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PART I



SLAVE

*There is a flower that grows on Mars. It is red
and harsh and fit for our soil. It is called
haemanthus. It means "blood blossom."*

1



HELLDIVER

The first thing you should know about me is I am my father's son. And when they came for him, I did as he asked. I did not cry. Not when the Society televised the arrest. Not when the Golds tried him. Not when the Grays hanged him. Mother hit me for that. My brother Kieran was supposed to be the stoic one. He was the elder, I the younger. I was supposed to cry. Instead, Kieran bawled like a girl when Little Eo tucked a haemanthus into Father's left workboot and ran back to her own father's side. My sister Leanna murmured a lament beside me. I just watched and thought it a shame that he died dancing but without his dancing shoes.

On Mars there is not much gravity. So you have to pull the feet to break the neck. They let the loved ones do it.

I smell my own stink inside my frysuit. The suit is some kind of nanoplastic and is hot as its name suggests. It insulates me toe to head. Nothing gets in. Nothing gets out. Especially not the heat. Worst part is you can't wipe the sweat from your eyes. Bloodydamn stings as it goes through the headband to puddle at the heels. Not to mention the stink when you piss. Which you always do. Gotta take

in a load of water through the drinktube. I guess you could be fit with a catheter. We choose the stink.

The drillers of my clan chatter some gossip over the comm in my ear as I ride atop the clawDrill. I'm alone in this deep tunnel on a machine built like a titanic metal hand, one that grasps and gnaws at the ground. I control its rockmelting digits from the holster seat atop the drill, just where the elbow joint would be. There, my fingers fit into control gloves that manipulate the many tentacle-like drills some ninety meters below my perch. To be a Helldiver, they say your fingers must flicker fast as tongues of fire. Mine flicker faster.

Despite the voices in my ear, I am alone in the deep tunnel. My existence is vibration, the echo of my own breath, and heat so thick and noxious it feels like I'm swaddled in a heavy quilt of hot piss.

A new river of sweat breaks through the scarlet sweatband tied around my forehead and slips into my eyes, burning them till they're as red as my rusty hair. I used to reach and try to wipe the sweat away, only to scratch futilely at the faceplate of my frysuit. I still want to. Even after three years, the tickle and sting of the sweat is a raw misery.

The tunnel walls around my holster seat are bathed a sulfurous yellow by a corona of lights. The reach of the light fades as I look up the thin vertical shaft I've carved today. Above, precious helium-3 glimmers like liquid silver, but I'm looking at the shadows, looking for the pitvipers that curl through the darkness seeking the warmth of my drill. They'll eat into your suit too, bite through the shell and then try to burrow into the warmest place they find, usually your belly, so they can lay their eggs. I've been bitten before. Still dream of the beast—black, like a thick tendril of oil. They can get as wide as a thigh and long as three men, but it's the babies we fear. They don't know how to ration their poison. Like me, their ancestors came from Earth, then Mars and the deep tunnels changed them.

It is eerie in the deep tunnels. Lonely. Beyond the roar of the drill, I hear the voices of my friends, all older. But I cannot see them a

half klick above me in the darkness. They drill high above, near the mouth of the tunnel that I've carved, descending with hooks and lines to dangle along the sides of the tunnel to get at the small veins of helium-3. They mine with meter-long drills, gobbling up the chaff. The work still requires mad dexterity of foot and hand, but I'm the earner in this crew. I am the Helldiver. It takes a certain kind—and I'm the youngest anyone can remember.

I've been in the mines for three years. You start at thirteen. Old enough to screw, old enough to crew. At least that's what Uncle Narol said. Except I didn't get married till six months back, so I don't know why he said it.

Eo dances through my thoughts as I peer into my control display and slip the clawDrill's fingers around a fresh vein. *Eo*. Sometimes it's difficult to think of her as anything but what we used to call her as children.

Little Eo—a tiny girl hidden beneath a mane of red. Red like the rock around me, not true red, rust-red. Red like our home, like Mars. Eo is sixteen too. And she may be like me—from a clan of Red earth diggers, a clan of song and dance and soil—but she could be made from air, from the ether that binds the stars in a patchwork. Not that I've ever seen stars. No Red from the mining colonies sees the stars.

Little Eo. They wanted to marry her off when she turned fourteen, like all girls of the clans. But she took the short rations and waited for me to reach sixteen, wedAge for men, before slipping that cord around her finger. She said she knew we'd marry since we were children. I didn't.

"*Hold. Hold. Hold!*" Uncle Narol snaps over the comm channel. "*Darrow, hold, boy!*" My fingers freeze. He's high above with the rest of them, watching my progress on his head unit.

"What's the burn?" I ask, annoyed. I don't like being interrupted.

"*What's the burn, the little Helldiver asks.*" Old Barlow chuckles.

"*Gas pocket, that's what,*" Narol snaps. He's the headTalk for our two-hundred-plus crew. "*Hold. Calling a scanCrew to check the particulars before you blow us all to hell.*"

"That gas pocket? It's a tiny one," I say. "More like a gas pimple. I can manage it."

"A year on the drill and he thinks he knows his head from his hole! Poor little pissant," old Barlow adds dryly. "Remember the words of our golden leader. *Patience and obedience, young one. Patience is the better part of valor. And obedience the better part of humanity. Listen to your elders.*"

I roll my eyes at the epigram. If the elders could do what I can, maybe listening would have its merits. But they are slow in hand and mind. Sometimes I feel like they want me to be just the same, especially my uncle.

"I'm on a tear," I say. "If you think there's a gas pocket, I can just hop down and handscan it. Easy. No dilldally."

They'll preach caution. As if caution has ever helped them. We haven't won a Laurel in ages.

"*Want to make Eo a widow?*" Barlow laughs, voice crackling with static. "*Okay by me. She is a pretty little thing. Drill into that pocket and leave her to me. Old and fat I be, but my drill still digs a dent.*"

A chorus of laughter comes from the two hundred drillers above. My knuckles turn white as I grip the controls.

"*Listen to Uncle Narol, Darrow. Better to back off till we can get a reading,*" my brother Kieran adds. He's three years older. Makes him think he's a sage, that he knows more. He just knows caution. "*There'll be time.*"

"Time? Hell, it'll take hours," I snap. They're all against me in this. They're all wrong and slow and don't understand that the Laurel is only a bold move away. More, they doubt me. "You are being a coward, Narol."

Silence on the other end of the line.

Calling a man a coward—not a good way to get his cooperation. Shouldn't have said it.

"*I say make the scan yourself,*" Loran, my cousin and Narol's son, squawks. "*Don't and Gamma is good as Gold—they'll get the Laurel for, oh, the hundredth time.*"

The Laurel. Twenty-four clans in the underground mining colony of Lykos, one Laurel per quarter. It means more food than you can eat. It means more burners to smoke. Imported quilts from Earth. Amber swill with the Society's quality markings. It means winning. Gamma clan has had it since anyone can remember. So it's always been about the Quota for us lesser clans, just enough to scrape by. Eo says the Laurel is the carrot the Society dangles, always just far enough beyond our grasp. Just enough so we know how short we really are and how little we can do about it. We're supposed to be pioneers. Eo calls us slaves. I just think we never try hard enough. Never take the big risks because of the old men.

"*Loran, shut up about the Laurel. Hit the gas and we'll miss all the bloodydamn Laurels to kingdom come, boy,*" Uncle Narol growls.

He's slurring. I can practically smell the drink through the comm. He wants to call a sensor team to cover his own ass. Or he's scared. The drunk was born pissing himself out of fear. Fear of what? Our overlords, the Golds? Their minions, the Grays? Who knows? Few people. Who cares? Even fewer. Actually, just one man cared for my uncle, and he died when my uncle pulled his feet.

My uncle is weak. He is cautious and immoderate in his drink, a pale shadow of my father. His blinks are long and hard, as though it pains him to open his eyes each time and see the world again. I don't trust him down here in the mines, or anywhere for that matter. But my mother would tell me to listen to him; she would remind me to respect my elders. Even though I am wed, even though I am the Helldiver of my clan, she would say that my "blisters have not yet become calluses." I will obey, even though it is as maddening as the tickle of the sweat on my face.

"Fine," I murmur.

I clench the drill fist and wait as my uncle calls it in from the safety of the chamber above the deep tunnel. This will take hours. I do the math. Eight hours till whistle call. To beat Gamma, I've got to keep a rate of 156.5 kilos an hour. It'll take two and a half hours for the scanCrew to get here and do their deal, at best. So I've got to

pump out 227.6 kilos per hour after that. Impossible. But if I keep going and squab the tedious scan, it's ours.

I wonder if Uncle Narol and Barlow know how close we are. Probably. Probably just don't think anything is ever worth the risk. Probably think divine intervention will squab our chances. Gamma has the Laurel. That's the way things are and will ever be. We of Lambda just try to scrape by on our foodstuffs and meager comforts. No rising. No falling. Nothing is worth the risk of changing the hierarchy. My father found that out at the end of a rope.

Nothing is worth risking death. Against my chest, I feel the wedding band of hair and silk dangling from the cord around my neck and think of Eo's ribs.

I'll see a few more of the slender things through her skin this month. She'll go asking the Gamma families for scraps behind my back. I'll act like I don't know. But we'll still be hungry. I eat too much because I'm sixteen and still growing tall; Eo lies and says she's never got much of an appetite. Some women sell themselves for food or luxuries to the Tinpots (Grays, to be technic about it), the Society's garrison troops of our little mining colony. She wouldn't sell her body to feed me. Would she? But then I think about it. I'd do anything to feed her . . .

I look down over the edge of my drill. It's a long fall to the bottom of the hole I've dug. Nothing but molten rock and hissing drills. But before I know what's what, I'm out of my straps, scanner in hand and jumping down the hundred-meter drop toward the drill fingers. I kick back and forth between the vertical mineshaft's walls and the drill's long, vibrating body to slow my fall. I make sure I'm not near a pitviper nest when I throw out an arm to catch myself on a gear just above the drill fingers. The ten drills glow with heat. The air shimmers and distorts. I feel the heat on my face, feel it stabbing my eyes, feel it ache in my belly and balls. Those drills will melt your bones if you're not careful. And I'm not careful. Just nimble.

I lower myself hand over hand, going feetfirst between the drill fingers so that I can lower the scanner close enough to the gas pocket to get a reading. The heat is unbearable. This was a mistake. Voices

shout at me through the comm. I almost brush one of the drills as I finally lower myself close enough to the gas pocket. The scanner flickers in my hand as it takes its reading. My suit is bubbling and I smell something sweet and sharp, like burned syrup. To a Helldiver, it is the smell of death.



THE TOWNSHIP

My suit can't handle the heat down here. The outer layer is nearly melted through. Soon the second layer will go. Then the scanner blinks silver and I've got what I came for. I almost didn't notice. Dizzy and frightened, I pull myself away from the drills. Hand over hand, I tug my body up, going fast away from the dreadful heat. Then something catches. My foot is jammed just underneath one of the gears near a drill finger. I gasp down air in sudden panic. The dread rises in me. I see my bootheel melting. The first layer goes. The second bubbles. Then it will be my flesh.

I force a long breath and choke down the screams that are rising in my throat. I remember the blade. I flip out my hinged slingBlade from its back holster. It's a cruelly curved cutter as long as my leg, meant for taking off and cauterizing limbs stuck in machinery, just like this. Most men panic when they get caught, and so the slingBlade is a nasty halfmoon weapon meant to be used by clumsy hands. Even filled with terror, my hands are not clumsy. I slice three times with the slingBlade, cutting nanoplactic instead of flesh. On the third swing, I reach down and jerk free my leg. As I do, my knuckles brush the edge of a drill. Searing pain shoots through my hand. I smell crackling flesh, but I'm up and off, climbing away from

the hellish heat, climbing back to my holster seat and laughing all the while. I feel like crying.

My uncle was right. I was wrong. But I'll be damned if I ever let him know it.

"Idiot," is his kindest comment.

"Manic! Bloodydamn manic!" Loran whoops.

"Minimal gas," I say. "Drilling now, Uncle."

The haulBacks take my pull when the whistle call comes. I push myself out of my drill, leaving it in the deep tunnel for the night-shift, and snag a weary hand on the line the others drop down the kilometer-long shaft to help me up. Despite the seeping burn on the back of my hand, I slide my body upward on the line till I'm out of the shaft. Kieran and Loran walk with me to join the others at the nearest gravLift. Yellow lights dangle like spiders from the ceiling.

My clan and Gamma's three hundred men already have their toes under the metal railing when we reach the rectangular gravLift. I avoid my uncle—he's mad enough to spit—and catch a few dozen pats on the back for my stunt. The young ones like me think we've won the Laurel. They know my raw helium-3 pull for the month; it's better than Gamma's. The old turds just grumble and say we're fools. I hide my hand and duck my toes in.

Gravity alters and we shoot upward. A Gamma scab with less than a week's worth of rust under his nails forgets to put his toes under the railing. So he hangs suspended as the lift shoots up six vertical kilometers. Ears pop.

"Got a floating Gamma turd here," Barlow laughs to the Lambdas.

Petty as it may seem, it's always nice seeing a Gamma squab something. They get more food, more burners, more everything because of the Laurel. We get to despise them. But then, we're supposed to, I think. Wonder if they'll despise us now.

Enough's enough. I grip the rust-red nanoplactic of the kid's fry-suit and jerk him down. Kid. That's a laugh. He's hardly three years younger than I.

He's deathly tired, but when he sees the blood-red of my fry-suit, he stiffens, avoids my eyes, and becomes the only one to see the burn

on my hand. I wink at him and I think he shits his suit. We all do it now and then. I remember when I met my first Helldiver. I thought he was a god.

He's dead now.

Up top in the staging depot, a big gray cavern of concrete and metal, we pop our tops and drink down the fresh, cold air of a world far removed from molten drills. Our collective stink and sweat soon make a bog of the area. Lights flicker in the distance, telling us to stay clear of the magnetic horizon. Tram tracks on the other side of the depot.

We don't mingle with the Gammas as we head for the horizon. Tram in a staggered line of rust-red suits. Half with Lambda *Ls*, half with Gamma canes painted in dark red on their backs. Two scarlet headTalks. Two blood-red Helldivers.

A cadre of Tinpots eye us as we trudge by over the worn concrete floor. Their Gray duroArmor is simple and tired, as unkempt as their hair. It would stop a simple blade, maybe an ion blade, and a pulseBlade or razor would go through it like paper. But we've only seen those on the holoCan. The Grays don't even bother to make a show of force. Their thumpers dangle at their sides. They know they won't have to use them.

Obedience is the highest virtue.

The Gray captain, Ugly Dan, a greasy bastard, throws a pebble at me. Though his skin is darkened from exposure to the sun, his hair is gray like the rest of his Color. It hangs thin and weedy over his eyes—two icecubes rolled in ash. The Sigils of his Color, a blocky gray symbol like the number four with several bars beside it, mark along each hand and wrist. Cruel and stark, like all the Grays.

I heard they pulled Ugly Dan off the frontline back in Eurasia, wherever that is, after he got crippled and they didn't want to buy him a new arm. He has an old replacement model now. He's insecure about it, so I make sure he sees me give the arm a glance.

"Saw you had an exciting day, darling." His voice is as stale and heavy as the air inside my frysuit. "Brave hero now, are you, Darrow? I always thought you'd be a brave hero."

"You're the hero," I say, nodding to his arm.

"And you think you're smart, doncha?"

"Just a Red."

He winks at me. "Say hello to your little birdie for me. A ripe thing for piggin'." Licks his teeth. "Even for a Ruster."

"Never seen a bird." Except on the HC.

"Ain't that a thing," he chuckles. "Wait, where you going?" he asks as I turn. "A bow to your betters won't go awry, doncha think?" He snickers to his fellows. Careless of his mockery, I turn and bow deeply. My uncle sees this and turns from it, disgusted.

We leave the Grays behind. I don't mind bowing, but I'll probably cut Ugly Dan's throat if I ever get the chance. Kind of like saying I'd take a zip out to Venus in a torchShip if it ever suited my fancy.

"Hey, Dago. Dago!" Loran calls to Gamma's Helldiver. The man's a legend; all the other divers just a flash in the pan. I might be better than him. "What'd you pull?"

Dago, a pale strip of old leather with a smirk for a face, lights a long burner and puffs out a cloud.

"Don't know," he drawls.

"Come on!"

"Don't care. Raw count never matters, Lambda."

"Like bloodyhell it doesn't! What'd he pull on the week?" Loran calls as we load into the tram. Everyone's lighting burners and popping out the swill. But they're all listening intently.

"Nine thousand eight hundred and twenty-one kilos," a Gamma boasts. At this, I lean back and smile; I hear cheers from the younger Lambdas. The old hands don't react. I'm busy wondering what Eo will do with sugar this month. We've never earned sugar before, only ever won it at cards. And fruit. I hear the Laurel gets you fruit. She'll probably give it all away to hungry children just to prove to the Society she doesn't need their prizes. Me? I'd eat the fruit and play politics on a full stomach. But she's got the passion for ideas, while I've got no extra passion for anything but her.

"Still won't win," Dago drawls as the tram starts away. "Darrow's a young pup, but he is smart enough to know that. Ain't you, Darrow?"

"Young or not, I beat your craggy ass."