's instinct kicked in, sensing danger, and Jak noticed his hand slide up the steering column to rest a thumb upon the button that would activate the onboard weapons. But he held back, and they both took the risk in waiting.

"Orders, sir?" said several of the other pilots nervously, but Torn was momentarily frozen in anticipation, watching these strange aircraft coming closer.

Just before they drew too near, as Torn was about to press the button, they stopped and the window of the central one slowly retracted, revealing the pilot. He was wearing a dark helmet with a large black visor that covered the complete upper half of his face so that his eyes could not be seen. It gave
him a sinister appearance, but then he stood up, revealing that he was wearing an equally black uniform which bore a silver emblem on the chest that none of the Hellcat pilots had ever seen before. In one hand he held a remote device, which he lifted to his mouth and spoke into, and his calm, inquisitive voice reverberated through the air.

"Greetings, blue travellers. My name is Rulo, captain of the Grey Wing of Idandi, and I offer you peaceful greetings. Who might you be?"

He lowered the device he had spoken into and raised the other hand outwards in a seemingly polite gesture of invitation, and waited. Onboard the lead cruiser, Torn and Jak looked at each other unsurely, until Jak prompted with a nod towards the mysterious visitors that Torn ought to make an answer. Torn quickly adapted, withdrew his hand from the fire button, and reached for his own radio and flicked a few switches so that his voice would project externally. He cleared his throat before speaking.

"My name is Torn," he announced, trying to put on a controlled and official-sounding voice, "And we are scouts of the Freedom League of Haven City."

He waited tensely for a response, unsure of what would happen next. The enigmatic pilot's expressions were unreadable beneath that black visor, but then he moved one leg onto the edge of his cockpit, and leant on his knee curiously. It seemed like he was studying them appraisingly, and for such an unexpected encounter, he seemed remarkably unfazed and relaxed, almost as if he knew he would find them here, and he displayed none of the apprehension or astonishment that they all felt.

"Haven City?" he said with intrigue, his voice as calm as before. "That is a name I do not know. Is that your homeland?"

Torn felt the pressure of another answer, while at the same time he tried to rapidly process this situation. In the end, all he could do was respond to the question, choosing his words carefully.

"Yes," he answered. "We have flown out here from Haven City tracking a signal we picked up recently."

Rulo's mouth fell open slightly, a hint of surprise and amusement on his lips. "That was probably us that you detected," he explained, now looking quite pleased. "My own scouts and I came to this area in the last few days, exploring the world for our city and searching for survivors of the Great War. It seems that we have found some."

"The Great War?"

Rulo explained, adjusting his position again. "Our city, Idandi, and all the neighbouring settlements, were long ago beset and destroyed by monsters of darkness with glowing skulls."

"The Metal Heads!" said Torn in realisation.

"Is that what you call them?" asked Rulo inquisitively. "We did not know their true name. They left only few survivors in our homeland, forcing us to flee and find shelter, and only recently have we become bold enough to come out from our long hiding and reclaim what was once ours."

To the scouts of Haven, this opened a whole new page in their history books, maybe even an entire volume, and they listened with great interest. It appeared they were hovering face to face with representatives of another culture, another city that had also survived the Metal Head Wars. And they were advanced, obviously possessing at least the technology of teleportation.

Jak was intrigued, and Daxter stopped trembling and peeped his head out higher from behind his
shoulder. However, in spite of their common enemy, Torn, as always, was mistrustful of strangers, and he figured he should start asking some questions of his own.

"How did you know we would be here when you appeared?" he asked.

"We did not," Rulo admitted. "We have been searching the world for survivors, as I said, for some time now, and you are the first that we have found. It seems that fortune and fate have had a hand in our meeting. But tell me, how did your Haven City fare during the Great War?"

Torn felt slightly derailed, for he had yet more questions he wanted answered and now another had been aimed at him. Nevertheless, he tried to be diplomatic, understanding that he spoke for Haven out here in these distant reaches far from home. They should continue reciprocating in this way, one question at a time, and if these strangers felt comfortable sharing their history, then maybe he ought to as well.

"The Metal Heads besieged us too," Torn explained, rolling with the unfolding conversation. "They never took our city, but we sustained heavy losses against them. We've been holding them off for generations, but we now believe that we've wiped out the vast majority of them at least, and they will pose no further threat to our world."

Rulo seemed impressed, but remained calm and controlled as always. Before he could speak again, however, Torn quickly followed up with his next question.

"When was the last time you saw any Metal Heads in your part of the world?"

Rulo was unflustered, and answered respectfully. "We have encountered none since we came out of hiding, and we believed that they had finally chosen to leave our lands in peace. But it seems that we may have you to thank for this."

He paused briefly, and then continued. "Your strength and resolution is commendable. Anyone who fights these 'Metal Heads' as you call them is no enemy of ours, and I say you would make valuable allies. I propose that we unite, and work together to rebuild what we all once lost. I am sure there are many ways we could help each other."

This sounded almost too good to be true, and many in the Hellcats felt eager to accept. Even Torn felt swayed, for he was starting to identify with these enigmatic strangers as more about them was made known. But he needed more time, and Ashelin needed to know about this. The decision to accept them would be hers. If only she had been able to join them on this mission too, had her other duties not kept her back at the city, but as her first commander, Torn knew it was up to him to speak on her behalf.

"I see the benefits of an alliance," he said carefully. "We in Haven have remained cut off from the outside world by the Metal Heads, and the discovery of other survivors would be big news in the city. But before we can make a decision, we must first travel back there with this information."

"As must we to our homeland," said Rulo understandingly. "My superiors will desire to hear of our meeting as well, and will most certainly wish to come and see your Haven City. Perhaps our leaders can meet and learn of each other's histories, and officially commence our alliance. Then perhaps you may visit our homeland too."

Torn was slowly starting to become less doubtful, for this man seemed genuine and well-spoken. A strengthening bridge of mutual understanding was growing between them. These people had been through the same evils as they had, and he could not deny that such an alliance would be both useful and helpful.
"I'm sure our governor would be very interested to meet with your leaders too," he said.

"Very good," said Rulo with approval. "In that case, we shall be on our way with the message. But how should we find each other again, and where would we meet?"

This was a pertinent question, but a risky one. Did Torn really trust these friendly but mysterious strangers enough to hand over the location of Haven City? No. He did not feel enough mutual rapport for that yet. There was a lot more he wanted to know first. Until then, it was better that they met at least one more time on neutral ground, even if it did mean repeating the long flight all over again.

“We can meet here three days from now,” Torn suggested. “By then, we'll have had a chance to explain and arrange everything back at Haven.”

Rulo nodded and gave a promising smile. "So it is settled, then. We shall find each other again at this point in three days' time. I look forward to learning more about your city and its people."

The two commanders exchanged their final instructions and preparations amicably, and then in a flash, the three silver jets were gone. Once the blinding glare had subsided, the radios onboard the Hellcats burst into excited chatter as the scouts excitedly began discussing their momentous discovery.

In the lead cruiser, the mood was more subdued. Torn flicked his radio off and shared an ambivalent look with Jak. “Well, what did you make of that?”

Jak wrinkled his brow in thought, having not said a word during the exchange. “I don’t know,” he said carefully. He had a knack for sensing trouble and hostility, and right now his honed warning system was triggered. “That guy seemed a bit strange to me.”

Daxter butted in. "Yeah! He looked like the kind of guy you do NOT want to be enemies with.”

"I know," Torn answered. “I got that feeling too.” He scratched his cheek. “Do you think he was telling the truth?”

Jak shrugged. “Maybe.” But there was no way any of them could be sure.

Torn felt a stubborn seed of doubt growing in his mind, and it made him question himself. Had he acted justly and appropriately? If something went wrong with this, then he knew it would be his neck on the line. But he tried to settle himself with confidence. He had acted on the side of caution, and had done nothing that would place Haven City in danger.

"Come on. We're wasting time out here. We've got to get back to Haven and tell Ashelin this news. Let's go. Now."
Ashelin paced up and down the empty boardroom restlessly, hands behind her back and thinking hard. Less than an hour ago in the Freedom HQ control room, she had received a faint, fuzzy transmission from Torn, after nearly two hours of radio blackout, and he relayed a sensational message. He and his small but elite scout team had followed the mysterious signal far out over the ocean, into the vast emptiness of the uncharted world, where they had discovered its source. It belonged to explorers of another city, another city far away that had survived the Metal Head Wars.

Haven was not alone!

This was big, the most significant news in the city's living memory, and it held huge implications for both their history and their future. But in a way, Ashelin was not too surprised. She knew that they couldn’t have been the only ones left; the Metal Heads couldn’t have wiped out everyone else on the whole planet. For so long they had had no contact with anyone else outside their own walls, unable to leave or search for others, until now. They had just made a historic first contact which would replant reconnections with the rest of the world. Was this the first of many to come?

Ashelin found herself imagining already what might unfold because of this, what they might learn from this other culture and vice versa, and how she would announce this ground-breaking discovery to her people. But for now this news remained closely guarded and would not leave the walls of Freedom HQ until she had firmly decided how this would play out, and to achieve that she needed more time and more information.

Torn had already explained as much as he could about the encounter over his radio during the return journey, but there were many things she wanted to hear and many questions she wanted to ask in person, privately. He was due to arrive any moment now. From the boardroom window she had seen his scout squadron reappear over the mountains only a few minutes ago. He must have landed back in the hangar by now, and making his way through the building and up the floors to meet her here.

She continued her pacing. Though she was a patient woman, today the waiting seemed extremely difficult.

Finally, there were the sounds of approaching movements outside the door, and then it swung open urgently. In strode Torn, not showing the least bit of fatigue from his long journey, followed closely by Jak with Daxter on his shoulder, who closed the door again behind them.

Ashelin turned to them, sharp, serious, and primed for answers. "Torn," she said immediately, locking eyes with her trusted commander, "Tell me everything that happened."

For the next half hour, Torn recounted every detailed step of the excursion, and Ashelin listened very
intently, absorbing everything that was shared between the two parties at the meeting over the ocean. The more Torn explained, the more intrigued she became, and she wished that she could have been there to see it for herself, had she not been bound to the city by her numerous other tasks and duties. A positive buzz was mounting inside her, but it was tempered by her well-honed vigilance and precaution. Like Jak, who leant on the wall listening to the exchange by the closed door, she had a sense for when something did not feel right, and Jak felt somewhat validated when he could read the evolving expressions on her face. But he said nothing, and remained patiently in his place. Even Daxter made no snarky interruptions as he was so often unable to help himself.

“Alright,” Ashelin said when Torn finished his recount, and she took a few moments to process it all, slowly pacing again. Torn watched her and waited for her reaction.

She stopped at the window overlooking the scarred streets and grey rooftops, gritty and unremarkable in the early afternoon cloud. But her eyes found their way to the western chain of mountains beyond the city wall, the mountains that few had ever crossed until today. “So you said we have three days until we’re supposed to meet them again?”

Torn nodded. “That’s right.”

“Same place? Way out there?”

“Uh huh.”

Ashelin paused briefly in consideration. That was a long way from the safety of their city. “And what can we expect from this… second meeting, exactly?” she asked with very plain concern.

“It’ll just be an embassy,” said Torn, catching the reflection of her eye in the glass. “The idea is to start up communication and learn more about each other. They suggested meeting leaders, so you should join us for this next one.”

“I know,” Ashelin said at once, understanding. “I’ll want to be there this time.”

That was a given. Torn had spoken well on her behalf, and he had correctly acted as he thought she would have done in such a situation, but she wasn’t going to sacrifice any other opportunity to be involved. This was too important.

After another short moment of reflection, she turned her head back over her shoulder to make partial eye contact. “And you’re sure they’re genuine about this?”

“The captain gave me his word,” Torn explained confidently. “They were the ones who suggested it, so they seem willing to trust us at least, and we’ll be on neutral ground.”

He said this, but he also sensed and understood the necessary caution that they needed to take here. Just like him, Ashelin was suspicious of the unknown and mistrustful of strangers, especially anything that originated from outside of the city walls, as anyone nurtured by Haven’s violent history rightfully deserved to be. This needed to be conducted one small, careful step at a time.

Ashelin nodded once, apparently satisfied, but her thoughtful expression did not change as she then turned her head in Jak’s direction. “What about you, Jak? What did you make of all this?”

Jak looked up from his quiet listening. “They could be telling the truth,” he said with a shrug, one which nearly dislodged Daxter, who by now was dozing off with boredom on his shoulder, “But something about them didn’t feel right to me.” He couldn’t find the best words to accurately describe his gut instinct, but the others knew him well enough that they didn’t need him to. All he was sure of was that he wasn’t sure he fully trusted those mysterious pilots or what they said.
His response brought Daxter back into momentary concentration. “Yeah,” said the ottsel with more seriousness than he usually showed. “That guy was kind of creepy. What if they’re nasty, like the Metal Heads?”

Ashelin looked back over the city again. That was her original fear and she really hoped that it was not true. “I know. We’re going to have to be careful. We don’t know what they’re capable of.”

She thought it over slowly, but the pressure was on her. She usually preferred at least a few days to process serious matters such as this. However, the soldier and leader in her knew, that in times of urgency, she sometimes needed to think on her feet and make choices quickly, and the first step was hers to choose. But this was bigger than just the three of them, four if she counted Daxter as well.

Torn, Jak and Daxter all waited silently as she weighed their options, granting her the time she needed. Then she straightened her back and turned around the face the room once more, looking resolved and ready to act. “Alright. The council needs to know this,” she decided, “As soon as possible. Then together we can decide on how we’ll respond to this and what we’ll announce to the citizens. Call a meeting right now. Urgent.”

"Of course," said Torn, recognising an order when he was given one.

An hour later, the most important people in the city were all gathered around the large table in the boardroom. Ashelin sat at the head with Torn at her side, Jak was seated a little further down next to Samos the Sage, and the rest of the seats were taken up by high-ranking council representatives and military commanders. Torn told his story again, and all were startled and amazed to learn of the discovery of another city that had survived the brutal conquest of the Metal Heads, and they all saw promise and potential for an alliance. However, just like Ashelin, many were also rightly curious and wary; Haven's long history of siege had conditioned its people to expect constant threat from outside their walls, and they made plain their concerns about the mysterious representatives of this faraway city called Idandi. Debates and questions were plentiful, laying out all the available knowledge on the table to be sorted through and scrutinised.

On Jak's shoulder, Daxter was dozing lazily. This meeting was so boring, he’d lost all interest long ago, but Jak had not let him go home because he didn't want him carelessly blabbing to anyone about what had happened today until it was declassified. So in the meantime, he was stuck here, and he was now struggling to keep himself awake. He rocked ever more precariously on Jak's shoulder, until he inevitably fell off backwards and onto the floor. However, only Jak and Samos took any notice, as everyone else was too absorbed in the discussion. The fall woke him up though, and he now looked up at Jak, who was silently motioning something to him. Being well-acquainted with Jak's habits, Daxter could read the expression plain as a book.

_Dax, try and stay focussed! This is important!_

Daxter tried to respond in the same manner, but all he could manage was an open-mouthed, cross-eyed expression, which he hoped conveyed the message that he was bored out of his skull.

Jak understood. _Well, find some way to keep yourself amused, then_, he motioned. _But keep it quiet._

Daxter pouted, got back to his feet and slumped off towards the large window that looked out over the city, pressing his face onto the glass as the discussion continued behind him. His eyes strayed off into the distance where his pub lay, just out of sight, and he wished that he could be over there right now. Tess was probably waiting eagerly for him to regale her with yet another fresh, exciting tale of his adventures. He scanned the rooftops of the nearer buildings, hoping to find something interesting among them (preferably a bikini-clad sunbather or two), but they were all empty. He misted up the window with his breath and drew silly little faces on it, but even that lost its appeal after a few
minutes. Man, this was boring.

But just when he considered curling up on the floor and trying to nap again, something shiny in the distance caught his eye. There was a twinkling movement over by the mountains, just rising between the front row of peaks. Daxter rubbed his eyes and tried to make out what it was, but only succeeded when a cloud passed over the sun. It was a small troop of silver aircraft... very familiar-looking silver aircraft.

"Uh, guys..." said Daxter, cutting Torn off in the middle of his current descriptions, "You might want to take a look at this."

Not many heard or paid heed to his interruption, and those nearest to him who did looked vaguely annoyed, including Torn; many were aware that Daxter was known as an attention seeker, and therefore believed that he never had anything noteworthy to say. However, Jak and Samos, who were positioned closest, could plainly see what had caused him to call out, and turned away from the table. As they got up and moved to the window, several others did too, until a small crowd had formed. Even Torn and Ashelin joined them, gently pushing their way to the front. When Torn got there, his eyes popped in stunned bewilderment at the sight that greeted him, and he pressed both hands against the glass.

"What the hell...?" he breathed out slowly.

By his shoulder, Ashelin looked on too, trying to comprehend what was happening, but Torn’s reaction and the horrible instinct in her gut told her that her suspicions were vindicated. "Is that them?" she asked seriously.

"It has to be," said Torn, confused anger growing, "But what the hell are they doing here?"

They were undoubtedly the same jets. The paralysing but very familiar flavour of betrayal began to creep up on him, settling in his throat so tightly that it could not be swallowed. It teased his quick temper, and he thumped a fist against the glass.

His radio was buzzing again at his belt, and so was Ashelin’s. She answered, and Vin's frantic voice could be heard gibbering through the speaker.

"Governor! Ashelin! Torn! We've got strange blips on our radar! They're coming straight for us, and they're really close!"

Dread and dissension began to fill the boardroom like the spreading of blood around a wound, as everyone detected the unmistakeable, undoubtable feeling that a renewed danger was approaching their city, and a murmur of building panic started to rise. Jak and Daxter shared an apprehensive and tense look, Samos grumbled worryingly, and as for Torn, his mind was in two places at once, the visual truth not aligning with what had been arranged. What was the meaning of this? Had there been some sort of misunderstanding, or was something more sinister unfolding?

The vehicles now hovered just a few kilometres away from the western city walls, as if giving them a thorough examination from a distance.

"I don't like the look of this," said Jak, his muscles twitching in preparation.

The atmosphere in the room fell from bad to worse. People were talking over each other, councillors asking what they should do, commanders reaching automatically for their holstered weapons.

"Torn, we've got to do something about this!" said Ashelin suddenly, cutting through the chatter. "Those things are going to cause a panic if they get seen! The city doesn’t know about them yet!"
Torn’s mind clicked back into function. He knew she was right, and tore himself away from the window and the thousand explosive questions that were ricocheting inside his mind. "Let’s get out there!" he ordered.

The room scrambled, and Ashelin, Torn, Jak and Daxter were the first through the door, none prepared for this in the slightest. They beat it through the corridor and into the nearest lift, which began taking them down to the hangar where their vehicles still waited.

"What’s going on, Torn?" Ashelin asked sternly as they descended, the fears she had voiced earlier growing more apparent every second.

"I don't know!" Torn answered forcefully through his teeth. "Something’s not right here! This is not what we agreed! How the hell did they even find us?"

"They must have followed us somehow," said Jak, now poised and ready for combat.

They continued to argue about it all the way down. It did appear, that for whatever reason, the explorers of Idandi had found their way to Haven already, before it had fully established its own reactions. But Torn was becoming more and more agitated at the painfully slow descent of the lift. "Hurry up!" he shouted at the buttons.

Ashelin and Jak backed away from him a little, for it looked as if he might actually explode. When at last the door did open into the hangar, Torn shoved his way through towards where his cruiser lay. The scouts were still there, waiting around as they had been ordered to be debriefed, completely unaware of the events taking place outside.

"Get back in your vehicles and come with us!" Torn ordered them without halting.

“What?” asked one of them, puzzled. “What’s going —”

“I said move!” Torn shouted, and at once they all scrambled back into their seats.

Torn swung into his own cruiser. Ashelin, a few steps behind him, quickly took the second seat, while Jak and Daxter leapt up into the gun turret. Before he’d even sat down, the vehicle began to rise, up and out through the roof hatch, and the other clueless pilots followed in their wake, not knowing what to expect. When they emerged above the buildings, they were greeted by a terrible sight: a pillar of black smoke was raging somewhere near the western city wall, small explosions flowered in the air around it, and a silver jet was falling from the sky in flames, brought down by Haven-based groundfire.

"Oh no," said Ashelin, her face blanching.

Torn was absolutely fuming. "What in the hell have they done!"

He slammed his foot down on the accelerator, speeding up dangerously towards the battle. Ashelin was pushed back into her seat, while on the turret, Jak readied the gun for a fight and Daxter tightened his grip on his shoulder. But as they drew near, what was left of the jets suddenly vanished in a flash of light, and Torn slammed on the brakes, temporarily dazzled again.

Furiously blinking back his vision, he gave the order to descend, and he and his company managed to bring their cruisers in to land close to the scene. It was not a pretty sight. Through the smoke, a block of large buildings that bordered the city wall were aflame and crumbling fast, and right in its heart was the sparking, melting body of a jet, impaled into the masonry like a knife. A building opposite had a large, burning crater in its side, as if something huge and violent had punched its way through. The street on which they had landed was a graphic display of shattered brick, metal and the
mutilated, burned bodies of Freedom soldiers.

Torn was swearing under his breath as he pulled himself out of the cruiser, engine still running, to stare at the scene in outrage. Ashelin was quicker to muster herself, and spared only a few seconds before mobilising the rest of the men who had followed them here.

“Call for back-up!” she ordered them. “Get more men over here and put out these fires before they spread! Search for wounded!”

The soldiers flung themselves into action, one getting on his radio to summon more help, the others running forwards to check the bodies and pull them away from the blaze. Jak joined them, Daxter quivering on his shoulder, and it wasn’t long before more guards were drawn to the chaotic scene.

This was when Torn turned around, angrier than anyone had ever seen him before. "What the hell happened here?" he demanded. "I want answers!"

As more soldiers flooded into the area and battled with the blaze, Torn’s temper could not be cooled. Ashelin tried to keep him calm, but she herself was struggling to keep her own feelings in check. As it looked to her, the jets had just executed an unprovoked sneak attack, but until witnesses could be brought forth to describe what had really happened, she had to try and keep control. That was the kind of rash assumption her father would have jumped to, and her determination to be a better ruler than him was just enough to keep her subdued for the moment. She didn’t want to believe it, but her instinct was against her.

Unfortunately, the soldiers who would have seen exactly what had happened were now all lying dead around the hole in the wall. The few witnesses who could be found were too shaken to give a clear account, and those who could all gave varying descriptions. Some said that they had pre-emptively opened fire on the mysterious and threatening-looking aircrafts, while others said that the aircrafts themselves had made the first shot. Someone even said that one of the old automatic Krimzon defence turrets had malfunctioned and misfired, triggering a retaliation.

Torn did not know which to believe. None of this made any sense. He stomped back and forth on the shattered path, utterly lost in his raging confusion.

"Torn?" Ashelin tried to get through to him. "Torn!" She caught him by the shoulder, and he paid attention. “We’ve got to do something about this. Whatever happened and whoever caused it, we’ve got to react. What if those things come back?"

That made him stop, the storm in his mind momentarily stilled. "You're right," he said, and at once, he began to form a rapid defence plan. "You!" he pointed at the highest ranking soldier in the vicinity. "Mobilise everyone under your command, clear the streets of civilians and man the defensive batteries. Be ready for anything, but don’t make any offensives unless I give the order!"

"Yes sir!" said the soldier, and he began drilling the rest of his soldiers into line, assigning duties to each of them.

“What can I do?” asked Jak, who had just come jogging out of the fray, sensing that he would be needed.

"Jak, I want you to round up as many pilots as you can and get them in the skies ASAP,” Torn ordered. “I want you up there with them and patrolling the perimeter of the city. Check for any other damages, but be ready to fight."

Jak nodded grimly, and then jumped into the cruiser they had arrived in, speeding off back to the
hangar with a silent, trembling Daxter still clinging to his shoulder.

Torn remained where he was on street level, scowling and seething. Ashelin came and stood beside him, and looked mournfully over at the flaming wreckage of the jet in the building. "This isn't looking good for either of us," she said. "What must they think of us now? After this?"

Torn hated to admit it, but he agreed with her. Worst of all, he felt betrayed that this whole thing had all come crashing down upon him in this way. He had genuinely wanted this alliance to happen, as he believed the people of Idandi had as well. But now, these terrible events cast serious doubts on that belief, and his old scepticism was back in the forefront of his mind.

"They know where we are now too," he said. "It's all too easy for them for come back."

"And if they do, I doubt they'll just sit around and watch from a distance again," Ashelin added darkly.

The city continued to put Torn's plan into action. Very soon, the sky over the city was full of Hellcats and soldiers spread through every street, urging citizens into the safety of their homes. The fires at ground zero were ferocious and stubborn, but the soldiers managed to get the worst of them under control. It was very fortunate that these buildings had been empty and unused at the time. Ashelin, who remained at the scene as well, worked with Torn to direct the efforts, barely catching a moment's peace. All the while, they still pondered how this could have happened.

But less than an hour later, it happened. Another blast broke the city air, and the streets were illuminated as not one, not two, but an entire fleet of silver jets materialised between the mountains and the city wall, hovering perfectly still. All the soldiers on the streets looked up in awesome fear, their weapons held silent in their arms, each remembering their orders to not fire until fired upon. Jak in his cruiser watched them from his current position on the other side of the city, and Daxter gulped on his shoulder. From the window of the HQ Building, Samos and the other officials looked on tensely, waiting for something to happen. Down by the smoking buildings, Torn and Ashelin stood resolutely together, radios in hand beneath the head of the formation. They were in a vulnerable position and they knew it.

"Steady..." Torn hissed. "Don't shoot..."

For a solemn minute, the entire city was still. By the wall, in the air, in the buildings, and on the streets, there was absolute silence.

But then, a growing green light appeared beneath the leading jet, and Torn flung himself into Ashelin as a searing beam of concentrated energy blasted over their heads, striking the nearest defence battery and shattering it into five crackling pieces. This was it!

"OPEN FIRE!" Torn bellowed into his radio from the ground.

The city erupted with the firing of the defensive turrets, and streams of flak shot into the air. Jak led the Hellcats in a charge, swooping in on a beeline for the foremost jets. The formation broke as several more crashed down outside the walls, while the rest shot off with incredible speed to different areas over the city, raining destruction down upon the buildings.

Torn picked himself up and pulled Ashelin onto her feet. Both were unharmed but exposed in the middle of a battle zone, and they quickly sought shelter beneath the doorway of a nearby building. They got there just in time before another beam of energy exploded behind them. The road on which they had just been standing now bore a melting crater, spraying fiery sparks and leaving them both cut off with minimal protection.
The damage unfolding was phenomenal as the battle raged on. The crystallised beams of energy firing from the jets were punching holes through buildings and cutting up roads as if they were made of wet paper, and soon, smoke was rising from every corner of the city. From the cockpits of the Hellcat cruisers, the sheer scale of it was all too clear to see, and this only made the pilots fight more fiercely. They took down many of the jets, but the rest kept on firing, lighting up the streets below and causing yet more chaos as they were shot down in flames. More than a few Hellcats went down too, and Jak himself had a very narrow escape as he swerved to avoid colliding with a barrage of rapid shots.

Torn's radio was overflowing with the screams of dying soldiers and calls for help, coming from every district in the city at once, and he barked orders back into it in a desperate attempt to keep control of the situation. Ashelin stuck close to him and looked around in furious terror, watching the flames consuming the streets. She let out a fierce yell, finally venting her feelings, and stepped out from her cover to fire a few angry shots at the sky with her own handgun. It achieved nothing, but she had to do something to stop this!

The fighting went on until more than half of the jet fleet had been shot down, and the rest then teleported away as one, leaving behind them a burning wake of death and undoing. The defences fell silent, and were replaced with the roar of flames and the screams of the wounded and the dying.

Stepping out from their cover, Torn and Ashelin surveyed the devastation with a terrible weight in their hearts.

"This... this is insane..." said Ashelin slowly, feeling sick. "What the hell were those weapons?"

Torn could not answer. All the soldiers who had been with them now lay dead on the streets, and the entire city and the sky above it were stained red with fire.

Very soon, Jak landed his vehicle close to them and opened up the cockpit, a surly but eerily calm look on his face. "That was no accident," he said simply and seriously. "I think we can say for sure that they don't want to be friends anymore."

Daxter, meanwhile, was still silent, his ears lying flat against his head.

"Hate to agree with you, Jak, but you're right," said Ashelin. "There's no doubt of it."

Torn was growling to himself, looking lethal and volatile. Without warning, he lashed out at a stray piece of metal with his foot, sending it clanging away down the broken street.

"I can't believe this!" he shouted to the sky.

The others waited fearfully until his rage had subsided somewhat before trying to speak to him.

"Neither can we, Torn," said Ashelin, and her voice had an immediate soothing effect. "But we can't waste any more time here. Half the city's in flames and they could come back and finish the job at any moment, and we need to be ready for them."

Torn's heart was thumping painfully along with everyone else's. But it reminded him that he was still alive, and he was the man responsible for the city's defence. He had to pull himself together.

"Yeah... you're right..." he breathed.

"Come on, Jak," said Daxter finally, not wishing to hang around any longer, "Let's get to the bar. I need to make sure Tess is OK."
Jak heard him, and he suddenly thought of Keira. He needed to know that she was safe too, wherever she was. He would have to go looking for her as soon as he could.

"Go," said Ashelin flatly to them. "We'll handle things from here, Jak. You go and do what you need to do, but be ready in case we need you again."

Jak understood, and he and Daxter once again rose into the thick air and headed towards the port.

Torn remained where he was, staring blankly at the fires, burning as hot as the anger in his eyes. Ashelin then re-approached him, having just got off the radio.

"Samos says HQ took some damage in the attack. It's top priority that it gets repaired."

Torn nodded, but he was only half-listening. He had fallen into some kind of stupor as he tried to absorb the consequences of what had happened today.

"Just look at it all..." said Ashelin distantly. "It'll take us weeks to undo all this."

Torn said nothing, but his grim thoughts were clear in his mind.

*If we even survive that long.*
Torn drew out of the troubling memories that had kept him awake for most of the night. Shirtless and sleep-deprived, he was sat upon the look-out hill and staring out into the dark ocean, awaiting the sunrise. A light breeze whispered through the treetops all around him and the sky was a deep blue turning pink at the horizon, but he could still smell the smoke and feel the heat of the fires that had raged across Haven city on the day the war had begun. He had felt terrible about it from the start, but even after all this time, the guilt still lingered within him, unable to be banished. He couldn't help but feel responsible for it all. The destruction, the fires, the killing, even the last great battle that had resulted in him being washed ashore on this island, it was all his doing, and he hated himself for it.

Just how long ago was that battle now? He had lost count of the days. It must have been more than a week, maybe even two, he could not know. On this island, time felt like it moved much slower than usual, passing gradually and monotonously, slipping away with the sun, and nearly every day had been exactly the same.

He looked now into the lightening sky, just as he had done countless times already, in search of the rescue vehicles from Haven that had not yet come. But all he could see were the slowly fading stars. Sometimes his senses and his imagination played tricks on him, and some lone sparks would seem to move as if they were something artificial. But it was never so. Nobody was coming for them, he knew that now. It had been too long. He felt a desperate urge to know what was happening back at the city, and why nobody had come looking for them. Not knowing tormented him.

The time had come for he and his friends to find their own way off this unbearable island and get back home, and Torn's plan right from the start had been trying to construct a boat of some kind. One was slowly taking shape in the camp, yet despite this promise of escape, Torn felt as if his existence had ground to a dead end, and trying to survive here had lost all its excitement. He had become so sunburnt that every movement caused him pain, and his skin throbbed with uncomfortable warmth even as he sat here on the starlit hilltop. This meant that he had been forced to keep himself out of the sun, wasting away under the trees and unable to do any productive work. The boredom and emptiness were driving him crazy, and he was hungry, always hungry no matter how much he ate. There was so little here to sustain him. All of the physical and mental fortitude that he valued was slowly slipping away, and he felt like an empty shadow of his former self. How much longer would he be able to last?

He had tried to stay level-headed and motivated whilst being stuck here, but it was becoming ever more difficult to sustain every day. Away from the city and the duties that would usually keep him busy, giving him a sense of purpose, his feelings of shame and self-criticism had been growing stronger until they were almost too much to manage. His time on the island away from everything had done nothing to dull these feelings, in fact it had made them worse. Even in the presence of Ashelin, who could always inspire those around her with her leadership and integrity, he feared his
tenacity was failing him. That was partly why he had abandoned the shelter tonight, where Ashelin, Jak and Olto still slept. He had dragged them into this war too. They did not deserve this punishment... but he did.

With that sad acceptance made, he felt like he could no longer go on. The weight of his situation piling in on him, he pulled his knees up under his chin and then let himself roll sideway onto the cold ground, forsaking all care for what happened to him now. The grass pricked his burned skin.

But then, on the horizon, the crest of the sun finally rose and shone the first morning light onto the island. It illuminated Torn's face, and his mind suddenly drew to a pleasant, lucid halt as the warmth met his skin. His bloodshot eyes stared blankly at the rising light, and the dreaded feelings seemed to have passed with the coming of the sun.

With this sudden change, he sat up again in the sunlight and looked around. These strange moments of despair had visited him before, and they were becoming ever more frequent the longer he remained here. Though it seemed now to have passed, he knew it would come back. It always did. Had his mind really become so damaged?

Pulling himself wearily back together, he got up delicately and lowered himself down the hill into the safety of shade, making his way stiffly back to camp. The path through the trees was now much easier to tread, for in the days they had been here, they had cut away a lot of the branches and plants, harvesting them as building resources or fuel for their fires.

He emerged from the undergrowth at the campsite, where all was quiet. Everyone else had to be still asleep inside the shelter, which they had now expanded to a decent and robust size that accommodated all of them with room to spare. Inside were the salvaged seats from the Hellcats, buried among leaves and the long grass which they had painstakingly stripped from the hill, serving as their beds.

A fire pit lay right in the centre of the camp, a shallow hole dug in the sand and surrounded by stones and a make-shift floor of large leaves. Odd bits of metal were heaped into small piles, all of what they had recovered from the sea; the debris had stopped washing ashore several days ago, and they had attempted the make the best of what they had gathered. The centrepiece of the camp, hanging proudly on one of the closest trees where it could be plainly seen, was the piece of Hellcat metal that bore the Freedom League emblem.

Lying on the threshold of the beach was their incomplete boat, a rickety construct of metal and tree trunks held together with vines. The work had been slow, guideless and largely improvisational, and the effort they had put towards it did not feel concerted; it was a plan that had been decided on but which nobody had yet been able to properly initiate or accept the need of, for they had all continued to hope for the possibility of a rescue, and that they would not have to build one and brave the open ocean alone. But Torn knew that today that would have to change, and he made a promise to himself as he looked upon it:

No more waiting. I'm going to get us off this island, if it's the last thing I do.

As he sat down and attempted to light the fire and prepare some food, the curtain of woven leaves that hung on the doorway of the shelter stirred, and Olto came crawling out.

"Morning," said the Freedom soldier quietly, standing up in the early light and stretching. "How long you been awake?"

"Not long," Torn lied. "Breakfast?"
"Yes please," said Olto, taking a seat beside him. "What've we got today?"

"Fried fish again," said Torn without enthusiasm.

"Ah, could have guessed," said Olto sarcastically. "Is it too much for you to bake us a nice cake or something for once?"

Torn produced a flicker of a smile, one so rare that it almost cracked his burnt face. All ranks abandoned out here on the island, Olto had adapted well to treating his commander as an equal, and everyone spoke freely with one another. He was actually somehow managing to stay cheerful, and his levity and good demeanour were really helping to keep the rest of them entertained and positive through their current difficult dilemma.

"There's still a lot more work until that boat's ready," said Torn, changing the subject as he held a fish over the flames.

"Yeah, need some help with that?" offered Olto.

"Well yeah," said Torn simply, "Look at me." He bared his right arm, which was red and raw. "I can hardly move around much like this."

Olto sucked in some air through his teeth at the sight of it. "Yowch. You're right, you need to stay out the sun. Badly."

Their voices soon woke Jak and Ashelin, who came out to join them for breakfast. Torn took a good look at each of them as they sat together. The effects the island had had on them all were plain to see. They all shared a similarly dishevelled appearance; their clothing stained, ragged and creased, their skin reddened and hard, their eyes tired and bleary, and all had lost noticeable weight. Olto's round face was definitely thinner. He and Jak were both rough and unshaven, their hair dirty and sandy, and Torn imagined that he must look much the same. He scratched at his cheek, and could feel the sharp hairs pressing into his fingers. But his eyes lingered the longest on Ashelin. She had lost much of her usual stunning allure and proud bearing, and looked much less regal now; even her dark red hair seemed less vibrant than he remembered. The bandage across her head was gone, but there was still a mark from her injury that showed up on her tattooed skin. Not only that, but none of them had had a proper wash since leaving Haven. Torn could smell the mingled dirt and stale sweat on himself, and knew he would soon have to pay another visit to the island's central lake; they had agreed to reserve it for bathing, that is if they desired more privacy than offered by the sea, while the closer one by the hill would be their source of clean drinking water.

But first, once breakfast was done, they all set to business and planned out their work on the boat for today. Olto and Jak volunteered to go into the forest and collect some more wood for it, while Ashelin and Torn stayed back at the camp and continued with what they had. Torn crouched down stiffly in front of the frame, but all the extra movement was clearly causing him discomfort, due to his severe sunburn, and this did not go unnoticed by Ashelin.

"Torn, let me do this," she said. "You're in no fit condition to work."

But Torn was intransigent, and wanted to feel like he was doing something worthwhile. "I'm fine," he grunted.

"No, you're not," said Ashelin, firmly but caringly. "You'll exhaust yourself like this. Please, just take it easy and leave the work to the rest of us."

It took a little more pleading, but finally and with difficulty, Ashelin persuaded him. He abandoned
the frame and lowered himself very slowly into the Hellcat seat by the fireside, wincing with pain, and not looking forward to another boring day of inactivity. He did not like sitting around like this when there was important work to be done, and he wished he could be a part of it.

Ashelin looked on sadly as he lay in the chair, and felt genuinely sorry for him. He looked terrible. "I wish there was something I could do for you."

"Just get me some water," Torn replied charmlessly, and Ashelin brought the flask to him. She thought he was going to drink from it, but instead he emptied it all over his face, and Ashelin swore she could see steam rising off of him.

"Did it help?" she asked.

"Not really," Torn grunted, dropping the flask onto the sand.

As he sat there sizzling and depressed, she knelt down beside him, and she could see just how much worse he looked up close. Poor Torn's skin was the colour of raw meat, his face was haggard and beaten, his thin body exposed his ribs, and his hair had long ago fallen out of its dreadlocks and now hung long and wild upon his shoulders, just as hers did. But Torn turned his head away. He hated her seeing him like this, and just wanted to hide himself as much as possible.

"Oh Torn, I know you're upset," she said sympathetically. "But we've all had to sacrifice some modesty here on this island, and none of us are really pleasant to look at any more."

Torn actually disagreed with her on that somewhat, but said nothing. Somehow, despite her now tangled, dark red hair, her partially dried out skin and the mark across her forehead, she still looked beautiful. At least, he thought so.

"But hey," Ashelin continued more brightly, "Once Jak and Olto come back with the wood, we'll get that boat finished and we'll be out of here in no time, huh?"

Torn listened, and nodded just enough so that Ashelin could notice. "I'm so sick of this place," he grumbled.

"We all are," said Ashelin understandingly. "But we've just got to keep it together and tolerate it for a little longer. I know we'll make it through this."

She placed a caring hand upon his bare shoulder out of instinctive comfort.

"Ow! Sunburn!" Torn cried out at the touch.

Ashelin pulled away quickly. "Oh, sorry!"

Meanwhile, Olto and Jak were deep in the woodlands, cutting strong branches from the thickest trees. They had amassed quite a collection, and they returned to the camp after an hour or two with heavy bundles in their arms. Ashelin was still there, working with the current supplies, but Torn was not.

"Where's Torn gone?" asked Jak, after he had deposited his collection of branches on the ground with a loud clatter.

"He's gone to the bathing lake," Ashelin explained from her place by the raft. "Said he'd probably be there for the rest of the day."

"Don't blame him," said Olto, dropping his pile next to Jak's. "If I was as badly burned as he was, all
I'd want to do is cool off too."

The three of them set to work on the boat again, but progress was still a struggle, despite their renewed effort. They had hoped that with a proper objective to work towards, it would feel like they were achieving something purposeful, but instead, it felt more like a chore, and none of them even knew if their methods would hold out. They had been at it several days already, and all they had to show for their effort was a loose frame that was nowhere near strong or buoyant enough to support even one of them.

They worked for a few more hours, and then took their usual long break in the middle of the day. Interestingly, however, it was not as hot as it usually was by now.

"Do you feel that?" asked Jak. "The air feels... different."

Neither Ashelin nor Olto had noticed yet, but now they were paying attention, they did feel an unmistakeable difference in the atmosphere and temperature, nothing like the previous days. A heavier air was now settled over the island, and a light breeze shook the trees. Even the sunlight seemed dimmer.

"Hey, look at those clouds," said Olto, pointing out to sea.

On the horizon, a rolling wall of grey was approaching like a slow-motion tidal wave, backed by broad, rising towers of cloud, some of the first they had ever seen since arriving on the island. They were a stark contrast against the perfect blue sky, like distant mountains, but as they watched them, they were suddenly lit up by a silent flash from within that was noticeable even in the daylight.

"Those are storm clouds," said Jak ominously, "And they're coming this way."

"That's not good," said Ashelin. "We're in for some serious trouble if they hit us."

The three of them stood for a moment longer, staring at the faraway clouds crawling closer. They felt vulnerable and unprotected against the approaching storm's power, and after a few seconds, the rumble of thunder reached them.

"Shouldn't we... you know... brace the camp or something?" suggested Olto.

"You're right," said Ashelin, and at once she instinctively began giving out orders. "Jak, start gathering up the food and the supplies and get them inside the shelter, make sure it's safe and stable. Olto, tie down the boat and secure it to the ground. I'll go get Torn."

The plan was put into action immediately, and as Olto and Jak tidied up the camp, Ashelin hurried off into the trees in the direction of the lake.

Meanwhile, Torn was just opening his eyes. His lack of sleep the previous night had caught up with him, and he must have drifted off in the water, his head just bobbing on the surface. As he stood up again, and his top half broke the water, he could feel the new chill in the air even through his sunburned skin.

"Torn!" called Ashelin's voice suddenly from behind a tree. She sounded pressing. Had something happened?

"Yeah?" he answered back.

"Torn, I think there's a storm coming. You'd better get back to camp and take shelter with us."
"OK," he said, "I'll be right there."

As Ashelin's footsteps retreated, Torn half sank back into the water. He really did not want to get out right now, he was still so tired and sore and drowsy and in no mood to do anything. But as he wallowed there, he heard a low rumbling sound from above the treetops. That was thunder, alright.

Pushing himself against his better desires, he climbed with difficulty out of the lake and did his best to dry himself before struggling with his trousers. It took him several minutes, and he eventually gave up with his shirt, but finally he staggered back to the camp. He arrived to find all of their supplies tucked away inside the shelter, the half-finished raft lying alongside it, and Jak securing extra sheets of metal to its roof.

By now, the sky had grown darker and the air much cooler as a great wall of grey towered over the island, the threshold of the storm. As Torn stood there and beheld its looming power, a sudden wave of wind made the trees shake, strong enough to sting his skin and almost unbalance him.

Then Ashelin appeared with the freshly-filled water flask, her hair blowing wildly about her face. "Are you sure we got everything?" she asked, raising her voice over the wind.

"I think that's it," said Jak.

"And the boat?"

"Should be safe in this spot right here," said Olto, appearing from around the side of the shelter.

"Alright, everyone inside," ordered Ashelin. "Hurry! The storm's nearly on us."

She herded them all through the leaves hanging over the door, but before she crawled in herself, she looked out to the sea. The clouds were churning closer, the waves at the shoreline were tossing violently, and the horizon far away was now obscured by a blurry curtain of approaching rain. Another deep bang of thunder rent the air like a cannon shot, and Ashelin could feel it in her chest.

Finally, she ducked inside the shelter and pulled an extra sheet of metal across the doorway. All four of them were now huddled in amongst the leaves and grass, and as Jak made sure nobody was sitting on the food, the wind outside picked up even more. Then the rain hit them, softly at first, but soon it was crashing hard and loud onto the metal sheets in the roof like bullets. It dribbled through in places, and the cold wind sought out the gaps in the walls, every blast threatening to tear it down from the inside and expose them all to the fierce weather. At times they found themselves actually having to hold parts of it in place to prevent it from coming apart. Then, the light faded until it was as black as night, save for when huge flashes of lightning momentarily bathed the island in brightness.

"This is crazy!" Olto shouted over the noise, but he did so with unmistakeable, mad mirth in his voice. As always, his positive spirit was never crushed. He seemed to be in awe of the extreme weather, marvelling at the force of nature all around them, and was even laughing for a great deal of the time.

"What the hell are you laughing about?" shouted Torn.

"This is pretty exciting, isn't it?"

"No!"

Neither Torn nor Ashelin could understand what he found so enjoyable about this. They had never faced such a ferocious storm with such primitive protection before, and to them, this was a serious threat to their survival, and nothing to laugh about at all. Jak, meanwhile, remained calmer. He had
experienced plenty of storms that were at least as bad as this one during his travels in the Wasteland and beyond, and he knew how to endure them confidently. However, even he had to admit that this was not going to be easy, as the elements continued to rage across the island relentlessly for what felt like hours.
The first to awaken, some hours later, was Jak, and he awoke to a refreshing stillness and an odd, leafy smell in the air. There was no more crashing thunder or hammering rain. His friends still lay asleep and exhausted inside the shelter around him. Very carefully so as not to disturb any of them, he crawled his way to the door and poked his head outside.

It was eerily silent in the fallout of the storm, so peaceful and tranquil, and the whole island looked and felt very different now it was not bathed in bright sunlight, dull and de-saturated. The sand was dark and soaked, the campsite was strewn with branches and leaves, and the sky was a featureless blanket of grey cloud. It was no longer raining, but residual droplets fell from the canopies onto his head, and there were marks on the beach where the tide had risen in the storm, right up to the edge of the trees. Jak realised how lucky they had been; just a few metres closer, and their whole camp might have been flooded. The waters were now receded further out than he had ever seen them before, as if sucked back by some plughole somewhere in the ocean, exposing new sand and rock formations. Amazingly though, their shelter had somehow withstood the storm; it looked battered and a few pieces had come loose, but it still stood. Their half-made boat was also safe and sound.

Jak walked out into the open air, feeling the change in atmosphere. A light, chill wind washed over the treetops, and it made him quiver, but there was no way he could light a fire, as the branches were now too damp to burn, and Ashelin still had the pistol they used to start one with. He wished he had a coat, or at least a warmer shirt. With no other way of keeping warm, he walked out onto the beach at a brisk pace, the cold, wet sand clinging to his feet.

As he walked, he was reminded of the storms that had sometimes struck his old village in his childhood. They had been rare back then, and usually only reliably occurred during certain months of the year, but he remembered the devastating effects they often had on their small coastal community. Buildings would be damaged by the wind and the huge waves, and one time, the old farmer's livestock had nearly all been swept out to sea. The following day, much work would have to be done repairing the damage and restoring the village to normal life again. But since most of the villagers were quite old, most of the work usually fell upon the fisherman, who was the strongest, and the sculptor, who had the greatest understanding of construction, while the others directed. As they had grown up, Jak, Daxter and Keira were usually roped into helping out too, which always resulted in much complaining from lazy old Daxter.

The memory of the look on his face made Jak smile nostalgically. He still missed his lifelong friend, and though he had come to accept his loss over the long, slow days he had spent on this island, the pain still lingered, and it was something he was unsure he would ever be able to get over completely. His shoulder still felt very empty and unbalanced now its familiar weight was gone.

As for Keira, he missed her too, but in a very different way. He had never been as close to her as he had with Daxter of course (even though he wished he was), but she had also been a great help to
them both on their adventures. Furthermore, she was still out there, safe and sound at home in Haven City, and probably very worried about him. If only there was some way he could speak to her again, some way of letting her know that he was still alive too...

He stopped for a moment as he came close to the shoreline’s old boundary, and looked out to the sea, grey and disturbed, and to his home lying far away out there, out of sight. Standing here, Jak felt a great longing to leave the island and see it from afar, wondering what others would see if they passed by. How noticeable was it from a distance?

Then he was drawn out from his memories and his musings by soft footsteps approaching from behind. He turned around, and it was Ashelin, walking towards him looking weary and tired.

"Quite a storm, wasn't it?" she said as she came to stand next to him.

"Yeah, it was," said Jak. "Did you get much sleep in the end?"

"Only a little, I think," said Ashelin, rubbing her eyes. "I was lying awake most of the time. You?"

"I think I got some, but I feel OK actually."

"I don't know how you do it, Jak," said Ashelin with a smile and a shake of her head. "You never seem to get tired."

She was more right than she knew. Jak considered himself lucky in that regard; he seemed to be one of those people who could go quite comfortably for long periods of time without sleep. Come to think of it, even he wasn't sure how he did it either.

"Brrr, it's chilly," said Ashelin with a shiver, buttoning up her jacket and holding her arms around herself.

Jak instinctively placed an arm around her too and stood a little closer to her. Ashelin did not object to the contact, and leaned into him naturally to share warmth. They quite enjoyed the feeling of being close to each other like this after the dramatic previous night.

"Yeah, looks like we're in for a cloudy day," said Jak, looking to the shrouded sky. "At least that'll make Torn happier. No sunburn going to happen in this weather."

"That's a good point. Today should do him some good."

They stood there a moment longer together, trying to keep warm in each other's presence while looking out over the open water, but Ashelin still shivered.

"You want to walk?" suggested Jak.

"Yeah, good idea," said Ashelin. "Should warm us up."

They broke apart and headed off down the beach, side by side. Under normal conditions, Ashelin would usually start her day off with a few brisk exercises, but out here on this island where every ounce of energy was precious, she had put aside her usual routine. The walk did help a little, however, and they made a full lap of the island together, taking in the cloudy stillness of the storm's aftermath. Pieces of foliage were scattered across the sands, and at least one tree had even been uprooted completely and now lay halfway between the sea and the forest's edge.

However, on the last side of the island they came to, they sighted something they did not expect to see. At first they thought it might be another fallen tree, or even another piece of long-lost wreckage
tossed ashore by the storm's violence, but as they drew closer, however, they saw that it was nothing of the sort. Lying beached upon the newly exposed sand around the island was the large, intact carcass of a deep-ocean fish, dark-scaled, and about the same size as Jak was.

"Whoa!" said Ashelin, walking around it fully when they were close enough. "This is definitely the biggest fish I've ever seen."

"Oh, this is nothing," said Jak, crouching down at its head for a better look. "There used to be bigger things than this living in the waters around my village, big enough to sink boats. One of them nearly swallowed me whole once. Man, I hated those things."

With a stick that was lying close by, he lifted open the creature's mouth, and thankfully, saw no sharp teeth within. It bore only a passing resemblance to the Lurker sharks he had spent a good part of his youth swimming away from, but the sight of it was still enough to stir up unpleasant memories.

"It must have been washed up here by the storm," he said, standing up again and eyeing it thoughtfully. "Hmm, looks fresh too. Come on, let's get it back to the camp."

"What? Are you serious?" Ashelin asked.

"Yeah," said Jak. "This'll last us a good long while, and it seems a pity just to leave it going to waste."

It took Ashelin a few seconds to work out what he meant by this. "Wait, you think we should eat it?"

She did not look very taken in by the sight of it, lying here dead and coated in sand, but Jak did make a sensible point. They could not afford to be picky here, and they had to take whatever they could get their hands on in order to survive. However, she was still wary about dining on some strange, unknown fish right off the beach.

"Are you sure?" she checked. "What if it's poisonous or something?"

"If it is, I should be able to tell," said Jak with a confident smile. "I practically grew up on seafood, and the village fisherman taught me a thing or two about preparing fish. All we've got to do is clean it, get a fire going and cut it into smaller pieces so we can cook it."

"OK, I'll trust you on this, Jak," said Ashelin, unsurely but acceptingly, "But aren't you missing the bigger problem here? How are we going to get this thing back to the camp? It's huge!"

"Hmm," said Jak, sizing up the fish. "I think we could carry it. Come on, let's give it a try. You grab the tail."

Ashelin reluctantly moved around to the opposite end of the fish, and together, they tried to heave it up. The lift was a struggle, but still within their strengths to achieve. However, even with the layer of sand on it, it was still slippery to get a firm hold on, and its size and shape made it awkward to carry.

"Eugh, this thing stinks," moaned Ashelin, who now had her arms clasped uncomfortably around the fish's tail.

"Come on," said Jak. "Camp's not too far away. We can make it."

The two of them lumbered back across the beach to their campsite, Ashelin not feeling pleasant in the slightest. The smell was starting to make her feel weird, and not only that, but her already dirtied and ragged clothes were now accumulating an extra layer of fishy slime.
When they arrived back at camp, heaving and grunting, they found that Torn and Olto were now up too, and their eyes shot open when they saw what their companions were carrying.

"Holy crap! Now that's what I call a fish!" said Olto.

"Where in the hell did you get that? And how?" asked Torn.

"Found it on the beach," Jak explained simply. "Lay out some leaves so we can put it down."

Torn and Olto both quickly cleared the mat of large leaves in front of the fire pit, and Jak and Ashelin were finally able to drop the huge fish onto them. It landed with a heavy splat, but while Jak was dusting the sand off it, Ashelin stood there with a disgusted look on her face as she examined herself.

"Oh man, this sucks," she said, looking down her front. "This uniform's never going to be the same again."

Jak smiled to himself, both with the contentment of finding such a plentiful source of food, and at Ashelin's naivety. Clearly she had never had to handle raw fish or prepare her own food herself from scratch. But he felt right at home doing this.

"OK," he said proudly, rubbing his hands together. "Today we're all going to have a proper breakfast. Torn, can I use your knife?"

Torn handed over his trusty weapon gladly, and Jak did a very good job of cleaning the fish and cutting it into manageable pieces. At the same time, Ashelin was able to distract herself from her own state long enough to get a fire going with her handgun. It took a few shots to light the wet wood, but soon they had warmth.

Before long, they were all roasting fish slices over the fire, and there was plenty of it to go around. There was so much of it, in fact, that there was more than they could eat, despite how hungry they had all been for the past many days. This was the first time in a long while that their appetites had been effectively satiated, and even Torn felt like he could move more easily again, despite the lingering sunburn. Ashelin now understood how wrong she was to doubt the quality of the fish. Together they all sat back around the fire and took in the feeling of wellness.

At last, they tried to decide on what to do with the rest of the day and their newly gained energy.

"We should get back to work on the boat," said Torn straight away.

"Yeah," agreed Jak. "We saw a tree on the beach that's been blown over. That could definitely come in handy."

"Good idea," said Ashelin, remembering it. "But before I do anything else, I need another wash."

Jak smiled at her again, still amused by her reaction. "Come on, Ashelin. A little bit of this is good for you," he said, wiping his hand across the stains on his own clothes. Ashelin did not believe him, however, and she left for the bathing lake soon after.

Olto, meanwhile, was looking curiously out to the sea. "I wonder if anything else washed up last night," he said. "We should go and take a look later."

"But what do we do with this?" asked Torn, gesturing to the gutted remains of the fish. "It'll spoil if we don't store it right."
"We'll have to do what we can and take the risk," said Jak. "Wrap it up in leaves and let's hope it holds out on us."

After they had done that, all three of them went out onto the sand again to find the fallen tree that Jak had mentioned. They all attempted to drag it back to the camp, and though it was very hard work and took a long time, the new strength they had gained from their meal made it more bearable.

Ashelin returned from her wash afterwards, and brought yet more interesting news. The rains in the night had overfilled both of the lakes and reduced the island's central hill to a slippery, muddy mound, almost impossible to climb. They would probably not be able to reach the berry bush at the summit again until it had dried out, but having just eaten a healthy portion of fish, that was the last worry on their minds.

Olto expressed a wish to explore the beaches in search of more interesting things, and Ashelin accompanied him while Jak remained at the camp to help Torn with the boat. However, she later wished she had stayed behind to do work, as she got rather bored as Olto waded out in the water, poked around in every rock pool and examined every stone. She had only really accompanied him out here for the sake of safety, in case he encountered any sudden trouble, but so far they had only found seashells and a number of stranded jellyfish, neither of which were much use to anybody.

"What exactly do you hope to find out here anyway?" she asked from dry land.

"Anything really," said Olto, who was up to his knees in the sea. "You guys found that fish, didn't you? Maybe there's more of them."

Ashelin folded her arms patiently. She was not looking forward to having to haul yet another huge sea creature up the beach, not after the mess the first one had caused and the very chilly bathe she had just taken in the lake. She still smelled horrible. Olto was clearly enjoying this a lot more than she was, and he reminded her right now of a small, curious child. He seemed especially fascinated by the shells he was picking up, and already his pockets were full of them.

"Aren't they intricate?" he said, examining one closely between his fingers.

"I guess," agreed Ashelin indifferently. "They don't really help us with anything though."

"I don't know," said Olto thoughtfully. "They'd make good decorations around the camp."

Regardless of Ashelin's opinions, he continued to gather up as many as he could find. But then, he came upon one that not even he had expected. He could just see its tip poking through the sand under the water, and when he bent down to pick it up, he found it stuck. Pulling harder, more and more of it became exposed, and before he knew it, he had pulled up a long, spiralling shell that was longer than his own arm.

"Whoa!" he said, holding it proudly above his head. "Look at this one!"

Even Ashelin had to admit that this was quite an impressive find, as Olto held it reverently in his arms. He felt as if he had just uncovered some kind of buried treasure, and that he now had in his possession something elusive and valuable.

"We could definitely use that for something, right?" asked Ashelin.

"Perhaps," said Olto, "But look at it! This feels too special to put to use. Let's take it back to camp and see what Jak and Torn think."

When they arrived there, they found that Jak and Torn had already laid out a number of sturdy-
looking logs to serve as a deck for the boat, and were attempting to tie them together with vines.

"Look what we found!" said Olto proudly, holding the long shell up high. "Beats your fish, huh Jak?"

Torn definitely looked impressed, but Jak's reaction was minimal. "Not the biggest shell I've ever seen," he said, "But good find."

"What?" said Olto incredulously. "You've seen bigger ones that this?"

"Yeah, round my old village," Jak explained. "Most of them had big crabs living inside though."

Olto suddenly looked apprehensive, and tentatively turned the shell around in his arms to look up inside it. It was empty.

"Nothing ever fazes you, does it Jak?" said Ashelin with a wry smile. "No matter what we find, you've always seen something bigger."

Jak shrugged honestly. "Anyway, what're you thinking of doing with that shell?"

"Well, I wanted to see what you guys think," said Olto. "I thought maybe we might be able to use it as some kind of water storage tank, for example, so we don't have to keep going over to the lake so often. Or maybe we could even..."

His voice stopped unexpectedly, and his face became blank. For a moment, everyone wondered why he had paused, and thought that maybe this was another one of his jokes. But all humour evaporated immediately, as without warning, he collapsed sideways, and both he and the shell fell to the ground. At once, everyone else rushed to him and gathered around to help.

"Olto, are you alright?" Ashelin asked worriedly, lifting him up by his shoulders.

Olto took a moment to respond, but then he looked back up at them, and seemed to be lucid once again.

"What... what just happened?" he murmured with confusion.

"You just passed out on us," said Jak. "You feeling OK?"

"I don't know," said Olto, creasing his face. "A really weird feeling just came over me."

Ashelin and Jak both helped him up to his feet, but he was shaky and wobbly, and they were supporting most of his weight for him. They led him carefully over to the Hellcat seat by the fireside so he could sit down somewhere comfortable and they could try and assess what had caused him to faint like that.

"You should sit still and take it easy for a moment," Ashelin advised. "Torn, can you get that first aid kit? There's some all-purpose medicine in there."

Torn at once went into the shelter to search for it, while Olto looked around with eyes half-focussed, trying to come to terms with what had happened to him. He was now seeing strange blank patches in his vision, and something in his mind felt like it had slipped out of place somehow. It was a curious feeling to experience, but despite the discomfort that came with it, he was able to hold on to his rational thoughts, and observe its effects subjectively.

"This is weird," he said, blinking unevenly and looking at his hand. "I've never fainted before."
Ashelin touched the back of her hand to his forehead. "You're feeling quite hot," she said. "It could be a fever. You might be in for a couple of rough days, Olto."

Olto reacted to this news in the best way he could think of, and that was to throw all seriousness out the window and try to make light of it. "Oh great, just what I always wanted," he said. "I had a feeling things were going a little too smoothly for us here."

It was then when Torn came back with the medicine, and they fed Olto a little bit. "Here, this should help," said Ashelin.

"Thanks, nurse," said Olto with a crooked, cheeky smile.

Ashelin smiled sadly back at him. They all felt sorry that he had to get sick when they were miles away from any professional healthcare, but even when he was facing impending illness, Olto somehow still maintained his cheerful and delightful character.

"I sure hope it wasn't that fish that caused this," said Torn ominously, "Or we could all be next."

This made them feel apprehensive, knowing that they too might collapse at any moment, but especially Jak. He was sure that there had been nothing wrong with the fish, and they had all trusted in his confidence and expertise, but if he had made a mistake, then they could all be in trouble because of him.

"Let's hope not," he said. "Let's just do our best to keep things under control and look after each other."

As Olto lay in his seat and the others warily got up around him, he drew one of the shells he had collected out from his pocket and looked at it again with deliberately sustained interest. He observed the colours twisting their way around its spiral shape, delicate pinks and whites, and the numerous little ridges that seemed so beautifully chiselled that they just could not be natural. Focussing on it seemed to make him feel more comfortable and at peace, and he smiled dozily to himself, knowing that he could get through this somehow.
Chapter Notes

Author's note: Thanks again for the Kudos. I'll stop announcing them and just put up the chapters when they keep coming in from now, but I still very much appreciate them. Any comments I receive will merit a special mention and thanks, so do please leave them.

Smoke rose from every district of the city, turning the air a thick and impenetrable black. Every available Freedom League soldier was on the streets, battling with the fires and trying to aid the wounded.

The sheer scale of the destruction could clearly be seen from the boardroom window of Freedom HQ, where Ashelin now stood, head leaning against the glass. Her mind was spinning and her whole body felt heavy with shock and doubt, her feet anchored to the floor. Even from all the way up here in this building, the screams could still be heard.

But even louder were the angry and confused debates of the city officials and military commanders behind her. Several different arguments were shooting back and forth across the table all at once, and the room was awash with raised voices and boiling emotions. They all wanted to know how this could have happened, but there was one firm conclusion already on everybody's minds. Based on the story that Torn had told, it was very clear to them all that this was a blatant act of deceit and belligerence; the mysterious people of Idandi had gone back on their supposed offer of friendship merely to sow ruthless destruction, and many in the room now believed that this had been their intention from the very start. Thus, in the immediate wake of this ambush, many also believed that it could have been prevented, their suspicions and speculations now confirmed with violence. As a result, Torn now found himself becoming an unwilling target upon which the council cast their invectives, holding him responsible for this destruction.

"Why did you not see this coming?" demanded one of the angry councillors. "Look what they've done to our city!"

"I told you, they were the ones who wanted to start an alliance!" countered Torn, bristling with fury. "Why would they say that if they just wanted to destroy us?"

"It was clearly a manipulative trap!" someone else shouted him down. "I'll bet it was all a story just to make you feel sorry for them, and you believed it!"

These words stung Torn as he continued trying to defend himself, and describe how genuine the explorers he had met had seemed. He truly did not believe that this was what they had wanted, but the fierce arguments from the others were beginning to make even him see doubts. Something, somewhere, had gone horribly wrong, it must have done! He tried to argue this, but without proof nobody would believe him, no matter what he said.

"If you'd been there, you'd have said the same!" Torn shouted back at them, his anger growing with every retort they made. "They showed no intention whatsoever of causing all this! Just ask Jak, or
any of the other pilots who came with us! They'll confirm this!"

"Jak's word means nothing!" scoffed one of the councillors. "That rogue's caused us too much trouble already, and he cannot be trusted!"

This was when Samos stepped in. "I will not accept this slandering of Jak's character!" he rumbled, dismayed that these ugly perceptions of Jak still lingered among certain members of the council, particularly those who had supported his unjust banishment to the Wasteland less than one year ago. The councillor who had just spoken up was one of those people; Samos remembered his face. "If it were not for him, Haven City would have crumbled long ago, and now he might be our only hope to save us again!"

"Samos is right," added Torn, thankful for the support. "Jak's saved our asses more times than you know. We owe him everything we've got, so lay off him!"

"But that still doesn't excuse what you've done!" continued the aggressive councillor, refusing to back down. "You've brought death upon us! You led them straight here!"

"That is not true!" Torn yelled in outrage, slamming a fist on the table. "We didn't even tell them how to find Haven! We did not lead them here, and we sure as hell weren’t followed!"

"Then why are they here?" demanded the councillor, and for that Torn had no answer. "You have no right to call yourself a commander of the Freedom League after your actions today! We should call for your immediate dismissal!"

Torn felt his face become even hotter at those words, and he snarled dangerously as agreement quickly spread throughout the room. Almost the entire council was turning against him, blinded by their rage, and he knew that he was fighting a losing battle. The painful truth was that a part of him agreed with them too, as even he could see, regardless of the truth, that his reputation as a competent leader was now irreparably damaged as a result of this disaster.

It was Samos who stood up for him again. "How dare you talk to one of your superiors in that way! Torn was trying to do the best for the city, just as he has always done!"

"You call this —" shouted the councillor, pointing sharply out of the window, "— the best for the city?"

"Enough!"

Ashelin's stern voice cut through the uproar. She had not even spoken that loudly, but she had succeeded in plunging the whole room into silence, and everyone now looked to her, still standing at the window looking mournfully upon the fires.

"Of course this is not what Torn wanted," she said, her voice distant and deep. "How can anyone possibly wish for this... this carnage? Don't you think we've had enough already to last a lifetime?"

Nobody dared to answer her. She ran her hand down the window, clenching it into a fist, and still everyone watched and listened in silence. Then she turned around, and slowly walked over to stand at the head of the table, not catching the eyes of anyone. She placed both palms upon the tabletop, and leant there heavily with her head bowed.

"The city is fragile," she continued emotionlessly without looking up, "And I honestly don't know what will become of us now. We have never faced anything like this..."

Torn stood there feeling a great weight of accountability. Only once had he ever heard Ashelin speak
in this way, as if she had given up all hope, and that was when the city had been almost overrun by the Metal Heads during the long, black war against them.

"But governor," said one of the councillors tentatively, "We can't just sit by and do nothing about this. We must take steps to ensure that this never happens again."

At that, he shot another threatening look at Torn, and Torn scowled back at him. Ashelin, her head still bowed, did not see this exchange, but Samos did.

"Pointing the finger of blame is a waste of time," he said warningly. "What's in the past is done. We should be turning our focus onto our present situation instead of looking back to our faults."

"But we cannot excuse this!" protested the councillor persistently. "Commander Torn is responsible for bringing straight to us a powerful enemy that only wanted to destroy us."

"That might seem like the most obvious explanation now," retorted Samos, "But we have no proof that that is what they were planning. Torn's word is all we have to inform us, and until he is proven wrong, his word should stand."

"I agree with Samos," said Ashelin a little forcefully, pre-empting another debate. Though she did not directly show it, Torn just knew that she was trying to defend him, and he felt his admiration for her rise. Yet her eyes remained downwards and closed, as if she were ashamed to even look at him, and as a result, her defence seemed much less genuine.

The councillor looked put out now that the governor had ended his vituperations, and he no longer said any negative words against Torn, albeit reluctantly. The others too fell silent for the moment, including Torn himself, but he continued to receive resentful, untrusting glances from all across the table.

"We need to stick with the present facts," continued Ashelin steadily, making decisive motions with one hand. "Stay with what we absolutely know, little though it may be. We can try and understand things later, if there's time, but right now we have a city in flames and we need to act to save ourselves. Standing here arguing over who did what will not help."

"Here, here!" said Samos in agreement, and many of the others in the room also expressed their accord. "I recommend we first get a global damage report of the city, and prioritise what needs saving."

"What about the civilians?" argued someone across the table. "Our top priority should be to save as many as we can."

"We can do both," said Ashelin, deftly preventing another argument from flaring up.

"What about the enemy jets?" asked someone else. "They could come back again at any moment to finish us off."

"Good point," said Samos. "Our defences must be repaired and ready. In the city's current state, we may not be able to withstand another attack, especially one as destructive as this."

"We should also try to discover more about our enemies," suggested a researcher, "And who they really are. I know, negotiation is probably out of the question now, but a lot of their aircraft were shot down in the fight, and their remains still litter the city. If we can salvage their weaponry and technology, my team and I might be able to find out how it works, and maybe even how to use it against them."
"That's a good idea," said a particularly aggressive commander, pounding a fist into the palm of his other hand. "Give them a taste of their own medicine!"

Several people agreed with him, but Samos spoke up wisely. "We must not let ourselves succumb to our own anger and lust for revenge," he warned. "Doing so would only make us reckless, and disregard safer and surer alternatives."

"It's what the people will want when we break the news to them," said the commander confidently.

"So do we!" echoed many of the other commanders and councillors.

"Alright, alright," said Samos with frustration, "But I think the citizenry will be wanting answers more than revenge."

Another momentary hush fell within the room, as all realised that the majority of Haven's people had still received no explanation for this attack.

"But what'll we tell them?" asked a milder councillor with worry. "And who'll say it?"

At first, nobody volunteered for this difficult task.

"I'll do it," said Ashelin. "Guess it has to be me. I'll make an announcement to the city soon."

Nobody questioned her choice, but all admired her for it, and the room finally settled into a mostly united entity.

"So," she continued, "We've identified several major priorities: we need to properly assess the damage to the city, save and protect the citizens, search for downed jets, and rebuild our defences. The question is, do we have enough man power left to get all that done?"

"I hope so," said one of the commanders. "Practically everyone we have available is out there already."

"We haven't all had the chance to count the casualties yet," said his comrade by his side, "But I think I've lost nearly half the men who were under my command in that last attack."

Ashelin grimaced as if pained. "OK, that's another thing we need to do: minimise further losses as much as possible, otherwise we're not going to see the other side of this."

Everyone fell into tense silence again, each looking to one another for solace as the human cost of this disaster sank in. Haven had already lost so many of its people in the constant wars that had plagued her; losing any more would surely spell out their doom.

"We might not be able to get through this alone," said Ashelin seriously. "Not if there'll be more attacks like this one. We're going to need help."

"But governor," said a councillor, "Where would we find such help? We're on our own here, just like in the Metal Head Wars, like we always have. There is no one else."

For the first time, Ashelin raised her head and looked down the table at no one in particular, but there was a hard stare in her eyes. "That's not true. There's the Wastelanders."

Nervous murmurs began to buzz around the room, and Ashelin caught the looks on everyone's faces, some of concern, others of bewilderment, and some even of hostility. The existence of Spargus still had not become common knowledge among Haven's citizenry; only a few knew, and those few who
did also knew of the Wastelanders' dangerous reputation. Many of them may once have been citizens of Haven before their banishment, but Spargus and Haven were still two separate, very different cities, and not exactly on friendly terms with one another, not yet. But they could prove a valuable ally if they could find a way to work together.

"Would they even be willing to help us?" asked someone, and he was not the only one in the room with this concern. "I mean, they were banished from the city after all, and after the treatment they received from... your father, governor, would they even want to come back?"

Ashelin was reminded of her regrettable heritage, and the terrible things her father had done to seize and sustain his power, all the lives he had ended and split apart. Ashelin was still trying to repair the damage and hate he had caused, and cleanse the stain on the name of Praxis, the name that she also bore.

"He's right," said another councillor in response to the first. "The Baron banished a lot of people. They might still be angry with Haven, and calling on them to help us might be a bad idea."

"They're outcasts," said one of the commanders hotly. "There's a reason they were kicked out. We can't trust them."

"We might not have a choice," said Ashelin. "The Wastelanders are tough, and not all of them were exiled justly. Some might still harbour an allegiance to us."

"But how can we be sure?"

"I'll send Jak to go and speak with them," Ashelin continued. "He knows their mentality, and they accept him as one of their own. Besides, Spargus has a new king who knows what it's like in Haven, and he and Jak have shared in a few adventures, so I gather. He'll listen, and I'm sure Jak can talk him into lending us support."

"I concur," said Samos at once.

There were still many uncertain looks on the other faces in the room. All of them knew of Jak's exile from the city, still in recent memory. It was for crimes he had not committed, ones that had never even been definitively proven, but still there were stray rumours that dogged him, and despite all he had done for Haven City, there were those who still did not fully trust him. His connections with the Wastelanders didn't help matters. But they knew they needed the extra help, and if Jak could use those connections to get the Wastelanders of Spargus to co-operate, then it was worth the shot.

"If you say so, governor," said a councillor uneasily, and once he agreed, everyone else found it easier to do so as well.

Torn remained deliberately silent. No one seemed to be paying him any attention any longer, and for the moment, that was how he wanted it, taking a breather while the others sorted themselves.

"Alright," concluded Ashelin, standing up straight again. "That's enough to be getting on with for now. Commanders, organise among yourselves which of you will take responsibility for which task, and mobilise your men accordingly. And best of luck to all of us. We'll need it. Move out."

Everyone around the table saluted, and then the room gradually emptied. However, Torn hung back until he and Ashelin were the only ones left. He could not ignore the accusations thrown at him by the councillors, even if they didn’t truly understand events like he did, and they made him start to doubt himself. Had he misjudged the situation? Was he really responsible for putting the city at risk like this? Could he have been more careful? Whatever it was, he began to feel clearly that he had
something to make up for, especially to Ashelin, but how would he possibly start?

Now in private, he approached her slowly. "Thanks, Ash," he began simply.

At last, Ashelin looked at him, but it was with a conflicted expression that was hard to read. Never had her sharp, green eyes been more penetrating.

"I think you owe more thanks to Samos, not me," she said quietly.

It was true, as Samos had defended him well throughout that debate. But it hurt that Ashelin was flatly ignoring his gratitude when he wanted her so much to accept it, and to know that he meant it.

"Yeah... I'll speak to him later," said Torn, rolling with whatever Ashelin wanted right now.

"I had to say something," said Ashelin more calmly, looking away again. "That argument was getting too out of hand. We need to stick together as one united government, and arguing like that will get us nowhere."

"But you believe me... don't you?" Torn asked warily.

Ashelin's head dropped again, and she returned to her previous stance of leaning on the table, still not meeting his eyes. "To be honest, Torn," she said with a deep sigh, "I don't know what to believe right now. Nothing adds up."

This was not the answer that Torn had been hoping to hear. They each took their work seriously and professionally, and they had always mutually supported each other no matter what, but only in these rare moments when they were alone together did they allow their personal feelings for each other to be expressed. They could talk more freely with each other, unaffected by politics. However, right now, she was not showing any of her usual confidence in him, and she acted no differently to how she had done when the room was still full of people. It made him feel as if she was keeping her true thoughts hidden, and this only reinforced the feeling that he had seriously wronged her. Even the transgressions he had committed in the Krimzon Guard seemed insignificant compared to this.

Today, he had done the one thing he had sworn to himself he would never do: he had let Ashelin down. He could tell.

"Ash, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise," she said curtly. "There's no point."

Torn's mind still throbbed with regret. Now Ashelin was not even accepting his apology. What else could he do?

"We've got a lot of work ahead of us," continued Ashelin. "This isn't going to be easy, and I don't know if we'll even see the other side of it, but I'm sure as hell going to give it my all to make sure we do."

Torn greatly admired her dedication, but he severely doubted his own resolve. He had only felt this close to giving up once before, back when he had sold out the Underground, but he had done it all to protect the woman standing before him right now.

"I trust you, Ash," Torn said, swallowing hard, "But I don't think... I don't think I can —"

"Don't even think about it," Ashelin ordered with a deadly tone, stabbing him with her sharp eyes again, and it froze the words in Torn's mouth. "I forbid you from resigning. You and I have come too far together to end like that."
She looked at him even more deeply, and Torn felt completely transparent for Ashelin to have known what he was thinking before he had even said it.

"This is a difficult time for all of us, and the last thing we need is you ditching us like that. We need you to help us get through this, Torn."

She spoke sternly but fairly, trying to motivate him back into action. It was partially successful, for her words stirred something within him, something that made him remember the duties he had sworn to the city, and to her, so long ago.

"Now come on," she said, standing up straight again. "We've got lots of work to do. Torn, I want you to take an hour's break to pull yourself together, and then I expect you to devote your full energy to helping the city. Is that clear?"

He understood the order, and was actually thankful that she was giving him something to do. This felt like she was granting him the chance to redeem himself, and he was sure to take it. He would do anything to have her trust back. However, he could still feel the disappointment radiating off her, the disappointment that he felt he had caused. He needed to show her that he could fix this.

"Yes ma'am," he said with a salute.
Author's note: special mention must go to Fire_Lemur, who is very lovely and a great writer, for giving some more Kudos to this story. I highly recommend reading Fire_Lemur's story, titled Those Magic Changes.
https://archiveofourown.org/works/15649566/chapters/36347694

Jak sat in the back of the transport vehicle that was taking him to Spargus. On the bench beside him, Daxter had long fallen asleep, and this had given him some time to think in peace about everything that had happened today.

Right after the attack on Haven City had come to an end, he and Daxter had headed straight to the Naughty Ottsel. There they found that it had somehow, miraculously, survived undamaged, and so had Tess, who had taken shelter in the basement with a few other citizens. She seemed frightened but calm as she asked them just what had happened out there, for she and all the others had yet to be informed about the ill-fated discovery of the people of Idandi.

After what little there was to be understood was made clear, Jak had gone searching for Keira, and found her alive and safe too inside Freedom HQ. But no sooner had they been reunited with each other, Ashelin had sent him the order to fly out to Spargus and requisition whatever help he could from Sig and his Wastelanders. He understood the urgency and why he was the man best suited for this task, and he accepted, but it felt traitorous to be leaving the city and the people he most cared about just when they needed him the most.

He sat and shivered in the back of the vehicle, remembering the sight of melting buildings and the countless pillars of black smoke rising from the streets. Hardened warrior though he was, he had never seen anything as bad as what he had seen today, even having fought on the frontline of battle that had taken place on the city streets themselves. He thought, after all of the physical and emotional turmoil he had been through, that he would be able to shrug off any terror, but even he could not ignore the painful feeling that now developed inside him. Usually, he felt little during times of conflict, just keeping his head down and focusing on the job at hand, terrible though it may be, and getting it done. In fact, sadly, it had come to the point where he now felt more comfortable in a warzone than in times of peace. At least he was never sitting around getting bored when there was fighting to be done. But this... this was something else entirely...

Haven had taken its worst hammering yet, and would not be able to survive this by herself, that much was clear. Calling on the Wastelanders for help was a sensible call, but it would be a risky endeavour that might lead to nothing. The Wastelanders of Spargus were tough, resourceful and independent, but did not like involving themselves in the affairs of Haven City, the city that had once been home to many of them before they were banished unceremoniously from its walls. People in Spargus rarely spoke of the other city, and when they did, it was not with kind tones.

Jak understood this better than anyone, and he remembered his own banishment with bitterness. He too had felt resentment towards Haven and the previous incarnation of the city council, spearheaded by the cunning and manipulative Count Veger, and for a short while at least, he felt no intention to
ever return and lend them his help again. They threw him out, why should he go back? He'd found a new home in Spargus after being picked up by the Wastelanders, earned his citizenship there, and identified with its people, who actually appreciated his talents and abilities once they had warmed to him.

But things were different now; those who had enforced his banishment were no longer in power, and Spargus had a king with whom he shared reciprocal trust and respect. There may still be hope for them, and he was going to be the bridge between the two cities.

The sounds of the engine began to whir down, and Jak broke his thoughts as he knew that they were coming in to a landing outside the walls of Spargus. The vehicle came down at an angle that was steep enough to slide Daxter out of his seat, and he crashed to the floor, waking up immediately with a yelp.

"Come on, Dax, we're here," said Jak, getting up.

Rubbing his backside, Daxter climbed up to Jak's shoulder, and they stepped out together into the familiar but hostile desert. It was windless and intensely hot, and the beaten walls of Spargus were standing just a few meters away, reflecting the powerful sunlight onto the already searing sand. In the opposite direction lay the open plains of the Wasteland, vast and barren and scorched, and a mirage made the horizon shimmer. The very air sizzled against the skin.

"This place hasn't changed much," mused Daxter, shielding his eyes with a hand.

"Come on, let's get to the city before any Marauders show up," said Jak, and he began to trek through the sand towards the mighty gates of the Spargus garage, now wishing he had remembered to bring his JetBoard with him to make the travelling quicker.

The doors hissed open heavily as they approached them, welcoming them into the cooler interior of the garage. It was bare and basic, wide-open and empty save for the line of rough-ridden desert vehicles parked in their respective places along the curving inner wall. Jak looked across them fondly, feeling like he had returned to a second home. He had driven them all at one point or another, but he took a lingering glance at one in particular: the monstrous Ram Rod sitting in the corner, the vehicle he had been driving when Damas, the past king of Spargus, had been killed. Jak felt a stab of grief as he looked upon it, reliving the painful moment. In the immediate wake of the tragedy, Jak unexpectedly discovered with soul-crushing sorrow that Damas had in fact also been his long-lost father, but fate was cruel that day, and the king died in his arms before either of them could realise their relation. It was one of the great what-ifs of his life as to what would have happened if he had lived. Though the vehicle was now repaired and operable again, Jak felt no wish to sit behind the wheel of it anymore. The very sound of its engine still haunted him, reminding him of Damas's last moments alive.

But then, Jak and Daxter realised that they were not alone here in the garage. Someone was standing close by the door leading into the city watching them, someone very familiar and very large. It was unmistakeably Kleiver, senior Wastelander and the keeper of the Spargus garage.

"'Ello mates!" he growled in his same old gruff tone.

He bounced his weapon staff menacingly in his hands and produced a nasty smile that revealed his terrible teeth, but Jak was not intimidated at all. He knew how to contend with Kleiver, and showing weakness was a sure-fire way to being walked over, perhaps even literally, given Kleiver's size and temperament. Despite being more than double Jak's age, Kleiver was still an opponent to be reckoned with, and very strong; his arm was as thick as Jak's entire body. He wore the durable leather and cloth trappings typical to all Wastelanders, bulging over his impressively wide belly, with
armoured plates made of salvaged metal strapped to the shoulder and elbows. But Jak noticed a new addition to his gear; perched atop his armoured shoulder, sticking out like a sore thumb and looking very miserable and victimised, was none other than Count Veger in ottsel form, ex-chancellor of Haven City and the man chiefly responsible for enforcing Jak's banishment into the Wasteland and so much more emotional suffering thereafter.

Jak spared him only one glance. He remembered at the end of their last great adventure witnessing Veger suffer his unfortunate transformation. He'd believed that he was being granted the gift to evolve into a powerful and advanced Precursor being, but he had been tricked and was instead reduced to nothing more than a two-foot tall, flea-ridden animal, much to his shock and disappointment. Then Kleiver had picked him up and decided to make him an unwilling sidekick; indeed, the only reason he was on Kleiver's shoulder right now was because his feet had been lashed there with a tight leather strap.

"Fancy seein' you nippers out 'ere again," Kleiver continued. "I thought you'd wussed out and gone back to the big smoke for good. Can't say I missed ya."

"Nice to see you too, lizard breath!" Daxter said sarcastically to Kleiver, who responded with a scowl. He was a man with a very short fuse, and none could light it better than Daxter.

"Kleiver, we need to see Sig," explained Jak quickly, getting straight to business before anything else unwise was said. "It's important."

"The king? And I thought you'd come all the way out here just to see me!" replied Kleiver, smiling that horrible smile of his again. Evidently this was his idea of a joke, but nobody was laughing. "Yeah, you can see 'im," he said after a moment. "He's up in the palace, usual spot. Give 'im a kiss from me, why don't ya?"

"Thanks Kleiver," said Jak, and he continued past him towards the door that led into the city.

As they went by, Veger from atop Kleiver's shoulder tried to gesture desperately at them, mouthing 'help me!'. However, Jak did not even deem him worthy of the attention, cruelly satisfied that he was suffering an unpleasant fate, and just strode on by. Daxter returned Veger's gesture for help with a rude one of his own, feeling very content with himself.

Spargus was quiet and calm, and everything was exactly how Jak remembered it. The bleached buildings still stood strong, the dusty streets were still alive with lizards and rats, and over on the far side was the great staircase that led up to the battle arena, where he had once had to prove his right to be allowed to stay here. It felt strange to be standing on these streets again, so peaceful, especially knowing what terror Haven was going through at this very moment. Nobody here even knew about the attack yet, and were obliviously going about their daily duties. A few Wastelanders tersely nodded at him as they passed by. They knew he was one of them, and he fit in here naturally, just like Ashelin had predicted.

"Come on, let's find Sig," said Daxter on Jak's shoulder. "It'll be good to see that old lug again."

"I sure hope he can help us," said Jak earnestly. "Haven needs it."

"I'll say," said Daxter in agreement. "If those guys ever come back for a second round, the city's toast."

Jak marched along the roads, heading towards the spire of the palace. It was the tallest building in the city, carved upon the very summit of a red cliff that divided the two main districts of Spargus, and its great tower bore an ever-burning fire, a guiding beacon of safety that could be seen from almost
anywhere in the surrounding Wasteland, even through a thick dust storm.

Very soon, they were standing at the palace gate. As Jak stepped through and onto the wooden lift that would take him up, memories rushed back to meet him again. This was the first time he had properly returned to the throne room since Damas had died, and this would also be the first he would not be there waiting for him with some urgent mission that required completing, or to lecture him on how to be a fine warrior. Once again Jak felt the sense of loss and the enduring mystery of what could have been had he lived; there was probably much they could have learned from each other.

But that did not sadden him too much, for another old friend would be waiting there in his place. A friend who had accompanied him countless times into situations of extreme peril, and had bravely battled by his side on their way to victory. Someone who was not easily turned down from a challenge, and would always step in to protect his friends, Sig was exactly the kind of person Haven City needed right now.

The lift clanked and creaked further upwards until it came to a shuddering stop in the middle of the palace throne room. Jak looked around. Streams of water fell from the high ceiling into the rocky pools all around, keeping the air cool and moist, the water wheels they fed grinded and whirred, and a great window looked out over the open desert. The only thing that had changed was the walls, which were now decorated lavishly with Metal Head trophies, and right in the middle of the room, sitting on the throne and polishing his Peace Maker weapon, was the man who was responsible for obtaining them.

Sig looked up the moment the lift came to a halt. "Hey, chilli peppers!" he called heartily, standing up as he spotted his old friends coming towards him.

He gave Jak a big, manly handshake that almost lifted him right off his feet.

"Good to see you again, Sig," said Jak with a calm smile, shaking the numbness out of his arm.

Like Kleiver, Sig was a tall and beefy man with great strength, but younger and fitter, and with an unrivalled passion for hunting Metal Heads. He always wore a battered suit of armour, seemingly made from the exoskeletons of the Metal Heads he had slain, and never went anywhere without his trusty Peace Maker, a monstrous weapon with many notches in its handle. One of his eyes was missing, replaced with a bionic device that sometimes shimmered and contracted like a lens.

"How's ruling Spargus been for ya?" asked Daxter cheerily. "Not been too tough for ya, big guy?"

Sig chuckled deeply. "Nah, it's a breeze! Everyone looks after themselves pretty well, and I get more time to go out Metal Head hunting."

"I like the new trophies," said Jak with a smirk.

Sig looked around proudly but sadly. "Yeah, they're about all that was left out here. They're getting harder and harder to find now. But take a look at this one. He put up a real fight!"

Jak raised a hand just as Sig pointed out a particularly large and impressive one. "Maybe some other time, Sig. We're here because we need to speak to you about something important."

"Fire away, chilli pepper!"

Jak told Sig everything about how they had discovered the representatives of Idandi, and had agreed to try and start an alliance, only for it all to come crashing down in flames.

Sig listened carefully. He was interested to learn about the existence of this new people, but was
filled with great anger at what they were now doing to Haven, and this surprised him more than he expected. Personally, he had never thought very highly of the people of Haven; he believed they were rather weak, and had brought most of the terrors they had suffered upon themselves with their poor judgements and planning. It was a widely shared perception among many of the Wastelanders here in Spargus that Haven would eventually crumble under its own self-inflicted wounds. He was partially right, but he was no stranger to its streets, and over the time he had spent there, he had come to consider it like his second home, and he knew for a fact that Haven's current leaders were far from weak or incompetent. Not to mention, he trusted and respected Jak, and the things he told him now sounded very bad. These new enemies were putting his valued friends in danger, and he would do anything to help them when they were in need.

"Man, these boys sound nasty," he said. "You know I've got your back, Jak, but to be honest, based on what you've just told me, I'm not sure how much of a help I would be."

"Honestly, Sig, we need anything you can give us," said Jak seriously. "Men, weapons, supplies, anything."

"Well, I might be able to get some weapons over to you at least," said Sig, thinking. "We've got quite a stockpile to defend ourselves against the Marauders, but even they've been pretty quiet recently, so our weapons are just sitting around not being used."

"It'd be nice if we could get that big turret down on the beach," said Daxter semi-seriously.

"Sorry cherry, that thing's impossible to move," said Sig.

"Well, some extra weapons are always useful," said Jak. "Thanks, Sig. But what about some extra fighters? We've already lost quite a lot of men as it is. Would any of your Wastelanders be willing to lend us a hand?"

Sig's face became uncertain and he scratched his square chin. "That one's more difficult, chilli pepper. A lot of the Wastelanders here still feel badly about Haven, and I don't know how many of them would want to give their support even now."

"That's what Ashelin feared," said Jak, and his own thoughts were confirmed too, having once been in the same position himself.

"I could try and put the word out for you," said Sig, "But I ain't holding much hope."

"And what about yourself, big guy?" asked Daxter.

Sig's face broke into a strong smile. "You know it! You just say the word, cherries, and I'll be right there to cover your butt!"

Both Jak and Daxter smiled back at him thankfully, knowing that they could still count on Sig's support. Perhaps if he was seen to join the fight, then it might encourage the other Wastelanders to do so as well.

"Tell you the truth," Sig continued, "I've missed fighting with you guys. Things have been too quiet here ever since you saved the world again, what with the Marauder attacks dropping off and the Metal Heads dying out one by one."

"Well, there's plenty of action to be had in Haven right now!" Daxter said, perhaps a little more cheerfully than he should have done.

"We really appreciate your help, Sig," said Jak. "But there's one more thing. I think you might've
already answered this question for us, but we need to do something to keep the citizens of Haven safe. Ashelin wanted to know if you could perhaps offer them refuge here until the heat dies down."

Again, Sig looked regretful, and Jak and Daxter already knew what the answer would be. "Like I said, cherries, relations with Haven here ain't good. I don't think the Wastelanders would take kindly to looking after Haven's refugees, even if I ordered them to, and many of them still uphold Damas's rule about proving your right to stay here through combat in the arena. They won't like it if people just turn up and stay without good reason."

"But... you don't still enforce that, do you?" asked Daxter with a gulp, remembering all the scary battles that he and Jak had been forced to face in that arena.

"No," said Sig, "That's one thing I never completely agreed about with Damas. Sure, you need to be tough to live out here, but there are other ways to prove your worth. Besides, we've not had any new exiles since you two turned up, so we've not had the chance to try anything new."

"And I don't think Ashelin will be banishing anyone else out here either," added Jak. "She's better than that."

Sig agreed. "Right. The other thing is if Haven folk did come here, it'd be a huge drain on our reserves. The things we need to survive — water, food, shelter — they don't come easy out here, and everything's carefully rationed. If we suddenly got a large number of newcomers, we might not have enough to share out for everyone. Sorry, cherry."

"That's what we thought," said Jak sadly. "Besides, I don't think most of the citizens even know Spargus exists. I guess we'll have to find some other way to keep them safe."

"I'll put the word out, like I said," said Sig, "But I don't think it'll happen. I'm sorry I can't be of any more help."

"It's OK, Sig," said Jak, "It's good just to know you're with us on this."

With their most pressing business out of the way, the two seasoned warriors continued to chat for a while longer, until Jak had to return to Haven with the news.

"I'll get the first batch of weapons out to you by the end of the day," Sig said, "Then I might drop by tomorrow to see things for myself."

"Thanks again, big guy," said Daxter, and he and Jak departed from the palace, both feeling much more confident about their chances of survival now that Sig was involved.

"I knew we could count on him!" said Daxter proudly as they stepped onto the baked streets of Spargus again.

"Yeah," agreed Jak. "Sig's tougher than tough, and he's a great ally. Come on, let's get back to the city and tell Ashelin."

As they walked through the garage once again, Kleiver was still there. In fact he appeared not to have moved since they arrived; he was standing in exactly the same spot, minding his own business but not really doing anything. Did he really have nothing better to do than stand there all day? Whether he did or not, his idleness gave Jak an idea that was worth trying.

"Hey Kleiver. Bored?" he asked, a cunningly playful edge to his voice.

"What's it to ya what I get up to in my spare time?" Kleiver spat back, suddenly paying attention.
"Just wondered if you might want to come and lend a hand in Haven," Jak said casually.

Kleiver puffed out an uncaring breath that ruffled his thick moustache. "Now why would I want to go to that big dump?"

"Just saying, but there's plenty of action going on at the moment, and we could use the extra muscle," Jak explained, slyly appealing to Kleiver's pride in his strength and fortitude. It seemed to work, for Kleiver looked somewhat smug to hear that someone appreciated his abilities.

"Alright, poppy, you've got me interested," he said, "And that doesn't happen very often. What've those drongoes in Haven gone and done to themselves now then?"

"It's complicated, but it looks like there might be another war starting," Jak explained. "Talk to Sig, he's planning how Spargus will respond."

"Well, we don't just dish out help here to those who don't deserve it," said Kleiver menacingly, crossing his thick arms. "Why should I involve myself?"

Jak smirked a little, remembering how difficult it was to convince Kleiver of anything. "We'd really appreciate the help, and I'm sure Ashelin will want to repay you somehow."

"Yeah, maybe a big tub of ice-cream for ya, jelly boy!" Daxter suddenly cut in.

Kleiver responded to that with another snarl, but the rest of his expression was difficult to read. He really did not think it worth his time to help Haven fight their battles, but then another part of him was looking for something exciting to do. This had to be serious if Sig was going to get involved.

Meanwhile, up on his shoulder, Veger was still hopelessly trying to free his feet from their holdings, but he was failing miserably and went ignored by everyone.

"I'll think about it, nippers," Kleiver said, "But don't get too cosy waiting for me to show up. And don't think it'll square things out between us either. Soon enough, I'm gonna beat all those race records you set, and then I'll be the top guy around here again!"

"Oh, still miffed about that, are we?" said Daxter smarmily.

Jak smiled reminiscently. He and Kleiver had something of an ongoing rivalry here in Spargus, always trying to outdo each other in tests of skill and manliness. So far, Jak had always come out on top, but he was wary that one day Kleiver might just challenge him to a wrestling match, and even he doubted whether he would be able to survive that.

"OK, well, hope to have you with us," he said finally.

He shared an awkwardly humorous glance with Daxter, before heading towards the garage door, leaving Kleiver to his thoughts. By now, the wind had kicked up, and sand blew into their faces as it cranked open. Jak once again found himself having to don his goggles and his scarf, as he staggered through the sand back towards the rough shape of the drop ship in the distance.
The days following the storm on the island passed slowly and miserably. A great cloudy blanket remained hanging dully over the island, muting all warmth and sunlight. The winds were cold and the sea restless, and they brought with them occasional rain showers that kept the sand and trees damp, making it ever more difficult to light fires and stay warm.

Mood reached an all-time low for the four friends who existed here, as if the grey weather had absorbed all happiness from the air. None of them could soon remember how long they had been stranded here; the days all seemed to melt together into a single smear of immeasurable time, and they had given up counting. Trying to survive here was no longer fun nor exciting, and none of them had smiled or felt properly cheerful for days. All they wanted to do now was to get away from here and end their suffering and misery.

They had endured hunger, loneliness, injury and bad weather, but now they had to face illness too. Olto was suffering from an unexplained fever that kept him inactive and weak, unable to walk surely or do any work, and he spent most of the time in his chair by the fireside. His limbs felt heavy and numb, he experienced bouts of strange visual and mental disorientation, and he felt both uncomfortably hot and shivery at the same time. He lost all appetite, and anything he did manage to eat never stayed down for very long. Finding sleep was difficult too, and he became so exhausted from deprivation that he often dozed off randomly without warning, and could not be roused.

Jak, Torn and Ashelin were left to care for him, but there was little they could do with only their basic supplies and medical equipment. Thankfully, they too had not succumbed to the same symptoms, which was a great relief. They wondered whether it was that fish they had found that had caused this, but even though they had all eaten from it, only Olto had been affected so far. However, with this possibility in mind, nobody was keen to try eating any more of it, and it was not touched again until it began to decay, and they had to dispose of it.

Their other main preoccupation was the construction of a raft that they may use to finally escape from the island's clutches. They no longer looked to the sky for signs of rescue vehicles from Haven, deciding in their sense of abandonment to take matters into their own hands. The clouds made sighting impossible anyway. Their resources piled up plentifully for the construction of their raft, but without any expertise or experience, the work was hard. Whenever they thought they had a stable structure, it would only come unleashed when they tried to move it or attach more, and their progress was marred by petulance and insecurity.

Jak was doing his best to guide the effort, being the one most familiar with building primitive vehicles from scratch, but he too was finding it a struggle. It had been so long since he had had to do anything like this, and most of his memories and skills had long been driven from his mind by the modern technology of Haven.
If only Keira were here, he often found himself thinking. She would probably be able to whip up a sturdy boat by herself in just a day or two.

Thoughts like this only caused him to miss her even more, and she was frequently on his mind. He grew steadily more depressed and lethargic, and sometimes spent long periods of time brooding alone.

Torn, meanwhile, was becoming surly. Even though his painful sunburn was fading in the cloudy weather and he was able to move about and work more freely, he was easily irritated whenever something went wrong with the building effort, and often took out his frustrations on the others, being the cause of several arguments. Out of all of them, he was the one most fed up with the island, and was impatient to get this raft finished as soon as possible and then head straight back home. The longer it took, the more difficult he became to satisfy.

Ashelin, more able to keep a level head, found herself the mediator on many occasions. She did her best to calm him, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not. She knew Torn well, and understood how he could be when his goals were delayed or not met, but even she was starting to lose her patience with him. He seemed now to be in a constant, inconsolable bad mood. It was all she could do to bottle her own frustrations to prevent any major interpersonal conflicts that might threaten their progress, or even their friendship.

As a fractured but determined team, they were able to persevere no matter how many snags they encountered, though it was not a pleasant working experience. It took about another week, after several false starts and trial-and-error tactics, until something that was recognisably a raft was taking shape in their camp. A bed of strong timbers made up the simple, flat base, held together with vines and horizontal branches atop and beneath. It did not look pretty, and was less than ten square feet in area, but it was the best they had managed to achieve so far.

Not only that, but Olto's condition was steadily improving too, and he had watched the raft's construction from start to finish. By the time it was ready, he was well enough to think and speak clearly, and was no longer so tired, but he still lacked the energy to help.

"Great job," he said earnestly to his friends, trying to diffuse the tension that he felt still lingering in the air.

Jak, Ashelin and Torn were all tired from their long days of work and constant issues. This endeavour had taken a lot out of them, physically and emotionally, and they were all now rather weary of each other's company. As a result, they felt little sense of reward or achievement.

Torn was the most dissatisfied. "It's not as big as I was expecting," he grumbled. "There's not enough room on here for all of us and the supplies we'd need."

"Well, this won't be our final version," said Jak. "We need to test it out and make sure it'll stay afloat. There's no point building more to it if won't hold out."

Torn glared around gloomily, disappointed that even after all this time and trouble, their work was still not done. But he understood that Jak was right; it was essential that the raft be tested.

"Come on, let's get it down to the sea," said Ashelin, sensing Torn's irritable mood building up again. "You going to be OK by yourself for a little while, Olto?"

Olto raised up the water flask in acknowledgement. "I'll be right here when you come back," he said surely.
Ashelin, Torn and Jak each took hold of an end of the raft, and heaved it up... slowly.

"Man, this is heavy!" grunted Ashelin. "We should have built it closer to the water."

As they struggled awkwardly down the sand, Olto watched them go. He was worried about them, for he had witnessed many of their disagreements and arguments from this very seat, some of which had even disturbed him from much-needed rest. Being stuck together on this island for so long had made him feel much closer to them, but there was only so much they could take of one another, and it pained him to see them snapping at each other like that. Despite his illness, however, he had persevered to try and lighten the mood, as he always did, but his lack of energy affected his attempts, and he was ultimately unsuccessful. Once he was back to a hundred percent, he would see to it that everyone remained cheerful and comfortable.

By his side lay his pile of gathered seashells, which he had often picked up and admired whenever he had felt particularly disheartened by his illness. They had helped him a great deal to get through it sanely, for they made him feel safer and happier. He sat there now with a shell in one hand and a fruit in the other, and lay back to watch how the raft fared.

Down at the shore, Jak, Ashelin and Torn had to lower the raft back onto the sand and take a rest. Their arms were aching from carrying it that short distance already.

"We might not even be able to lift the full-sized version," said Ashelin, flexing some muscle back into her arms.

"There'll be a way," said Jak determinedly, looking out over the water. There was still a fair breeze in the air, and the sea was grey and unsettled, pushing long, deep waves upon the sand. Already they could feel the cold spray blowing into their faces.

"Is this really the best time to test it?" Ashelin asked unsurely.

"It doesn't matter," said Torn impatiently, "We've got to do it."

"Might as well see if it can hold up in rough weather," said Jak. "If it can stay afloat in this, we know we've done a good job."

"Then let's not waste any more time," said Torn, more forcefully than he needed to. "Come on!"

Gathering strength, they heaved up the raft again, and carried it into the shallow water. They lowered it down again when they were in up to their knees, and to their contentment, saw that it supported itself well, bobbing around on the turbulent surface.

"Looking good," said Jak encouragingly. "Let's take it out a bit further."

They continued pushing it out until they were up to their waists, and still the raft held its buoyancy. Even Torn was finally starting to look happy with their progress, and was glad to see that it had paid off after all this time. But the waves were getting stronger and faster, sometimes reaching up past their shoulders.

"This water's goddamned freezing!" said Ashelin, her teeth chattering. She could not remember ever feeling so cold, half-submerged in the sea like this, and she could not imagine how much worse it had to be for Torn, who had not worn a shirt for days due to his sunburn. However, he was making no complaint, and struggled on.

All the while, Olto watched from his chair as the three of them went out further, slowly shrinking into the ocean. Their raft was clearly floating well, but he hoped that they would not go out too far,
because that tide looked strong. However, they came to a stop before they were out of their depth, keeping a hold on the raft so it would not drift away.

"It still looks good," said Jak. "Let's see if it'll take our weight. Who wants to go up?"

Ashelin volunteered to climb atop it, but just so she could get out of the cold water. Jak gave her a leg up while Torn held the raft in place, and soon she was kneeling on top of it, feeling very unsteady as it wobbled around in the water, tilting with every wave. She clung on tightly at the centre, trying to distribute her weight evenly across the whole surface area.

"How you handling it?" Jak called up to her.

"This feels precarious!" she replied. Though she was now out of the water, it made absolutely no difference to the cold; her clothes were soaked through to the skin, and now she had the wind acting against her too. However, despite her unstable platform, the raft seemed to be taking her weight, and as she became more comfortable up here, her emotions began to rise, as did the others'.

"It's holding out," said Torn, cracking the first proper smile in days. "Help me up too."

Ashelin pulled him up out of the water by the arm, and shuffled over as much as she could to make room for him. Now they were both up here, holding each other for balance, while Jak remained clinging on to the side in the water.

Up on the beach, Olto continued to watch the promising excursion, and smiled when he heard their happy shouts coming to him on the damp wind. He tried to wave at them, but they were too preoccupied and too far down the beach to see him.

"This is great!" said Ashelin, a wary smile on her face.

But then, things started to go wrong. The added weight combined with the continued motion of the waves was beginning to unsteady the raft, and the logs and branches that made up its keel began to bend and sway, and sag in the middle. A particularly strong wave knocked Ashelin off balance, and she rolled over sideways. There came a crack as she hit the raft, and Torn looked down to see one of the branches had split.

"We've got a problem!" he shouted.

Jak partially pulled himself up so he could see the damage, and though it did not look too bad from where he was, the stability of the raft was now compromised, and the tethers were starting to stretch dangerously.

"Uh oh," he said.

From his seat in the camp, Olto could perceive the change in their voices and body language, and sensed they were in trouble. He could see them with their hands on deck, as if trying to hold it together, and Jak was now half draped across the top trying to help. Another sweeping wave pushed them forwards, there was the sound of creaking and cracking, and the next thing Olto knew, the raft overturned completely and came apart like matchsticks, and everyone tumbled into the waters.

Olto sat up worriedly, and tried to see where his friends had disappeared to, and if they were OK. He forced himself to half rise up from the chair, knowing that it may be up to him to make a rescue, weak though he was, but then he saw their heads and their floundering arms break the surface. The water where they had fallen was shallow enough for them to stand up, so Olto relaxed a little and sat back down, knowing they were in no serious danger, but feeling their failure.
He kept his eye on them as they all waded sadly through the water, helping each other along the way, unhurt, but freezing, soaked and defeated. Jak wiped away the water that was dripping from his hair onto his face, disappointed that all of their hard work had gone to waste like this.

"Ah man, I was sure that design would work." He picked up half a log that was lying at his feet, weighing it in his hand. "We'll have to try again, but with stronger materials."

"But that could take us weeks!" Ashelin protested, finally letting out some of her suppressed frustrations.

"Well what other choice do we have?" said Jak aggressively. "How else are we gonna get out of here? We've got to keep working, Ashelin!"

"But can't we just rest first? Please?" Ashelin begged, shivering with her arms around herself. "We've been working non-stop already, and it hasn't exactly been smooth going for us. I'm exhausted, Jak."

Jak calmed himself down a little as he realised the sense in Ashelin's words. She had spoken an uncomfortable truth; they had been a rather dysfunctional team over the last few days, and now he thought about it, it had probably contributed to their lack of success today. If they were to build a lasting raft, they would need to co-operate more harmoniously and really put their minds to the task.

"You're right, Ashelin," he sighed. "I'm sorry. Let's just get back to camp and dry off, and we'll think about this all later."

Ashelin nodded thankfully, but then, they both realised that Torn was standing in grim silence just a few feet away from them, staring at the broken pieces held in his hands.

"Torn?"

He appeared not to hear them, standing as if in a trance. But then suddenly, he snapped. With a defeated, angry shout, he hurled the pieces back into the water, swearing loudly and kicking the wet sand. All of the frustrations, pains and self-doubts that had been building up for weeks came to a violent climax, and were now erupting out of him like fire. Olto heard him raging all the way from his chair. They had all predicted this moment would come sooner or later, considering Torn's increasingly unpleasant mood over the last few days and watching him barely manage to hold himself together, but it was still a shock to see him lose control like this.

At last, when the worst of it subsided, Ashelin felt brave enough to approach him, trying to calm him down as she had always done, but she did not get far.

"Torn —"

"Don't tell me everything's alright!" Torn bellowed at her, "Because it isn't!"

"Torn, please just listen to me," she said, trying to be soothing, "I know this isn't good, but we need to stay calm and stick together and try again, and we won't make any progress while you're like this."

"Don't you understand?" Torn shouted back, right in her face. "It doesn't matter what we do! Everything we've tried has failed! We're never gonna leave this place!"

Ashelin stood her ground. "Torn, listen to yourself!" she said more strongly. "This isn't you. The Torn I know would never give up like this. You're too angry. Just think!"

"I'm done thinking!" Torn shouted, his voice cracking. "I've had it with this place! I've had enough
of all of you! I hate everything here!"

He turned from her and made to stride heavily away, but Ashelin was not going to let him go that easily. She had put up with him like this for too long, her patience was almost depleted, her own temper was rising. She was going to straighten him out once and for all with a few choice words. She caught him by the shoulders and forced him back round to face her, taking on a very stern, commanding demeanour, letting some of her own anger come forth.

"Torn! You —"

"Get the hell off me!" Torn roared, and he savagely shoved Ashelin so hard that she fell over backwards into the wet sand. Jak was kneeling protectively by her side in an instant, ready to defend her if he had to, but by the time they looked up again, Torn had already taken several long steps away down the beach, his back to everybody.

"Torn!" Ashelin called desperately after him, but he made no acknowledgement and continued on walking. "Torn! Come back!" It had no effect. Torn remained as unresponsive as a deaf man.

Ashelin felt so much all at once: shock, confusion, indignation at the way she had just been treated, even the desire to attack. She made to stand up and pursue him, but Jak held her in place with a hand on her shoulder.

"No, Ashelin. Don't bother," he said with eerie calmness.

"What?" she said disbelievingly.

"Just let him go."

Ashelin looked back and forth between the two of them, looking very hurt and powerless and unable to retort. She could not believe that Torn had just done this to her, and could not understand Jak's decision to do nothing. Though Jak too was feeling resentment towards Torn for his actions, he knew from experience that arguing with him when he was like this was futile, and would only make things worse.

"Come on, up you get," said Jak. "Let's just go back to the camp."

He helped Ashelin up to her feet, the sand sticking to their wet clothes, and she watched until Torn disappeared into the trees further down the beach. Slowly and dejectedly, the two of them ambled back to camp with the few broken pieces of the raft they could carry.

When they got there, Olto was waiting with a remorseful expression on his face. "I heard it," he said, all his usual cheer gone to the point that he sounded like a completely different person. "Is he going to be alright?"

"I hope so," said Jak, dropping the remnants of the raft onto the sand, now as broken as their friendship felt. "Can you help us light a fire, Olto?"

Olto complied, being the only dry member of the group, and wishing now to do anything to heal the hurt and hostility that plagued their island. Ashelin was shivering uncontrollably, and not just from the cold anymore. Even as the fire was lit and they all sat down around it, she could not banish it, her mind too distracted by the pain of Torn's abandonment.

"Ashelin? You OK?" Jak asked finally, as he sat down beside her.

Ashelin shook her head, and tiny water droplets flicked from her hair. "He's never been like this
before," she said sadly. "Never this bad. He's not himself, and I don't know what he'll do next... and I'm scared for him."

Jak wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder, which Ashelin gratefully accepted and returned. She felt like she needed a hug right now, and leaned naturally into him.

"Should one of us go and look for him?" asked Olto. "I could do it."

"Not just yet," said Jak. "Thanks for offering Olto, but he clearly needs some alone time. In fact, we could probably all use some by now."

Everyone silently agreed; it was true that their relationships had become strained and they were starting to desire more varied company, but none of them wanted to be alone at a moment like this.

"So what do we do now then?" asked Olto.

"Just sit and wait and dry off, I suppose," Jak said vaguely, staring into the growing fire. "Hopefully Torn will feel better once he's had the time by himself to cool off and think about what he's done."

Everyone hoped he was right, even Jak himself, as they sat in the sombre silence. He and Ashelin remained holding on to each other, and Ashelin was thankful for the water drops that still trickled down her face. They disguised her tears.
Haven City, against everything it had hoped, found itself unwillingly sucked into yet another conflict against a powerful and destructive enemy, and nobody could understand why. It had all happened so suddenly, and the cause of it all still remained elusive and unexplained. The instigating incident had claimed the lives of those who had clearly witnessed it, and the constant defence that needed to be maintained around the city meant that there was little time to properly investigate, for the mysterious jets continued to return, apparently now intent on finishing what they had started. All attempts to signal for a ceasefire or to come to a diplomatic solution were ignored, answered only with violence and destruction, and the people of Haven had no choice but to fight back and defend themselves.

Every battle played out in the same way. The jets would teleport in from out of nowhere and commence their onslaught without any warning at all, concentrating their fire on the defence batteries and the Hellcats that engaged them in the air. Freedom HQ often came under heavy attack too, as well as other tall buildings which looked important. Haven defended itself valiantly, downing many of the hostile aircraft but suffering much damage in the process. When the jets’ numbers became too few to be effective anymore, the survivors would teleport away, abandoning their dead and leaving the city to burn and stew in its own blood. A desperate rush then ensued to save what could be saved and rebuild the defences in time for the next attack; sometimes there would be several days between them, and sometimes only a few hours, there was no way of predicting.

It was a dire situation, a re-awakening of the city's darkest nightmares. Once again they were trapped within their own walls, which were no longer enough to protect them, a sitting target just waiting for the inevitable coming of death that lurked outside. It was a grim outlook, and only the undying spirit of Mar that remained alive in every citizen kept Haven from accepting defeat.

What pained everyone the most, however, was the apparent futility of it all, and none of Haven's leaders understood the true motivations of their enemy. Had they really wanted to start a bountiful alliance, as they had proffered? Or had it been a lie, and had they been planning on this right from the start, as many in the city now believed? If so, then what was the point of it all? What did they possibly hope to achieve by attacking on sight like that?

As incomprehensible as their reasons were, the people of Haven were all too familiar with their consequences and implications. After all, the Metal Heads, an embodiment of heartless hate and mindless destruction, had besieged the city for as long as anyone could remember. Therefore, the general citizenry, who had not been made aware of the initial meeting over the faraway ocean or the potential for an alliance, had no difficulty in applying the same mentality to this new foe. It was the only rationalisation they could come to.

Haven's leaders had a difficult and stressful job on their hands, knowing that their every defence may be their last. Effective communication and co-ordination throughout the city was paramount, as was the minimisation of human casualty, and already they had employed several beneficial tactics to achieve these goals.
First, control of the defensive weaponry throughout the city was handed over to Vin, who in his digital form, wired in to the city grid, could tirelessly monitor the systems and have them constantly running automatically and at peak efficiency. This alleviated a great amount of dangerous work required of the Freedom League, as soldiers no longer needed to be manually operating the defences and could be put to greater, safer use elsewhere.

The Freedom League itself had taken severe losses in the very first attack, and demoralisation had become a major, constant risk. Many of the citizens volunteered themselves to replenish the gaps in the forces once they knew what was going on, spurred on by anger and the thirst for vengeance against those who sought their destruction. However, it was not that simple. The Freedom League could not just accept untrained civilians into their ranks like that, as desperate as the situation was, and training them up would take time that they did not have. They much preferred to keep the civilians safe at all costs.

Instead, they sought the help of the Wastelanders of Spargus. On the day that Jak brought the news to them, they despatched a shipload of extra weaponry and all the emergency supplies they could spare, which Haven was grateful for. On the following day, Sig himself turned up in the city, accompanied by Kleiver and twelve other equally large and fierce-looking Wastelanders, the only ones who had voluntarily answered the call for help. Few though they were, Sig’s presence was a great morale boost for everyone who knew him, and during attacks he shot down many jets from the ground with his mighty Peace Maker. The others were promised to be rewarded for their efforts, but they showed no interest in the re-instatement of their Haven citizenship that was initially offered. They made clear that they were here purely because they believed it was the right thing to do.

Despite the help they were receiving from Spargus, sending the civilians of Haven there for refuge sadly proved not to be possible; Spargus did not have the resources to accommodate so many, and relations between the two cities were still too fragile. The citizens had no choice but to stay confined within their homes for the most part, or head for the most protected places in the city when an attack came. Many of the buildings in the New Haven district had secure underground basements, and friends and families came together to help each other as much as possible. Fortunately, since the enemy was so focussed on taking out the Freedom defences and aircraft, the residential areas were largely spared, but they still came under stray fire now and then, and sometimes aircraft would come crashing down onto houses and streets, so safety was never guaranteed.

As a result of all of these measures, none of the attacks had been worse than the very first. There were still unfortunate, unavoidable casualties, of course, but Haven was putting up such a great defence, that the death count was soon overturned.

The enemy jets kept on returning, seemingly inexhaustible in number, but they just could not claim a substantial victory. They tried adapting their methods, first approaching the city from alternate directions, or sometimes even teleporting in directly above the city airspace to catch them off guard, but they were repelled every time by Haven’s superior defences, which were repaired as quickly as they were being destroyed. When they tried attacking the city from a greater distance, out of range of the defences, they were intercepted by Hellcats.

Haven, meanwhile, had no way of bringing the fight to their enemy’s homeland, having never learned where it was in the first place and having no easy way of finding it; their mysterious enemy had always been the ones dictating the conflict ever since it had begun. They were the ones who decided when to fight, and all Haven could do was react to their moves. Though the streets and the areas outside the city walls were frequently strewn with the pieces of the jets that fell, none of their pilots were ever found alive, so there was nobody even to take prisoner or interrogate. Therefore, in order to learn more about their foe, they had to rely on assumptions, deductions and examinations of the wreckage and other things they left behind, and the scientists studied their unique materials and
weaponry, hoping to harness some of their technology for their own use, or learn how to best repel its force.

This destructive cycle continued for weeks, which turned into months, with no foreseeable end. All through the cold winter months, the city was beset, and the war became an uncomfortable stalemate, with no side able to gain the upper hand. Gradually however, as winter's shadow was giving way to the warmer spring, the attacks began to peter out, coming with reduced numbers and with increasingly longer periods of time between each.

In one of these tenuous moments of peace that had so far lasted a week, Ashelin gathered the city's most important people for another meeting in the Freedom HQ boardroom to assess the situation and discuss their next options.

"This war's been going on for months now," said Ashelin, leaning heavily upon the tabletop, her voice laden with regret and fatigue, "And it's clear that neither of us are going to back down. But we can't keep going on like this."

Nobody could disagree with her on that. The war had taken a lot out of both sides, the streets of Haven bore a permanent stench of fire and death, and everyone was weary from the stress, lack of sleep, and the pain of the loss of so many people. Even around this very meeting table, there were empty seats. Ashelin looked the worst; she was pale and there were dark circles under her eyes, making her look much older than she truly was. But then her voice rose.

"This has to end," she said conclusively, thumping her fist on the table in a momentary flash of strength.

"But how?" asked someone at the other end. "The enemy have us pinned down in our own city, they keep sending wave after wave of attacks on us, and we are powerless to stop them. What more can we do?"

"That's what we are here to decide," Samos spoke up. "It is true that there is little we can do right now but to keep defending ourselves as we have always done, but enemy tactics are changing, and we have to understand what this means and how we shall react to them."

"Samos is right," continued Ashelin, grateful that the wise sage was here to offer his perspicacity. "We've seen a decrease in the number of enemy attacks as of late," she said, now looking over the charts she had on the table. "The last one was about a week ago, and they've been nowhere near as devastating as the ones before. If I wasn't any the wiser, I'd say they're finally starting to lose strength."

"They must be running out of men by now, surely," said Jak, a few seats away. "We've taken down so many."

He spoke with the knowledge that he himself had claimed a great number of the enemy jets that had been destroyed; in every battle, he had been up in his cruiser and fighting valiantly, proving himself once again to be an indispensable figure in the city's defence.

"If that's the case," said Torn bravely, "Do you think they'd be open to negotiations now?"

"Maybe," said Ashelin, hoping that it was true, however unlikely it now felt. "We don't know their true numbers. Hell, we still don't even know why they attacked us in the first place. But if I were in their position, I think I would have realised by now that these attacks aren't getting them anywhere, and would try a different tack... that is, if I was really set on destroying who I was fighting against."
"They must be!" said an aggressive commander, almost in automatic response. "Why else would they keep coming back? All they want is to wipe us out!"

"There is no way that we can confirm that," Samos cautioned. He felt as if he had said this at least once in nearly every meeting he had attended, for the attitude of the commander was widely shared by nearly everyone else in the whole city. "For all we know, they might be as confused and guideless as we are. There has been so little communication between us, and neither of us knows for sure how the other thinks."

"Well spoken," said Ashelin. "Until we can actually speak with them directly, we don't have their side of the story. But let's get back on track here, and try and come to a decision about what we'll do next. We need to address our next moves. What's everyone's first impressions?"

There was a moment's silence as everyone tried to gather their thoughts and conjure ideas, but it was a difficult exercise. Torn was the first to voice his.

"I'm still in favour of trying to get through to them," he said, and all heads turned to him. He noticed the alienating looks from many of them, as if they neither desired nor valued his further input, because even though it was unproven, many in the council still held him at least partly responsible for all of this fighting. It had been like this for months, but he had been doing his utmost to redeem himself. "I know they can be reasoned with," he persisted against their accusatory and mistrusting glares. "I spoke with them before this all started, after all. I only hope they'll exhaust themselves soon, and finally open up negotiations."

Jak supported this with an agreeing nod of his head, for he had been there too when first contact had been made. It remained the only time when the two opposing forces had ever actually spoken to each other.

"I can understand why you would suggest that, commander," said Ashelin, and Torn internally flinched when she addressed him by his rank rather than his name. She had taken to doing that more and more regularly, he had noticed, treating him more like a soldier than the close and trusting friend that he was to her, as if she desired to maintain only the professional relationship between them that was necessary. Ever since that first battle, she had not looked at him in the same way.

"If they do, then I will gladly accept them," she continued. "It's the one thing I've wanted ever since this all began, to speak with some of their representatives and come to an understanding with each other, to end this pointless war. I hope that this will still be possible. But if they don't decide to try and talk, then we need to consider the alternatives. For example, like I said, they may see now that their attacks aren't working, so they might try something else that would give them the upper hand somehow. I think that's the possibility we should be most anticipating."

"But what could they possibly be planning?" asked a councillor nearby, as Torn felt put out.

"I don't know," said Ashelin, "But that's why we need to keep a vigilant eye open, and just be ready for anything. Any other thoughts?"

"I say we should try attacking them for once!" said the aggressive commander after another few moments of silence.

"And just how do you propose we do that when we don't even know the location of their homeland?" Samos asked with mildly suppressed frustration. He was getting rather annoyed with this particular commander and his brashness.

"We should start sending patrols out beyond the city walls and try and find where they live," retorted
the commander. "Every moment we spend sitting here gives them more time to find a better way of destroying us. Bringing the fight to them might be the only way to stop this once and for all. Violence and deceit is clearly the only language they understand. I say it's either us or them that has to fall, and I'd make damned sure it's not us."

Many of the others in the room made concordant noises and gestures.

"I don't want to have to destroy them completely unless I have no other choice," said Ashelin firmly. "My hopes are still for a peaceful resolution, however unlikely it may now seem, and if the option presents itself, then I'll do whatever I can to take it.

"You raise a good point but it's not tenable," she continued, looking directly at the commander (something which Torn noticed she had not done with him). "Knowing where their own city is would definitely even the playing field, so to speak, but we have no idea how far away they are. It would be a misallocation of men that would serve better here in the city, and we might be searching for months and never find them."

"Yeah, they always teleport in and out," said Jak. "Who knows how far they've come from?"

That reminded Ashelin of something. "How much have we learned about their teleportation technology?" she asked, now turning to the head scientist who was present in the room.

"It's slow progress, governor," answered the scientist contritely. "We haven't yet salvaged an intact fully-working system."

"But are you any closer to understanding how it works?" Ashelin pressed on. "We could really use that technology to our own benefit."

"A little, but it's mostly guessing, and we're still a long way off from building one ourselves."

Ashelin looked disappointed. Though Haven did possess teleportation technology of its own, it was limited to the few warp gates that were located in static positions around the city, and even they were not fully understood, being of ancient Precursor origin. Implementing such technology into vehicles was beyond their current capability.

"And what about their weapons?" asked Ashelin further.

"They've got us even more stumped," said the scientist. "None of us have ever seen anything like them before, and we can't figure out for the life of us how they work."

Uneasy silence fell in the meeting room. They were going round and round in circles with their discussions, making no progress, unable to arrive at any unanimous or effective decisions. It did all feel like a lost cause.

"What about you, Jak?" Ashelin asked, turning at last to the city's hero. "What are your thoughts on all this?"

Jak shrugged. "Honestly, I'm just hoping they'll eventually give up and go home."

"Yeah, but what are the chances of them doing that after everything they've done so far?" asked someone else sceptically.

"It once again begs the question of why they continue to return every time," said Samos.

Jak could hear in his head what Daxter's answer would be: *Maybe they're just stupid.* But the ottsel
"I mean, they could just stop attacking us and we'd never see each other again," said Jak. "It's not like we can follow them or anything."

Suddenly, something clicked in Ashelin's mind, the pieces of an idea that could potentially change everything in this war. "Or could we follow them?" she said, slowly and thoughtfully.

Everyone looked to her, waiting for her to elaborate.

"Those jets…" she thought out loud. "When they teleport away… they have to end up somewhere. Well, maybe we could track one. If we can find a way of planting a tracer or something onto one of their vehicles during a battle, we could follow the signal and see where they go."

Across the room, Jak looked up with renewed interest. This was a plan he partially recognised, for it was just what Ashelin had done for him when he had been banished to the Wasteland, slipping him a small hand-held beacon so that he would be found. If it had worked for him, then why not on the enemy too?

The others in the room made interested noises. Then the aggressive commander punched a fist into the palm of his other hand. "And then we can head over there ourselves and attack them for once. Just imagine when we show up there and return every blow they've ever landed against us. It's the last thing they'll expect!"

"Only as a last resort," Ashelin repeated, ending the assenting murmur that was building in the room again. "Remember, I want our priority to be ending the war diplomatically, if we can. Besides, I don't think we've even got enough of a force left to launch our own offensive now."

"We should at least prepare for the eventuality," advised Samos. "I know it is not your preferred choice, governor, but we have to face the fact that they are unlikely to give up without a fight, if their past behaviour serves as any record."

Ashelin had to accept, with a sad sigh, that Samos was once again right. Regardless of their intentions, peaceful or destructive, they had to be well prepared if they were ever to travel to the enemy's homeland, for they did not know what to expect there. But first, they had to find it.

They took a vote, and the majority were in favour of this plan.

"Very well," Ashelin said. "In that case, there are two things we need to do. First, we need to make a tracking device. I think we've still got some beacons lying around somewhere, we could modify one of those. What do you think?" she asked the head scientist.

"I think that could be possible," he answered. "Can't imagine it'll be too much trouble either. Beats trying to understand those teleporters."

"Alright, see what you can do," said Ashelin, "But don't give up on those teleporters either. We might need them, if we can get them working. Our second objective should be to start building up our strength again, but it'll need to be done somewhere safe and preferably secret. Anything we build in the city's likely to get destroyed in the next attack."

Everyone now pondered over this new problem, but it was Jak who proposed a solution, drawing on his knowledge of all the places he had visited in and around the city. "What about the old drill platform in the mountains?" he suggested. "It's out of the way, there'll be room to work, and there's probably still a lot of useful supplies and eco left up there."
"Good call," said Ashelin. "That might just do it. But I don't think anyone's been up there since before the war, so we'll have to sweep the place to make sure it's still safe and secure. It's worth a look in any case."

She stood up straight. "Alright, we've made some good decisions today, and we have our next objectives. Torn, I want you to prepare a squad and head up to the drill platform to take a look around. Check its condition and bring back anything useful you can find."

Torn saluted, accepting her order without question.

"Meeting adjourned for today," said Ashelin. "Be safe, everyone, and keep fighting the good fight."

The table emptied as everyone gathered up their things and left the room, all feeling a renewed sense of purpose. At last, here was something productive they could work towards, something that made them feel more in control of their own fate, and could possibly turn the war around in their favour.
Old Wounds Healed
Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Big thanks to the reader known as 'brevs' for your excellent comment on the story. Great to have you here, and hope you will stick around. Here is the following chapter for you. Enjoy.

The atmosphere in camp was cold, heavy and uncomfortable. Ashelin, Jak and Olto sat together around the fire in deep, lonely thought. None of them wanted to talk about it. Just a few hours ago, their pitiful raft had smashed into pieces on the waves, and Torn had stormed away, consumed by rage and resignation. He was yet to return to camp.

Everyone was feeling tense and lost, but Ashelin was feeling it the worst; the bond she shared with Torn was a close one, but right now she had never felt more distant from him. She had never seen him break like this before, not even during the blackest moments of all the wars and struggles they had shared in. When he had shoved her over like that, it made her angry enough to want to get right back up and actually hit him for such insolence. If Jak had not been there to stop her, she probably would have done, losing her own temper and only causing worse consequences for sure. But now, after the time to think, her anger had dissolved into sadness and regret, and she just wanted him back. So far, they had followed Jak's suggestion of letting him calm down on his own and waiting for his inevitable return. All through the rest of the gloomy day, they remained in their seats, not talking to each other for long stretches of time. The wind had completely abated now, the sea had calmed, but the heavy clouds still lingered. The whole island felt disturbingly silent, as if there were no other souls here but themselves, three ghosts sat around a fire. Torn still did not show himself as the day wore thin, and their suspense began to grow worse. Should they keep waiting?

As the last hour of daylight was in the thick sky, Ashelin could not take it any longer. "I'm getting really worried about him now, guys," she said, standing up. "I'm going looking for him."

Neither Jak nor Olto tried to stop her as she disappeared into the darkening shades of the trees. The first place she went to was the hill, finding it still coated in damp mud and impossible to climb, but Torn was not there. Nor was he at either of the two lakes, nor in any of their other most visited places on the island. Ashelin searched on for what felt like an hour, but as she continued to find no sign of him anywhere, her feelings became more frantic. Soon she was wandering the uncharted depths of the forest without thinking, knocking aside leaves, wading through bushes, calling in every direction, but there was never any answer.

She came to a stop, now standing knee-deep in the wild plants, to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. As she looked around, she realised that she might be lost; this was an area of the forest she did not recognise, and she could not even remember which direction she had come from. The daylight had almost faded away to nothing under the trees, and deep patches of shadow were growing between them. Soon it would be too dark to see, and dense, disturbing silence hung all around, not even the slightest breath of wind. She was perfectly alone.

She could not understand it. It was as if Torn had completely disappeared, but how could he have
done? There was nowhere for him go, no way off the island. None of this made any sense, and terrible suspicions were starting to crawl to the front of Ashelin's mind, suspicions she wanted so much not to be true...

"Torn, where are you?" she called desperately one last time, feeling at her wit's end.

But then she heard something, ever so faint, yet it seemed so very clear in the insulated silence of the deep forest. Her ears twitched and a jolt of hope leapt into her chest. It was unmistakeably Torn's voice saying her name.

She followed it, both eager and fearful of what she may find, and she emerged from the thick undergrowth by the side of a tall, grey rock, dappled in moss. And there he was, sitting in its shadow with his back against it.

"Torn..."

In the failing twilight he looked like a lost, forgotten and sad figure. Both his hands were bloody and beaten, and there were red stains on exposed sections of the rock where he had evidently been punching at it, but he appeared to bear no greater injury. He did not look up when she appeared at his side, unable to meet her eyes, and kept looking down on the ground between his feet.

"Ash," he said simply, "I... I'm sorry... for what I did. It's just... being stuck here for so long... with no means of escape... I just lost it. I never should have laid a hand on you... and I didn't mean what I said..."

There was no mistaking the undisguised remorse in his voice and his body language, but Ashelin did not need it to sway her. She was overcome by the relief of finding him here, relatively unhurt and no longer blindingly angry, just when she had begun to suspect he might have done the worst. She knelt down beside him in the shadow and touched his bare shoulder, and he felt as cold as the stone.

"Torn, it's OK," she said softly. "I understand. Life here hasn't been easy for any of us, and we're all feeling it. We want you back, Torn. All of us."

Torn gave no visible reaction. He heard her words, spoken caringly and sincerely, but somehow, he could not believe them. In his own eyes, what he had done to her today was the final transgression on top of everything else that would place him beyond redemption. He knew that Ashelin had no reason to accept him back now, and the guilt was too strong to make him see otherwise. Even if she could forgive him, he could not forgive himself for attacking her like that.

"No. It's not OK," he said miserably, his head still bowed.

Ashelin gave his shoulder a gentle, playful push. "Come on, I'm not going to banish you from the camp just for pushing me over."

"It's not just that," said Torn darkly. His long time alone had reignited all of those terrible feelings that had plagued him throughout the war, growing increasingly inescapable whilst here on the island, and they were back again at a crescendo. There was no suppressing them now, no pretending that he was OK. He had to get them out in the open lest they swallow him up completely.

"It's... all my fault," he admitted, and the dagger of guilt stuck in his stomach twisted painfully.

"What are you talking about?" asked Ashelin, momentarily puzzled as she peered into the side of his dark face.

Torn swallowed. "This whole war..." he said, speaking as if he were confessing a great sin on his
deathbed, “It's all my doing... and it's my fault we're stuck here.”

Ashelin's face froze, shocked to hear him say this. At once, it reminded her of all those turbulent meetings with the city council and the accusations and denunciations that Torn had faced, but she never thought for one moment that he would actually believe them himself. He had been so dedicated to his work during the war. However, this had all evidently been self-distraction, and now he was laid bare in front of her, all his vulnerabilities and shame.

"Oh Torn..." she breathed with profound understanding. She’d had no idea that this consumed him so badly, eating away at him all this time beneath his rugged exterior.

"I never wanted any of this to happen," Torn went on, "And I'm sorry I brought you into this, Ashelin. You know I'd do anything to protect you... but all I've done is put you in more peril. I've failed. I failed the city, but worse... I've failed you."

Ashelin's mouth dropped open slightly, but these were the words, above all others, that provoked her to act. Torn had got it all wrong, and she had to make him see the truth. She suddenly gripped Torn tightly by the shoulders and turned him to look right at her so he paid attention. Her face was hardened and very serious, and she aimed her potent stare directly into his bloodshot eyes.

"No!" she ordered sternly. "Don't you ever say that! Torn, you haven't failed anyone, not the city, not me. None of this is your fault. I will never accept that!"

Torn was held in suspense by this sudden display of power and authority. This was the last thing he had ever expected to hear from her after all he had done, but it punched a hole right through his armoured layers of guilt and denial, straight to his heart, while in his mind it felt as if a veil were slowly lifting, unclouding his judgement.

"You... you mean that?" he breathed.

"Of course I do," Ashelin affirmed. "Torn, listen to me. You have done more good for Haven City than anyone else I know, even Jak, and nothing you ever say or do will change that."

Ashelin's words and her determined voice brought Torn's self-doubts to a crashing halt. All this time, he felt he had betrayed the city, and had irreparably damaged Ashelin's trust in him, never to be the same again. However, she revealed now for the first time since that terrible day that her faith in him was as strong and unaltering as ever. Nothing had changed. That was the personal confirmation he needed to hear from her right from the start, to know that she still held him in high regard, that she did not blame him, and most of all, that she still cared for him. He could read it in her eyes, those powerful green eyes, and months of shame and regret were melting away even as she looked at him now.

"We've all made mistakes and misjudgements, and done things we wish we hadn't," Ashelin went on, loosening her grip on him slightly. "Even me. But you are the finest commander the city has ever had, Torn, and the bravest man I have ever known. Now, repeat after me: I am not responsible for the war."

Her eyes glistened beautifully in the last vestiges of daylight that found its way through the thick woodland, and Torn knew he had no choice but to accept her command.

"I... am not responsible... for the war," he repeated, and he really believed it now. The veil had been ripped off and cast away, never to be seen again, revealing the truth that he had blinded himself to all this time.
"And don't you forget that," said Ashelin, now in a tender whisper.

Her face became softer, and Torn beheld, as if for the first time after a long parting, the woman he had come to trust, respect and love so deeply, that unmistakable, compassionate expression that she reserved just for him when they were alone together. He thought he might never see it again. Then she drew closer and kissed his face, a long, healing kiss.

That was enough to seal the deal for Torn, and suddenly he no longer felt ashamed to be in her presence; he wanted to be with her again, to be close, no longer moping by himself in the dark. He needed her. Slowly, he raised his arms and wound them around Ashelin's back as she did the same around his shoulders. All of a sudden, the approaching night felt much less cold.

The two of them spent a close and quiet moment together which seemed to last much longer than it truly did, not talking, just holding one another. When they finally broke apart again, Ashelin asked him caringly, "Now, you going to be OK?"

"Yeah... I think so," Torn answered. He still had difficulty finding his words, not knowing what to possibly say to her. "Thank you, Ash. How can I possibly make this up to you?"

"You don't need to do anything. You never had to. Now come on, let's head back to the camp. Jak and Olto are waiting for us."

She made to get up, but Torn caught her arm. "Just... don't tell them about this," he said evasively, his way of saying please. "What we said here..."

"Of course not," said Ashelin with a wink and an understanding smile. It seemed that Torn's pride was already recovering healthily. "Just between the two of us. Now come on, up you get."

She helped him to his feet, and Torn let her guide him by the wrist. A terrific relief now consumed all of his thoughts, and he felt indescribably lighter, unshackled and free from the troubles that had dogged him for months. Together, they took an alternate route back through the trees and emerged upon the beach to a pleasant surprise. The clouds were finally starting to break apart after so many days of cover, and the island was touched once again by warm, late evening sunlight. The sun itself could just be seen as a bright blur hovering delicately between the horizon and the lowest cloud layers, red and deep.

"Oh look," said Ashelin lightly. "That's a welcome sight, huh?"

Torn silently agreed. Somehow, this felt like a portent of change. They walked slowly together along the beach, taking in the day's last light, and it was not long before they strode into view of the camp. Jak and Olto, still sitting around the fire, saw them approaching, looked at each other and stood up. They felt optimistic at the sight of Torn again, walking hand in hand with Ashelin, but were unsure of what to make of the expressions on their faces. Once they too stood by the fire, a moment of silence fell, then Ashelin allowed Torn to step forward and address them.

"Guys, I'm sorry for how I've been these past few days," he said sincerely. "I know I've not been easy to work with... but I promise, that's all going to change now."

This apology felt small and insignificant compared to the one he had just given to Ashelin, but it still needed to be said now his head was straight. Jak and Olto both caught Ashelin's affirming nod, and knew that all was OK again. They both smiled acceptingly with relief, and each of them showed Torn their unconditional forgiveness with a hug.

"Well, welcome back, partner," said Jak.
"It's not the same without you on the team," added Olto with his usual, lovable smile.

Torn smiled back thinly, his final apology complete. At last, they were truly a whole again.

"Now let me do something about your hands," said Ashelin kindly.

Torn sat down while Ashelin fetched the first aid kit and applied some bandages around his knuckles.

"How'd you do that?" asked Jak casually.

"Took my anger out on a rock," answered Torn dryly. It felt very strange to be talking with them again as if nothing had ever happened, and even though he had been forgiven by them all, he still felt as if he had much to do to make up for his terrible behaviour somehow. Like his work was never done.

"There you go," said Ashelin a few minutes later as she finished the bandaging.

"Thanks, Ash. You're a life saver," Torn sighed, examining his hands before letting them drop, and then his head rolled back under the weight of all that had happened today. He felt as though he'd been pushed through a mile of concrete wall. "I'm just so tired right now."

Nobody was surprised. "I think we all are," said Ashelin. "An early night would do us some good, wouldn't you say?"

Everyone agreed, just as the sunlight disappeared.

In the middle of the night, Ashelin awoke naturally. The others all lay deeply asleep around her still, buried in grass and leaves inside the shelter, but for some reason, despite the stressful and exhausting events of the previous day, she no longer felt tired. As she lay there struggling to return to sleep, the same thoughts rolling around inside her head, she eventually abandoned her hopeless efforts, and carefully crawled outside into the night.

It was tranquil and silent in the camp. There was no wind, the sand was still damp from the many days of rain and bad weather, but the air now felt drier and warmer, a welcoming change. She stood in the centre and looked through the leaf canopy up at the sky, where growing gaps in the dark clouds formed lakes of stars that shimmered in their faraway beauty. It felt so calm now, but her mind was restless. The emotional fallout of the day before was still tangible and catching up with her again, and something in her half-sleep had stirred up new realisations which she had awoken with.

"Oh Torn," she sighed to herself, looking back to the shelter where he slept. "Why didn't you tell me how you felt?"

Poor Torn had been through a lot, and it got her thinking about herself too. Was there something she could have done to prevent his guilt from becoming so torturous for him?

She sat down limply in the Hellcat seat by the dead fire and tried to let her thoughts and feelings settle, just staring blankly out to sea. She deliberately avoided looking at the remnants of the raft that still lay right where they had left them on the edge of camp, because whenever she did, her memories kicked up the sense of failure associated with it again like sand in the wind.
There was no doubt about it, their time on this island had been a severe challenge, physically and psychologically, and tested them for all they were worth every single day. They had to get out of here, the sooner the better, and get back to the city where they belonged, where they were needed. Sitting here alone, Ashelin now felt her homesickness more than ever, no matter how much she had tried to keep it together. She couldn't abandon her people, but she couldn't abandon her friends either, least of all Torn.

She sighed deeply, already bored and lonely and hopeless. How was she going to pass the rest of the night? It still felt hours until sunrise, and for some reason sleep still evaded her. She was getting chilly too. She needed something to do, something to keep her occupied and prevent her from wallowing in her emotions. Forcing herself out of the chair, she rummaged quietly around the camp, checking their supplies, and found a dangerous shortage of food. In yesterday's drama, nobody had refreshed their provisions. Looked like she had found a job to do then, and since she was wide awake now, she figured she may as well make good use of the time and go forage for some more.

Off she ventured into the trees. The forest path to the hill was silent and dark, nothing moved at all, and she felt very alone as she walked its course. The night that filled the gaps between the trees on either side of her was utterly impenetrable and intimidating, but the faint starlight from above was just enough to guide her way.

Then she broke through into the clearing and confronted the hill's dark shape, still coated in thick, wet mud. Atop it was the outline of the berry bush against the clearing sky, tantalisingly out of reach. Ashelin paused and considered it. They had run out of those berries days ago, but perhaps now with the change in weather, the hill could be climbed and she could retrieve a fresh batch. It still looked quite hazardous, but in the twilight, she thought she could make out a reasonably safe way up. She took one pace towards it, but her foot slipped right away on the wet earth.

"Whoa!" she gasped as she nearly lost her balance. "OK, got to do this slowly..."

One careful step at a time, she advanced onto the treacherous, sloping ground, kicking the toes of her boots deep into the mud for a secure hold. In this way, she made slow but good progress, getting about half way to the top, and her prospects became more positive as the silhouette of the berry bush loomed nearer. However, the hill's upper reaches were unsettled, and one of her feet suddenly slipped precariously down again, and her body turned with the movement. She didn't fall but she froze on the spot, now sideways on the hill, legs wide and arms outstretched to balance, and not daring to move a muscle.

"Damn it! Well, this was a stupid idea."

She was stuck, and she had no idea what had ever possessed her to try climbing this accursed hill. Reaching those berries was not worth the risk just yet. She had to get down, if she could, but she didn't feel secure in the slightest. Beneath her boots she could feel the mud shifting and liquefying. One false move would result in disaster.

"OK... gently..." she said to herself.

She swivelled her least stable foot deeper into the mud, hoping to firmly anchor herself in, and it felt like it was working. With her other leg she took the first tentative downward step. She made it, but she wasn't so lucky with her next one. The mud gave way, and both her feet began to slide awkwardly apart from each other, greatly upsetting her balance.

"No! No! No, no, no!" she cried, trying to right herself desperately, but she'd lost all control. Both legs shot out from under her, her arms flailed, she felt herself tumbling, and with a heavy splat she fell backwards into the side of the hill, and then slid gracelessly, head-first, all the way down to the
When she came to a stop, she was lying half-buried at the foot of the hill. For a few seconds she was silent with shock, breath held and eyes wide, but then her face broke, her emotions burst forth and she swore as loudly as she could up at the sky, not caring if it woke the others and brought them running to investigate. But nobody came, even in the several minutes it took for her to extract herself from the deep, sticky mud. When she was at last back on her feet again, she looked down herself in humiliation.

"This... is just... perfect!" she hissed through her clenched teeth, trying hard not to scream out loud again. Forget the foraging, there was only one thing on her mind now: she needed a wash. Badly.

She squelched uncomfortably around the hill into the shadowy woodlands again, this time in the direction of the bathing lake near the island's centre. It was almost pitch dark under the trees and difficult to find the way, but this couldn't wait till morning; she would find that lake if it killed her, and all the way, she lambasted herself without restraint. The mud was everywhere: up her back, in her hair, even the insides of her boots, and they squished disgustingly underfoot with every step.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" she muttered angrily.

Several unpleasant minutes later, the starlit gleam of the bathing lake appeared through the dark, and Ashelin sighed with relief. She'd made it, and she wasted no time in sitting down by the water's edge and wresting her boots from her feet. A gloopy waterfall of mud cascaded out of each of them onto the grass, and then she plunged them one by one into the water, drawing them out and placing them upside down. Then she stood up, and without even bothering to check that she really was alone, she peeled off the rest of her clothes, dropped them unceremoniously in a pile on the ground, and then lowered herself into the lake.

The water was chilly against her skin, but she didn't care and forced herself in deeper, fighting back the shivers. All that mattered was ridding herself of this mud. Even in the shadowy twilight, she could perceive it flowing away from her, a murkier shade of black in the dark pool. She kept on wading until she was in up to her waist, the deepest point of the lake, and here she took a breath and submerged herself entirely, disappearing beneath the surface.

The lake clearing fell still and the ripples in the lake dissipated. Then from somewhere up in the sky, a parting in the clouds opened and the green sun shone through. Its emerald light fell upon the lake through the gaps in the protective canopy, and illuminated the surrounding plants and trees.

Ashelin re-surfaced with deliberate slowness a few seconds later, brushing her wet crimson hair away from her forehead and out of her eyes. When they flickered open and blinked away the last drops, they perceived the change that had fallen upon the clearing. A spotlight from the heavens was on her and she was encompassed on all sides by leaves that moved without wind, and from her position in the centre of the lake, the water lapping gently around her shoulders with a refreshing earthy scent, she felt a lot smaller, secluded and almost imperceptible. It was a strange and unexpected feeling that made her stop and just take it in. She'd never been one to really admire nature before, but even she had to admit that this place was surreally beautiful in the green light of night.

She rose a little more, and felt indescribably like a new woman emerging from the pool of life, cleansed and re-born, as if all of her tensions, cares and impurities had washed away with the mud. Even the emotional residue of Torn's abandonment and finding him in the forest only a few hours ago felt far away and insignificant, like it no longer mattered, like it belonged to a different life.

Acutely aware of this transcendental sensation, she allowed it to hold her under its spell for many moments, until it naturally subsided and she remembered her clothes. They needed to be washed too;
after all, she had no others she could change into out here, and it was about time they deserved a good soak. She distracted herself from the scenery for a moment and waded slowly back to where they lay on the bank. In the shallows she plunged them under and scrubbed them with her knuckles until she thought all the mud was gone, before draping them across an over-hanging tree branch to dry out, as clean as she could make them.

With that last chore taken care of, she moved calmly back out into deeper waters, where she allowed herself to fall backwards and float naturally on the surface, letting out a long, sentient breath. Her heart slowed, her mind eased, and her body felt weightless. This, she now understood, was true freedom; freedom from threat, freedom from care, freedom from all things she knew. It was so vastly different to what she had expected from her long years of struggle for it back in Haven, so pure and otherworldly, even a little lonesome and intimidating. But at last, she felt complete, like her purpose in life had been fulfilled. If only she could somehow achieve this feeling back home in the city, but she doubted it could ever be truly replicated, even in the tranquil lushness of Haven Forest.

She remained in that lake for a long time, buoyant upon starlit currents and drifting along timelessly with the calm, windless night, feeling totally safe in her natural surroundings, and losing herself to the serenity of the experience. She never wanted it to end, but it had to, for the dawn was soon approaching. The light gradually changed colour and the sky grew brighter overhead, seemingly absorbing the night's magical energy. Reluctantly and with great will power, Ashelin drew herself out of the pool and sat on the bank to dry off. She had spent so long in the water that she could still feel the phantom effect of it swishing around her, and her fingers and toes had wrinkled until they looked and felt like pale raisins.

She reached for her clothes, now mostly dry, and as she dressed, she felt ready to face the coming challenges that this new day would bring. The nocturnal swim in the lake seemed to have instilled new life into her, a difficult feeling to describe, but it was just the thing she needed to collect herself. Her body was rejuvenated and her thoughts were clear and directed.

Now fully dressed and standing in dappled early daylight, she took in a deep breath of the fresh morning air, and finally left the area, walking through the trees and emerging at the shoreline. The sky had dawned a perfectly clear blue, not a cloud in sight, and the rising sun shone full. Ashelin smiled docilely. It appeared that the storm's lingering shadow had finally passed over, and she hoped that their spate of misfortune that seemed to have accompanied it would soon turn around as well. Things did feel spacially different already, like the island could breathe again.

By the time she returned to the camp, she was completely dry, and not long after she had sat down again, Jak emerged from the shelter.

"Morning, Jak," said Ashelin, prompting him to look to her.

"Morning," he grumbled sleepily, rubbing his head. Then he came over and joined her. "I needed that sleep."

"Yeah, me too," said Ashelin. She chose not to tell him about her private nocturnal bathe in the lake, preferring to keep it her own little secret that she could perhaps revisit on another night. That alone time had done her good. Besides, she knew that Jak and the others would laugh so hard to hear that she had fallen down that hill. Even though there was no way of telling from her outward appearance what had happened to her now, to her it was still embarrassingly obvious.

"You still up for building a new raft today?" she asked instead.

Jak looked over at the salvaged pieces. Yesterday they had all agreed they would make a fresh start on it in the morning. "Yeah. Let's do a better job of it than last time. But first, breakfast."
The two of them set to work preparing a fire. But when it was lit, they realised they still had hardly any food left in the camp, nothing that they could cook. In last night's muddy distraction, Ashelin had completely forgotten to bring some back. However, Jak soon set off to the other side of the island to catch more fish. Torn and Olto were both awake when he returned with a fresh catch.

"Hey," Jak said to Torn. "You feeling better today?"

"Yeah, I think so," answered Torn with a stretch and another thin smile. "I'm ready to get back to work now, and I promise, I'll be good this time."

"Great, man," said Olto, slapping him lightly on the back. "And you know what else? I think I'm fully healed now. No more nasty fever!"

He took in a strong breath of air, and everyone was happy for them both. Already their lives felt better, like a fresh start. Torn took a drink from the flask until it was empty, and Olto, feeling full of energy again, gladly volunteered to fetch more, and went off to the lake by the hill. However, he was back again within two minutes, bearing only a strange and curious expression.

"Hey guys, something weird's happened to the hill," he said.

Ashelin's good mood suddenly shattered, and she eyed everyone around the camp nervously. She knew at once what this must be about.

"What do you mean?" asked Torn, who was none the wiser.

"Just come and see."

Everyone got up curiously and followed him back to the hill, even Ashelin, but she stayed at the back where she could not be seen, hoping that this wasn't what she thought it was.

"Look," said Olto when they got there, pointing at the long streak in the muddy hillside.

Ashelin felt her face become hot and embarrassed. She knew that this was where she had fallen down the hill in the night, and now it seemed that she would no longer be able to keep it a secret from the others. She mentally slapped herself in the face for not realising this sooner. She should have stopped Olto before he set off, and volunteered to fetch the water herself.

"How did that happen?" she asked pre-emptively, pretending she had no clue and hoping she sounded innocent enough. But then she realised that it was not the mudslide that had caught Olto's interest.

He was much more interested in what had been revealed beneath it...
Jak, Ashelin, Torn and Olto all stood gathered at the foot of the hill, staring at the collapse of mud and the curious sight that had been revealed beneath it. Instead of damp earth, there lay a patch of grimy, orange-coloured texture, almost blending in with the dark colour of the hillside, but it glinted metallically in the morning sunlight, and this was what gave it away.

"What is that?" asked Ashelin, now genuinely curious.

It looked strangely familiar to them all, but to none more so than Jak. He knew this exact colour from his childhood, and could recognise it anywhere, but it had been so long that he just had to check. Could it really be?

While the others stood ponderously still, he stepped forwards and leaned down to wipe away more of the mud with his bare hand. It came away easily, and the metal felt smooth and dry and unrusted, despite being buried under wet mud for who knew how long, but to Jak, this was a sure sign of its true nature. Soon he had cleared away a small area, and he knocked on it with his knuckles as the others watched curiously. The material reverberated with the unmistakeable thrum that he knew so well, dulled by the rest of the mud, but there was no doubt in his thoughts now. The feel, the sound, the colour, there was nothing else it could be.

He turned to the others with an incredulous gleam in his eyes. "This is Precursor metal."

The others raised their eyebrows.

"You mean the Precursors?" asked Olto. "The ones from all the history books?"

Jak nodded proudly.

"Wow. Cool!" said Olto with amazement, and he and the others drew in for a closer look.

Everyone took a moment in silence to realise what this meant. They had stumbled upon a hidden piece of history, completely by accident, and this hill which they had thought so ordinary was no longer what it seemed.

"But what's that doing here?" asked Torn, putting forward what he thought was the most pressing question.

"I don't know," said Jak honestly, but excitement was starting to build within him, "But there's definitely something underneath this mud!"

He continued exposing more of the metal, his forgotten childlike sense of exploration and discovery flooding back to him from so far away. On this very hillside lay an ancient Precursor artefact, and he
wanted to pull it out at once and see what it could possibly be. However, even as he expanded further out from his original cleared patch, he could find no edges to the metal, no break in its smooth, featureless surface. It just went on and on the further he went, and soon, he had cleared an area large enough to lie against.

"How big is this thing?" said Olto.

But then, as Jak pulled away a large clump of earth, he found the unmistakeable calligraphy of Precursor letterings. Sensing answers, he delved deeper, and uncovered more. He continued digging around this spot until a continuous string of text was revealed, curving in a tight arc and encircling a strange, spherical protrusion shaped like a cannonball, seemingly embedded into the metal.

"What does it say?" Ashelin asked as the last of the mud came away.

Jak had trouble deciphering the words, however. Many of the letterings were filled in with dried mud which proved difficult to extract, and the ones which could be read made no sense by themselves. Even if they were all perfectly legible, Jak still doubted that he would be able to understand them; he knew from his extensive past experience that these inscriptions usually read like complex riddles, and Keira was always the one who had been best at working out what they meant. If only she was here now to see this, to share in this moment with him...

"I can't make it out," Jak said. But he was feeling all the more motivated now by this unexpected and intriguing discovery, and judging by what he had uncovered so far, whatever lay under this hillside was no small artefact, he could tell that with certainty; it appeared to be a single, sizeable piece of metal. New suspicions were beginning to grow in his mind, suspicions which were changing his whole view of this island, and he wanted to see if he was right.

"There's got to be more under here," he said eagerly. "Come on, let's dig it out!"

Olto immediately stepped up to help, but Ashelin and Torn were not so keen on this idea, and stayed where they were. Neither of them particularly wanted to go trawling through all this mud, least of all Ashelin, who after her embarrassing fall last night, preferred to avoid going anywhere near any quantity of mud ever again at all costs, if she could help it. However, she did not admit this out loud, and put forward instead a different concern that had just struck her, one that was just as valid.

"Jak, wait a minute," she said warily, and Jak stopped. "Are you sure you know what you're doing? I mean, something about this doesn't feel right."

Jak looked back at her questioningly, not expecting her hesitancy. "Of course I'm sure. I've found loads of Precursor items just like this, and I've got a special knack for using them. Trust me on this."

Ashelin still did not feel fully at ease, however. For her, this was unfamiliar territory, she was always sceptical of the unknown, and she was not comfortable messing with things she did not understand. One look at Torn showed that he felt the same way.

"But what if it's something dangerous?" she said. "I think we should leave it alone."

"But none of the artefacts I've found before have ever been dangerous," Jak argued calmly. "And don't you want to know what this is too?"

"Well... yes," Ashelin admitted, unable to deny her curiosity.

"Well come on, then," Jak said beckoningly. "The only way to find out is to dig it up. Who knows, it might even be something that could help us get off this island!"
There was no extinguishing his sense of prospect, and Ashelin and the others were definitely feeling the intrigue. Eventually, she deferred to his greater experience, as did Torn, reluctantly.

"Alright, we'll trust you on this, Jak," she said. "You know the most about this stuff out of all of us. But if it's all the same with you, I'd rather not spend the rest of the day getting needlessly dirty."

"Come on, a bit of mud never hurt anyone," said Jak with a playful grin, scooping up a sloppy handful. "Didn't you ever do this kind of thing when you were a kid?"

"No," Ashelin answered right away as if it were obvious. "I grew up in the palace, remember?"

"Oh yeah. Right."

"Besides," added Ashelin, "Don't you think our time and effort would be better spent re-building the boat, Jak?"

"Exactly," Torn spoke up. "Whatever this thing is, there’s a chance it might not help us with anything. I'd rather be working on the boat today as well, just like we planned."

Jak understood their reasoning and caution, but building the boat just felt so unimportant to him right now. With the discovery of this new Precursor mystery, the island suddenly seemed much friendlier, more like his old home. He was relishing the chance to re-live his childhood explorations, and would be perfectly happy to stay here all day and dig up the whole hill if he had to. But his friends, of course, did not share the same connection with Precursor history that he did; interest for such things in Haven had long ago been driven out of mind by the Metal Heads' long siege, and only a few historians had survived to continue the research. Therefore, they had never had the pleasure of getting up close and personal with Precursor items before, and they did not understand the potential or power this artefact could hold, or how much it meant to him.

Everyone stood around for a few seconds in awkward indecisiveness, unsure of how to safely proceed with this minor disagreement on their hands. The last thing any of them wanted was another dramatic falling out so soon after the one yesterday, and all were determined to be a more functional and conscientious team from now on.

"So what do we do then?" Jak asked.

"Why don't we take a vote about it?" suggested Olto, who had been watching the discussion unfold patiently.

"Alright," said Torn, satisfied by this element of democracy, and everyone else agreed too.

"OK, so who votes we work on the boat today?" said the Freedom soldier.

Both Ashelin and Torn raised their hands.

"Right. And who thinks we should dig up this Precursor thing?"

Jak's hand went up, but so did Olto's. It turned out that he was just as curious about this as Jak was, and was very interested in learning more.

"It's a draw," he said.

"So what does this mean?" asked Jak. "What do we do?"

"I guess we do both then," Olto suggested. "Split ourselves into groups. That way, everyone's
happy, we won't get behind on the work, and we'll have this Precursor thing at our disposal if it turns out to be useful. How does that sound?"

"Well reasoned," said Ashelin. "I could work with that."

"Me too," said Torn, satisfied with the effective solution. "Remind me to give you a promotion when we get back home, Olto."

Everyone compromised and settled that that was what they would do; Ashelin and Torn would start work on the new boat, while Jak and Olto would try and excavate whatever was under the hill and try to identify what it could be. It was an equal division of labour and everyone was doing something they thought was worthwhile, but Jak knew that they would most likely need his help with the boat at one point or another, and he promised that he would come and lend a hand whenever he was needed.

So, they set about executing their plan. First they all returned to the camp together to finish their breakfast and so that Jak and Olto could pick up some of their hand-made tools that would help them clear the mud. They left Torn and Ashelin an axe each so that they could harvest more wood, and then headed off back to the hill.

"OK," said Ashelin when they were gone, "Let's think about this boat then. How much have we got left of the original one? Are there pieces we could re-use?"

"Only a few," said Torn, bringing over the fragments. But as Ashelin examined them, he was reminded of his actions that had partially resulted in this mess. Though he had been forgiven by everyone and most of his shame had been healed by sleep, this was a fresh reminder of his behaviour, and he was starting to feel regretful again, as if there was still something wrong.

"Ash, wait," he said shyly, taking advantage of their privacy. "Before we start this... can we just quickly talk again?"

"Sure," said Ashelin, remembering the support she had offered him yesterday. "What's on your mind?"

Torn swallowed. "I just want to know... just want to make sure... are the two of us fully OK?"

"Of course we are," said Ashelin with a little reassuring smile, and she understood at once what he was referring to. "We're still cool. Don't worry about it anymore."

Torn nodded thankfully. It felt so much easier now he knew he could talk with her whenever he needed to; it really helped to strengthen their connection, to make them feel closer again.

"Alright, thanks Ash," he said. "That's all I wanted to ask. I still feel kind of bad about it, you know. But as long you're OK with it, then I guess I'm OK too."

"I know what you mean," said Ashelin sympathetically. "It's probably going to take a couple of days before I feel back to normal too, I think. Well, as normal as it gets around here," she added, glancing around the camp. Then, the thoughts and realisations she had awoken with in the night came back to her, now somehow neatly arranged and comprehensible, and a stab of guilt struck her.

"Actually, I probably owe you an apology too, Torn," she said with shame. "This whole war... I was so consumed by it, and I wasn't there for you when you needed someone to talk to the most."

The two of them shared a quiet moment of reflection, and both understood the way things had been. The war and the stresses that came with it had constantly demanded their attention, and the two of
them had never really had the opportunity to fully talk things over in private, to get their feelings out in the open. Torn had tried, but Ashelin now realised how distantly she had behaved, always deflecting his attempts to get close so they could focus on what needed to be done to survive. It was a difficult choice they were faced with every day, which to put first: the city or each other?

"So, I'm sorry too, Torn," she said, this time meeting his eyes so the full sincerity of her apology was apparent. "I had no idea this was eating you up so bad. If I'd known, I would have done something about it."

Though he rarely showed it, Torn did have a sensitive side, which he didn’t let out as often as he should. She knew that.

“If you ever need someone to talk to again, don’t bottle it up, alright? You can always talk to me, Torn, and I promise, from now on I’ll always make the time for you.”

Torn took in Ashelin's words, and understood. Well, at least they were both being honest and open with each other now. He had to forgive her, as she had forgiven him.

"It's OK, Ash," he said, giving her his thin smile again. "We did what we had to do, and we put the city before ourselves. That was the right thing, you know that. We can't change the past, but we can still affect the present and the future."

His rationality was reassuring, and Ashelin completely understood. He was absolutely right.

She reached out an arm and pulled him closer into a quick hug, which he accepted and returned. "Now come on," she said at last, breaking apart, "Let's get to work on this boat."

Back at the hill, Jak and Olto had already begun to scrape away more of the mud from immediately around the areas of exposed metal, working further outwards in search of more features and clues to its identity or its purpose. So far, apart from the strange spherical shape in the side, they had only uncovered more plain metal, but Jak was in a positively excitable mood right now as he kept on digging away, and Olto took notice.

"So, you know quite a bit about this stuff, huh?" he asked Jak as they worked.

"Yeah," Jak replied. "There used to be things like this everywhere in the old world, and I spent pretty much my whole childhood finding stuff just like this. Old ruins, ancient vehicles and machines. Daxter and I used to go digging and exploring on the beach or in the forest, and we'd usually uncover something new every week."

Olto’s interested was piqued, and guessed what Jak meant by ‘the old world’. Back in the city, there had been a lot of rumours and legends surrounding Jak and his origins, that he came from a far-off time and place, but he had never known what to believe. However, now he had the chance to hear it from the man himself, and anything else he knew.

"Any idea what this might be, then?" he asked.

"Don't know yet," Jak answered with a shake of the head. "I've got some ideas, but it could be anything at this stage, it's too early to tell. But that's the fun of it all, finding out as you go along," he added with an adventurous smile, just like the one he used to wear as a boy.

Olto smiled back contagiously. "What was it like in the old world, then? Before the Metal Heads came?"

"Oh, much different," said Jak fondly. "Quiet, peaceful, relaxing, no big wars to worry about..."
"Sounds nice," said Olto, leaning on his stick. He seemed to drift away in a fantasy for a moment, lost in a world that he would never know. "Wish I could have seen it. A world with no Metal Heads. Imagine that..."

"Yeah, they destroyed most of this stuff," said Jak sadly, "But I guess they never found this one." He knocked on the metal again, and the same deep *thrum* rang out, more sonorous now that more of the mud was gone. "Man, I love that sound."

"So how'd you end up in this time, then?" Olto asked.

"Ah, we found a time rift," Jak explained, "Not that we knew what it was back then. We accidentally turned it on and got sucked through it. Next thing I knew, I landed in Haven City, no idea where I was, and I didn't really get much of a chance to find my bearings either."

That was an understatement. Someone had somehow known that he would arrive in Haven when he did, for not a minute after he'd crash landed, he'd been arrested and dragged off to the prison to endure the two most terrible years of his life. He left that part out of the story.

"Bet your world would feel the same way to me," Olto said, unaware of just what Jak had really been through upon his arrival. "But what about the eco? I'll bet there was lots more before the Metal Heads used it all up."

"Oh yeah, there was plenty of eco," Jak explained fondly, rolling in this more pleasant direction of the conversation. "My friend Keira — she's from the past too — thought there was an ancient underground pipeline running eco through the whole planet, opening up in these vents. We found a few of them; I could walk right through the eco streams and absorb all its power, and I could activate old Precursor artefacts with it."

"Whoa, wait, you can do that?" asked Olto in disbelief, and he halted in his work completely now.

"Yeah," said Jak proudly. "According to the sages, I had a unique talent for it. I was the only one in the village who could channel all types of eco."

Olto was amazed both by the fact that there had once been so much eco, and that Jak had some sort of control over it. Eco channelers were now so rare in the modern world that they had become but a legend.

"Wow, you're full of surprises. Now that I've gotta see!" he said enthusiastically.

"Well, if we ever get enough eco, I guess I could show you some day," said Jak, looking at his muddy hand and flexing his fingers. "I think I can still do it. I haven't tried it properly for a long time."

"Maybe there's eco in this thing here," Olto suggested. "It could be part of that old pipeline you mentioned!"

"Could well be," said Jak. "Let's keep digging and find out!"

They got back to work, encouraged by their discussion and the new possibilities it realised. But as they worked, the morning wore on and the sun climbed higher overhead. In all the preceding cloudy days, they had forgotten how hot it could get on this island, and now it was reflecting off the metal right back at them.

"Whew, this is hot work," said Olto, wiping away the sweat from his forehead and leaving a muddy smear in its place. "Think I need a break."
"Me too," said Jak, smirking at Olto's muddy face.

They both climbed down to ground level to stand in the cooling shade, and looked up at what they had revealed so far. A wide expanse of Precursor metal, from the bottom of the hill almost to its summit, now shone in the sun, making up almost a quarter of the hill's size. But if their progress was anything to go by, there was still much more to dig out. Whatever this thing was, it was big, much bigger than even Jak could have anticipated, and he was starting to suspect that it actually took up the entire hill. It might not even be a hill at all, but an intact Precursor monument or structure of some sort, overgrown and reclaimed by nature. Could they get inside it? Would there be a door somewhere?

"Looks pretty mysterious, doesn't it?" said Olto.

"Yeah it does," Jak agreed.

"And to think that this was here under the hill all this time," Olto went on, "And we never knew..."

As they stood there looking upon it for longer, Torn emerged into the clearing. "Hey Jak, we... whoa..."

He stopped dead at the sight of what had become of the hill, and Jak and Olto looked around at him.

"Our thoughts exactly," said Olto cheerily.

"So have you found out what it is, then?" asked Torn.

"Not yet," Jak answered, but he was continually speculating. "There still seems to be a lot left to uncover. I think we've only just started. Anyway, what were you going to say?"

Torn got back on topic. "Yeah, so we've been thinking about the new boat, and Ashelin and I both think we should build some pontoons out of stronger timbers, ideally whole tree trunks. What do you think?"

"Could work," said Jak, taking his mind off the Precursor mystery for a moment, but it was threatening to consume all of his intrigue and attention. "Sounds sensible anyway."

"That'd be a lot of work, though," Olto said cautiously.

"But I think he's right," said Jak. "Our last one broke pretty easily. It might be the best option we have."

"Anyway, we'd appreciate a bit of help with this now," Torn said diplomatically. "Can you help us cut down some trees?"

"Yeah, I think we've done enough here for now," said Jak with a last look up at the exposed metal. "It's getting a bit too hot to work on this now anyway."

"Great, but Ashelin says you two need to wash up before even setting foot in camp," said Torn with a little humour.

"And then maybe some lunch," added Olto, patting his thin stomach. "Digging up this hill was hungry work."

Jak listened, but his eyes remained distractedly on the Precursor metal. This hill concealed a hidden Precursor relic of some kind, seemingly untouched and undiscovered by the Metal Heads and their
destructive hand, cut off from everywhere else. But what was it for? What was it doing out here in the middle of the ocean? Did this island hide even more artefacts, waiting to be rediscovered?

One thing was for sure, that despite how long they had already spent here on this island, and all of the challenges they had been through so far, there was still lots to discover.
The Platform

Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

A small fleet of Hellcats broke through the heavy cloak of mist, which wreathed itself around the frozen peaks of the city's western mountain range. Torn was leading his men to the drill platform, a massive mining apparatus constructed long ago, designed to extract valuable eco from the deep mountains as a resource of power for the city and its defences. However, ever since the city's shield wall had been sabotaged near the end of the Metal Head Wars, it had fallen into disuse, the warp gate that connected to it had been lost in the war, and nobody had had the opportunity to venture up there since. But Torn knew where it sat in its high perch among the rocks, having been there himself on a few rare occasions during his tenure as a KG officer.

He squinted through the thick fog, frustratedly trying to discern the gaps between the mountains. This was not the ideal weather for their mission, for it made navigation dangerous, but it had to be done, the sooner the better, for the greater benefit of the city. The drill platform could potentially serve them well as a hidden secondary base on which to build up their forces, somewhere safer than the city streets which were always under constant threat of damage. He hoped that the enemy had not already become aware of its existence.

Finally, the platform's dark shape loomed into sight through the icy mist, still clinging to the sides of the mountains with its great metal buttresses. Torn was at once struck by the eerie silence and how the structure had crept up on them like this; the few times when he had come here in the past, he had always been greeted first by the bright lights that kept the platform lit, followed by the reverberant hum of the heavy machinery as it ploughed constantly into the hard bedrock. But now, the lights were out and the only sound came from the engines of their own vehicles. The platform was dead, deserted and decaying.

"OK squad, we're here. Follow me in," Torn ordered as he began his descent.

The group of vehicles came down together on a clear, flat area near the edge of the platform, and their pilots disembarked. Winter had not yet relinquished its hold up here high in the mountains. A layer of light frost covered the cold and lifeless machinery, a biting breeze swirled through the air, and the men could feel the chill of the half-frozen metal even through their boots. All around, the mist hung ominously like a dense curtain, so that not even the neighbouring mountains could be seen. It gave the area a haunting, enclosed feeling, as grey towers and old generators merged with the fog like industrial ghosts. However, from what little they could see right now, the platform appeared to be holding out well against the elements, and was in a fairly good state of repair.

Torn drummed his men into line and gave out his orders, his breath misting in the cold. "OK men, listen up. You know why we're here. Split up and explore, groups of two. But watch where you step. There's a lot of high drops up here. And keep an eye out for trouble. Metal Heads used to come up here sometimes, and it's possible there might be some still hanging around. We meet back here in one hour to report what we find. Move out."

His men saluted and organised themselves into pairs.

"You two, come with me," Torn said to the two soldiers closest to him, who obeyed.

All the groups moved away in different directions, disappearing into the fog, while Torn led his two men towards the nearest building. Lying before it was an old, deactivated warp gate, its ring separated from its base. The doorway stood open and exposed, and Torn shone his light beam into
the shadows. Nothing moved.

He silently gestured for his men to follow him in, stepping over the threshold into a small, dark room. This led them down dead, twisted corridors through the bowels of the building where the floor was strewn with rubble and pieces of mechanical and electronic debris. In places, parts of the floor had collapsed entirely, letting in a spectral flow of mist from the hidden drop below that danced around in their light beams. Apart from this, however, they encountered nothing else, no signs of life.

Proceeding carefully, their exploration continued up a set of metal stairs, which brought them into a more open space. It was the most ruinous room they had yet encountered; there were smashed computer terminals along every wall, the large curving window had been blown out, and parts of the ceiling had collapsed into the room, covering the floor with heaps of debris. This, Torn remembered from his few past visits and familiarising with the blueprints, had to be the main control room, but if the trail of damage was any indication, there had evidently been an explosion here, the one which had put the platform out of use. If there was anything left to be salvaged, this would surely be one of the best places to check.

"Take a look around," Torn said to his men, who began clambering carefully through the wreckage.

Torn himself moved to the yawning gap in the walls and surveyed the scene outside. However, there was little to be seen, as the shrouding mist still floated ominously across the platform. Only the featureless outlines of the nearest buildings and towers showed through, grey and massive, and not even the dimmed beams of his soldier's searchlights could be seen among them.

"There's nothing here we can use," said one of Torn's men behind him. "Everything's been destroyed."

"Must have been a pretty big explosion that knocked this place out," said the other.

Torn was unperturbed, having expected such, but there was still much more of the platform left to explore, and maybe his other groups would find something useful somewhere else.

Meanwhile, two soldiers had ventured through some old buildings to examine some burnt-out generators. Unfortunately, there was no fuel left within, but they had found another door that led them outside again into a narrow, well-cleared area far away from the rest of their team. It felt emptier here, sheltered slightly from the breeze, and the two men suddenly felt more isolated from their comrades than ever before.

"Man, this place gives me shivers," said one of them, "And I don't mean just from the cold."

"Yeah, me too," said the other. "Glad I never had to work up here back when it was still running."

They followed the nearest wall and climbed a slope to reach slightly higher ground. Up here, they found metal cabling strewn on the floor, leading back into openings in the wall as if it had been ripped out by something. Just beyond this, they came to a point where the floor widened out and then ended with a deep drop. Only a single grated bridge offered a way forward, extending far out and disappearing into the fog ahead.

"Where do you think this leads?" asked one of the men.

"Can't tell," said the other, "But we should check it out."

"Will that thing hold?" asked the first.

The other soldier stomped his foot hard onto the first step of the bridge, and nothing happened. It felt
Cautiously, the two of them proceeded into the gloom, and kept going until both ends of the bridge were gone from sight. The mist was thicker than ever out here; they were suspended on a narrow gangway in the middle of a clouded, featureless abyss, nothing around them in all directions, and a vastly indiscernible drop below.

The soldier at the rear gulped. "Did I ever mention I don't like heights?" he said with a shiver.

"Probably for the best you can't see how high we really are then," said the other, who was only slightly more composed. "The big drill must be down there somewhere."

He dared to lean to the side a little bit to see if he could make out the shape of the titanic gyro that once bored ferociously into the roots of the mountains, but even this tiny movement nearly made him lose his balance. Without any visual reference, the whole world seemed to turn around them, which was even more unnerving since the safety rails on this bridge were low enough to easily topple over. If they fell, it was likely no one would ever know.

"Where's the end of this goddamned thing?" said the one at the back after what seemed like a few minutes of walking.

"It's got to be close now," said the one at the front, but there was still no sign of it. Something about this did not feel right, almost like there was some other power here that was deceiving their senses.

But just then, there was a dull, muffled thump. It was quiet, but amplified by the mist it was clear enough to perceive among their timid footsteps. The leading soldier halted, and his companion was forced to stop at his back, almost waking into him.

"Was that you?"

"Was what me?"

There was another thump.

"That."

"No..."

The two of them held their ground for a moment and listened. They could hear it clearly now, beating irregularly like a malfunctioning heart, but its direction of origin and distance were impossible to pinpoint.

"I don't like this," whispered one of the men. "What the hell's that sound?"

"Probably just some old broken machinery clanking in the wind," said the other rationally. "I hope..."

But that idea was forced aside when the soldiers began to feel small vibrations in the bridge with each deadened sound, right through their boots, and both of them froze up.

"There's something on this bridge with us!" hissed the rear soldier urgently, and they both raised their weapons.

The noises kept coming, feeling unmistakeably like footsteps on the metal, as if something were
treading towards them, drawing nearer with each one. It couldn’t be any of their comrades, because if it were, they would have surely seen their torch lights or heard their voices. This was something else. Faced with the mysterious unknown, trapped in the centre of this bridge, their courage momentarily slipped away from them, and neither could find it within themselves to call out and check.

"Behind us!" said the rear soldier suddenly, spinning around and pointing his gun into the mist the way they had come. But his companion could swear that the sounds were actually coming from ahead, and he took aim through the fog in his direction. They stood back to back, sweating and shaking in their isolated spot on the shrouded bridge, each beholding an identical, empty view as the noises came closer and closer, unseen. They were stuck with nowhere to flee, but they could see nothing approaching from either direction.

"You see anything?"

"No."

"Come on, where is it? Show yourself!"

But then the noises and the vibrations stopped dead, and the men stayed rooted to the spot, unable to move or even speak to each other. It was as if something invisible had walked right through them and disappeared. They waited. Then ever so gradually, a new sound emerged from far away: a long, droning, metallic scraping sound. This was definitely coming from ahead, and the first soldier kept his weapon raised, waiting for whatever it was to appear in front of him, his finger lying ready upon the trigger.

Then he saw it. Something dark and low came slowly moving along the bridge towards him, bringing with it the eerie new sound, louder and louder. As it drew closer, however, he identified it to be a rusted old barrel of eco, rolling perfectly down the centre of the bridge.

"What is that?" asked his friend fretfully behind him, not daring to turn around and surrender his vigil.

"It's an eco barrel," responded the other with confusion. He out-stretched a leg and put his foot against it when it reached him, halting its movement. It was empty and lidless, but he maintained the aim of his weapon into the fog ahead of him. Whatever had caused this to roll at him must not be far away, perhaps even standing just out of range of perception on this very bridge, hidden by the fog, and staring back at him. He could not banish the spooky chills that were trickling up his spine, knowing he may be standing face to face with something unknown. That scared him more than any material threat. He could not see it, but could it see him?

However, nothing more came, the tense feeling slowly dissipated, and the sounds never resumed. There was only clouded silence once again. It appeared that whatever had been stalking them, if that was what it had really been doing, had now moved off elsewhere. Either that, or it was quietly waiting for them at the end of the bridge, ready to launch an attack as soon as they got close enough. Neither of the two soldiers, however, were keen on finding out alone, and they were in a very vulnerable position right now, exposed and unprotected.

"What in the hell is going on up here?" said one finally, after what felt like an age of shivery waiting.

"I vote we move back and get help," suggested his friend.

"Can't argue with you there."
They retreated back the way they had come, still covering opposite directions and leaving the empty eco barrel out in the middle of the bridge, until they were once again back on firmer ground. To their relief, there was nothing there waiting for them, but they did not drop their guard.

From there they backtracked to their starting point, and by that time many of the other groups had also returned. Curiously, they too reported similarly confusing experiences; objects moving by themselves, hearing unexplained disturbances in the fog, and one soldier even thought he had seen something, but it had moved too quickly for him to identify what it was, if it had been anything at all.

Torn was informed when he returned from the control tower, having assessed that there was nothing salvageable in there, and he was concerned about what his men described. If more than one group had experienced this strange phenomenon, then it definitely deserved more detailed investigation.

"Alright, we need to search this whole place more thoroughly," he decided. "If there's something here, we need to find out what it is and if it poses any threat. Sharp eyes, people."

The men reformed into larger groups and moved out again, while Torn accompanied one group back to the bridge where the two soldiers had had their encounter. On the way there, he tried to rationalise what could possibly explain the odd experiences his men had reported.

His immediate instinct was that it could be Metal Heads, knowing that they had often tried to attack the platform in the past, but he had never known them to act this deviously before; it was most uncharacteristic of them to be sneaking around like this, not their usual tactics at all. However, cloaked Metal Heads with special camouflage ability had been reported before, even on the very streets of Haven itself during the war, so the idea of a few lone cloakers that had survived and adapted into stealthy hunters up here was still a very possible one.

But even cloakers could not conceal the tell-tale glow of their skull gems which always gave them away, and none of his men had reported seeing this on their searches. So if it were not Metal Heads here, then what else could it be? Torn began to feel a dreading suspicion that perhaps their new enemies had discovered the drill platform after all, and that some were up here right now trying not to be seen, maybe laying a trap for them. Perhaps this was what they were up to in their absence of attacks? If that was true, then their plan of building a secret base up here could already be jeopardised; the drill platform would be the perfect place for them to stage new offensives on Haven.

The mystery only deepened when they returned to the bridge, and found that the eco barrel left in the centre was no longer there. Of course, it may have fallen over the sides, but that did not explain how it had got onto the bridge in the first place. Something must have disturbed it.

The group bravely advanced to the other end of the bridge and explored what lay beyond. The results, however, were disappointing: the other side was much the same as the first, only a number of corners that led to a dead end with a locked door, and not a single other eco barrel to be found anywhere.

Torn and his men were growing frustrated the longer they searched. They kept in radio contact with one another, but nobody could find any sign of what had been witnessed before. The platform felt completely empty now. Had they all imagined it, their senses tricked by the derelict atmosphere and the fog up here? Or was there really something out there still, cleverly keeping itself hidden in some place they could not reach, and moving between locations as they progressed in their search?

The murky weather was not helping at all. It was growing darker and gloomier already, and soon it started to rain, a cruel, freezing drizzle that seeped through the gaps in their armour. Therefore Torn called an end to the fruitless search and had everyone regroup at the landing zone to decide what was to be done next.
They all stood around their vehicles together now, feeling aimless and unsettled in the rain with the few supplies they had salvaged in their searches, wondering if there was something watching them from somewhere right this moment. Torn did not feel satisfied with their efforts. Their search of the platform felt rushed and incomplete, and he was sure there were more places to check, if only they had the time and better visibility.

The men chattered amongst themselves.

"Do you think there really is something here?"

"I don't know. I never saw anything."

"But what moved those things then?"

"Could have been the wind I suppose."

"That can't have been the wind."

Torn let his men have their discussion while he relayed a message back to Ashelin from the dry shelter of his cruiser cockpit.

"Torn, what have you got to report?" asked the governor. "Can we go ahead with the plan?"

"Not yet, Ashelin. The drill platform seems to be in good shape, but we ran into some... complications."

"What do you mean?"

"There's been some strange activity going on up here," Torn explained. "Noises in the mist, objects being moved about. There might be someone, or something, living up here."

"Who?" Ashelin asked, sounding concerned and focussed.

"Our searches were inconclusive," Torn went on. "We couldn't find anything, but we can't dismiss it yet. We'll have to return here again when the weather's better and we can look around properly. There's no other choice."

"Alright," said Ashelin with reluctant acceptance. "This puts a bit of a delay on our plans, but you're right, it's important that we get to the bottom of this first. Any idea what it could be?"

"Two," said Torn, and he glanced out of his rain-speckled windows to check that none of his men were listening. "Could be Metal Heads, or it could be the enemy sneaking around. They might have found this place already."

The radio crackled as Ashelin sighed through it. "In that case, let's hope it's just Metal Heads. What did you find materials-wise?"

"A few stores of eco, but there isn't much else left here. We'll bring back what we can carry."

"OK Torn, that could really help us," said Ashelin. "Right, let's put a wrap on it for today then. Head back when you're ready, then come see me, and we'll discuss our next steps."

The call ended, and Torn took a short moment to think. He did not like it when things made no sense like this, and he felt pressured to complete his mission not just for the city, but for Ashelin too. In his mind, he still had a lot to make up for, but now he had his next orders, and it was time to move out.
A soldier knocked on his cockpit window, and Torn opened it. "What are your next orders, Commander?" asked the soldier. "The men can’t take much more of this cold."

"There's no point in staying here any longer today," said Torn. "We're losing light and this damned fog and rain are making it worse. Until we're absolutely sure there's nothing up here, we can't denote this place as safe to occupy. Let's load up the supplies we found and return to the city, we'll continue our sweep another day. Head home, everyone."

Nobody was sorry to leave this grim place; they had spent several hours out in the cold air without any warmth or sustenance, and the ominous feeling that they may not be alone up here was difficult to manage. Everyone felt rather divided as they heaped the salvaged eco containers into their vehicles; their mission had been neither a success nor a failure, but at least they were returning home with something, however little. With their progress at a standstill and with nothing more they could do, they all re-boarded their cruisers and took off, following Torn's lead back through the misty maze of mountains, and leaving the platform's mysteries far behind... until their next visit.
Torn's report of what had happened up at the drill platform was curious and unsettling, and it made Ashelin very suspicious. Was there really something lurking around up there? If so, what was it, and did it pose any threat to them? These were questions that needed to be answered if they were to progress forward with their new plans to re-occupy the platform, and she wanted as few compromises as possible.

So over the following days, Torn and his team made multiple returns to the platform to conduct a thorough, comprehensive search of the place. Even in broad daylight and under more favourable weather conditions, there was still a strange feeling in the air, the feeling of being watched by something unseen. However, there were no more unexplainable encounters, and nobody could find any trace of anything sentient that may be hiding among the machinery; everything was perfectly abandoned and lifeless.

Torn, the rational and sceptical man that he was, began to suspect that there really was nothing there, and their continued failure to find anything supported that conclusion. It was probably all down to tricks of the imagination in the fog, he rationalised, and if anything had been there, it seemed to have abandoned the area now. However, he knew the costs of being wrong all too well, and took the extra measures needed to be as certain as possible. At last, after several more days of searching, he was satisfied with his efforts, having combed every reachable area of the platform for trouble, and finding nothing. In the face of this evidence, he declared the drill platform empty and safe for reoccupation.

With this decision made, Ashelin initiated the next step of the plan, and shipments of men and material were transported up there. The warp gate was reactivated, precautionary defences were set up around the perimeter, and it was not long before a dedicated working environment was established and the platform was once again alive with activity. It was the perfect place to work in secret and build up a new force; nestled up here in the mountains, safely hidden from sight of the city, there was no threat of their work being undone by the next attack, as their enemy seemed to be unaware of its location or existence, and they hoped that it would remain so.

Ashelin was satisfied with this development, and while this work was going on, she could focus her attention to the other half of the plan taking effect in the city. She gathered Torn and Jak to discuss it with them, for they each would play an important role in it.

"OK, so here's what I'm planning," she explained. "I want to see if it's possible to track the enemy jets when they teleport away, and see if it'll give us a location of their homeland."

To Jak and Torn, this was a sound idea. It was just as she had suggested in the last big meeting, and they were both willing to give it a shot. Times were desperate, and this might be the only means they had of breaking this unending impasse.
"I've got the scientists working on some tracking devices," Ashelin continued, "And they should have a prototype ready to test soon. But we need to be ready to use them the moment the next attack comes, and get them planted. That's where you two come in. Jak, you're one of the best flyers we've got, and I'm putting my faith in your abilities again. I need you to be up in the air in the next battle with the trackers, and use them to tag an enemy jet. You up for it?"

Jak smiled confidently, feeling the draw of excitement and success. "I'll do it," he answered at once.

Ashelin smiled back at him proudly. "Great. I knew I could count on you." Next, she turned to Torn. "Torn, you're with me on this one. While Jak's targeting jets, you and I will be directing everything from up here in Freedom HQ, and it's up to you to make sure our men don't shoot down the one that's been tagged."

"Got it," said Torn, accepting his assigned role without question. It would not be an easy task, but he would do it.

"Well-executed teamwork and accurate communication are what we need," Ashelin said finally, "But as long as we all do our respective jobs, and do them well, then I have every confidence that we'll succeed."

Within a few short days, the first prototype trackers were ready for testing. They were small devices, much like the beacons the Wastelanders used, but they were specially modified to be fired from a Hellcat and attach themselves to the metal on the enemy jets.

On the day of the test run, a small group headed by Ashelin convened outside the city walls, where they waited for Jak. He had taken the first batch of trackers up in his cruiser, and he practiced targeting the pieces of debris that still lay out there. He did not disappoint, scoring many hits on the broken remnants, and the trackers stuck fast, emitting their signals which were picked up clearly back at Freedom Headquarters. Then, the researchers collected the tagged debris and simulated the teleportation by sending it through the newly repaired warp gate up to the drill platform, where it arrived safely and intact, the trackers still attached firmly and their signals still clear and readable.

Ashelin was pleased to see the initial steps of her plan working so well, but she knew that in the chaos of battle, things were unlikely to be this easy. Nearly every day now, she got together with Torn and Jak to continually re-evaluate the procedure, maximising their chances of success. They couldn't afford many mistakes, and it was decided that Jak should attempt to tag as many enemy jets as possible, and Ashelin commissioned several more batches of trackers for this purpose. Jak's cruiser was loaded up with them, and was kept in the hangar ready to take off at a moment's notice, with Jak himself always not far away; he spent most of his time in Freedom Headquarters now, just waiting for the next attack to come so he could leap into his cruiser and do what he had to do. Meanwhile, Torn made sure that all of his soldiers were aware of their next objective, and also informed Vin, who was still in charge of the defence turrets all around the city.

Everyone knew exactly what was to be done, the trap was set, and they all waited... and waited... and waited. Days went by, but the skies over the city were now eerily calm and suspiciously empty. The defences around the walls sat cold and silent, unfired for so long, and the city was left in a prolonged state of suspense as they waited for the return of the enigmatic jets. However, there was no sign of them at all.

"Come on, where are they?" Ashelin often said to herself, watching the sky impatiently from the windows of Freedom HQ.

She did not like it being so quiet, having to be constantly on alert. While it was true that the enemy attacks had seen a dramatic decrease in frequency and strength as of late, this was currently the
longest recorded interim in the fighting. In fact, it almost felt as if they had disappeared for good. Had they really given up their onslaught after so much effort and so little progress, like Jak had wondered? Or were they still out there somewhere, waiting for the perfect moment for a renewed strike?

Ashelin was frustrated by this unexpected delay, and more so by the feeling of unknowing that came with it. Not only that, but it also felt cruelly ironic that the one time she actually wanted the enemy to attack, they did not come. Now that she finally had a means of potentially turning the war around in Haven's favour, they were not being given the chance to use it. Did the enemy somehow know about their plan to track them? Was this why they were not coming back? Or had something unforeseen occurred?

Regardless of what the truth might really be, it granted Haven an indefinite but unrewarding period of peace, which Ashelin was quick to take advantage of. While she waited for the next attack which might not even come, she arranged for some secondary repairs to be carried out across the city, restoring many of the buildings and roads which had been previously damaged, now that all the essentials were complete. She also took the time to re-assess civilian morale and update them on what was going on, for the people were becoming restless and tired of being confined inside their homes — even if it was for their own safety — when there was apparently no danger outside. After much careful consideration, Ashelin took the risk to slacken the protective curfew and let the people walk more freely on the streets again. Of course, they were briefed with special instructions should they find themselves outside when the next attack finally did come, and there were always guards close by to offer protection and escort them to the nearest safe points.

In concurrence with this, Ashelin received the news that Daxter had decided to re-open his bar to the public. It quickly became a cheery gathering place for the weary populace, somewhere they could be together to find support in one another and distract themselves from their uncertain predicament, and it really helped. Ashelin had not expected him to do this, but she definitely had to agree that this action, while simple and humble, was Daxter's greatest contribution to morale yet. In fact, it almost felt as if things were back to normal again, were it not for the constant, looming threat that still remained hanging heavily over the whole city, keeping everyone on edge and unable to fully relax, constantly looking to the skies.

One day, Daxter was proudly entertaining his bar patrons with another one of his classic embellished stories, standing dramatically on a table in the middle of the room. Tess was lying at his feet, looking up at him wondrously and listening with rapt attention.

"... and from the moment I so much as bared my teeth, those cowardly Metal Heads turned tail and scarpered back into the slimy holes they crawled out of! And just like that, Orange Lightning saved the day once again!"

The surrounding listeners cheered and applauded, and Tess got up and caressed Daxter around his shoulders.

"Ooh, you're so terrifying!" she cooed to him, and Daxter purred contentedly.

Jak was resting against the bar counter with a drink in his hand, while Sig stood to his left side with a drink of his own. "Did that really happen?" the big Wastelander asked with humorous doubtfulness.
Jak smiled ruefully. "You should know better than to believe his stories by now."

"Well, true or not, he's got great delivery," said Sig with an appreciative nod and a raise of his glass.

Jak nodded too, admitting that that was the one thing that Daxter was unquestionably good at. He took another drink and then looked around the rest of the bar.

This had been the scene for the past several days. Sig and his accompanying Wastelander had been coming here ever since they had first arrived in Haven to help, making the pub their base of operations in between battles. Sig had to admit that ever since Krew had gone, the building had gained a much more welcoming and comfortable atmosphere. But whenever they heard the sounds of battle outside, it was straight to business, and out they would go to fight without missing a beat. Jak, however, had been rather bored with the lack of action recently, waiting to execute their carefully-designed plan in the war. He had drifted between the pub and Freedom Headquarters looking for some excitement, but Ashelin never had anything for him to do except for talking through the plan again for what felt like the hundredth time. Eventually he had stopped checking. At least the Wastelander were good company; they actually made great drinking buddies, and Daxter had already crowned Kleiver the 'lord of the belch brigade'.

The ottsel was now taking a big bow on the tabletop, basking in the admiration of his customers, but then suddenly, a loud boom was heard outside, and the whole room fell into silence. Jak's ears pricked up, and the Wastelanders instinctively reached for their weapons. They all knew at once what this must mean: the enemy had finally returned! Jak leapt right up, ready for action and pumped with adrenaline. At last, the moment they had all been waiting for was here!

Another boom shook the walls, and several people screamed. Tess was the first to act, fully prepared for this eventuality, and taking responsibility for the safety of the customers. She stood up to her full height on the table and held both arms in the air.

"Nobody panic!" she called out. "Everyone please stay calm, and follow me into the basement. We'll take cover in there until it's safe."

The room bustled into life again. The throng of customers all moved as one towards the back door that led to the basement, guided by Tess. Jak and the Wastelanders, meanwhile, swept up their weapons and cut straight through the crowd towards the door.

"Dax, come on!" Jak called, and the ottsel leapt over the heads of the customers and landed neatly on Jak's shoulder.

"Go get them, Daxie!" Tess called after him.

Outside, they saw that, sure enough, the jets were back, raining down their all-too-familiar terror upon the streets and buildings; they had not given up after all. The Wastelanders had already run off in different directions, and Sig was standing close by, aiming his Peace Maker upwards and tracking one of the jets. He let loose a terrific shot of supercharged energy which collided with the enemy aircraft as it swooped overhead, and it came crashing down into the waters of the port in several fiery pieces.

"Jak! Where are you?" spoke Ashelin's urgent voice, as Jak's communicator came rumbling out of his backpack.

"I'm coming!" he replied, remembering his role in the plan, but then he realised that he was just about as far away from Freedom Headquarters as it was possible to get and still be in the city. He had to get moving, and fast!
"Go, Jak! I'll cover ya!" shouted Sig, as he continued to send deadly projectiles into the sky.

A little further down the road there was a zoomer parked by the wall, and Jak sprinted to it. He leapt on when he was close enough and sped away as quickly as he could, teeth gritted.

"Hold on, Dax! You're about to see some really wild driving!"

All around them was absolute chaos. On the streets, squads of Freedom Fighters fired upwards, some protecting groups of cowering civilians who huddled together in doorways and in ruins. Meanwhile the defence batteries around the city walls boomed on, while above them, jets and Hellcats clashed and exploded. Fiery wreckage, stray missiles and energy beams were falling across the city, and one even nearly came down right on top of Jak's zoomer, but he was able to barrel-roll out of the way just in time. Daxter yelled, holding on just by his fingers. Sure, he was well used to Jak's reckless driving by now, but he was taking it to a whole new level today. The hero pushed the zoomer to its limits, shooting through the city's industrial district so quickly that everything was a blur.

"Damn it, Jak! What the hell's taking you so long?" Ashelin shouted through the communicator.

"Get your ass over here, Jak!" added Torn's voice. "Now!"

"I'm almost there!" Jak shouted back as he entered the slums, leaning forwards on his zoomer in a futile attempt to make it go even faster.

He knew the quickest way through the slums and took it, screaming into New Haven within a minute. When he at last arrived outside Freedom Headquarters, he did not even bother braking. He jumped right off his vehicle, which splashed into a nearby fountain, and he landed forcefully on the pavement. Daxter was almost squashed as Jak rolled with the fast impact, but before he could complain, another bolt of enemy fire hit the concrete right behind them, burning a smoking hole in the road.

Jak ran right into the hangar, and found his cruiser prepped and ready to go, right where it should be. Without wasting another moment, he got into the seat, flicked the switches and took off.

"Ashelin, I'm in the cruiser!" he said over the radio.

On her computer radar, Ashelin saw his label taking flight, and then caught a glimpse of him as he flew past the control room window. "Good! But we probably don't have much time before they leave again. They've already taken a fair few losses. Just get shooting and plant those trackers!"

Jak flew fearlessly right into the fray, seeking out a suitable jet to target. But as he had fully expected, this was a lot harder than aiming for stationary pieces of debris. The jets were much faster and more manoeuvrable than the Hellcats were, not to mention they attacked back, and he could not keep a bead on any one of them long enough to take a sure shot. As soon as one sensed it was being followed, it would take rapid evasive manoeuvres, while at other times, Jak would have to break off his pursuits because he himself had come under attack, or the one he was chasing would suddenly be destroyed by ground-fire. More were falling across the whole city, and still Jak had not scored a hit, all his shots missing so far, and falling harmlessly down to the streets.

"Come on, Jak!" Ashelin urged him through the radio, seeing no traces on her screen. "Pick up the pace!"

"I'm trying, alright!" Jak growled with frustration. "I can't get a clear shot!"

"Men, give Jak some help!" Torn ordered.
At once, about five Hellcats orbited in closer, forming a kind of guard formation around Jak's, but still leaving him with enough room to freely manoeuvre. Wherever he went, they followed like a shadow. With his back now protected, Jak could concentrate solely on what was in front of him.

"Jak, ten o'clock!" yelled Daxter.

Jak looked, and saw a jet that was on a trajectory to pass right in front of him. With very careful timing, he let out a burst of fire as it came closer, and the jet flew right through it. Several trackers missed and fell to the earth, but Jak could see that at least one had stuck, flashing regularly on the underside of the jet's wing. In Freedom Headquarters, a moving red blip appeared on Ashelin's screen, standing out amid the blue ones that represented their Hellcats.

"He's got one!" she cheered. "Nice shooting, Jak! We've got a signal!"

Jak felt a great relief of pressure and had a short moment of triumph, high-fiving Daxter. But no more than five seconds later, the very jet he had hit was targeted by an automatic defence cannon and blasted apart, and the signal was lost.

"No!" Ashelin thumped the control panel out of exasperation. "Jak, it got destroyed. You've got to get another one!"

Jak let out a growl of annoyance as the pressure returned with vengeance, before quickly regaining his concentration and seeking out yet another target. He worked together with his wingmen, who chased jets into his line of fire so he could open up on them. Using this method, he was able to score several more hits, and a few more dots started to appear on the main radar screen.

"He's doing it!" said Ashelin. "Keep it up, Jak!"

Opposite her on the other side of the computer terminal, Torn was doing his best to convey to the other pilots which jets to avoid shooting down and which were still safe to attack, but everything was happening so fast that by the time the words had left his mouth, the information they carried was outdated, and he struggled to keep up. His men did not have the comprehensive view of the battlefield like he and Ashelin had, and one by one, the signals were going out again, and Jak was starting to run low on trackers.

"We're losing them!" said Ashelin. "They're being shot down too quickly, and they're going to retreat soon if they take any more losses!"

But Torn had a desperate idea. "Vin, turn off the defence cannons!" he ordered.

"Wh– what? Are you sure?" Vin's nervous voice jittered through the computer.

"Confirmed, hold your fire now!"

The ground turrets instantly fell quiet, and the amount of flak in the air was significantly reduced.

"Alright," said Torn. "Jak, that should make things easier for you. Find a jet and plant another tracker. Everyone else, keep the others busy and draw their fire."

The skies were much clearer now and easier to navigate, which Jak found extremely helpful. The other pilots obeyed their orders, but they were now easy targets for the remaining jets, which increased their offensive in response to the sudden ceasefire. Several of the Hellcats were already in trouble, and they flew as skilfully as they could to prevent being shot down. Some did not make it.

"This is risky, lowering our defences like this," said Ashelin, looking up at Torn.
"I know," Torn replied, not returning the look, "But we're running out of time, and this could be our only chance to make this work."

Ashelin understood, and it was worth taking that chance. But when she looked back down to her radar screen, she was alarmed to see that something was zeroing in on their position very quickly. She looked out the window, and there was an enemy jet flying straight at them.

"Get down!" she screamed, hurling herself to the ground and pulling Torn down with her.

There was a loud explosion as an energy beam shot right through the window, the temperature in the room tripled, molten glass and bits of wall went flying over their heads, and then everything disappeared in smoke and dust.

Outside, Jak and Daxter had witnessed the explosion on the upper floors of the Freedom Building, and were now seized by a halting panic.

"Ashelin! Torn!" Jak yelled into his radio, but there was no answer except for loud static.

Daxter gulped. "That doesn't sound good."

Jak's panic gave way to anger, gritting his teeth so hard that it hurt. He needed to shoot something now, but the jet responsible for that attack had already been taken care of by some of the other Hellcats. How he wished he could have been the one to take it down. But then he remembered the importance of his task, and managed to calm himself somewhat.

"We've got to keep at it," he said, swallowing back his emotions. "We've got a job to do, and we'll get it done with or without them."

Daxter seemed to understand, and though quivering slightly at the uncertain fate of their friends, pulled himself together alongside Jak, and the two of them turned to face the battle once more, scanning the sky to target one of the approximately ten jets that remained. It wasn't long before Daxter tugged on Jak's ear.

"Jak, over there!"

He was pointing at a solitary jet that was doing something rather unusual. It had seemingly broken away from the rest of its group, unnoticed by everyone else, and was now hovering low by itself over the ruins of Dead Town behind the city's north-east corner. If Jak didn't know any better, he'd have said it was hiding. But rather than ask questions, he seized his opportunity and headed straight over to it. It was in his sights, and as he sped in closer and closer, it began to rise up a little, and looked as if it was preparing to turn. Now he was close enough to make out the pilot frantically pressing buttons on the dashboard; he knew he was in trouble.

"Big mistake, pal!" Jak said with vengeful relish, and then he opened fire until the guns clicked and were empty. It was all too easy, and the moment the trackers made contact, the jet disappeared in a flash, leaving Jak temporarily dazzled and having to pull up blindly to prevent crashing into the ruins.

Meanwhile, back inside the control room, Ashelin and Torn lifted the debris off themselves and helped each other back up. They were bruised and dusty and their ears were ringing painfully, but thanks to Ashelin's quick reactions, they were both alive.

"Ash, you alright?" asked Torn.

"Yeah, I think so," replied Ashelin, coughing up some dust. "I'm not hurt. But boy, that was close."
Back on their feet again, they could see that the whole room was ripped open; there was now a large hole in the wall, letting in the cool air and the sounds of battle from outside, and the floor was littered with a trail of damage. However, Torn ignored all this and went straight back to their computer terminals, shoving the debris off them, only to find that they no longer functioned, spitting sparks and giving no clear data at all.

"Shit!" he said angrily, kicking the console. "We've lost contact with everything!"

But before they could try to organise a backup strategy, suddenly there was a flash of light from outside, and then a disturbing silence fell upon the city. Everything froze.

"That's it," said Ashelin, moving tentatively towards the hole. "They've gone."

She looked out upon the scene, fires and smoke plumes burning on the streets, and the remaining Hellcats dispersing. The pilots needed no further orders; they knew what was to be done after every battle, and they flew off at once to different areas of the city to offer aid wherever it was needed. One vehicle flew right over to the gap in the wall, hovering level with Ashelin. It was Jak, who looked much relieved to see them both alive and without major injury.

"Are you guys alright?" he asked right away. "We saw a jet shoot out your window."

"We're fine, Jak," Ashelin replied, dusting herself off still. "But what's the situation out there? Did you get it done?"

"I think so," Jak answered positively, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I think I got one right as it teleported out. We got a signal yet or what?"

"Uh, we don't know. Our computers got knocked out by that attack and we lost all communication in the last minutes."

"I'll get on the line to Vin in a moment," said Torn, coming over to stand beside Ashelin. "He'll be able to track it down."

Everyone all took a moment to let out the breath they were holding in. That battle had demanded a lot of concentration from them all, but it seemed that all their hard work and preparation had paid off in the end. But this was only the beginning, and they still had much more to do before they could rest easy.

"Thank you, Jak," Ashelin said after a long, cathartic sigh. "You've done a really great thing for us today. You might have just turned this war around for us."

Jak responded in his usual modest way, with a smile, a shrug and a small nod. But Daxter, predictably, spoke up. "Hey, don't forget about me!" he chimed in, waving his arms around in a bid for attention.

Ashelin looked annoyed, as she always did whenever Daxter tried to claim credit for himself, but this time he actually deserved some.

"Dax really helped, actually," Jak explained. "He made a great spotter."

"Well then... thank you for your help in this as well, Daxter," said Ashelin. Strangely, that was not as humiliating to admit as she thought it would be, and Daxter swelled with pride at finally being acknowledged by her, as if expecting her to pin a medal straight onto his chest.

"So what happens next?" Jak asked.
"We'll try and follow the signal," said Ashelin. "Find out if the tracker worked. I really hope it gets us somewhere. I'll keep you updated, Jak, whatever happens. In the meantime, feel free to take a few days off. You've done a lot for us, and you've earned a break today."

Daxter's ears perked up. "Come on then, Jak! You heard the lady. Let's head back to the bar."

This time, Jak did not object to having nothing to do. The battle had been taxing, and if there was one thing he needed right now, it was a drink.
Jak found himself standing alone in the main room of Freedom Headquarters. He didn’t know what time it was, but he knew that he must have been summoned for another important mission. However he seemed to be the only person there. He had never seen the place so empty before; neither Ashelin nor Torn were here as they usually were, working hard at the computers or waiting to brief him, nor Samos, and even Daxter was missing from his usual place on his shoulder. He settled to wait around for a moment, pacing up and down the room, rationalising that someone would turn up soon and give him instruction.

Suddenly, a warning alarm sounded. Jak’s attention was drawn to the main computer terminal, and he headed to it to find out what was wrong. His immediate thought was that perhaps the city was under attack again, but he felt sure, somehow, that that was not the case at the moment. The computers did not confirm one way or the other, because no matter how hard he tried, he could make no sense of what was being displayed on the screens; the graphs and charts were like nothing he had ever seen before, and the words were out of focus and kept shifting shape, impossible to read. He tried pressing some buttons, but they seemed to have no effect whatsoever, or those that did only brought up more alien menus and images that he could not understand.

He was becoming ever more confused as he struggled with the machinery, and frustrated with himself for not being able to comprehend it. What was wrong with him? Why could he just not grasp what was happening here? And where was everybody else? Why was there nobody present to help him with this? Where were Ashelin and Torn, who always knew what to do?

Something about this did not feel right at all, and the more he thought about it, the stranger his whole situation started to seem. Come to think of it, he now noticed that there were several things about the computer terminal and the room itself that did not look as they should. The only explanation he could come up with was that they must have updated the entire computer system while he had been stranded on that island. Yes, that must be why he was having so much difficulty using it and why it seemed so unfamiliar.

"Hang on... the island."

He was suddenly halted by the inconsistency of his thoughts, and something inside his head seemed to click: he could not remember ever leaving that island... and yet here he was, back home in Haven City. Therefore he must have got off it somehow, and he had a vague recollection of being rescued, but somehow he did not feel as if it had actually happened, like it had been a dream.

"Just a minute... a dream?"

The realisation hit him with all the force of a charging yakow, and something inside him leapt, like a jolt through his whole body. A great fog felt like it had lifted from his mind, like he was now fully awake and could think much more clearly. He looked around the room with refreshed consciousness, and everything seemed to shimmer, as if there were a thin film of water over his eyes. Then he looked at his hands, which appeared to be pulsing a yellow colour, as if he were channelling eco. And then he finally understood why everything around him seemed so strange.

"The island wasn't a dream," he said aloud. "This is!"

Suddenly, Vin's virtual head flicked up on the central terminal. "That's right, baby!" it said, and then
it was gone again.

Hot excitement shot through him, a euphoric feeling of discovery. A hundred new thoughts and emotions were tearing through his mind like a Vulcan barrel on overdrive, so many that it was impossible to digest them all at once. It was overwhelming, and it brought him to a total standstill for a moment, before one clear impulsive thought broke through all the rest: *I'm dreaming! And I'm back in the city! I've got to tell someone!*

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind, he was racing straight to the door as fast as he could, so quickly it was as if he had taken just a single bound, and they burst open for him. But instead of emerging into the lift shaft as usual, he immediately appeared outside. This unexpected non-linearity caused him to pause in surprise and look around, but he recognised where he now was.

He was standing at the foot of one of the docking towers out in the port. It loomed over him as if it had been stretched to many times its real height, and the other buildings surrounding the port seemed further away than usual and were dancing in and out of focus, as if observing them through a heat haze. The sky was a uniform, featureless white, and the water a similarly motionless blue-grey, but there was still nobody to be seen anywhere; the roads were deserted and silent. Even the drop ship that would take him to the Wasteland and should always be parked nearby was missing.

"Hey!" he shouted out with mad excitement, not sure what was going to happen. "Where is everyone?"

All of a sudden, the drop ship was there again, seemingly materialised from nowhere when he had looked the other way. With a hiss, he watched as the back hatch lowered, and out of it stepped the one person he had been longing to see for so long: Keira. Maybe it was because of his accelerated emotions, or the unstable visual effect of the dream, but he thought she looked more beautiful than he had ever known her to be, so much so that it barely resembled her real self, but it was unquestionably her. He just knew.

Then she saw him too and froze on the spot, and her perfect face mirrored the expression that he felt his making too. Without saying a word, they ran to each other and collided into the best hug he had ever experienced, real or imaginary. Jak was so happy, and he felt Keira press herself into him with remarkable realism, her hair tickling his face, making him smile even more. There was so much he wanted to say and do now they were back together again, and it felt like all of the world's problems had been solved. Having her so close to him just felt so perfect, his emotions were racing in this transcendentally beautiful moment.

"It's so good to see you again, Keira. I've missed you," he said honestly, squeezing harder.

Keira said nothing back, but she continued clinging to him tightly. But when he glanced up again from the top of her head just briefly, he suddenly noticed that the surroundings had become darker and much fuzzier, as if existence itself were closing in around them. The sense of urgency he had felt earlier resurfaced, and he rushed to tell Keira at once what he had discovered, and momentarily forgotten in his euphoria.

He broke up the hug with some difficulty — it was as if they had got stuck together somehow and almost merged into one — but he plunged on with his intention.

"Keira," he said bravely with a gulp, fixedly staring right into her unnaturally vibrant green eyes. "Listen carefully. I know this is going to sound crazy, but... I think we're dreaming right now!"

He paused to see how she would react, but she still did not speak. Her face was shimmering and shifting before his eyes along with the rest of the dream world. Everything was deteriorating now,
Jak could feel himself starting to wake up, and knew he was running out of time, but he tried to hold on to Keira by the shoulders in the hope that it would keep him rooted to the scene.

"This is all really weird, but you've got to believe me," Jak continued, and then he poured out his re-emerging memories of his plight. He had to tell Keira where he really was so she could find him. "Listen, I'm still alive. I'm stuck on an island somewhere with Ashelin, Torn, and a Freedom soldier called Olto. We've been here ever since the battle. You need to tell everyone back in the city that we're alive and we need rescuing and —"

He stopped mid-sentence, for Keira suddenly looked terrified and was trying to step backwards.

"Keira, wait! What are you doing?" said Jak desperately, tightening his hold on her, but she struggled silently against his grip. She was trying to get away, not to find help, but as if she wanted nothing more to do with him.

"Just listen to me!" Jak cried. He became forceful out of frustration, but she continued to resist. Jak could not understand why she was suddenly behaving like this when he had so many important things to tell her.

But now the darkness descended upon them both, things were fading away into a smear of formless black, and Keira was all he could make out now. He was losing control of his own body and senses, and his arms no longer felt where they should be. He tried shouting at her but his voice cut out on him, he could not breathe, and then he yanked on her as hard as he could in a desperate attempt to keep her with him.

With a gasp and a lurch that he felt through his whole body, his eyes split open and everything was gone. He was now lying flat on his back, looking up at a dark, familiar roof of interwoven leaves, branches and pieces of metal. He was back on the island inside the shelter.

"Whoa," he whispered to himself. He sat up and wiped a hand across his forehead, which was damp with hot sweat, and he found himself panting with exertion; it felt like he had just travelled a great distance in a very short time. Powerful emotions were still pounding through his body, and he took a moment to try and understand what had just happened to him.

Had it all been real? Had he somehow just met up with Keira in a dream? It had been so wonderful to be with her again, just to hold her and speak to her, but now that he was awake, those feelings were slowly fading away, gradually replaced by growing sadness and the feeling of loss, like he’d missed an important chance to do something. He had just held her in his arms, hugged her so close and lovingly, really believed that it had been real, but then she had disappeared into thin air, and now he held only handfuls of grass. He felt painfully crushed that such a pleasurable moment had ended so suddenly, and held his head in his hands.

But then he remembered the things he had managed to say to her, and felt a new pang of hope. He had tried to tell her that he was still alive and marooned on this island, and that he needed to be rescued. Had he succeeded in getting the message across to her? Was she awake at this very moment too, thinking and feeling the very same things that he was right now, and rushing to pass on his message to everyone else in the city? Would a rescue soon come for them because of this? How he wished he could know.

But the more he sat there and pondered it, no matter how much he wished it to be true, the more unlikely it seemed. His fantastic thoughts were fading, replaced by wakeful rationality. It couldn't possibly have been the real Keira. How could they meet up in a dream? It was impossible... wasn't it?
Looking around the inside of the shelter, he saw the shapes of his sleeping companions beside him. There was Torn, buried in the grass, and Olto on the other side of him… but where was Ashelin? The seat in which she usually slept was empty, and Jak suddenly found himself preoccupied with this new curiosity. Where was she? Now too wide awake to ever return to sleep, he decided to get up and look for her, crawling outside into the deep night.

A calm breath of cool air met his face as he emerged through the leaf curtain and stood up in the middle of the camp. The night was still, the sea calm and flat, and the few clouds that were visible were wispy thin, painted across an endless sky of stars that sparkled in their distant beauty, luminous clusters and a great galactic band soaring across space. The green sun hung like a great nightlight, and bathed the beach in a mysterious, warm glow. It was a mesmerising sight. But not too far away there was a recognisable figure sitting on the sand and looking up at it all. It was Ashelin.

He walked out to her and stopped by her side, and she looked back up at him.

"Hey," she said quietly. "Can't sleep either?"

"No," he replied simply to her question. She was completely oblivious to what he had just been through, and he was bursting to tell her all about it, but how on earth would he start? Expressing his inner feelings and experiences was something he had never really been very good at; he was a man of actions rather than words. But would she take it seriously? He doubted she would; Ashelin was the kind of person who always seemed to have her head grounded firmly in the real world. Would she believe him? Would she even be interested in this sort of thing?

Ashelin did not ask anything further, however. Instead she directed her gaze back into the enigmatic sky, a soft and placid smile visible on her face. "This is really something, isn't it?" she said serenely.

"What?" said Jak, momentarily confused, but then he realised that she was talking about the wondrous sight above them. "Oh... yeah, it is," he agreed.

He looked up again. Night skies such as this were nothing particularly special for him; he had seen many throughout his childhood and on his journeys in the Wasteland, in places and times far from polluting city light, but it added to the mysterious atmosphere and feelings of the present night.

Ashelin lay back a little further, supporting herself on her elbows, and seemingly lost in a state of mild and peaceful wonder. "I'm going to miss this when we get back home, you know."

"Really?" said Jak.

"Yeah. I never thought I'd actually say this, but I think this island's finally starting to feel... nice."

Jak thought about this, momentarily distracted from the confusion of his dream. He had not expected to hear Ashelin say such a thing, because after Torn, she had been the one of them most set on getting home. But now that he thought about it, he could see what she meant. They had been through many physical and emotional trials here on the island, and it felt like most of their time had been spent either wallowing in helplessness, fighting illness or injury, or labouring very hard just to survive. Every moment had offered some form of a struggle, and there had been precious few times when they had all truly enjoyed themselves or felt satisfied with their efforts. But now, in this night's deepest hour, the positive aspects of the island were finally starting to become apparent, and no longer did it seem so unbearable to be stuck here.

"It sure is peaceful here," Jak said in agreement. "But we can't stay here forever."

"Yeah, I know," said Ashelin wistfully. "We've got to get back home eventually. I want to know
what's happening back there."

"Me too," said Jak, and he especially meant it. His dream experience had left him with an even stronger desire to get back now, to see Keira again, and to confirm with her if their special shared experience had really happened. He had to tell someone about it now, he could not suppress the mystery any longer.

He lowered himself down on the sand beside his red-headed companion. "Hey Ashelin..." he began, thinking of the best possible way he could put his experience into words.

"Hmm?"

"I had a really weird dream just now..."

"A dream?"

He told her everything he could remember in as much detail as he could, and Ashelin listened, though she did not look as if she fully understood it all.

"Wait. So you mean you actually knew you were dreaming while it was happening?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jak explained. "It just hit me all of a sudden, and I just knew."

Ashelin looked impressed. "Wow," she said, finding nothing else appropriate to say. "I didn't know that could be done. Sounds pretty cool."

"It was pretty amazing," said Jak reminiscently, remembering the exhilarating feelings. "Has that ever happened to you before?"

Ashelin rolled her eyes doubtfully. "Don't think so. I never remember my dreams."

"But what do you think it means?" Jak persisted with her.

Ashelin shrugged cluelessly. "Hell if I know. You're asking the wrong person here, Jak."

Jak sighed. This was proving just as unsuccessful as he had predicted; Ashelin was not much help at all with trying to understand this, but at least she had listened to him. If there was anyone he really wanted to tell about it though, it was Keira, because she had been in it after all. But of course, the two of them were separated by miles of ocean right now, more distant from each other than they had ever been in their lives, but after this dream, he felt somehow spiritually closer to her.

"When I found Keira," he went on wistfully, looking up into the starfields, "I was just so happy to see her again." He smiled pleasantly at the memory of their wonderful embrace. "But then it all sort of faded out on us. I tried to keep a hold of her and tell her where we all were so she could find us, but then I woke up. I wonder if it worked..."

Ashelin raised an eyebrow quizzically. "So... you actually tried to pass on a message to her in the dream?"

"Yeah," said Jak. "I know it sounds crazy, but in the heat of the moment I just really felt it might work. Tell her we're still alive, and maybe she could tell everyone back in the city."

Ashelin looked at him as if he had just said something utterly incomprehensible. "But Jak... dreams aren't real," she said carefully and gently. "You can't meet up with other people in them. There's no possible way that could work."
"I know that," said Jak almost instantly. "I'm just telling you what happened. Keira just seemed so realistic... and I just got a really strong feeling that... I can't describe it. You had to be there to see it."

An intermediate silence fell between them again, and Ashelin was not sure what to make of this very strange story. This was all starting to sound rather supernatural to her, totally implausible. However, she could detect the sincere emotion in Jak's words, she knew he would never just make up something like this — that wasn't like him — and a small part of herself even wished that it might just end up, somehow, bringing them home more quickly. Was there any harm in that?

"Well, OK Jak," she said acceptingly after a little while. "I don't know what happened to you, but to be realistic, I think we still stand a better chance of getting home with the boat."

Jak sighed. "Yeah, you're right. Got to focus on the real world. Still... it's made me think." He sighed again, and a forlorn look drifted into his eyes, which he cast out to sea. "I hope Keira's OK."

"You miss her, don't you?" said Ashelin sympathetically.

Jak nodded sadly, and then lowered his head. "I really wish I could see her again now."

Ashelin put an arm around him and pulled him closer in understanding comfort. "You will, Jak. We'll get back there. I know it."

This was the best she could probably manage to say; she felt uncertain saying anything too personal about Keira, because apart from their few, brief conversations, they barely knew each other. But Jak appreciated the close touch of support, and rested his head onto Ashelin’s shoulder.

They sat together for a little while longer, just watching the stars turn and taking in the feeling of each other's close company in the night.

"How've you and Olto got on with that Precursor thing at the hill, by the way?" she then asked. "You got any further with working out what it is yet?"

"No," said Jak, brightening a little at the change of topic. He had been pondering it unsuccessfully ever since they had started excavating it a few days ago, in between working on the new raft, and it was something he really wanted to try and solve and understand before leaving this island, and he had not given up yet.

"Shall we head over there?" suggested Ashelin. "I don't think I've had a proper look at it yet."

"Sure," said Jak. This was just what he needed to get his mind off of his sense of loss.

The two of them helped each other up, and together, they headed back towards the camp. They passed their new half-finished raft lying at the threshold of the trees, and crept quietly through the camp so as not to wake Torn or Olto, and then into the forest.
Jak and Ashelin walked together along the twilit forest path, heading for the hill at the island's centre where the hidden Precursor relic lay. Ashelin looked up at the tree canopies passing by overhead, and was immediately reminded of a few nights back, when she had gone for her special midnight swim in the bathing lake. Ironically, it was because of that little excursion, indirectly and purely by accident of course, that the island's hidden Precursor object had been discovered in the first place. She still had not told any of the others about that, however, keeping it to herself out of embarrassment. In fact, she had considered visiting the lake again tonight for another secret swim, until she became distracted by the stars out on the beach, and then Jak had turned up, telling her about the strange dream that he had experienced. It still puzzled them both, but they were not talking about it now, however. They had other things on their mind: an ancient mystery that needed unravelling.

Very soon, the two of them broke out of the shadows and stood in the clearing. Ashelin looked up at what had once been a tall, grass-covered hill, and her mouth dropped open at the sight of what had now become of it. An intact dome-shaped Precursor monument, perfectly matching the hill's original size and shape, now loomed over her. The green light of night gave it an eerie and ghostly colour, and it seemed to sparkle in the starlight, like a pristine jewel standing tall and proud at the island's heart. Its sides were clean and smooth save for the spherical decoration they had originally uncovered, and there were more around the sides, the only features on its otherwise blank façade. Only one layer of earth still crowned the very summit, keeping the berry bush rooted and alive.

"Wow," said Ashelin, taking a good look at it and stepping closer with Jak. "I never thought it would take up the entire hill!"

Jak nodded proudly. He and Olto had been working hard to uncover it over the previous days, working mainly in the mornings and evenings when it was not too hot, and he was pleased with the progress that had been made.

"Well, it actually never was a hill, really," he said. "This thing's been here all along. The grass just grew over it."

"It sure looks pretty," said Ashelin, standing within touching distance of its base. She placed her palm against its surface and moved her hand across it. "It's warm.

"Yeah, Precursor metal's like that," Jak explained knowledgeably. "It's like it contains some kind of resonant energy. With eco you can tap into it."

Ashelin withdrew her hand, and could feel a tingle lasting for about a second after. "So what do you
"Really not a lot," Jak admitted. "I can't remember ever finding something exactly like this before. Usually there's at least some kind of obvious switch or button somewhere that does something, or you need a bit of eco to get it running. Blue works best. If we had some here I could channel, that might get us somewhere."

"My gun's powered by eco," said Ashelin. "Should I go get it?"

Jak shook his head. "Wouldn't work. I'm not talking about small amounts like that. I'd need a lot more."

He walked a short distance around the dome, before coming to a stop by one of the spherical shapes that were embedded into its sides.

"But I think these have got to be for something," he said, leaning forward on one foot against the metal slope to get a closer look.

Ashelin joined him at his side, studying the protrusion. "Have you worked out what the words around it mean yet?"

"No, I can't understand them," said Jak. "Some of these letters I've never even seen before. It's a shame because they probably tell us exactly what we need to do with it."

Ashelin looked a little past him to the next one. There appeared to be four in total, one for each quarter of the dome. If a line could be drawn from each of them into the dome, they would probably meet exactly in the middle.

"Do you think they could be compass points?" she suggested, taking note of the even spacing between all four.

Jak considered this; it sounded like a sensible idea based on what he could see. "Possibly. But which is which?"

In order to work this out, he guessed he would have to stand on the very top and watch where the sun rose and set every day. That way, he could at least roughly estimate which way was east and west. Was this structure a giant navigational instrument then? Some kind of orientation platform? Could it even possibly direct them home somehow?

"What's at the top?" Ashelin then asked, looking to the summit and the crown of earth it still bore.

"Don't know," said Jak, looking up too. "It's the only part we haven't dug up yet."

He stopped thoughtfully. He and Olto had purposefully left the top layer of soil in place, for now at least, so as not to sacrifice the reliable source of food that the berry bush provided.

"But maybe there is something up there though. If there's a switch or anything, that's where I'd bet it'd be..."

"Shall we climb up and have little look then?" suggested Ashelin. "Can't be much harm in taking off just a little bit of the dirt. One corner maybe?"

"Sure," said Jak, impressed by Ashelin's intuition. "You're pretty good at this, Ashelin. If you weren't running the city, you'd make a good researcher."
Ashelin smiled humbly. As far as she was aware, she was just applying her common sense to what she could see and observe. "Well, I don't have the same knowledge about this as you do," she said, trying to be modest.

"But you're asking a lot of good questions," Jak said, smiling back. Surprising enough as it was, he was beginning to see a little bit of Keira in her, even though the two women were very different characters. "I guess we can take off a bit of the soil from the top then. Follow me up, but climb carefully. This thing's kind of slippery."

Of course, Ashelin did not need reminding about this, but Jak was right. While he could scramble up with relative ease in his bare feet — having spent most of his childhood climbing all over Precursor metal just like this — Ashelin was finding it difficult to get a sure grip, even in her worn but still rugged boots. It was like a slide from a child's playground. To help her, she placed one foot onto the nearest spherical protrusion as an initial foothold, allowing her to make a slight start on the ascent. But then her foot unexpectedly slipped off, and she sprawled across the metal with a pained groan.

"You OK?" Jak called down.

"Yeah, I'm not hurt," Ashelin called back, a little embarrassedly. She had no luck whatsoever when it came to climbing this thing, but at least this time there was no horrible wet mud to fall into. "But I might need some help getting up here."

Jak slid back down to lend a hand, but when he reached her, he noticed that the sphere she had used as a foothold seemed to have shifted a little.

"Hang on. Look at this."

He slid all the way down and took position in front of the sphere, observing it closely. In the dark, he could make out a shape that had become half-revealed on its surface, a kind of indentation. He placed both hands on it, and found that it had become slightly loose, and now turned stiffly in its socket.

"It moves!"

"Oh wow," said Ashelin, realising that she had been the accidental cause of yet another discovery. "I must have dislodged it with my foot when I slipped."

Jak used his strength to rotate the sphere further so that all of the indentation could be revealed. It was hard work; this sphere had clearly not been moved for a long time, or it was not meant to be turned manually. It shuddered with each push, and flakes of dry mud were shaken free from the edges and its inner workings as he turned it around. But soon, he had rotated it so that its inner half was now facing the outside, and it would budge no more. On its newly exposed face was a shape that looked curiously like a handprint.

"Wow," said Ashelin again.

"Now this looks like something!" said Jak excitedly.

Following his instinct, he pressed his hand cautiously into the print, and he felt the familiar warmth from the metal flow into him, vibrating his palm. Now he knew he was really onto something. When he pressed down harder, the sphere sank an inch lower into its socket, and the words around the rim sparked and flickered momentarily with blue light. Jak's eyes shone with a similar luminance of discovery, but then the sphere stopped moving, like it had hit something, and pushed back into its original position, and the lights went out again. Jak creased his eyebrows in thought.
"What's it doing?" asked Ashelin.

Jak tried again, and the same thing happened. "This has to be a way to activate it," he said. "But it's not working."

"Do you think the other ones might turn around too?" proposed Ashelin.

Jak's face hopefully brightened again. Ashelin had made yet another good idea. "Very probably," he said, feeling all the more admiration for her. "Let's check them."

They both set off around the hill in opposite directions to the other three spheres, and tried to rotate them around too. They each proved initially difficult to shift, just like the first, but by applying enough strength or a well-placed kick, they were able to eventually dislodge them from their stuck positions, and turned them all around. Ashelin had been right: all three of the others revealed a similar handprint shape too, and Ashelin and Jak met at the last, their hands quite raw after their efforts, to establish what it meant.

"I think we're nearly there," said Jak, feeling more excited by the minute. "Let's try pressing the handprints again."

They went around together and each lay their hands in place one by one, and again, the letterings lit up fleetingly at the touch, but nothing more. By experimenting further, they attempted pressing two at once, and this yielded a more promising result: the letterings stayed alight for a fraction longer, but still, they went out again and the spheres shunted back into place.

"I think I see how this works," Jak called to Ashelin from the other side of the dome. "I think all four need to be pressed at the same time."

"That means we all need to be here, then," said Ashelin. "You, me, Torn and Olto."

They regrouped at the front of the dome, sharing an excited smile.

"Shall we go get them?" asked Ashelin.

Jak looked back through the forest pathway, back towards the camp. "No, let's wait till morning."

"Oh, yeah," said Ashelin, understanding. "They probably won't like being woken up in the middle of the night just for this."

"Well, Olto might not mind," said Jak mischievously. "He's quite interested in this. But Torn..."

"Hmm, you're right, that'll only make him grumpy. Guess we've got a few hours to kill then."

Jak was consumed with feverish excitement, feeling ever closer to finding out what this dome really was, but he could wait a few more hours. Ashelin shared his anticipation, and was actually quite surprised by how much it was affecting her as well. She had never really cared much for Precursor history back in Haven, but it turned out that she had a natural fortune for it, and now that she had personally discovered something herself, she felt much more a part of it all. This was turning out to be a very interesting night.

To pass the remaining hours until dawn, they sat together on the dome’s summit, snacking on berries, chatting and watching the stars continue on their slow course through the sky, a sight that kept Ashelin serenely mesmerised. A gentle wind blew over the tree-tops, sending a pleasant chill to their vantage point on the dome. Soon, the stars began to fade out, and colour returned to the sky. It lightened from a deep nocturnal blue to a dim dawn red, passing through the magenta states in
"You know," said Ashelin philosophically just before sunrise, "We've been through a lot here, haven't we? When we get back home, I don't think I'm going to be the same person."

"Me too," said Jak, understanding what she meant. This had certainly been his most challenging adventure to date. Though he had lived through many more dangerous encounters in his past, he had almost always had help or support from his friends then, but this time, his friends were just as helpless as he was. But most of all, his closest companion who had been with him through every one of those past adventures was now gone, likely lost forever. He doubted he would ever fully get over Daxter's loss, and he already felt himself forming closer bonds with those who were still around him, especially Ashelin sitting beside him now.

It didn't feel long at all until the first sunbeams began to glow on the horizon, streaking golden paths across the cloudless sky, and glimmering upon the ocean.

"Hey, the sun's starting to come up," Jak said, nudging Ashelin in the arm.

They sat back to watch the natural spectacle unfold. For a few minutes, there were both stars and sunlight in the sky together, but as the brightness grew with the rising sun, the greater light obscured all others.

"This is amazing," said Ashelin in peaceful awe.

Jak smiled pleasantly, feeling such a familiar resurgence of happiness, amplified by having someone new to share it with. "Back home, in my old village," he said fondly, "Daxter, Keira and I used to get up extra early in the summer sometimes just to watch the sunrises. This is just how they used to be."

Ashelin took her eyes off the beautiful sight for a moment. "You miss it, huh? Bet it was nice."

Jak nodded. "It was. But this place... it reminds me a little of home. Still, I bet the sunrises from the top of the palace were a show, huh?"

"Uh, I never really paid it any attention, to be honest," said Ashelin, but she wished now that she had.

They sat there together for longer, as the sun climbed higher and life returned to the island, bathing it in light and warmth. Soon, all the stars had disappeared, and the day had arrived.

"Alright, what do you say we head back to camp now?" said Jak. "Torn and Olto will probably be up soon."

The two of them descended to ground level, enjoying the quick slide down the dome, and returned along the forest path, emerging at their campsite. While there, they prepared some breakfast, and it was not long before Torn and Olto were drawn out by the smell of cooked fish. Over the food, Jak told them both about the breakthrough they had made at the dome, and how it would require all of them to activate it.

"Ah, I thought those lumps couldn't be just for decoration," said Olto interestedly. "It's about time we knew what that thing was. I'm all for it."

Torn was less enthusiastic, preferring as always to focus work on the new raft, and he took more persuading. He still had his misgivings about this mysterious dome. "So you're sure about this, Jak?" he asked.
"It's gotta be," Jak said eagerly, "But it needs all four of us to do it."

"Yeah, but then what?" asked Torn sceptically. "Have you thought about what it might actually do once we activate it? We don't know what this thing is."

"We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?" said Jak, flashing a reckless, excitable grin. "That's all part of the discovery."

"And you're sure it's nothing dangerous?" Torn persisted warily.

"I'm pretty sure it'll be safe," said Jak. "But if anything goes wrong, I'll try and handle it. Trust me."

Torn was still not fully convinced or satisfied about this, but then he caught the goading look that Ashelin was giving him. She too had been just as cautious about this Precursor object as he was, especially when they had first discovered it, but her doubtfulness now seemed to have evaporated overnight. He knew he could trust her judgements, and she trusted Jak's, so he eventually relented.

"Alright, I'll come along," he said. Hopefully it would not take too long anyway, and then he could return to more important work afterwards.

A few minutes later, they all emerged at the foot of the dome, now gleaming in the early sunlight, and Jak wasted no time in organising them all.

"Alright, pick a sphere, everyone!"

He and Ashelin moved around to the other side of the hill, standing before the spheres on the far side. Olto needed no further encouragement, and stepped up next to the one on the front right, peering intently at the hand-shaped imprint in the metal.

"You're right, it does look like a hand," he said with intrigue and mild humour. "Why didn't we think of moving them before?"

The last one was for Torn, and he approached slowly, still questioning with himself if this was really a sensible thing to do. But he put his faith in Jak and his knowledge of such things, and prepared himself for the unknown.

Meanwhile, Jak was buzzing with the anticipation of imminent discovery, his hand hovering over the palm print. Now they would see if he was right. "Everyone ready?" he called.

"Ready!" answered everyone else, and they held their hands in position too.

"OK!" said Jak. "Three, two, one, now!"

As one, they each pressed their hands down into the imprints and pushed. The letterings around the rims all flashed into life again, and the spheres vibrated beneath their fingers with a deep hum and sank deeper into their sockets. Olto's eyes lit up like a child's, and even Torn momentarily forgot his worries as he succumbed to fascination.

But then suddenly, from somewhere there was a muffled thud, which seemed to halt everything. The vibrations stopped, the hum ceased, the letters extinguished again, and the spheres juddered back into their original positions. Jak's excitement and sense of promise was dealt a heavy punch to the stomach.

"What happened?" asked Olto from the other side of the hill.
"Is that it?" asked Torn, withdrawing his hand uncertainly.

"Jak?" said Ashelin, looking sideways to him.

"Hang on." Jak was quickly thinking. Why was this not working? Was there something else they needed to do?

"Did you all press down firmly?" he checked.

"Yes," answered everyone.

"And did the letters all light up around the edges?"

"Yes."

Jak grumbled with frustration. Something must be missing here, but then it struck him: eco. Thinking back to all the Precursor objects and machinery he had ever activated in the past, he had always been channelling eco, and this dome must surely require some too. But they had none here, not the vast enough quantities he thought would probably be necessary, and even if they did, the others were not adept eco channelers like he was. Would this dome remain forever dormant to them?

"Jak? Should we try again?" suggested Ashelin.

"Alright," he said, though with his new realisation in mind, he was sadly not expecting anything better this time. But who knows, they might just get lucky. It was worth another shot.

"Let's try it again. Ready everyone? Three, two, one, go!"

Everyone again placed their hands into the metal, and the hum started up once more. But this time, promisingly, it lasted several seconds more, building in intensity, and the letterings stayed illuminated too, a little brighter, before it all cut out again with another muffled thud.

"Did you see that?" said Olto positively. "I think it's just warming up."

A small smile returned to Jak's face, and as his hopes regained strength, it grew broader. Maybe they did not need eco after all. "This might be working!"

"Once more?" asked Ashelin, smiling back at him fruitfully.

"Once more!" replied Jak with a confident nod. "Three, two, one, go!"

Their hands pushed down on the metal and the hum returned, and this time it was strong and loud, and the letters bright and clear. They kept up the pressure until the spheres sank down to the wrist and slotted firmly into place. The vibrations intensified through their fingers and into their whole bodies, like a mild electric shock, but warm and pleasant. Now the sound was building in volume and pitch, as if with a growing power.

"Jak?" shouted Torn with apprehension. "It feels like this thing's going to explode!"

Olto and Ashelin shared Torn's concern, and all three of them began to back away, but Jak was laughing loudly. "It's working!" he shouted out, instinctively knowing that nothing bad was going to happen now.

Then there was a deep, mechanical whirring noise from above, and everyone looked to the summit of the dome where the last layer of earth and grass remained. It began to shake, and clods of dirt fell loose and rolled past them down the sloped metal. Then the whole crown of earth split in two and
diverged, a powerful white light shone forth through the opening, and the berry bush and the rest of
the soil and grass fell away through the middle.

"Wow!" said Olto, but over the noise the dome was making, he could barely be heard.

Everyone shielded their eyes against the light, feeling the vibrations in the earth around them. And
then everything stopped. There was silence in the clearing save for a gentle reverberation in the air
around them, a mild electric energy, and the bright light at the summit shone twinkled in the morning
sun.

The dome had opened.
Espionage

Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

Immediately after the battle, Ashelin and Torn did what needed to be done and tried to assess if their tracking plan had been successful. To do this, Torn got in contact with Vin, but because many of the main computers in Freedom Headquarters had been damaged when it came under fire, he had to visit the power room personally.

However, there Vin proudly revealed what he had detected with the long-range scanners. It took a while to travel the distance, but a single matching signal from a tracker had made it back. It was weak, and had only lasted for about half a minute, but that was all Vin needed. Within a day, he had thoroughly analysed the data, followed its trace, and produced a set of co-ordinates for where it had ended up.

The trackers had worked! They now had a location, a location that could possibly be their enemy's homeland, or at least somewhere that would lead them closer to it. Torn passed on the positive news to Ashelin, who in turn later informed Jak. The enemy had fallen for the ploy, but Ashelin suspected, judging by the very short window of time the signal had been transmitting, that they had discovered the tracker very soon after teleporting away from the battle, and likely had it destroyed. Did they realise the purpose of it? And if they did, how would they react?

The victory was tainted with this uncertainty. Ashelin's instincts were flaring up again, and she somehow felt that this success would not come without a cost. They had these coordinates, but now what? They led somewhere far, far away over the north-western mountains and the ocean beyond, further than anybody in Haven's recorded history had ever travelled before. Getting there would require extensive preparation and leave the city vulnerable for at least a day. Ashelin was already feeling misgivings. Was it even feasible to try and travel there? And if they did, then what? Would they be forced to fight once more?

These results had opened up new questions and possibilities, ones which Ashelin struggled to make a decision on. She still hoped for a peaceful solution, a solution that would waste no further lives on both sides, but public opinion was against her; many of the other powerful city officials and pretty much all of the citizenry wanted to return all the death and damage that had been dealt upon them with reciprocal ferocity. To them, the only solution was to completely wipe out those who were a threat to their survival, and only then would peace be possible.

At the end of the day, Ashelin knew she had to do what was best for the city, even if it was against her own personal ambitions and morals, and the pressure was mounting as their zero hour drew nearer. Soon she would have to make a very difficult choice, and while the city worked towards its retaliatory objectives, she wished that something would come forth and offer her an alternative.

Several days later, Haven was fully recovered from the last attack, the damage to Freedom HQ had been repaired, and the fleet under construction at the drill platform was growing stronger by the day. However, the enemy had once more fallen silent; they had not returned for another attack since the last, bringing Haven another indefinite and uncertain respite.
One morning, Daxter, Tess and Jak were all in the pub again. Today was a quiet day, the Wastelanders had all recently returned to Spargus to bring back more supplies, and there were only a few regulars here at the moment. Daxter was chilling on the table top of the main bar counter, while Tess watched over the customers like usual. She noticed how they had all become gradually more settled as the days went by, and even among them there was a feeling that the war was almost at its end. It was the main topic of discussion on everyone's lips during their visits, and mood was generally relaxed and optimistic.

But Jak was bored and quiet, sitting on his stool with a drink in his hand. He had spent most of his granted days off here, with little else to do while he waited for the next objective from Ashelin. He disliked these periods of inactivity, and was restless to get on with the next stage in the plan, whenever that would end up happening.

Sometimes, to alleviate the boredom, he engaged in conversation with some of the other bar patrons, who were very pleased to get the chance to speak with the famous hero. He learned of how they had all held out through the constant battles, how one person's house had nearly been crushed by a falling jet, but most of all, how they all longed for the war to be over. Friends and family had died, and these people wanted those who had been responsible for it to pay, and looked to Jak as a representative of the Freedom League for their salvation. This made him feel new pressure, as he realised just how much hope he inspired in these people, and though confident in his abilities like always, it still daunted him somewhat to know how many counted on him.

"You feeling alright, Jak?" Tess asked him, noticing his quiet contemplation.

"Yeah," Jak answered automatically and without concern. "Just thinking about what'll happen next."

Tess understood. She was well aware of the significance of what had been achieved in that last battle. After all, she had heard it from Daxter many times already in his stories that he told to keep the customers entertained, but he did have a tendency to confabulate, and Jak often had to clear up the exaggerations for her.

She looked at the other ottsel now, who stretched out beside her with a big yawn, as if he were sunbathing on some tropical beach. She smiled to see him looking so relaxed. Normally the little guy was full of energy and excitement, especially since the pub reopened, but it seemed that this relatively quiet day had brought out his lazy side. At least he was easier to manage like this.

Then, a movement in the corner of her vision drew her attention, and she turned to see that a new customer had just taken a seat at the bar, one chair away from Jak.

"Oh, hi there!" she said, cheerfully and welcomingly. "Can we get you a drink?"

The man just shook his head and lifted a hand just a little. "Not just now, thanks," he mumbled without looking up. He sounded rather crestfallen and weary.

Jak's eyes flicked sideways to glance at the newcomer, and the first thing that he and Tess both noticed was his rather odd choice of apparel: he wore a coat that looked too large for him, a hat that was drawn down low, and beneath that, strange-looking dark goggles that completely obscured his eyes. He made quite a distinctive impression, nothing like anyone else who had come in today, but Jak dismissed it as probably unimportant. After all, fashion trends could be confusing, and he himself possessed a rather unique set of goggles too. Who was he to judge?

He returned his attention to his drink, and to Daxter who still lay daydreaming in front of him, not even bothering to open one eye.
Tess, however, politely persisted with the stranger. "Well, anything else we can do for you?"

The man shook his head again, this time letting out a deep sigh. "Oh... I don't know..."

Tess sensed that something was wrong. "You OK?"

He sighed again. "I guess... it's just this whole war. Kind of takes its toll on you after so long..."

Tess could see what he meant. He did look rather rough and worn out, and there was a stench of staleness coming off him that her sensitive nose could easily detect, like he had not washed for a few days. The war really must have hit him hard, and she guessed that maybe his home had been destroyed and he'd been living on the streets.

"No kidding," said Jak, who was also starting to feel the same way. Maybe this was someone he could relate to, instead of finding yet more pressure from.

"Do you think we really have a chance?" the newcomer asked drearily, still keeping his head low.

"We're doing our best," Tess answered sympathetically. "That's all we can do."

This did not seem to console him much. Tess analysed his body language, and could tell that this guy must be feeling very strained indeed. There was a loneliness and reticence about him also, which only made him seem even more pitiable. This was hardly something unfamiliar; she'd spoken with a number of people just like him who had turned up here at their lowest points.

"I don't think I've ever seen you here before," she then said, trying to stir up a friendly conversation to make him feel more comfortable and at ease, but there was genuine curiosity there too. She had a good memory for faces, and she would surely remember such a recognisable individual if he had ever previously visited.

"Uh... no," he replied simply. "I don't really go out much. This is the first time I've come here."

Daxter, who had lain silent and relaxed since the start of this limping, uneventful conversation, suddenly perked up at these words. "A new customer?"

Then all of a sudden, he sprang up onto his feet, reinvigorated with his usual energy, and making everybody jump slightly. "Well then, welcome to the Naughty Ottsel, my good sir! The best bar in town!" he proclaimed with great showmanship. "I'm Daxter, but you can call me Orange Lightning! I own this place, and it's your lucky day, because every customer's first ever drink here is on the house! Let me get you one!"

Before anyone could stop him or tell him that no drink was desired, Daxter had dived behind the counter, and re-emerged a few seconds later with a brimming mug balanced precariously on his shoulders. Jak was wise to reach out for it before any major spillage occurred, and he placed it casually on the table top between himself and the newcomer, who now felt obligated to accept.

"Oh... thank you," he said timidly, pulling the glass closer to himself. But he did not start drinking right away. He still looked troubled and unable to settle down into his current situation, something that Tess did not fail to pick up on. She thought she even caught a trickle of sweat running down his face.

Daxter, however, evidently noticed nothing. "Enjoy, my friend!" he said cheerfully, but then an impulsive thought suddenly struck him. "Ooh! Hey, if this is your first visit, you can't have heard any of my great stories yet!"
"Uh... no," replied the newcomer, now looking at Daxter bewilderedly.

Daxter broke into his signature, broad, toothy grin as he sensed another opportunity to recount his and Jak's epic adventures. Both Jak and Tess knew what was coming, and Jak rolled his eyes.

"Let me tell you all about the last battle!" Daxter announced, louder than he needed to so that most of the other customers took notice as well. "It's a tale of action, daring, and heroics, and best of all, it includes yours truly!"

"Whoa, hold up, Dax," Jak said, pulling on the brakes. "We don't need to hear it again."

Truth be told, as engaging as Daxter's stories were, he was getting a little tired of hearing them by now, and he wasn't really in the mood for yet another rendition at this particular moment.

"Oh come on, Jak!" Daxter complained. "Everyone loves my stories!"

"Actually, I'd... I'd quite like to hear that," said the man with the goggles, sounding and looking much more interested all of a sudden.

"Yes! Story!" called out another customer who had overheard, and his approval was echoed by the others.

Daxter looked smugly and victoriously at Jak. "You see?"

Jak and Tess met each other's eyes, and Tess shrugged as if to say, 'nice try, but let's just let him get on with it and have his fun'. Jak reluctantly relented, and tried to shut himself off as Daxter turned to face the open room and the small audience that was now paying attention.

He began his tale right there on the bar counter, peppered with his usual theatrics and animation as he led his listeners through a blow-by-blow account of the last battle. As usual, he chose to focus on the action rather than the strategy and thinking behind it, but soon everyone was hooked, especially the new guy sitting close by. Tess kept an eye on him throughout, and noticed how he listened with detached curiosity, almost as if he were taking mental notes she thought, but it was hard to tell where he was looking through those dark goggles he wore. She wondered what they were really for, and why he didn't take them off now he was indoors. It really did seem rather odd, and it roused her suspicions. Was he trying to hide something?

"We can take 'em on!" Daxter exclaimed once his story had reached its dramatic conclusion. "And once this war's over, we're gonna hold an all-night celebration here, and you're all invited! There'll be music, drinks, dancing..."

With every item he listed, more appreciative cheers rose up, getting louder and more vigorous. Only Tess, Jak, and the guy sitting with them did not join in.

"No one, and I mean NO ONE, is going to stop us from partying!" Daxter finished triumphantly. "Another round of drinks on me!"

The greatest cheer yet erupted from the small gathering. Daxter took a big bow, basking in the admiration from his customers, and then he and Tess set about filling and handing out the promised glasses. The bar briefly became quite crowded, but after the other customers had dispersed with their fresh drinks, the room slowly settled back down to its casual murmur of conversations. The man with the goggles remained in his seat, but Daxter's story appeared to have brightened him up a little.

"Wow," he said to Jak, somewhat awe-struck. "That was quite a tale. Did you two really do all that?"
"Mostly," Jak admitted flatly, no longer caring to smooth out the embellishments.

As Tess began to clear away some of used glasses left on the table top, Daxter reclined in his place in front of Jak again, looking very content with himself as he closed his eyes and stretched out fully. "Ah! Yep, won't be long now, huh Jak? Soon we'll smash those baddies and then we can party hard!"

Jak just nodded silently and took another sip of his drink. Nobody spoke for a few seconds.

"So... you think we're winning then?" asked the guy beside Jak hopefully.

"Yep, we got this war in the bag!" said Daxter confidently, before anyone else had the chance to say anything.

"How so?" asked the man.

"The enemy aren't packing the same punch they used to," Jak clarified carefully. "We've been hitting them back for so long, they must be losing strength by now."

The man's posture straightened with understanding and renewed optimism, and then he broke into a smile, one which Tess thought looked rather over-exaggerated. "Oh... well, that's great then, isn't it!"

His head flicked in her direction briefly and Tess smiled back, still acting friendly and polite, but her outward expression disguised her developing thoughts. An old instinct she had honed through her work in the Underground was tugging at her conscience insistently, telling her that something here was not as it seemed...

"Can't wait for this all to be finally over," he continued, now seeming much more talkative than before, "And it sounds like you two are the guys to get it done, huh?"

"You bet we are!" Daxter said immediately from his relaxed position. "That's why they call us the demolition duo! Jak and I have saved this city before, and we can sure do it again!"

"Wow. You're both real heroes!" said the man appreciatively.

"Well, we don't do all the work," Jak added more modestly, aiming to alleviate some of the pressure on himself. "The whole Freedom League's doing its best to get us through this."

"The Freedom League... ah, yes..." said the man thoughtfully, and he looked as though he was remembering something. "So... you're a part of that then?"

"Not officially," Jak answered bluntly, "But we do a lot of the legwork."

"Oh right. Cool."

There was another lag in the conversation and the guy looked like he was waiting for someone else to say something. But by now, Daxter was drifting off into his fantasies again, Jak no longer felt like talking, and Tess was still clearing away the last of the empty glasses from the table top. But she had been listening carefully throughout, still trying to place the suspicions that she felt.

Then the guy moved up, taking the empty seat between himself and Jak. They were right next to each other now, and Tess saw how Jak's arms tensed up, clearly uncomfortable with the uninvited closeness. She paid full attention now.

"So... what's next for us then?" the man inquired, dropping his voice a little but still sounding
curious. "You two got a big plan or something to knock out those attackers forever?"

Jak pouted slightly, now feeling a little harassed by this guy's continued questioning and unnecessary breach of his personal space. He was starting to get a little too inquisitive for his liking.

"Don't worry," Tess broke in, trying to put an end to this sensitive line of enquiry, and also saving Jak from having to answer. "We'll get them alright, and that's all that matters."

Jak was silently thankful for Tess's circumvention. "Yeah. We're getting there," he added stiffly, barely hiding his annoyance. "Um... can you not sit so close please?"

"Oh, sure. Sorry pal," said the guy, and he shuffled away a little, but remained in arm's reach. As he moved, his coat swung open slightly, and Tess thought she caught a glimpse of something within, something green and glowing. Whatever it was though, it happened too quickly to identify, but Tess suddenly sensed danger.

When he looked at her briefly again, she fixed a smile again quickly, pretending she hadn't noticed it.

"So... you must have personally met the leader of the city too?" the man asked further, not letting up on his questions. But this one caused Jak to raise an eyebrow. He would have thought the answer to this was obvious to everybody.

"Yeah..." he answered slowly, not sure where this was going. "Why?"

"Oh, well, I bet he's really glad to have you fighting for us!"

Jak creased his brow in mild confusion, and then finally looked back at his strange tablemate. "Are you talking about Ashelin or Torn?" he asked. "Ashelin's the governor."

The man's expression faltered for just a second, but then he reclaimed it. "Oh, yeah, right, of course," he said quickly, smiling nervously. "Sorry, I got them mixed up. Like I said, I don't really get out much..."

Tess caught another bead of sweat roll down his face. This really vindicated her suspicions now; that was indeed a most uncharacteristic mistake, one that no citizen of Haven ought to make, even for someone who 'didn't get out much'. She and Jak shared a wary glance again, and in that moment, both could tell that they felt the same way. Something about this guy seemed very... off; turning up out of the blue for the first time, the strange goggles, the persistent questions, and he still hadn't touched a drop of his drink. They both came to the same conclusion, but they had to be absolutely sure, so they started to conceive an instinctive, silent plan.

"So where do you live, anyway?" Tess asked in a perfectly innocent manner.

This question seemed to catch the man a little off guard, but he answered quickly. "Oh... it's not far away."

"Whereabouts?" Jak persisted, not satisfied with such a vague answer. He wrapped his fingers gently around his drink.

"Oh... it's back in the really dingy neighbourhood," said the guy, waving his arm vaguely to the right. "You know... those slums. Quite close to the walls, actually... and those ruins right outside."

This was a plausible and believable answer at least, but Tess was not done yet. "Oh, I know where you mean," she said with a convincing tone of false understanding. "That's Dead Town, the part of the city that fell when Mar invaded."
"Yeah, that's it," said the man, mirroring Tess's confirmatory behaviour. "I know it's not very pretty, but —"

WHAM!

Out of nowhere, Jak hit him full in the face with his glass, and drink splashed everywhere. The man never saw it coming, and he toppled violently backwards off his seat and onto the floor with a loud clatter. The chatter in the room was immediately silenced as everyone turned around to see what had just happened, and Daxter sat bolt upright on the table top.

"Jak! Are you crazy?" he shrieked. "You just attacked one of my customers!"

But Jak was on his feet in an instant, and Tess was paying full attention with a hard look on her face, her ears erect. "He's no customer, Dax," said Jak seriously. "He's an enemy spy!"

Daxter struggled to process how this could be, but in that time, the man was back on his feet, blood dripping from his nose, and his next actions confirmed Jak's accusation. He reached into his coat and pulled out the glowing object Tess had glimpsed earlier, which looked very much like a weapon. But at once, Jak leapt forwards and grabbed hold of his arms to wrestle it from his grip. It went off by accident, shattering the mirror behind the bar with a laser-like projectile, and Tess and Daxter dived for cover under the counter just in time.

A few customers screamed and ran from the building, others hid under the tables, while the rest sat glued to their seats in shock at what was happening. A few more stray shots went off into the ceiling as they struggled against each other, until Jak twisted his opponent's wrist and the weapon fell at their feet. Jak kicked it away, swung the spy around with a burst of strength, and then landed a hard elbow strike to the side of his head. The spy's hat came off, revealing a pale, bald scalp. Jak struck again, but this time the spy ducked, rammed his shoulder into Jak's midriff and charged against him until his back hit the next wall. More customers scattered from the chaos as it spread throughout the room. Jak was winded, but he fought back and kicked against his attacker, sending him staggering away.

"Look out, Jak!" Tess screamed from behind the bar, for the spy had suddenly swept up a discarded glass and hurled it right at him. Jak ducked quickly as it smashed above his head, raining down droplets of drink and sharp shards. In this momentary distraction, the spy made a move for his dropped weapon again, but he was cut off by a loud yell.

"Yaaaaaa!"

Daxter had overcome his shock, pulled himself together and leapt bravely into the fray, landing on top of the spy and digging his claws into his exposed head. The spy screamed in pain and tried to pull Daxter off him, but the ottsel clung on valiantly, buying Jak more time to recover. Then the spy's hand found a firm grip on Daxter and yanked him away hard, but Daxter had caught hold of his goggles, and as he was tossed away across the room and over a table, they came off with him.

"Agh!"

By now, Jak was back on his feet and ready to continue the fight, but his opponent now seemed disorientated. With his goggles gone, his eyes were only half-open and he was partially shielding them with one of his arms, acting like he had just been blinded. Jak briefly wondered if Daxter had clawed him in the eyes, but then he seized his chance, realising that his opponent was vulnerable.

He ran forwards to attack again, but the spy heard him coming and turned to face him. He was squinting, his bloodied face contorted in frustration and discomfort, and he did his best to continue
defending himself by lashing out wildly and unpredictably. It was all too easy for Jak to avoid the
desperate strikes and take him down. He caught his right arm and delivered a punch to his gut, an
uppercut to his jaw, and then kicked his legs out from under him.

The spy went down hard and fast and his face hit the floor. He scrambled blindly around for
anything he could get his hands on, but then Jak's heavy boot pressed between his shoulder blades,
holding him down.

"Jak! Here!" called Tess, and she threw him a small handgun which she had produced from under
the bar. Jak caught it and aimed it squarely at the back of the spy's head.

"Don't move!" he ordered, "Or you're dead!"

The spy knew he was defeated. It was pointless to try and run or continue fighting now, and he just
lay there with his eyes closed, face against the floor, breathing hard, and feeling the humiliation of his
failure. Blood was pooling under his nose.

By now, the last of the remaining customers had all fled the building, and there was silence in the
room once again. Daxter re-emerged from behind the table he had been flung over, still clutching
onto the spy's goggles.

"What do we do with him now?" asked Tess, eyeing the spy from the bar counter with a mean look.

Without taking his eyes off his fallen foe, Jak pulled out his communicator and contacted Torn, still
breathing heavily from the fight. "Torn! We've got an enemy spy over at the Naughty Ottsel!"

"What? A spy?" came Torn's stunned voice after a second or two. "What the... how the hell did he
get into the city, Jak?"

"I don't know," Jak answered, "But don't worry, I've got him apprehended."

There were a few more seconds of silence on the radio before Torn spoke again. "OK Jak, I'm
heading to you right now. Keep him there."

There was a click as the radio switched off, and Jak let it hang loosely in his hand. "Torn's on his
way," he said to the two ottsels, keeping the gun trained on the spy's head and looking down on him
in disdain.

"Jeez," said Daxter, scuttling over. "He's a spy? And to think I gave him a free drink!"

"Good trick, Tess," Jak said with basic compliment, but not taking his eyes off the spy.

Tess smiled modestly. "Well, you're the one who brought him down though."

Daxter now understood how this spy had been unmasked. Tess and Jak had led him unwittingly
right into their clever trap; all true citizens of Haven knew that Dead Town had fallen to the Metal
Heads, still within living memory, not to Mar, who was the legendary founder of Haven City, and
not someone who had ever tried to invade at all.

"This guy clearly didn't know the city's history well enough, did you, pal?" Jak growled at his fallen
opponent.

Daxter had now moved to stand a few feet from the spy's head, and performed a rude and taunting
dance in front of him. "Ha! That'll make you think twice about taking on us! Not so tough without
these, are ya?"
He dangled the spy's goggles annoyingly in front of his face, which only made the spy feel even more insulted, but he said nothing.

"Where'd his weapon go?" asked Tess.

"Dax, go look for it," ordered Jak, and Daxter reluctantly broke off his teasing to search the place. He found it under a chair not far away. It appeared to be a small handgun with a glowing green energy cartridge that housed some sort of tiny crystal, a bizarrely intricate device.

Only a few minutes later, Torn came marching in through the front door, looking primed and purposeful, and accompanied by a small team of soldiers. He surveyed the minor mess that had resulted from the fight, and then found the figure lying beneath Jak's feet. He needed no explanation to know that this was the enemy spy. He made a silent hand gesture, and two of his men then lifted up the defeated man under his arms and dragged him effortlessly out of the building without struggle, to a waiting transport cruiser outside.

Jak watched him disappear in disgrace through the front door, and finally relaxed the aim on his weapon. When the soldiers were out of the room, Torn came in closer to talk, looking deadly serious. "Tell me everything that happened here," he ordered bluntly.

Jak and Tess together gave a thorough account of the spy's behaviour and questioning, right up to how they had sussed him out and taken him down. Daxter punctuated the story with brief interjections, emphasising his own actions in the fight.

"How much does he already know?" Torn asked.

"Not much I think," Tess explained. "He listened to one of Daxter's stories and was asking about Freedom plans, but we didn't reveal anything."

"Alright, good," said Torn, feeling a little more relaxed. "But this is still serious. Ashelin thought the enemy were going to try something new, and I guess this was it, somehow managing to smuggle in this spy. She'll need to know about this, and I'll tell her next. It's a damn good job you stopped him when you did. Who knows what he might have done otherwise."

Torn stopped himself with a smirk, one so rare that Daxter thought it might crack his face. "Well, if it's Freedom HQ he's after, he'll definitely get to see the inside of it now, but he won't be able to carry out whatever trouble he was planning. That's for sure."

"What are you going to do with him?" Jak asked.

"We'll search him and interrogate him, find out how much he really knows already, and just how the hell he got into the city. Then we'll see what we can learn from him about the enemy. We could use him to our advantage."

"He had this weapon on him too," Tess said, handing it carefully over to Torn.

"And don't forget about these!" added Daxter, providing the spy's goggles.

Torn took both items, examining them only briefly, and then his eyes swept across all three of them in turn. "Good work," he said earnestly. "All of you. Jak, you're an irreplaceable asset to the city."

Jak shrugged off the gratitude and slumped back into his seat as if it was nothing at all, just another day's work.

"Tess, I can see I was right to entrust you to intelligence in the Underground; you haven't lost your
touch."

Tess gave a single nod and an appreciative smile. "Thanks, Torn."

"And Daxter..." Torn paused in thought, and the otsel waited eagerly in anticipation. "... just keep this place open, it's really helping the people."

Little though this was, it was some of the rare praise that Daxter had ever received from the tattooed commander, and it made him beam with pride to be recognised. First Ashelin, now Torn. He would certainly be mentioning this in his next stories!

Jak quietly processed the recent events. It had certainly got his blood pumping, and he felt ready for action once again. This war had just got a lot more interesting.
Interrogation

Chapter by ObliqueStrategies

Chapter Notes

Author's note: this is the bonus chapter I decided to include along with my October 2019 revisions. Felt it was important and necessary to include, and it also holds relevance to the future stories. Enjoy.

The long corridor stretched out ahead like a tunnel. Ashelin was deep inside Freedom HQ, marching purposefully along with Torn by her side and two trusted Freedom soldiers following close behind. Their heavy tread echoed down the long walls, and door after reinforced door passed them by on both sides. Ashelin counted the numbers on each one. They were simple barracks bunks, built to accommodate soldiers or shift workers here in HQ, but when necessary, they also made effective holding cells. Behind one of these doors she knew a very critical prisoner was being held, a prisoner who had only just been caught, and Torn was taking her to see him now.

Less than an hour ago, she had received the alarming news that an enemy spy had somehow infiltrated the city, but had been discovered and apprehended in The Naughty Ottsel by none other than Jak. It had shocked her at first, just as it had Torn, and provoked many imperative questions. Who was he? How did he get into the city? How long had he been here already? What was his mission? Was he the only one, or were there even more spies still undiscovered within their walls?

But once the initial shock had passed, Ashelin quickly realised that this was the opportunity she had been hoping for ever since the beginning: a chance to forge a much-needed bridge of communication between the two sides in this conflict; to finally speak with a representative of their enemy, face to face, so they may at last try to understand one another; and more so, to bring the long months of fighting to an end peacefully, or at the very least arrange an official ceasefire. This was the chance for negotiation, and she would be sure to quickly seize it, dropping everything else that she was doing to devote her full attention to this.

"Has anyone spoken to him already?" she asked Torn, trying to gain as much last-minute information as possible before this clandestine meeting.

"No," answered Torn. "I thought you'd like to be the first to try."

Ashelin nodded in approval of Torn’s judgement, for she did indeed desire to personally conduct the first interrogation at least. That was vital, and she had spent the last several minutes preparing herself for it. But she had no true foreknowledge of exactly what to expect from their prisoner, only the assumptions and impressions fed by the months of hard conflict. She wondered what he would be like, what cunning objective he had been sent to achieve. Perhaps sabotaging their defences, or obtaining sensitive information, or even assassinating important figures... maybe even herself. Torn had briefed her already, passing on what he had learned from Jak when he came to carry him away, but that too was little and uninformative, and answered none of the biting questions that she or anyone else had. Anything more to learn would have to come from this spy himself.

"The council probably won't like us doing this though," Torn then said warningly, but there was a tint of proud defiance in his voice too, just like in his Underground days.
"Yeah, I bet they won't," said Ashelin brusquely. "But that's their problem."

It was true, she was running a risk here, acting independently before the council could meet and decide what to do about this situation. In fact, they hadn't even been informed yet about this spy's capture, but they would find out, and soon enough. Word of his infiltration and the fight in the bar was already spreading alarmingly quickly among the general citizenry, and that Ashelin could not control; the few who had been there to witness it told their friends, and their friends told their friends, and soon it would only be a matter of time before the news made its way to the top. This might be the only moment she had to act on her ambitions.

But her decision to not inform the councillors was deliberate. Many of them did not see eye to eye with her desire for a peaceful solution to the fighting; they still did not believe that such a thing was even possible against such a driven, destructive enemy, and this was something which they did not fail to remind her of at every available meeting or opportunity, and it was starting to grow very wearisome.

Ashelin could understand their point of view of course, for long generations of persistent conflict against the Metal Heads had turned the people of Haven into bitter survivors, suspicious of everything that originated outside their walls, and expecting only danger and death from the other side. If they were still fighting the Metal Heads now, she would agree with them and pursue the forceful path, but these new enemies were not Metal Heads; they were other people, other humans who could think and reason just as they could. It had to be possible to get through to them, and though it might be difficult, now this door presented itself to her half-open, with a tantalising glimpse of sanity, reason and escape on the other side.

This was why she wanted to conduct the first meeting herself. The city councillors would most surely only make matters worse with their belligerence and impatience if they got involved, exploiting this spy for every scrap of information he had, before disposing of him dishonourably once he was of no more use. That was the kind of mistreatment that had marked her father's regime, and she had sworn to herself at her instatement that things would be better under her leadership. Even now she was still working to erase the scars that the Baron had left.

She had a different plan, but it would require tact and very carefully chosen words. Her intention was to show this spy the good and decency of Haven, achieved by treating him with respect, dignity and clemency. In turn, she hoped, this would give him no further cause to hate them, and hopefully lead to securing his trust and cooperation without forcing anything out of him. Of course, she knew that it would be neither quick nor easy, and expected great resistance from him, at least at first. It might not even lead to anything, but her moral fibre was too strong. It was worth the shot, and it could be their only chance. One of the soldiers who walked behind her was even carrying a tray of food that she was going to offer him as a show of kindness. First, gain his trust, then he would be more likely to talk.

She walked the last few paces in silence, rehearsing her well-thought out words in her mind. She had nervous butterflies in her stomach, caused both by the significance of this imminent meeting and the secrecy of it all. But compared to the stresses of the past several months of war, they felt little more than an insignificant tickle.

Torn finally stopped before one of the many identical doors. "This is where we've put him," he explained. "Are you ready, Ash?"

Ashelin's heart had now doubled its pace, and the butterflies broke free. The moment had come. Time to be ready. No turning back now. She took a deep breath to compose herself, arranged her thoughts one last time, and then stood up straight to her full height, making herself look as confident
and as in command as she could in the face of her anxious feelings.

"Open it," she said with a short nod.

Torn typed in the access code, pushed the door gently, and then cautiously peered into the room. Ashelin noticed how his hand touched the weapon on his belt, and she brushed her fingers against her own too. She knew the prisoner had been searched and was unarmed, and he was unlikely to try and attack them now, so hopefully she would not need to use it. But it was a comfort to know that it was there, just in case, and for self-defence only, she reminded herself.

Then Torn gestured that it was safe to enter, and held the door open for her. The two soldiers waited in the corridor while she boldly stepped through, into the small and simple room, senses high and reflexes primed. Her eyes found the prisoner at once. He lay on the bed by the wall, a crumpled figure stirring feebly and moaning painfully, but reacting to the sounds of her entry. This was him.

As she moved into the middle of the room, stepping over a large coat that lay discarded on the floor, she caught a slightly unpleasant smell in the air, like body odour. She stopped a respectable distance from the bed, and the figure in it sat up with effort, his arms shielding his barely-open eyes. He seemed very weakened, lethargic and confused, moving slowly, and Ashelin could tell that it was not because he had just been asleep or anything like that. No, he was in severe pain, and it caught her momentarily off guard, puzzled.

"What's the matter with him?" she whispered to Torn, who stood by the door.

"Don't know," Torn whispered back. "He's been like this since we picked him up."

Ashelin looked back upon the pitiful, cringing being, who almost didn't look human like this. Suddenly she hoped that Jak or the arresting soldiers had not been too rough on him. That wouldn't help in securing his trust at all. Had her plan already failed before it had even begun?

But one thing was certain, he was in no condition to pose any threat right now; he wasn't even looking in her direction, continuing to keep his eyes shut and covered by his arms, but he seemed to be trying to find his bearings. She allowed herself to relax a little at the minimal threat, and remembering her intentions, decided that she had better start speaking to him and make her presence known.

"So you're the spy, huh?"

She tried to sound authoritative but non-adversarial, and she believed she had succeeded. The spy's head turned in her direction, he made a little noise, but nothing she could understand, and then tried to open his eyes to get a look at her. But the moment he did, he let out a pained cry.

Ashelin's face did not waver, but the spy's clear discomfort was making her feel increasingly guilty and uneasy with herself, not wishing him to suffer unnecessarily. She looked at Torn again in urgent confusion, but he shrugged cluelessly. But then, Ashelin deduced the problem: it was the light. For some reason, this spy was responding painfully to the light in the room, even though the bulbs were no brighter than normal. Regardless, with her eyes on Torn, she jerked a thumb up at the light in the ceiling and then swept a hand across her neck. Torn understood and hit the switch on the other side of the wall. Partial darkness fell in the room, leaving just the light from the corridor breaking in.

This seemed to have an immediate effect. The spy stopped his cowering and finally lowered his arms, and Ashelin got her first proper look at him in the half-light. He was thin and completely bald, without even eyebrows, and his head and face bore scratches and bruises, no doubt injuries he had suffered in the fight with Jak. The clothes he wore seemed to not be his own, for she could recognise
the Haven style. He must have stolen them in order to blend in, and judging by how he smelled, he must have spent several days living rough on the streets. He fully opened his eyes for the first time, which looked unnaturally large in the dim light, blinking hard. Ashelin was reminded of an animal emerging from a long time of hibernation. But now he could see her properly as well, and she reasserted her composure, standing with her hands held smartly behind her back, and trying to look serious but not intimidating. She allowed him the short time to take in the sight of who he was dealing with as his vision recovered.

"Better?" she asked, in reference to the change of lighting.

The spy looked momentarily confused still, but then he gave one single nod back to her, either a silent answer to her question or a small gesture of thanks. It was hard to tell. Nevertheless, Ashelin was pleased with this first correspondence, but maintained a formal countenance. This spy now seemed lucid and receptive, so she initiated the opening words she had prepared. First things first, an apology was in order.

"I'm sorry if my soldiers have treated you harshly. But I'm sure you understand the necessities of war. It was a precaution they had to take, and they only acted as any soldier would in this situation."

She hoped that this initial gesture of understanding would put him at ease, and maybe provoke a response too, but instead, the spy just stared at her hard with those dark, globing eyes. His expression was unwelcoming, and she felt her early progress starting to slip away already. Nevertheless, she pressed on. With the necessary apology out of the way, it was straight to business.

"Now, I'm sure that we both have a lot of questions we want to ask each other."

She paused, giving him another chance to respond, but none came. His large eyes really were unnerving, but she held her ground.

"So, which of us is going to ask first?" she pressed further.

This was all part of her plan. Before she asked him anything about himself, his people or his mission, she would give him the chance to ask his most pressing questions first, and she would answer them as long as they were within reason, questions like ‘where am I?’, ‘who are you?’, or ‘what are you going to do with me?’ She wanted him to feel comfortable, secure and unthreatened, like an equal. But even after several long seconds, he still glared at her blankly, and the prolonged silence and the relentless gleam in his eyes was starting to make her feel strange. He did not even blink. Ashelin just managed to maintain her composure, and wondered what was going through his mind as she continued to wait for an answer that she now suspected would never come. Fine. If he was not going to talk, then she would initiate.

"Very well. Let's start with introductions, shall we? My name is Ashelin, and I am the governor of Haven City, the highest seat of authority here." Next, she gestured to Torn standing in the doorway. "I gather you've already become acquainted with our military commander Torn."

She caught the spy's eyes dart momentarily to the doorway, squinting just a little, and fixing on Torn for about a second, before they returned right back on her.

"You are being held inside the headquarters of our military order, The Freedom League, and you're here because there are some things we'd like to talk to you about. Does that answer your immediate questions?"

She believed she had provided him with the essential information to get going with for now; she had introduced herself and explained where he was. However, he made no confirmation at all, and
remained as silent and as still as a hunched statue. She raised an eyebrow expectantly, but this produced no further reaction. Perhaps it was time to be a little more direct.

But before she spoke next, she realised that with her hands still behind her back, from the spy's perspective it might look like she was hiding something. She figured she had better bring them into plain sight, to show him that she intended no harm or deception.

"Well, I've given you my name," she continued, moving her hands to rest patiently on her hips. "Now are you going to give us yours?"

In the darkness she thought she caught a flicker of a change in his expression at these words, but it was not a positive one; it was like a miniscule snarl of mistrust. Evidently he was not swayed by anything she had said so far, either that or he was trying to play some mind game with her. If she could not get even his own name out of him, then there was little chance he would be willing to reveal anything else. The only way she could think of countering his silence was to offer him more information of her own; there was probably a lot he did not understand, but ought to know. So she began formally reciting one of her prepared speeches, taking slow paces up and down the room as she spoke.

"I am well aware of the complicated relationship that exists between us. The discovery of your culture was to be a momentous event, but for reasons that are still not entirely clear to us here in Haven, a conflict has arisen between our people. It has dragged on for months now. We have both suffered heavy losses, and achieved little in the way compensation. I don't know what your intentions were in all this, but if it continues in this way, it will be the destruction of us both."

She paused and looked directly at him again. "Your capture, however, has opened up new possibilities, and I just want you to understand your current situation. You are the first of your people, to our knowledge, who has ever come alive to the streets of Haven, and subsequently, you are also the first I have ever been able to meet and speak to, face to face. This is an opportunity for us to understand one another, and work together to put an end to this conflict. Do you not wish to negotiate with us?"

Ashelin thought she had expressed herself well, yet the spy's gaze was still relentless and he said nothing.

"No?" Ashelin prompted further, now opening her arms slightly. "Is there nothing you want to say at all?"

The spy reacted by finally breaking his long stare, and turned his head away from her completely, looking down at his own feet resting on the bed. Ashelin waited patiently for a few more seconds, but his demeanour or position did not change. She understood what his silence meant, and felt disappointed, but not surprised. This was pretty much as she had expected him to act; impenetrable and uncooperative. He was clearly still too bitter and mistrustful from his arrest, and in no mood to negotiate at this point in time. It was too early, but she knew how important it was to not force his trust before he was ready to give it.

Ashelin changed her expression to one that was a little softer, and made her voice sound sympathetic. "It's perfectly understandable that you don't want to talk to us, after everything that's happened. I can only imagine the resentment you must be feeling right now."

She then dared to take one tiny step closer to him, and spoke in rational plea. "But we don't need to be enemies. We don't need to continue this pointless fight. I'm not here to trick you or harm you in any way. I want to help you, and your people. All I ask is that you please believe me, and accept my offer of help. Will you?"
She hoped these last words would sway him, but still he was unresponsive. At last, Ashelin accepted his silent intransigence. She had said all that was safe to say at this point in time, but if words were not helping, then it was time for the gift.

"I'll give you some time to think it over," she said at last. Then she gave another prepared gesture to Torn, who took the tray of food from the soldier standing out in the corridor who carried it, and brought it to her.

"Until then, as a sign of our good intentions, this is for you," Ashelin went on, and she lifted the tray a little higher in signification, before depositing it on the small table unit opposite the bed. "Don't want you to go hungry. I hope it is to your tastes."

With that, she headed towards the door, which Torn still held open for her. But before she stepped through, she paused on the threshold, questioning herself if she had really done enough on this first, most important meeting. It was clear he was unwilling to talk, but was there still more that she could say before leaving?

She looked back one last time, making sure her position was plain and unambiguous. "Please understand that all I want is a chance to resolve this conflict with no further loss of life, for your people or mine, and you can make this possible. I don't want to have to keep you locked up in this room, like some caged animal. But I cannot take the risk unless you show me that you are willing to cooperate peacefully. I will come back to see you again tomorrow, and I hope by then your feelings will have become more amenable."

Finally, she left the room, leaving the light off, and Torn locked it up once more. Ashelin took a moment on its other side, reflecting on what she had just been through, before turning to the two accompanying Freedom soldiers.

"You two," she said to them, and they stood to attention, "Stay here and guard this door, and don't let anyone else in to see him. This takes priority over all your other duties. Is that understood?"

"Yes, governor," said both soldiers with a salute, and they immediately took their places, and Ashelin felt secured. It was vital that nobody else interfered with her efforts in this. Then she gestured to Torn, and they both began walking away down the corridor, taking it slow so they could talk.

“How do you think it went, then?” asked Torn at her side.

“What do I think?” said Ashelin, pressing her lips together thoughtfully. “Well, I didn't expect him to start talking right away. It's too soon."

"You think he'll listen?" asked Torn.

"I sure hope he will. There’s a lot riding on this, Torn. I just hope he realises the difference he can make."

There was a pause of a few seconds, their footsteps the only sound, before Torn said, "So what now?"

"There's still time to bring him round," Ashelin said confidently. "Baby steps, Torn. Clemency and patience are the keys here. We can’t force him. We need to let him come to us, when he’s ready. I’ve done all I can for the moment. I’ve given him something to think over, now all we have to do is wait. We'll check back tomorrow in any case, try again and see how it goes."

Torn nodded, accepting Ashelin's decision. Personally, he did not feel that a whole lot of progress
had been made today, despite how well Ashelin had spoken. This whole situation also got him thinking back to the original meeting of first contact out over the ocean, months ago, and remembered how the pilot who called himself Rulo had been the one to speak first, offering friendship and prosperity. *How they have changed,* he thought.

"Alright," he said finally. "If you think it'll work, I'll stand behind you on this, Ashelin."

Ashelin was silently grateful for his support, but her mind was already taking the next steps forwards. They both knew what was going to come next.

"Shall we call for a meeting with the council now, then?" Torn asked.

"Yeah, I suppose we'd better," Ashelin replied grudgingly. "But we'll keep this little meeting a secret for now. Let's see how they really react first."

Torn understood, and the two of them marched the rest of the way in silence.
Everyone stared up at the light shining forth from the dome's summit.

Jak was beaming. The last time he had ever seen anything this magnificent was back in the old world: a great Precursor door that had stood atop Gol and Maia's sky-scraping citadel, and what life-changing wonders it contained. Could this dome hold similar treasures?

He looked to Ashelin, and her eyes shared the same excited sparkle of his own. Then she in turn looked at Olto, and he looked at Torn, and then Torn looked back to Jak, completing the circle. Without saying any words, they each knew what they would do. All thoughts of danger and concern forgotten in their fascination, they scrambled as fast as they could up the sides of the dome, towards the glow at the top to see what it was.

They all got there at the same time, and beheld a circular opening in the now exposed summit. The light seemed to soften to a barely noticeable glow as they drew near, not painful on the eyes. With brimming intrigue, they pulled themselves closer, their hands gripping the edge of the opening, and peered down into the structure.

What they saw amazed them. A deep vertical shaft yawned open before them, plunging right down the centre of the dome and far into the earth beneath, so deep that it made their stomachs feel suddenly empty leaning over the edge. Circular lamps lined the interior walls in a spiralling pattern, and Jak was reminded instantly of the Precursor sub-rails he had once travelled through, ancient underground tunnels which ran deep into the very planet. But this was not a part of the sub-rails, because set between the lamps was an even more amazing sight: shelves upon shelves of pristine Precursor items, ancient artefacts of all shapes and descriptions, too numerous to count, and finer than anything held in all the museums of Haven. They followed the lamps in their downward pattern into the very depths of the earth, as far as the eye could see, with no end in sight.

"Wow!" Olto whispered, amazed at the quality and quantity of these many items, and the immeasurable depth of the shaft.

Ashelin and Torn were equally awe-struck, but could find nothing to say. For the first time, they could take a direct look into the world of their ancient forebears of legend. But for Jak, it was like stumbling on a hidden gold mine. He felt like a child again, so euphorically happy to finally be so close to something of Precursor origins, to be a part of something that they just might have used themselves to build the world so many ages ago. If only Daxter could have been here to see this and share in this incredible moment, or Keira, or even Samos...

"What do you think this is, Jak?" Olto asked after a long while of staring into the shaft.

"It looks like a Precursor storage chamber of some kind," Jak answered with his best deduction. "Just look at all those artefacts. I've never seen so many in one place before."

Everyone else looked at each other impressively, knowing that this must be something important if it caused Jak, the seasoned adventurer that he was, to say this.

"Just how deep does this thing go?" asked Torn with wide-eyed interest.

Jak tested this by drawing a stone out from his pocket, extending his arm over the opening, and then letting it drop. They watched it as it fell past the many lamps and shelves, straining their eyes to keep
it in sight for as long as they could, until it was too deep and too dark to see anymore. Then in silence they listened for the sound of it striking the bottom, waiting, and waiting... and waiting. But no sound ever came.

Olto whistled impressively. "That's a long way down..."

Everyone cautiously shuffled back from the edge a little, now fearing falling into this seemingly endless pit, but Jak was thinking hard again, trying to make sense of what this meant. Maybe this passage did go all the way to the earth's core, just like the sub-rails. What was down there, and where did it lead?

"But what's a Precursor storage chamber doing way out here on this island in the middle of nowhere?" asked Ashelin, interrupting his current thought with a new question.

For that, Jak had no definitive answer. Clearly, someone had gone to great lengths to conceal all of these artefacts here and arrange them so carefully on those shelves, but exactly who that was, how they had accomplished this, and why, remained unknown. Could it have been the Precursors themselves who had done this? Or maybe their descendants or worshippers, hiding away all of their artefacts to protect them from the Metal Heads when they invaded? Those dark monsters had destroyed so much of their legacy, but they had never found this hidden treasure horde.

"I don't know," Jak answered honestly. But he really wanted to find out. Maybe there was a clue somewhere inside this dome, something that would give them the answer...

"We should try and get them out," he said determinedly.

The others were all too fascinated to argue otherwise and they agreed, wanting to see those artefacts up closer and find out just what they were. However, there was a problem.

"But how are we going to reach them?" asked Torn. "How's anyone supposed to get them out? There's no way down."

He was right. Even the topmost shelf was metres out of arm's reach, but Jak knew from experience that there had to be a way to get to them. If they had got in there in the first place, then they could be got out again. He imagined a hovering platform that would transcend the many levels of shelves, passing smoothly down the dome's centre, but there was none here. Had it been removed to thoroughly isolate these items from intruders? Or was it perhaps lying out of sight right at the bottom? If only he had some eco, then maybe he could summon it and find out for sure. But until then...

"We'll have to go down there ourselves," said Jak. "One of us at least, and bring them back up."

Nobody else seemed very keen on this idea, however. They all peered down into the dome again, the sheer depth of it making them feel a little nauseous from all the way up here, and none of them particularly fancied going down into it. If they fell, there was no coming back.

Ashelin especially was in two minds about this. After this incredible discovery, she had recently found greater appreciation and interest in the Precursors and what they had left behind, but her initial cautions about this dome had now resurfaced. "Are you sure it's worth the risk, Jak?" she asked tentatively.

But Jak nodded, feeling adventurous. "Just look at them all. There's got to be hundreds of artefacts down there, and they could really help us, maybe even get us home somehow. Who knows what we could find."
The others looked warily to each other, teetering on the verge of willingness. Jak thought for a few seconds, looking down into the shaft again. It was so tantalising to have so many intriguing and potentially useful artefacts and instruments just out of reach. The first few metres of the drop to the top shelf was smooth, glassy Precursor metal, and climbing down to it would be impossible. But there had to be a way, and Jak saw only one sure solution.

"I could go down on a rope," he suggested. "There's plenty of vines in the forest. All we'd need to do is tie a few together and then we're good to go."

Everyone remembered the vines. They had used some as makeshift ropes already back at their camp, such as in the construction of their raft, and they seemed to be strong enough for that purpose at least. It could work here too. However, Ashelin still felt very uneasy.

"I don't like the idea of you going down there on just a rope, Jak."

"We'll make sure it's safe," said Jak. "We'll only really need it for the first few metres anyway. I reckon I could hold onto those shelves when I reach them, and then the rope's just a safety line."

It would be a risky endeavour that the others were reluctant to agree to, but the lure of discovery was just too great, and eventually Jak persuaded them, realising it as the only possible way. Though it would take extra work, everyone was willing to get involved, even Torn; the raft was completely forgotten by all in the wake of this incredible discovery. It was all decided now, and everyone was united in their goals as they ventured into the woodlands in search of the vines they needed.

An hour later, Jak sat on the edge of the circular opening, his legs hanging over the deep shaft. A firm rope was tied securely around his body, made of the strongest vines they had gathered from the forest, all rigorously tested. Ashelin was just behind him on the shoulder of the dome, holding it taut at one of the connecting knots, while further down the line at the dome's base, Torn and Olto did the same, providing extra anchorage and managing the slack. They all looked eager and ready, but also apprehensive at what they were about to try.

"We're all set, Jak," Ashelin said.

Jak took a deep breath. This was it. Descent time.

He turned himself around carefully, supporting himself with his hands on the rim, and lowered his legs backwards over the edge. He could feel the pull of the rope on his body, and when he looked Ashelin in the eyes, he could see the trepidation reflecting in them.

"Alright, start lowering me."

"Good luck, Jak. Be careful," said Ashelin, and then she nodded down to Torn and Olto.

They fed her the rope and she let it slide gently through her hands. Very slowly, Jak began to lower down into the shaft, guiding the effort. This whole operation required perfect co-ordination and communication, but it was starting promisingly so far, and the rope was holding his weight.

"This feels OK," Jak said when his entire lower half was below the rim. "Keep going."

As Ashelin passed him more length, he leant back with it, and carefully moved both his hands, one at a time, onto the rope. Just before his head vanished below the surface, he looked up at Ashelin again and winked at her. And then he was gone from sight.

He was fully within the dome now, suspended on the rope, descending slowly and smoothly. Keeping his legs straight and his feet flat against the plain metal walls, he walked himself down with
the lengthening rope. The tight bindings around his body did not feel very comfortable now they fully held his weight, but it was enduring, and that was all that mattered. Though he had traversed many high drops before on his past adventures, he did not dare to look down, concentrating on the positioning of his feet and the rope in his hands. He felt a trickle of sweat slide down his face, and his heart was thumping powerfully.

"How's it going, Jak? You still OK?" called Ashelin from above, and Jak looked up to see a glimpse of her face peering at him over the rim, still just a couple of metres above.

"It's all good," he answered back. "Just keep going."

The steady descent continued, but after a few more steps, the wall on which he walked ended and opened up below him onto the first shelf. He gingerly moved his feet and was now suspended in the air, letting the rope take him deeper, until his arms were level with the shelf.

"Stop!" he called back up, and the rope halted immediately at his command. Now that he was properly within the dome, the sound of his voice swelled and rang throughout the inner space, reverberating for many seconds after he had spoken like a thousand-strong choir somewhere beneath him. The sensation caused him to smile crazily as he now hung in mid-air above The Great Below.

"Everything OK?" Ashelin called back down. Her face appeared again silhouetted against the opening above.

"Yeah!" Jak said back up to her with a wave, and his voice filled the dome once more as a spectral chorus. He could make out Ashelin's face brighten in astonishment at the sound.

"That's one hell of echo down there!" she said.

From behind her, there was an excited laugh and a shout which Jak could just about perceive.

"Olto loves it too," Ashelin added. "But have you reached the artefacts yet?"

"Yeah, I'm right next to the top shelf."

Jak outstretched his arm and caught hold of its edge, and pulled himself closer to it. His toes brushed the lip of the one beneath.

"Give me about a foot more rope," he called up, and the rope loosened a little more. His feet touched down comfortably on the lower shelf, taking the weight off the rope and giving him a bit of extra leeway to move around. The gap between these two shelves was just wide enough for him to stand comfortably on, but a little too wide apart to climb down to the others like rungs on a ladder. He would still have to rely almost completely on the rope and the strength of his friends to help him go deeper, and then to get back out again.

But now that he was securely supporting his own weight, he could afford to observe and enjoy the majesty of his surroundings. He felt a strange energy all around him, the gentle hum of the earth resonating through his whole body like a second pulse. The air was cool and dry in here, sheltered from the wind and the surface elements, and every movement or sound he made was amplified inside the structure. Upwards, the opening was now a circle of sky, while beneath him, the shaft just continued infinitely downwards.

"It's really something down here!" he called up. “But don’t let go of that rope!"

The circular shelves which he clung to formed a complete circle, running around the full circumference of the shaft's inner walls, and the lamps embedded between them glowed dimly and
mysteriously, illuminating the many wondrous items which they bore. Here he was literally in the heart of Precursor history once again, close enough to touch.

He reached out for the first one lying directly in front of him, and took it reverently. It appeared to be a small star-shaped ornament, fitting nicely into the palm of his hand, and it reflected the chamber light beautifully. It was not an artefact he recognised, but there would be time to fully examine it and the others once he was safely back on the surface. He slipped it into his backpack, and then made to do the same with all the other objects on the top shelf, carefully shuffling his way all around the circle. He took a quick look at each of them before he stowed them away. There were a couple of other ornaments similar to the first, a short metal rod, and most interestingly, a cylindrical container of some description. The largest of the artefacts on the first shelf, this container emitted a dull, shifting red glow from a small round window on its front, and Jak recognised it at once: it was red eco!

Having completely stripped the top shelf, and with a backpack full of treasure, Jak called back up to his friends. "OK, pull me up again now."

He felt the rope tighten again, and very slowly, he began to rise upwards. He helped as much as he could, but the upper walls were smooth and impossible to find a grip on. Thankfully, there was not far to go, and as soon as he reached the opening, he pulled himself through and re-appeared on the surface at Ashelin's feet.

"Did you get them?" she asked, grabbing his hand and pulling him back into fresh air.

Jak smiled proudly. "Sure did. Take a look!"

He drew the items he had collected out of his backpack and displayed them to Ashelin. Torn and Olto climbed up the hill to join them.

"Cool!" said Olto, examining one of the ornaments keenly. "What does it do?"

"Don't know, but we can figure that out later," said Jak. "I want to go back in and clear the second shelf next."

Now they had done it once, it felt much easier sending Jak down into the dome again, despite the extra depth. They were getting into a confident rhythm with the rope now, and Jak went down many more times, his adrenaline keeping him energised and brave as he continued to collect up more artefacts. Many of them were fairly small and easy to carry, just like the first ones, but they were becoming larger and more elaborate the deeper down he went, and these bigger ones proved more difficult to extract. One such large artefact looked like a chest of some kind, no doubt holding something that was just as wondrous as the other things they had collected. Getting this one out was a challenge and put a fair strain on the rope, but they succeeded after a good deal of effort.

By the middle of the day, they had accumulated a good pile of artefacts, but after that chest, they were getting rather tired and hungry. So they decided to take a break for lunch, carrying all the items they had recovered so far back to the camp with them. They looked over them as they ate.

"We've made a good haul, haven't we?" said Olto, admiring the heap of Precursor items. "What shall we start with?"

Jak reached over and picked up the item nearest to him, a small sphere, and weighed it in his hand. He knew at once what it was. "This is a power cell," he said. "Looks like it's dead, though."

He could recognise a power cell anywhere, for it had once been his quest to scour the earth for them. Normally they would shine brightly, be warm to the touch, and could power the most elaborate of
Precursor machines. This one, however, was cold and dim, and the little pieces which would normally orbit around it were stuck fast into the globe. Jak was disappointed, but then a sudden thought hit him: what if this was one of the many he had collected and personally handled long ago in the past? It was an intriguing possibility, but with no way to confirm.

The next item was also something he recognised: the small container of red eco, one of the first things he had extracted from the dome. A valuable energy source, but they had no real use for it here except for recharging Ashelin's gun. They put it aside for now. Maybe it could serve some purpose for one of the other artefacts.

"How about this one?" asked Torn, lifting up the rod that Jak had also collected from the first shelf.

He held it in his hands while they all looked over it with inquisitive, examining eyes. Then Torn's hand found a button on the side, and when he pressed it, the rod suddenly extended to three times its original length, almost hitting Olto in the face. A blue spark fizzed out of one of its ends.

"That was blue eco!" said Jak excitedly, and Torn handed it over so he could take a closer look. "This thing must be some kind of tool or weapon that runs on blue eco. But it doesn't look like there's much left in it now."

"Would the red eco work in it?" suggested Ashelin.

Jak made a thoughtful expression. "Not sure. You've got to be careful when mixing different kinds of eco, or using one kind in something that was made for another kind."

Next they had a look at the chest, which Olto was most interested by. There seemed to be no lock or lid, but a little searching revealed a hidden compartment with a switch. When pressed, an opening appeared, and they were able to pry it apart with ease. Inside was a marvellous treasure: neatly arranged right to the brim, was a vast collection of Precursor orbs.

"Wow! We're rich!" said Olto excitedly, pulling one out.

"Oh, these things used to be everywhere," Jak explained.

Precursor orbs had become much rarer after the Metal Head invasion, and were now highly sought after in Haven City, more than ten times their value in the past. However, again, there was little use for them here on this island. Still, they were determined to look after them and bring them back to the city if they could, so they stored the chest carefully beside their shelter.

One more artefact they examined did offer a very functional use, however. It was a bag of some sort, and it appeared to be made of Precursor metal in the form of a durable leather. Jak was fascinated by this novelty; back in the old world, any such bags or satchels were made from animal skins. He wondered how its unknown crafter had managed to transform the metal into this state. They could definitely put this to great use when they went back into the dome again.

By the time they had finished eating, they still had many more artefacts to sift through and identify a use for. But still they felt drawn back to the dome to try and bring out more, and it was not long before they were heading back there again to carry out that desire. Once Jak was securely roped up once more, they prepared to lower him back in.

"Right, let's go in again!" said Jak, and everyone returned to their well-practiced procedure.

At least the first dozen shelves had been completely cleared by now, but there were still many more even deeper. Jak went in and out several more times, bringing the newly discovered bag down with him and using it to hold the artefacts he continued to gather. It was a remarkable little container, for it
could somehow hold much more than it looked capable of, and also made its contents lighter and easier to bear.

One time, as he stood on a shelf that was quite deep inside but still nowhere near the unseen bottom of the shaft, Ashelin called down to him. "We're running out of rope, Jak! You won't be able to go much deeper than this."

Jak shouted back up to signify his understanding. The halo of blue sky up above now seemed so far away.

Then, realising that this was as far as he might be able to go, he sat down on the current shelf and took another moment to just look around again in contented amazement, drinking in the beauty of where he was. It was a very isolating feeling to be down here, encompassed in the dark earth, and illuminated only by the mysterious glowing lamps in the walls all around. He dared to look down into the endless expanse, and the shelves and their inaccessible artefacts lying out of reach. He understood and accepted that they would never be able to retrieve them all, but how he wished he had a way to get to them, to dive all the way down and see what lay at the bottom of this marvellous structure. He bet there had to be something really special hidden down there, perhaps the greatest of all the artefacts.

But then, a few shelves below, something caught his attention. He could make out the edge of another object, mostly obscured from sight by the shelves above it, but something about it drew his curiosity more than any of the others he could see. He had to try and get closer.

"Can you give me a few more feet of rope?" he called up.

There was a few seconds before the response. "Maybe," came Ashelin's distant voice, "But there won't be much left for us to hold up here."

"Just give me as much as you can!" Jak shouted.

"Alright, we'll try," said Ashelin. "Just be careful!"

Jak guided their movements, and he passed about five more shelves bearing increasingly larger Precursor items, none of which he had ever seen before. But then the rope halted, and he hung in mid-air again, still several metres above the thing he had sighted.

"That's it!" called Ashelin. "We can't risk letting you go any further, Jak. The rope's almost out up here."

Jak was silent, concentrating on his target. He swung himself, trying to get a better view of it.

"Jak? What are you doing?" called Ashelin, alarm and confusion in her voice. "What do you see?"

Jak did not answer yet, wanting to be absolutely sure of himself, but then it struck him. He could see it now, and he recognised it at once. His heart gave a massive leap in his chest, for there was another one sitting right next to it, and a third next to that. This was too good to be true!

He shouted involuntarily, both with joy and shock. His friends far above him, already concerned for his safety, heard the sudden cry, and thinking that Jak was in danger, pulled him up at once. Jak zoomed upwards at an incredible speed, but when he emerged into the sunlight in front of his breathless and exhausted friends, he was laughing.

"What?" the others asked him. "What happened? What did you see?"
Jak was smiling ear to ear, a mad look on his face.

"Zoomers..."
Ashelin stood alone at the window, dressed in one of her best uniforms. The weather was bright today, reflecting the overall positive mood now flowing through the city, and there was an optimistic cheer in the air from the crowd of excited citizens gathered on the streets below. Yet here she stood, looking down upon the city she ruled over just as she had done on the first day of the war, and here she stood again on what would be the last.

It had all been decided: today the enemy would be destroyed. The bombing fleet was now fully prepped and ready to go, and very soon, Ashelin would be leading it to the enemy city to carry out its terrible purpose. That was why everyone was so happy. All these people had gathered outside Freedom HQ to witness the departure of the great fleet, and to hear the announcement of their impending victory, their freedom.

But Ashelin's feelings could not be more different. She let out a deep, defeated sigh, and her breath misted the glass inches from her face. These last few weeks had been unnecessarily difficult, complicated and stressful for her, and she was not pleased with the outcome taking place today. She had not wanted it to come to this, and she had done everything in her energy and power to prevent it, preferring to end the war without the need to utterly wipe out the enemy. But with the bombing fleet finally nearing completion, and the enemy attacks seemingly stopping altogether, the city council had been calling for a decisive victory that would eliminate the enemy threat for good, now that they had a means to achieve one. They did not see the point of Ashelin's ongoing desire for a diplomatic solution when all previous attempts had failed and they could end the war right now, striking while their enemy seemingly was at their most vulnerable.

And so yesterday, driven by their growing impatience and their lust for revenge, they had seized the moment and called for an official vote on the matter. The result was overwhelmingly against Ashelin's favour, and she had been forced, unwillingly, to accede, lest the government divide itself any further. She felt thwarted, not by the enemy, but by her own people.

The door opened behind her, and Torn entered, followed closely by Jak with Daxter riding on his shoulder. Ashelin knew it was them without even having to turn around. They would all end this together.

"The soldiers are all ready to go, Ashelin," Torn announced. "They're waiting for us to join them and then we can set off. You ready?"

Ashelin stood up straight and turned to face her comrades. They each saw the hard and exasperated look that she wore, and it was a look they had come to know well. She had been in a vexed and harried mood for days, aggravated by the council who continued to dog her, urging her to make use of the powerful fleet now at their disposal. Ever since she had given in to their persistence yesterday,
she had gone about her preparations in Freedom Headquarters in a prickly and volatile state that made others fearful to approach her. If anyone ever managed to engage her in conversation, they received little more than a few brusque words. Today she looked no better.

"Yeah, I'm ready," she said tersely. "This isn't how I wanted this to end, though."

"I know," said Torn understandingly. "But we've got to do this."

He knew what Ashelin was feeling, because he was feeling it too. Just like her, he had also faced strong pressure from the council, for he had always sided with Ashelin's decisions no matter what, right from day one. On top of this, many still held him somehow responsible, even now at the end of it all, for starting this whole war in the first place. It was a feeling that still followed him wherever he went like the scent of smoke. As much as this was against his own wishes too, he hoped that their mission today would at last provide some closure for him, for he had lost a lot of confidence among the council.

Jak had not been a part of as many of these important meetings, so he had not experienced the strain that Ashelin and Torn had been put through, but he had been there at first contact alongside Torn, and understood what could have been. "So we're really doing this then?" he asked cautiously, as Daxter fidgeted on his shoulder. "We're really going out there to wipe them out?"

"I'm afraid so," answered Ashelin. "The council won't accept any other alternative now. They won't be satisfied unless our enemy's gone for good."

Jak took a moment to seriously think about the consequences of what they were about to do. A whole nation of people would die today. Even though he had been personally responsible for the deaths of many of their soldiers already, battling brilliantly in the defence of Haven City, to hear that they would be annihilated entirely had an unexpectedly remorseful effect on him. This was no ordinary mission like the ones he was used to, and these enemies were not mindless Metal Heads, but other people.

"But what about that spy we captured?" he asked hopefully. "Didn't you manage to get anything out of him?"

"No," Ashelin replied with a sad shake of her head, for this was what pained her the most about all this. "He's refusing to help us."

Everyone remembered the spy. Since the day of his capture, Ashelin had continued towards her goal of securing his co-operation, personally conducting several civil interrogations with him, and forbidding anyone else from becoming involved and potentially undoing all of her progress. But he was slow to accept and trust, slower than even she had been expecting, making no concessions and remaining obstinate and impenetrable. She refused to back down, however, sticking to her conciliatory methods, gradual though they were, and she would have been happy to continue this for however long it took to eventually make a breakthrough, which she believed she had been getting close to.

However, the council did not share her patience, and were growing weary with the continued lack of result. To them, just as Ashelin predicted, this spy was something to be exploited, not to be bargained with, and anything otherwise was a waste of time and opportunity. She’d held out for as long as she could, trying to convince the council to wait just a little longer, pleading them to trust in her judgement. But she was against the clock as the bombing fleet neared completion, and in the end she had lost, and the council decisively forced her to abandon her efforts with their vote yesterday.

"I’ve paid him a few visits,” Ashelin said regretfully, “Tryed to get him to open up and work with us.
Thought I was getting somewhere, slowly. But he isn’t budging. He's told us nothing about his homeland, his people, or himself. Not even his own name."

Jak, who had not seen the spy since the day he had fought him in the pub, was quietly surprised to hear this. "But doesn't he want to save his own people?"

"I gave him that chance," said Ashelin, "But he didn't take it. It seems he doesn't want anything to do with anyone anymore. He still doesn't trust us, and I don't think he ever will now."

Torn sympathised with her silently, for he had been present at every one of those interrogations as well, witnessing Ashelin's steady progress. Their last visit to him, just a few short hours ago this morning, was a last desperate attempt to sway him, hoping that the news of his homeland’s impending destruction would be the catalyst to finally make him act. But it had not gone well, and in fact had produced the opposite effect. Whatever trust and rapport Ashelin had so carefully built up with him was now shattered to pieces.

"Jeez, what's up with these guys?" Daxter said carelessly, interrupting everyone’s contemplations. "Do they want to lose?"

Ashelin tried to shrug aside Daxter's display of casual indifference, knowing that he clearly did not understand the complexity of the dilemma. "It's a real shame," she said wistfully instead. "He was the only one who could have stopped this now. I just know that if I'd had just a little more time, I could have got through to him. But the council thought otherwise." She exhaled heavily. "Man, I hate politics."

There was a moment’s silence.

"What's going to happen to him now then?" Jak asked, looking troubled and speculative.

"I really don't know," Ashelin answered. "For now, we're keeping him here in his prison room, and we'll try and decide on something when we get back from this. But the fact of the matter is he hasn't told us anything of use. We're flying blind into this. We don't know what to expect when we get there."

She spoke conflictedly. She did not want to be the conquering warlord that her father had strived to be, but there was no other choice now; all alternatives had been exhausted. She had to protect her city in whatever way she could, and if this was what it took, then she would do it, regretful though it may be. They were at war, and the objective of any war was to survive and win. The soldier in her knew that.

"That's why it's so important that we're ready for anything," Torn added in response to her last comment.

He knew this especially, for he had closely monitored the fleet as it gained strength. Even though it was definitely the largest air force ever assembled in Haven's history, he knew that size did not always guarantee a victory, especially against a technologically superior foe; strategy and intelligence were more important. He was not comfortable about flying over there without such detailed information, so he had taken extra precautions to ensure their fleet was at its best, while still leaving a large enough garrison behind to safeguard the city while they were gone.

"We've got just enough men left to get this done," he explained. "As long as nothing goes seriously wrong, that is..."

"Bah, it doesn't matter!" said Daxter suddenly, bursting in with his usual cockiness. "With Jak on our
side, we can't possibly lose! Right partner?” he said slyly, digging his elbow into the side of Jak’s head, to which Jak said nothing. “And then we'll finally be able to kick back and celebrate the end of all this. I've got a big party planned, you know, and you're all invited!”

The ottsel was the only one in the room feeling bright, yet he seemed not to fully realise this. Once again he completely failed to grasp the weight of the situation.

But Ashelin looked at him very seriously, in no mood to tolerate any of his foolishness today. "A lot of people have already died needlessly because of this war, Daxter,” she said darkly. "Us and them. And even more are going to die today. But this could have all been prevented. This whole war's been such a waste. If we win this... we won't have much to celebrate."

Daxter gulped. He had never thought about it like that, and it was enough to quell him into a contagious silence that soon spread throughout the room. Nobody spoke for about a minute as they each individually processed their tragic situation. Their apprehension had reached its peak, and the only sound was the growing noise from the crowd outside.

Eventually, Ashelin turned around to face the window, straightening the collar on her uniform. "Alright, let's get this over with," she said.

She took a brave breath, then pushed open the windows and stepped out onto the balcony, into the warm afternoon air. Jak and Torn followed, but hung back by the opening, out of sight of the people below, and giving Ashelin the full platform to herself.

A great cheer arose at her appearance to the masses, a cheer that she knew she did not deserve. She looked down upon her vast audience, and there was not a single empty space on the streets to be seen; they were absolutely packed with people all waving and shouting. A few adventurous individuals had even climbed the fountain in the centre square to get a better look, and were soaking wet as a result.

"Look at them, Ashelin thought to herself. They're excited for this. They don't realise what it's taken to get us here, or what could have been had things gone another way. But they don't need to know.

Though she now had an open platform, there was no point in venting her grievances to the citizenry; she needed to maintain her image as a strong and confident leader that would bring them peace, just as she had promised them at the start of all this. But as brave as she was, even she was feeling apprehensive on this day.

Then she looked up briefly into the sky. It was a great risk having so many people so tightly packed together on the open streets like this. If the enemy suddenly decided to attack at this very moment, then the victory would be theirs, not Haven's. Luckily, her speech would not take too long, for she had carefully thought through every word that she would say.

She raised one hand, and the cheering gradually died down into an excited murmur.

"People of Haven City,” she began, and her amplified voice reflected off the surrounding buildings. "We are no strangers to war. After all, we have been fighting to survive for as long as we can remember. There has always been an enemy clawing at our walls, and we have known precious few times of peace."

This part of the speech was easy, for she did not have to make anything up. It was all true, and as she spoke, the people below listened obediently.

"We have been driven long and hard to defend ourselves from this constant onslaught," she
continued. "For many months now, we have been hounded by a new and powerful enemy, trapped within our own walls as they have rained down fire upon us. We are all tired, we have suffered much, and lost many. This war has left scars on us that will be felt for years to come..."

The crowd was respectfully silent now.

"But we have endured," Ashelin said more rousingly, and her sense of power was growing stronger with every word. "We have fought and defended ourselves with a bravery and determination that would make Mar proud."

The crowd swelled with patriotism, and behind her, Torn, Jak and Daxter all nodded with assent.

"We have lasted this long," she proclaimed, now feeling the energy and passion that her words inspired, "And we are not about to let ourselves fall now! We have been through dark and difficult times, but we have always survived. No matter what we face, we will always stand firm against those who seek to destroy us! And today is no different!"

The crowd cheered more fully now, and the shiver of fearlessness and resolve could be felt even up here on the balcony.

"Our homes may be in ruins and our numbers may have dwindled, but I give you my word as the governor of this city that we shall rise again and prosper, just as we have always done and always will!"

The roar grew stronger, and Ashelin felt bold and empowered, no longer hesitant or afraid.

"Fear no more for your safety, people of Haven!" she announced loudly, her arms held high, "For today, this long war ends! Today, we shall have victory and the peace that we deserve! Today, we shall earn our Freedom!"

The loudest roar yet tore through the city, and at its climax, the great fleet of Haven emerged over the city wall for all to see. And it was immense, casting a great shadow over the streets. Line after line of shining Hellcat cruisers loomed overhead, each three assigned to a heavily laden bomber. Even Ashelin was feeling proud now, and her speech had gone very well; she had focussed on emphasising the strength and survival of Haven rather than the regretful destruction of their enemy, and it seemed she had got away with it. In fact it was surprisingly easy to allow her own frustrations to colour her words.

She remained on the balcony for half a minute more, watching as the fleet organised itself into formation between the city and the mountains, where they waited for her to join. With one last salute to her people, she then turned back into the building. Torn, Jak and even Daxter were all applauding her in admiration.

"Great speech," said Jak.

"You said the right things," added Torn.

Daxter could find nothing to say, which was rare for him.

"Thanks," said Ashelin simply, and for the first time anyone could remember in a long while, she smiled. But it lasted only a moment, before her face returned to its steely determination. Now there was a mission to be done, and she was back to being all business.

"Come on now," she then said. "The rest of the fleet's waiting for us. Let's head down to the hangar and join them."
They descended together in the lift right down to the bottom floor, and they stepped out into the now largely empty hangar. They each had a personal cruiser waiting for them, and they all climbed aboard and got their engines humming.

But before they all set off, Ashelin took one more moment. "This is really it," she said from her seat in the cockpit. "Our last mission."

Both Jak and Torn looked up from the buttons they were pressing on their dashboards. "Let's hope it really is our last," said Torn. "I'm done with all this work."

"I think I need a break too," added Jak.

"It's been hard on all of us," said Ashelin tiredly, uniting their thoughts. "But once we take off, there's no turning back."

There was another short moment's silence as they processed the situation.

"One last thing, guys," Ashelin said. "If there are any survivors after our bombing run, I want to do whatever I can to help them."

The weight of what they were about to do descended upon the group once more. Now they were sitting in their cruisers, it felt more painfully real than ever. But then the mood was suddenly broken by Daxter.

"Hey, are we there yet?" he asked impatiently, and Jak shot him an annoyed look for again not taking this seriously enough.

"Alright, there's nothing more to say," said Ashelin at last, engaging her lifters. "Let's just go."

Her vehicle began to rise up towards the opening in the ceiling, and Torn followed after her, and then Jak, until they were outside in the sky above the city.

The crowds cheered loudly again when they saw their cruisers take flight. Daxter was unable to stop himself from taking immediate advantage of this moment, and stood up in his seat to wave out of the cockpit window. But whether anyone could see him clearly from the ground was anyone's guess.

They formed up together at the head of their fleet's formation, Ashelin taking lead position with Torn to her left and Jak to her right. Then they turned to face the mountain range. Ashelin pressed a few buttons on her control panel, and the coordinates of their destination flashed up onscreen, revealing the path to their enemy's homeland. Then she spoke into her radio, sending a message back to the control room of Freedom HQ. "Control, this is Ashelin. We're in formation and we're setting off now."

"Roger that," said a voice from the city. "May Mar's fortune be with you, governor."

"Thank you," replied Ashelin, before flicking a switch that redirected her signal. "OK fleet," she announced, and her voice was heard throughout all the cockpits behind her, "Here we go. Stay in formation and follow my lead."

She gave the order and flew onwards slowly, and like a great migration, the fleet followed, dragging their might across the sky. It was an impressive sight to behold, and an even more impressive feeling to be leading it. Back in the city, the people waved and cheered one last time as they disappeared over the mountains, seeing them off as impending heroes.

And so off they went, into the unknown, and heading towards their destiny.
As the sea of mountains passed by beneath them, Daxter was settling himself down into the second seat of Jak's cruiser, getting comfortable for the long journey. "How long till we get there, then?" he asked.

"A few hours at least, Dax," said Jak, checking the readings from his onboard computer. "We've got a long way to go yet."

Daxter made a funny little bored noise. "Ah, whatever. Just tell me when the action starts." With that, he slumped down even more lazily and closed his eyes for a doze.

Once Jak was sure he was staying in formation, he took a quick glance at his friend. "Better put your seatbelt on, Dax," he warned him.

"Nah," Daxter replied with a nonchalant wave of his hand, knowing it would only hinder his ability to relax. "It'll all be fine. This mission'll be a breeze."

Jak was a little concerned but said nothing. Hopefully this would be a smooth ride without major difficulties, and they had some way to go before they expected any combat.

Once the mountains were behind them, the leading cruisers descended as one to a slightly lower altitude, and the convoy following them copied their fluid motion perfectly, cresting the mountains like a wave. Before them now lay the barren wilderness that stretched on for miles to the grey ocean. Torn was immediately reminded of the last time he had journeyed out here, back on that fateful day when this whole war had begun.

"The open road..." he said, looking out at the world unfolding ahead of him.

The others looked forwards as well, taking in the desolate and uninviting scenery. But in the distance the beginnings of an early sunset were starting to form, thick white clouds absorbing the sunbeams. It made Ashelin feel calm but still melancholic about how this day would end. This would be Haven City's last great mission, for afterwards there would be no more known enemies to fight, no more battles to be won, and no more compromises. Or so she could hope. After this, she aimed to concentrate on making Haven great and prosperous again, and this made her feel optimistic, knowing that something good would come out of this terrible day.

The children of Mar were finally going to be free.
"What? Zoomers?"

Torn looked astonished when Jak revealed this information, as did Olto and Ashelin. This was a momentous discovery if it were true, one which could change their fortunes entirely on this island.

"Are you absolutely sure, Jak?" asked Ashelin.

"Positive," Jak answered, his smile still decorating his face. "I know what I saw, and I'd recognise them anywhere. They were zoomers alright."

"Oh my god," said Ashelin, breaking into a building smile of her own.

"Wait," said Olto, "Then this means... they could be our ticket out of here!"

"Exactly," said Jak with a proud nod and an even wider smile. "If we get them out, then we can finally go home!"

There was a moment of joyful silence as everyone finally understood the full implications of what this meant. Then they all laughed together. Zoomers! There were zoomers inside this dome that could carry them to their freedom. But then they got serious. There was no debating it. This was too important to ignore. They had to get them out.

They spent another half an hour discussing the best way to achieve this, and lengthening their vine rope by several more metres so they could reach deep enough. But eventually, they agreed on a plan, a difficult and risky plan, but a plan nonetheless.

It was late afternoon by the time Jak fearlessly descended into the dome once again, but this time he did not linger or bask in its wonder; he was single-minded and his eyes were focussed downwards, seeking out the shelf where the zoomers lay. Deeper and deeper he went, past all the ones he had cleared and beyond, until... there they were! The extra metres of rope they had added really made the difference, and soon he was level with the ancient machines, and could get a proper look at them.

"I've reached them!" he called up from the depths.

"How do they look?" asked Olto from high above.

"Absolutely beautiful!"

Three in total, and in marvellous condition, they looked just how he remembered them, complete with their double propellers, shining orange metalwork, and broad, sweeping tailfins. A stream of memories suddenly came flooding back to him, of all the times he had spent racing Keira's original model. It had carried him across deep, treacherous waters and canyons of molten fire. How the engine would scream! They truly were a remarkable and indispensable creation, one that had played a vital part in his past quests and adventures, and he wished all the more now that Keira could see them too. She would surely cry with happiness.

He pulled himself closer, and climbed up onto the shelf so that he was sat among the vehicles. There was not enough room for him to lie down or stand up, but he felt strangely comfortable in his position regardless. He observed the dashboard of the one closest to him. It looked very different to
the modern-day descendants he had become used to, but it all came back to him in an instant. He knew exactly what to do if he were to jump into the saddle again.

"How you doing, Jak?" Ashelin called down, breaking him out of his happy reminiscence.

"I'm on the shelf now!" Jak answered, remembering that there was work to be done. "I'm right next to the zoomers. You've really got to see them!"

"That's great, Jak," Ashelin shouted happily, "But how heavy are they? Do you think we can lift them out?"

Jak tried to shift the nearest vehicle with his hands, gauging its weight. It was hard to budge, and just as heavy as he expected. This was not going to be easy, but thinking back to the past, he remembered how he, Daxter and Keira were able to pick up and carry their original model around if they all lifted together. If three scrawny teenagers could do it, then four grown adults should have no problem. But the big question here was whether the rope would take the weight.

"I think we can manage it," he called back up, and waited for the echoes of his voice to fade out a bit before continuing. "Let's give it a go. I'm going to tie the vine to the first zoomer now."

Diligently, he undid the bindings on himself, and he suddenly felt much less secure now he had severed his connection to the surface, as if he might topple into the shaft at the slightest lean forwards. However, there was plenty of length in the rope to lash around the zoomer, so he set to it, wrapping it around the mid-section where he thought the weight would be most balanced, and fastening it securely with the strongest knots he knew. When he had double and triple checked the lashings, he shouted back up again.

"OK, the zoomer's attached! Start pulling it up when you're ready, but be careful. It's going to be heavy!"

Up on the surface, the others heard his signal, and prepared themselves, taking the strain on the rope.

"OK Jak! Here we go!" shouted Ashelin. "Now!"

She, Torn and Olto all took slow, synchronised steps backwards down the hill. They could feel the weight now, and gripped tightly as it threatened to pull back on them and drag them into the pit.

"Oof!" grunted Olto from the end of the line. "This is heavy!"

But they had the procedure all carefully worked out in advance; by walking down the slope of the hill in this way, they were able to slowly pull up the zoomer with a minimum of effort, using their own combined weight as a sort of counterbalance and the extra help of gravity to aid them.

Meanwhile, deep inside the dome, the zoomer began to lift before Jak's eyes, ever so slowly. He kept a hand on the tailfins, preventing it from swinging out wildly into space and keeping the heavier front from tipping forwards too much. Soon it was hanging freely in the centre of the shaft. The rope creaked threateningly as the zoomer rose inch by inch, but it was enduring. Their plan was working!

Jak waited until the zoomer rose above the edge of the next shelf up, and then began to manoeuvre it back over.

"Stop!" he called back up, and the movements halted. "Hold it there a moment!"

On the surface, the others planted their feet firmly against the hillside and leant back with the weight of the rope, holding it suspended and steady. They knew that the zoomer must now be hanging level
with the next shelf, but now their anxiety was peaked, because this meant that the riskiest part of the procedure had come.

Inside the dome, Jak climbed up and pulled himself onto the shelf above him, as quickly but as carefully as he could. He did so without incident; all of his climbing adventures in the past had prepared him well for this. But taking a quick look down into the endless drop still made his stomach lurch fearfully. This was almost as bad as in Gol and Maia's citadel, where he had been forced to navigate many floating platforms and rickety walkways high over a deep abyss, one of the most frightening and technical climbs of his life. Beneath him, the shaft continued downwards, with still more shelves bearing artefacts, no end in sight, and up above, the opening to the surface world was a distant pinprick of light.

Bringing himself back to the task at hand, he reached out again and pulled the zoomer towards himself, while at the same time the others on the surface lowered it gently when they felt the movement, until the zoomer was resting upon the metal beside Jak.

On the surface, the others relaxed the tension in the rope, much to their relief. This was a promising start; it had only taken them a few seconds to raise the zoomer up by one shelf, and they were still barely halfway down the hillside. But there were still many more levels to go.

After a short rest and checking that everything was still alright, they repeated the process, one step at a time, using each shelf on the way up as a resting point. Ashelin, Torn and Olto kept pulling, while Jak guided the effort from below. It was slow and strenuous work, but metre by metre, shelf by shelf, the zoomer was rising ever closer to the top, until it rested on the last one beneath the opening. This was the final obstacle, but also the most difficult.

"We've just got to go for it now!" said Jak encouragingly. "We're almost there. Just pull it up all the way."

The others prepared themselves for the final heave, and took their last steps back down the hill. By now their arms were pulsing from all the exercise, but they pulled on. They were so close. Then, for the first time in who knew how long, the zoomer finally emerged into the open air. They heaved it up onto the top of the dome, their muscles protesting, and it now sat before them, shining in the afternoon light. Ashelin, Torn and Olto were all amazed by the sight of it.

"Wow!" said Ashelin. "When you said zoomers, I never imagined them to look… like this!"

"But it looks great, doesn't it?" said Olto, feeling the chassis with his hand. "I'm going to look forward to flying one of these."

They took another rest, spending a few minutes admiring the old machine, before they once again set themselves at the rope. There were still two more zoomers down there, but after having successfully brought one up, they now felt much more confident about their chances of retrieving the others.

They repeated the entire procedure twice more, sending Jak back down into the depths, attaching the vine, and pulling up the other zoomers shelf by shelf. It took them a long time to complete their task, but the promise of escape made them persist boldly. All through the rest of the day they toiled. The sun was low and the shadows were long when the second zoomer was drawn out, and night had fallen by the time the third broke free of its prison. Ashelin, Olto and Torn were nearing the end of their strength after so much pulling, but they felt happy and rewarded with their efforts as all three zoomers now sat before them on the hilltop. They looked even more beautiful in the moonlight.

Finally, they helped Jak out too, and once he was back among them, they all hugged each other, and sat down together on the shoulder of the dome for another rest, basking in their achievement beneath
"We've all done really well today," said Torn with a tired but proud smile, leaning back against the metal hillside. "Good work, everyone."

"Yeah, we've had a real workout today," said Olto, flexing his arms back and forth. "We'll sleep well tonight!"

They were all feeling the ache of a long day's work, both physically and psychologically. Their entire bodies felt tingly and numb. Jak, who was the least tired, remained crouching by the zoomers, examining them fondly and carefully. Ashelin looked over to him, and then realised a problem that was now staring them in the face.

"We're one short," she said. "There's four of us but only three of these."

Torn and Olto saw it as well. "She's right."

"Jak, did you see any others when you were down there?" Ashelin asked.

Jak tried hard to remember. "I don't think so. Not on any of the nearest shelves at least. There could be more I suppose, but they're probably in much deeper. We might never get them out." He took another wary look through the opening.

Olto gave a smirk. "Guess two of us might have to share one then if we can't find another."

This dealt a dismal blow to their feeling of success, knowing that their work might still not be complete. They still needed to test if these zoomers actually still worked as well, but right now they were too tired to care.

"Oh, let's work this out tomorrow," said Ashelin at last. "It's too late now and I'm beat. Let's just get these things back to the camp and crash."

"In that order," Olto added humorously, sparking up a light chuckle from the group.

So all together, they summoned up their last strength and carried the zoomers, one by one, back through the trees. Compared to their previous workload, this did not take them long at all, and very soon, all three of the enigmatic vehicles were lined up on the sand beside their unfinished — and now perhaps unnecessary — raft.

Ashelin, Torn and Olto were feeling ready to collapse into sleep by now, but Jak lit one last fire and prepared some food, handing it out before they all turned in. They ate and talked together until the fire started to burn itself down, and when it did, the green sun rose above the ocean, directly ahead of their camp, and everyone turned to look at it. It was a peaceful and sleepy feeling to sit in its glow, and the ancient zoomers twinkled majestically, facing the open ocean, ready to ride. And this made them realise that tonight could perhaps be their final night on this island, the last time they would sit here and bask in the stars. They took a moment to collectively think about all they had been through here, the good and the bad.

"You know, it's going to be strange leaving this place," said Ashelin.

"Yeah," added Torn, finding nothing else to say. Out of all of them, he was the one who had arguably suffered the most on this island, and there was nothing here that he would miss.

"But hey, I'd say this has been a real adventure here," said Olto, remaining cheerful as always. "Sure, it's not always been easy, but we've made it through, haven't we? And we're probably stronger now
than we were before, and we've found all this treasure! Seriously though, I just want to say that I'm honoured to have been through this with you guys."

They all appreciated his sentiment. Then Ashelin yawned, and it contagiously affected the others.

"Well, let's finally call it a day then, shall we?" said Torn.

"Yeah, let's get some sleep," agreed Jak. "Tomorrow, let's see if these bad boys still work."

They all went to sleep that night in high spirits, nestled in the grass under the roof of the shelter that they had built from the ground up. If this was to be their last night on this island, then they could not be in a better mood for it.

High above them, the tops of the trees shuddered.

The night passed calmly without a single cloud, the four friends slept deeply, and the next morning dawned like any other before it, but in the air there was a sense that something great was about to happen.

When Jak woke up, the first thing that immediately came to his mind was the zoomers. In fact they had never truly left his thoughts throughout the entire night. He could not wait to get going with them, to find out how well they worked, and if they really could use them to get home. But despite his eagerness, he took a little moment to lie still among the grass, taking in the simple comforts of their primitive home, maybe for the last time. Outside he could hear the whispered voices of Ashelin and Torn, chatting over the crackling of the campfire.

At last he sat up, and saw that Olto still lay asleep close by, buried in the grass. He crawled past him quietly and emerged outside into the fresh morning air. Ashelin was sitting by the fire, eating some cooked fish slices with pieces of fruit, their usual breakfast.

"Morning," she said quietly, spitting out a fish bone as he came to sit beside her.

"Hi," he said back. "Where's Torn?"

"You just missed him actually. He's gone to the bathing lake," Ashelin explained. "Fruit?"

Jak took the bit he was offered with thanks, and looked around the camp contemplatively as he ate it. He had become quite proud of how it had developed over their time here, and it really did feel like it had become a home now. Everything they had gathered had its place and represented a part of the journey they had taken here: the Freedom League emblem still hanging on its tree; the long shell that Olto had found after the storm; the Hellcat seats and the rest of the debris that had all washed up on the beach; the stacks of wood for building and burning; the unfinished raft; the pile of Precursor artefacts from the dome; and finally, the three magnificent zoomers, all lined up at the edge of the beach, exactly where they had left them and just waiting to be flown.

Ashelin noticed how his eyes lingered passionately upon them. "You excited about today?"

"You bet I am," Jak answered with a grin. "Just look at them."

"You really think they'll work?"

"I sure hope so," said Jak. Though he did not like to admit it out loud, he was all too aware of the possibility that, like a few of the other artefacts they had rescued from the dome, these zoomers might
also have mechanical problems after such a long time of not being used, and then they would be back to square one. However, he had a good feeling about this. Keira’s old zoomers which these were based on were tough and reliable, and his positive spirits and anticipation made the chance of failure feel less perceptible.

"I hope they're comfortable," Ashelin said, groaning as she straightened her back. "I'm still feeling a bit stiff from all the lifting yesterday. Once Torn comes back from the lake, I think I'll go for a soak myself. Still, can't wait for a proper bath when we finally get home. How I've missed soap."

She chuckled, and Jak joined in too. It was funny how they could find humour in such simple things today.

"Alright, you ready to try them out?" asked Jak after he had quickly finished off his food, unable to maintain his patience.

"Shouldn't we wait until we're all here? Olto's not even up yet."

"Come on, we don't all need to be here for this," said Jak. "And they'll find out soon enough anyway."

He held out his hand in an offer to help her up, and Ashelin found it difficult to argue. Jak clearly could not force himself to wait. Not only was she just as keen about this as he was, but there was something about the boyish smirk he gave her that was extremely persuasive.

"Alright then," she said after a moment, relenting. "Let's give it a go. Lead on, Jak."

The two of them began by moving the heavy zoomers further out onto the open beach, one at a time, and placing them down about ten feet apart. While Ashelin massaged her still aching arms, Jak approached the last one they had carried over, and dug a circular pit in the sand beneath so that its base propeller would not get stuck when they turned it on. But once he was sure it was ready, he swung his leg over it and settled himself into the familiar saddle.

"Now let's see if these babies work!" he said, rubbing his hands together with excitement.

As he checked over the controls, Ashelin came to stand by his side to get a closer look at the dashboard.

"Hmm, it looks quite different to our modern ones back home," she said observantly.

But Jak knew exactly what to do. He gripped the handlebars and waited for a moment, taking in the feeling, but Ashelin stayed at his side looking on.

"You'll want to step back," he warned her.

Ashelin did as she was advised and took about ten paces backwards, then stood to watch with her arms folded, wondering just what would happen. These old models weren't dangerous, were they?

In the saddle, Jak made his final checks, and then gave Ashelin another mischievous smile. "Here we go!" he said, and then he slammed his fist down upon the ignition switch.

At once, the vehicle started to hum and vibrate underneath him, getting louder and stronger. Both propellers began spinning and built up speed, faster and faster until they were both a blur. Jak disappeared in a billow of sand, and Ashelin had to unfold her arms to shield herself from getting covered. Now she understood why the distance was necessary. But when she braved to open her eyes again, she saw the wondrous sight of the vehicle hovering in place, and Jak celebrating in the
saddle, pumping a fist into the air. She also assumed he was cheering, but the zoomer was making so much noise that he couldn’t be heard. She had not expected this thing to be so loud, the primal engine roaring with monstrous ferocity!

Jak was absolutely ecstatic, and was laughing hard all the while. It was working! He leant forwards a little and the zoomer began to move, drifting over the beach and leaving a cloud of sand in its wake. It behaved just as he remembered, and the controls were all coming back to him; the steering, the acceleration, and the noise! Then he gave it some speed and really began to put it through its paces. He pulled off a few sharp turns, made some jumps, and even flew out over the shallow waters, screaming over the low waves. There was not a single splutter from the engine nor a single glitch in the controls; it handled perfectly!

All the while, Ashelin watched as he lost himself to the thrill of speed, and cheered him on. This was fantastic! The zoomer worked, and in the experienced hands of Jak it could really fly!

At last, Jak brought it back, slowed it to a halt alongside the others, and hit the switch. The zoomer touched back down delicately on the sand, and as the roaring of the engine died away, Jak replaced it with a roar of his own as he celebrated the success, both arms held high in victory.

"Woo! Yeah!"

Ashelin came running over, losing herself to her own excitement. "You did it, Jak!" she cheered, bright and beaming. "It works! It works! Isn't this great?"

Jak dismounted from the saddle and ran a hand along the chassis, feeling its warmth. "Man, I've missed this!"

"Loud, isn't it though?" said Ashelin, still laughing. "I bet that's woken Olto up!"

Jak was already looking to the two others, raring to continue the feeling of success. "Come on, let's test the other two. Take your pick."

"Alright!" said Ashelin, unable to resist. She was excited to have a go herself, but also a little nervous at the same time about whether she would be able to control it. She could fly the modern ones well enough of course, but she did not know what to expect from these older models, or how different they would be.

However, once Jak had explained the simplified basics and she was up in the saddle with the engine running, it all came to her quite naturally. Apart from the heavier weight, the whirring propellers and the different angle of the handlebars, it was almost the same as their modern descendants. This was easy! Though she couldn't keep up with Jak's greater vehicle skills, she was soon flying confidently.

The two of them raced each other up and down the sand for a few minutes, just enjoying themselves. Finally they pulled up together, and from their saddles, they smiled broadly and triumphantly at each other, and then exchanged an excellent high five and a shout of success. Once they were back on their feet, they each threw a fond arm around each other, sharing in their joy and exhilaration.

"They're all perfect!" said Jak proudly, once they had calmed down a bit. He couldn't believe their luck. "Now we really can go home!"

"I know!" Ashelin said, "But we'll still need one more though. Let's hope there's another one somewhere in the dome, huh?"

"Yeah, it's worth another look anyway," said Jak. He had completely forgotten about that. "But what if we can't find another one?"
"We'll figure something out," Ashelin replied confidently. "But right now, let's go tell Olto and Torn the good news. Then we can put our heads together and start properly planning our journey home."

"Sounds like a plan," said Jak, squeezing Ashelin's shoulder again. "You head back to camp first, I'll come in a minute."

Ashelin jogged excitedly back to the camp, while Jak knelt down beside one of the zoomers again, dusting the sand off their bodies. For some reason he thought they should be kept as pristinely clean as possible. But he smiled to himself as he worked, unable to keep his positive emotions suppressed for any long time.

_Keira's in for a real treat when we ride back into the city on these bad boys! _he thought to himself, patting the seat.

But suddenly, a harrowing scream shattered his pleasant thoughts, and the sound of it struck him like an icy dagger to the stomach. He looked up. That was Ashelin's voice, and it came from the camp! Without any hesitation, he abandoned the zoomers and sprinted back there as fast as he could, sand kicking up behind him and fear coursing through his very veins. He had never heard Ashelin scream before; she just wasn't like that, and only the most extreme peril would cause her to do so!

"Ashelin!" he called out as he ran. "Ashelin, are you OK?"

There was no answer, and sensing danger, he ran even faster. He skidded into the boundaries of the camp with no idea of what awaited him. But Ashelin was there, standing as still as a statue with her back to him... and apparently unharmed.

Jak was momentarily relieved and confused at the same time. "Ashelin, what is it?"

But when he stepped up beside her, he could see what had made her scream, and he would have too, had his voice not frozen up inside his throat.

Then Torn came crashing through the trees, dripping wet and shirtless. He too had heard Ashelin's scream all the way from the lake, and had immediately rushed to the aid. But he arrived finding that there was nothing he could do, for on the ground before them, Olto lay dead.
Author's notes: This is the final chapter. I hope it provides a suitable and exhilarating conclusion to the story. My greatest thanks to everyone who has read it, provided kudos and comments so far, especially to the reader 'shamalamadingdong' who has provided the most comments. I hope I will still be receiving more comments and likes even now this story has no more official updates. I may return to it at some point, as I often find that when I read through things with a fresh eye, I find extra little pieces to add or changes I can make, so it is a continuing process.

I must say, when I first started uploading my story to this website, I wasn't sure how much interest it would receive, especially since it took a few weeks before the first Kudos came in. But it seems I do have a fair audience here, so I will continue posting more of my stories here.

I do have a second story which is currently undergoing revisions and rewritings, and there will be an even bigger third story which will tie up the loose ends of both. Keep posted for that.

Thanks again to all.

Olto's body was lying face up on the ground in the middle of the camp, his shocked eyes devoid of their usual cheerful life. A sickly yellow foam coated his lips, the sand around him was sprinkled with blood, and worst of all, there was a large open wound in his chest that still leaked.

Nobody ran forward to help him, for they knew there was no point, and they were all too paralysed with shock to take even the first step. Torn put a hand to his head and turned away, Jak held his breath in disbelief, and a tear fell down Ashelin's face. For the first time, there was not a single sound on the whole island, and nobody could find their voices or their minds, unable to comprehend this terrible, unpredictable sight.

Finally, the long silence broke when Jak asked the only words he could muster. "How did this happen?"

But nobody could answer. Torn looked like he had just been shot, and Ashelin was visibly trembling. The numbing terror spread between them contagiously.

But then, Olto's body disturbingly began to twitch, and Jak, Ashelin and Torn all looked on in horror as something black and hideous began emerging through the hole in his chest. First came long, prickly legs, and then a hairy, glistening body. It was a spider, a huge, ugly spider, coated red with blood and pulling at a piece of inner flesh that was still attached to something. Perched atop Olto's defiled body, it then became aware of the others surrounding it, and hissed fiercely.

They backed away from it uneasily, gripped too tightly by fear and shock to react in any other way. Torn's back hit one of the trees, and above him, something cracked, and a shard of it fell at his feet. They all looked up, and saw the sphere of bark at the very top of the tree breaking open and giving birth to a second spider, much bigger than the one that had slain Olto. Free of its casing, it glared down through the leaves upon the figures in the camp with all eight of its predatory eyes.
A sudden, terrible realisation breached Jak's fear. At last, he understood what those treetop spheres were, those curious growths that had puzzled him ever since his first day on this island.

"They're eggs!" he breathed with wide-eyed horror. "Spider eggs!"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

More were breaking open all around the camp. Then suddenly, something dropped behind Jak and Ashelin, and they spun around to face two even larger spiders, blocking off the route of escape to the beach. Their eyes sparkled hungrily, their pincers clicked and hissed, and they looked ready to pounce.

Then panic took over.

"RUN!" Jak bellowed.

He and Ashelin both bolted at the same time just as one of the spiders leapt between them. Leaving their fallen comrade, they all sprinted into the forest in a consuming fear, desperate to escape the horror they had just witnessed. But behind them, they could hear the rapid pursuit of the spiders' pattering feet. They were giving chase!

"Just keep running!" Jak yelled.

"Where?" Torn shouted back.

"Anywhere!"

Within seconds, they had broken through to the Precursor dome, but they ran straight past it, Torn around one way, Ashelin and Jak the other. When they met up on the far side, they crashed into the undergrowth again, and the world became a frantic, terrifying blur. Wild brambles tore at their legs, roots threatened to trip them, and sharp branches whipped their faces, but they fought through it desperately, not caring where their feet took them.

At last, the forest thinned out and they emerged into a clearer area, their clothing ragged, their skin scratched, and their chests pumping painfully. They could endure no more and go no further, and here they dared to stop, standing together protectively and listening tensely. The sounds of pursuit had died away. Here there was complete, deathly silence, save for their own heaving breaths. Finally, they relaxed a little.

"I think... we've lost them," panted Torn, holding a painful stitch in his side, but he warily surveyed their surroundings, aware that he could be wrong.

They were in a protected area beside a tall, moss-covered rock. He recognised it; this was where Ashelin had found him on the day their first raft had failed, when he had stormed away in anger. Unpleasant and shameful emotions still lingered here, but they were nothing compared to the great sorrow that now descended and smothered them all, as the loss they had just suffered began to properly sink in. It hit Ashelin first and the hardest, and still breathing painfully, she slumped down into the very spot Torn had once occupied, her back against the stone.

"Olto... no!"

There was both anger and despair in her quivering voice, and she clutched at her head hard, her broken nails biting into her scalp through her lank hair. Torn and Jak looked round to her, both feeling the crushing pain as well, as if a part of themselves had died too. It was so bad it made them feel sick.
"This is wrong," said Torn heavily, his shoulders sagging. "He didn't deserve to end like that..."

Jak could say nothing, his emotions blurring his eyes. Olto's death was hitting him just as hard as Daxter's, and the sight of his two usually dauntless friends almost breaking down only hammered the stake in deeper.

Though they were all hardened soldiers who had witnessed many of their own men slaughtered horrifically in battle, the sight of Olto's mutilated body was still strong enough to leave deep scars, because he had become so close to them during their difficult time on this island. They had all worked, lived, and survived together as a team, and Olto's unconquerable cheerfulness had served as a much-needed lifeline for them on numerous occasions, banishing the gloom that plagued them and pulling them through their dire situation with hope and camaraderie. But now that was all gone. He had been killed, right when they least expected it, and the morale perished with him.

"He was a good man," Ashelin said blankly.

"A fine soldier," said Torn in unconscious response.

"And a great friend," finished Jak.

Another terrible, mournful silence fell, drowning them in grief as they each privately battled with their inner emotions. This was unbearable. They all felt like traitors for just leaving his body behind like that. Why had they run? Why didn't they stand and fight off those monsters? Was there something they could have possibly done to save him?

Suddenly, a disturbance in the bushes broke the moment, and everyone tensed up again. But before they could work out exactly where it had come from, a lone spider burst through the foliage and launched itself straight at Ashelin in her vulnerable position on the ground. Her eyes widened in fright, and her reflexes were only just quick enough, as she batted it out of the air with a strong left forearm within inches of her face. It hit the ground on its back, its legs writhing grotesquely.

Torn was about to jump forwards to help, but Ashelin was on her feet in less than a second, and with a vengeful cry, she stomped down hard upon the spider's exposed thorax. It screeched as its body was crushed sickeningly under her boot, but Ashelin did not stop there. Her anger took control, and she stamped again and again and again without mercy, until there were only small fragments and a dark stain in the grass.

"That's for Olto!" she snarled, spitting on the destroyed corpse.

She stood there for a moment, heaving with anger and breathing sharply through clenched teeth. Jak and Torn had witnessed the whole thing, and her unshackled rage actually frightened them. Torn tried approaching her slowly, while Jak returned his attention to their surroundings, knowing that if one spider had followed them, then others might too.

"Ashelin?" Torn asked cautiously. "You alright?"

Ashelin's breathing slowed, her anger subsided, and then she let out one long, deep breath. "Yeah... yeah, I think so."

"Heck of a kill though," said Jak impressively.

Ashelin scowled. "I sure hope that was the one that killed Olto."

There was a cold hatred in her voice that was enough to chill even Torn and Jak, but they both sympathised with her emotion, understanding it completely.
"Just what in the hell's going on here?" said Torn seriously, eyeing what was left of the spider.
"Where did these things come from? Have they been hiding in those trees all this time?"

"I don't know. Maybe," said Jak, without disrupting his vigil. "But we'd better get moving. More could turn up at any moment."

"It doesn't matter," said Ashelin dangerously, drawing her gun and cocking it ready. Killing this first spider had given her confidence and a tempting taste of vengeance, and now she was ready for more. "I'll kill them all."

"Easy, Ashelin," said Torn with both hands raised placatingly. "I don't blame you at all, but we've got to be careful. They killed Olto, and they could just as easily do the same to us. We're barely armed, and we don't know just how many we could be up against."

"You're right," added Jak, still keeping a strong eye out. He raised a finger. "Listen..."

Through the silence of the deep woodland, they could hear the faint crack, crack, crack, as more spider eggs hatched, coming from every direction at once.

"Those spider egg trees are all around the island," said Jak. "If they're all hatching right now, there could be hundreds of them."

This was what caused Ashelin to reconsider, imagining the possibility that they could be trapped here in the middle of the island, surrounded by a barrier of carnivorous spiders that blocked their only escape. Though all three of them were experienced and competent fighters, Olto's death had crippled their resolve and made the danger all the more palpable. Facing that many potential enemies was tough enough even when they were properly prepared for it, but here they were caught unawares and vulnerable, with only one gun between the three of them, nowhere near suitably equipped for full-on battle. As much as she desired to continue dishing out payback on the monsters that had slaughtered Olto, she understood now that fighting back was not worth the risk.

She gave a heavy, exasperated sigh. "Then what are we going to do?"

Torn saw only one answer. A good commander knew when to fight and when to retreat, and this was definitely not a time to fight. They had to get out of here, and he knew how.

"Jak, did I hear you testing those zoomers earlier? Do they work?"

Jak looked back at him, and at once they were both thinking the same thing. "Oh yeah, they work all right," he said with a growing, bold grin of understanding.

Torn's hopes were secured. "In that case then, we're getting out of here. Right now. Today's the day we escape this island."

All their eyes met, and they all felt the significance of this decision.

"We can't stay here," Torn continued seriously after a few seconds of no reaction. "Sooner or later those spiders are gonna find us, and I don't think we can fight our way out of this one. We'll be overwhelmed. The zoomers are our only hope now, and we've got to reach them."

Ashelin looked like she agreed, but there was doubt in her eyes. "But the zoomers are on the other side of the island from here," she said worriedly, questioning herself again as to why they had run, "And the camp could be crawling with those spiders by now."

"I know, it could be bad," Torn accepted. "But we've got to go back. All our supplies are there and
we'll need them once we're out on the ocean. The quicker we get moving, the better chance we have of escaping here alive. Now who's with me?"

He held a hand out in front of him, and after a few seconds, Jak placed his on top, and then Ashelin. Here they were, united as one against what could prove to be their greatest test of survival yet.

"We will escape this island, and we will get back home," said Torn with inspiring determination. Then they all withdrew their hands and placed a closed fist over their hearts: the Freedom League salute of solidarity.

Their goal was clear then: reach the zoomers and use them to escape, but it would be easier said than done, and it would require all the bravery and ability they could muster. They were being forced to flee the island before they had properly prepared for their journey, and they had no way of knowing just how many spiders could be prowling the forests and beaches right now.

"So how're we going to do this then?" Jak asked. "What's our plan?"

"I see two options," said Torn, his quick military mind analysing the situation. "We can head back through the forest. It'll be slow, but we could use the thick undergrowth for cover. Or we can head out to the coast. We could move quicker along the beach, but we'd be out in the open and more easily spotted."

Jak and Ashelin considered it for just a few seconds. "Let's take the forest," they both voted.

Torn agreed with them. "Yeah, that was my choice. Should be the safest option." He paused and scraped a hand damp with sweat over his rough chin. "Alright, here's what we'll do. First we'll make for the dome, and then from there we'll try and reach the camp. We'll gather up as many supplies as we can carry, and then make a run for the zoomers."

"And if we encounter any spiders?" asked Ashelin.

"We'll defend ourselves if we have to," said Torn, "But I'd prefer to avoid drawing attention to ourselves as much as possible. Escaping undetected is our best shot, before any more of them realise we're here."

"Fine with me," said Jak. "But... which way's the camp?"

That was a good question. In their blind running fear, they had lost their bearings and orientation, but Torn tried to figure it out.

"We came from this way, didn't we?" he said, looking to the dense wall of foliage they had crashed through, but from this side it looked almost impassable. Even if they did get through it, there was a chance they might run straight into the other spiders that had chased them from the camp.

"We'll have to go around it and find an alternate way back," Torn decided, and with their intentions set, they all took a few moments to psychologically prepare themselves.

Torn finally got his shirt back on and drew his knife from his belt. "You ready?"

Jak and Ashelin nodded. This was it.

"Alright, let's go."

Sticking close together, they disappeared into the shadows of the trees, keeping their eyes peeled and their ears sharp. The island's peaceful atmosphere had completely changed to one of ominous and
restless foreboding. For several minutes they encountered nothing, but they could hear strange, unsettling noises and movements all around, as if the whole forest had come alive and was whispering with ill intentions.

Ashelin squeezed the handle of her gun in reassurance, prepared to use it at the first sign of true danger. "I don't like this," she whispered, her eyes scanning the gaps between the trees. "It feels like we're being watched."

As they continued deeper still into the woodland, their continuous diligence put a strain on their senses. At the rear of the group, Jak found himself actually wishing that something would attack them, to end this dreadful cloud of unknowing. The rest of those spiders could show up at any moment, but where were they? He was expecting to have encountered some by now. Were there really not that many after all? Or had they not ventured this deep into the wood yet, still clustering around their trees at the coast? Or had they just been incredibly lucky in avoiding them so far?

But then they heard movements really close, and they all ducked down into the bushes, out of sight. Through a small gap in the leaves, they saw the unmistakable shapes of three spiders crawl into view, and pause not far ahead of them, chattering and scratching the blanketed earth with clawed feet.

Jak and Torn dared not to make a sound, but Ashelin slowly aimed her weapon through the leaves, ready to fire. Torn pushed the gun down with his hand, and Ashelin read his silently moving lips: "No. Wait for them to pass."

The spiders lingered for about a minute that felt much longer, as if picking up on some scent and searching the forestry for prey. The three friends lying hidden waited fearfully, their hearts pounding so hard that they feared it would give them away. But then the spiders abandoned whatever interest they had apparently sensed, and scuttled off again into the shadows of the deep woodland.

Torn slowly began to rise from hiding, checking that the creatures had really left the area. There was no sign of them, and he wordlessly beckoned Ashelin and Jak to follow. That was a close call. They crossed where the spiders had moments ago been prowling, and thence into the undergrowth again. They encountered no more for some time, but the forest still felt as uncomfortable and hostile as ever, and soon they started to feel lost. These were the least-visited parts of the island that they did not know so well; nothing here was familiar, and it all looked the same. The longer it took to find their objective, the more their doubts and uncertainty grew.

"Are you sure this is the right way, Torn?" Ashelin whispered.

But Torn had a plan. He knew from the rough direction they had taken that they must be heading around the island in a clockwise direction. That meant that the Precursor dome had to be lying somewhere through the thick foliage to their right, and if they went left, he knew they would eventually arrive at the coast. But they did not want to go that way yet, into the perilous line of spider trees that encircled the woods. Sooner or later though, he knew they would have to break through it to get to the sea, but for now, all they had to do was continue on their current course bending gently rightwards. He paused in a small clearing just to re-orientate himself and double-check.

"It can't be far now. Just keep going. Yes, this way."

They continued further, and Torn's hunch proved accurate. Very soon, they caught the familiar glint of orange metal through the trees up ahead.

"There!" hissed Torn. "That's the dome."
With their goal finally in sight, the heavy feeling lifted somewhat, and they picked up the pace a little more. The dome stood before them now, but here they paused behind some bushes at the threshold of the trees where the sunlight could not find them, waiting and listening. The area around this side of the dome seemed deserted, but in the open air above them, they could hear the disturbing sounds clearer than ever. The entire island was waking up, and it made them reluctant to leave the relative safety of their hiding place. But they had to move on.

"Are we good?" asked Jak, who was keeping his eyes backwards in case they were being followed.

Torn gritted his teeth. "Alright, we've not got far to go now. The camp's just round the other side. We just have to go for it."

He took one last long look into the open area. Nothing.

"Alright, come on."

Stepping out into the open, they immediately felt dangerously exposed and vulnerable, and they moved as quietly but as quickly as they could, searching for the opening in the forest that would lead them back to camp. But then suddenly, a chilling hiss froze them to the spot, and a spider appeared right atop the dome's summit. Ashelin took instinctive aim with her weapon and fired. A concentrated eco projectile hit the spider squarely in the eyes, and it screeched and reeled and went tumbling backwards into the shaft.

But the gunshot echoed across the whole island, treacherously revealing their presence. For a moment there was answering silence, but then the forest seemed to tremble, the noises around them intensified, and there was a rapid rustling of leaves closing in on them from all directions.

"They're coming!" said Torn in alarm. "Move! This way! Quick!"

They broke into a run, but they did not get far before they were seen again.

"Ashelin! To the left!" yelled Jak, as another spider came leaping out of the trees. Ashelin saw it just in time, and with another deft shot, it fell down dead.

Then, they found the cut leading back to their camp, but they were forced to skid to a halt as an entire cluster of spiders came streaming through it, attracted by the sound of the gunfire. Their path was blocked, and more were breaking through the bushes all around, flooding in from all sides. There was no avoiding it now; they had to fight and defend themselves!

With their backs to the dome, they prepared to face the surrounding swarm. Ashelin kept on firing fiercely, preventing any spider from coming within five feet of her. To her right, Torn brandished his knife and slashed at any that came too close, severing legs and fangs. Jak found himself snapping a branch off a nearby tree, and was swinging at the attacking insects, knocking them back into the bushes they scuttled out of. They battled bravely until only a few spiders remained, and these stragglers seemed to sense that their prey was too powerful, and they began to back off, hissing and spitting venom. Ashelin still fired after them, taking out a few more as they scuttled away back into the trees again, but some escaped. Then the area around the dome was quiet. The three warriors stood back to back, listening to the unnerving silence, as the twitching corpses and body parts of their defeated foes littered the ground around their feet.

At last, Ashelin lowered her smoking weapon. "That... was satisfying," she breathed. Her bloodlust and thirst for revenge had been quenched... for the moment.

"Everyone alright?" asked Jak, still watching the tree line. He was sure there were still many eyes on
Nobody was hurt, but Torn's focussed mind was only on their objective. "Come on! The way's clear. Now's our chance! Through here, quick! We're almost back to the camp!"

They ran onwards onto familiar and well-trodden ground, not daring to hang around here any longer. Now their adrenaline was really flowing and it drove them on, but the noises in the trees were alive again and more riled up than ever. They may have driven the spiders back for now, but they knew that they would inevitably return, likely in greater numbers, and then they might not be so lucky. The entire island now knew they were here, hunting them down. But the closer they drew to their campsite, they found themselves feeling growing apprehension rather than safety; they knew what awaited them back there, and they would be forced to again confront the horrors they had fled from. But they each swallowed their fear and bravely continued, knowing it was the difference between escape and death.

When they emerged through the trees and stopped, they dreaded to find more spiders waiting for them, but the camp was deserted. Pieces of broken eggshells littered the sandy grass and cracked underfoot, and up in the trees, there were still several ominously unbroken. Out on the unprotected beach, there lay a clear line to their goal; the zoomers remained untouched but dangerously exposed in the open. Olto's body, however, had disturbingly disappeared; only a few bloodstains in the sand remained.

"He's gone!" said Ashelin with shock.

"Ashelin, we can't go looking for him," Torn reiterated. "I'm sorry but there's not enough time. Come on, we need to grab our supplies and get to the zoomers while we have a clear shot."

"What about the artefacts?" asked Jak.

Their eyes all fell upon the heap of loot, in momentary doubt. They could only really afford to take what was necessary, but none of them wished to part with the treasure they had worked so hard to obtain.

"Just take as many as we can carry," Torn decided. "But essentials first. Hurry! We don't have much time."

They got to work immediately. Jak took responsibility for gathering up the food, stuffing all the fruits they had left into his backpack, and then he disappeared inside the shelter to search for anything that had been missed. Ashelin found her weathered jacket and put it back on, and then began sweeping up random artefacts into the Precursor bag they had recovered from the dome. Meanwhile Torn stood guard, keeping a vigilant eye out on the surrounding area and frequently glancing up at the foreboding eggs in the trees that had not yet hatched. At the same time he tried to make sure they had everything necessary for their journey on the ocean: food, the medical kit, their clothes... but there was something missing... something important...

"Where's the water flask?"

"Here it is," said Jak, finding it knocked aside and hidden beneath a fragment of shell. "Uh oh."

Torn tensed up and Ashelin reached for her gun again. "What is it?"

Jak shook the flask in his hand, and it made only the faintest swish. "It's almost empty."

Torn growled at this setback, and their momentum slammed to a frustrating halt. They could not leave the island without any water, and they all knew at once what this meant. They cast a wary
glance back the way they had come. There was no other option: they would have to venture back into the perilous forest again, back to the lake to fill the flask before they could escape.

"I'll do it," Jak volunteered bravely.

"We'll come too," said Ashelin at once.

"No," Jak argued. "If we all go, we're more likely to attract attention. You need to stay here and keep this way clear so we can escape."

"Jak, you can't go back in there alone!" Ashelin protested, unwilling for them to be separated from one another at such a desperate time as this. "We need to stick together!"

"It'll only take a minute," said Jak persistently, already unstrapping his backpack full of fruits. He forced it into Torn's hands. "Here, keep packing things into this and prep the zoomers. If I'm not back in two minutes, you need to get out of here. Just get on the zoomers and go."

Torn looked out to where the three vehicles lay shining on the sand, wishing they could just run to them right now while they had a clear shot. The riled noises in the trees were getting closer. Though he didn't like this any more than Ashelin, he knew that Jak was right, and arguing with him would waste precious seconds. This was a necessary risk, and he was the best man to undertake it.

"Go on, Jak," he said in capitulation, "But we're not leaving without you."

Jak accepted. Ashelin tried to argue again, but she could think of nothing to say that would blunt the steely look of determination in Jak's eyes.

"Trust me, Ashelin," he said, looking directly at her. "I can do this."

Ashelin looked pained and powerless as Jak began to step back towards the forest path. This was just suicide! But then she reached out and stopped him by the shoulder. Jak expected more resistance and to have to rationalise his actions to her again, but instead Ashelin looked at him with calm understanding.

"Jak, wait. Take this." She took his other hand and placed her gun into it, closing his fingers around the handle just as she had done with the beacon that had saved his life on the day of his exile from Haven City, so long ago. The memory of it was reawakened in both of their minds at this instant. She was not going to lose him again.

"Hopefully you won't have to use it, but just in case. Be careful, alright?"

Then she quickly kissed him on the cheek. A warm and genuine smile momentarily fluttered onto Jak's face, but then it was replaced again with the hard and determined look that Ashelin now reflected straight back at him. He nodded once, and they both understood his objective.

"I'll be right back."

Then he was gone, back down the shaded path to the dome and out of sight.

"I sure hope he knows what he's doing," Ashelin muttered fearfully, already feeling immediate misgivings about letting him go off on his own.

"He'll be fine," said Torn, trying to be reassuring, but in truth he was feeling just as much apprehension. "He's got through worse scrapes than this before. Come on, you heard him. We need to keep packing."
They returned their attention to their supplies, continuing to pack what they needed in subdued but hasty silence. They were almost ready. The bag of artefacts was getting full, but due to its unique and unexplainable properties, it was not heavy and felt like it could still take much more. Torn was still trying to think if they had forgotten anything, looking alternately around the camp, then out to the zoomers, then up at the trees, and down the forest path. Still no sign of Jak.

But then suddenly, no more than a minute after he had left, gunshots tore through the forest and they both looked up in fright, feeling their impact even from here.

"Jak!" shouted Ashelin, understanding at once that he must be under attack, but the only answer she got was more gunshots. "Torn, he's in trouble!"

She immediately abandoned what she was doing and darted for the trees, but before Torn could stop her or follow, there came another threatening crack! from above them, followed by another and another, as a fresh wave of eggs began to hatch all across the island. The sound froze Ashelin in her tracks, and then she found her path suddenly blocked by another spider that had dropped down in front of her. She reached automatically for the absent weapon in her empty holster. Without it she felt naked and vulnerable, but she reacted quickly and leapt back, her hands finding the extendable rod artefact from the pile, and she gripped it tightly in defence. If she had to go through these spiders to reach Jak, then so be it.

"Come on!" she growled, but it showed no intimidation and sprang forwards. She swung the rod and sent it flying back into the leaves.

Behind her, Torn drew his knife out again, ready to join her and renew the fight. But he found himself occupied by yet more spiders that dropped down from the trees and scuttled through the bushes into the campsite. A whole new swarm had found them, much more than last time!

"This is bad!" he shouted, kicking an attacking one away from him. "There's too many! We'll be overrun if we don't get moving now!"

"But we can't go without Jak!" Ashelin yelled, clubbing another spider into submission. "I knew this was a bad idea. Jak! Come on! Where the hell are you?"

They continued to fight, but above the violent noise in the campsite, they could hear the gunshots drawing promisingly nearer. And then, Ashelin caught sight of Jak's shape racing down the path at full speed. He was shooting backwards over his shoulder, and gesturing frantically ahead.

"Go!" he roared, his voice fraught with a panic that it rarely ever showed. "To the zoomers! Now!"

He blasted his way through the last of the spiders that separated him from Ashelin, and then he threw the water flask to her. She caught it, and could feel the heavier weight of water within. He had succeeded, filled it right to the brim, but now the entire island was closing in on them!

"Alright, time to go!" Torn ordered as soon as he saw Jak re-emerge. "Grab the stuff and go!"

Still fighting off the increasingly numerous insects, they swept up all the belongings they could carry. Torn dodged one last spider and dashed out onto the sand, followed closely by Ashelin, their hearts thumping painfully. The zoomers lay right ahead of them unobstructed, but when Ashelin glanced back over her shoulder, she could see that Jak was not following.

"Jak! What are you doing?" she bellowed in disbelief, her pace slackening unexpectedly.

"They're too close! We'll never make it in time! I'll hold them off!" Jak shouted back from the edge of the camp. "Get the zoomers started! Just go!"
He'd shot at one of the long sticks from their collection, setting it afire, and was brandishing it before him in sweeping motions. It kept the spiders at bay, scared to approach him, and he held his ground, occasionally still firing whenever a spider dared to get too close.

Fighting her urge to turn back and aid him, Ashelin forced herself to keep running, praying that Jak was going to be safe. When she reached the zoomers, Torn was already in a saddle flicking switches, and the blades on his zoomer began to turn. Ashelin shouldered the bag of artefacts and swung a leg over the one beside him.

Back at the camp, Jak was still holding off the spiders, but soon there were too many for him to handle, and his ammo was almost gone.

"Wait, what am I doing?" he said to himself. Now was the time to run!

He hurled the depleted weapon at the leading spider, cast the burning branch to the sand at his feet, and then span on his heels and sprinted out into the open. He only hoped he had bought Ashelin and Torn enough time for the head start they needed, but had he taken too long to save himself? Would this be his last sacrifice?

Torn looked round as Ashelin started up her vehicle, and finally saw the true scale of the hunt. Spiders were now flooding out of every opening in the line of trees up and down the entire beach, turning the sand black with their teeming mass. There had to be hundreds! In the middle of it all was Jak, an insignificant speck in the centre of a tidal swarm that was fast surrounding him. He ran furiously, his face contorted and pained from fear and exertion, but his pursuers were gaining, and soon he would be swamped from all sides like a boat in a stormy ocean.

"He's not gonna make it!" Torn gasped with dreadful realisation.

Ashelin looked back and beheld the dire scene, the spiders hot on Jak's heels. They were all around him! Baring her teeth in fury and determination, she revved the handlebars on her zoomer and swerved it back round to face the trees. "Come on! We've got to help him!"

She shot off with a screaming noise, and Torn quickly did the same in a last desperate attempt to save their friend. On their zoomers they felt powerful and untouchable, and they passed Jak on both sides in a cloud of sand. The foremost spiders of the pursuing swarm halted before the loud, deadly spinning propellers, and then scurried backwards over the ones behind them, sending the horde into a scattering disarray. The ones further back screeched and snapped their pincers, unable to get close.

"Go, Jak!" Ashelin shouted over the din of the two engines.

Jak found he now had a clear path to the last zoomer but did not slow down for anything. Though his chest throbbed and his legs were burning, when he was close enough he took one massive leap into the saddle and activated the propellers in a single fluid motion.

"Let's go! Now!" he shouted back.

Ashelin and Torn did not hear his voice with three primal engines now roaring together, but they glanced back and could see that he was now ready. They turned around just in time, for some of the spiders had now gained the daring to start attacking the vehicles and try to pull the riders from their seats, and they continued to chase after them as they sped towards the open waters.

"Keep going!" Jak yelled from the leading vehicle, Torn and Ashelin not far behind him. But even now they were not yet out of danger. The spiders were encircling them again. Some of the ones that had spread out in their scattering had regrouped with the many others at the rear, their ranks swelling.
once more, and they were moving quickly out in front of the zoomers to head them off. A line of them stood between the ocean and the approaching vehicles, forming a last desperate barrier to prevent them from escaping. They were screeching ferociously in defiance and their front legs were raised high.

"Hang on!" Jak bellowed.

The three survivors pushed their vehicles to the limits and ploughed right through the spiders, chopping them to pieces on the front propellers. Blood and body parts sprayed upwards, splashing in their faces, but they kept going in a straight line until they saw water rushing beneath them. They had broken over the shoreline and were cresting the low waves.

When Ashelin next looked back over her shoulder, the beach was far behind them, connected only by a wide wake that streamed out from the tails of their zoomers. The sand was lined with black spiders who could not follow; many screeched angrily after them, while others tried to pursue into the shallows, only to be tossed back by the waves or drowned.

"We're clear!" Ashelin shouted climactically. "They can't follow us now!"

Torn and Jak looked behind as well, but did not stop. All three of them kept zooming along together as one without slowing down, out over deeper waters and beyond reach, but wide, euphoric smiles were growing on their faces with every metre they left behind them. The wind was in their hair and a great feeling swelled in their hearts. Then Jak could contain himself no longer, and he let out a long yell of triumph as they screamed out over the open ocean.

"Wooooooo! Yeah!"

He punched the air with his first, and soon Torn and Ashelin were cheering along with him. They'd done it! They'd escaped the island and the clutches of those spiders! Then finally they slowed to a hovering standstill far from the island, and pulled up alongside each other and laughed, sharing high-fives from the saddles.

"Well done, guys!" cheered Torn. "Well done!" Then he shouted back at the island. "You think you can eat us? Pah! Not likely!"

Their hearts were still beating fast and their breathing still deep, but now away from the danger their emotions began to dim with every passing second, shrinking to a quiet buzz. All three of them stopped and took a gaze upon the island that had been their home for the past long weeks. Viewed from a distance, it looked peaceful and quiet, and the top of the dome was clearly visible above the trees, a small light glinting in the sun. In their dwindling emotions, they actually now felt sad to be leaving.

Jak leaned forwards, finally able to relax, and rested his arms upon the warm vibrating body of his vehicle. "It's over!" he breathed, still feeling the pulsing pain of exertion in his chest. "We made it!"

"Well... not all of us," Ashelin said, suddenly solemn.

Torn and Jak remembered, and then silent reverence fell over their spot on the ocean, in memory of their lost friend who had died so undeservedly. Gazing mournfully upon the island, it hurt to know that his body was still back there somewhere among the spiders. Ashelin most of all wished she could have brought him home, or at least given him an honoured burial, but there had been no time. The soldier in her understood that in times of crisis such as this, they had to focus on saving those who still lived. But still... he would be dearly missed.
"Rest in peace, Olto," Ashelin said. "I'm sorry we couldn't save you."

They all sat there in their saddles, the hum of their engines the only sound.

"Well... that's that then," Jak said at last, bringing the long moment of solace to a close.

Ashelin suppressed her last tear and accepted. "How much food did we get away with in the end?" she asked, turning her attention back to what most immediately mattered.

Torn still held Jak's backpack, and he took a look inside at all the fruits they had managed to escape with. "I'd say we've got enough to last us a good few days... if we use them sparingly."

He knew the medical kit also lay somewhere near the bottom. Ashelin had the water flask still and the bag of several artefacts, but Jak was empty-handed. This was less than he was satisfied with; in their mad scramble for the zoomers they had been forced to leave a lot behind, but they could not go back. They would have to make do with what they had got.

Torn strapped the bag around himself. "We should get going now," he suggested. "We've probably got a long ride ahead of us."

Finally, the three of them turned their heads to the other direction, to the open nothingness of the ocean and the cloudless passage that lay ahead.

"Which way's the city?" Jak wondered aloud. Throughout their time on the island, they had completely lost all sense of direction.

"This way's as good as any right now," said Torn. "Let's just keep going straight and see where it takes us."

Ashelin was ready and took charge, revving her handlebars. "OK boys, let's finally go home. Next stop, Haven City."

They smiled at each other, and as one, they fired up their engines again and began moving, into the sea, into the sun. Behind them, the island faded away into the blue haze of the watery horizon, taking its mysteries and its perils with it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](mailto:drop%20by%20the%20archive%20and%20comment) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!