

Alone And Forsaken

She had never minded being alone. Growing up, she'd been the quiet one, always reading in the corner during her approved free time. It wasn't that she didn't have friends— she had plenty of those among her peers— but she'd been able to be on her own, and the lack of another person nearby had never really bothered her.

It was fitting, then, that she would die alone.

Her left leg was a mess. The metal of her armor had melted into her flesh where the sniper's plasma beam had seared into her calf. Unfortunately, she hadn't been lucky enough to have her nerve endings burn off, too. It burned, a deep-set pain that she knew would never go away.

The smell of death wafted through the ship. Plasma burns pockmarked the walls around her and the floor was littered with the bodies of humans and Federation alike. One of the women from Fireteam Crimson was lying on the ground next to her, her face melted inwards like a cheap Halloween mask that had been left on a car dashboard on a summer's day.

Dumbass. That's why you have a helmet.

She checked the corpse's weapon, just because. Empty. That was fine.

Her own rifle was long since empty, but her pistol held three rounds. Not that she would need more than one.

She turned to her left. The body there was a Federation grunt, an ugly little thing that looked like a wrinkly turtle had a baby with a squid.

Ugh.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to her feet. Her left leg buckled a bit under her weight, but she managed to stay upright.

As she made her way to the bridge, she passed over body after body. Here was Fireteam Emerald, or what was left of them after the plasma grenade had gone off. There, a Federation officer lay dead, a hole from a shotgun blast cut through its massive, gorilla-like body. Next to it lay a marine, his body smashed by the officer's giant hammer.

She struggled past the remains of Fireteam Silver and onto the bridge. She looked out through the view port and into the expanse of space. Stars glittered like jewels along the black backdrop of void.

Thirty minutes ago, she and the rest of her team had been playing cards in the barracks when a Federation ship had intercepted their carrier as it exited slipspace to refuel at a ICSN station. The carrier had been headed for Baelon's Rest, where the 70,000 civilians onboard would start a new life for humanity.

This was the fifth planet this century. Sure, there were small colonies in the outer reaches, but those were places nobody wanted to live— small desert planets with little water, rocky outcrops where the local wildlife was a constant threat, planets where the entire place was a turbulent ocean in a perpetual storm. Besides, those were much closer to Federation territory, and in constant danger of attacks. Humanity needed a core world to make its own.

There had been hope before, places where life had an excellent chance to thrive with nearby moons to stage defenses on. Time after time, though, something went wrong. Stormwatch had been lost when the local star had started to fade. Delta 5 had been overtaken with constant solar flares. Stride was simply too small, and before long all the resources were gone. Kryr's Fist had been good, too, but when veins of liquid plasma had been discovered below the surface, the

Intergalactic Council of Sovereign Nations Marine Corps had decided that powering the ships and the suits was more important than staying in the same place for longer than a century, so everyone except the miners and the military had been forced to leave. West End had been perfect, until the Federation attacked and glassed the place. Some of the Traditionalists wanted to go back to Earth, but the ICSN and the Corps wouldn't let that happen.

She had been born on Earth, in a lab near what had once been Denver, and in her opinion it wasn't much of a home. The planet the Traditionalists worshiped from the old pictures was long gone, ruined by the first Federation attack. Now it was mostly rocks, military installations, and factories. The main Corps training grounds were on Holdfast, but the heart of the operation was on Earth, in the top-secret labs and facilities where she had been created along with the rest of her team. The Titan program was the pride of the Corps, and the super soldiers it created meant hope for humanity and death for the Federation. That was Earth's purpose now: creating the weapons to turn the tide of the war.

She and her fellow Titans of Fireteam Cobalt had been deployed hundreds of times across the galaxy, anywhere from backwater villages on godless desert planets to the jungles of Hadron 7. This was the first time they'd been sent on a babysitting mission. It was supposed to be simple: Run security for the carrier *ICSN Safe Port* for a few days as it made its way through slipspace, then stick around on the ground for a few weeks until preliminary defenses were set up. Simple, but important. All 70,000 of the survivors of the destruction of West End were on that ship, the last vestiges of the shrinking race known as humanity. The last ICSN estimates she'd heard had put the overall number of humans left, including the scattered Marine forces and the members of the few outer colonies, at about 100,000. Getting to a place to make a real home and repopulate was crucial. As such, there were ten four-man teams of Titans onboard the

military section of *ICSN Safe Port*, in addition to the considerable detachment of marines.

Ideally, though, the Titans were just for a worst-case scenario, and most of their time would be spent playing cards and taking a well-earned break from the war.

The Federation, as always, had other ideas. She supposed somewhere in their wretched alien brains they had some reason for wanting to obliterate humanity, but they had never bothered letting the humans know what exactly that was.

The attack had come as they exited slipspace, the only way the slow Federation ships could ever get near an ICSN transport. A blast had rocked the ship, sending cards flying everywhere and ruining her poker face. The team had glanced at each other and ran to the armory, cards forgotten. Beck had muttered something about pocket aces under his breath, but she knew as well as he did that he liked kicking alien ass a lot more than playing cards.

As they reached the armory, an officer had begun relaying fireteam stations over the comms system.

This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. Fireteam Emerald to West Escape Pod Bay. Fireteams Auburn, Magenta, Gray, and Bronze to Central Bridge. 19th platoon to Airlock 1.

She thought of the people in the civilian section of the ship, who would be oblivious to the danger that loomed. No announcements, no frantic scurry, just sitting around and doing whatever they pleased.

Lucky bastards. What I would give to be able to just sit and watch the stars and listen to some music, with no cares in the world.

Fireteams Crimson and Emerald were already inside the armory, suits on, when they arrived. Behind her, she could hear the voices of members of Fireteam Silver and Fireteam Gold.

She stepped forward into an armor ring, and a lens popped down from the ceiling and scanned her retina. Thirty seconds later, she was suited up with all systems running.

She walked forward and grabbed a pistol from the rack and took a few extra magazines as well. From her locker, she got her B-50R rifle and plenty of magazines.

“Captain, where we headed?” she heard Beck ask over the helmet comms.

“Airlock 5,” she heard Korra reply. “Command says we’ve got boarders inbound.”

“Boarders?” Kai asked. “Here or the civilian section?”

“Military section,” Korra said.

“ICSN transports don’t have airlocks on civilian sections specifically for this reason,” Beck said. “Federation ships have to lock on to airlocks so they don’t get blown apart from pressure when they cut through. That means they’ll have to make it to the connection bridge if they want to reach the civilians, and in order to—”

“Nerd,” she interrupted. “You like spaceships. We get it.”

“Says the one who could tell me the steps of construction for each and every Corps weapon and their ammunition,” Beck shot back.

“At least I don’t spend my free time trying to conjugate alien verbs,” she replied.

Kai flipped her a rude gesture. “I’m learning valuable information about the way our enemy communicates and—”

“Cut the chatter,” Korra said. “We get it. You’re all nerds.”

“You just don’t want us to mention your obsession with shapes,” Beck said.

“I study tactical patterns,” Korra said. “If your tiny brain doesn’t understand how they work, that’s— damn it, Beck.”

“Got ya’,” Beck said. “Nerd.”

“For real, though,” Korra said. “Focus up.”

“Copy that,” Beck said.

It was about then that they made it to the airlock, where about twenty or so marines were already gathered, weapons at the ready.

“Woah, Titans!” she heard one of them say. “I never thought I’d see one in real life!”

“Dude, there’s like a million of them on the ship,” someone replied. “You’ve said that every time you’ve seen one. Calm down.”

“They’re still cool. Like something out of a comic book,” the soldier replied.

“Get a room,” someone else said.

“All of you, shut up!” she heard a fourth voice say. “The Federation could get here any second!”

She shook her head and readied her weapon. Korra stood far to her left, B-50R in hand. Far to her right was Beck, KM-72 machine gun held steadily at his chest. Next to him was Kai, her V9 assault rifle aimed at the door.

It was quiet, as usual. To some, the silence was eerie, but to her, it was peace. She loved these moments before destruction, what the training manuals called the deep breath before the plunge or the calm before the storm. The silence comforted her and helped her focus on the task at hand.

There wasn’t a speaker in the airlock, so the announcements from the comms system were faint in the background.

Attention all personnel. Federation boarders inbound. Internal contact imminent.

Nobody said anything openly. The marine to her right was clutching the cross hung around her neck, muttering her Hail Marys under her breath. The marine on her left was silent,

face pale. She could hear prayers all around, in all varieties of languages, asking for a variety of things— forgiveness, protection, love, hope.

She did not pray. Titans were not religious, except for the religion of war.

From somewhere in front of her, a voice began to sing.

Oh, Death

Whoa, Death

Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

Well what is this that I can't see?

With ice-cold hands taking hold of me

Well I am Death, none can excel

I'll open the door to Heaven or Hell

Oh, Death

Whoa, Death

Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

The singing stopped as the glow of a laser cutter began to shine through the metal of the airlock.

“Standby!” Korra yelled. “Check your targets and watch the crossfire! When they come through, give ‘em hell!”

“HOO-RAH!” someone else yelled, and the cheer went up from the gathered soldiers, before the world went silent again, and not even prayers broke the silence.

Then the wall exploded inwards and chaos reigned. Federation boarders poured through the breach, and gunfire erupted from both sides. She looked through her scope and found the

head of one of their officers and fired until it fell. Someone threw a grenade into the oncoming group and purple blood sprayed everywhere. From the smoke came a glowing blue orb, and she turned and ran as the plasma exploded outwards. She heard screams, and in her helmet's heads-up display, Kai's name went dark.

She didn't have any time to mourn as she turned back towards the boarders and started to fire again. They kept pouring in, wave after wave of officer and grunt alike. The little ones went down easily, but the big ones, the officers, were stronger, faster, and smarter and the marines couldn't keep up. Soon it was only her, Korra, and Beck left. They fell in next to her and the routine kicked in. Aim, fire, reload, repeat. Thirty seconds later it was over, and silence fell in the airlock once again.

"We need to move," Korra said. "They're trying to get to the connection bridge and into the civilian section. We can't let that happen."

"I thought they had four fireteams there," Beck said as the group started to make their way to the connection bridge, picking off Federation grunts as they did.

"They did," Korra replied. "But Auburn's already down and Gray is about to go out, too. That bridge is our number one priority."

Another explosion rocked the ship and she nearly lost her balance but caught herself before she could fall over. The blast was a good thing, as a beam from a sniper shot that was meant for her head missed wide right. She turned, found her target, and shot once, bringing him down.

They were nearly at the connection bridge by that point, and she could hear the sounds of a massive firefight around the corner. They pushed forward, and as they came around the bend in the hallway, a desperate scene unfolded before their eyes.

Fifty or so Federation officers were surrounding the doors to the control bridge, held at bay by the remaining members of Fireteams Magenta and Bronze. The ground next to them was littered with Federation bodies, and she could see among them marines and the members of Fireteams Gray and Auburn.

She heard heavy footfalls behind her and turned, weapon at the ready, to see John from Fireteam Silver and Perry from Emerald approaching.

John nodded at her, and she heard his voice come through the helmet's proximity comms. "How bad is it?"

"Bad."

"Alright, Cobalt," one of the guys from Magenta said as he shot down a grunt. "Time to join the party."

"You heard the man," Korra yelled. "Give 'em hell!"

It was the longest firefight she had ever been in, and that was saying a lot. For every enemy she killed, it seemed like ten more took their place.

One by one, the Titans fell. John took a sniper shot to the head as he was fighting an officer in hand-to-hand combat. One of the guys from Magenta got stuck with a plasma grenade, and that was the end of him, and the ten people closest to him, too. Perry went blow for blow with a hulking officer with a war hammer and won, right before a grunt shot him in the back of the head with a pistol.

Then there were only five Titans left, and still the Federation troops kept coming. Korra gestured to her and Beck and they dove behind the bulkhead door and into cover.

"We're not going to win," Korra said. "But we have to keep the civilians safe. I need you two to cover me so I can get to the control panel and disconnect the bridge."

“Captain, this section will be dead in space,” Beck said. “The engines, cargo bay, and food supply is on that part of the ship.”

“I know that,” Korra replied softly.

“Once the bridge disconnects, the seal won’t work properly. We’ll have oxygen leaks.”

“I know that.”

Beck looked down the hallway. “There has to be another way. Maybe we can—”

“There’s not another way,” Korra said. “And we’re running out of time.”

Beck nodded. “Then let’s get it done.”

Korra hefted her rifle. “Okay. On my signal, Beck, you—”

A plasma grenade flew through the opening in the bulkhead and stuck to the ground five feet from them.

Beck didn’t hesitate, leaping forward and throwing himself over the glowing blue orb. He looked back at them. “Get to the panel.”

Then he exploded outward in a burst of plasma.

“Cover me,” Korra said, and she leapt through the opening in the bulkhead.

Federation troops were swarming the room now, and a little one with a laser cutter had begun to cut its way through the door to the connection bridge. None of them were paying attention to the hallway or the bulkhead, apparently assuming that the grenade had wiped out all three of the Titans.

She took her grenade and threw it into the far side of the room, away from where Korra and the control panel were. It went off, spattering ten of the nearest Federation troops against the wall.

Looking through the scope of her B-50R, she picked off the targets that seemed most dangerous to Korra, who had made it to the control panel and was tapping away. Suddenly a siren began to wail, and red emergency lighting flicked on.

Warning, an automated voice said. The connection bridge has been detached. Engines offline. Hull integrity severely compromised. Oxygen seal broken. Warning.

As the voice began to repeat its message, Korra let out a cheer. "That's for humanity, you alien bastards!" she yelled, and began to fire her weapon at will.

Every weapon in the room turned towards her and fired, and Korra was obliterated in a hail of light.

One of the Federation officers barked something, and the entire group began to retreat. One of the foot soldiers haphazardly fired into the air as it left, and then they were gone.

She looked over to the body of Korra to mourn her commander, and then felt rage rise within her as she realized that so much plasma had gone into her that there was nothing left to mourn.

She was going to die anyway. The oxygen seal was broken, not to mention the holes torn in the side of the ship and the loss of the engines. Her armor was good, but it was meant for ground combat and didn't seal in space. Living wasn't in her playbook anymore.

She looked back at the bulkhead, to where Beck had sacrificed himself. Again, there was no corpse to mourn. She looked at the bodies of her fellow Titans strewn across the floor. She looked at the marines who had died alongside them. She looked at the corner of her helmet display, where each of her squad member's names was now dark.

She turned and sprinted after the Federation troops.

She caught up to them as they were entering their boarding ship. She emptied her magazine into them and two of the little ones fell to the ground, dead. She went to reload her rifle and realized she had used her last clip.

She cursed, pulling out her pistol. She emptied another clip into the exiting party, and as the door began to close, she pulled the pin on her last grenade and threw it into their ship. The door slammed shut and the glass of the door was splattered with purple, and then the ship departed and was gone.

Her helmet display indicated that there were no remaining marine forces on the ship.

She reloaded her pistol with her last magazine and headed down the hallway towards another airlock. There was a sound behind her, and a shot rang out.

Pain enveloped her left calf as the beam tore through her armor and into her flesh. She turned to the source of the shot, aimed, and fired twice. The officer with the sniper rifle fell to the ground, dead. She sank to the ground, and the ship was silent except for the sound of the emergency sirens letting her know that she was going to die soon.

That was three minutes ago. She was on the bridge now, staring out as the civilian section of the carrier got further and further away. The Federation boarding ships were following, but they were meant for boarding, and were much slower than the carrier.

She'd done her job.

She struggled to the command panel and looked over the systems readout. It was flashing red, and as she took it in, she realized it was filled with information she already knew.

Communications Relay- Offline- Significant Damage Sustained

Engines- Critical Failure

Shields- 0%- Generator Failure- Hull Damage Imminent

Hull Integrity- 15%- Several Breaches Detected

Life Support- Critical Failure- Oxygen Levels 35%

She shot the display. It went dead, but that damned alarm still wailed. Her head was pounding now, and each blast of the klaxon just made it worse. She glanced around slowly and her eyes fell on the controls for the comms system. She shot again, and at last, everything was silent. No more yelling, no more explosions, no more anything. Just her and the cold, empty blackness of space.

Her breathing was shallow now. It took effort to move. Her thought process was slow. She looked down at the pistol.

One round left.

The pain in her leg was beginning to fade by now and the edge of her vision was tinged with darkness.

She threw the pistol across the room and made her way to a space where the window was flush with the floor and then sunk to the ground.

With a last bit of effort, she took a small disk from her belt and inserted it into a slot on the side of her helmet. There was a whirring sound, and then a click, and the music began to play.

She had curated the mix over her years of service, and it contained her favorite songs from back home. She liked old music, the type of stuff that was only available in the historical archives of long-forgotten museums from back when things weren't so bad.

This was her favorite song. She'd made sure to put it first, just in case.

She looked out into the expanse of space, again to that canvas of void dotted with specks of light. The carrier was no longer visible, not even as a dot on the horizon, and she allowed herself to slump backwards onto the wall, her mission complete.

The darkness in her vision grew further inwards, and she sighed softly and smiled to herself as Hank Williams and his Drifting Cowboys played her out of existence.

*Alone and forsaken by fate and by man. Oh Lord, if you hear me, please hold my hand.
Oh, please understand.*