

LANDFALL

By SpookyRockfall

A short story based on the Pinwheel Universe by SnekGuy, set during the Autumn War

The transition from artificial gravity to weightlessness is rarely fun, especially for Commandos that enlisted after the Battle for Valbara. AG plates are an Earth'nay technology, gladly provided by the aliens after the battle. Their inclusion in the newest Valbara'nay ships, though, makes the lives of embarked troops much more comfortable. Tezca'tic'noya pulls her way through the small, circular airlock and into the waiting dropship, feeling the wave of nausea wash over her. The rest of her flock silently floats in behind her, one after another. Tezca watches them glide past to their crash couches. She can't see through their black, opaque visors that hide their long faces but she knows what each one of her flock members are feeling even without looking at the display panels on their forearms. They are ready for the battle ahead.

Their combat suits are pristine; they were only issued a few days ago, camouflaged for the campaign ahead with deep reds, oranges, and yellows. Commando pressure suits have always been form fitting but this latest design is even more so, refined with United Nations Navy, or UNN, technology. Aside from ceramic armor plates that cover their chest and thighs, every other part of the suit is almost skin-tight with a padded tear-resistant fabric. They have to be for Commandos to retain their agility while protecting them from vacuum or chemical weapons. Lahu'ixt'atl is the last of her flock to enter. Though slight to the point of obscurity, Tezca can tell her flock apart by their slightly different body proportions. Valbara'nay are all fairly homogeneous. At least the women; males are shorter and visibly less muscular.

Though an outsider wouldn't know on looks alone, Valbara'nay are densely muscular for their small size. Lahu's most obvious feature besides her tail, which Earth'nay often see first, are disproportionately thick thighs. They are packed with fast-twitch muscles, allowing incredible feats of speed and agility. Her digitigrade legs narrow down to thin, sinewy ankles. Valbara'nay walk on two large toes that are each tipped with a sharp, oversized talon. Her long, muscular tail is prehensile, which not only allows for amazing balance but also an extra limb to grasp around or otherwise hold onto objects. Contrasting her broad hips, Lahu's waist and upper body are surprisingly slim. Her shoulders and arms, while still muscular, are nowhere near as thick as her legs. Valbara'nay have dull claws that tip their three digits, two fingers and an opposable thumb, which are also far smaller than what appear on their toes. A slim, flexible neck gives way to a rounded skull and long jaws that taper to a thin snout. Violet, reptilian irises and nostrils that sit high on their pointed noses give them a predatory appearance, not to mention their many needle-like insectivore teeth that line their maw. Valbara'nay scales, normally a shade of olive-green, are remarkably tiny which interlock with one another to create a fine texture which is almost indiscernible at any distance.

Lahu turns her head, inspecting the troop compartment as she floats toward her flock. Two long, tapered tubes extend from behind her skull, almost reaching the base of her tail. These are feather sheathes; long appendages packed with muscle. They are fleshy, prehensile tendrils which are filled with feathers, layers of thin plumes of different colors. If fully flexed to either side of Lahu's head, these sheaths would extend the whole array of these feathers atop her head in a massive, comparatively speaking, colored feathered headdress display. Minute muscle impulses flex and skew each plume of feathers, allowing her to alter and rapidly shuffle which colors are displayed.

Valbara'nay have always used their colorful feathers to express emotions and wordlessly convey information; a useful evolutionary trait left over from their pack-hunting prehistory. Though now, fully enclosed in their armored and sealed suits, none of them can extend their feathery plumes. Instead, their suits' sensors detect the muscle impulses, which then display the corresponding color or pattern on wrist-mounted screens. Zana'tl'teot's and Iztli'col'netla's shine yellow with excitement while Zoti'zo'maniu and Lahu both display a worried purple, briefly flickering to green as they settle into their seats, content in the newfound safety of their harnesses.

"This is just like training; there is nothing to worry about." Zana chirps as she nudges Zoti, speaking through her suit speakers. "We just have to hold tight until we reach the surface." She has always been the most optimistic out of all of them.

"That still involves dropping planetside strapped next to four *Cozat'li*." Zoti replies, pointing her tail at one of the tracked armored vehicles in front of them, restrained between the twin rows of seats inside the dropship. "I know the straps are strong but I can imagine what will happen if they break."

Cozat'li tanks are a recent addition to the Commando's arsenal, designed to supplement their force's anti-armor firepower during rapid hit-and-run maneuvers. Valbara'nay have always been adept at being quick on their feet and their doctrine contrasts the steadfast fist of UNN's mechanized companies. The *Cozat'li* is fast and maneuverable while mounting a Coalition 30mm coilgun inside its small turret. Humans, the friendly aliens from a planet called Earth, call it a tankette, denoting its diminutive, two-meter tall height. It is small to them of course; the *Cozat'li* is a fraction of the size of a UNN Kodiak main battle tank, both in physical dimensions and mass.

Tezca and her flock crew the one in front of them; Lahu operates the vehicle as the driver while Zana wields the turret controls and weapon system. Tezca herself sits besides Zana in the hull of the tank, keeping in constant communication with surrounding units and providing extra infantry support. A tank is nothing without infantry support and while *Gue'tra* armored vehicles provide ample troop capacity for the

company, a few extra Commandos can ride in the tank's small crew compartment while marching. Zoti and Iztli provide their *Cozat'li* with a little extra close-in protection.

“There is nothing in orbit that can stop us; the Coalition has cleared the gravity well of anything that doesn't have a Coalition IFF tag.” Zana remarks with a flash of confident red-orange from her forearms. It is true, they all watched the space battle from their troop carrier, the *Spear of Kapval*. The Bugs put up a tough fight but could not match the combined firepower of forty-two UNN carrier strike groups and eleven Consensus fleet carriers plus their many support ships. The Bugs were never going to defend the space around the planet, not when the Coalition brought the largest fleet ever assembled to Kerguela.

The Consensus joined the Coalition two years prior and have been preparing for this invasion ever since. It was readily apparent early on that Valbara'nay could not keep pace with Earth'nay on the ground. The taller, heavier aliens have so much more stamina, having evolved to travel for hours on end to hunt or migrate. They stand almost three hundred centimeters taller and can easily weigh three times as much. Valbara'nay's distant ancestors, in contrast, were ambush hunters which relied on speed and agility to survive. Great in short bursts but terrible for a ground war. With the differences between species so great, the Consensus decided to build their own invasion army to take back what is rightfully theirs.

Thirty rotations ago, Kerguela was their only colony, still young and developing. Valbara'nay united under the Consensus to peacefully explore the stars after the discovery of superlight technology; their philosophers and scientists agreeing that why would there be conflict among the stars with resources nigh limitless? Such utopian ideas came crashing down once the Bugs invaded without warning, the roaches killing millions without discrimination or mercy. Only a thousand returned to warn Valbara. The Ensi, commander of the Consensus fleet, was among them. Now Valbara'nay have returned with much more powerful allies to kill the Betelgeusian Queen and retake Kerguela.

Four more Commandos float into the dropship, stopping themselves atop one of the tanks. Every Commando in the shuttle turns their attention to the new flock; these are the commanders of the unit, the whole flock sharing the same rank. The foremost of them latches onto the tank's long barrel shroud with her tail, standing firm against it in the microgravity.

“Alright ladies!” Moli'hui'tlaco's shrill voice is made loud as it broadcasts into every Commando helmet. “We have our orders. As you all know, our forces have found little resistance on the surface. That has now changed. The roaches are coming out in

force, attacking companies on the ground with incredible precision. They are ambushing everyone but the UNN companies in the Red Zone are getting chewed up like a hapless Gue'tra herd." The first days of the invasion were incredibly peaceful but now it appears the Betelgeusians, the name the UNN gives Bugs, were simply watching and learning. "We have total control of the airspace but there are now reports of Bug air defense active across the moon."

That brought a murmur throughout the dropship. Tezca and Zana look at each other. Bugs with air defense? This is an unpleasant shock. Uncontested airspace was always presumed. What other surprises do they have hidden? Thirty rotations is a long time for a Bug colony to develop and nobody has ever invaded one so mature. The Commander continues unabated "We are reacting to a Red Zone ambush; we are to land, reinforce UNN forces, and assist till we are no longer needed. Bug air defense is a priority target. Double check your gear now." With her short speech over, Moli and her flock find their seats and straps in.

Iztli cocks her head back at her own flock, trilling excitedly "Our first Bug hunt! You think our girl is up to the task?" She points her snout at their *Cozat'li*.

"Of course she is! A Coalition thirty-mil coilgun will shred Warriors, much less Drones." Tezca quickly replies. "It also has enough armor to take hits from a Warrior's plasma gun too. We'll rack up kills in no time!"

A new voice chimed in on the local network "We're releasing from the airlock. Standby." A dull thump reverberates through the hull of the dropship as it detaches from the troopship, using its small maneuvering thrusters to push itself away and orient itself within the growing formation of other Consensus dropships. The artificial gravity plates activate, a lone ration bar dropping to the deck after bouncing off one of the tanks. The tug of acceleration pulls at Tezca as the main engines fire, propelling the ship toward Kerguela.

She peers out of the nearest porthole, using a single violet eye to inspect the moon. Kerguela dominates her view of the surrounding space, wispy white clouds covering some of the vibrant red and oranges of the landmass. Small blue seas contrast with the warm foliage colors. The system's binary stars combined output creates a thin habitable zone in the system, though the pale, otherworldly wavelength from both stars has forced the moon's flora to evolve red and orange leaves to soak up what energy they can. The vehicles have already been painted a striped camouflage similar to their suits. It is quite different from the normal Valbara purple and green schemes that she is used to.

Tezca spots a few of the other dropships as they burn together toward the dropzone. Unlike the smaller UNN dull ocean-grey landers, Valbara'nay dropships are painted in a mottled blue and grey scheme of Consensus' Navy colors. These dropships have been refitted with UNN tech, including AG plates, more powerful thrusters that add VTOL capability, and data-link systems that let the pilots coordinate with UNN forces. The black ceramic tiles on their nose and belly still betray their ground-to-orbit spaceplane origin when they took off and landed on long runways. A sudden flash of yellow dances along their flanks, the pilots no doubt excited to see some action. Like the screens on their suits, Consensus spacecraft mount displays along the nose and sides of their hull which mimic the pilot's own suit signals.

She turns her head back to her flock, which are all currently checking their suits and weapons. Tezca pulls up her own weapon to inspect, a standard issue Coalition personal defense weapon. The PDW is a small, compact bullpup coilgun which uses linear induction to propel slugs at great velocity. Valbara'nay are too small to use larger, more powerful coilguns effectively. Earth'nay prefer medium rifle versions while the towering cat-like Borealis'nay prefer long versions with a barrel pack full of coils and tipped with a wicked bayonet. The weapons are modular, all using the same parts from the X-Species Modular Rifle, or XMR platform. The PDW is more than capable, though. XMRs can accelerate a tungsten slug at two kilometers per second on the highest power setting, imparting rounds with enough kinetic energy to easily penetrate most forms of soft cover. Or several Drones.

"Am I the only one that misses our laser rifles?" Tezca chitters, speaking to no one in particular. "I enjoy the way the beam burns and melts through materials." Before the adoption of UNN coilgun technology, the Consensus only used powerful neodymium laser weapons, a refined technology of their distant warring past. "The glittering beam..."

Zana's panels flash an amused teal as she turns her head "You just don't like the recoil of PDWs. The longer effective range is a favorable tradeoff too..." As a *Cozat'li* gunner, she has become rather partial to the coilguns.

Iztli chirps up "They both have their uses but we've all seen the simulations. Coilguns are more useful than lasers in most combat scenarios. There are *Cozat'li* that mount large lasers. Have you seen the specifications? It is short ranged but devastating up close."

"Short ranged?" Zoti briefly scoffs, tilting her helmeted head at Iztl "It might be limited on damage but it can easily blind anyone, especially on a broad-beam setting. Drones have eyes too. Their weapon scopes have eyes." They have all had training

with laser rifles. A laser can do serious damage to soft tissue, even beyond effective range.

“Yeah, we know.” Tezca forces herself to relax but her tail remains restless. “It doesn’t matter what we use; we will smash the roaches anywhere we find them.” To prove her point, she pulls out a metal band with thick bumpy protrusions on one side, slipping it over her two fingered hand. This is the only issued melee weapon, used to smash and shatter carapaces of insects; Valbara’nay are much stronger than they look and these metal knuckles have already proven their worth on Valbara. The rest of her flock flash a pattern of affirmation. Even Lahu, who is usually too preoccupied with tasks ahead.

The dropship begins to rattle as it plows through the upper atmosphere at high speed, superheated plasma turbulence merely buffeting the bulky craft. Orange-yellow flames lick past the small window nearest Tezca. It is a tense moment; the flock simply holds on to their restraints of their crash seats. The shaking and rattling subsides rather quickly as the view outside turns blue.

“Five minutes to drop point.” The pilot’s voice is calm. Perhaps she has done this many times over the past few days. Tezca’s flock are only now being deployed, having missed the first few drops. Perhaps it is for the best, there are rumors that several Commando units were ambushed along with the UNN forces. Now the Bugs have played their hand, battles will hopefully go smoother.

Moli’s voice crackles to life through the unit channel. “Things will be happening fast. Fall out quickly and secure the landing zone. *Cozat’li* will provide covering fire while everyone mounts into vehicles. There may be UNN forces close by; watch for friendly IFF tags and watch your fire. XMRs can pierce many trees.” A few Commandos check their PDW’s power settings and battery levels. “Speak plainly to Earth’nay. If they say something you don’t understand, ask. We are new to this type of war and we will be supporting their maneuvers. Do we have consensus?” Everyone flashes an affirmative pattern on their screens. Moli sounds pleased. “Good.” She switches to English, the Earth’nay language used by the UNN. “Lock and load!”

Tezca grins at the new phrase. Moli probably learned it from one of the early Earth’nay instructors. Her flock was one of the first trained on their new technology on Valbara and even fought Bugs that landed inside the capitol during the invasion. Valbara’nay language is far more rapid and fluid than English, in large part due to her species’ great learning capacity and flawless memory. Their brains can process a higher amount of visual and auditory information. Earth’nay speech is painfully slow and laborious in comparison, though with the added benefit of it being easy to mimic; every

Commando must learn it well enough to have a fluid conversation with any UNN member species.

The dropship lurches somewhat and groans abruptly as the pilot pulls the heavy craft level with the ground, dipping a wing as the formation banks toward a specific point on the surface. A tapestry of oranges and reds can be seen through the windows. It is so alien to Tezca. Of course her flock have been well informed of what the moon is like; the sudden feeling of awe surprises her more. Perhaps excitement? Her panels flutter full of yellow at the thought of stepping on a new planet. Tezca scowls at the thought, though, panels flickering red. Not new. Taken. Her flock will help reclaim it for all Valbara'nay.

Before long, craft shutters as it touches down in a wide clearing with light forests on all sides. The ramp at the rear of the hull clangs open and drops remarkably fast for its weight, kicking up mud as it settles into the ground. Almost simultaneously, every Commando unfastens from their seat and prepares to exit. Along with other tank crews, Tezca and her flock rush to the rear of their *Cozat'li*, opening the hatch and piling inside as other Commandos release the retaining straps for the tank. Lahu quickly starts the machine, an electric humm filling the tiny space. Lights illuminate the white interior and screens flicker to life as Zana flips switches, booting up computers and the weapon system. Zoti and Iztli close the hatch once they strap in. Tezca quickly runs checks and chirps an all-clear to the unit "*Cozat'li* two-eight operational; stand clear."

Lahu shifts the machine into gear with a push of a button and accelerates the tankette out of the dropship, stopping ten meters out, the tracks of the vehicle digging out twin ruts into the soft ground; apparently it recently rained. Zana instantly trains the turret to their fire zone, approximately ninety degrees of coverage to the unit's front right. "Thermals clear! No targets."

Behind them, the second *Cozat'li* rolls up behind and slightly to the right of them, its own turret facing directly to the right. The rest of the disembarked Commandos rush out of the dropship, each flock their own separate squad. They fan out, taking positions around the tanks with practiced precision, covering every angle. A half-dozen dropships empty their cargo of Commandos and vehicles, with twice as many *Gue'tra* armored vehicles being deployed than tankettes. *Gue'tra* are compact and agile four-wheeled vehicles that seat six, including the driver, which provide Commandos with rapid transport capacity.

Once the squad of tanks is clear, the lander's thrusters crank up to full power, lifting it off the ground. Within moments, every dropship in the formation takes off,

blowing tufts of red-brown grass and mud everywhere. Soon they will return to orbit to ferry more Valbara'nay and materiel to the ground.

The Commando unit remains vigilant, watching the surrounding forest, as the roar of the dropships grows into a faint rumble before fading into silence. It is replaced by a brief moment of quiet serenity; wind and rustling foliage. The gas giant *Te'tat'zin* hangs large over the forest, bands of blue and purple easily visible though the atmosphere of the moon. The tranquility is interrupted by distant gunfire. The sharp cracks of high powered coilguns have been dulled by distance but their sound is unmistakable. Moli's voice fills their helmets again "Mount up! Waypoints now set. A mechanized company is being pinned two kilometers away by massing Bug forces. Form up; the *Cozat'li* will lead the way. Wedge formation."

Flocks on the ground rush to their assigned buggies while Tezca's *Cozat'li* rolls into position ahead of formation along with the other tanks, each one's turret scanning a separate direction ahead of them. Her flock needs no further orders. Formation maneuvering is a simple task.

Every Commando, no matter her role, communicates with each other via a data-link network. Flocks have their own private link but any member can speak to Moli's flock at any time. Other Commando's flocks or even UNN personnel can link to any other with a command from their wrist computers. Furthermore, their helmets share all data in real-time. Threats are highlighted red and shared to nearby friendlies, video from helmet or vehicle mounted cameras can be viewed, and IFF, identification friend or foe, tags can be seen no matter the obstacle. Commandos had similar technology but the UNN brought it to a whole other level.

Within a few moments, the formation of tanks and buggies race off towards the UNN positions. The nimble craft deftly dodge between trees. Red leaves quickly rush past them. The tall trees tower well above the ground, no doubt due to the lower gravity, which is ten percent less than on Valbara. Large spires of brown mushrooms, several meters tall, grow between dark trunks of larger trees. Lahu laughs, clearly amused by how easily their *Cozat'li* smashes through clusters of mushrooms. "These things are disgusting!"

"I wonder if we can eat them," Iztli muses, watching a forward camera through her visor. "It would be a waste not to; look how large they are!" More mushroom chunks bounce off the armored hull as they crash through another cluster. The ground was relatively smooth, which made for a comfortable ride. Zana scans the path forward with the cannon's optics, the long barrel fully stabilized straight ahead as the rest of the vehicle bounces over bumps and dips.

Columns of smoke are visible through the orange canopy above them, pointing the way toward the fighting. Zana and Lahu have a focused view forward so the rest of the flock focus their attention off to the sides. Tezca watches other *Cozat'li* speed forward alongside their own in a loose wedge, kicking up dead leaves, mushroom bits, and mud. The embarked Commandos on their buggies keep pace a hundred meters behind. They have minimal armor, fully relying on speed and the tanks themselves to keep their troops safe from enemy fire.

Trees and mushrooms give way to a gently sloping clearing. The formation slows upon seeing the death and destruction that litter the open landscape ahead. "Eyes front. Report movement." Moli orders, speaking to all flocks. The ground looks like it erupted in fire, blackened and burnt. Corpses can be seen practically everywhere, thankfully almost all of them are Drones. Their carapaces, many broken and shattered, are similarly colored to their own suits; the Queen has adapted camouflage to their combat castes it seems. Unfortunately for the Coalition, it suits them well.

Betelgeusian Drones all share the same basic shape, even if each Queen tailors them with slightly different features. They stand roughly 1.5 meters tall, bipedal, and walk on three toes. Being arthropods, their exoskeleton supports muscle and organs within. The most striking features are their four arms. The upper arms are larger, mainly used to handle small arms, while the lower two are smaller. Drones often rush into close quarters combat with daggers in their lower arms, something Tezca privately wants to see firsthand. These Drones have harsh, sharp helmets. Their visors are red with four 'eyes' around the helmet. Whether they actually have four eyes is another matter. Every Bug also features a horn that grows out from the middle of their face and branches outward past their forehead. Each one is supposed to be unique but they all look the same to Tezca. Besides the addition of camouflage, these Drones have spikes on their armored carapace, probably a close-quarters adaptation. Dark yellow and green liquid ichor spills from many of their wounds.

Tezca has to look away from the Insects. She scowls to herself as she examines the rest of the battlefield from her station's screens. "I'm picking up IFF tags." A few small red markers flash on her screens. Unmoving UNN marines lie among shallow craters and piles of Drones. "They're dead. Drive around them, Lahu." She has an urge to stop and check for survivors. Blue IFF tags would appear on her helmet's HUD if there were any, though. The mechanized company must have gathered the wounded and pushed toward a more favorable position. Or retreated to one.

"Woah," she mutters. They pass a wrecked Kodiak tank. Or what is left of it. Its armored sloped front and tracks are all that remains. "That's worrying." The tracks were

slagged and warped, as if melted by a large blowtorch. The flat sides of the upper hull and large turret atop were gone. She saw the tank's large weapon a moment later. The partially-melted turret, which itself masses more than their *Cozat'li*, had impaled itself in the mud nearby, smoke still pouring out of it.

"It looks like it exploded. What could have caused that?" There is unease in Lahu's soft voice. If a Betelgeusian weapon could destroy an MBT several times larger than their own tank, what chance did they have against it?

"I don't like that at all." Zana says before keying into the commander's channel "Two-eight: No contacts."

Tezca sweeps her view around their burnt environment "This happened recently. Keep alert." They continue forward past the battlefield. She frowns inside her helmet, pondering if someone will have to clean all of the Bug parts from the treads. Betelgeusian attacks tend to favor suicidal waves of Drones, hoping to overrun any opposition with sheer numbers. Fortunately, XMR technology and datalinks usually keep them at bay. They might have numbers but the Coalition has teamwork. Airstrikes, gunships, and artillery strikes. Even orbital strikes from warships in orbit. Some kind of support is usually available to ground forces.

The wedge formation of *Cozat'li* accelerate to cruising speed once they pass the wreckage. They follow a trail of destruction; numerous Drones litter the ground spread between craters and burnt patches of orange grass. The Marines were fighting the whole way, tracks of their heavy vehicles leading the way forward. Their destination is only a kilometer away now with battle ahead just out of sight over the next rise.

Two black dots drop from above, piercing the sky as they rocket toward the ground. Their sharp, angled twin-tailfin shape denotes them as Beewolfs. These are the UNN's premier fighter craft. The pair swoops in toward the smoke then abruptly banks away back towards the sky. "Tezca! Do you see them? Amazing!" Zana chirps "They must have dropped bombs!" A sharp, visible pressure wave appears then immediately rocks the tankette, the explosion loud enough to be heard through the vehicle's armored shell. A large plume of dirt rises past the ridge. She gasps, correct in her assumption. "Wow. I bet the roaches are toast."

"I see them. Those were large bombs. I just hope there are more Bugs to kill." Tezca, nor any of her flock, are bloodthirsty but it was an understatement that many Valbara'nay wanted retribution for the deaths of millions. The Ensi's flagship is even named *Vengeance*; she could not have picked a more apt name. Puffs of white smoke spill out of the trees, catching Tezca's attention.

Two separate streaks of white rocket out of the forest from their right, slinking upwards toward the Beewolfs on green flames. The fighters react quickly, janking in opposite directions as they begin to evade. They deploy bright flares in quick succession as they pull hard away from the rising missiles. One missile is duped and cluelessly speeds into the tree canopy, detonating in a green fireball that catches everything around it on fire. The second missile tracks its target well but the Beewolf pilot pulls a hash maneuver, dumping all of his flares. The missile races past and explodes nearby, silhouetting the craft briefly in a bright flash. Having just avoided destruction, both fighters speed away back to orbit.

Moli opens a channel to the whole unit, wasting no time with orders. "First platoon! Advance forward to assist friendlies and hold. Second and third platoon, new heading! Three-one-zero. The company ahead has pinpointed a Bug concentration for us!" She was using the information shared by the UNN troops. "We also have to take out that air defense or we are not going home. Flank from the right and hit them fast and hit them hard." The eagerness is apparent in her voice. It is a chance for Commandos to show Earth'nay our worth; to prove we can conduct a ground war just as well as they can. "Coordinate and push. Let's wet our claws! Weapons free!"

Almost all Commando units were assembled using the standard UNN company template, which split their forces into platoons which can react independently to threats. Their *Cozat'li* is assigned to the first platoon. The flock, minus Lahu in the driver seat, take a moment to glance at once another. Their forearm screens flash orange with determination and confidence. Tezca can't help but make a toothy grin before turning back forward. "Stay in formation Lahu. Stop just before the hill. We need to take a peek first." The tiny tank digs its tracks into the soft ground as it bounds straight ahead with three other *Cozat'li*. Four *Gue'tra* buggies trail them, ready to disembark their flocks. She communicates her intention with the other tanks, quickly getting confirmation from them.

Iztli looks to the right of her vehicle using cameras, watching second and third platoons peel off and head into the forest to their right, Moli's flock among them in a modified buggy. It equips more powerful radio gear and even a point-to-point laser transmitter. They could probably communicate with the *Vengeance* itself. "Good hunting ladies!"

"Eyes front, prepare for contact." Tezca feels apprehension but it isn't about the combat ahead. She trained for this her whole adult life; she knows what to do. Her flockmates, her family, know this just as well as she does. They all met each other in the academy and have since become one, inseparable entity. She never wants to think of

what would happen if they were injured or worse. This invasion was a test for them. Years of preparation and it was all in vain; Valbara would have been lost if not for an Earth'nay fleet that just happened to be in the system at the right time. Tezca needs to know if they can make a difference on Kerguela, here and now. One million Coalition troops up against fifteen million insects that have had thirty years to dig defenses? Her flock will repay their poor hospitality generously.

The line of *Cozat'li* roll up to the lip of the hill, stopping just so that their turrets and sensors can peek over the now-rocky ground. The scene before them would be picturesque if not for the carnage. A shallow valley slopes before them, curving downwards between their tan, rocky hill and a forest on the other side. A sinuous creek snakes its way through the valley; it doesn't appear deep but red vegetation and boulders provide a lot of nearby cover. The tracks they were following lead directly to the UNN company, having smashed through smaller trees and flattened any bushes in their way. The path forward is an easy one, at least.

The dust from the airstrike lingers in the air, obscuring much of the forest beyond the impact point. Whatever the bombs hit, it is no more. Two large craters of rocks and dirt cleared out large sections of the forest edge; one even filled with water from the creek. A harsh, green fire flickers up from the other, large chunks of charred Bug flesh scattered around. It must have been an important target. Perhaps the same weapon that destroyed the Kodiak. The UNN Marines and vehicles formed a curving firing line near the bank of the bending creek, using it as a barrier against the advancing Drones. This was nowhere near a full company, though. A platoon or two at most. What happened to them? There should be a dozen more vehicles with them. There are only a few Puma infantry fighting vehicles, their deployable sides extended outwards from their hull to provide their Marines with hardened cover. Only two Kodiaks remain on the line, their squat, angular hull and large turrets make them easily identifiable. A few dozen Marines are scattered about, taking cover behind their IFVs, tree stumps, or fallen trees. Scattered fires litter around the creek. There seems to be a lull in the fighting; the large bombs must have scattered the enemy.

"Where are the rest of them?" Zana asks, peering at the line of vehicles through a high-zoom sensor atop the turret. The *Cozat'li* are only a few hundred meters away from them.

Iztli switches to the same view, sounding almost forlorn "This is bad. Where are the insects?" Zana scans the craters again, seeing no movement.

Zana grumbles aloud. "Thermals are going to have trouble with all this fire and dust."

“There!” Zoti exclaims, directing their attention to the forest beyond the craters. The canopy of red and orange leaves casts many shadows but some of these shadows are moving.

Zana aims the gun at the treeline, using the gun’s powerful optics. Thermal imaging might be heavily degraded through the dust but many warm bodies can be seen scattered through the trees, moving toward the line of Marines with singular purpose. “Contact!”

Within moments, bright-green plasma bolts erupt from the treeline; the Drones are using them for cover. Only a few dozen of the creatures advanced over and into the craters, which then hunker down to fire at the Marines in turn. Iztli notices their strange, grouped movement, her arm panels turning an uneasy purple. “Are they moving in squads?” The Drones in the trees suddenly burst forward, now that their comrades are covering them. “They are covering each other!”

Tezca doesn’t like the sound of that. A suicidal enemy is an easy enemy and squad-based advances infers more tactical tactical awareness than previously assessed in Betelgeusian ground attacks. “It doesn't matter now.” She keys into the platoon channel, quickly conversing with other flocks to formulate a plan of attack. Their quick chirps, warbles, and beeps of their native tongue are a tangible advantage in combat. Having reached consensus, every Commando springs into action. Valbara’nay might not quickly think of their feet but they plan for everything ahead of time.

“Roger that, advancing!” Lahu kicks the *Cozat’li* into gear, quickly accelerating down the rocky slope along with the other tanks. The buggies follow closely behind. They need to close the range to dismount their Commandos.

“Loading HE!” Zana’s colored screens flash an indignant red as she flicks a switch on her weapon station. “Firing!” The thirty-millimeter gun shudders, recoiling back into its sleeve. Even with recoil dampening, it rocks the tiny tank. The round travels the scant hundred meters to the forest’s edge in an instant, catching a Drone in the open. The Bug simply explodes, its torso splitting into pieces, the detonating round catching a nearby Drones with fragmentation. They slump to the ground, their bodies shredded and broken.

It only takes a few quick seconds to race into the valley. The *Cozat’li* skids to a halt at the creek’s bank. Iztli, Zoti, and Tezca grab their XMRs and open the rear hatch. The sounds of intense gunfire and explosions immediately hit them. Thankfully, their helmets automatically dampen the noise. They emerge into a muddy puddle, their large,

two-clawed feet sinking into it. The three Commandos take defensive positions around their tankette. Tezca slams into a tree trunk and watches buggies rapidly decelerate behind their tanks, their armored doors swinging upwards as Commandos rapidly dismount and take cover, each flock spreading out to create crossfire positions.

Tezca swiftly looks around. Blue IFF tags of the Marines shine in her heads-up-display to her left. Numbers and miscellaneous info of the Earth'nay blink above them, detailing their unit and status. The nearest squad of Marines take notice of them with a wave. One Marine taps a few commands on their wrist computer, connecting them to Tezca's flock. They are only twenty meters away.

"About damn time!" He takes a strenuous breath "I thought we were done for." The Marine pops his head over the cover of his IFV's extended cover to take a few shots across the creek. The Drones are gaining ground as they stagger their push. The sharp, staccato cracks of their tankette gun briefly deafens Tezca. She turns her snout around the stump she is using for cover to see the impacts: another squad of Drones was torn to shreds. The Marine ducks to reload "This is the third wave! We don't know where they are coming from but it doesn't look good without air support."

"We're here to assist." Tezca says, switching to English, her voice much higher pitched in comparison. "Thirty-fifth Assault Commando, reporting in!" She laughs to herself, having always wanted to say that. Plasma bolts sizzle by, flashing by her head. The heat is so intense that she can feel the warmth on her scales under her suit. She yelps in surprise, scrambling back in cover. She quickly checks her XMR and sets the power to maximum, the weapon humming to life as she explains the updated situation to the Marine. "Our second and third platoon are flanking; they should relieve pressure on this position." She rolls around the stump to take aim from a crouched position. A squad of six Drones take cover around scattered boulders and logs, only fifty meters away. The Drones take cover where they can; they are not mindless or stupid. Still, easy targets for a Commando. Tezca signals a complex colored pattern from her wrist screens, a quick fluttering of colors in a specific pattern.

Iztli and Zoti bolt out from behind their *Cozat'li* to boulders alongside it, flashing an affirmative pattern in return. Rapid speech is great but an ability to wordlessly inform others of complex topics instantly is an amazing boon to squad tactics. The three Commandos open fire simultaneously. A trio of Drones are hit. One takes a round in its helmet, shattering its head into several large chunks. The other two are riddled, the rounds piercing their carapace, leaving oozing holes as they crumple to the ground.

The remaining three Drones quickly return fire, bolts of accelerated plasma emanate from orange pistols and rifles, their rails crackling with energy. Betelgeusian

weapons are made of resin and are living in their own, strange way. They need nutrients to stay 'alive' and pressurized gas for ammunition. The plasma bolts splash at the Commandos' positions. Tezca's stump has fist sized chunks blown out of it, leaving blackened, ember-riddled holes. She holds her weapon tight as she huddles behind crackling wood. Zoti and Iztli duck behind their boulders, which is far better cover, Tezca suddenly realizes. Zana seems to be enjoying her time though; the plasma rounds simply leave small scorch marks on the sloped, armored hull of the *Cozat'li*. The gun trains at the three Drones and easily cuts them down. It is what the weapon was designed for, after all.

Lahu trills out a warning "They are pushing through the water! Direct front!" A dozen Drones, two squads, power their way through the knee-high water with reckless abandon. The disembarked Commandos turn their attention to them, dropping five of them. Several float downstream along the strong current.

Tezca aims at another that jumps out of the water; it levels its plasma pistol at Zoti's position. Her XMR kicks into her shoulder, the tungsten slug shattering the Drone's carapace, over-penetrating enough to dismember another Drone behind it. The second Bug isn't even phased, surging forward as it draws daggers made of chitin. There is no time to take aim as plasma bolts splash around them; squads of Drones across the creek seek to pin the Coalition troops. One bolt whizzes past Tezca's cover, causing her to duck into the mud. "Focus fire across the water, Zana! Iztli, Zoti: fire at anything out of cover."

They chirp a quick affirmative over the local channel. Tezca glances down the creek; the whole line is being swarmed with insects crossing the knee-deep water. Scores of Marines return fire the best they can. A Kodiak fires its intimidating main gun at concentration of Drones near the forest's edge. The large shell detonates before reaching the trees, showering everything -trees and Drones alike- with innumerable flechettes. Drones caught in the open are cut into pieces wholesale. Mortars fire from a small mount atop the tank's turret. The shells arc upwards high into the air before raining down at entrenched Drones; one Bug is lofted into the air by an explosion, two arms and a leg missing. Puma IFVs pump out thirty-millimeter rounds from small turret blisters, the same weapon system their *Cozat'li* use. Even with all this firepower, it appears they are making little impact on the attacking mass of Bugs.

"This is intense!" Iztli replies as she leans out of cover to loose a few more shots at the advancing squad of Drones, another one collapsing into the mud. They are running headlong into fire to get close distance; Bugs are adept at melee combat. "Reloading!" Iztli ducks behind cover while Zoti downs another Drone rushing their position. Iztli discards the empty magazine before slamming another one into her XMR.

She switches to full auto as she fires around her now-scorched boulder, cutting down the rest. “They are going to overrun us!” Her voice is tense but Tezca can see the flashing, fearful blue lights on Iztli’s suit.

Tezca ducks behind cover to reload her XMR, her heart pounding in her ears. A brief, sorrowful thought flashes in her mind: what if she loses a flockmate? How could she cope with such a loss? She would probably do something foolhardy. Another plasma bolt burns a divot out of her stump, snapping her back to the present. Embers sprinkle down on her suit as her colored panels flash a loud, angry red. She swivels out of cover, using her tail as an anchor as she snaps off accurate fire into advancing Drones. Carapaces shatter as they tumble into the water. “We’re not done yet, Iztli! Look how many we still have to hunt!”

Iztli scoffs, more amused than nervous. “They are hunting *us!*” It is better than being dismayed at least.

Zana laughs at the exchange as she relentlessly fires the tankette’s gun, its slow, rhythmic chugging no longer a distraction. The barrel’s coils glow orange with heat. Coilguns cannot fire continuously forever in most atmospheric conditions, else their coils lose power and eventually melt. Across the bend of the creek, something large plows its way out of the forest, standing far above the smaller Drones. It swings a large arm to swat away a log blocking its path, smashing it into splinters. Tezca’s eyes widen at the sight. “Warrior!”

Without skipping a beat, Zana immediately switches targets, training the gun at the Warrior. “Loading AP!” There is a whirr accompanied by a clunk from the tankette as the loading mechanism switches to armor piercing rounds.

Before she could fire, the Warrior takes aim. It levels one of its huge, crab-like upper arms at their *Cozat’li* and fires its plasma cannon. A large bolt of plasma smashes into the tiny tank, boiling away paint and armor in a bright, dazzling green flash. Tezca’s visor automatically dims the flash to save her eyesight. She turns away, recoiling from the wave of heat. It feels like her body got shoved into a heating incubator for infants. She quickly scans the tankette in shock, its blackened front hull glowing a dull red. “Lahu!” It is her turn to shine blue colors at her flockmates, fearing the worst.

A painfully long moment passes before Lahu’s voice crackles into Tezca’s helmet speakers. “I’m alright! A little warm, though.” The dense ceramic armor of the *Cozat’li* was specifically tailored to absorb and ablate the intense heat of plasma, vaporizing to keep the heat at bay. It took a big hit but it held. Tezca’s suit flashes green; she can’t help but breathe out in a sigh of relief.

Zana wastes no time repaying in kind. The thirty-millimeter gun accelerates supersonic armor piercing rounds directly at the Betelgeusian Warrior. These heavy units are technically vehicles; a Bug pilots them from within. They look like an upright and tall crustacean with thick, overlapping plates of hardened, dense chitin armor. Their massive upper arms are full of muscle, tipped with razor sharp crab-like claws. Warriors are the Bug's heavy infantry, hefting around a bulky plasma cannon capable of causing much more damage than regular small arms. The thing barely has time to realize the threat of the Commando's weapon. It can only raise its thick arm to shield itself.

The high-velocity rounds don't notice the difference. They pummel straight through its arm and embed into the Warrior's thick hide, blasting fist-sized holes. Ichor and pus leak from the wounds as the monstrosity staggers. The nearest *Cozat'li* pours additional fire into the Warrior. Its arm withers from the onslaught and is completely shredded, breaking off at the elbow. It continues to resist for a few, surprisingly long moments, being utterly decimated, before falling face first into a mess of its own bodily fluids and broken chunks of carapace.

Tezca whoops, thrusting a fist into the air! Zana whistles joyfully "They're not so tough!" Her jubilant tone shifts rapidly after she checks her weapon's panel "The gun is getting hot."

"Conserve your shots. Only fire at closing enemies!" Zoti says as she reloads in knee-deep mud, her legs and tail already caked in it.

The rushing Drones had the opening they were looking for. With the tankettes distracted by the Warrior, a squad of six leap from the water and sprint at the Commandos, firing their weapons wildly. Lahu was the first to spot them. "Watch out!" She warbles. "Another squad!"

Zana had just enough time to aim at an onrushing Drone, not bothering switching back to explosive-tipped rounds. The gun recoils with a crack, the round zipping across the scant few meters to decapitate the unlucky Drone. One of them rushes at Tezca, who swiftly guns it down. Two of them leap atop the *Cozat'li*, clawing and pulling at any hatches or handholds they can identify. One unleashes a few point-blank plasma bolts directly at Lahu's transparent viewport, which promptly melts. The remaining two Bugs vault over Zoti's and Iztli's rocky cover, daggers drawn in their lower arms.

Tezca reacts instantly, sweeping her XMR at the two would-be boarders, firing round after round into their torsos, ripping through carapaces and flesh like nothing. Her mind is on autopilot, the safety of her flock is her only driver. They are tossed off the hull

by the impacts, dropping dead beside the muddied tracks of the tank. Using her powerful legs, she leaps forward, effortlessly bounding atop the tank in one, swift motion. She aims downward at the surviving Drones but she is too late. Her flockmates are already engaged in deadly melee combat. Without a clean shot, she can't risk harming them; her shots will pierce anything at this range. Her stomach lurches with intense dread.

A Drone lept at Iztli first, knocking them both to the ground. It drives a dagger into her chest, the ceramic plates protecting her vitals stopping it cold, the blade embedding in her armor. She wails out in alarm, struggling to keep the Drone's other dagger from finding a less armored spot. She abruptly twists her torso as the Bug thrusts down, missing her neck by centimeters. Iztli turns the motion into an advantage, grabbing onto one its upper arms, contorting sideways as she uses its weight against itself. She pushes her legs into its chest and pulls back with her arms, using her back and tail for more leverage. The Drone's right arm detaches with a disgusting cracking noise, spilling out a squirt of ichor on the ground. Its serrated mandibles twitch in pain as she kicks it away. Now separated enough, she fires her weapon point blank into its chest, downing it immediately.

Zoti was more prepared in her fight; she equipped the metal knuckles just after the fighting started. The Drone that lunged at her with daggers in hand was hoping to get a quick kill, slashing the blades at her recklessly. Zoti deftly parried them with her knuckles, sparks flying off of them as she endured the assault. The Drone then leveled its plasma pistol, understanding that its strikes were failing. It was all the time Zoti needed. She abruptly ducked low as a plasma bolt sailed over her head, sweeping her powerful, muscular tail under the Drone's legs. It toppled easily but she was on it before it hit the ground. She jabbed at its head with a knuckle with an angry hiss, smashing its helmet wide open. The next punch broke its armored carapace on its torso. Her attacks quickly became a blur, striking the insect rapidly, quickly turning its body into a shattered, gooey mess. Fragments of shell and blobs of ichor drench her muddy suit. Victorious, Zoti's color screens shine bright red of rage.

Tezca's own panels were steady blue but quickly changed to green, relief, when her flockmates steadied themselves back in cover. She wanted so much to see their faces, to dote on them in support. To nuzzle their noses. But they are Commandos, warriors of Valbara; they are made of tough stuff. They can embrace each other after the battle. Tezca has decided she does *not* want to be in close combat with a Drone. "Let's not do that again." She pats the turret with her tail before hopping behind it for cover. "How are you doing, you two?"

Zoti and Iztli check their weapons then cock their heads up at Tezca, with Iztli replying flatly “You don’t have to tell us that.” A jagged piece of the chitin dagger is embedded in one of her armored chest plates. Zoti wipes mud and insect blood off her visor. She really is covered in the gunk.

Zana never ceased firing at the oncoming Drones, downing so many that they started piling up across the creek in heaps. “Oh, I am having fun! I lost count of how many I’ve killed.”

Lahu sounds tired but still keen. “That was stressful but I’m fine. My visibility is greatly reduced.” She has to rely on the vehicles camera’s for vision but even some of those have been damaged or completely melted.

An Earth’nay voice, the same Marine as before, joins in “You Valbarans sure know how to fight. I recorded that!” The Marine positions were almost overrun just as they were. A Drone’s corpse hangs against the Puma’s deployable cover. “It looks like we have them on the ropes! Let them have it!” Tezca doesn’t know what that phrase means but his elation was contagious. His squad leveled their rifles out of cover and fired in unison, felling another squad of advancing Drones. Zoti and Iztli do the same, adding to their fire.

Another Valbara’nay from a different flock chimes in, apparently embolden as well “Sisters! Victory is at hand!”

A massive green explosion, rocking the Coalition line, interrupts the cheering, Tezca craning her head to peer at it. A Kodiak MBT shudders under the impact but it seems no worse for wear. Whatever hit it barely put a dent in its massive armor plates.

“Damn! Not these fuckers again!” The Marine and his squad suddenly duck behind their cover. “Bug tank! Concentrate fire! Those tiny tanks of yours should be able to hurt it.”

“Bug tank?” Tezca swivels her snout toward the forest in front of them. The rest of her flock do the same, with Zana training the gun to help search for it.

“I see it!” Zana aims the gun somewhere deep in the trees. “Wow, I’m loading AP for sure; that thing is massive.”

Tezca can barely see it from atop their tankette. The smoke is thick with a lot of burning foliage but she can discern the Bug tank’s general shape. It has a bulbous hull that sits atop...far too many legs. At least six. It slowly scrambles forward on the legs,

though many larger trees block its path; the forest doesn't seem the best place for it to move through. Another bulbous feature sits atop its red-clad body, though this growth has a long, metallic protrusion sticking out toward its prow. It must be a plasma cannon! It is larger than a Warrior's. Longer too, it can probably accelerate a plasma bolt much further and faster than any other insect weapon. "Watch out for that gun."

White streaks launch out of its flanks, arcing upwards slightly before crashing down near the Kodiak. "That thing has missiles too!" Some missiles detonate harmlessly against the MBT's armor or completely miss. Others impale themselves in the soft ground before releasing a green, hazy gas. "Chemical weapons! Check seals!" Choking to death on chemicals is the last thing she wants to do. Her suit checks are green though; one less thing to worry about.

Zana promptly opens fire, the thirty-millimeter gun chugging out high velocity rounds at the Bug tank. They hit the flanks of the scuttling tank, most physically ricocheting off its apparently thick armor. Some find weak points, cutting into the softer flesh of the vehicle. Such little damage doesn't affect it.

Tezca, Zoti, and Iztli resume their fight against the horde of Drones. They can't push across the water with as many Drones as before but suicidal charges didn't stop them, then. Another bright flash of green, followed by the explosive shockwave, knocks Tezca over slightly. The Bug tank shot the Kodiak again, this time hitting its now-traversing turret, leaving a large scorch mark where a storage bustle used to be.

"Oh that thing is fucked now." The nearby Marine laughs, standing up just enough to peek at the Bug tank. "Never fight a Kodiak head-on."

Tezca looks at the main battle tank. It trains its large coilgun on target and, after a brief moment, fires. The large cannon kicks back with enough force to even rock the huge tank. The Kodiak's shell streaks forth, impacting the Bug tank instantly. Several trees that were in the way are shattered, filling the forest with splinters. The Bug Tank itself lurches backwards. Tezca can see bug blood and viscera flying out the rear of the vehicle. Its organic turret explodes upwards in a green column of flame, the armor piercing round must have hit something important. It slumps sideways and rolls on its side; its numerous legs curling underneath it.

"That is how the Marines do it! Yeah!" The male Marine is ecstatic again "Wool!" Tezca grins, hearing the happy Earth'nay. She returns her attention back at the water's edge, taking aim at Drones from behind the turret of their *Cozat'li*. They will be victorious.

Iztli laughs, filling the channel with high pitched squeaks. "Can we have one of those?" Zoti chuckles as she reloads. The Drones seem to understand the battle is lost, beginning to retreat. They still cover each other as they fall back, though. Another green explosion trickles through the trees on their right but Tezca pays little heed to it.

Zana aims more carefully, picking off single targets with the tankette's gun between the trees as the Bugs retreat.

"All units!" Tezca stands up, alert. It is Moli! She is broadcasting on the local UNN channel. "The roach air defenses have been neutralized. Local Drone forces are retreating westward." Zoti and Iztli turn around behind their rocky cover, sitting on their tails to listen. "Air support from *Vengeance* is inbound, ETA: five minutes."

Tezca's flock cheers, their suit panels lighting up yellows and greens. She slumps down though, resting atop the curved armor plate of the turret now the threat of the Drones are gone. The red-orange paint is burnt in so many places. Tezca sighs, content and relieved. Tired too; Valbara'nay maybe be fast but have little stamina.

Zana pops off a few more rounds at straggling Drones but flicks the safety on after a few moments. The coils emanate metallic clicks as they cool. Zoti and Iztli stand up, tentatively checking for survivors beyond their boulders. Betelgeusians are well known for surviving mortal wounds and still being able to use their weapons. Zana and Lahu join Tezca atop the tank, looking far more pristine than their muddy flockmates.

Five minutes later, two sharp, pointed arrowheads pass overhead, racing in front of twin sonic booms as they dive bomb the retreating Insects. Powerful but distant explosions rattle the forest. The flock simply watches from atop their *Cozat'li*, content on their perch.

They have won their first battle. Hard fought and messy, they survived. They showed their teeth, metaphorically speaking, to the Earth'nay. They seemed impressed, if the radio joyous chatter had anything to say about the Commando's performance. The Marines would have been overrun if it was not for first platoon. Though anybody can split an enemy's fire, surviving long enough with few losses is another matter entirely.

Second and third platoon rejoined shortly, the rest of them as ecstatic as they could be. Their flank was a total success. Moli's push overran token defenses and were able to quickly destroy several of the Bug air defenses. Apparently they are mounted on the same tanks the Kodiak destroyed.

The flock watches them drive past them toward a large gaggle of UNN Marines. All of them give the returning Commando salutes, blood-red flutters from their forearm screens. Losses were unbelievably minimal. Two buggies were destroyed. Five of the tankettes are damaged but repairable. Amazingly, there were no deaths; only injuries.

Tezca opens her visor along with the rest of her flock, the top half of their helmets essentially opening upwards like a maw of a mighty Teth'rak. The stench of charred flesh and burnt flora permeate the air but she doesn't mind it. It smells like victory. Their panels flicker between green and affectionate pink as they huddle together. Tezca embraces her flockmates, their helmets clatter into one another as their snouts bump together. They survived their first battle. Though there will no doubt be more hard-fought battles to come, Tezca is confident her flock will help bring Valbara victory.
