

A woman in a dark, futuristic jacket and pants stands on a rocky, reddish-brown planet surface. She is holding a small, dark, cylindrical object to her mouth. Beside her is a dark-colored dog wearing a white, spherical protective helmet. The background features a large, blue, textured planet (likely Jupiter) in the sky, with a hazy, orange and blue horizon. The overall scene is set in a desolate, alien environment.

FRONTLINES: EVOLUTION

# SCORPIO

MARKO KLOOS

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*For Robin, always.*

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# CHAPTER 1

*Lanky-occupied colony planet, 18 Scorpii system*

*46.1 light-years from Earth*

*17NOV2124, 0000h Standard Colonial Time*

*Eight years, three months, and eleven days since the Lanky invasion*

At the precise moment when Alex officially turns twenty-one years old, she is sitting in the back of a Spaceborne Infantry mule that's rolling across the gravel fields of the southern plateau, three hundred kilometers from home.

She touches her wrist computer to turn off the vibration alarm she had set for 0000 hours. It's an arbitrary marker, of course—she knows she was born at 0447 Standard Colonial Time, not at the stroke of midnight—but the law says that midnight marks the transition. And according to the law, she's a full-fledged colonial citizen now, with all the rights and responsibilities of that status.

*Happy birthday to me, she thinks. Wish you could be here, Mom and Dad.*

Alex looks around in the mission module of the mule. The armored eight-wheeler is a military machine and not designed for comfort. There are only four people in here with her, sharing a space that can hold a dozen SI troopers in battle armor, so there's room for them to spread out a little. Private Lopez is sleeping on the other side of the module, stretched out over four seats that he turned into a makeshift bunk with an insulated mat and a sleeping bag. Sergeant Frye is sitting in his seat in the space between the troop compartment and the cockpit, scanning the displays in front of him with bleary eyes and sipping from a plastic cup of long-cold instant coffee. Up front behind the forward armor bulkhead, Private Harris is driving the mule, leading their little two-vehicle column south at fifty klicks per hour.

To the rear, a colonial all-terrain cargo tractor is following a few hundred meters behind, close enough to stay under the protection of the military transport's gun turret but far enough to get to safety if the mule runs into trouble.

Ash, who is curled up by Alex's feet, stirs from his snooze and looks up at her with dark, soulful eyes.

"Good boy," she says softly and rubs the top of the dog's head. Ash settles back down with a content little grunt. The black shepherd is the reason she's riding in the military vehicle instead of back in the tractor with the other civilian colonists on this expedition. He's small for his breed, the runt of his litter, and he's useless as a regular military dog because there isn't a gram of distrust or aggression in him. But out of the three dogs the colony has left, he's the best at sensing approaching Lankies. Ash is a biological early-warning system that works even in poor visibility, and he has never failed to detect a Lanky coming their way. People being what they are, not everyone in the colony really earns their calories every day. And dogs being what they are, Ash has proven his worth many times over.

"He's gotta be bored out of his mind," Sergeant Frye says from across the aisle. "I know I am."

"He's all right," Alex replies. "Napping is his default state anyway. But I'll need to let him out before too long."

"We're coming up on a waypoint marker in a few. Gonna have to stop anyway to send up a drone."

"What's it look like out there?" she asks.

Sergeant Frye nods at the screens in front of him.

"Come see if you want."

Alex unbuckles her harness and walks to the other side of the compartment on slightly unsteady feet. She takes the seat next to the sergeant's command station and leans forward to look at the display panels. Outside, the world rolls by in various shades of gray, soot-colored clouds above windswept gravel and craggy rock formations. Sergeant Frye nudges his control stick and pans the view to give Alex a wide-angle perspective. Behind them, the cargo crawler is following in the tire tracks the mule made, kicking up little puffs of rock dust and stone chips with its large, knobby tires.

"Three hundred twelve kilometers out," Sergeant Frye says. "Let's hope the juice is worth the squeeze. I'll be pissed if we come back with half

a case of MREs and some wonky battery cells.”

“We picked everything clean that’s close to home. Pretty soon someone’s gotta figure out a way to get across the mountains and up north to the spaceport.”

“Not gonna happen,” Sergeant Frye says. “Not without wings. Mule would run out of juice halfway even with a spare energy pack. And that’s assuming you could get over those mountains in the first place.”

“I know, I know. I just keep imagining the haul we could get out of there. Nobody’s cracked those underground stores open in eight years. Imagine coming home with a half ton of sugar and a hundred brand-new filters for the air scrubbers.”

“And a working drop ship with half a million liters of fuel. Since we’re wishing for unicorns now,” Sergeant Frye says.

“Think there’s anyone alive over there?” Alex asks. “On the other side, I mean.”

“At the spaceport?” Sergeant Frye bites his lower lip while he thinks about her question. “Never say never. Their admin center is a Class IV unit. Tough as shit. Maybe it was enough. Maybe they holed up and rode things out like we did.”

He drinks the last of his coffee and throws the cup into the recycling container that’s strapped to the bulkhead lining next to the vehicle commander station.

“But there’s no way for us to know for sure since comms went down with the satellites when the Lankies arrived. If they’re still alive, they’re in the same boat we’re in.”

“But you don’t think so.”

Frye shakes his head. “They don’t have the hydroponic setups we have in the Vault. They didn’t have food stores or water for eight years. And that spaceport is out on the coastal plains. Pretty far away from bedrock. I think they held out a month or two, maybe. Not that I would mind going out there and knocking on doors to find out for sure.”

“Same here,” Alex says. “I’ve started to forget what the place looked like. Before, I mean. We went once a year for the proctored school exams, and the medical checkups.”

“Did you know anyone there?” Frye asks.

She nods.

“Micah and Aurora. Their dad got reassigned to the med center. They moved three months before the Lankies came. I thought they were the luckiest, to get to live out there by the spaceport. Micah was a smug little shit about it too. I told him, ‘I hope your stupid puddle jumper crashes.’” She shakes her head with a sad smile.

“Hey, none of us had any idea. Our platoon was packing up to rotate out to Station 21. If the Lankies had shown up three days later, we would have been down there, all alone on that little peninsula. And that would have been that. It was the luck of the fucking draw, nothing more,” Sergeant Frye says.

They ride in silence for a while, and Alex wishes she had broached a different subject because now she can’t help thinking about what it must have been like out at the spaceport when Lanky pods started falling out of the sky without warning. None of the visuals her brain serves up are pleasant, so she tries to push the thoughts away by looking at the landscape outside again. A rainstorm passed across the plateau a little while ago, and the cargo crawler following in their tracks is splashing up water as it rolls through puddles left in the wake of the downpour. Overhead, dark clouds are roiling in an angry-looking sky. Her father used to say this place was *beautifully harsh*. Before the Lankies, when people could be outside without being in a vacsuit or a vehicle, Alex had agreed that there *was* a certain beauty to the planet. Now, however, their home world is just harsh, and getting harsher every year as their resources slowly dwindle and the Lankies keep undoing decades of human terraforming work.

“All right,” Sergeant Frye says with a glance at the map display. “Two clicks to the waypoint. I could stand to stretch my legs a little. Harris, Bayliss, are you awake over there?”

“Depends on your definition of the term, Sergeant,” Harris replies from her seat in the cockpit.

“We’re coming up on marker 320. Let’s make station for a little while and send out the bird. Pick us a cozy spot to park.”

“Affirmative,” Private Harris replies.

Frye looks past Alex to Private Lopez, who is still stretched out on his makeshift cot and snoring softly.

“Lopez,” he says. “Hey, Lopez. Get up.”

When Lopez shows no sign of having heard the sergeant, Frye fishes his cup out of the reclaim container.

“Duck,” he tells Alex, and she gets up and out of the way. Sergeant Frye chucks the empty cup in Lopez’s direction. It bounces off the infantry helmet the corporal is using for a pillow and lands on top of his sleeping bag.

“*Lopez*,” Frye calls out. “Wake the fuck up.”

Private Lopez stirs and turns his head.

“We’re making a recon stop. Get your gear on and get ready.”

Lopez lets out a muted little groan. He props himself up on one elbow and starts to unzip his sleeping bag.

“All right, all right,” he mumbles and flicks the cup onto the floor. “I’m up. Where are we?”

“Marker 320.”

“Shit,” Lopez says. He checks his wrist computer with another groan. “Slept for four hours. Feels like it was ten minutes.”

“You’re rested so you get to take overwatch,” Sergeant Frye says. “See if you can get some coffee going, and then we’re trading seats. Dog’s gotta go, and so do I.”

“Copy that, Sergeant,” Lopez says and sits up on his bench to pull the sleeping bag off his legs.

“Join the Spaceborne Infantry,” he says. “See the galaxy. Visit exotic planets. Learn to sleep in a wide variety of uncomfortable circumstances.”

He looks up at Alex and winks.

“Naturally, the recruiter left out that last bit.”

“Of course he did, blockhead,” Sergeant Frye says. “It’s a recruiting office. You ever see one of those for jobs that are *fun*?”

Alex chuckles as she gets back to the other side of the compartment. She sits down by Ash, who is now paying attention to the sudden activity.

“Let’s get you geared up, buddy,” she says to the dog. Ash thumps his tail against the floor in response.

Ash has his own mission suit, a load-bearing vest with an independent oxygen supply and rebreather system rigged from an engineering vacsuit. His mask is stowed in a side pocket of the harness. Alex takes it out and straightens the straps before putting it on the dog’s head. Ash is used to the procedure, and he sits patiently while she tightens the fasteners and checks for a good seal. He has a sturdier constitution than the human colonists, but even Ash can’t breathe the air on this world for very long without a mask anymore, not with the levels of carbon dioxide introduced by the Lanky

terraforming process. The mask muffles his sense of smell, but he doesn't seem to need his nose to know when a Lanky is coming their way. Alex adjusts the mask and connects it to the air supply in the dog's battle pack.

"Good boy," she tells him again when Ash is ready to step out. "You look fierce. Ferocious. Like a war dog."

The ferocious war dog gives her a dubious glance and taps his tail on the floor again in a decidedly unwarlike manner. She double-checks all the connectors and fasteners on his harness before checking her own.

"Dog team ready for dismount," she reports back to the commander's position and exchanges a thumbs-up with Sergeant Frye.

"All right," the sergeant says. "Masks on for dismount. Harris, let the civvies know we're making a stop. Lopez, get your ass on the gun. The remote station is all yours."

"With joy, Sergeant. With joy."

Frye climbs out of his chair and lets Lopez take his spot. Both SI troopers put on their helmets and lower the visors. Frye takes his rifle out of its storage bracket and checks the loading status of the weapon.

"All right," he says and swings himself over to the seat next to the mule's rear hatch. "Rest stop at marker 320, sixty minutes. Remember, always stay in sight of the tour bus. And don't buy souvenirs from the locals. It's all a rip-off."