

EXTROFORGE

Part Two: The Arrival



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A SAMPLE FROM

ExtroForge

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Harland Maxwell

From the middle of the novel

After forty years in cryosleep, Mara, Eli, and Tavi have reached the promised world of Soteria — and been refused by both surviving governments. With Jalen and Nyra they have been moving through jungle that two rival arks are tearing apart. The war above them is about to come down.

Chapter Eighteen

The Sky Opens

Seventy minutes after the warning went out, the crawler reached the low ground with one wheel locked and smoke leaking from its battery housing.

Eli ran beside its patched flank, ankle-deep in warm runoff. Painted hands covered the metal, prints left by children aboard the vehicle. Through a cracked side panel he counted eleven faces, then lost track as the crawler lurched over a root. The service cart that should have opened the western shield route was due in three minutes.

“Keep south,” he called to the driver. “No lights. Don’t stop at the beacons.”

The driver leaned from the cab. Blood darkened one sleeve. “The other camp?”

“No answer.”

Jalen caught the rear rail and hauled himself onto the step. “We’ll send them another warning when we’re under cover.”

There was no cover worth the name. The contested corridor stretched ahead as a shallow crease through the forest, cleared for Republic maintenance vehicles. White shield pylons stood among flowering vines on the western side. To the east, the ground climbed into broken shelves of black stone.

Mara pointed toward those shelves. "If the cart doesn't come, we take the crawler there."

"It won't climb that," Nyra said. She limped fast with one hand on her knee brace, dark lenses turned toward the pylons. "And I'm hearing emitter load."

Eli heard only the crawler's damaged wheel scraping through mud. Then the insects stopped.

He looked up. The aircraft circling above the Republic position continued on their lazy pattern. One banked over the corridor, sunlight bright along its narrow wings. Nothing else moved.

Tavi pulled the scanner from the padded bundle without slowing. Its display showed the Republic perimeter, the crawler and five weak identity tags. South of them lay a blank field where the PDS jamming had been.

"That blank is moving," Tavi said.

The service cart appeared between two pylons, exactly on schedule. It traveled twenty yards into the corridor and halted.

Eli's plan had allowed for a delayed driver, an inspection, even arrest. An empty cart stopping by itself belonged to a worse set of odds.

"Back!" he shouted.

The sky opened.

Dark aircraft dropped through the cloud layer with their wings folded close. Their concealment vanished only when weapon bays flashed blue. The first volley passed above the corridor and struck three Republic shield emitters at once. White columns of energy punched through the canopy. Trees bent away from the discharge, shedding broad silver leaves.

The Republic interceptors rolled out of their patrol and fired. A PDS craft broke apart behind a shield flare, fragments burning green as they fell. Another skimmed the treetops and released a chain of pulsing charges.

The western pylons vanished behind boiling light.

“Stone shelves!” Mara yelled.

The crawler driver fought the controls. The locked wheel dug a trench and swung the vehicle sideways, blocking the low ground. Inside, children tumbled against the panels. Jalen climbed through the rear hatch.

“We unload here,” he called. “Pass the small ones down.”

A Republic targeting beam swept across the crawler’s roof.

Eli seized a loose sheet of reflective insulation from Nyra’s bundle and flung it over the vehicle’s identity plate. The red line paused on his wrist, warm enough to sting, then slid toward the southern trees.

Those trees were moving.

Armored land craft drove through the forest on broad articulated treads, crushing root arches beneath them. Their faceted hulls carried PDS markings almost hidden by mud. Shields overlapped from one craft to the next, blue planes sliding across trunks and throwing sparks where branches entered the fields. Infantry advanced in the protected gaps.



The southern trees parted, and the armored column came through.

Forty years of travel had removed every Earth border from beneath their feet. Humanity had arrived at a planet without nations and immediately rebuilt the old hatred from memory, complete with uniforms and targeting codes. Eli's forged Republic identity would draw PDS fire. His true citizenship would earn him a cell if the Republic learned it. The distinction felt arbitrary until a weapon selected him.

A tone chirped from the scanner.

"Battery lock," Tavi said. "ROE side."

The Republic guns behind the perimeter elevated toward the PDS armor. Eli saw the firing sequence before the guns discharged. The nearest battery would rake the low ground to strike the shielded column. The crawler sat directly in its line.

“Twenty seconds,” he said.

“Eleven people,” Jalen answered from inside.

“Then we don’t have twenty.”

Nyra jammed a pry bar under the crawler’s rear panel. Mara joined her, boots slipping in the runoff. Metal shrieked. The opening widened enough for Jalen to push a frightened boy through. Eli caught him and passed him toward Tavi, who guided the child behind the first stone shelf.

A girl came next, clutching a water canister larger than her head.

“Leave it,” Eli told her.

“It’s ours.”

He took the canister and her hand. “Fine. Terrible time to negotiate.”

The Republic battery fired.

Energy crossed the corridor in a flat orange sheet. The leading PDS shields caught it, brightened and bowed inward. The impact rolled through the ground. Eli fell against the rock with the girl under one arm. The water canister bounced away, and Tavi snatched its strap before it rolled back into the open.

Behind them, the stalled service cart erupted. Its chassis spun across the low ground and struck the crawler’s front wheel.

“Last two!” Jalen shouted.

Mara climbed through the torn panel. A moment later she reappeared with the injured driver’s arm over her shoulders. Jalen followed carrying a small child wrapped in a Republic emergency coat.

PDS land craft breached the tree line. Their linked shields shoved burning vegetation ahead in a glowing wall. Republic fire hammered the formation, each strike revealing infantry beneath the blue fields. One armored vehicle veered around a shattered trunk and entered the corridor.

Its forward weapon rotated toward the crawler.

Eli waved everyone deeper into the rocks. Nyra stumbled at the first ledge, caught herself, then slapped away Jalen's reaching hand and pointed to a narrow fissure instead.

"Down there. Move."

They slid into the split ground as the armored vehicle fired. Heat chased Eli over the edge. He landed hard beside the injured driver while wreckage from the crawler rattled across the stone above.

The fissure bent beneath an overhang crowded with pale roots. Mara counted the evacuees twice. Eleven. Jalen crouched at the opening, watching Republic interceptors chase PDS aircraft through columns of smoke.

Tavi checked the scanner. Half the map had turned white with weapons interference. The western crossing no longer existed, and armored signals filled the route north toward the Vortex alignment.

"This shelf runs east for maybe sixty yards," Tavi said. "After that, the scan is solid static."

Another impact showered soil from the roots. Eli took the rescued water canister from Tavi and handed it back to the girl. Around them, the children pressed close to adults who had no uniforms and no idea which army might accept them.

"Sixty yards is enough to start with," Mara said. She helped the driver stand, and they moved farther beneath the rocks while the battle rolled across the corridor overhead.

* * *

The fissure narrowed until the injured driver had to turn sideways. Above, each weapons strike squeezed dust from the roots and drove it into Nyra's lungs. Her brace clicked too loudly. She shortened her stride to hide the drag in her leg.

Ahead, daylight broke through a sloping gap. Republic voices called from the far side.

"Evacuation trench," Jalen said. "They can take the children."

A helmet appeared above the gap, followed by the black muzzle of a rifle. "Identity bands up!"

Eli raised his forged band. "Civilian transfer. Eleven evacuees, one wounded."

The soldier waved urgently. Two medics slid down and took the driver between them. Jalen passed the child in the emergency coat to waiting hands, then crouched to speak to the others. He kept his voice level even when the ground kicked beneath them.

Nyra stayed back. The Republic trench ran south, behind the outer shield line. It offered the evacuees a route toward the base shelters. For the five of them, it offered searches.

Mara caught Jalen's sleeve after the last girl climbed out with her water canister. "We go east."

He watched the evacuees disappear between the trench walls. Then he nodded and followed.

They had covered perhaps thirty yards when blue light flooded the fissure. The stone hummed against Nyra's palms. Overhead, a PDS land craft forced its shield across the shelf, shearing off roots as thick as her waist. Sap sprayed through the opening and ignited in bright yellow sheets.

"Run," Mara said.

The word was for Nyra. Everyone knew it.

She drove her stronger leg forward and made the brace follow. Heat pressed down through the split ground. Tavi

scrambled ahead with the scanner held against their chest, while Eli kicked burning root fragments away from Mara's jacket. Jalen stayed close enough to catch Nyra if she fell.

She wanted to strike him for that. She saved the energy.

The fissure ended at a migration clearing churned to black mud. Huge grazers poured across it, driven from the north by Republic fire. Their green-scaled backs rolled above the brush. Six legs struck in uneven sequence, turning the ground liquid under Nyra's boots.

"We wait," Eli said.

The PDS craft broke through the shelf behind them. Its forward treads crushed the fissure mouth closed.

"We don't," Nyra said.

Mara pointed toward a root ridge in the clearing's center. "Between those two groups. Stay close to the first herd."

They entered behind three young grazers. Mud sucked at Nyra's brace. The animals' comb-shaped mouths hung open as they ran, threads of violet weed trailing from their jaws. One stumbled when orange fire crossed above its back. The herd bunched toward the ridge.

Clicking rose from the brush on their right.

Two Venerators raced along the herd's edge, low bodies flashing between the grazers' legs. A third leaped onto the root ridge and snapped at a limping juvenile. The juvenile swerved. Its plated shoulder struck the ridge hard enough to split it.

The crack ran toward Nyra.

Jalen seized her pack and hauled her backward as roots erupted from the mud. She hit him with her elbow from reflex. He grunted but kept hold until a grazer's foot slammed down where she had stood.

"Release the pack," she said.

"When we're across."

"Stubborn boy."

"Learned from specialists."

A Venerator sprang over the broken ridge. Tavi flattened beneath its path. Mara dragged them upright while Eli fired a survey flare into the mud beside the predator. White light burst at its feet. The creature twisted away, clicking sharply, and vanished under the streaming herd.

Nyra's left knee folded.

Jalen took her arm. This time she allowed it. They staggered the final yards together and dropped behind a bank of silver fans. Every plant snapped shut around them, hiding their bodies beneath overlapping leaves.

The scanner showed PDS armor on the western edge of the clearing. Republic weapon locks blinked east and south. Their route away from both forces had collapsed into red interference.

Nyra pressed her fingers into the soil. A fine tremor ran through it, steadier than the impacts. Regular. Loaded.

"Give me the scanner."

Tavi passed it over without argument.

Nyra stripped off one glove and touched the cracked sensor contact. The machine's vibration sharpened through the bones of her hand. She shifted the scanner across the ground. Beneath the frantic plant signals lay a straight pulse, then a second, both leaking current at the same interval.

"Buried supply line," she said. "Old utility alignment."

Tavi wiped mud from the display. "The base was built six weeks ago."

"The line's older than the defenses. Survey crews laid it first, then built over it." Nyra pointed northeast. "There'll be inspection access where the voltage drops."

Eli studied the perimeter marks. "That direction takes us inside."

"Yes."

Mara looked back at the armored shapes moving through smoke. "Any route outward?"

Nyra's fingers trembled against the scanner casing. She curled them under before Mara could reach for it. "Only if you fancy crossing the herd again."

A Republic barrage struck the PDS shields. Light spread across the closed silver fans, tracing every vein. Farther east, one of the perimeter emitters blinked out. The buried pulse weakened with it.

Nyra rose with Jalen's help and kept hold of his forearm until her brace locked. "Inspection access won't stay powered forever. Follow the line."

They moved beneath the folded plants as the grazers thundered past, angling toward the Republic defenses and whatever cover remained under them.

* * *

The buried line led them to a Republic service hatch half swallowed by mud.

Jalen dropped beside it as a PDS aircraft screamed over the canopy. Its shadow crossed the silver plants, followed by a hard blue flare against the perimeter shield. The shield bowed inward. Light crawled over the ground beneath his hands, bright enough to show the hatch's warning stencil through six weeks of root growth.

AUTHORIZED TECHNICIANS. LETHAL DEFENSE ACTIVE.

"Friendly welcome," he said.

"We're classified as infiltrators," Eli replied. "The welcome is accurate."

Tavi knelt at the hatch and unfolded two probes from the scanner. Their machine-burned fingers shook once before settling against the contact strip. "Lock has power. Defense circuit does too."

"How lethal?" Mara asked.

"Depends how attached you are to your hands."

Nyra lowered herself against the bank, her braced leg extended. “Access plate. Left side.”

Roots had sealed the plate’s edge. Jalen dug with his utility blade while another strike rippled through the shield. Dirt jumped around his wrists. Somewhere beyond the bank, Republic guns answered with a rolling concussion that flattened the silver fans.

The plate came free. Tavi peered into a nest of wet fiber and scorched contacts.

“Survey crews reused an orbital cargo lock,” they said. “Cheap thieves.”

“Can you open it?”

“Cheap thieves are my favorite kind.”

Nyra passed them a narrow driver. Tavi bridged two contacts, flinched at the spark, then turned the driver while Mara held the scanner above their shoulder. A red targeting bar appeared across Jalen’s chest.

Eli saw it first. “Down.”

He struck Jalen behind the knees. A pulse snapped over them and burned a smoking hole through the bank. Mara fired the survey flare into the hatch sensor. White fire filled the lens. The targeting bar scattered.

“Temporary blindness,” she said. “Move.”

Tavi twisted the driver. The hatch lifted four centimeters and jammed against a root.

Jalen wedged both hands under the rim. Eli joined him. The metal rose another finger’s width, enough for Mara to drive her knife through the root. Nyra leaned in with one shoulder, her face tight behind her dark lenses.

The root parted. The hatch lurched upward, spilling cold air over them.

Tavi went through first, then Mara. Eli helped Nyra lower herself into the narrow shaft. Jalen watched the perimeter while her boots found the ladder.

Past the closed plants, people crowded against a fence of portable barriers. Hundreds, perhaps more. Most wore

civilian work colors. A woman held a blanket over two children as burning fragments pattered onto the fabric. Republic soldiers stood at a gate thirty meters away, waving armored crews through while the crowd pressed against the barriers.



Beyond the closed plants, the Republic's civilians waited beneath a sky that had begun to fall.

A base-wide broadcast cut across the gunfire.

“Outer shield contraction in four minutes. All combat personnel withdraw to interior sectors. Civilian holding zones remain secured pending verification.”

Secured. Jalen knew that word. Doors secured. Rations secured. People kept in place until those with cleaner records decided their fear was legitimate.

The shield bent again. This time its lower edge flickered out for several seconds. PDS infantry advanced beneath overlapping blue disks, crossing ground that had belonged to the Republic a minute earlier.

“Jalen!” Mara called from below.

He climbed into the shaft and pulled the hatch down. The targeting sensor fired as it closed. Orange light seared through the narrowing gap and scored the wall above his head.

They crouched inside a conduit barely wide enough for Nyra to straighten her braced knee. Tavi brought up the scanner’s rudimentary base map. Their position blinked beneath a vehicle approach, separated from the interior by two maintenance junctions.

Then a second transmission broke through, quieter than the evacuation order. Rook’s voice remained calm despite the impacts.

“Security teams will scan every entrant at interior checkpoints. Priority search parameters are shielded mineral mass, anomalous energy response, and the identities Suri Dane, Len Arro, and Pela Marr. No exemption by rank or injury.”

Mara’s hand went to the front of her jacket. The shielded crystal case made no visible shape there, yet Jalen knew exactly where she carried it.

Eli studied the map. “We take the drainage branch. It bypasses the checkpoint and reaches the eastern stores.”

“How many people can it carry?” Jalen asked.

“Five, if the supports haven’t shifted.”

“After us.”

Eli looked toward the sealed hatch. “The crowd can’t reach this access without crossing the vehicle lane.”

“They can if someone opens those maintenance barriers from inside.” Jalen pointed to a thin line beside the civilian sector. “That corridor joins the drainage branch.”

Nyra enlarged the map. “Manual gate at this junction. Republic controls beyond it.”

A deep impact shook dirt from the conduit roof. The map flashed, and the outer shield timer dropped to three minutes.

Mara caught Jalen’s sleeve. “We came here to get clear.”

“We came here because every clear route closed.” He kept his voice low. “That happened to them too.”

“We expose the crystal at an interior scan, Rook gets a weapon that could decide this battle,” Eli said. “The cost spreads beyond that fence.”

“Then we avoid the scan. We open the corridor and move them through the breach behind us.”

Tavi traced the maintenance line. “Gate motor shares this utility feed. I could trigger it locally, assuming the next strike doesn’t cook the relay.”

“Which means reaching the junction,” Nyra said. “Fast.”

Beyond the conduit, the crowd began pounding on the portable barriers. Muffled voices called for a technician, a soldier, anyone. Jalen set his palm against the conduit wall. Each blow carried through the buried structure and into his bones.

He looked at Mara. “Five people slipping through won’t make this an escape. It makes us the last ones through a door we closed.”

Her jaw tightened. Another shield impact washed blue light through the hatch seam.

“All right,” she said. “We go in, stay off Rook’s scanners, and open the civilian route.”

Eli adjusted the charge on his survey pistol. “Those goals interfere with each other.”

“They usually do,” Jalen said.

Nyra hauled herself upright with the conduit rail. She handed Tavi the driver and pointed them toward the first junction. Mara followed close behind, one hand shielding the case beneath her jacket. Jalen took the rear as the pounding continued beyond the conduit, and the five of them moved deeper under the failing perimeter while Tavi counted down the distance to the gate.

Chapter Nineteen

Inside the Perimeter

Two minutes deeper into the conduit, the battle had moved over their heads. PDS fire struck inside the contracting perimeter now, close enough that each impact punched dust from the seams. The base announcement kept restarting at nine seconds, its voice chopped into meaningless pieces.

Tavi crawled on one knee toward the first junction, dragging the scanner beneath their chest. The conduit narrowed around bundled utility lines. Every cable had the same Republic habit of being labeled in tiny gray print where no living technician could read it.

“Forty meters,” Eli said behind them.

“That was before the map reset.” Tavi tapped the scanner. “Now it thinks we’re in a laundry reclamation unit.”

“Useful?” Jalen asked.

“If everyone wants clean socks.”

The next bombardment killed the conduit lights. Mara’s hand lamp came on, throwing their shadows across a circular service door ahead. A pale field shimmered over its edges.

Nyra stopped so abruptly that Jalen nearly collided with her. “Shield seal.”

Tavi studied the fluctuating numbers on the scanner. "It's borrowing power from the perimeter. When the shield contracts, that door welds itself closed."

"Time?" Mara asked.

The broadcast found its place again. "Outer shield contraction in fifty-six seconds."

"Approximately that," Tavi said.

They pried the door's control cover loose. Behind it sat unfamiliar optical blocks, too clean and too brightly coded, connected to an older cargo relay. Republic engineers had built a new security system on top of whatever hardware arrived cheaply from orbit. Tavi understood the relay. The polished blocks were another language.

Blue light swelled along the door rim.

"Can you mask the case from here?" Eli asked.

"Maybe. The scanners look for an energy response. I can teach this relay to report the shield's own noise instead."

"Maybe?"

"You brought me to a machine during an artillery strike. Certainty costs extra."

Tavi clipped two probes to the cargo relay. Data flooded the scanner, vanished, then returned with every address changed. They found the sensor return and fed it a recording of the last shield fluctuation. The system rejected the loop.

Nyra leaned over their shoulder, dark lenses reflecting the code. "Too exact. Damage the sample."

Of course. Real power never repeated cleanly.

Tavi introduced a wobble from the scanner's cracked gyroscope. This time the diagnostic light turned amber. Mara drew nearer, the shielded case pressed under her jacket. A second reading rose on Tavi's display, a narrow spike buried inside the perimeter's violent glare.

The crystal was still visible.

"Move back," Tavi said.

Mara did. The spike followed her.

Twenty-eight seconds.

Tavi opened the relay's grounding path and routed the sensor return through the conduit wall. The display bucked. For one alarming instant, every indicator leaned toward Mara. Then the shield took another hit. Static swallowed the spike.

"Masked," Tavi said. "As long as the base keeps being attacked."

"That seems dependable," Eli said.

The service door remained closed.

Tavi searched the control tree for the local release. An impact reset the relay before they found it. The scanner map blinked into a wider view, revealing a cluster of locked doors beyond the junction. Human-presence counters glowed beside them.

Two hundred and twelve.

Tavi enlarged the sector. CIVILIAN VERIFICATION HOLDING. Its evacuation route ended at the maintenance corridor Jalen had seen outside. Security had sealed every door around it.

"Found the gate network," they said. "And the holding sector."

Jalen crouched beside them. "Can you open it?"

"The same command opens our service door. It also flags every connected release."

Eli looked at the countdown. Eleven seconds. "Can you separate them?"

Tavi tried. The control tree folded into a demand for a command credential, then reset under another distant strike. "Give me a minute."

"We have nine seconds," Mara said.

Beyond the conduit wall came a faint metallic pounding, many hands carried through the buried frame.

Tavi could isolate their door by burning out the civilian branch. That would hide the intrusion and leave the hold-

ing sector sealed outside the new shield line. The option sat plainly on the scanner, neat as a workshop diagram.

“Open all of it,” Jalen said.

Eli shifted his survey pistol toward the far passage. “Security will know exactly where we are.”

“They’re already looking,” Mara said. “Do it, Tavi.”

Three seconds.

Tavi bridged the release bus with Nyra’s driver and pressed both probes into the optical block. Current bit through the old burns on their fingers. The scanner asked for confirmation. They drove the tool deeper.

The shield contracted.

White light raced through the conduit. The service door slammed inward as its seal failed, missing Tavi’s head by the width of their harness. Farther away, heavy locks struck open in rapid succession. The pounding beyond the wall broke into shouts.

Their scanner filled with red security notices.

INTRUSION: EAST UTILITY SPINE.

UNAUTHORIZED MASS RELEASE.

A base map unfolded beneath the warnings. Civilian counters streamed from the holding rooms into the maintenance corridor, converging on the same drainage branch the five travelers needed. Tavi had given them a route and announced it to every security station still operating.

Jalen pulled Tavi through the doorway as a targeting lens dropped from the ceiling. Eli fired once. The lens burst, spraying hot fragments against the wall.

Boots sounded beyond the next junction.

“Republic security,” Nyra said. She shoved the service door until its warped edge caught. “They’ll come from both sides.”

Mara checked the map, then pointed toward the moving civilian signals. “We stay ahead of them and keep that corridor open.”

Tavi gathered the probes with stinging fingers. The false shield signature still pulsed across the network, carrying Mara's hidden spike inside it, but warning markers multiplied along their path.

"Clean socks would've been easier," they said, and followed the others toward the approaching crowd while Jalen hauled a maintenance cart across the junction behind them.

* * *

The maintenance cart held for six seconds.

Jalen counted each impact as Republic guards struck it from the far side. On the seventh, the cart lurched sideways and its bent wheel tore free. He ran after the others into a corridor already flooding with people.

Families from the holding sector pressed toward an illuminated evacuation arrow. The arrow pointed back at the sealed rooms they had escaped. A woman in a Republic service coat carried a sleeping child over one shoulder. Two PDS prisoners in gray field uniforms moved with their wrists bound by a single restraint cable. Everyone slowed when they saw Mara's pistol and Nyra's scorched armor.

"Keep moving," Jalen called. "The sign's wrong. Inner access is this way."

A Republic guard shoved through the crowd, rifle raised. "Prisoners against the wall. All of you, show credentials."

"The wall will be outside the shield in under two minutes," Tavi said.

"They're PDS combatants."

One of the bound prisoners lifted his linked hands. Blood darkened his sleeve, though Jalen could see no weapon. "Signal technician. They pulled me out of a downed lander."

“Against the wall,” the guard repeated.

The ceiling flashed blue. A crack traveled through the transparent exterior panels, and beyond them a Republic aircraft plunged trailing white fire. It vanished behind the barracks. The impact rolled beneath Jalen’s boots.

Panic compressed the crowd. Someone fell near the evacuation sign. Jalen caught a boy before he was dragged down and pushed him into the service-coated woman’s arms.

“Your credentials won’t stop artillery,” Jalen told the guard. “Use your rifle to cover the rear.”

The guard’s muzzle swung toward his chest. She was young, perhaps his biological age, with dust pasted to her lips. “Who put you in command?”

“No one. You want the job?”

Another strike made the lights blink out. Emergency strips glowed along the floor, leading toward a junction packed shoulder to shoulder.

The guard lowered her rifle a few centimeters. “Inner corridor C is protected.”

“Then get us there.” Jalen turned before she could refuse. “Anyone who knows this sector, raise a hand and keep it up.”

Five hands appeared. He divided the crowd around them, giving each guide a section small enough to hear a shouted instruction. People able to carry took children or supported the injured. He sent the steadier evacuees to the rear beside the guard, including the PDS signal technician after Mara cut his restraint cable.

The guard saw the severed cuffs. “You can’t release him.”

“I just did,” Mara said.

“He stays where you can see him,” Jalen added. “So do we.”

That answer displeased both of them, which made it useful.

The column began to move. Jalen walked the edge, closing gaps before frightened people filled them by running. A shield contraction warning pulsed through the corridor. Every exterior panel turned milky as the field drew inward through the base.

Eli caught Jalen's arm near the junction. On Tavi's scanner, a gold command marker crossed a parallel passage less than fifty meters away. Three security escorts moved with it toward the central systems district.

"Command credentials from the Ascendant," Eli said. "Same signature family as the alerts aboard ship."

"Rook?"

"The odds are unpleasantly good. This branch intersects his route." Eli enlarged the map. "We cut through that equipment room, we're ahead of him."

Mara had seen the marker. Her hand pressed the hidden case beneath her jacket. "How long?"

"Thirty seconds."

Jalen looked back. The column had stretched from the junction to the fractured exterior panels. A man with a burned trouser leg stumbled between two strangers. Near the rear, the freed technician was helping the Republic guard drag a toppled barrier aside.

A mechanical hum rose under the alarms. The outer shield boundary appeared beyond the panels, a blue plane advancing through the barracks. Anything left on its far side would face the bombardment. Anything caught in a narrowing field aperture could be crushed against the base structure.

"Thirty seconds takes us away from them," Jalen said.

"It may be our only clean chance," Eli replied.

"It isn't clean."

Rook had hunted them since they woke. He had turned the Ascendant's broken systems into traps before most sleepers opened their eyes. Letting him reach the energy complex could cost every person inside the perimeter.

Then the shield plane touched the corner of the holding block. The building's outer cladding peeled away in a burst of glittering fragments. The crowd screamed and surged.

Jalen stepped onto a bench. "Stop pushing. Guides, hold your sections where they are."

Nobody heard him over the first shout. He pulled a signal flare from the Republic guard's belt, struck it against the bench, and raised the hard red light above his head.

"Look here! We move together, or the people at the back get left outside."

Faces turned toward him. The pressure eased by degrees.

He pointed to the inner passage. "Guides take twenty at a time. Carriers stay in the middle. Rear guard, bring the last section through before the blue line reaches that door."

Nyra braced herself beside the narrowing shield aperture, one hand on her knee. "Field's coupling to the metal frame. It'll close early."

Tavi dropped beside the door control. "I can slow the motor. I cannot negotiate with the field."

"Slow what listens," Nyra said.

Mara looked from the command marker to the civilians. "Rook goes."

"For now," Eli said. His jaw worked once before he erased the intercept route.

They moved the column in sections. Jalen paired the frightened boy with an older PDS medic whose cuffs had also been cut. The Republic guard protested, then stopped when the medic lifted the child over a buckled floor seam.

Blue light reached the rear doorway as the final evacuees crossed. Tavi ripped their probes free. The door snapped shut, and the shield passed over its outer face with a sound like stone dragged across glass.

Inside Corridor C, people sank against the walls. Jalen stayed standing long enough to count them by sections. No guide reported anyone missing.

Eli checked the map again. A red barrier now covered their planned bypass. The command marker had crossed it moments before the lockdown.

“Our route to the western exit is gone,” he said. “Only open path runs inward.”

Tavi tilted the scanner so they could all see the pulsing destination label.

ENERGY COMPLEX EVACUATION ACCESS.

The Republic guard wiped dust from her mouth. “That corridor was reserved for core personnel.”

“It has civilians now,” Jalen said. He handed her the spent flare and signaled the first guide forward. “Show us the safest way there.”

* * *

The energy complex had been built to impress people from a distance. Up close, its white towers sweated coolant and shook with each strike.

Mara followed the Republic guard through a service gallery packed shoulder to shoulder. Heat pressed through her stolen uniform. Beneath it, the crystal’s case knocked against her ribs in time with her steps, a second pulse she could almost mistake for her own.

The evacuation signs changed at the next junction.

WESTERN EXIT scrolled across the wall in green. An arrow directed the column through a narrow security arch, then vanished. A new message appeared.

CORE PERSONNEL HOLDING. IDENTITY VERIFICATION REQUIRED.

Steel partitions dropped behind the first dozen evacuees. Mara jumped back before one struck the floor. Eli

caught the frightened boy by his collar and pulled him clear of another.

“That isn’t an evacuation route,” Nyra said.

The Republic guard slapped her palm against the control plate. “Command override. It won’t take my code.”

Beyond the partition, two security officers raised pulse carbines. Neither fired. Their helmet displays flashed identical instructions, and they looked almost as alarmed as the civilians trapped with them.

A ceiling speaker crackled. “Suri Dane, enter the verification chamber. Compliance will reopen the western corridor.”

Rook’s voice remained calm beneath the alarms.

Every face near Mara turned. The forged name had protected her from the Republic since Earth. Now it pinned her in place more securely than restraints.

Jalen stepped between her and the arch. “There are eighty-six people in this passage.”

“I am aware, Mr. Orr,” Rook replied. “Their survival depends upon removing a destabilizing object from the crowd.”

The crystal pushed warmth through its shielded case. Mara saw the corridor open in her mind. She saw herself cross the arch alone, hands empty and companions safe. The picture brightened around one simple surrender.

She dug her thumbnail into the seam of the case until the vision thinned.

“You built a cage in an evacuation route,” she said.

“I built a controlled transfer point. Enter it.”

A deep concussion rolled through the complex. Light burst from a conduit overhead, spraying molten flecks across the floor. Jalen covered the boy while Eli dragged an injured Republic clerk away from the wall. Far outside, aircraft engines rose into a howl and ended in a blunt impact.

The security officers behind the partition shouted for the civilians to get down.

Tavi crouched at the control plate and opened its casing. “Two command layers. One runs the doors. One keeps rewriting what the first one thinks the doors are.”

“Can you break it?” Mara asked.

“Eventually. We have a very poor relationship with eventually.”

Eli studied the changing arrows on his scanner. “He needs her inside the arch before he seals the inner door. The sequence will ignore any obstruction outside the target zone.”

Nyra limped to the wall and pressed two fingers against a vibrating coolant pipe. “Doors are fail-locked, partitions are held up by induction clamps. Kill local power and gravity does the rest.”

“On everyone underneath,” Tavi said.

“So hold them up.” Nyra pulled a compact jack from her belt and shoved it toward Jalen. “There. Make yourself structural.”

Jalen wedged the jack beneath the nearest partition. The Republic guard understood and seized a fallen brace. People along the line added lengths of bench frame, rifle stocks, anything rigid enough to bear load.

Rook’s voice sharpened by a fraction. “Tampering will close every route from the complex.”

“You already closed them,” Mara said.

Eli pointed at the scanner. “Tavi, the false layer checks the arch sensor every four seconds. Feed it a completed transfer.”

“Using what identity?”

Mara tore off the band marked SURI DANE and slid it across the floor.

Tavi caught it. “That may burn the name.”

“It’s burned already.”

Tavi bridged two contacts with a probe. The arch flashed around the empty space, reading Mara’s band

while Eli held his scanner against the optical pickup. A crude human outline flickered on its display.

“Give your ghost a coat,” Nyra said.

Eli draped an emergency blanket through the arch. For one absurd second, the system displayed a silver, headless Mara.

TRANSFER CONFIRMED.

Nyra tore the local bus free.

The lights died. Partitions slammed downward, stopped by the jack and the straining braces. Jalen shouted, and the civilians pushed together. Metal crept lower, then held high enough for people to crawl beneath.

Mara went through first. She grabbed the burned clerk’s wrists while the Republic guard pushed from behind. On the far side, the two security officers lowered their carbines and began lifting children through the gap.

Power returned in stuttering red bands. Tavi snatched Mara’s identity band from the arch as its inner doors sealed on empty air.

Rook’s image appeared across every wall display, broken into strips by system damage. His scarred hand rested on a command console somewhere else in the base.

“You mistake delay for victory,” he said.

The screens went white.

A roar climbed through the floor. The nearest coolant tower buckled behind its observation glass. Vapor engulfed the lower chamber, and blue arcs leaped between bus columns. One struck a maintenance gantry. The metal glowed, sagged, and dropped out of sight.

The Republic guard stared at her wrist display. “Core temperature is rising across all six banks. Emergency sinks aren’t responding.”

Tavi plugged the scanner into a surviving diagnostic port. Symbols raced too quickly to read, then resolved into a branching diagram filled with red. “Containment took a direct strike. The damaged banks are feeding each other.”

“Shut them down separately,” Eli said.

“Controls say they already are.” Tavi looked toward the burning chamber. “They’re lying.”

Nyra leaned on the wall, lenses reflecting the arcs. “Chain failure. When the first bank ruptures, it overloads the shield grid. Then every charged line in this base finds ground through whatever happens to be standing nearby.”

The western exit indicator blinked out. A second route vanished after it.

Mara felt the crystal turn toward the complex. Through the shielded case came an immense pattern: the core banks linked to buried conduits, the conduits to the contracting shields, the shields to every weapon and grounded tower across the base. The whole grid opened before her like a river system seen from high above. She could reach into its current. She could force it into a new channel.

Pain touched the back of her right eye, light and precise, though she had not opened the case.

Eli caught her hand before it reached beneath her jacket. “Mara.”

Around them, Republic soldiers lifted PDS prisoners under the jammed partition. Jalen crawled back beneath it to help the last security officer. None of them had another exit.

Mara closed her fingers around Eli’s. “The ordinary controls are finished,” she said. “Get everyone away from the bus columns. I need to see how far the grid reaches.”

He did not release her, though he turned and began directing people toward the insulated service wall while Tavi carried the scanner alongside them.

Chapter Twenty

The Last Corridor

Seven minutes after the coolant tower buckled, the service gallery had lost its ceiling lights and half its floor.

Nyra knelt beside an open distribution cabinet while impacts worked through the base in heavy pulses. Each one made the exposed contacts jump blue. Smoke had thickened enough to stain her tongue, and sweat slipped beneath her dark lenses. Her left knee brace had locked twice since they left the security arch. She kept that to herself and drove Tavi's probe into a Republic coupling.

The diagnostic display steadied. Six core banks glowed red at the center. Around them, the evacuation routes were black.

"Found the emergency shield bus," Tavi said. Their burned fingers moved through the cabinet's projected controls. "It thinks it serves the vehicle ramps."

"It did." Nyra traced the severed line on the display. "Before someone parked an aircraft in the transformer yard."

A fresh detonation struck beyond the wall. The cabinet spat sparks across Tavi's tool harness. Jalen pulled them both back as a cracked insulator dropped between their hands.

Nyra shoved his arm away. "I'm still using that hand."

"You can complain after we have an exit."

“I can do both.”

Mara stood at the gallery junction, directing civilians against the insulated wall. Republic uniforms crowded beside two wounded PDS prisoners whose restraints had been cut. Eli moved along the line, taking names and sorting those able to carry someone. Every few seconds he glanced toward Mara. She held one hand beneath her jacket, close to the hidden crystal case, and kept the other pressed over her right eye.

Nyra looked back at the grid. “The vehicle bus has four surviving emitters. We pulse them in sequence and make a corridor to the south service trench.”

Tavi enlarged the trench schematic. “That gets them two hundred meters from the core.”

“Two hundred meters farther than here.”

“The emitters use Republic phase control. This cabinet is an old colonial standard.”

Nyra exposed the braided cable beneath her sleeve kit. “And this is Ascendant salvage. Today everything is compatible if you threaten it properly.”

Tavi gave a strained laugh and began matching frequencies. Nyra rerouted current from the gallery fire suppression, then stole the reserve assigned to an empty aircraft pad. A warning filled the display.

NORTHERN DEFENSE CAPACITY REDUCED.

Outside, a shield dome flickered over the hangars. A PDS strike craft crossed the opening and dropped behind the vehicle berm. White fire climbed into the tropical dusk.

The Republic guard stared through the broken wall. “You just weakened the northern line.”

“The northern line has guns and open ground,” Nyra said. “This corridor has children.”

Another warning appeared. Tavi silenced it with the heel of one hand. “Phase match at sixty-one percent. That is either enough or a creative way to cook everyone.”

“Bring it to sixty-five.”

“My probe is melting.”

“Then be quick.”

Nyra’s fingers had begun to tremble. She trapped her wrist against the cabinet edge and adjusted the load with two knuckles. Forty years of alarms had taught her how long a body could remain useful after it started objecting. They had also taught her that useful and safe rarely occupied the same compartment.

“Tavi,” she said.

“Sixty-four point eight.”

“Close enough. Send it.”

The first emitter fired outside with a low concussion. A curved shield panel appeared across the shattered courtyard, pale gold and thin enough to show burning land craft through it. The second panel formed twelve meters beyond. The third failed, returned as a wavering strip, then widened when Nyra fed it the last reserve from the gallery doors.

The route pulsed rather than holding. Gold light, open air, gold again.

Eli studied the timing. “Three seconds protected. Two exposed.”

“Move on the light,” Jalen called. “Pairs where you can. Nobody runs alone.”

The Republic guard led the first group. A PDS prisoner supported an injured base technician, their shoulders locked together as they crossed. The shield vanished while they crouched between segments. PDS cannon fire scored the courtyard beyond them. Gold returned, and they stumbled onward into the trench.

More people followed.

Hope was visible in mundane things. A woman tightened a child’s shoe. One of the security officers passed his carbine to Eli so he could carry an older man. The boy

Jalen had pulled from beneath the partition took hold of a stranger's sleeve and waited for the light.

Then the diagnostic map flashed crimson.

REMOTE REGULATOR DESYNCHRONIZED.

Tavi opened the fault tree. "The timing regulator is compensating from the core station. Every impact knocks it farther out."

Nyra forced the next shield segment into phase as the base shuddered. Pain drove from her altered knee into her hip. The gold path blinked off with twelve people in the courtyard.

"Hold!" Jalen shouted.

Nyra dumped power from the northern line. The corridor returned before the next volley struck, bending white fire over the evacuees. Somewhere beyond the hangars, Republic guns fell silent.

The display calculated again.

REGULATION LOSS EXPECTED AFTER NEXT MAJOR IMPACT.

"Remote commands won't survive another one," Tavi said. "There's a manual station beside the core exchange."

Eli looked toward the chamber, where coolant vapor rolled through blue electrical arcs. "Exposed?"

"Completely," Nyra said.

Jalen crouched beside her. Soot had darkened one side of his patchwork vest, though its old ration-cooperative symbols still showed. "Tell me what the station does."

"No."

His expression barely changed. "That complicated?"

"That obvious." Nyra rerouted the fourth pulse. "Someone holds two regulators in phase by hand. Heat will climb. The controls may arc. When the corridor empties, that someone leaves."

"Good. I can follow instructions."

"You can follow them from here."

A flight of PDS aircraft passed above the fractured roof. Their engines pressed the smoke downward. Jalen watched the next group enter the trench, Republic and PDS wounded carried on the same improvised litter.

“We need you correcting the live route,” he said. “Tavi needs both hands in that cabinet. Mara and Eli keep the line moving.”

He had assigned every useful person except himself.

Nyra caught his vest before he rose. Her trembling fingers closed over a faded neighborhood patch. “You leave when I call the last crossing.”

“When you call it,” Jalen said.

He took the maintenance handset and headed toward the core exchange at an ordinary walking pace, pausing once to guide two evacuees onto the next gold pulse. Nyra returned to the controls because the shield path was already narrowing, and because forty more people were waiting beside the wall for their turn.

* * *

The manual station had been designed for a technician with protective gear and an intact floor. Jalen had neither.

He crossed the core exchange on a maintenance rail while coolant vapor turned every surface slick. Below him, ruptured conduits glowed through the haze. A section of decking had folded against the far wall, leaving the regulator console tilted over the gap.

The handset crackled at his ear. “Two pulses left before drift,” Tavi said. “You need the upper phase lever and the lower dial together.”

“I see them.”

“You should also see the warning labels.”

“Very decorative.”

He stepped from the rail. The console shifted beneath his boots, and his stomach rose with it. Jalen caught the up-

per housing before the whole assembly could tip. A severed cable snapped near his shoulder, spraying blue sparks into the vapor.

Through the broken exchange wall, the shield corridor blinked across the courtyard. Gold panels made a crooked road between burning transports. People crouched in the gaps, waiting for the next protected interval.

Jalen wedged one foot against the console base and seized the controls.

“Upper lever to six,” Tavi said. “Lower dial counter-clockwise until the vibration eases.”

The dial kicked against his palm. Heat bit through the metal, sharp enough to open his fingers, but he closed them again and turned. A deep tremor ran through the station into his arms.

Outside, the nearest shield panel widened. The waiting civilians moved.

“Regulation restored,” Nyra said over the handset. Her voice was rough with interference. “Now come back while it remembers how to behave.”

Jalen watched a Republic medic drag a PDS pilot across the exposed strip. Behind them came the boy from the partition, still holding the stranger’s sleeve.

“Looks settled from here,” Jalen said. “Routine handoff. I’ll keep the timing while you clear the cabinet.”

The pause on the channel lasted half a second too long.

“Jalen,” Eli said.

“You have twenty-three people beside the wall. Take the front.” He forced the dial another mark as its vibration worsened. “Mara, bring up the last carriers. Keep them paired.”

Mara appeared at the gallery opening across the courtyard. Even through smoke, he could see the angle of her head as she searched for him. One hand remained pressed over her right eye.

“You’re coming after us,” she said.

“Yes.”

The lie entered the channel cleanly. He had spent years before hibernation calming ration lines and persuading frightened families that the next shelter had room. A useful voice did not promise safety. It gave people the next task.

“Move on the light,” he told her.

The gold panels flared. Eli led the first pair out, supporting an injured Republic officer between him and a PDS prisoner. Mara followed with two civilians leaning against her shoulders. Tavi carried the scanner under one arm and steadied the woman behind them with the other.

Nyra came last from the gallery. Her braced knee resisted as she stepped over the broken threshold. She stopped in the open strip and looked toward the exchange.

Jalen could not see her eyes behind the dark lenses. He saw her take in the tilted console, his locked stance, and the electrical fire crawling along the return rail. Her hand tightened around the handset.

“Last crossing,” she said.

Not yet. A Republic soldier had fallen behind the gallery partition. The man crawled into view, pulling a wounded PDS gunner by the straps of her armor.

“Two more,” Jalen said.

Nyra turned. She limped back through the fading panel and caught the gunner under one arm. The Republic soldier tried to rise, failed, then shoved himself onward with both hands.

The station alarm changed pitch.

Tavi’s voice broke across the channel. “Incoming strike. Big one. Jalen, release both controls and get flat.”

If he released them, the phase sequence would collapse. The two soldiers were still between emitters. Nyra had reached the nearer one and was hauling her toward the trench.

Jalen leaned harder into the lower dial. “Eli, get everyone below the trench lip.”

“Leave the station.”

“Take Mara.”

“Jalen, don’t make this into an order.” Eli sounded close now, close enough to come back.

Jalen saw him beyond the final panel, half turned against the flow of evacuees. Mara was beside him, struggling to keep her feet while Tavi pulled at her arm.

“We don’t need agreement,” Jalen said. “We need distance. Go.”

A shadow crossed the vapor overhead. The PDS strike craft swept past the breached roof, one wing burning, and released its payload toward the core complex.

Nyra dragged the gunner across the final boundary. The Republic soldier rolled after them. She looked back once.

Forty years had altered the mutual-aid network Jalen once built aboard the Ascendant. Other people had carried it while he slept. They had changed his rules when the rules failed, changed the names when names became dangerous. Nyra had been awake for all of it. If anyone understood that survival did not wait for a founder’s permission, it was her.

She raised two fingers to her dark lenses, then turned and pushed the soldier down into the trench.

Jalen pulled the upper lever past its marked limit.

The strike hit.

The exchange wall bowed inward. Light filled the gaps around the console, white at the center and gold where the corridor caught it. The impact threw Jalen against the housing. His shoulder struck metal, and one knee buckled, yet his burned hand stayed on the dial.

Across the courtyard, shield panels curved over the trench. Debris broke against them and tumbled aside. One emitter vanished beneath a falling section of hangar roof.

Jalen shifted the phase load to the remaining three before the route could open.

The console tore loose from one floor anchor.

“Corridor holding,” Tavi shouted through heavy static. “Everyone from the gallery’s across. Jalen, now. Now!”

He tried to lift his foot from the brace point. The deck between him and the maintenance rail split with a hard metallic crack. Half the exchange dropped away, carrying the return path into the core chamber. Heat rose through the new opening and blistered the paint on the console.

On the far side, Eli reached the trench. Mara twisted in his grip, shouting Jalen’s name. Nyra caught Mara around the waist and helped pull her below the shielded edge.

Jalen checked the load display. The surviving emitters were still feeding the trench, though their phases wandered with every tremor. Behind the evacuees, a final group emerged from the vehicle berm, six figures in torn uniforms carrying a child between them.

“More coming from the south,” he said into the handset. His voice sounded ordinary enough. “Keep the trench clear.”

He reset his stance against the tilted console and brought the first emitter back into line. The group stumbled onto the crooked road of light. One uniform was Republic gray, another PDS green. The others were too scorched to identify. They passed the child from hand to hand when the shield narrowed between emitters.

“Three panels,” Tavi said. “Hold that phase.”

The lower dial bucked. Jalen pressed his burned palm over it and watched the six figures cross the last exposed strip. Eli reached from the trench and took the child. Nyra hauled the final civilian over the lip as a gold panel blinked out behind her.

Tavi’s scanner chirped through the channel. “No one else moving near the corridor. They’re all across.”

Jalen eased the first emitter toward the trench and shifted the remaining power over the evacuees. Across the ruined courtyard, his four companions stayed below the shielded edge while the last civilians crawled deeper into cover. He tightened his grip on the hot dial and continued correcting the phase whenever it wandered.

* * *

Mara struck the trench floor on one knee. Eli's arm locked across her chest before she could climb back out.

"Let go."

"Give me a route." His mouth was close to her ear, forcing the words through the alarms. "A real one."

Beyond the shielded lip, the courtyard had become a field of broken angles. Jalen's exchange stood on the far side, half its floor gone and its wall folded around the tilted console. Gold light flashed over him whenever a shield segment corrected. Between flashes, smoke erased him.

Mara dug her fingers under Eli's wrist. Her right eye showed only a bright smear through the hand clamped over it. With her left, she found Nyra pushing the last Republic soldier deeper into the trench. The PDS gunner lay beside him, coughing into one scorched sleeve. Civilians crowded the descending access ramp ahead. They moved too slowly.

"Jalen," Mara called. "Transfer the controls."

"No receiver left." Static chewed the edges of his voice. "Keep them moving."

Tavi crouched beside the scanner. A crack split its display, but the surviving half painted the courtyard in trembling lines. "Could bridge from the trench emitter. Maybe. I need access to its phase cabinet."

Nyra looked toward a waist-high housing twenty paces down the trench. Blue discharge crawled across its lid.

“Cabinet’s live. Reserve cell could hold the feed while Tavi splices.”

“Could?” Eli asked.

“Today has been hard on certainty.”

Nyra pulled a flat black cell from her belt. Its indicator showed one red bar. Mara had seen that cell drive emergency tools since their flight from the jungle. Once spent, Nyra would lose the only portable supply compatible with the old Ascendant fittings in her brace.

Mara pointed down the ramp. “Eli, take the column. Nyra, Tavi, with me.”

Eli did not move. Behind him, the child from the final group had wrapped both arms around a medic’s neck. The medic staggered under the extra load while dust rolled from the ceiling.

“There are sixty people between here and the core shelter,” he said. “If I take them, you stay here.”

“I’m bringing Jalen.”

“Then tell me how.”

A tremor pitched the trench sideways. One civilian fell against the PDS gunner. The Republic soldier caught both of them and shouted for the people ahead to make room. Panic compressed the column instead. Bodies jammed at the first turn of the ramp.

The crystal shifted under Mara’s jacket, a cold pressure against her ribs. For an instant she saw a clean solution: gold light hardening into a bridge, the broken exchange drawn close, Jalen walking over untouched. Behind the vision waited the crystal’s hunger for her attention. Her injured eye pulsed with each flare.

She shoved the offered image aside. “Tavi, open the cabinet.”

Tavi sprinted bent-backed along the trench. Nyra followed, her braced knee catching once before she forced it straight. Mara twisted out of Eli’s grip and climbed high enough to see the exchange.

“Jalen, we’re building a remote.”

His silhouette leaned over the controls. “No time.”

“You lied to me.”

“Yes.”

The plain answer cut through the noise. Mara’s hands slipped on the trench edge.

“Release on my count,” Tavi said. “Nyra, cell.”

The cabinet cover came free with a burst of sparks. Nyra drove the reserve into an auxiliary socket and held it there with both hands. Red light climbed the tendons of her wrists. Tavi reached into the housing with an insulated hook.

The nearest gold panel steadied. For half a second hope found solid ground.

Then every light in the trench went white.

Nyra cried out. The reserve cell split along one seam, venting gray vapor, and threw both engineers backward. Tavi landed against the wall. Nyra stayed upright by catching the cabinet, though her brace had gone dark.

“Cross-feed rejected,” Tavi gasped. “Station’s physically isolated.”

Mara was already over the lip.

Eli seized the back of her jacket and pulled. The fabric tightened across her throat. She kicked for purchase, scattering grit into the courtyard.

“Jalen!”

The smoke cleared enough for her to see him. His sturdy frame was wedged between the console and its torn anchor rail. Both hands remained on controls that fought him with each pulse. There was no deck behind him anymore. A furnace glow rose from the core chamber beneath his boots.

He had sealed himself there by staying. No door held him, no command lock they could break. The shield remained because his hands remained.

Mara looked down the ramp. The stalled column had begun moving again, Eli's shouted instructions passing from person to person. The child disappeared around the turn. The two wounded soldiers followed, supporting each other now. Above them, fractured ceiling plates sagged on red-hot braces.

If the four of them crossed back, the civilians would lose the people keeping the route clear. If Jalen released the station, the shield would uncover everyone still on the ramp.

"Mara," he said through the handset at her belt. "They need the front more than I do."

She grabbed Eli's forearm and let him haul her into the trench. Her boots hit beside the ruined cabinet.

"Tavi, find another system that can take the load. Anything with field control. Nyra, get the column through that turn."

Nyra tested her dead brace and grimaced. Mara offered a shoulder. This time Nyra took it without argument.

Overhead, one of the remaining emitters tore loose. Its metal tower leaned across the courtyard, shedding sparks as the gold panel beneath it narrowed. Jalen corrected the phase, and the light opened just enough to keep the trench covered.

Tavi ran beside them, scanner held close to the cracked display. "Core containment has field coils. Wrong frequency, terrible controls, currently on fire."

"Can we reach them?"

"From the shelter junction. If the junction still exists."

Mara pushed into the crush at the ramp turn. Eli had cleared the blockage and was passing evacuees beneath a buckled doorway, two at a time. Beyond it lay the armored shelter passage and, somewhere behind its walls, the core controls.

The trench lurched again. A ceiling brace snapped loose and struck the shield, bowing gold light down toward their

heads. Mara shoved Nyra through the doorway, then turned back toward the distant exchange while Tavi pulled the scanner cable free for the run to the junction.

Jalen was still visible through the falling debris, bent over the manual station as the last shield segments flickered out of sequence. Mara took the cable from Tavi and followed Eli into the shelter passage, searching the walls for any access panel that might connect them to the burning core.

This excerpt ends here. The novel continues.