

JOHNNY MAINS

*Yautja Habitat designated UMF 12, beyond Outer Rim
September 2692 AD*

General Patton was laughing, and Lieutenant Johnny Mains, leader of what was left of the 5th Excursionists, the VoidLarks, knew that he was going to die.

He refused to go without a fight.

The scratching, scampering sounds of the approaching Xenomorphs grew louder. They were nearing the bridge of this strange ship, perhaps called by their android master, or attacking of their own volition. Either way, it would mean the end. Mains and his one surviving Excursionist, Lieder, were low on ammunition. Their combat suits were depleted. They had fought well and lost many good friends along the way, but this was their last stand.

"We stay together," Mains said. "Concentrated fire. Keep them at the doors—once they're onto the bridge they'll spread out and take us down. Ammo?"

"Com-rifle has some nano, low laser charge, one plasma shot. Sidearm. You?"

"Shotgun. Couple of grenades."

"We might as well spit at them."

"We'll take a few. Last grenade's for us."

Lieder glanced at him as she drew closer. No objection there, and he was glad. They'd watched too many people die beneath a Xenomorph's attack to have any intention of going that way. At least hugging a grenade between them would ensure they'd die together.

The android Patton chuckled again, a wet, mechanical sound that grated on Mains's nerves.

"Can't I shoot him?" Lieder asked. She knew the answer. It would be a waste of ammunition.

Patton remained pinned to the rear wall of the ship's bridge by a Yautja spear. Splayed at his feet were the bodies of a single Yautja and innumerable dead Xenomorphs, their slick carapaces burst apart from when they'd self-destructed at the moment of death. Countless acid burns splashed and scarred the walls and floor, and the acrid stench still hung on the air.

Mains had never heard of a Xenomorph doing that before. *Suicide is a Yautja trick*, he mused. *Just another mystery.* "They're close," Lieder said.

Mains didn't need telling. His suit's systems were low on charge and glitching, after all he'd been through, but they still projected a motion image onto his visor. The trace was large, and close.

Patton made a strange, new sound. Straining, groaning, electrical clicks and ticks rattling behind his inhuman voice. Mains had the nagging urge to communicate with the android, get some answers. That he commanded the Xenomorphs was clear—his name was stamped on a patch of exoskeleton at the back of each of their heads. How did he do it? What did he want? Where had he originated, and why had he attacked this huge Yautja habitat?

Mains hated the idea of dying without knowing.

"Been an honor, Johnny," Lieder said, squeezing his hand.

"Fuck sentimentality, Private," Mains said, but he squeezed back.

"Here they come."

The first Xenomorph darted through the doorway and onto the bridge. Lieder sliced its neck to crotch with a laser blast, and it thrashed across the floor and against the wall, body bursting and acid blood spraying as it self-destructed.

Two more followed. Mains fired his antique shotgun three times at the first. It dropped from view behind a control panel, then leapt again, leaking corrosive blood and coming right for him. Another shot put it down.

Lieder killed the third creature with a nano burst, the specks flowering in a thousand explosions across the entrance to the bridge. It caught another couple of Xenomorphs down in the approach corridor, and when the first detonated it must have killed the second, their death throes thudding through the ship.

Patton was becoming more agitated, writhing on the wall, grasping at the heavy Yautja spear that pinned him there, attempting to tug it away. He would not succeed. Sparks danced at the spear's entry point in his chest, miniature lightning storms arcing between android and weapon and back again. He scratched at the shaft, and then tried to force his fingers inside the wound.

"Plasma!" Lieder shouted.

Three more Xenomorphs were coming through the entrance to the bridge, two on the level and one crawling across the ceiling like a monstrous spider. Mains's visor darkened automatically as Lieder unloaded her last remaining plasma charge in their direction. The blast struck the one on the ceiling, and it disintegrated in a

sun-hot eruption, melted flesh and sinew blazing as it showered across its brethren below. They screeched in agony, scampered further onto the bridge, slumped down and burst apart.

The air filled with a haze of superheated gas. Their combat suits filtered much of it from view, but it still seemed to Mains that his visor was misting up.

Patton wailed, a horrible, high sound that descended into something like laughter. It was a strange android, features bland and only superficially human, with no apparent attempt to convey a personality or make it in any way distinctive. That served to render its very human sounds of distress and frustration even more haunting.

Maybe I should have put a shotgun blast in its head, Mains thought.

The plasma burst had set a white-hot fire around the entrance, and for a few seconds the attacking Xenomorphs held back.

"They won't wait long," Mains said.

"Don't want them to," Lieder said. "I'm all fired up. What the hell is *he* doing?" She nodded at Patton. Both of his hands were now pressing into the wound in his chest, fingers-deep in his fleshy outer layers, silvery charged arcs dancing from knuckle to knuckle.

"Doesn't matter," Mains said. "Our Yautja friends have already taken care of him."

The Yautja were not their friends. Far from it. For more than a year Mains's unit—the 5th Excursionists, nicknamed the VoidLarks—had been shadowing the massive Yautja habitat designated UMF 12, keeping a careful eye on the strange aliens and ensuring that they launched no ships toward the Outer Rim. Just recently there had been a spate of Yautja attacks across the Rim, incursions that resulted in hunts and deaths. The

VoidLarks had been involved in one of these, called to Southgate Station 12 while on a rare resupply run. They'd lost two of their crew of eight taking on the Yautja there, and that had seemed like a huge loss.

Upon returning to station a million miles from UMF 12, they'd soon become involved in more fighting as Yautja ships launched back toward the Human Sphere. Damaged in a deep space contact, they'd crash-landed their Arrow ship the *Ochse* on the huge habitat, then survived for a month with only occasional contacts. Running, hiding, it had been the sighting of this large, mysterious ship that had steered events toward a bloody end. Neither recognizably human nor Yautja, the ship had become their objective, and it would be their resting place.

That end was now close. With only two of them left out of the original eight, the VoidLarks were fighting their last.

Patton chuckled again as he noticed them watching him. It was a haunting sound, filled with humor yet coming from an expressionless face. His eyes were deep and dark, giving away nothing. His blood was too white, skin too pasty and pale.

"L-T!" Lieder shouted.

Mains crouched and fired as more Xenomorphs surged through the plasma flames and the remains of their kin. There were six of them, then eight, and he primed and heaved one of his two grenades toward the bridge's lower level.

He and Lieder ducked, the explosion tore through control panels and Xenomorph skin, and as they stood and started shooting again three more aliens were spitting and melting on the floor.

"Back up," Mains said, his voice raised over the hideous sounds. "Toward the end wall, both of us together."

"I'm not retreating anymore," Lieder said. Through the explosions, shrieking, and chaos, her voice was transmitted directly into his ear through his combat suit's headset. Her determination and fury made him proud.

"It's not a retreat," he said, and when she looked he showed her his last grenade. "We press this between us and the wall and it might just vent the ship to space."

The alien ship was secured to one of the long mooring towers protruding from the end of the Yautja habitat. Its atmosphere was thin but breathable, and the habitat maintained an artificial gravity that meant they could move from one place to another without having to float.

But one hole punched through the ship's hull, and everything would be sucked out into the void. The remains of their bodies, twisted together in death, mingling with the corpses of Yautja and the shreds of Xenomorphs scattered across the bridge—and anything else left alive.

"What a way to go," Lieder said.

"Spin!" Mains shouted.

Lieder reacted instantly, finger closing on her trigger as she crouched and spun. She had her laser set on widest spread, and she took down two Xenomorphs with one burst. Another barreled into her, knocking her from her feet, crushing her down to the floor, its arms slapping her weapon aside as its head dipped down.

Mains saw her eyes go wide, and she turned to look at him.

He stepped forward and fired his last shotgun shell into the side of the Xenomorph's head. Its acid blood sprayed, splattering across his hand and forearm and dropping onto Lieder's chest. Their suits hardened against it, repelling the acid, but their charges were dangerously low, and he soon started to feel the burn as

the toxic fluid ate into the weakened material.

He threw the shotgun aside, sorry to lose it. An antique, and hardly standard issue, it had saved his life on more than one occasion. Now it had saved Lieder's, just in time for both of them to die.

She scrambled to her feet and they locked arms, backing quickly across the bridge. Much of the equipment was mysterious, but there was enough here to recognize. This ship looked to have been built and sent by humans, its purpose to attack a huge Yautja habitat with weaponized Xenomorphs, their leader a mad android. Once again Mains was struck by regret, that they'd die without uncovering what this all meant.

More Xenomorphs appeared and stalked them. Moving slowly now, seeing their prey defenseless, perhaps even now they were somehow listening to Patton's command.

The android twisted and tensed on the wall, still trying to delve into his own ruined chest. Reaching for something. Trying to fix something that was broken, perhaps.

Mains held the grenade behind his back and pressed it to the wall. Behind him, less than a hand's width away, was cold dark space. He would meet it soon.

Lieder stepped in front of him, face to face, and pressed herself to him. More of the grenade's blast would be forced against the wall that way. It also meant that they could kiss. The clear suit masks meant that it was not real, but the thin material flexed, and Mains imagined he could taste her breath and feel the heat of her against him.

"Private, you're crossing a line," he muttered.

Lieder smiled.

His thumb stroked the grenade's priming button. One more press and they'd have five seconds.

He pressed.

She knew.

Five...

His comms unit crackled and whistled. "Johnny Mains, you bastard, hold onto something!"

Four...

"What the hell was that?" she muttered.

Three...

Mains knew that voice.

The Xenomorphs, perhaps sensing that something had changed, surged toward them. There were six of them leaping the control panels, limbs skittering and scratching.

Two...

"Hold onto me as tightly as you can!" Mains shouted. He lobbed the grenade across the room and fell sideways, kicking his way beneath a control panel and dragging Lieder with him.

One...

"Grapple and harness!" For a split-second he thought his combat suit was out of charge, and couldn't obey his command. Then he heard the faint hiss of his waist pack firing the small grappling hook. It bounced against the heavy panel behind his back, then burrowed inside, barbed hooks splaying and holding it tight.

The grenade exploded. A Xenomorph shrieked. Mains and Lieder held each other. The blast whistled in his ears.

"Don't you fucking *dare* let go of me," he said.

"Johnny, what the hell's happening?"

An alien blocked out the light. Its shadow was sharp and vicious, teeth dripping, limbs reaching for them as it hissed in victory.

"Durante is happening," he said.

The second explosion was much larger than the first. The floor bucked beneath them, light bloomed and flashed, and then the whole world was screaming. Mains kept his eyes open, though his suit had shaded its visor to

protect his eyes from the glare. Something tugged at him and Lieder and he squeezed her tight, locking his limbs around her, determined that if she went, he would go too.

It'll tear us apart, he thought, *pull off our limbs, open us up and—*

It wasn't the Xenomorph pulling them.

Atmosphere was venting. A hole had been blown in the ship's hull, somewhere out of sight, and air was being expelled into the vacuum, screaming across the bridge and carrying with it anything that wasn't screwed down. That included the dead aliens and Yautja, tumbling and colliding as they went, as well as the living Xenomorphs that had been coming at them across the wide space.

His suit's wire and grapple strained tight, but held fast.

He only hoped it would last.

As Mains's visor cleared he adjusted position, turning onto his side so that he and Lieder could see beneath the control panel and across the room. The hole was small, the size of a normal door, but constantly expanded as heavy objects smashed through. Two Xenomorphs flew straight out, then a third grabbed hold of the hole's edge, spidery fingers digging into the damaged superstructure. Detritus struck it several times. It held on, pulling, actually hauling itself against the flow.

A human corpse crashed into the alien and they both disappeared into the void. Faulkner had been Mains's friend. He'd died bravely, and now he was out there forever, tumbling into infinity.

The flow of venting air lessened. Somewhere in the strange ship blast doors must have been closing. Sound retreated, and a few seconds later they found themselves subsumed within a haunting, threatening silence.

Lieder stood first, helping Mains to his feet. They now

carried only a sidearm each, and Mains knew that his laser pistol's charge was down to just one or two swift shots.

The android, Patton, was dead at last. Whatever he had been attempting had failed, when the blast had driven a fist-sized chunk of metal into his face. His head was a bloody mess of flesh, titanium skull, and ruined insides, his unimaginably complex computing power destroyed in an instant. Artificial he might have been, but in reality the android was as frail as any human.

"Johnny!" Lieder said. She slapped his shoulder, reaching for her sidearm with her other hand. He spun and peered in the direction she was facing.

There was movement at the ragged hole in the ship's hull. As he saw what it was, he thought for a moment he might be dreaming.

Maybe he was already dead.

"Wait," he said, holding her arm.

"Holy shit," Lieder said.

Two shapes entered through the hole, safety lines extending behind them and out into space. They were heavily armed.

"Oxygen levels critical," his suit said. He might have ten minutes of air remaining.

"What the hell sort of trouble have you been kicking up?" a voice asked.

"Durante," Mains said. "Eddie... really?"

The man who stepped forward must have been almost seven feet tall, broad and powerful, his combat suit straining at the seams even though it would have been specially made for him.

"Always said you'd need rescuing one day," the huge figure replied. He grinned at Lieder. "And who are you?"

"Hitting on her already?" Mains asked.

Durante shrugged.

Mains laughed. "She'd have your balls for dinner."

Durante looked around the smashed ship's bridge as another shape dropped through the hole behind him from above.

"Seen some action, Johnny."

"It's been a tough few weeks."

"Tell me about it."

"What does that mean?" Mains asked.

Durante looked at him strangely.

"We've been cut off here. No communications in or out, other than a signal we sent a few minutes ago."

"So you don't know anything that's been happening?"

"No. Why?"

"I'll tell you on board the *Navarro*. You all that's left?"

"Yeah. How did you know about us?"

"Picked up a distress signal from the *Ochse*. Where is it?"

The *Ochse* had exploded minutes after crash-landing them safely on the habitat, following a tough contact with some Yautja ships departing UMF 12. Frodo, the ship's computer, must have broadcast a distress signal seconds before being blasted into memory.

"It's toast," Mains said. He'd grown close to Frodo. The ship's computer had developed a personality, and they'd all thought of it as another member of the crew.

Durante grunted, then gestured for them to follow.

"Unless you've grown to like this place..."

"Get us the fuck out of here," Lieder said, "and have your ship prep a channel to Tyszka Star."

"Sounds like we've both got plenty of news to share," Durante said as they prepared to leave.

Mains and Lieder held onto each other as they crossed the bridge under the watchful gaze of Eddie Durante and his fellow members of the HellSparks.

Mains hadn't seen the big man in over six years. A fellow Excursionist, he'd been in command of one of the other Arrow-class ships tasked with patrolling beyond the Outer Rim. They'd done some training together at Tyszka Star, and years before that they'd shared time in the same Colonial Marine regiment. They hadn't been close friends back then, but when they'd both been selected for Excursionist training, they'd grown to like each other. Still, Mains had never expected to see Durante again. Such was the life of an Excursionist.

"Thanks for coming by," he said as they approached the smoking hole in the hull.

"Wasn't busy," Durante said. He and Mains stared out over the huge, curved surface of the Yautja habitat, and into the impersonal void of space surrounding them.

Mains did not believe in God, but as he and Lieder were helped over to the *Navarro*, he gave thanks to Eddie Durante.



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