

Somewhere over the Virginias

In the cargo hold, Fox was checking the locking clamps hooked over the M-TAV's wheels, making certain they were secure. Venus was leaning against the fuselage looking out of the porthole staring down at the ruins of an Old-World City they were flying over, barely visible under the moonlight and the thick forest that had encroached to reclaim its primordial state around and in the ruins. She could make out streets, a railroad and acres of dark ruins. It hadn't been hit by nukes, it was simply abandoned when civilization had fallen apart during the nuclear winter, when the mountains were as cold as the North Pole.

'...It's crazynuts if you ask me,' came Fox's voice from behind the M-TAV. 'All this babbledick to ferry a couple of novies to some old ruins. And what for, eh? What could possibly be down there that gets a priority one status? What sort of Old-World fuckshit gets the big-dicks all uppity like they got isotopes up their asses, eh?'

Venus took a deep breath, her attention divided between listening to Fox's babbledick and looking at the beautiful mountains below, lambent in the moonlight, the high peaks dusted with snow.

'...It's all babbledick...' He came out from behind the M-TAV and looked over at her. She hadn't made a single comment the entire time. 'Everything looks okay. D'you want me to run the system check again?'

She turned and gave him a sharp look. 'No. You just keep your goddam paws off my rig,' she snapped possessively. She treated the M-TAV like a living thing, her baby, and nobody touched her baby but her. She reached into her breast pocket for her half-smoked cigar and planted it between her teeth.

Fox leant against the M-TAV's rear wheel that was as tall as he was. 'You ever been to this Manhattan place before, Corp?'

'Been over it,' she said as she lit her Server Town turd. 'It was a big place. Millions of people clocked off...' She clicked her fingers. 'Fast as that.'

Fox shivered. It was hard to imagine millions of people living anywhere in one place. Harder to imagine what it must've been like when the nukes fell. Arguably, they were the lucky ones. The long nuclear winter was primordial hell, from what Jeremiah O'Connor's chronicles said. 'D'you think the intel's right. About the Godders I mean?' he asked worriedly.

She shrugged her shoulders and glanced round as Tiger and Thundersky entered the hold. She gave them a narrow look up and down. 'If they are there, just don't let 'em take you alive,' she said ominously, still watching the novies.

'We've come to check our gear,' Tiger said, his eyes once again drawn to Venus, who was a beautiful woman, even with all her tac gear on.

She noticed and didn't appreciate it. She preferred a real man to some baby-faced kidling. 'It's open. Help yourself,' she said lowly and turned back to look out of the porthole.

Holding onto the grab rail, Tiger pulled himself up the back step. He reached up and pressed a button in the bulkhead. The armored rear compartment door of the M-TAV hissed as it slid open.

There were storage and weapons lockers left and right of the gangway, which led to an internal bulkhead door into the M-TAV's articulated tactical command and communications module (C and C).

Tiger opened one of the compartments and dragged out a heavy titanium trunk and opened it. Inside were quantum circuits and qubit processor chips, sensors, calibration tools, a roll of Intsofiber micro-wire wound on a bobbin, and high yield sonic charges.

They spent the next few minutes checking and calibrating their equipment before packing it away again to stow it back in the locker.

They climbed down and closed the hatch.

'So, we gotta babysit you kidlings have we,' Fox said.

Tiger gave Fox a contemptuous look.

Thundersky ignored Fox, his restless curiosity drawing him away to explore the outside of the M-TAV. He had never seen one up this close before.

It was just under fifty feet long and about thirteen feet high ground to roof, and by the same again wide. Its body was angular, with sharp edges designed to deflect artillery and parabellum rounds.

'Quite something, ain't it?' Fox said, following up behind him, running his hand along the M-TAV's smooth, shiny black Intsoglass coated body.

Thundersky nodded his head. 'Beautiful.'

'She weighs in at fifteen point three tons unloaded,' Venus interrupted as she casually sauntered over, passing Tiger a sideways look, unappreciative of his amorous glances at her breasts.

'And has a self-charging two thousand seven hundred and fifty horsepower mag-drive powerplant,' Thundersky said.

Venus was impressed. 'Giving her a top flat terrain speed of eighty-nine point seven miles per hour,' she said. 'In the water, she can make ten knots submerged, fifteen on the surface. This baby does everything apart from fly,' she added proudly as Fox climbed the ladder up onto the roof, to the twin barreled, belt fed fifty caliber railgun.

'You know they're working on a grav-drive hover version?' Tiger said. 'The new Mark Five.'

'And Red Team will be the first to trial it,' Venus replied. 'Have you seen the prototype?'

'Yes,' Tiger said. 'My father designed its engines and weapons systems. Sixty feet from nose to tail. Ground speed of about a hundred miles per hour. Hover speed of three hundred knots.'

'Why isn't it in service yet?' Fox asked.

'There are stability issues in hover mode,' Tiger said.

Fox put his hand on one of the long barrels of the railgun. 'Say hello to the medium range Electromagnetic Tac-Z-Fifty Railgun,' he said. 'Controlled by multi-spectrum auto-tracking and defense system. She fires belt loaded fifty caliber self-guiding sonic charge projectiles with a thirty-mile range at a rate of sixty-seven rounds per barrel, per minute,' he said. 'We've inbuilt Tac-Z-Thirties front and back and a Martianite diamond laser pulse cannon under the blister...' He gestured to a long blister humping up in the middle of the roof on the front section of the articulated M-TAV. 'Intsglass skin over a six-inch-thick Lunar-titanium body. It would take a direct hit from a sonic cruise missile to knock this motherfucker out. Yes, sir...' He climbed down and walked to the front where Tiger, Thundersky and Venus were standing. 'This here is a deadly machine of war.'

The drone suddenly and unexpectedly began a steep ascent that sent them staggering back like drunks. They reached quickly for whatever was at hand to grab on to.

Thundersky reached for a grab rail to the side of the M-TAV's cockpit steps. Venus grabbed hold of one of the securing clamps holding the front wheel, and so did Tiger. Fox ended up on his butt and slid away down the decking until he crashed into the bulkhead.

An alarm sounded. A voice spoke: 'BRACE! BRACE! BRACE! Incoming. BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!'

They hung on for their lives, their faces fixed in horror as the drone climbed almost vertically, the jets blasting out at full throttle.

The aft rockets fired up.

'We're going sub-orbital!' Tiger said with alarm.

Fox tried to get up, but he was pushed back by the g-forces.

The monstrous M-TAV shifted several inches and creaked on its securing clamps.

'Deploying countermeasures,' the computer announced.

There was a SWOOSH noise.

'Countermeasures deployed. Targeting heat plume...'

There was a sudden whine followed by a clunk that seemed to come from below their feet.

'The drone's arming its weapons,' Venus said.

The drone was violently rocked by a sonic detonation three thousand feet below them.

A jet screamed a hideous mechanical death knell and the drone pitched violently to port, and again they were thrown back, almost losing their grips. Fox was clinging to the fuselage, his face frozen in terror.

'Shit! We're hit!' Venus shouted.

'INCOMING! BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!'

BOOM!!! The drone was rocked again by another sonic blast beneath the rear port engines.

'Get in the M-TAV!' Venus yelled.

Fox pulled himself up and Thundersky helped him as Venus opened the cockpit hatch. Stair treads slid out from the fuselage below the hatch and she climbed up, followed by Tiger.

Thundersky pulled Fox away from the bulkhead towards him. Fox lurched towards him, reaching out for Thundersky's hand. Thundersky grabbed hold of him with his right hand, his left clinging to the handrail, managing to heave Fox back.

Once inside, the hatch slid shut automatically and the noise outside was muted to near total silence.

'Buckle yourselves in,' Venus said.

The drone was descending rapidly.

The computer repeated over the M-TAV's internal comms: 'BRACE FOR IMPACT! BRACE FOR IMPACT! BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!'

They sat as tense as coiled springs, feeling the drone pitching and yawing, diving towards the earth sixty thousand feet below, none of them believing they were going to survive. But the M-TAV was the safest place to be.

'What about the others?' Fox said.

'You wanna go get 'em... Be my guest,' Venus said. It was everyone for themselves now.

The drone was diving nose first out of the night sky, trailing black smoke.

In the M-TAV, the computer repeated: 'IMPACT IMMINENT! BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!'

Their faces froze with rictus, clinging to the arms of their seats as the drone dived towards the earth.

The drone's remaining engines and thrusters fired to reduce their impact velocity at full thrust and they could feel the drone shuddering as it slowed them dramatically, but they were still coming down fast.

'IMPACT IMMINENT! BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!'

There was a bone-jarring crash and a terrible CRUNCH of folding metal. The M-TAV shot forwards with a violent jerk...

Outside, the underside of the drone smashed into a mountain crevice with a thunderous CRASH. Rock exploded into the air as the drone bounced off, shearing the starboard thruster off along with half the wing, ripping a huge gash along the side of the drone. They plunged down the mountainside, hitting more rocky outcrops of rock and treetops, acrid black smoke spewing from the broken wing as the drone dived towards a plateau. It touched down on the mountainside and bounced away before crashing again onto the plateau and snapping into two halves that both slid on in separate directions, ploughing deep gouges into the turf. Sparks arced and popped from shorting circuits which were ripped apart. The rear half of the fuselage twisted 180-

degrees before it smashed into an outcrop of granite, spewing debris along a five-hundred-yard arc before finally coming to a stop.

The front section of the drone slid on unimpeded like a giant sled towards the edge of the plateau eight hundred yards from impact. With nothing to stop it, it tumbled over the precipice and plunged in freefall nose first another thousand feet into a rocky gorge with a fatal CRASH that echoed through the mountains like a clap of thunder.

The silence was ringing, the only sound being the creaking fuselage settling on its rocky grave and circuits buzzing and popping with bright flashes of light.

It was pitch black in the M-TAV, tilted about forty degrees left. Nobody and nothing stirred. The silence immense and profound. Red emergency lighting strips came on overhead, casting them in a blood red hue.

Thundersky stared dazed at the light, hardly believing he was still alive. He raised his hands to his face, feeling for wounds and blood. His face was still intact and dry except for the clamminess of sweat from his fear. He was still in his seat – they were all in their seats, leaning limply with the tilt.

Fox coughed and groaned behind him.

'Goddammit...' Venus murmured. 'Is everyone okay?'

Thundersky unbuckled his safety belt and almost fell out of his seat.

'We've gotta get out of here,' Venus said thickly.

Thundersky looked at the broken fuselage and wondered how they were going to get the M-TAV out of the hold, which was twenty feet from the loading bay doors to the ground. He was sure the loading ramp wouldn't be working, and they were probably going to need to blow the loading bay doors off too.

'We need to check the rest of the drone for survivors,' Venus said, looking coolly at them. 'And then get the hell outta here.'