

# BATTLE TIDES



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*By S. David Acuff*



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v 1.0

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BRAVOBAY BOOKS  
Los Angeles, California  
bravobaybooks@gmail.com

ISBN: 979-8-9888293-2-4 (hardback)  
979-8-9888293-3-1 (paperback)  
IMPRINT: BravoBay Books

## DEDICATION

First, to my three Jedi Princesses who  
are, by far, my greatest legacy...

*Caitlyn* - a mama bear protector with a  
righteous heart and a keen vision

*Alexis* - a lyrical poet with a full and  
prophetic heart of worship

*Raegan* - the bravest explorer and the  
wielder of truth and jokes

To my editor Brian Thomas Schmidt  
for holding my feet to the fire with his invaluable  
industry knowledge and craftsmanship

To an unbelievable roster of SciFi mentors:  
George Lucas, Philip K. Dick, Steven Spielberg,  
Ridley Scott, Denis Villeneuve, John Kessel, Stan Lee,  
Orson Scott Card, Michael Crichton, Andy Weir,  
and Tolkien & Lewis...

...thank you for making the  
future so real.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PART 1

Prologue:	Test Flight	1
1:	The Hunted	19
2:	The Reboot	33
3:	The Outlands	45
4:	Bender's Chop Shop	55
5:	The Shadow Moon	69
6:	Draccario Bath House	89
7:	Battle Dragon	113

## PART 2

8:	The SS Daystar	133
9:	Zimmer's Mistake	155
10:	The Reanimation	173
11:	Peanut's Suicidal Plan	185
12:	The Stone Scorpion	199
13:	The Mandreen Ordeal	207
14:	Exit Strategy	231
15:	No Skinbag Left Behind	247
16:	Under Cover	262

## PART 3

17:	The Ruins of Othello	277
18:	The Kytos Alliance	291
19:	Airborn	311
20:	Dragon Rules	327
21:	Ma'kobi Conscription	337
22:	Return to Bravo Bay	357
23:	Baptism of Fire	373
Epilogue:	Aftermath	395
	Glossary	407





*“What maketh a man, is it the mind,  
the body, or the soul?  
What maketh a man, is it not desire?”*

Tomos v. KACorps hearings  
NeoTokyo | 2522





- Prologue -  
TEST FLIGHT

*Planet Earth, Miramar Settlement, 2415AD*

Conditions were pretty damn perfect.

Above the salt line of the Miramar Settlement, it was 16 degrees Celsius. The Caribbean airstream pushed lazily across the inlet and swept long-tailed sea condors along its thermals. These nasty-spirited fire-birds were descended from the first batch imported after the original Outworld expeditions a hundred years ago. They'd been a menace to the aquatic life here since their early arrival, and today they returned to their favorite hunting ground using their favorite hunting technique.

That is to say, an alpha would swoop down, disappear below the salty brine, and resurface with a tuna or a dolphin squirming in its talons. Then, a protector

condor would circle low, blowing a fiery ring to ward off the rest of the pack and isolate their mate, who would simultaneously feast and chum the waters. This, of course, brought the larger sharks to the surface, only to be snatched high into the air, and soon the entire pack was dining. Occasionally, the sharks would score a sea condor, but more often than not, the advantage was aerial; the evolved flight tactics favored the alien birds of prey.

High above, puffy cumulus clouds hung in the sky like one of those CiCi-D paintings from the Colonial Rise, just after the Third World War, circa 2264. But that was over 150 years ago. The difference being—unlike her brilliant and peaceful oil renderings eschewing man-made tech—this perfect vista was pockmarked with four menacing Ranger skiffs hovering in a delta formation just off-shore.

Their matte-black elongated fuselages and short, fat wings made it obvious from this distance how the elite group got their handle: the SkyCross squadron. Up close, their Tartan-Ballard engines hummed and whirred electronically as internal gyros fought the up-drafts and crosswinds to anchor them all securely in a precise 3D airspace.

Below the waterline, the ocean was calm. The crystal-blue waters created high visibility for fifty meters. Sea life swam in and around an active underwater city. This was Miramar, the top-secret test facility of the Kytos Alliance's Air Corps. But its formal military designation had long since given way to the nickname given by the handful of test jockeys that even knew it existed: *Bravo Bay*.

A brand-new D/U/G was moored beyond the base, tracking sea life, area conditions, and a thousand-per-second ever-shifting variables. The *Defensive Underwater Guardian* was a scientist, gatekeeper, weatherman, and, in case of attack, first line of defense. Although the AI Mother Drone was anchored in place by a retractable leash, the forty-plus micro-drone swarm it housed was highly weaponized and coordinated efficiently, effectively, and completely autonomously by D/U/G.

In its signature deadpan style, D/U/G relayed a status report to Bravo Bay HQ: *'It's exactly twelve minutes before high tide and a statistically acceptable day to rattle death's door.'*

The AI's message pinged the Heads-Up Display (HUD) of the day's fresh meat—a 24-year-old captain named Michael "Dash" Strouthers. *'Roger that, DUG,'* he mentally relayed back as he squeezed his six-two frame into the cockpit of the H2X-Ø Mustang and latched an umbilical cord into the life support Relay at the base of his neck. Here in docking pod four, the vehicle looked to Dash like it was relaxing in a giant jacuzzi, like an athlete the morning before the big game. As the turbulent water levels outside the ship rapidly engulfed the wings, he cinched his five-point harness into place across his chest and lap. The final seats hadn't even surfaced from the design labs yet, so this retrofitted HX-45 chair had been jerry-rigged into place.

There was no rear seat for a RIO, either, just an empty hole. It was just as well because, per Bravo Bay protocol, the NAV for this inaugural sortie should be vacant. With the recent upheaval from the Draccario se-

cession from KACorps, hot-shot pilots were even harder to come by. Every available driver wanted a piece of the new Mustang, but it was a finicky ride. Nobody but Dash came close to passing SIM quals.

From the thigh pocket of his flight suit, he pulled out a small, weathered flight log notebook. He kissed his ancient lucky charm and slid it into the scrum box. The little chamber was currently empty, but after an air-sub went active-duty, it would be outfitted with the standard emergency toolkit, some rations, a homing beacon, a weapon, etc.

Next, he triggered the canopy. The dual interlocking halves slid forward and back into place and sealed with a small sucking *swish* sound. Now that the sea-foam smell was trapped outside the glass, Dash breathed in the slight tinge of a mechanical hydraulic mixture that was so familiar in these new rides hot off the factory floor.

The ComLink in Dash's HUD crackled to life again with a friendly female face. *'Captain Strouthers, radio check. Radio check one, check one,'* relayed Major Stephanie "Step" Phillips from her position up in Flight Control.

"Radio check: affirmative, Step. Readin' you loud and clear," Dash replied. "Though I won't be gettin' used to someone else's words rattlin' around in my head, that I won't."

*'It's devilish,'* he added over the HUD link.

"Roger that," Step said with a knowing chuckle. Dash watched her twist her dirty blond hair into a messy bun and pin it up with a five-inch prong. Knowing her, it was not just a fashion accessory but a

makeshift weapon if needed. Step continued, "All the new toys..."

'...and all the glitching bugs to work out,' she added, saving her private commentary for their encrypted mind-link Relay.

\* \* \*

In contrast to the bubble of silence inside the Mustang, Flight Control was an echo chamber abuzz with activity. A half-dozen international personnel monitored flight gear, network traffic, atmospheric and vehicular stats, and especially those damned pesky sea birds who had picked one helluva spot for their morning picnic. Step watched another bull shark get plucked clean out of the water. She sighed, annoyed. "Ranger Lead, who we got top-side today," she asked into her headset.

"It's Gigsby, ma'am," Ranger Traci "Gigsby" Riggins confirmed as her face popped up on Step's feed.

"Gigsby, keep an eye on the sky trash and barbecue their asses if they swarm any closer to our reef."

"With pleasure, Step," Gigsby flashed a thumbs up and a smile. That'd be a fun order to fulfill if it got the green light.

'Major,' D/U/G chimed in, 'I could swarm and reduce the flight hazards to negligible levels in 22.3 seconds if cleared for live ordinance, ma'am.'

"Negative. Stand down, DUG." Step rubbed a bandaged thumbnail along her brow. "Last thing KA-Corps wants is for their trillion-dollar octo-brain to be used for a glorified duck hunt."

*'Heard,'* D/U/G said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Maybe," Step offered the temperamental AI, "we find you some other target practice later on if you're up for a training op?"

*'Absolutely,'* D/U/G perked up. *'That would really skimmel my wibblers, Major.'*

"Okay, that is not even a—never mind. Dash, you all zipped up?" She asked as her eyes flicked across his ship readouts for the twentieth time. They hadn't changed. All indicators showed the cockpit seal was solid, and all systems were optimal.

"Aye," Dash answered. "Snug as a bug."

"About damn time. All right, then, what say we light this tuna?" Step circled a finger in the air to her comms team. "Last looks everyone," she added, off mic, as they leaned into their monitors. "Go time."

\* \* \*

"Aye," Dash said, punching a button labeled スタート, which he knew to translate "start" from the original Japanese manufacturers.

Start.

Humble beginnings to such an auspicious event along man's quest for air superiority. The Wright Brothers, Chuck Yeager, Alan Shepard, Quantile Fisk, Dav'n Jess, and now Dash Strouthers. Faster. Stronger. Farther. Longer. Pushing that envelope. Bleeding that edge.

*Fwoooooom.*

Goosebumps formed on his arms as the whole cockpit shimmied and purred to life. Readouts, monitors, and heads-up displays cycled around Dash



through startup sequences and settled one by one into ready status. "Not bad. Cold boot to systems ready in 3.4 seconds."

\* \* \*

"That's almost 5 seconds faster than last week," Step tapped some info directly onto her screen, and maintenance logs popped up. "What did you do?"

"Talked with Gator, and we decided we'd bypass the Break Cycle all together since it's pullin' the same as the G12 adapters."

"Smart." Step called up the G12 specs on her monitor. *'You know, the brass at KACorps R&D will be thrilled to know you've outfoxed their brightest eggheads with a workaround,'* she relayed.

\* \* \*

*'They don't know the half of it.'* Dash relayed back as he chuckled to himself, *'It'll be worth the demerits.'* He watched the Seabee performing his final launch tasks on his wing. The fresh-faced kid removed the final fuel hose and retracted the gangplank from the H2X. Stepping back through a porthole, he closed the hatch behind him, lifted off a safety latch, and punched a big red button. Yellow lights accompanied a warning buzzer. Two-minutes. Dash had watched this same process a hundred times during training.

"Flooding the tubes," the Seabee announced to everyone on comms. Dash could see he was a little nervous—hell, they all were—so when the kid looked up at

him in the cockpit, he held a hand up and gestured for him to “calm down.” The kid nodded and smiled. He was hitting all the right marks and doing a great job. They all knew details mattered. As did grace under pressure. It’s what brought people home alive. Dash was thankful he had such a highly trained crew to have his six. Even the ones that looked like they hadn’t hit puberty yet.

He checked at his foot pedals. Down below, he could see the walkway underneath that led to the ship’s living quarters. Once fully operational, this long-range fighter would comfortably hold two crew members and four extra passengers. On long flights, he’d be able to lower his seat from the cockpit and access some fairly comfortable R&R space. Not luxurious like some of the executive yachts he’d seen. KACorps wouldn’t allow for that. But they’d be adequate.

Looking out over the fuselage, Dash watched the floodgates open all the way and water levels rise even faster around the mid-sized fighter. It was odd to see a naked fighter jet, totally void of the standard marks or colors of any specific Ranger unit. This one was much larger than any of its predecessors because of the new triple-engine build.

It was the first time they’d all seen the new Cyrenium shell, too, which wrapped around the ship like a smooth and curvaceous protective skin. It was pliable enough to repulse space frag and small arms fire, yet durable enough to withstand the bottom of the ocean or the most ornery hyper-gate. Word on the street was it could punch through a mountain, but Dash

didn't want to test that theory on its maiden voyage out.

"Damn, that bird's sexy, Dash. Bring her home in one piece, yeah?" The Seabee smiled through the portal to Dash, adding a hang-loose, all-ready signal. This was something the Bravo flights had adapted years ago, as opposed to the traditional thumbs up on the more regimented carriers.

"Y'ain't seen nothing yet, mate. Hold on to your knickers." Dash smiled back, returning the sign through his cockpit window just before it was engulfed under a swirling agitation of sea foam.

Dash turned his focus to his instruments, checking and double-checking them. Finally, he pulled a pair of olive-colored Nomex flight gloves from his other thigh pocket and wiggled his fingers into place, snug as a second skin. He slid his left hand over the throttle controls, and his right hand gripped the flight stick. If it weren't for the climate conditioning, his palms would have been a sweaty mess. While these controls, augmented by the mental Relay, had definitely improved since the first trials, for a while they were notoriously touchy. And buggy as hell. He remembered at least two SIM rides that he'd crashed and flooded because he was so acclimated to the sticky controls of the older HX-45, the fastest and most maneuverable ship in the Air Corps. Correction: *formerly* the fastest and most maneuverable ship in the Air Corps. But this new airsub would cut an entire barrel roll with the small flick of a wrist. It was like flying a hummingbird.

“Well, Dash,” Step’s voice cut through his headspace, “All systems are go. You ready to take her for a swim?”

“Aye,” he exhaled slowly. “Light ‘er up.”

‘*First time outta the gate, Dash,*’ she cautioned him via Relay.

But Dash broke in, ‘*I got it, I got it, you break it you bought it. I’ll be gentle with her, Step. Promise.*’

“Just looking for a nice, easy lap around the lunar dale and back,” Step replied. “What’s left of it, anyway.”

When her mic was open, Dash could hear the nervous click of her pen. ‘*What the hell is she so nervous for?*’ Dash thought. ‘*I’m the spam in a can strapped to the two-megaton space submarine.*’

‘*You know I can hear you until you close your mic,*’ Step chided.

Dash swore. “Sorry, Major, I’ll never get used to this new tech.” He shook his head to clear it up. He took a deep breath and exhaled through his pursed lips. There were three engine modules on the panel in front of him. He flicked the safety off the first, hesitated a second, and then punched it. The Hydros slowly began to whine as they spiraled up to speed. He wiped a dust fleck off of buttons two and three and then focused his attention up the tube as the bay doors opened. At the end of that track lay the open waters of the Caribbean. And D/U/G.

“SkySAT, this is Bravo Bay,” Step called up, “requesting final clearance for that moon dance. Over.”

“This is SkySAT. Roger that, Bravo Bay. Be advised that you have a 90-minute window before the en-

tire Draccario fleet begins their mass exodus. And good riddance, if you ask me. Until then, the lanes are clear."

'Well, sh\*t on a sunstick. That's two days ahead of schedule,' Step said privately to Dash. "Okay, 10-4, Sky-SAT. Alright, Dash, the waters are smooth, the sky is clear, and you've got the ball."

"Copy," Dash acknowledged. He slowly opened and closed his fingers on the controls a couple of times, making sure he was nice and limber. Feather's touch. It was important to be one with your bird. Loose. Just like the water all around him. Flowing. Responsive.

Dash relayed out, 'Open the gate, DUG, and count me down.'

'Heard,' D/U/G replied as he lowered the shields. 'You're in the blue in ten, nine—'

Dash pressed a thumb against a MobileComm mounted to his left, and a 3D picture of a beautiful blue-haired Japanese woman rezzed up on-screen. He and Mizuke had met when he was stationed under Neo-Tokyo. They had fallen in love and been married almost five years ago. Usually, this picture of her was his other lucky charm. But she'd been missing since Colonel Wexell's attack on the *Bellevue*. He had to remind himself that everything would be okay. One thing at a time. He shoved his fears back into the basement and resolutely returned both hands to the controls.

"Bleed the edge," Dash said with a resigned confidence.

"Hooah. Bleed the edge," Step echoed the base credo back at him.

'Six. Five.' Track lights illuminated the submerged launch tube. 'Three. Two—'

At zero, the sub restraints flicked open, Dash juiced the throttle, and the Hydros sucked in thousands of gallons of water per second in a frothing swell that catapulted the Mustang swiftly down the tunnel. Lights strobed overhead as he glided along. Half-way down, he felt the sonic safety pulse D/U/G emitted, which dispersed any unsuspecting sea life lingering near the mouth of the portal. Most of them would swim off after the first pulse, by the second, not even a sardine remained—the coast was completely clear.

The H2X-Ø super-sub shot out of the launch tube and into open water. Urging the Hydros faster, the Mustang jumped forward, leaving the Bravo Bay superstructure and D/U/G behind in a cloud of bubbles.

“Mustang clear,” he notified the base.

“Mustang clear,” Step confirmed. “And have you got a visual on your escort? Aft. 7 o’clock high.”

Dash turned his head, and, sure enough, there was the chase sub, bearing down. HX-45f class. Old school. Inside would be his old buddy, Lt. Colonel Vincent “Gator” Gordon. They’d flown a hundred missions together, and it was an honor to have him along on this particular test flight as well. “Visual confirmed, haha. Better late than never, Gator.”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Junior,” Gator replied. “Had to see this new toy causing all the freshmen to sh\*t their diapers.”

“Just try t’ keep up, old timer,” Dash threw a hang-loose sign to his wingman through the canopy.

Gator returned the signal. “Now, this is being recorded for posterity, so try not to puke up your toenails this time.”

Dash winced and looked down at the 3D picture of his wife again. *'That's something Mizuke would have said,'* he thought to himself, forgetting again about the HUD-link.

*'Stay with us, Dash!'* Gator said privately back to him.

*'I know. Don't worry, I got this.'* Dash flexed his fingers once more and then nudged the throttle up to 18%. As the two subs cut across the ocean floor, they suddenly crossed over the lip of the Puerto Rico Trench, and a bottomless deep lay open beneath them. He rolled the Mustang over and dove into the abyss. Gator followed.

Inside the cockpit, the ambiance of the HUD changed seamlessly. With limited window visibility, the augmented reality maps provided eyes into this dark wonderland. Dash's eyes began to glow white. Moving from your physical eye to cybervision was strange the first few times because the ship around you just sort of disappeared, and it was almost as if you were free-floating through the water at break-neck speeds. Dash's shoulders sagged a little as he relaxed. This now felt like any of the hundred SIM rides he had performed.

The two ships darted in and out of huge underwater structures. Gator took a curve that thrust him forward into pole position. He and Dash had played this game many, many times. Dash snuggled up tight on his contrails. Back during the topside racing days, this was known as "drafting." They had studied the technique at the Kytos Academy to glean any combat advantage it may have to offer. The two moved seamlessly in and around one murky structure after the next. Close

enough to see that these underwater playgrounds of theirs used to be a thriving cityscape. Havana, from the looks of it.

They flew past a skyscraper, and Gator's slipstream knocked a spire loose from the balcony of what was left of an old hotel.

Dash swore and jerked the stick to the right, almost over-compensating himself right into the iron skeleton of an abandoned construction project. He deftly rolled out of the collision course and rejoined Gator on the building's far side.

"Good hands, Mustang," Gator said, checking his friend over his shoulder.

"Getting some proximity warnings up here," Step chimed in. "What's going on out there, boys? Thought we were taking things slow and easy."

D/U/G started to answer, *'The Mustang was almost—'*

*'Shut it, DUG!'* Dash relayed and then, breathing heavily, read from the displays, "Pressure's stable. HUD sync and visibility are excellent. Hydros maintaining 20%. Very responsive, ma'am."

"Roger that, Dash," Step confirmed. "You are clear to begin Level Two maneuvers. Let's get vertical."

Dash reached up to engine number two and engaged it. "Spinnin' up Atmospheric drive," he called back. "Increasing throttle to 25% and breaking for the surface."

The sunlight began to penetrate through the deep blue waters more and more with the shallower altitude. The Mustang cut through the Caribbean underwaters like a knife, leaving Gator's chase sub further



and further in its wake. The HX-45 had the older Atmos drives, which required its pilot to breach, sit atop the water for a few seconds while they purged, and then it could take off into the sky.

The Mustang's newer tech was far superior. Dash was about to perform the first breach and burn. The stern of his ship creaked and groaned with the vastly changing hull pressures, but all the shielding seals held, and the ascent was a smooth ride.

"Ready to breach in 20 seconds," Dash said, his heart pounding in his chest.

The SkyCross Squadron hung there in place, ready to break anchor and pick up the air-to-air visual inspection whenever Gator's rig stopped for its mandatory purge. They'd be able to escort Dash the rest of the way into space and back.

"Ranger Force is in position," Gigsby reminded them.

"Fifteen seconds," Step informed them all, "til history is made."

"Come on, Dash!" Gator cheered him on from a good two hundred meters below.

Dash watched as the water line rushed toward him. "Come on, baby," he muttered under his breath.

The Mustang breached, spewing the ship high into the air like a baby humpback. Startled, the sea condors scattered in every direction, bellowing loudly. Back in the cockpit, there was a brief moment as the Hydros detected oxygen intake and switched over to the Atmospherics. Dash watched the engine lights blink from green Hydros, to yellow Hydros to green Atmos in a split second. And with a loud burst, the Atmospherics

kicked in, and the burn began, pinning him to his seat. The Mustang launched successfully skyward.

"Atmos are go," he said, his white knuckles excitedly clutching the throttle, "I repeat, Atmos are a go."

There was a small celebration in the control room when Step broke in, "Roger that, Mustang. One for the record books. Confirm Ranger visual."

Dash rolled the ship, and, indeed, there was Ranger Gigsby and her four SkyCross fighters closing into escort position fast. "I got 'em, Step. Visual confirmed."

The Rangers assumed formation around the Mustang as they all climbed up through the stratosphere. The pattern, with an assist from their special NAV gear on board, would help scramble the Mustang's footprint in the sky. The last thing they wanted was to attract the wrong attention to their secret base and especially to this latest project, which would be a substantial military game changer.

Dash's eyes swept over the controls, and all the ship's vitals were green. "Bravo Bay, I am throttling up to forty-five percent," he informed them.

"Roger that, Dash," Step called out. "Shoot the stars."

As the Mustang increased its speed, the Rangers began to struggle to keep up. As the distance between them increased, Dash called out the speeds. "Mach 15... Mach 18... Mach 25... Mach 30..."

Dash reached down and engaged engine number three. "Ions coming online."

"Ions coming online," Step echoed to Base. "Ten seconds to sub-space."

“Ten seconds to sub-space,” Dash confirmed, adding playfully, “To the moon, Alice.”

Those would be the last words recorded by Captain Dash Strouthers. His only visible hint of a problem would be the split second when the yellow warning light flicked on over the supposedly inactive Hydros, just before the Ions kicked in. There was a massive explosion, which marked the end of that H2X-Ø prototype. And the end of Dash Strouthers.



- 1 -

## THE HUNTED

*Planet Da'karh, 2561 AD*

A fuzzy, bright light cut through the sticky blackness, and with an abrupt and painful jerk, Jacques Bastille re-entered consciousness. His first thought was, *Who the hell is Dash Strouthers?* These military-grade Byno-Cores were supposed to be wiped clear of their previous seed-lines and inhabitants. He was going to need this meat-suit tuned up and scrubbed out once he figured out wherever the hell he was.

Bastille's eyelids flapped open, and he tried to make sense of the warm pillow his head rested upon. But it was no pillow. It was sand. Some sort of beach, perhaps? A vacation? As his hearing recalibrated and the ringing diminished, he could pick out the roar of the ocean's surf somewhere in the distance.

He quickly deduced that the planet's atmosphere was breathable since there was a gaping hole in his helmet and he was still alive. He struggled to his knees and hit the release lever around his neck. The helmet unlocked, and he peeled it off. He spit out sand and blood from his otherwise parched lips. A small tract down the left side of his face was tender, and he winced when his glove skimmed across it. It felt like it had been recently flame-broiled.

Bastille ran a quick internal system scan. In his retinal-HUD, there were a bevy of warning messages indicating internal damage to the cybernetics of his Byno-Core. His body-armor was charred and trashed, most likely the only thing that had kept him alive, absorbing the bulk of... well, whatever had happened. Swaths of his tattered desert cloak caught in the wind and swirled around him.

One of his arms felt like it was just shy of broken. And the other—

*Wait, why can't I feel my right arm?* Something caught his eye a few feet away from him. It was a hand buried in the sandy dunes. Still wobbly on his knees, he edged closer. He grabbed the hand whose tattered glove looked identical to his own and pulled. The arm came free from the sand; loose grains rushed in to fill the void as if nothing had ever been there. Was this his arm? Dumbstruck, he looked over at his right shoulder. Where an arm should have been, there was just a tangle of wires hanging out, sparking from time to time when the tips crossed.

*What the hell...*

Bastille forced himself vertical. And what were these small, black floating things drifting down from the sky? He grabbed at one passing by. It looked like burning fabric, and it turned to black powder in his fingers. Turning around slowly, his breath caught in his chest, and his mouth fell open. It was no ocean. The sound was the plume of fire from a gigantic, crash-landed C-Class freighter going up in smoke.

*Is that my ship?*

Another explosion sent more blackened debris and fireballs raining down all over the area. Bastille shielded his eyes with the loose arm. From the looks of it, the ship had skidded for a quarter klick, digging a channel into the soft ground before it nose-planted and settled where it was.

*I don't remember being thrown clear. Or escaping. In fact, I don't remember—anything!*

He studied the burning wreckage behind him for a clue. Any clue. The front half of the ship was destroyed, but the stern was still intact—for the moment. The entire shell was riddled with holes. Very recent battle damage. Very precise battle damage. He noted the massive Sig Cannons retrofitted to the hull. That meant this was no casual freighter. If it had artillery, then it would also have munitions aboard. Which meant there was a weapons hold, and even if it had only been partially stockpiled, between that and the fuel cells, this whole ship could atomize into stardust at any moment.

Bastille collected the arm and willed himself to his feet. Moving unsteadily away from the ship, his foot caught on a strap, and down he went again. Some sort of black duffel. Military grade. There was an electro-

lock whose PIN most likely floated around the foggy abyss of his fractured databanks, along with most every other lost bit of memory.

So, maybe he hadn't been so much thrown from the ship; rather, he had walked away, headed... somewhere. Nowhere.

A new sound pricked his ears, and he instinctively crouched low behind a smoldering section of fuselage. It was a small battle skiff like the Outworlders favored. The top of the ship was a hammer-head shape that swept back into a long and pointed tail. Attached below was a pod like a turret. It housed a variety of guns poking out in every direction. It rotated around as the three landing struts unfolded from the belly.

*Bounty hunters.*

That much was coming back to him now. The bounty hunters were still after him. They had shot him from the sky and were circling high above, there to finish the job. But why? Bastille checked his gun belt. The holster was empty.

The ship landed, sending a tornado of sand in his direction, handily erasing the last vestiges of footprints he'd left behind. Bastille ducked down, holding his desert cloak against his face to block the grainy assault.

An access ramp lowered, steam spraying from the exhaust seals, and a bounty hunter stood cautiously on the gangplank, assault blaster leveled. Powered up. The protocol was to perform a scan on the wreckage for survivors, but there'd be too much heat and smoke for the sensors to return any useful intel. He stood on a single leg the size of a small oak tree.



He wore no helmet. Probably couldn't fit one over that horned toad head of his. He had some armor on, but that scaly lizard skin made it redundant. A trade precaution. He slid the large rifle onto a back sling and latched it in place. Then he bent down slowly til those clawed hands touched the ground and he moved forward, dragging his leg appendage behind him, swishing it side to side like a tail.

The Snake moved into the wreckage area. Bastille watched him slither towards an open hatch, crawling his way quickly along the ground. He was either crazy or desperate. Neither would bode well for Bastille.

He waited for his enemy to disappear inside the smoking freighter, then sprang forward to follow. He faltered when a second bounty hunter dropped down from the battle skiff's hatchway.

*Since when do Outworlders work in pairs!?*

Well, it was too late now to duck for cover. Bastille was out there. Exposed. He veered left, using the skiff's landing strut to mask his line-of-sight approach. He gambled that the bounty hunter would be too fixated on the fantastic wreck before him.

The hunter stood on his gnarled, monopod of a leg, rifle drawn. He scanned the area, dangerously close to turning around, when a small explosion near the ship's bow—what was left of it—riveted his attention forward again.

Suddenly, Bastille was upon him, charging low and throwing his good shoulder right into the bounty hunter's back. It sent them both off balance and his rifle flew to the ground. The bounty hunter slammed into the side of some jagged metal and bellowed in pain.

Bastille, still at his back, clenched his fist and hammered down on the base of his skull again and again. The beast wheeled on him, and its armored elbow cracked into Bastille's forehead, severing a loose connection in his memory synapse that caused an excruciating short circuit.

*Fzzzzzzzht.*

\* \* \*

*Planet Earth, NeoTokyo*

Dash Strouthers lay in a medical facility with Mizuke by his side. This was the same beautiful, blue-haired Japanese woman from the picture in the cockpit of his H2X-Ø Mustang. Dash was very confused. He looked around, getting his bearings. A doctor to his left had clearly just administered an anesthesia boost into the crook of his arm. There was a restraint on his head, holding him perfectly still. Not that he could move anyway. His whole body was strapped to this hospital bed.

"W-who the hell is Jacques Bastille?" Dash whispered hoarsely.

Mizuke leaned forward to trace her delicate fingers across Dash's furrowed brow. "Shhh shh, Dash. Easy. The procedure is going great. You're going to be okay. Even better than before, right, Doctor Morrissey?"

"Or your money back." Doctor Morrissey winked at them. Morrissey unwrapped a new sterile multitool onto the tray beside them. The cylinder had a bunch of surgical devices interlocked together, with a socket at

one end. Then he unscrewed his left hand. He removed it altogether and set it aside, replacing it with the multi-tool. He snapped it into place with a final twist. The tools extended out like robotic fingers and lit up and whirred as the doctor tested them out.

“What’s happening?” Dash asked both, but neither. “I had a dream. I was fighting a lizard man. A bounty hunter.”

Off of Mizuke’s questioning look, the doctor reassured her, “Slight disorientation at this stage is very normal.”

Mizuke maneuvered her rolling chair closer to the bedside. She tucked a lock of her blue bangs behind her ear and leaned close to Dash whispering, “Listen up, Hotshot. With these new KACorps neural implants, you will have your pick of *any* ship in the Air Corps. It’s what you’ve always wanted, Dash. Bravo Bay is *this* close.”

To illustrate, she held up her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. Dash opened his mouth to talk, but no words would form. Mizuke smiled and kissed his cheek.

Dr. Morrisey motioned for Mizuke. “Mrs. Strouthers, if I could have you step back out into the theater, we are ready to continue with phase three.”

Mizuke stood, wrinkled her nose at Dash, and then followed a Byno-Nurse escort out the door. She appeared again on the far side of a raised window and took a seat alongside some other mystery spectators. Dash’s head was swimming now. He found it difficult to focus.

As the meds kicked in, the doctor settled back into place at the top of the bed, where Dash's scalp was lifted off and brain tissue and circuitry were exposed. A salve of NITs (Nanobot Integration Technology) worked away, fusing the metal mesh together. Extending a small pair of tweezers, the doctor placed a small titanium oxide chip onto the circuit-bed in Dash's brain. And as it snapped into place, it sparked.

*Fzzzzzzzht.*

\* \* \*

### *Planet Da'karh*

Jacques regained consciousness with another blow to the head from the savage bounty hunter, but he was still too stunned to deflect it. Unfortunately, there was no time to decipher whatever the hell this Dash and Mizuke mess was all about. He may have lost his mind, but he was determined not to lose his head. The lizard assassin seemed intent on it, though.

This close to him, Bastille could see the clan markings all over this guy's green-ish gray lizard skin. This was one of those extreme Outworlders. Human, but in the loosest sense of the word. So genetically modded up and mutated, there wasn't much of a person left. Quite literally, he was the perfect cold-blooded killer. Hence their derogatory name, Snakes.

The bounty hunter released Bastille, who fell back, grunting with pain as he crashed into the ground. The Snake was also wounded and bloodied. He crawled towards his rifle, but jerked to a dead stop about a foot

away. When he turned around to see why, Bastille was standing on his tail, brandishing his own severed arm like a club. The arm swung down hard and connected with the bounty hunter's head. The impact of tungsten bone against the lizard's skull flattened the creature to the ground, senseless.

Bastille dropped the arm, picked up the large assault rifle, and, planting the barrel tip firmly against the bounty hunter's back, pulled the trigger. With a flash, the Snake's life was ended. Dusty contrails spread from beneath him as the desert absorbed the shockwave and viscera from the blast. Bastille turned to check for the other Snake, but he was still inside the burning ship. So he slid the gun strap over his shoulder. Then he set his severed arm atop the black cargo bag and stuffed them both behind the landing strut.

Wrapping his cloak around his mouth and nose, Bastille climbed up into the burning freighter and leaned into the smoking doorway. The second bounty hunter was nowhere to be seen. Bastille picked his way quickly through the hazy corridor. Emergency lights flashed as the last of the ship's power drained. A message repeated over and over through the comms overhead: "Hull breach imminent. Please make your way to the escape pods. Hull breach imminent."

He slowed down when he came to a cross-corridor. Peeking around the corner, he saw the Snake up ahead working on a dead crew member. The lizard brandished a curved blade, lifted the corpse up by his hair, and sliced off the Relay box at the base of his neck. Dropping it into a pouch around his waist, he let the body slump back to the floor. He was collecting evi-

dence. No, more than evidence, he was collecting digital scalps.

Bastille backed up into a separate hallway. Though his mind was a dark abyss, he leaned into the small, vague familiarities he felt, almost a *deja vu*, as he maneuvered through the ship, relying on muscle memory. Left. Right. Right again, until he arrived at the captain's quarters. Power throughout the ship was waning, so he had to muscle the sliding door open manually.

The room was a disaster. Bastille entered and began to kick through the rubble on the floor, searching for any clues or anything helpful. He spotted his Mauzer pistol amid the debris. He grabbed the barrel, and the gun snagged on a hand that gripped it firmly. He twisted the pistol loose and tucked it into his holster. Then he threw a mattress and some broken shelves to the side to reveal a female form, crumpled beneath. Electric blue hair. The wall next to her showed the full impact of her body when the ship had crashed. Bastille bent down and checked for a pulse, but he could already tell from the strange angle of her neck, she was gone.

*Who are you, blue-haired goddess?*

He rolled her onto her side, took out his own knife, pried the Relay cartridge from the box at the base of her neck, and tucked it into a pocket. He studied her face again, but there was no mental information pulling up a match. On-screen in his retinal-HUD the facial recognition reported an "Error!" Just a software glitch and a mysterious ache in his heart.

He straightened up. Not much more he could do here. He headed back toward the door and, on muscle

memory, pressed the wall to his right, and a panel opened with several armaments inside, including a belt of explosives, which he draped over his neck like a bandolier. The other stuff he couldn't really carry one-handed, so he'd just have to leave it behind.

Another explosion at the front of the ship rocked the whole structure and shifted everything at once. Bastille stepped out into the corridor, and there was the bounty hunter advancing in his direction, headlamp penetrating the smoke. Bastille slowly reached his left arm across to the Mauzer on his right hip. The Snake noticed him, too, and they both drew down and fired at each other, diving for cover. Bastille was the first to his feet, scrambling deeper into the ship to find an alternate exit.

A full minute later, he jerked open a large door to reveal the cargo bay, bent all to hell. The entire tail section was vertical, and the only exit portal was forty feet up. Bastille climbed up the boxes and debris and used the floor grates to scale his way toward the door.

*Damn this one-arm business.*

He was out of breath by the time he reached the escape latch and pulled the handle. The door blasted open. Looking outside, he could see the bounty hunter's ship, the dead Snake lying on the ground cooking in the sun, and the black duffel right where he'd left them thirty feet below in the sand.

Back in the cargo bay, the remaining bounty hunter slithered in just as Bastille hung a leg over the side to jump. They caught each other's eye, and Bastille smiled. The Snake raised his rifle and would have had a clean shot, but a high-pitched whine distracted him to

his left. It was a magnetic detonator Bastille had left on the wall as a parting gift.

Bastille dropped down to the desert below as the cargo bay exploded high overhead. He scrambled for the bounty hunter's ship and pulled his black duffel onto the lift.

Once aboard, he dropped the bag and climbed into the pilot seat on the bridge of the battle skiff. He tossed his loose arm onto the console, and granules of sand splashed around it. The support Relay at the base of his neck glowed blue as it uplinked with the ship's systems. He half expected it not to work, but apparently he'd paired with this system before. So, with a thought, he lifted off, swinging the nose of the hammerhead skiff around toward the rear exit of the C-Class transport.

There, glaring back at him, was the bounty hunter just climbing into view. The Snake drew his rifle and sent some flak toward the departing ship. Bastille casually switched on the targeting system, and as he powered the skiff backwards and away from the transport, he swung the turrets around and let loose a barrage of missiles.

The bounty hunter attempted to jump free, but it was too late. A chain reaction of explosions blew a huge crater into the desert floor.

Bastille spun the skiff around and kicked the throttle wide open. Metal shards and debris rattled against the back of the ship as he cleared the blast plane. Barely. Bastille swore through gritted teeth as he evaded the gigantic mushroom cloud; the ship's digital instruments glitched in and out from electrical interference in the shockwave that overtook them.



Everything stabilized after that, and he pulled the nose up and accelerated toward open space. He was only too happy to leave the desert planet behind, which he now recognized as Da'karh. This memory thing was going to frustrate the hell out of him. Like finding all the right answers the day *after* a big test. As he climbed, he jacked the ship's umbilical cord into the Relay box at the base of his neck and snapped it into place. Suddenly, his Retinal Heads-Up Display synced with the ship's HUD. He checked over the monitors, and something caught his eye in the bottom corner of the display. It was that same 3D picture from Dash's H2X-Ø test flight.

*Mizuke? What the hell is going on?*

As the hijacked ship broke through the planetary exosphere, the Atmos drives kicked over into the Ion drives and Bastille instinctively flinched, but the ship pulsed safely forward.

