

BREACH

NICO WACHALOWSKI—MOTHER OF MERCY CLINIC

Fog drifted across the clinic's lot as I pulled in next to a bank of snow pushed against a twisted chain-link fence. Van Offo watched the entrance with a flat orange glow behind his pupils, as a strip of fabric, part of a shirt, maybe, flapped from a coil of razor wire out back. The building face was covered in graffiti and darkened by years of smog. I'd seen too many places like it in the past year.

I cut the engine. A gust of wind blew powdery snow across the windshield and made the clinic's metal door rattle in its frame. Through the window, I saw the waiting area was full.

"Let's go," I said. But Van Offo didn't move. He leaned back and watched the door through half-closed eyelids. His mood had taken a turn since we left the train yard. He stared at the entrance to the clinic, but not at the people crowded inside. He had that far-off look he got when he saw something else, something only he could see. It was the same look Zoe used to get.

"You know something?" I asked him. He shrugged.

Orange light flickered softly behind his pupils. He had a secure connection open through his JZI, like he always did. The others watched and listened with him.

"Van Offo, if there's something I need to know—"

The orange light went out and his eyes cleared. He'd killed the connection and left us alone in the car.

"The team is still getting into position," he said. "You mind if I smoke?"

“Knock yourself out.”

He pulled one of his black cigarillos from his pocket and lit it. The tobacco crackled as he took a long drag, and smoke drifted from his nostrils. He clenched the end between his teeth and fished a business card out of his wallet, then scribbled something on the back. He handed it over to me, under his palm.

“What’s this?” I flipped it over. He’d written a phone number there, and under it he’d written a name:

ZOE OTT

“That was not easy to get,” he said.

“Is she still in the city?” I asked him.

He nodded. “She is.”

I watched him smoke for a minute.

“Is she safe?”

He looked amused as he blew smoke through a crack in the window.

“You think you know something about that woman, Nico, but you don’t.”

“I know she needs help.”

“Not from you. She could kill you where you sit and not even mean to. She’s seen things almost no one else has seen. Trust me—she’s bigger than both of us.”

“Then why give me this? Why now?”

“Because the end is nigh,” he said, and he smiled, but eyes were serious.

Van Offo, and those like him, had alluded to something like that before, but the way he said it made me uneasy. It didn’t sound like theory or rhetoric just then.

“When?”

He blew smoke from his nose. “Soon.”

“Will the city be destroyed?”

“The city? This city is just a drop in the bucket, I’m afraid.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Motoko doesn’t tell you everything.”

“Then you tell me.”

“Let’s just say that if what we’ve seen is true, I’ll be glad to not be around for it.”

“Around for what, Al? What did you see?”

“A point past which there is no more future to look into,” he said. “Once Fawkes pulls the trigger, that’s it. Somehow he triggers a global event. I don’t know how. Wiping out this city is just the beginning.”

I stared at him, and when he saw the look on my face he smiled weakly.

“Never mind,” he said. “Just do your job. Maybe all this is a lie, to get you to do what we want. Right?”

Motoko Ai was a liar, that much I knew, but I knew Van Offo too and he believed what he’d told me.

I could see it in his eyes.

“Ai told me I kill Fawkes,” I said.

“Maybe that will stop this and maybe it won’t. Motoko thinks we can still fix things, but I wonder.”

“If killing him doesn’t stop it, then what will?”

He tapped the business card with Zoe’s name on it.

“How?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He looked toward the clinic entrance again with that odd expression on his face. “Something she said once. She suspects she will be involved, or that’s what she said.”

“Was she drunk when she said it?”

“Of course.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think anything can stop it.”

He spoke offhandedly, but he was serious. The bad feeling I had got worse. I stowed the card in my jacket pocket.

For the first time, I realized there might be more to Van Offo than I’d thought. I knew how his superiors operated. They didn’t want me contacting Zoe, and he’d gone against them by giving me that number. It put him at a big risk.

“You know,” he said. “You two have something in common.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“An obsession with what you’ll never have.”

He stubbed out the cigarillo and waved away the smoke.

“Get your affairs in order,” he said. “Before it’s too late.”

“What about you?”

“I just did.”

Wachalowski, the team is in position at the rear entrance. Local law is moving in to cordon the block.

Understood.

“I have to reestablish the connection now,” Van Offo said.

“Al—”

The orange light flickered back on behind his pupils, and he held up one hand. I stopped talking. He wouldn’t answer, and there wasn’t time anyway.

Stand by, I told SWAT. We’re going inside.

I opened the door and climbed out of the car. The air was bitter cold, and at street level, it was barely brighter than night. The clinic kept three lights on over a rusted sign that read MOTHER OF MERCY. As we approached, I saw a bullet scar in the brick and two more dimples in the metal doorframe.

I pushed open the clinic door and stepped through. The waiting room was even more crowded than it looked from the lot. Every chair was filled, and many stood to wait their turn. The receptionist sat behind a pane of bulletproof glass. She busied herself on a computer and didn’t look up when we came in.

“The end is nigh.”

He believed it. On some level I’d always thought it was a scare tactic, a way to manipulate me when the usual methods failed, but I looked at the people in front of me and I couldn’t help but wonder, *Is this all for nothing?*

I closed the distance to the receptionist station, and faces began to turn toward us. Some showed concern, others fear. They were poor, and most were homeless. They didn’t need any more trouble than they already had.

The woman at the desk looked up as we approached the glass. She looked us both over.

“What is it this time?” she asked. Her voice came through a barely functioning speaker fixed in the glass pane. I held up my badge so she could see it.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but you know the drill.”

She frowned, but reached under the desktop. The door to the examination area buzzed and the bolt opened.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than hassle us?” she asked. But right at that second, I didn’t have a good answer for her.

“Get your affairs in order, before it’s too late.”

I opened the door and Van Offo followed me through. It bolted again behind us.

“I’m calling my supervisor. . . .” she began, but her voice trailed off. Al reached across and switched off the speaker to the waiting area. He leaned in close to her and spoke in a low voice.

“That won’t be necessary. Just relax and wait here.”

I opened a connection to their computer system and began sifting through their logs as I looked down the short hallway that connected the reception area to the rest of the clinic. A man with a grizzled beard and a frostbitten face sat in a chair, a blood pressure cuff around his right arm. The nurse attending to him didn’t look up from the gauge as she pumped the rubber bladder. A doctor stood nearby, and he frowned when he saw us.

“Can I help you?” he asked, but stopped short as two SWAT officers crept in from a side hallway. His eyes widened.

“Calm down,” Van Offo said. The man’s eyes relaxed but remained wary. “Everyone stay calm and quiet.”

“Sir, we’ve tracked a suspicious data stream to this site,” I said to him. “We have reason to think—”

“What do you mean ‘suspicious data stream’?” the man asked. “Look at this place . . .”

His voice fizzled in midsentence as Van Offo approached him.

“Sleep.”

His eyelids fluttered and closed. He wobbled on his feet a little, and Van Offo steadied him.

“We know there is someone else here,” he said to the man. “Where are they?”

The man’s face changed then. The look of confusion had been an act, and when it fell away there was anger in his eyes.

“You’re too late,” he said in a low voice. Several staff members glanced nervously at us, not sure what to make of what they were seeing.

“What makes you say that?” Van Offo asked.

“They’re not coming back,” he said. “I heard them.”

“Answer me,” Van Offo said. “Where are they? Don’t lie.”

I processed the last of the system’s logs and found that no significant data had been stored in their system in the past twenty four hours.

“It’s not here,” I said.

“It’s here somewhere.”

I looked around and saw confusion and fear. Whatever Fawkes’s men were up to, these people didn’t know anything about it.

Except the man Van Offo had. He knew. Even while being controlled, there was a spark in his eye and I could tell he’d been converted, in more ways than one.

SWAT, have you found anything? I asked.

Not yet. We’ve got the perimeter secured.

I signaled to the two officers to check the examination rooms. They moved down the hall and began opening doors. From one, I heard a woman gasp.

Van Offo’s pupils dilated as he stared at the doctor, who began to speak in a slow, quiet voice.

“The basement,” he said.

“Basement?”

Even while his face remained slack, I could see the intensity in his eyes. The man wrestled with something internally, but as many had before him, he failed. His eyes became sleepy and docile.

It always unnerved me to see it. It was eerie how quickly people could be made to abandon their beliefs. Al was particularly good at it.

“The basement level is flooded,” a woman said, not understanding. “It hasn’t been used in years.”

“What’s down there?” I asked her.

“Look,” she said. “I know it’s out of code, but it’s locked up. We don’t use it. This place serves—”

“How do we access the lower level?” Van Offo asked the doctor. He pointed down the hall robotically toward a wall of metal shelving stacked with boxes.

SWAT, this place has a basement level that wasn’t on the schematic. We’re headed down.

Got it.

“Come on,” I said. Van Offo and the officers followed as I passed the examination rooms and shoved the rack aside. There was a door behind it, secured with a heavy padlock. Several more SWAT members approached from the connecting hallway.

“Open it,” I said. One of them used an arc cutter to slice through the lock, and it trailed smoke as it thumped to the floor. He flipped open the latch.

I opened the door and started down. Flashlight beams swept the stairs in front of me to a landing where a heavy metal door had been mounted in the concrete. I pushed on it, but it didn’t budge. When I scanned the edges, I picked up a magnetic field.

“It’s got a magnetic lock,” I said. There were no hinges and no release mechanism on our side of it. When I tried to peer through the metal, I found it was shielded. Whoever set this up wasn’t anyone from the clinic. The door had been installed from the inside, to keep people out.

SWAT leader, can your guys open this? I asked.

Yeah.

One of his team moved in and pressed a metal tool to the doorjamb. A panel lit up on one side, and the hairs on my arms stood up. The feed from my JZI warped briefly and I heard the bolt release from inside the door. He shoved it open with a metallic creak.

Beyond the door, a concrete corridor extended into the dark. There was an electric switchbox mounted

on the wall to the right. I flipped it, and electric light flickered on from above. Wires ran along the floor to noise screens that were mounted crudely along the ceiling.

There's something down here. We're moving in.

Understood.

Up ahead, a doorway opened into a large cellar where a dim light flickered. As we neared it, my heel dropped down into a foot of icy water. Laser points swam over the glassy surface as the splash echoed down the tunnel.

“Help us,” a voice called from the cellar. It was a scream, but it was muted, so I barely heard it. I drew my gun and signaled to the others.

Watch for civilians.

“Help,” the faint voice screamed again.

“No one can hear you,” another muffled voice yelled back.

We stepped through the doorway at the end of the hall, SWAT moving in behind me. I passed through the noise screen and the faint screams jumped to full volume.

“—one! Anyone! Help us!”

There were a series of wire metal cages set up on the concrete floor against the far wall. In each one, a person sat shivering in several inches of water. When a flashlight beam moved over them, they squinted and covered their eyes. More noise screens hummed from the ceiling.

A thin man in a wool coat and with acne scars on his face stood outside the cages, holding in each hand a large, insulated alligator clip that trailed thick cables. Many of the wire cages had clips already attached to the frames.

“Hold it!” I shouted, aiming my gun. He turned to look at me, but his expression didn't change. He connected the clips to the cage nearest him while the woman inside stared.

“I said, ‘freeze’!”

He stepped away from the cage and held up his hands.

“It's done,” he called out. I looked around but didn't see anyone else with him. Two SWAT officers

sloshed through the water toward him, rifles trained on him. He knelt down with a splash as one officer bound his wrists behind his back with a zip cord.

“Just do it!” he yelled.

“Shut up,” I said.

Alice, we're at Mother of Mercy. We've got human captives here—five men, five women. You getting this?

I see it.

I scanned the pockmarked man's face and found him in the system. His name was Rafe Pena, arrested in the past for drug and weapons transport, and assault.

“Oh,” a woman whispered. “Oh, it's the police. . . . Thank God. Thank God, it's the police. . . .”

Computer equipment hummed on the surfaces of a series of workbenches set up along the right wall. LEDs flashed in the shadows. On the other side of the room, a series of gurneys were set up with IV racks. I could make out blotches of dried blood on the bedding. Surgical tools lay in trays, and behind them, hanging on the concrete wall, were larger blades: bone saws, a machete, and even an ax.

“What is all this?” I asked. Rafe kept his eyes down and didn't answer.

“Who are you working for, Rafe?” I asked.

“Fuck you.”

“You're just a thug. Who set this up? Who's paying you?”

“Get us out,” another voice said. Someone shook the wall of one of the cages. “Get us out of here!”

“Stay calm,” I said. “You're safe now. We're going to get you out.”

The rattle got more intense. It was a shirtless, skinny man with brown skin and a shaved head. Tattoos covered his shoulders and chest. His fingers were bloody as he gripped the wire, and his eyes were wild.

“Sir, calm down.” I looked around for a way to open the cages. Each one was fitted with an electronic lock. I followed the cables from the alligator clips and saw them merge with other bundles of cable that ran under the water.

“Check that out,” I told the officer. I shined a flashlight beam on the metal base of the nearest cage,

where a young woman sat, hugging her knees and shivering in the filthy water.

The cables ran up the sides of each cage and into a breaker box on the wall behind them.

“Do it now!” Rafe screamed. He was talking to someone besides us, someone who was watching us and who could throw the electrical switch remotely.

“Kill that breaker!” I said. One of the officers moved toward it and pried it open as I scanned around the edges of the ceiling. There were cameras mounted there behind the foam paneling. Someone was watching us.

The man rattled the cage again and pounded his fist against the side.

“Get me out of here!” he screamed. “Get me the fuck out of here now!”

Van Offo sloshed through the water toward him, and I grabbed his arm.

“If those go live, we’ll all fry,” I told him. “Wait until we get the power—”

He shook free and continued toward the cage.

“Van Offo!”

“Calm down,” Van Offo said to the man.

“Fuck you! Get me out of here!”

“I said be calm. Sleep.”

“Fuck you!”

I looked over and caught a glimpse of Van Offo’s face, blank with surprise. The lights flickered, and a woman screamed.

“Get me out of here!”

“Someone shut him up!”

I crossed to the cages and checked the electrical box—a major current was running through it from a shielded cable.

“Here,” I said. The officer with the arc cutter used it to sever the connection, sending sparks down onto the surface of the water. The current to the cages went out.

“Get me out of here!”

“Van Offo, do something with him!”

“I can’t,” he said. There was disbelief and fear on his face.

A phone rang loudly in the small space, and for a minute even the man in the cage got quiet.

“Where’s that coming from?” I asked. After a few seconds, it rang again.

I swept the flashlight along the walls until I found a heavy black handset mounted there. It rang a third time.

As I waded through the water toward it, I started a trace on the clinic’s outgoing circuits. I grabbed the handset and pulled it free from the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Are you with the FBI?” a man’s voice asked.

“Who is this?”

“You don’t look like regular cops.”

“I’m Special Agent Wachalowski. Who is this?”

“I made a terrible mistake,” the man said.

“What kind of mistake?”

SWAT had begun cutting through the locks to free the prisoners. The bald man had been sedated and was being pulled out carefully. Some retreated to the backs of the cages, not sure what was happening. One didn’t move at all. When the officer shined a light in her face, she didn’t respond.

“You have to stop them,” the man said.

“Stop who? What is this place?” I asked him.

“I was supposed to put them down,” he said. “I thought I could do it. . . . What have I done?”

“Sir, tell me what this place is. Did you bring these people here?”

“It would be a mercy . . . but I can’t do it.”

“Sir—”

There was a loud bang from back upstairs. Someone screamed, and footsteps began to move across the floor above us.

“MacReady was right . . . we should have listened—” The man said; then the line cut out.

MacReady. I knew that name. A man named Bob MacReady worked at Heinlein Industries. He’d helped me in the past. Was that who he meant?

“Did you get a trace?” Van Offo asked. I shook my head. The call had been rerouted somewhere down the line. The ’bot couldn’t track it before the link failed.

“All right, get these people—”

Something heavy crashed across the floor overhead. There was another scream, and then shouting. The ceiling above us began to rumble with many heavy footsteps.

“What the hell’s going on up there?” one of the officers asked.

SWAT leader, what’s your situation? There was no answer. The racket upstairs got louder until it sounded like they’d fall through on top of us. Back down the concrete tunnel, the metal door banged open.

SWAT, what’s your status?

A switch snapped from down the hall, and the lights in the tunnel went out. The shuffle of many footsteps began to echo toward us before splashing into the water.

“What the hell is that?” an officer asked. The laser sights began to drift around the now dark doorway. They reflected off the water and danced on the ceiling overhead.

I looked at Van Offo and he looked back, his eyes determined. He held his weapon in one fist, the knuckles white.

“Get back, away from the doorway!” I said; then a figure shambled into view there, with a gang of others close behind.

They were men and women, mobbed together. I saw filthy coats and greasy hair as they stumbled through the opening and sloshed through the water toward us. I recognized them. They’d been in the waiting room when we first came in.

The receptionist from the front desk squeezed through the pack and stumbled into the room, swinging a revolver in one fist.

“Gun!”

Her eyes were wide, and when the flashlight beam hit them, I could see black splotches that had formed in the whites. A light flashed from behind her pupils as she pointed the gun and fired. Van Offo clutched the side of his neck and went down into the water. A laser sight appeared on the woman's forehead as a single shot blew out the back of her head.

By then, twenty more had crowded into the room with another twenty behind them, blocking the only way out. One of them flipped the breaker switch, and the lights inside the basement went out.

The room erupted into a racket of screams, splashes, and gunfire. Muzzle flashes lit up the dark as SWAT fired on the crowd. But there wasn't enough time; they closed in and were on us.

Van Offo, are you okay? Do you read me? He didn't respond.

Someone went down in the water, then a body collided with me and I stumbled back into the dark. I crashed into a gurney and heard surgical equipment splash into the water.

Alice, we need backup.

On its way, Wachalowski. What's your status?

Bodies moved all around me as I picked myself up out of the icy water. Adjusting the light filter on my optics, I saw the clash had filled the whole room. I couldn't tell who was who.

We need backup now.

Wachalowski, Van Offo just dropped. What's your status?

I looked around but couldn't find him.

Al, are you still with me?

He didn't respond. I flipped to the backscatter to try to ID him from the JZI in his head, and the whole place lit up. In and among the zippers and tooth fillings, I saw clusters of nodes and filaments coiled at the base of almost every skull.

They're revivors. All of them—the people from the waiting room, even the body of the receptionist—were revivors. The components stood out in sharp relief in the darkness, moving crazily through the room around me. My heart dropped as I realized what I'd seen.

Huma.

Alice, the—

Something struck my head hard, and everything flashed white for a second. When I tried to take a step, my leg gave out and I fell down into the cold water.

Wachalowski, goddamn it, what is your status?

I popped two stims and a surge of adrenaline pulsed through my body. I tried to push through the crowd, but there were too many of them. I popped another stim as they forced me back down. The back of my head hit the floor and I saw stars.

As they closed in, I managed to get my gun out in front of me. A figure loomed above with something gripped in both hands. It lifted the handle over its shoulder, and I made out the head of the ax I'd seen mounted on the wall.

I fired, but the shot went wild. The revivor behind it pitched back, and the one in front brought the ax down.

There was a hard impact at my right shoulder. Something hot spattered my face. I tried to pull the trigger again, but nothing happened. The cold water that lapped around my neck turned warm.

Alice . . .

Wachalowski, local police and the military are scrambling. A team is on its way. Hang in there.

My heart pounded in my ears. I kicked with one leg and heard air huff as my heel struck something solid. Warning codes streamed by in the darkness in front of me. The impact came again. The pain in my arm, beyond my shoulder, disappeared.

I'm going to die. . . .

Blackness rushed in. The sounds of the struggle muted, then faded. The faces hanging over me were swallowed by the darkness.

Wachalowski, do you read me? Help is on the way.

The screams disappeared. The warning messages stopped, and everything got quiet.

"...the end is nigh..."

It was the last thing I remember thinking. The chaos around me seemed far away. It was happening

somewhere else. In my mind, all I saw was Van Offo's face as he said the words, and the look in his eye that told me it was true.

"When?"

Wachalowski, do you read—

"Soon . . ."

