



FROM THIRTY THOUSAND feet, the distant wall of cloud looked almost beautiful, the swelling towers gleaming in the sunlight, the sky a rich, deep blue above them. The satellite feed painted a far uglier picture, a broad curve of cloud reaching inland from the Gulf of Mexico, and when Cammie looked from it to the image beside the communications console, only the faint glow of blue eyes indicated that Julian Chase was mixing in to *Renegade's* cabin and not actually standing there.

"Say again, Lieutenant?" Chase said. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"I think you do." Miranda Worth's projection gave a wry grin and reached to one side, dragging a map into existence and flattening it to show the terrain under the storm. "We had word that a group of refugees was making their way along the back roads network, and we'd already assigned a Vanguard unit to meet and collect them once they crossed into the delta."

Chase looked faintly skeptical, and Cammie couldn't blame

him. That was a fairly typical mission, not one that required the gen:LOCK team.

“However,” Miranda said, and behind her avatar, Cammie saw Kazu lida roll his eyes.

“Here it comes.” The spoken words were in Japanese; the translation flickered across Cammie’s field of vision, and she grinned. Kazu generally said what he was thinking, and this time you couldn’t really argue with him.

Miranda ignored the comment. “Since we made that arrangement, the group contacted us again to say they had linked up with a second group of refugees who claimed to be carrying information vital to the Polity. The refugee leader is a member of the underground; she couldn’t vouch for its accuracy, but the new group said it had something to do with stolen brains, or maybe stolen minds. You see why that caught our attention.”

“Yeah.” Chase lifted one hand to his head, though everyone knew he couldn’t actually scratch his scalp. “Okay, I see why you—why we—would be interested . . .”

“We have a Vanguard unit on the way to the rendezvous point,” Miranda cut in. A beacon flared on the map. “We’ve now received intel that Union forces are moving to intercept them. If they’ve got anything on the Union’s use of the gen:LOCK technology—we want it. We need it, Chase.”

Chase looked over his shoulder. “Cammie?”

Cammie touched keys and hooked her fingers into the projection that appeared, stretching and turning it so that it

matched Miranda's map. She gave it a push, and it settled over the image, hiding the details under the ugly bands of cloud. She frowned and moved a virtual slider so that the angry reds and yellows and greens faded enough to see the terrain through it. A lot of it was flat and open, the kind of terrain where they could land and upload to the Holons, but all of it was under the shifting color that marked the outer bands of the incoming hurricane.

Chase gave her a quick smile of thanks, but his eyes were on the map. "Where—" he began, and a new beacon appeared on Miranda's map. "Got it. What's the Vanguard's ETA?"

"The rendezvous is set for 1450," Miranda said. "Crews report that they're on schedule in spite of the weather."

Chase sketched a course across the map, then looked over his shoulder. "Yaz?"

Yasamin Madrani didn't look away from *Renegade's* controls, the map repeated on her heads-up display. "We can just do it. If the weather holds."

Chase nodded. "It'll be tight, Captain, but we can get there."

"Good. Back up Vanguard and help them get the refugees to the base at De Soto. And find out what it is they know."

"Roger that," Chase said. Miranda's projection vanished, but the map remained, and Chase poked at it, stretching and shifting it to examine the terrain. Kazu pushed himself up out of his seat and came to join him.

"That's the rendezvous? Looks like it could flood."

Chase nodded. "We'll need to get in and out before the rivers rise."

Cammie looked at the map. The rendezvous point lay between two rivers, the land flat and empty. She pulled up the latest satellite data, but nothing had changed since the last time she'd seen it. She looked back at the rest of the team. "Ahem. I cannae believe I'm even asking this, but isn't that an actual hurricane? Right there, where we're going?"

"Yep." Chase gave her a quick smile.

Cammie swallowed the word that rose to her lips. She was trying to work on her cursing, as Dr. Weller had put it, and had agreed to forfeit Ether credit for every time she swore out loud. On the other hand, she thought the situation warranted a curse or two. Hurricane Pam was coming ashore right on the 88th meridian, the dividing line between the territory taken by the Union and the part still held by the Polity, and that was only going to add to the chaos along that contested border.

Four years ago, the Union had swarmed ashore in New York City, capturing the city and pushing west. It was only in the last year or so that the Polity had been able to establish a new border along the 88th, and the Polity was still reeling from those losses. gen:LOCK had done its part to hold that border, but the Union had made more than one incursion deep into Polity territory. It was worrying to think about what

the Union might be hiding behind the swelling storm. The clouds in the image looked more menacing than ever.

"Another thing for which I did not sign up," Valentina Romanyszyn murmured. She didn't move from where she was sitting, one leg cocked over the arm of the seat.

Cammie shot her a glance and decided that she wasn't going to help. "But I mean—" Everyone was looking at her now, except Yaz, who was flying, and she swiveled the "ears" on her headband for emphasis. "Can we fly into it? It's a hurricane!"

"It's within *Renegade's* tolerances," Yaz said.

"Yaz is right," Chase confirmed. "The Hornbills are designed to take worse than this."

"Though of course that has not been tested," Valentina said.

Chase dropped his head to look at her. "Seriously?"

She spread her hands. "What? I'm not saying we shouldn't go, but—"

"It'll be fine," Yaz said through gritted teeth.

Kazu shrugged. "Eh, if the Vanguard needs our help, I say we help them. It's only weather."

Cammie nodded agreement. gen:LOCK was intended to work with the Vanguard, to fight alongside its more conventional units. Despite Dr. Weller's best efforts, the five of them were the only people who could safely use the gen:LOCK technology, uploading their consciousness into the Mindframes that controlled the giant mechanical Holons.

Well, there *had* been six of them, once, but the man they'd known as Rob Sinclair had turned out to be a Union spy and nearly brought the program down before it even got started. Dr. Weller had worked closely with the Vanguard to develop gen:LOCK and the Holons. After his death during the Battle of the Anvil, gen:LOCK had continued to work closely with Vanguard's command. They'd done everything from combat support to hit-and-run rescues. Helping refugees was certainly something they'd done before.

Valentina sat up, calling a screen of her own to swipe through a series of datasets. "The latest intel says the Union only has a few Spider Tank units in the area. That might be trouble for the Vanguard, but less so for us."

"We should be there in an hour and forty-five minutes," Yaz said. "All systems are green."

The carrier rocked, banking onto its new course, the tower clouds now centered in the windshield. "Better strap in," Chase said. His avatar was standing between Yaz's seat and Miguel Garza in the copilot's chair. Migas wasn't a pilot himself, but he knew *Renegade's* systems better than anyone else on the team. He also looked after the Holons, of course, but Cammie was learning right along with him. Everyone had liked her first unit mods; she had some more thoughts about that, the next time they had a bit of a break.

*If we ever get a break*, a treacherous voice whispered in the back of her mind. As always, the memory of Nemesis made her stomach lurch. Nemesis had been the Union's

answer to the gen:LOCK team—had been created from gen:LOCK technology, from the Mindframe, the “brain” the Union had retrieved when it captured Chase’s first Holon. Union scientists had taken Chase’s cyberbrain, twisted him, and placed that consciousness into a terrifying, four-armed monster as powerful as any of their own Holons. She could still remember her first encounter with it, a shadow looming out of the night that leaped on her before she could fight back.

Before she even really knew *how* to fight back.

With a vicious lurch, Nemesis had her pinned, three of its massive hands digging into her armor while she pawed frantically at its arms and chest and empty air, and its fourth hand ripped off her Holon’s head. She was blind then, panicked, hearing only the frantic cries of her fellow recruits rushing to her aid while Nemesis tore into her core, clawing through the machine in pursuit of her eBrain. It had been the barest luck that the others had arrived in time to rescue her. But Nemesis was dead, dead and destroyed, and the Vanguard swore there were no other copies. She refused to give it any additional attention. Anyway, gen:LOCK had been more or less flat out since Nemesis was defeated, helping the Vanguard here, running errands for RTASA (Rogue Technology Aeronautics & Space Administration, an underground organization that is sponsored by Marc Holcroft and led by Dr. Fatima Jha) there, even delivering parts and supplies when no other units



could get through. It hadn't left much time to think about anything but keeping the Holons running, and there was a part of her that was glad of it. All that work meant she was too tired to dream.

*Renegade* dropped suddenly, and she clutched at her seat, swallowing hard. She still wasn't entirely used to flying, and the Hornbills seemed to bounce around a lot more than the civilian transports.

"Cammie," Chase called. "Strap in."

"Right, yeah." She pulled the belt across her lap and clicked in the shoulder straps as *Renegade* gave another sickening jerk. "Is it going to be like this all the way in?"

"Probably worse," Valentina said.

"Not too much worse." Chase smiled. "It looks like we can slide in between two of the heavy bands. Get in, back up the Vanguard, and get out before things get worse."

"Will we be able to land?" Kazu asked. "I've been through typhoons before, when I was a kid. This storm is going to push the water right up the bay."

"We should be far enough north of the actual coast," Chase said.

Cammie reached for the latest weather forecasts and satellite feeds and everything else she could find, hung them one on top of the other, and added Miranda's map as an underlay. "According to our weather center, the eye of the storm is going to come right up Mobile Bay," she said. "They're predicting a twenty-foot storm surge along the

coast, and a fifteen-foot well up into the rivers." *About six meters, then, she translated, and four and a half meters inland.* That was a lot of water.

"When is it supposed to hit?" Chase asked, and Cammie frowned at her displays, trying to sort out the information.

"Working on it." The rendezvous point was about twenty miles inland, depending on where you decided the actual coastline was—there was a deep bay, maybe twenty-five miles from north to south, before you hit the river mouth—but that didn't actually make things better. If she was reading the forecasts correctly, the storm would just drive the ocean up that narrowing space and keep funneling it into the rivers. That might be why there weren't any settlements there. She frowned at the numbers. "Okay, high tide isn't for another eight hours; that's when the flooding's likely to start. And the water will just keep rising as the storm comes onshore."

"How fast is it coming?" Kazu asked.

Cammie checked the latest satellite download. "Seven kilometers an hour—sorry, a little over four knots, I make it."

"That gives us a little time," Chase said. He waved his hand to copy the map to the air in front of every team member except Yaz. A white line crossed the empty green between the rivers, and a red star marked a point just east of one of the wider branches. "That's the rendezvous point, and the line is what's left of Highway 65. It looks like they've picked a point before it crosses the Tensaw—that bridge

used to be intact, but maybe they're worried about crossing it in this weather."

"I would worry about that," Valentina said. "Also about Union forces. The Spider Tanks will not be bothered by rain and wind. We can expect air cover as well, though possibly not as much."

"That's all open ground," Chase said. "The weather is going to turn it to mud. They're likely to have more trouble with it than we are."

*Renegade* bounced again, and Cammie dug her nails into the arm of her seat. They were going to be fine, she trusted Yaz's piloting completely, but it wasn't going to be a lot of fun. The cloud towers loomed closer in the windshield, tops catching the sunlight, the thickening bases hidden in gloom. Yaz glanced at something on her displays and banked *Renegade* gently to the east, threading a path between two of the smaller towers. In the distance, Cammie thought she saw a flash of lightning, and she ducked her head to focus on her own displays. She'd look for a safe place to land, someplace close enough to the rendezvous but on higher ground. If there was any. She scowled at her own pessimism, and went looking for more data.

---

Yaz threaded her way between the bands of clouds, her hands firm on the controls but not tight, just as she had been taught. *Renegade* bumped and jostled in the unsteady air,

not as bad as it could be, but enough to make her appreciate the harness that held her in her seat. To the south, the clouds were taller and thicker, columns and towers rising like distant cities, deceptively beautiful against the bright sky at altitude. She had seen ruins like that in the desert, piled stone so ancient only the archaeologists could say for sure who built them, the once-sharp lines of cut stone worn blunt and blurred by the centuries. *Towers of Mazandaran*, she thought. A perilous border to be avoided at all costs.

As if to emphasize the thought, *Renegade* hit an air pocket and bounced, dropping three hundred feet before she could catch it. She corrected, grim-faced, and Chase mixed in between the pilot and copilot's seats, his legs jittering with static where they impinged on the consoles. "How're we doing?" he asked.

"On course and on schedule," Yaz answered automatically. The heads-up display still showed them firmly in the corridor between the two bands of heavier cloud, though that corridor was narrowing sharply as they made their way farther east. Unfortunately, the rendezvous point was farther south, necessitating a turn into the heavy winds and rain of the banded clouds. She was still trying to decide if it would be better to stay out of them as long as possible, and risk a steep descent into crosswinds, or turn south sooner, and have the wind at their tail. *Probably the latter*, she thought, and risked a quick glance at Chase. "We'll need to turn south fairly soon. Migas, can you put up the course?"

"Right." Migas reached for his console, and the secondary screen widened and brightened in the windshield.

Chase leaned forward slightly, as though that would help him to see. "You think we're better off coming in from the west? That's going to be pretty rough."

"I think it's better than the crosswinds," Yaz answered. She toggled to the alternate course. "That's pushing our tolerances more than we need to."

"Yeah." Chase flicked back to the original screen. "I see your point. How's Vanguard doing? Do we know?"

"I've been monitoring," Migas said. "So far, so good, though the satellites say they're going to hit some heavier weather in the next half hour. They say they'll make the rendezvous on time, but I'll keep checking with them."

"Good."

The radar pinged, *Renegade's* systems highlighting a blotch of yellow with a rapidly reddening center that was creeping uncomfortably close to their course. In the distance, Yaz picked out an even more solid-looking mass of cloud: no fairy-tale tower this, but a gray-shadowed wall. Lightning flickered in its depths, and she adjusted her course, watching the change cascade through the range of variables displayed beneath the radar image. Fuel consumption, time to target, range and return time, and the rest: All of them looked good, and she nodded. "Do we have a landing site?"

"Cammie's looking for one," Chase said.

Yaz felt herself stiffen for a fraction of a second, made

herself shift against the restraining harness. Cammie knew as much about finding a landing site as either Kazu or Valentina—it wasn't like either one of them had had anything to do with air support—but this was more about hacking the satellite systems. Here on the edge of Union territory, that was an important factor, and she nodded. "Any luck?"

"Nothing yet." Cammie's voice floated forward from her station in the middle seats. "The good news is that it's all open terrain, no towns or anything like that to worry about."

"And the bad news?" That, predictably, was Valentina, and Yaz suppressed a sigh.

"It looks like it's open because it's flat and muddy and floods in bad weather," Cammie answered. "Which is pretty much what we've got. I can pick a lot of places, but I'm having trouble telling if they'll stay secure."

"High ground?" Yaz suggested, and could almost hear Cammie roll her eyes.

"Yeah, I'd thought of that. There isn't much, but I'm still looking."

"Keep on it," Chase said.

"Hey, boss," Migas called. "Transmission from Vanguard, De Soto Team Baker."

That was the group tasked with the extraction, and Yaz frowned. They ought to be maintaining radio silence to avoid drawing Union attention. Chase didn't look pleased either. "Put 'em through, Migas. Let's keep this short."

"Short and sweet as we can, gen:LOCK," a woman's voice

said, and Yaz realized Migas had opened the mics before Chase had finished speaking. "Nguyen here, commanding the drop squad. We're running into heavier weather than anticipated, winds seven to ten knots above satellite prediction in very heavy rain. Thought you should know."

"Can you make the rendezvous on time?" Chase asked.

"Still planning on it," Nguyen answered. "We'll update if that changes."

"Any word from the refugees?"

"Their last transmission reported them on schedule," Nguyen said. "But this weather's going to slow them down, too."

*And probably worse than us*, Yaz thought. It would be no fun at all to try to push through the wind and flooding rain in whatever motley collection of vehicles the refugees had managed to collect.

"Right." Chase made a face, but his voice was as relaxed as ever. "Let us know if you hear anything more. gen:LOCK out."

"Roger that," Nguyen answered. "Team Baker out."

Chase looked over his shoulder. "Any luck, Cammie?"

"Depends. I'm not having much luck finding high ground—I don't think there really is any; it's all flat and marshy. But—"

Light flared on Yaz's console, showing the ground around the rendezvous site, the line of the old highway cutting across the empty green.