

Based on the critically acclaimed game from id Software

RAVAGE™



MATTHEW COSTELLO

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PROLOGUE

APOPHIS 99942

Raine looked up from his beer as the bartender raised the volume of the TV.

The newscast showed rioting in the streets of Kabul, then a jump to another reporter atop a hotel roof looking down at a Baghdad filled with fires.

“The effect of the United States Armed Services complete withdrawal continues destabilize the entire region. The violence now threatens to spread to neighboring states. Secretary —”

“Turn that crap off, will ya, Eddie?”

The sound disappeared.

Raine picked up the near-empty shot glass next to his beer and drained it.

Funny, to sit here in this Red Hook dive appropriately named The Hook, just as his old man used to do when he retired to his old neighborhood in Brooklyn. His dad—a lifer in the Marines—was a man who had only one vision for his two sons.

Not just to enter military service.

Both would go into the *Corps*.

No question about it.

And Nicholas Raine didn't even question the idea of following his brother Chris.

Ultimately, that meant following him to the never-ending training missions and covert ops that made up the constant war of the twenty-first century.

Then things changed.

Probably on the day his brother got caught by an IED. The grim reality of these forever wars hit him.

And worse, the old man died, his heart hitting him harder than any man would ever dare. He hadn't been well for a while, not after years of hard living and drinking and too much time on his hands. Chris's death seemed to deal the final blow.

That attack didn't kill the old man. But the chaotic Veterans Hospital in Bay Ridge didn't have any miracles in its pouch to save the old sergeant.

Yet—he himself soldiered on.

It's what he knew. What he *could* do. It had become ... all that he was good at.

He tried to remind himself that his father believed in all this “serving God and country.” That “Semper Fi” was more than a gung-ho motto.

So he soldiered on. That is, until the order came to leave. Seemingly out of the blue, whole units and commands vanished overnight.

And now he bided his time here—holed up in a dingy one-bedroom in Red Hook, this his *office*—waiting to see if his country had any more need of him.

“Goddamn soldiers just gave the hell up anyway.”

Raine heard the words.

Said too loudly to just be a private comment. The customer in broadcast mode apparently.

Then again: “All those years, all our fuckin' money, and then they just up and run? Goddamn.”

The bartender, Eddie, shot Raine a glance. Not that they had spent these nights sharing their life histories.

Not that they were pals.

But like any good bartender, Eddie had antennae.

Eddie moved down to the end of the bar. To the customer with his loud opinions on the fighting men and women. On what happened and how they just left the area.

The implication: *like cowards*.

Raine turned to watch Eddie, seeing his head bob. Telling the guy, just barely audibly. “C’mon, can that stuff, okay, Mikey?”

The guy on his stool looked down at Raine, putting pieces together.

“I’m entitled to my opinion. It’s my damn opinion. We went over there and then after decades, after freakin’ *decades*, we just leave? Tell ya, the troops, these new guys, they just couldn’t cut it.”

Raine was already off his stool.

Moving down the long wooden bar.

Monday night. So quiet. A few people shooting pool in the back, oblivious.

A couple sitting in a booth, talking, possibly taking note, thinking they should have selected a better spot for a romantic meeting.

As Raine got close, he sized up the guy.

A giant bowling ball of a head that melted into absolutely no neck, as if his skull had been glued to a barrel-chested body. Massive Popeye arms. Maybe a dockworker. Big powerful guy.

Good.

That would make this even better.

Raine didn’t say anything. After all, what was there to say?

Instead his right hand shot out like a projectile, targeting the man’s right hand as it closed around a beer glass.

Raine’s grip tightened on the man’s wrist and squeezed. The guy’s glass rolled free as Raine pressed the hand flat, now splayed against the sticky wood of the bar.

At the same time, his other hand went to just under the man’s chin. Because even though it didn’t look as though the man had a neck, of course he did. Sure. Buried somewhere in the jowly fat and muscle.

Raine’s fingers closed tight. The man now had two amazing sensations of pain coursing through him at the same time: the hand, which was being squeezed so hard it felt like it would pop off, and the agony from his throat.

The fat, drunken, self-appointed military historian couldn’t breathe; his eyes bulged out.

Finally, Raine spoke.

“Listen. If I ever hear you say a word criticizing our military—even a single word—that hand you have there will become useless. And whether you will be able to speak—”

A little tightening of his grip on the man’s fat-covered throat.

“—that would be anybody’s guess.” He paused. “Got it?”

The bug-eyed man nodded.

Raine released him and walked back to his stool.

The TV had been changed back to the Monday night game.

Giants. Minnesota.

His shot glass had been filled.

But maybe he'd rather catch the game back in his apartment a few blocks away. Sitting here, tonight at any rate, had lost its appeal.

He slid off the stool, threw a few bucks on the bar, and walked outside.

A chilly fall night, and Raine zipped his jacket tight, collar up. He didn't even see the black vehicle, engine idling, sitting outside The Hook. Didn't register it as something out of the ordinary until a window rolled down and someone called out to him from the passenger seat.

"Lieutenant?"

Raine stopped and turned around, now noticing the limo-like vehicle. Not exactly the usual wheels found in this neighborhood.

He stood there while the passenger door opened and a man in a suit got out.

"Yes?"

Raine saw that the man held a large envelope in one hand.

"Lieutenant, I have orders for you. Here."

Raine laughed. "Orders. From whom? I've been told that it would be quite a while before my country needed me. In fact, I was banking on it."

In answer, the man simply extended the envelope.

For a moment he didn't take it. But in the end he was a soldier, a *Marine*, and when a man said "jump" ...

He undid the clasp and took out a single piece of paper. The man from the black car helpfully pulled out a small flashlight and pointed it at the document.

He looked up at the man. "Says here ... I'm supposed to get in the car—right now, all day speed—and go with you to Floyd Bennett Field where a plane is waiting. And that's ... it?"

The man said nothing.

"Not one for talking, hm?"

"Lieutenant, I've just been told to hand this to you and have you come with me. You can see that it is signed by General McWilliams. Everything is in—"

"I know. 'In order.' I don't get it. Can I at least go back to my apartment, grab a bag, some things?"

The man shook his head. "No, Lieutenant. *My* orders are to see that you come directly. No stops, no bag."

"*Your* orders? Who you with? NSA? CIA? Any of the A's?"

Again the man said nothing.

"I'll tell you one thing, whoever you are. It's something my dad drilled into me. Reason I joined the Corps. Stayed in the Corps. And that thing is respect for orders, respect for command. That's how you save lives. So this—"

Raine waved the sheet of paper.

"—actually *means* something to me. And if I'm supposed to—God knows why—go with you, then that's what the hell we will do."

Raine guessed he might still be amped by his bar scuffle.

In answer, the man opened the back door.

Raine got in, and with his escort sliding back in the passenger seat, the big black car pulled away from the front of the dive bar.

Out to a sleepy Flatbush Avenue.

It was getting late, so only a few places were now open as the dense area of Brooklyn gave way to open spaces near the Atlantic, places with tall grass, and what Raine thought had been the abandoned airfield named Floyd Bennett.

Been a while since he'd been out this way. Back then it was to Riis Park and sunny days at the beach. When Brooklyn was at its best.

At one time Raine knew there had been plans for housing to go up here, to transform the field—the historic airfield that once saw Amelia Earhart and Wiley Post fly away to smash world records—into a development.

But the economy, and then the history of the place, saved it. No money for development but enough for a National Landmark designation that preserved many of the hangars and even kept a few airstrips in place. But nobody—military or commercial—used it.

Or so Raine thought.

They passed the Belt Parkway, to the beginning of the field. The fence on the side of the road showed the lack of attention. Weeds, debris. No money or nobody cared? Probably.

“Why here?” Raine asked.

The driver didn't say anything.

The escort did, though, turning around. “I don't know, Lieutenant.”

Great help, that guy. Loaded with information.

He wished he hadn't had that last beer. It would be nice to be totally clearheaded for whatever this thing turned out to be.

They stopped and turned at the entrance off Aviation Road. A pair of army soldiers stood guard, the wide gates swinging open just as the black car reached it, then quickly shutting behind them.

When they reached the runway, Raine leaned forward, looking for what he guessed would be a military transport. Instead, off at one end, he spotted the lights of a small jet.

As they got closer, Raine could see nothing military or commercial about it. Rather, it looked exactly like some fat cat's private jet. A jet a businessman might use to run down Palm Beach. Catch some rays in January. Play with the mistress. Rub in a rival's face.

Not what he expected at all.

The driver pulled the car up to the side of the plane. On cue, the door of the plane opened, stairs gently tilting down to the tarmac.

The car stopped.

“Here we go, Lieutenant.”

The escort got out and Raine followed him.

WELCOME TO BUCKLEY

The small jet seemed to leap into the night sky, then took a sharp angle that had it firing racing out to the nearby Atlantic before banking and heading west.

Not going to Lejeune, then, Raine realized, thinking of the base in North Carolina he had been stationed out of before being sent home. *Interesting.*

He looked down and saw the lights of Coney Island. Another abandoned project. Somehow the planned renovation of what they used to call “America’s Playground” never happened.

When there’s no money, things don’t happen.

Still, in the reflected glow of the lights left on at night, he saw the tall, always imposing spire of the parachute jump. Inactive for, what ... sixty, seventy years? The once breathtaking ride had long been an inoperative landmark, a skeleton, a monument to time when such thrills could be created.

A time of great amusement parks and world’s fairs. His father used to talk about a place on Coney called Steeplechase.

“Nicky, I tell ya—you kids would’ve *loved* it. Crazy rides. Horses that raced around the perimeter. Made your heart race. And safe? Fugeddabout it. But now? All gone. Everything gotta be so damn safe these days.”

All gone.

One of his father’s favorite sayings.

This restaurant, that movie palace, his favorite fishing boat in Sheepshead Bay.

All gone.

Then his wife—Raine’s mom—died, and he hit his ultimate “all gone.”

Became a changed man. Quiet. Stayed to himself. As if he had given up. And when Chris came home in a box? The military escort. The salutes. The flags waving, and Raine fighting to keep from breaking down. His father had sobbed uncontrollably, showing Raine another part of what it meant to be a man.

All gone.

Raine had made a pledge to his brother then. A promise to keep fighting—to make sure that he never had to say “all gone.”

I’ll keep on for both of us, Chris. I’ll go back. I’ll do what they sent us over to do. Don’t you fucking worry about that.

And he would keep that promise until someone decided that whatever we were doing to keep the world free and safe was over.

He had to.

What was the expression? Ours not to question why. Ours but to do—

Coney and the coast faded into the background, the jet still climbing sharply.

“Lieutenant Raine?”

“Just Raine, Mister ...”

“Raine it is. I’m Jackson. The plane has sandwiches and beverages. Maybe a beer?”

“Got any of those little packs of peanuts, Jackson?”

The joke finally made the man in a suit smile.

Barely.

“Don’t suppose you can tell me where we’re headed?”

“Actually, my orders allow me to now that we’re airborne.”

Raine raised his eyebrows.

“There really *is* a need for all this security, Lieutenant. I imagine it will be made clearer to you soon.”

“I hope so. The destination?”

“Buckley Air Force Base.”

“Colorado? Really? Pretty damn far away.” He shook his head. “And what awaits me at Buckley?”

Jackson stood up.

“Let me check on those peanuts.”

The night deepened. A moonless night, the stars bright and nearly unwavering in the cloudless sky. And every now and then Raine saw *one*.

A yellow-red streak in the sky.

For a week or so they’d been visible each night, this sporadic meteor shower connected to the asteroid—Apophis 96 ... 95 ... something—still way out there in space. Apparently a bunch of debris ran well ahead of it, hitting the atmosphere.

It was a big asteroid, too—nearly the size of the city. Good thing it was going to give them a miss.

There—another streak. This one turning fiery before it disappeared.

Giving us a miss.

Lucky thing. Because, after all ... despite Hollywood’s mad plots of diverting a major asteroid, just what the hell would we really do?

Still—he had to wonder why we were getting so many of these meteorites. Seemed strange. Then again, what he didn’t know about astrophysics could fill a lot of books. And had, he thought.

He put his head against the porthole window, wedging a pillow into the crack between the window and the seat.

The window—cold, but soothing.

He shut his eyes.

He felt a change in angle.

He opened his eyes, and for a moment didn’t have a clue where he was. Total disorienting, waking up on a plane. He wasn’t complaining, though—traveling this way was damn sight better than bouncing around on a military transport.

He looked over at Jackson, who was looking out a window on the other side. Raine looked out his own window and down. There wasn’t much out there. The dots of houses and lights on the roads took on an eerie yellowish cast when seen from a few miles up. After a few minutes he could see an airstrip ahead.

Had to be Buckley.

Jackson looked over.

“Seat belt on?”

“Learn that in flight attendant school?”

Another small smile. Maybe this guy enjoyed knowing things that he didn't. Something that security and spy types liked. Secrets. They were all about their damn secrets.

Raine wasn't too big on secrets.

“We'll be down in a few minutes.”

“And my magical mystery tour continues.”

“Right.”

The smile on the man's face had faded, replaced by something else, something in his eyes. Concern? Sadness?

Raine had led men into situations that could only be described as hell. Into actual hell—no exaggeration—and he had brought a lot of them out again. In that time he had learned to check their eyes. To catch the fear sitting there. The concern. The telltale anxious signs that someone might crack. That someone might just freeze up.

And a few words—of support, of connection—could make the difference.

Humans are funny. They have a lot of needs. But maybe the one need they have above all is communication.

Does someone understand me?

Is someone listening?

The plane leveled off some. Slowed.

Raine stretched, arching his back to shake off the effects of hours sleeping crumpled up in a chair—albeit a fairly luxurious one. At least the beers and shots had lost most of their edge.

Good. Especially if he was going to get his orders.

He looked back out the window and noticed the planes on the tarmac getting bigger. The small jet circled hangars, some of them spilling out F-16 fighters into the early morning. Still, it looked pretty quiet here, even if it was an hour or so before dawn.

He guessed the time.

About 4:30 A.M.

He looked at his watch: 5:07.

Not bad. Still, the sky should be turning light, no?

Then he remembered the time difference. *Mountain time here.*

He pressed a button of his watch and moved it back two hours: 3:07 ... 3:08 A.M.

He relaxed—he never could explain it, but it was strangely relieving to have the right time on his wrist.

. . .

The screech of the jet's tires hitting the runway.

A tilt as the nose touched down.

The scream of the engines in reverse, brakes.

That crazy feeling of having your body pasted against the seat.

The jet slowed. As it taxied to wherever it was going to discharge Raine, he thought of something that hours ago hadn't seemed too odd:

He brought *nothing*.

No uniform. No change of underwear, no running shoes. No toothbrush, no person

effects. Nothing but what he wore to the bar, and a wallet filled with too little cash. The idea hit him full force.

It's crazy. To fly out here with nothing. Sure, orders are orders ...

But he didn't have a clue what it meant.

The plane slowed some more. Raine unbuckled his belt while it still taxied. When the jet stopped, he listened to the small sounds of the engines slowing, quieting. Bright lights came on in the cabin.

Jackson stood up before him.

"Welcome to Buckley, Lieutenant."

He went over to the small jet's door and pulled a wide metal latch to the left, unlocking it. And like some magical portal, the door popped open, sending stairs down to whatever waited outside.

HANDLING THE TRUTH

Raine walked out into the cold mountain air, where an Air Force jeep stood by, engine running.

“I assume that this jeep is for us, Jackson?”

“Yes.”

Raine walked over and got in the back while his escort went around to the front passenger seat. The jeep pulled away fast, before Raine even had time to get settled.

“We late or something?”

No response. *Of course not.* Raine looked out at the quiet airfield, the hangars with bright lights inside showing massive bombers and jets as if on display. A few ground crew walked around, but other than their arrival, there didn't seem to be much happening at the base.

He looked over his shoulder at the small jet. Already it had started taxiing, turning in the other direction.

Time for its next pickup?

As the jeep raced toward a distant corner of the base, Raine felt his apprehension—if that's what it was—grow.

He had been thinking what this might be about. Being picked up in the middle of the night. Flown here. The private jet. Not getting anything from his apartment.

It would be as if he had simply vanished.

Not that there was anybody to notice. With his family gone, and his last attempt at a relationship crashed months ago on the reality of his steady deployments, who'd really be looking for him?

The landlord maybe. For rent. But even that was automatically sucked out of his checking account.

So what was this?

He didn't know; but he knew one thing. Whatever this was about, he would be finding out shortly.

Raine looked down at his hands: clenched tight, resting on his knees.

Relax, he commanded them. *Ease up.* Whatever the U.S. government had planned for him was—quite literally—out of his hands.

The jeep streamed on, and they'd soon left the main part of the base with its hangars full of expensive hardware. A massive building loomed in the distance, four, five stories tall. It looked like something NASA might need, but prefab and put up fast.

Raine leaned forward as the jeep went straight to that structure in the early Colorado morning.

The building was surrounded by a fence topped with concertina wire, and at the gate post four soldiers stood with their M16s at the ready.

And inside the fence—in case no one got the point—an Abrams battle tank, another soldier

manning the .50 caliber from the open turret.

Probably more security inside the building itself. Raine's intrigue was growing. Something pretty important was happening there.

The jeep screeched to a halt, and he didn't need to be told this was their next stop. Hill opened the jeep door.

"Thanks for the ride," he said to the driver.

Following Jackson, he went to the gate. Jackson flashed something from his back pocket and one of the soldiers gave a signal, and the gate opened.

Raine came up beside him. "Y'know, stopping for a warm coat might have been a good idea."

Jackson was dressed only in his suit.

"Tell me about it."

A joke? Interesting.

Jackson led the way to a side door. Raine could see this building had giant hangar-sized doors as well. Something big was going on in there.

Or was going to come *out* of there.

Another soldier at that door, but he already had it open, and the two men walked in. Raine noticed that Jackson walked with the quick, direct stride of someone who knew where he was going.

He'd been here before.

He made a sharp right at entering and went down a long corridor with corrugated metal walls on either side. It seemed to Raine that there was no way to go deeper into the building.

But then the corridor turned left, and right again, like a maze. Jackson moved quickly, leading him down a warren of hallways before they came to an open service elevator. It was a wire mesh frame, designed to get big things up and down. Jackson slid it open, the elevator's gate rattling.

Raine looked up, the roof of the building high above them, then at the elevator keypad.

After a zero, all *negative* numbers.

"We're going down?" Jackson nodded as the elevator gate closed. He slid his card in front of a reader—too fast for Raine to see—and a light turned green. The elevator started down.

And it kept going down for what seemed a long time.

When it stopped, someone was there to greet them.

"Lieutenant Nicholas Raine. How are you, Lieutenant?"

Raine looked through the mesh and saw his old captain.

"Captain Hill?" Raine saluted.

Hill opened the gate. At first he was surprised to see his captain, but then Raine noticed the scene behind Hill, and it seemed the surprises might only have begun. It resembled Hollywood's fantasy version of a war room. Banks of computer screens, some showing images, other data. People walking around quickly with a grim sense of purpose. And toward the back, a raised stairway up to a door.

Two more soldiers at that door.

Raine walked out of the elevator. "Didn't expect to see you here, Captain."

Captain Stephen Hill, a man Raine had always respected even if he didn't always agree with him, laughed. "To be honest, Raine, never expected to see you here as well." The smile

faded. "In fact, I never expected to see you again."

"I—um—"

"I know. You've got questions. Well, I've got answers. I have an office down here. It's small and a bit of a mess, but it will serve." Hill took a breath.

"I'm ready to tell you everything."

Hill had his eyes locked on Raine's.

Like—he's sizing me up.

For what?

"I think I'm ready for that."

A bit of a smile returned.

"So, Lieutenant, you think ... you can handle ... the truth?"

Such a line. An old movie scene that every officer Raine ever knew could quote verbatim.

"Always preferred truth to its opposite, Captain."

"Yeah. I know that about you. Okay—follow me and we'll get started. 'Cause, you know, you see ... you don't have a lot of time."

As they walked toward Hill's office, the captain pointed to a little kitchenette off to the side. "Coffee? Glass of water?"

"No, sir. I'm fine." *Why is he stalling?*

They reached his office, and Raine took a seat facing Hill's desk. It was piled with papers, stacks of photos, and an open laptop. Behind the desk, another computer screen. On it was a paused video, cued to run.

"Tell me, Raine. What do you know about Apophis 99942?"

"Asteroid. Doing a flyby of our planet. Big. Seen the pictures."

"Right."

Hill hit something on his computer, and the frozen video on the screen began running. It showed a massive object moving through space. The asteroid.

"That animation?"

"No. Real. We've had some deep solar system projects out there. Not public knowledge, but they do intersecting loops of our solar system. Give us video feeds. Mainly to watch what other countries might be doing in space. At least, that was the idea."

"Jesus, Captain. That is mighty big."

Raine stared at the live image. This careening hammer threatening to destroy anything in its path.

If this rock from space actually was to hit Earth, we wouldn't have a chance.

"God. The size of a city. Over three miles wide. Good thing it will miss—"

"But here's the thing, Raine. It's *not* going to miss. It's going to be a hit. A direct hit."

The words hung in the room like the pronouncement of a death sentence.

Because in that instant ... Raine knew that's exactly what they were.

"An asteroid that big? It would be—"

"A slate wiper."

The screen changed. Now it *was* animation, showing the asteroid plummeting through the atmosphere, a massive shock wave racing before it, walls of ocean water rising up, screaming away from the impact well before the asteroid hit.

Then—*impact.*

No sound. But there might as well have been, as the animation showed an explosion that seemed to bite off a massive chunk of the planet, sending country-sized pieces of Earth flying upward.

Hill touched his laptop.

The animation paused.

Raine shook his head. Hill had been his captain for two major counterinsurgency efforts, by-the-book officer who stood by his men, and definitely stood by the truth.

So Raine didn't question what he'd just been told.

But it seemed unbelievable, unreal ... *impossible*.

"I don't get it," he said. "The whole world thinks we're safe. They've been told."

Hill nodded, and gestured to the control room they had passed.

"See out there?"

"Couldn't miss it. Like Canaveral."

"Yeah. This is just one of many sites with a similar purpose. Here in America, and in other countries, too. Apophis is coming, and there's not a goddamned thing we can do about stopping it."

"So ..." Raine took a breath.

The whole mad night had turned surreal. Maybe he'd blink, wake up, and find himself sleeping off the boilermakers from The Hook.

"... we're doomed?"

Hill sat down. He leaned close. Raine thought—*God*—that he saw something in the captain's eyes he'd never seen before. Not in all the bloody streets and valleys of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as bad went to worse.

Were his eyes watering up?

"We couldn't stop Apophis," Hill said. "But that didn't mean we couldn't do *anything*."

He had looked away, and only now looked up at Raine.

A small smile, and Hill looked away again.

Something else was going on inside his captain, Raine realized.

"Ready for your orders?" Hill said.

Raine actually hesitated before responding. He was a soldier, though, and an officer was about to give him a mission. Somberly, professionally, he said, "Yes, sir."

Hill stood up.

"C'mon, then."

And Captain Hill led the way out of the office.

They walked up the stairs behind the bank of workstations, toward a door Raine had noticed when he first descended into this command center. The way was illuminated by a mammoth screen that hovered above everything. The only thing on it was some sort of timer: *2d4h37m37s*.

The seconds rolling back, flying away, the time left until Apophis hit.

The time left until doom.

The two guards at the door moved aside as Hill waved a pass and the door opened.

“What you’re about to see is not something a lot of people have.”

Hill went in and Raine followed.

And what was there—Raine couldn’t even put a name to it.

He and the captain stood side by side at a railing, looking down at a dark, massive object.

One end came to a cone-shaped point. The sides had razor-toothed metal tracks, like what you’d see at a mine operation, ostensibly for digging into the ground and moving rock.

The base looked flat, and wider, like the bottom of a mammoth bullet. And—at that base—

a door.

“Captain, I have to admit: I don’t know what that is.”

People in white coats walked around, holding tablet computers, touching them, looking at other screens.

And—surrounding the room—were the ever-present soldiers in full combat gear, holding their machine guns at ready.

As if they were expecting a raid.

“You’re not supposed to,” Hill said. “C’mon—I’ll show you.” He led Raine down another flight of stairs, so that they were on the ground next to ... whatever it was. With it looming above him, Raine was impressed by just how tiny it made him feel. They walked around it and he noticed little details without knowing what they were for. Finally, they completed their circuit.

“It’s called an Ark, Lieutenant.”

“Like Noah?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s why they picked the name. The French call it L’Arche, the Chinese—

with no connection to Noah—a *chun jia*. Means ‘life pod’ or something.”

“Everyone has these?”

“Those with the tech. Those that the scientists who discovered the truth about Apophis 99942 thought could be trusted. Lot of countries still don’t know. They still expect the flyby.”

“An Ark. You’re going to put people in there?”

Hill turned to him. “People *are* in there. Deep cryo. This one’s hours away from insertion.”

“And that means?”

“Each Ark gets buried somewhere, some nearly a mile deep—depends on the strata and rough predictions of seismic activity over the next century. Each one goes in with the survivors in cryo sleep—”

“Hang on. You call them survivors. This is to save people?”

“Right. Like Noah. Save some of humanity. The best and the brightest. Scientists, doctors, scholars. Each country with an Ark program formed a committee, also top secret.” Hill looked at Raine. “I’ll tell you—it’s fucking amazing no one has found out.”

“Sure is.”

Hill pointed at the truck-sized Ark in front of them. “This one will get inserted, and it’s due to emerge 120 years from now.”

“Where—”

“Above my pay grade, Raine. All I know is the timing. It’s thought that whatever radiation Apophis releases on impact should have subsided by then. The darkness created by the hole will have also long passed. Life may not survive, but as these Arks come up, they will bring hope for some kind of future for humanity.”

“I imagine they carry seeds, tools, things to start again.”

Now Hill had his eyes trained on him. Raine was so caught up in taking all this in, the global destruction to come, the Ark Project, this top secret place—that he forgot he had come here on orders.

What the hell could those orders be?

Hill put a hand on his shoulder.

“You see, Raine. That Ark down there has one empty and free cryo chamber. And you, my friend, are going in it.”

Raine turned away. *I’ve been told that it’s all over. And that thing down there, that’s hope.*

That was his first reaction.

More than a century in the future.

Was that hope? Which was worse? Dying in a flash or emerging from under the ground to what could—he imagined—be hell.

Unlike the rest of the world, he now had an option.

To survive, to have hope, to possibly have a future. “I don’t get it, Captain. You said ... ‘best and the brightest.’ Pretty sure I don’t qualify.”

“What will the world be like a hundred years from now? Whole landmasses may have been blown away by the impact, bodies of water disappeared while new ones took shape. Will anything alive have survived? So yeah, we are sending down a lot of scientists. Doctors of all kinds. All the collected wisdom in the world in the Ark computers. But all that knowledge and learning still may need one thing—”

A woman—white coat, chiseled face, blond hair pulled back, librarian glasses—came up to Hill.

“They’re ready for you down there, Captain.”

She shot Raine a glance. Was that jealousy in her eyes? Envy?

Pity?

The scientist turned sharply away.

“They may need some law and order, Raine. Security. Things could get a little hairy. Leadership may be the skill that could make the difference between life and death.”

A small laugh. It sounded false.

“So amidst the Arks, we placed a scattering of military, all trained in difficult situations. War, disasters, all kinds of crises. Armed, and with an understanding of their mission: to

protect the Ark Survivors, and lead them if necessary.”

“Why me?”

“Well, it wasn’t going to be you. *I* was supposed to be going. Not my choice. They brought me in, told me the mission, and I agreed. But then—”

Now Hill looked away.

“They found something during one of the last medical checks. Some cancer. With enough time, treatable. Hell, I might even live. But we didn’t have time. So ...”

Hill looked back to Raine. “Would you send someone who’s perhaps dying with cancer in the future? I offered to withdraw before they even came up with the idea.”

He took a breath.

“I also suggested my replacement.”

Neither said anything for a moment.

“Guess—I should say thanks. But I feel like I don’t know enough. Who’s in this Ark? Who can I expect when it comes out? Where—”

“I know. Lots of questions. Follow me.”

Hill moved toward the Ark.

Toward the open door.

Raine had to duck down as he slipped into the Ark.

Inside, in the pale light, the interior was quiet, a hushed temple of technology. Scientists moved around the room, some checking monitors, taking notes, others hitting keys.

Above them, surrounding the room, a belt of large screens mounted to the wall, the telltale signs of a serious computer embedded somewhere inside the Ark’s walls.

Suddenly, a gentle female voice filled the room.

“Full system initialization completed.”

Raine turned to Hill. “The computer talks?”

“Yes, and you can talk back to it. Ask it questions. When you emerge.”

“Talking computer ... that a good thing?”

Hill grinned. “Might be your best friend when you come out of your pod.”

Raine now turned and looked away from the monitors. In a circle, sarcophagus-like chambers sat arrayed like spokes; a dozen such chambers. Almost like a bizarre funeral parlour—more like coffins than anything that might save life.

A spiral staircase curled down. He wondered: storage floors below, holding the tools, the seeds, the building blocks needed for a new world? He heard someone come up to Hill.

“We’re all ready, Captain.”

All but one chamber was closed tight. One still lay open, waiting.

“Everyone else is already in cryo, Raine. This Ark is due to leave soon. So to your questions, who these people are—it’s all in the briefing you will get when you awake during emergence. The computer can answer any questions you might have. It will also be able to give you an update on the outside environment well before you reach the surface.”

Raine nodded.

“Guess you’re not *asking* me to go.”

Hill smiled. “Yeah. It’s an order, Raine. Funny feeling, isn’t it? To know that the whole world will be destroyed except for you and the other Ark survivors. And yet somehow—doesn’t exactly feel like a gift.”

“All the Arks come up at the same time?”

“No. The scientists thought it best—safest—if the Arks came up at staggered periods. That allows for the greatest chance of survival. We don’t know what the world will be like. Some come up earlier, others much later.”

“And mine—120 years.”

“Exactly.”

The doctor with the librarian glasses stepped into the Ark. “All set, Captain.”

“Okay.” Hill turned to Raine. “Lieutenant, as I said, this one is ready for insertion. Just go to get you in there.”

“Now?” he asked. Raine hadn’t thought it was going to happen so soon.

Hill didn’t bother answering. He simply went over to a side wall of the Ark and grabbed what looked like a space suit.

“This—is an Ark suit. Get into it, if you would.”

And then he tossed the suit at Raine.

THE DEEP SLEEP

Raine lay down on the cool bed of the cryo pod.

A trio of doctors whizzed around him, checking the fit of the suit, looking at the Ark's monitors, then coming back to check small readouts on the suit itself.

Hill had disappeared, and that made Raine uneasy.

None of the doctors said much, just a "lift your arm, please" and "turn to your side." Their bedside manner sucked.

Finally, Hill came back. Just in time for Raine to notice that something had begun swinging over the cryo pod from the side, resembling a hypodermic with a dozen wires trailing from it.

Except this hypo was the size of a bazooka.

"Mighty big needle," he said.

"Yeah." Hill turned to the doctors. "Can you give us a minute?"

"We don't have a lot of time," one of the white coats said.

"Just a few minutes." His tone didn't leave the impression this was a request. Same as the captain, Raine thought.

They backed off, busying themselves at the consoles positioned around the perimeter of the Ark.

"In a few minutes this device will implant something in you called 'nanotrites.' Experimental. It's not even something we would use on the battlefield."

"Then why do I want them?"

"Because of their potential. The test cases show that nanotrites do some pretty amazing things. In case of severe tissue damage, organ failure—even a momentary cessation of primary functions—the nanotrites are amazing cellular engines. They promote incredibly rapid tissue growth. They can even restart organ functions."

"And the downside?"

"We don't know all the side effects. Not in the slightest. Could be there's a price to pay for using them, but if there is, we haven't had time to find it. And, they are not the miracle nanomachines we thought they were."

"You're losing me."

"Nanomachines—biologically engineered micromachines. We've been playing with them for decades. *These* seem to work. And because of that potential, we feel it's too good an opportunity to pass up. We don't know what kind of world you're going to wake up to, but we think these nanotrites will be pretty useful. Everyone who went into the Ark has had them implanted."

"I'm guessing I don't have a choice about them. I mean, you said they haven't been fully tested. Could be I'd be better off without them ..."

"No. You're going, so you get them. Consider that an order."

"And fingers crossed on side effects."

Hill grinned. "Send us a note back."

Raine looked at the doctors, waiting, still standing back.

“Captain ...” he said quietly.

“Yes?”

“The asteroid. Most of the world predicts a miss. Then a handful of scientists predict a hit. How’d that happen?”

“That’s the other thing. Can’t say I fully understand it.” Hill came a bit closer. “An astrophysicist at Palomar was the first to see something was off about the asteroid, then someone in the London Observatory. They were professional friends, so they communicated their findings to each other, and as soon as they alerted their governments, they were ordered to keep it quiet. More scientists made the discovery ... all seeing something different than what was predicted.”

“Which was?”

“The asteroid acted erratically when it passed close to any zone with a measurable gravitational force. Somehow, that gravitational force, which in most cases should have been insignificant, or at least measurable and predictable, caused a dramatic shift in the asteroid’s trajectory, a definite wobble. Most astrophysicists would write it off to random erratic behavior. But for this group, even with Apophis so far away, they saw it as something else.”

“Captain,” the lead doctor said. “It’s time.”

Hill held up his hand. “They were finally able to measure it, Raine. Whatever caused the trajectory to wobble and shift ... could be measured. And all anyone knew was that there had to be something within the asteroid itself, something due to its unknown mineral makeup where it came from ... what it was made up of ...”

“That caused the effect?”

“Exactly. Another unknown, Lieutenant.”

“Seems to be all you have to offer today.”

“It’s time,” a doctor said, more firmly. Hill nodded.

Raine, wearing the bulky Ark suit, raised his right hand up as sharply to his brow as he could.

“Last time I’ll have to do that, sir.”

Hill nodded, grinned, and then saluted back.

“Okay,” he said to the doctors. “We’re all set.”

The long, gunlike device came down slowly, precisely to Raine’s neck.

The female doctor gave Raine the play-by-play.

“Lieutenant, you will feel the metal tip press against your neck. The nanotrites need to reach critical velocity within the insertion device. It’s really a minicentrifuge. Once they enter, they will travel immediately to your brain stem.”

“And you can’t knock me out for this?”

A small smile from the doctor.

Guess it’s too late to ask her out on a date, Raine thought. Late, by maybe a hundred years.

“For the first moments, you can’t have anything in your system to knock you out. No sedation. Full brain activity is required.”

“Then full brain activity they shall get.”

“Moments after they enter your body, the drip into the suit will pump in the sedative. You won’t be awake when the full cryo process begins.”

“Which I guess is a good thing, hm?”

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