

Not One of Us

Fenrik Leech stands in the prep bay of the Coalition battle cruiser *Ajax*, surrounded by rangers and warjacks. The rangers keep their distance and cast wary glances in his direction. They whisper to one another, and the audio relays in Fenrik's helmet pluck these idle thoughts from the air.

I hear he's not human under all that tech.

They say he never takes off his mask.

I think he's working with the Emyreans.

Why did Colonel Haster even hire this freak?

It's nothing Fenrik hasn't heard before.

"Leech." Colonel Haster's voice fills Fenrik's helmet. "Captain Kilroy has expressed concerns about you working with her unit."

Fenrik rotates his head until he sees the armored shape of the Ranger captain. She glares at him with barely contained malice.

"She has no cause for concern," Fenrik replies, his modulator hiding his tone behind a flat mechanical delivery.

"Tell me what happened on Jarkan," the colonel says.

Fenrik cocks his head and wonders if Kilroy knew one of the rangers who died on that icy moon. Perhaps someone close to her.

"An ambush. Emyrean forces overwhelmed us." He leaves out certain details. Details that would cast doubt on his presence here.

"Yet, you survived," Colonel Haster says.

"Would you rather I expired?" Fenrik asks.

"I...that's not—" The Warcaster lapses into silence for a moment, and then she says, "Just do your job, Leech."

"I always do."



Fenrik enjoys the sensation of traveling through a void gate. That brief moment of being nowhere, unattached to everything. Sensors in his helmet—ancient tech he found on a backwater world, in ruins so old they defied any attempts to date them—pick up subtle movements in the void. It is not *entirely* empty. He pushes this thought aside as he steps into a harsh yellow light. Helios, where the Coalition settlement lies, does not know darkness. Its twin suns keep it in perpetual daylight.

"We're in," Captain Kilroy says aloud into her comm. "Power us up."

Arc pours into Fenrik's systems. Colonel Haster is more than just a battery for his mechanika, however. Fenrik is a wyrd, and she will channel cyphers through his systems. Systems that are unlike any among her own rangers. Does she feel the difference?

They have arrived outside the main gate of a small settlement. The walls are sturdy synthicrete, the buildings nondescript rectangles and squares aligned in neat rows. The only thing of interest in the area is the half-constructed Arc tower. Helios is meant to supply the Coalition with much needed Arcanessence.

Captain Kilroy motions her troops and a pair of Dusk Wolf warjacks forward. Fenrik assumes he is included in this order and follows as the rangers approach the settlement. His audio sensors pick up nothing, not the working sounds of a busy settlement, not the dire sounds of combat with Aeternus Continuum raiders, which is why they are here. A distress signal from Helios was sent a day ago—a fragmented message about an AC attack. Fenrik has heard a distress signal like this before. He did not share this information with Colonel Haster. Again, it would cast doubt on his presence, on his reasons for accepting the contract.

Fenrik dials up his sensors and the rangers' heartbeats thud through his auditory systems. They are the only living things in the vicinity.

The rangers step through the gates, and Fenrik dutifully follows. He scans the buildings, his optics piercing the synthicrete easily, revealing the corpses within. This is a tomb, a mausoleum. He says nothing.

The rangers fan out. They discover the bodies. They ascertain the colonists were killed not by spiker rifles—the common armament of Aeternus

vassals—but by concentrated ionic energy. Captain Kilroy expresses dismay. The battle cruiser picked up Arc signatures of Aeternus vehicles and troops. It was the same on Jarkan. Fenrik could have told her this, but they might not have gated down to the settlement. They might not have hired him.

And then it comes.

The ambush on them is eerily similar to the one on Jarkan. Saber warriors pour out of the buildings near the rear of the settlement, Zenith attack vehicles scream through the sky, and three Daemon warjacks charge out from behind a cluster of Arc silos. An overwhelming force.

The rangers fire on Kilroy's order. The kinetic slugs from their battle rifles shred the first rank of Saber warriors. Fenrik adds blasts from his nexus staff to the barrage, destroying more Emphyrean warriors, but there are too many. He switches his comm to the open channel and hears Captain Kilroy shouting orders and trying to relay information to Colonel Haster.

"Emphyreans! Ambush!" Kilroy screams.

"What?" Haster sounds as if she cannot understand. "We're not picking up Emphyrean signatures. We're still showing Aeternus vehicles and troops down there."

"I don't—" Kilroy's line goes dead. Screams and shouts from the other rangers continue, and Fenrik switches off the open comm.

Colonel Haster hastily channels a fury through Fenrik's systems, and his tech increases the range dramatically. On her command, he targets the rangers with Conviction Countermeasure, blurring their outlines, and making them more difficult to target. He targets a Daemon warjack with Pyrokinetic Surge, setting it aflame. None of it matters. None of it makes a difference.

The moment Fenrik has been waiting for occurs. The line of rangers falters, and a pair of Saber warriors push through. Fenrik stands twenty yards behind the Coalition troops, and he activates his mimetic cloak as the breaching Saber warriors open fire on him with their ion cannons. The blasts miss, and the automatons charge into melee. He destroys one with a nexus blast while it's still some distance away. He lets the other get close enough that he can hear the ragged hum of its fusion scythe before he shoots it in the chest. Not the head. He needs that.

The Saber warrior falls inert at his feet, and Fenrik glances up to see the rangers are still holding off the Emphyreans. That won't last. He pulls a fusion knife from his belt, squats over the Emphyrean, and cuts through the armored plating on its head.

"Fenrik! Help them!" Haster screams through the comm. She powers his systems with Arc, as he knew she would, but Fenrik ignores her.

He finally pries a snarl of organic-looking cables from the Saber warrior's head. He sees the last stand of the Coalition rangers. Most of them are dead, but a few attempt a fighting withdrawal.

Fenrik uses the Arc flooding his systems to trigger another ancient bit of technology. The transabyssal modulator tears open a gate, and he steps through.



Fenrik steps into the prep bay of the *Ajax*. He feels the ship moving through the deck plating. The colonel is fleeing from an Emphyrean battle cruiser she has only now detected. He is again surrounded by rangers. This time they're pointing rifles at him, their faces rictuses of fear and hatred.

"Stand down!" a commanding voice says, and Colonel Haster pushes through her troops. Her own face is a mask of rage. "You left them to die, Leech!"

"They would have died if I had stayed," Fenrik says flatly.

"You don't know that," Haster says through clenched teeth.

"I do, and so do you. You have more important concerns than the loss of your troops, Colonel."

She stares at him, eyes still clouded with anger but now fear as well. "What are you talking about?"

"Are you not curious how an Emphyrean strike force appears on all your instruments as a band of Aeternus Continuum raiders?"

Haster pales. "If you know something, you'd better tell me right goddamn now."

He holds up the device he took from the Saber warrior's head. "My theory is this changes the mechanika signatures of any machine in which it is installed."

"How can you know that?" Haster says.

"As I said, a theory," he replies. "I will let you examine it if you share the findings with me."

Haster laughs. "You'll 'let' me?"

"How much do you know about Empyrean technology, Colonel?" Fenrik says.

She frowns. "How much do *you* know?"

"Enough to help you get what you need."

She shakes her head, but there is only one choice she can make. "Deal."

Fenrik experiences elation, fulfillment. The device, once adapted to his own systems, has many useful applications. He missed his chance on Jarkan. He has rectified that mistake.