

Friend and Foe

Lieutenant Iris Hathaway didn't like working with mercenaries, though it was often a necessity when operating on the fringes of the Coalition of Worlds. Most mercs were unreliable, dangerously so, but they were at least human. The same could not be said for the mercenary assigned to her unit by Captain Kyra Theroux as the battle cruiser *Nomad* gated into the skies above Ikarus.

The entity known as Corebus stood nearly as tall as the warjacks Hathaway would be leading into battle; he towered over the human rangers who made up her platoon. Though he was an Emphyrean, his mechanical body had been remade by Marcher World technicians, and he now resembled a small warjack rather than the alien forms of his fellow Aeons.

"Lieutenant Hathaway," Corebus said in greeting, his vox producing a close approximation of human speech. "Captain Theroux says I am to serve under your command."

"So, what does a former Emphyrean Aeon want on a fringe Coalition world?" Hathaway asked, not bothering to hide her suspicion.

"I wish to be of assistance," Corebus said. "I assure you my motives are not a threat."

"Uh huh," Hathaway said. "Let's talk about those motives. We get a distress call from the colony on Ikarus about an Aeternus Continuum attack, and then no communication for a week. Well, no communication with anyone but you. You reached out to us about Ikarus. That's damn peculiar, if you ask me."

"Captain Theroux is aware of my reasons," Corebus said.

"That's great, but Captain Theroux is going to be up here in her rack while my rangers and I head into battle with a former Emphyrean in our midst."

"I need not remind you that your own Coalition offered me membership, which I gladly accepted," Corebus said, and for a moment, Hathaway thought she detected a defensive note in the Emphyrean's tone.

"Look, I don't think you're like the Emphyreans trying to scour the universe clean of humanity," Hathaway said grudgingly. "But I also don't think you're being completely honest with us."

Corebus shook his head, a decidedly organic gesture. "I requested to join Captain Theroux's mission because I fear the dangers on Ikarus far exceed the presence of Aeternus Continuum raiders. In fact, I believe Ikarus holds a dire threat to everything in the Hyperuranion, both humans and Emphyreans."

Hathaway's eyes narrowed. "What else is in the Hyperuranion other than humans and Emphyreans?"

"Nothing," Corebus said. "For now."



The Aeternus Continuum had left the Ikarus colony little more than smoking rubble, and Hathaway clenched her fists in rage as she opened the comm to Captain Theroux. "We're too late, Captain. The bastards killed everyone."

"I'm still showing Aeternus forces on the planet," the Warcaster responded. "About four miles due east of your position."

"Captain Theroux," Corebus said, breaking into their open channel, "is there any record of...archaeological activity in the area?"

"What the hell are you talking—?" Hathaway began.

"Yes," Theroux responded. "Colony logs indicate significant ruins nearby."

"Where?" Hathaway asked, though she knew the answer.

"Four miles due east."



The AC forces were far more than a simple raiding party—their numbers nearly equaled Hathaway's own. The majority of the AC troops were vassals, as per usual, and they swarmed around a great black obelisk that jutted from the ground like a rotten tooth. An Arc trawler hovered above the object, and vassals had connected what looked like towing cables to the artifact.

"What the hell are they doing?" Hathaway asked Corebus.

"Trying to open a lock," the Empyrean replied. "That obelisk stands upon an interplanetary void gate, one that has been sealed for millennium."

Hathaway shook her head. The Empyrean's words were borderline fantastical. Interplanetary void gates were massive things, miles in diameter, and the most valuable and fought-over mechanika in the Hyperuranion. "I don't understand. How is it locked?"

"That obelisk is a massive null generator," Corebus said. "It emits a dampening field powerful enough to disrupt the gate's ephemeride cycles and keep it from opening."

"Are you telling me the Aeternus Continuum could lock down any interplanetary void gate with that thing?" Hathaway said.

"Technically, yes, but it's this gate that concern me," Corebus said.

Hathaway pointed down to the dig site where vassals led by a hooded immortal weaver were working on a dozen squat rectangular devices that glowed a bloody shade of crimson. Each of these devices was connected via a snarl of wires to the obelisk. "Well, you might want to reconsider. Those look like Arc jammers they're connecting to your null generator. They're about to power it down and carry it away."

"Unlikely. They almost certainly lack the mechanikal knowledge to access the generator's primary systems."

"Yeah, well, I'm not taking that chance," Hathaway said, then into her comm, "Captain, we have a new target. I'll need heavy artillery ASAP."

Corebus jerked his head toward her in alarm. "No. You don't understand. The generator is the only thing —"

A bright burst of light cut Corebus off mid-sentence as the obelisk came free from the rock holding it, and the trawler lifted it into the air. The ground trembled, and a low steady hum filled the air.

"What happened?" Hathaway asked, her stomach roiling with sudden fear.

In answer, Corebus stood, plucked the battle rifle from the hands of nearby ranger scout, and before any of them could protest, aimed and fired it down at the AC forces. He didn't hit anything, but the shot gave away their position.

Hathaway's mouth fell open in horror as spiker fire poured into the hillside and vassals swarmed up from the dig site. "What have you done?"

"The only thing I could," Corebus said.



Hathaway shot a raider as he charged at her with a fusion knife, then stumbled backward as the ground began to shake again. Plumes of dirt and smoke shot into the air in a circle around the perimeter of the dig site, and a massive ring, as high as an Arc tower, broke free from the ground and rose upward. The AC trawler lay directly in its path, and the ring swatted the ship aside on its elliptical journey. The trawler broke apart and crashed to the ground, engulfing AC troops in fire and wreckage. The obelisk fell more or less where it had been originally, though it now lay on its side.

"Pull back!" Hathaway screamed into her comm as the gate's smaller interior rings broke free from the earth and began to spin up. Her rangers hardly needed to be ordered to flee the gargantuan machine as it awakened from its eons-long sleep.

The Aeternus Continuum forces were also retreating, and many vassals were simply obliterated when they failed to time the passage of the spinning rings, though more than half managed to escape the radius of destruction. The only beings not retreating were the immortal weaver—who seemed unwilling to give up the Continuum's prize—a towering Nemesis warjack, and Corebus. The Empyrean had gained the center of the rings, like diving into the eye of a storm, and barreled toward the obelisk. The Nemesis charged to meet him.

Corebus moved gracefully over the rough terrain, dodging the Nemesis' fusion scythe. His fists glowed with mechanikal power, and he slammed them into the warjack's hull, smashing through armor plating as if it were hardly there. Hathaway knew the Empyrean was their only hope of shutting down the gate before it opened a hole in space and time to who knows where.

"Hit that Nemesis," Hathaway said into her comm. Her rangers, positioned safely between two of the rings hundreds of yards away, focused their fire on the warjack. Hathaway aimed her own rifle at the immortal weaver, Arc suffusing the mechanikal systems in her armor and optics and adding hundreds of yards to her range. She squeezed the trigger and saw the weaver jerk and then fold over one of the Arc jammers.

The Nemesis stumbled back under the withering fuselage of rifle fire but landed a strike on Corebus with its fusion scythe, removing the Emphyrean's right arm. It was to be the warjack's final blow, as the Emphyrean struck with his left fist, driving it through the warjack's hull below its head and into its cortex. Its mechanical brain destroyed, the warjack shuddered and toppled over.

Corebus stumbled toward the obelisk, clawing at his chest with his one remaining hand and opening an access port to his internal systems.

The rings were moving so fast now they were a blur overhead. Worse, a mote of absolute darkness now hung in the center of the spinning rings, and Hathaway could feel it pulling at her. If the gate opened, they'd all be sucked into the void.

Corebus reached the obelisk and grabbed hold of one of the cables the AC had attached to the object. He ripped it free from a nearby Arc jammer and shoved the connection port into his chest. He convulsed and sank to his knees, and Hathaway was certain the power in the artifact would tear him to pieces. Instead, runes along the obelisk pulsed a vivid purple, and the rings began to slow. The dark mote disappeared, and Hathaway nearly collapsed in relief as the gate began to shut down.



"Are you okay?" Hathaway asked as she approached Corebus. The Emphyrean had regained his feet, but he was still hardwired into the obelisk. She didn't think a machine could look exhausted, but as Corebus listed to the side, she and a pair of rangers rushed forward to help hold him up.

"I'm sorry about your soldiers," Corebus said. "I did not mean to put them in danger."

Hathaway shook her head. "I think a lot more would be dead if you hadn't done what you did." She paused, guilt eating at her for not trusting Corebus before. "I'm sorry."

The Emphyrean waved away the apology. He clearly had more pressing concerns. "I cannot keep the null generator powered for much longer."

"Tell me what you need," Hathaway said.

"Arc batteries," the Emphyrean replied. "As many as you have. Once the null generator's Arc manifold has drawn sufficient power from them, it will self-regulate and begin to draw Arcanessence from the environment again."

"You get all that, Captain?" Hathaway said into her open comm.

"I did," the Warcaster replied. "We're rounding up the arc batteries now. ETA twenty minutes."

"Hang in there," Hathaway said to Corebus. "Help is on the way."

Corebus nodded slowly, and though he looked like he might keel over any minute, Hathaway couldn't help but ask the next question. "Why did the Emphyreans seal this gate?"

Corebus was silent for a moment then said, "Do you remember when you asked what existed in the Hyperuranion other than humans and Emphyreans?"

Cold dread shivered up Hathaway's spine. "Yeah. You said nothing."

Corebus stared at her, the twin motes of his optical sensors like distant stars, cold and terrifying. "I said nothing...for now."