

OVERWATCH[®] 2

HEROES ASCENDANT
THOUGHTLESS
GODS



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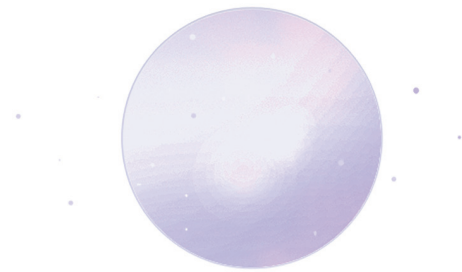
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The setting sun bathes the ruins of the makeshift settlement in pink and crimson. Smoke from burning wreckage and vehicles peppers an apocalyptic haze over the Australian outback.

The Junker Queen grins as she surveys the destruction. Armed Junkers scurry about, rooting out what remains of the band of omnic who had either the audacity or the ignorance—but definitely the misfortune—to come within a mere hundred kilometers of Junkertown. Hammond learned long ago that these omnic—that have terrorized the Outback since the aftermath of the Omnic Crisis—are different. They're not like the omnic the wider world is used to; something about the desert—the radiation, the heat . . . perhaps their extraordinary insularity—has twisted them into something else. They are bigger, wildly aggressive, and totally unpredictable except in their unceasing hostility against the Junkers. They're ferocious in a fight too, and relentless in their pursuit of gear and weaponry to augment their destructive capabilities. The Queen snorts as she takes note of a downed omnic with five upper limbs: sometimes “arms race” is literal.

The damned thing wakes as she walks past. It grabs for her leg, crawling toward her like some hideous, wounded insect, hissing, “get you . . . meatsack . . .” She almost startles, but as it raises one flamethrower arm, she whips out her Scattergun and unloads into the metal monster's overbuilt skull. Twice, for good measure. It stops moving.

Hammond nods in approval and starts to move his mech, but another tortured scream of metal draws his attention. All heads turn as a large omnic, its limbs twisted and bedecked with razor-sharp blades, feet bolstered with small knobby tires for speed, bursts from a hidey-hole.

Hammond realizes that this omnic—the size of a battle-mech, though corroded and dilapidated like so much of the Outback—is preparing to fire a Crisis-era shoulder-launched missile that it has incorporated into its body.

Hammond chatters; the Wrecking Ball mech announces, “Danger!”

He fires his grappling hook, which *clangs* into the omnic’s knee, making it stumble just as the Junker Queen dashes at the monster, swinging her axe, Carnage. The omnic turns toward her, but its aim is off; Carnage cleaves its head from its massive shoulders, and the rocket fires into the sky and explodes harmlessly. The Junkers cheer the fireworks as the headless chassis topples to the ground with a crash. The head bounces once and settles on the hard-packed dirt. “All you . . . dead . . . soon . . .,” it says as its lights go dark.

“No rubbernecking!” the Queen barks at her followers. “Show’s over.” She nods at Hammond in thanks for the assist.

Meri, the head of the Tinkers, looks over at him. Hammond and Meri now share responsibility for getting the Queen’s pet project, which had recently been unearthed from the depths of Junkertown, online.

The Queen continues toward a mangled steel structure where Hammond is attempting to gain entry, raining shards of metal onto the Junkers nearby. She calls out, “Think maybe this is where they’re hiding the good stuff, champ?”

Hammond looks over to her. They have been seeking a specific type of component for the massive anti-grav thrusters he and Meri have been rebuilding. He’s privately skeptical that the omnics would have come across such a rare treasure in this region, but he wants to keep the Queen’s spirits up, so he shrugs. He cringes a bit—his ears are sensitive—as the Queen whistles sharply at a team of scavengers nearby.

“Make a clean sweep, people! Let’s find our pot of gold,” she declares.

Hammond watches the various factions of Junkertown—Tinkers, Wreckers, Scavengers, etc.—getting into a rhythm now as they go about dismantling wreckage in the aftermath of the battle, breaking ramshackle vehicles, infrastructure, even omnic bodies into smaller parts for later repurposing. The Wreckers use everything from axes to backhoes to crowbars to tear things apart into manageable pieces. Scavengers sort through the scrap, searching for material, textiles, rare metals, and other electronics and treasures. They barter and haggle and fight over parts with the Tinkers, who triage for value and usability. “Keep it movin’, you lot,” Meri tells her people. “Thruster parts’ll gain you extra pay.”

Hammond turns his attention back to the reinforced door of the structure. Losing patience, he fires a burst of the mech’s quad cannons, then bashes the mech into the door a few more times.

*“GOTTA ADMIT—TIN CANS THEY MAY BE . . .
BUT NULL SECTOR MAY BE ONTO SOMETHING. THE FIGHTS
'ROUND THESE PARTS ARE STARTING TO GET OLD. MAYBE . . .
WE GO SEE THE WORLD A BIT, ONCE YOU AND MERI
FINISH FIXING UP OUR NEW RIDE.”*

The hatch of the mech rattles just a bit—a souvenir from his fight with Roadhog in the arena. Though the lock functions just fine, he is a perfectionist, and it's irritating. He will have to fix that.

“I've got explosives if you need 'em, champ,” Meri calls helpfully.

Hammond grumbles. “Negative,” the mech responds, managing to convey Hammond's annoyance. One last bashing and the door finally comes off its hinges.

Inside, Hammond finds a fair-sized room with several monitors showing various news feeds—a crude communication center, he assumes. The monitors display news about some sort of planetwide robot attack. The mech opens and Hammond emerges, blinking in surprise at the images. This is not what he was expecting.

The hamster wonders for a moment whether, as much as the Junkers hate the omnics, they have been underestimating them. Did they build this war room, or was it scavenged from some human settlement? And have they been monitoring the world? If so, why? What does it mean? He mulls this, then stores the thought for another time and reverses course to the doorway, chattering. “Breaking news,” the mech translates. “Come see.”

The Queen looks over at the rodent curiously, then strides through the entryway, unslinging her axe. “What's got your grappler in a twist?” She enters the room and reacts, surprised to see the various feeds. She clocks them in turn. “Los Angeles, London, Johannesburg . . . is this all over the world?”

Hammond nods.

“Null Sector, eh? Bloody omnics're always up to something.” Junker Queen nods approvingly at Wrecking Ball. “Well done, whiskers.” She pauses. “Gotta admit—tin cans they may be . . . but Null Sector may be onto something. The fights 'round these parts are starting to get old. Maybe . . . we go see the world a bit, once you and Meri finish fixing up our new ride.”

Hammond turns his attention back to the news anchor on the lowest screen to the left: "The latest city to fall under attack by Null Sector, Lijiang is one of China's premier technology centers, home to Wancài Industries, Lucheng Interstellar, New Harvest Banking Consortium, and other corporations." The anchor pauses as the feed switches to grainy footage of a military squadron under heavy fire. "The government is devoting extraordinary resources to defending Lijiang, as the proprietary technology developed by Lucheng and its competitors could make Null Sector even more dangerous . . ."

Something catches his eye on one of the screens: a sign on a glittering skyscraper. Something unmistakable. A blue arrow on its side, a diagram of a lunar orbit encircling it. The logo of Lucheng Interstellar. The owners of the Horizon Lunar Colony, his former home.

His creators.

Thoughtless gods.

He is frozen, paralyzed by a seething surge of adrenaline and rage. In a blink, the past twelve years vanish, and he is catapulted into his earliest, most fractured memories—images, really.

Soft. Warm . . . Mother.

Rustling. Click click click—claws on plastic. Winding tubes go up and down. Squirring, snuggling in among his siblings: a dozen, and later, more. He is *happy*. A simple happy.

The scientists place him into mazes. He uses his sense of smell to find treats they put at the end. He learns to solve puzzles, and enjoys it—especially the reward, the blissful, salty *cronch-cronch* of his favorite sunflower seeds. Though he does not know that he is being pitted against his siblings, he finds treats more often and more quickly than they do. He grows to become the biggest in his family. Sometimes when he finds a treat very fast, the scientists make noises and bare their teeth, and then hand paper to each other. (Years from now, amid the roars of battle in the Scrapyard, he learns that this is called "betting." The scientists wager on him and his family to pass the time.)

He is alone and cold and afraid. The one scientist who is there more than all others, the one they call "Doctorchao," jabs him with shiny sharp sticks. It hurts horribly. He cannot fight or flee from her, so he expects death, but it does not come, as it does for some of his siblings. It lasts for months; each interaction is more than he can bear. He does not understand why he survives.

He wakes up one day to something new, a marking that appears over and over: a kind of loop. Doctorchao approaches as another examines him.

How's Specimen Eight this morning?

We're calling him Hammond, Dr. Chao. We've found that naming them helps with their development . . . Why a hamster, by the way?

HE SEARCHES FOR THE EYES OF HIS MOTHER, BUT THERE IS AN UNBRIDGEABLE CHASM BETWEEN THEM THAT ENCOMPASSES MORE THAN DISTANCE.

They're less expensive than gorillas, and nobody cares how many hamsters we lose. So don't get too attached.

He undergoes more treatment. And more. He grows, in both body and mind. He wonders why he is being experimented on. That is the word the scientists use about him. There is a rush of exhilaration to his brain. He *understands* things, a flood of realization about himself. He is . . . smart, special, *powerful*. These are things he never was before. He prefers it this way.

The scientists do not return him to his home this time. They place him in his own larger cage, apart from his family. When he claws at the bars, the scientists speak in gentle tones; they are concerned he might crush the others. Though he was larger than his siblings before, he is now many times so. He has never been alone for this long. He searches for the eyes of his mother, but there is an unbridgeable chasm between them that encompasses more than distance. He watches his family play together from his separate cage. They pay him no mind. He is very lonely.

He is confused and frustrated. He tries to ask the scientists why more of his family are not with him . . . are not *like* him; he misses them terribly, but he has no language, no way to communicate this to them. They think he is simply doing antics and they laugh. They encourage him to do more antics. They give him treats.

Over time, more siblings are removed from the communal habitat (he has learned many words from the scientists now, even if he cannot speak). They are given the same injections that Hammond was given. Each time, he waits eagerly for them to join him. He is hopeful.

And then, each time, he is sad. Unspeakably sad. His brothers and sisters are dead. He has seen the scientist Dr. Nevsky consulting with the scientist Dr. Nguyen. They are confused. They realize their experiments are failing—except for him—but they do not agree on what causes the failures. Yet their faces convey no sorrow or remorse. He has learned how to read human faces. He has come to realize that his well-being depends on it. He wonders why they are not sad.

CLANK.

"Oi! Champ! What'd you do that for?" Startled out of his reverie, Hammond looks around to see the Queen gesturing at him with her knife. He realizes that his grappling hook has smashed

through the monitor entirely. He stares for a moment, then retracts the grapple from the ruined screen.

Meri enters the room and notes the wreckage of the monitor. "Bad time?"

The Junker Queen sighs. "Good as any. What's up?"

Meri grimaces. "We've scouted this dump with a fine-tooth comb. It was a long shot they might have what we need—and unfortunately, it looks like we're out of luck."

The Queen's lip curls in irritation. "How are we supposed to fix up our toy without those components, Meri?"

Meri takes an involuntary step back. "We'll keep looking."

Hammond glances at Meri. He's not concerned about her, but then he looks back at the ruined screen with the flickering image of Lijiang Tower. A realization occurs to him.

He chatters at them.

"The mammal has something to do," the mech declares as he rides it outside.

The Queen cocks her head, curious, and follows him out. "Hey. I give you a certain amount of leeway, but you can't just go AWOL. What's your play?"

Hammond utters a stream of barks and growls. "He knows where to find components," the mech proclaims.

That sets her on her heels. "Okay then. Let's saddle up!"

Hammond shakes his head no and trills softly, activating the rolling function and heading due west, into the evening sun. "He must go alone," the mech's voice carries back as it trundles away.

"Right, try not to die, then," the Queen shouts after him. "Batty rat." She turns to her chief engineer. "Looks like it's all you, Meri. Jump to it."

The moon casts its pale light on the city of Lijiang, China. Hammond has to be very stealthy as he pilots the Wrecking Ball through the streets to avoid Null Sector troops. There has been some damage to the city, but frankly less than he expected, given what he has seen of the omnic troop transport ships and munitions. The fact that the city has been mostly evacuated makes his task somewhat easier, as does the fact that the omnic patrols are regularly timed and easy to hear coming.

The Night Market sits at the base of Lijiang Tower. It looks like it was once a bustling place, even at this late hour, but the invasion has left only a few hardy souls on the streets desperate enough to disregard the danger. Perhaps the human counteroffensive outside the city has drawn

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Null Sector's attention. It is oddly peaceful now. The Wrecking Ball rolls in at a swift clip, then Hammond pops the mech's legs and tilts up. He finds the reflections of holographic signs and lights on the wet streets to be strangely alluring. Not what he expected from a city of millions of people. He suspects it would be somewhat less alluring if they were all packed in here.

He emerges, sussing out a route into the tower, but he is surprised by the scent of food nearby. His stomach growls; though the Junkers are many things, "good cooks" is not one of them. He spies the Piggy Mama Hot Pot stand and zeroes in on the aromas coming from it. He can almost taste the marinated meats and salty vegetab—

No. That can wait. He wipes the drool from his puffy cheeks. He needs the thruster components. But he also wants answers. And . . . maybe payback. He mutters to himself. He gazes up at the skyscraper, and for a moment he feels small and insignificant. A little afraid. This makes him angry, which is good and useful.

He smiles grimly.

The entrance to the tower enjoys a large open courtyard. So much for stealth. Well-armed security agents patrol the perimeter in packs of five—safety in numbers. Smart. Heavy bunkers have been set up to defend the building. He snorts. This confirms his thoughts about Lucheng: they will protect themselves rather than helping push Null Sector out of the city. He has heard a human saying: the fish stinks from the head. *Apt*, he thinks. *Lucheng is a stinky fish.* Nonetheless, he has an idea.

Hammond pops back into the Wrecking Ball and fires its grappling claw to its full extension, latching on to a corner of the building nearest the tower. Swinging some meters above the ground, faster and faster, Hammond times his release precisely, then activates the mech's Pile Driver function. The Wrecking Ball becomes a speeding projectile that craters into the tower lobby like a meteorite, knocking the guards inside off their feet.

Hammond chatters. "Oh no." The mech drones: "Null Sector is attacking. Null Sector is so bad.

Everyone flee.” Hammond rolls the mech back out of the lobby before anyone can respond, but he knows that this attack will draw the bulk of the building’s security. So he wastes no time, crossing to the large building map, which informs him that Lucheng Interstellar occupies the top ten floors; the parts he’s looking for will be there. They must be . . . they had *better* be. Then he rushes around the side of the building, where he uses the grappling claw to scale the glass edifice, ten, twenty, thirty floors up.

He pauses for a moment to admire the tranquil gardens, where executives no doubt fling underlings into the deadly moat. The rodent chuckles to himself at that thought, then resumes his climb. Forty—swing—fifty floors up before he swerves out and fires the mech’s quad cannons at the plate glass windows of the fifty-seventh floor. He remembers this move from an old Christmas film the scientists showed on the colony once, and with one last swing, the shatter-proof glass explodes beneath the force of his momentum.

There are no people in the offices. This is good for him but also good for them. Maneuvering the mech to an elevator bank, Hammond pries open the doors, climbs into the shaft, and ascends to the sixty-third floor, where Lucheng is located.

Exiting the elevators, Hammond notes that massive security doors have dropped into place. If he were here with the Junker Queen, she would ask him why scientists would need doors like this. But he knows this is not just any office. There are secrets here. Ugly secrets.

He sighs. Getting to the control center through them will be difficult and will take more time than he has. As soon as Lucheng’s security discovers the hole he put in the side of the building, they’ll send more than just guards.

Hammond trundles the mech over to an air-duct register near the perimeter of the building. He pops out of the mech, checks to ensure that he has the tools he will need, opens the duct grate, and clambers in. Just before he closes the grate, he warbles at the mech.

“Autotarget mode engaged,” the Wrecking Ball intones.

As he dashes through the air ducts, pausing here and there at each juncture for direction, he remembers other air ducts, where he used his keen sense of smell to sniff out treats—or tools. Now, he scents for particular electronic frequencies, the heat signatures of server towers, the dried sweat of security agents on duty for the last eight hours. He grins as he approaches his goal, remembering a long-ago triumph.

His first escape.

He is back in the lunar base, years ago. Seeing that he is alone, Hammond maneuvers a bobby pin out of his cheek, where he has held it for most of the day. It takes a few minutes to pick the padlock Dr. Zhang placed on his cage to keep him contained for the night. Climbing atop his

enclosure, he launches himself to the ceiling, where his claws grasp the slats of the ceiling vent. He has hidden a screwdriver as well and quickly accesses the air ducts.

From that moment on, he is uncontainable. The ducts remind him comfortably of the Habitrail mazes he used to live in and even the mazes the scientists used to run him through to assess his intelligence. Then, as now, he uses his sense of smell to guide him to the commissary, where he binges on corn chips, yams, fruit, ice cream. He had *no idea* the variety of things that are edible. Later he discovers the garages, the fun to be had playing with tools, of fixing broken mechanisms and creating new ones from spare parts. It feeds his ego to put something over on the humans, just as it amuses him greatly to leave “presents” for Dr. Patel in his room. But more importantly, engineering, repurposing, or fixing things feeds his insatiable need for challenge. Soon enough, there is little he cannot fix or build.

Hammond will later appreciate these same qualities in the Junkers: how they take wasted, broken things and bring new purpose to them. They re-create and recycle. What’s more, they don’t think too deeply; they live for the moment. He appreciates that too.

In time, Hammond comes to memorize the network of ducts, and he realizes that there are other creatures that have been . . . He’s not sure what to call what Doctorchao has done to him. “Changed” is insufficient. Augmented? Evolved? He has glimpsed a few of these creatures through the slats of the grates, and some of them made every hair on his body stand up with their *wrongness*. He avoids those ducts now. But one night he is bringing some tools to work on his secret project—the one that will take him away from this place someday—when he hears a whimper, a squeak, almost, through the vent of a room below. He pauses. He sniffs. And though what he smells does not smell like him, it is not one of *those*.

He peers through the slats into the dim and can just make out a hairy form on a bed. It whimpers again. He hardly dares to hope: Did another hamster somehow survive the scientists’ treatments? Will one of his siblings finally join him? His heart races; excitement and curiosity overrule caution. He quietly unscrews the grate and drops into the room. He pulls out a flashlight from the one-piece uniform that the scientists make him wear. (He would chew it to rags were it not for the pockets he carries tools in.) He turns on the flashlight and creeps toward the figure . . . which sits up and yelps in surprise. Hammond lets out an involuntary squeal and launches himself backward while the figure leaps to the ceiling, gibbering.

It takes them both a moment to regain their composure; the gorilla clings to the open grate, breathing heavily, looking panicked. Hammond realizes that the gorilla is wearing a uniform similar to his own, with the number twenty-eight on it. Hammond is struck by a sense of . . . sympathy? The ape has obviously survived what Hammond has. The gorilla looks at him suspiciously. The

*ONE NIGHT HE POINTS TO A DRAWING—A BLUE CIRCLE
WITH PATCHES OF GREEN. IN THE UNFORGIVING VACUUM
OF SPACE IS A ROCKET; TWENTY-EIGHT IS IN THE
VIEWPORT, A CRUDELY DRAWN HAMMOND
FLOPPED OVER HIS SHOULDER.*

hamster shows his front paws to communicate that he means no harm, then remembers that he has a peanut butter bar in one pocket; he opens it and offers it to Twenty-Eight, who sniffs curiously and drops from the ceiling. Hammond tosses the bar to the gorilla, who takes a tentative bite and breaks into a broad, sunny smile.

Finishing the candy bar, the ape examines Hammond, and in his giddy curiosity about what Hammond even IS, he laughs. He bounces on his bed. Hammond notices the bed frame squeak and uses his screwdriver to tighten the offending bolt. Twenty-Eight's eyes go wide as he points at the tools. Neither can speak, but Twenty-Eight is well suited to charades. Hammond tries his best to answer back with gestures. None-theless, when Hammond leaves, the ape eagerly asks if he will come back, and Hammond agrees. He tosses the screwdriver to Twenty-Eight, who cradles it like something precious.

It is the start of Hammond's first friendship. Like him, Twenty-Eight is far more intelligent than the others realize. And like him, Twenty-Eight is alone, somewhat outcast from the other apes. There is something about him, an innocence, that inspires a sense of . . . *protectiveness? Is that it?* in Hammond. Hammond remembers it in himself—an eagerness to test the world. It seems to irritate most of the other primates, who tend either to ignore Twenty-Eight or harass him. That, of course, leads to his occasional isolation while the scientists recalibrate the social elements of their grand experiment.

Hammond starts sneaking treats to his friend regularly. Peanut butter is Twenty-Eight's favorite thing. He even shows the gorilla how to fix things. And in return, Twenty-Eight shows Hammond how to . . . well, how to dream of something better. One night he points to a drawing—a blue circle with patches of green. In the unforgiving vacuum of space is a rocket; Twenty-Eight is in the viewport, a crudely drawn Hammond flopped over his shoulder.

Back in the present, in the central control room of the Lucheng complex, two agents operate a dizzying array of camera feeds. The first agent cocks her head toward the ceiling. "Did you hear that?"

The second, focused on a feed showing the massive hole where Hammond breached the building, grunts. "Hear what?"

"A scraping noise in the ceiling ducts."

The second guard snorts. "Probably just a rat."

The first guard stares back. "A rat. On the *sixty-third* floor."

The second guard scoffs, not returning her look. "What else would it be?"

Just then the ceiling grate swings open, and Hammond drops into the room. The agents stand in shock; the first guard struggles to unclip her sidearm from her belt as she panics. "That's the biggest rat I've ever—!"

She does not get to finish, because Hammond has beaten them both to the draw with Tasers. They go down hard. He grins.

Hammond pulls a chair up to the console that the guards were operating and quickly sizes up what he needs. First things first: he activates a building-wide alarm and types in a message for the comm system to read. "Threat remains. Evacuate building," a calm voice urges repeatedly as the emergency lights shut off. He watches the camera feeds, seeing agents herding scientists and administrators to the exits. There is a joke Hammond once heard about sheep, but it doesn't appeal to his sense of humor; he prefers slapstick. Pratfalls, broken limbs—that kind of thing.

In short time he has unlocked the heavy security doors, and using his remote control, he summons the Wrecking Ball. But moments later, two more guards dash into the room.

"Don't move! H-hands . . .," the first guard stutters, seeing the three-foot-tall, heavily armed rodent facing him. "Up?"

A rumbling sound approaches. Hammond smirks as the guards turn just in time to get toppled by the Wrecking Ball. He uses the grappling hook to tow the now-unconscious guards out of the room, then returns inside, bringing the reinforced doors back down to barricade the control center. No more time for antics; he has work to do.

He types into the console, flipping through various security feeds. Where would they store the components he needs, and how does he get there? A thought strikes him, and in it there is not just a realization but a frisson of fear: *he knows who would know*. He shoves his unease away and cycles through the security feeds impatiently, hoping to see some sort of lab or storage facility.

He growls softly in frustration, then stops abruptly as another set of screens catches his eye. What he sees is not anything in or around the building.

It is a security feed of a place he never expected to see again. The place he once called home. Horizon Lunar Colony.

He starts to cycle through camera feeds. The main hangar—bay twelve—where he taught himself mechanical skills, rovers and jump packs lying around, seemingly gutted for parts. A greenhouse filled with thriving crops. The commissary, deserted. The classroom where he and other genetically altered animals were educated and tested. A medical bay. The hydroponics lab. A waste-treatment plant.

Deep in thought, lost in memories, the hamster startles at a woman's voice. "Specimen Eight, I presume?"

He whirls around as the mech announces, "Intruder approaching."

Hammond chitters angrily at the machine.

"New pilot profanity detected. Adding to database," the mech counters.

Whiskers twitching violently, Hammond snarls at the frail, aging Chinese woman who has seemingly materialized a meter away, seated in a hoverchair. She smiles gently at the threat. "I am no danger to you, Specimen Eight." The fact that she uses the identification number he was given, rather than his name, is not lost on him.

He growls; though it might sound comical and small to humans, the threat behind it is not.

"Address him as Hammond," the mech translates, leaving out the more colorful squeaks.

She nods in understanding, if not acquiescence. "'Specimen Eight' must be a bit . . . impersonal. Do you remember me?"

Hammond grumbles at her.

"He is not an idiot, Dr. Chao," the mech pronounces.

She nods again, impressed. "Well, it's been quite a while."

He grumbles again. "You left the colony early," the mech says.

"If by that you mean before the . . . rebellion, then yes. But as you can see, it feels like I spent more than enough time there. After years in and out of lunar gravity, my body atrophied beyond repair. I'm afraid at my age—even with years of physical therapy—it was too difficult to regain the muscle mass I lost. I wasn't a great candidate for cybernetics either, so . . ." She gestures to the chair.

Hammond scoffs and the mech translates. "You should have evacuated the tower when Null Sector invaded. Foolish."

"You know as well as I do that there is information here that mustn't fall into the wrong hands.

***“THE COMPANY ASSUMED YOU PERISHED IN THE APES’
REBELLION. BUT I HAD MY DOUBTS ABOUT THAT;
YOU WERE ALWAYS SO . . . CAPABLE.”***

As CEO, I’m responsible for that.” She sighs. “Besides, you don’t get to my age without learning how to distinguish one danger from another. If you really wanted me dead . . .” She shrugs, almost challenging him.

He stares for a moment, then grunts. He adds a high-pitched but meaningful growl.

“Option remains viable. You will give the hamster information, or else,” the mech voices. “Where are Huang-Unigwe activators kept? For antigravity thrusters.”

Rather than reply, she gazes at him appraisingly. “I must say, I am surprised but pleased to see you, Specimen Eight. Where have you been for all these years?”

Hammond *hmphs*. The mech whirs. “None of your business.”

“The company assumed you perished in the apes’ rebellion. But I had my doubts about that; you were always so . . . *capable*.”

Dr. Chao approaches the terminal; Hammond keeps the mech’s quad cannons trained on her. She types in a command to shift the camera feed. A water treatment plant—still functioning, tended by robotic hands. She switches the feed to a fabrication station, where structural materials are produced for the moon base, and then to a particular room. Hammond startles and turns to her, head cocked demandingly. “Your old room. And the cage you so effortlessly escaped time after time.” She grimaces wryly. “No matter how they changed or reinforced the locks.”

Hammond growls again. The mech states, “He does not like being told what to do. Or what not to.”

“Yes, you always thought outside the box. As I recall, Dr. Zhang and Dr. Flores had something of a running bet as to where you were going.” She turns to another monitor and calls up old security footage from the lunar colony. In it, a younger Hammond is working on something mechanized, utilizing a gravity wrench and a laser cutter. “You taught yourself engineering and mechanics. Why, just look at this cunning little mech you cobbled together. Imagine the uses we could put it to.”

Wrecking Ball takes a step closer to Hammond. The hatch rattles a bit as it does. Hammond grits his teeth; he’s got to fix that.

Hammond grumbles a response.

"Everyone underestimates the small," says the mech.

She does not offer further response; instead, she pulls up a feed of a training facility, a large, multilevel gymnasium. On the feed, two apes spar in a ring. He recognizes a beefy orangutan who used to bully him for the simple pleasure of it. Dyson is now older, thicker—and he has fashioned armor and weaponry for himself.

They gaze at the screen, where the apes trade fierce blows. Oscar pins his rival; the other ape gestures submission. Oscar delivers a painful mock kill anyway.

Hammond chitters at Chao. "What happened?" the mech asks.

"What do you mean?" Chao asks.

Hammond screws up his face, concentration fixed on the screens. He verbalizes lengthily.

The mech takes a moment, processing, then says: "Why did Lucheng never try to take back the lunar base from the apes? Trillions of dollars in resources lost. That is not like humans."

Chao looks sour. "Oh, we've tried. We sent three teams up over the last ten years to retake the colony. Each better trained and better armed than the last. What we didn't realize," she admits, "was how damned *clever* the apes are. Saw us coming. And while we were innovating, so were they."

Hammond is not sure what she means by that. She brings up a new feed. This one focuses on the exterior of the colony—specifically, a massive telescope that sweeps slowly, almost imperceptibly, from side to side, scanning space. He knows that Lucheng uses this site to perform astronomical observations; outside of the hazing effects of the earth's atmosphere, they enjoy incredible clarity of imagery.

Hammond recalls that he actually reached the telescope once and took the time to look through it. He did not enjoy it. Perhaps it is a species-level feeling. Having nothing but open space above his head causes a primal sense of unease; rodents are prey animals, and death nearly always comes from above.

Well, he thinks to himself, *most* rodents are prey animals. Not him. Not anymore and never again. He is a hunter, a destroyer.

He idly wonders whether the apes are maintaining the various systems, including the telescopes—once used to track asteroids that posed an existential threat to Earth. Whether Lucheng scientists are controlling it remotely, or whether it has sat untended for the last decade, degrading and leaving the planet vulnerable to an extinction-level event.

Hammond verbalizes.

"Does Lucheng still control the telescope?" the mech asks Chao.

HAMMOND NOW SEES: WHATEVER ELSE LUCHENG MADE THEM, THEY ARE ALL, IN THE END, JUST ANIMALS. ANIMALS WHO WILL DO WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE.

She nods. "Although, at the moment we worry less about the unknown dangers coming from space than the dangers we know exist there."

"The apes," Hammond guesses.

"I find it ironic . . . you spent so much time trying to escape cages, even to help the others escape theirs—oh yes, my friend, I know—and yet you've *chosen* to hide in the one you made for yourself. Survival tactic, I assume."

Hammond glares but stops himself from attacking her; he does not miss her smug expression, but he is forced to consider her words. He takes the controls and switches to Lijiang Tower's security feeds, resuming his search for the thruster components, and finally finds what he's looking for: a tech lab in the rocketry research center. He notes the lab number in the feed and pulls up a diagram of the component he has been seeking. It is not the same as he remembers, but it is close enough to what he'd designed so long ago.

There is violence. There are screams. He does his best to avoid it. Though he bears the scientists no love for what they have done, he does not want to witness their demise. Some of the primates give him angry looks, but they are more bent on the destruction of their oppressors than on him. His small size benefits him, as occasionally it does.

Still, he knows the apes may soon decide they do not want him around. He realizes that he has a very limited amount of time to act on his own behalf. He takes to the ducting and swiftly makes his way to the spaceport.

Hammond scuttles through the various bays only to see to his horror that the apes have disabled the shuttles that are used to transport astronauts, scientists, and workers to and from the moon base. He is trapped here.

He reacts to a noise from bay fourteen and stealthily makes his way there. He stops, seeing a figure—Twenty-Eight, Winston—working furiously on an escape craft, nearly ready to leave. It

looks like it is based on the plans they dreamed up together, the rocket they would one day leave the colony on. The ape makes a final adjustment to a familiar rocket thruster, closes its compartment, and heads for the cockpit. Hammond is confused . . . and then hurt and angry. It seems Winston does not plan to bring Hammond with him, and this leads to another devastating realization: they are not friends after all.

Hammond now sees: Whatever else Lucheng made them, they are all, in the end, just animals. Animals who will do what it takes to survive.

In the control room, Hammond suddenly realizes Dr. Chao is aiming a Taser at him; he barely dodges the wires as they shoot out, and he barks a command. The mech's grappling hook fires out, knocking the weapon from Chao's hands.

Chao breaks his reverie, "I must know, Specimen Eight: Was Winston aware that you piggybacked on his escape?"

Hammond looks away, scowling.

She gazes at him appraisingly. "And you never let him know that you were okay. Never went to see your best friend. Perhaps to join Overwatch with him."

He glares at her and chatters emphatically, spitting on the floor for good measure.

The mech whirs. "He stole . . . untranslatable. Rodent profanity detected."

She raises her hands in mock surrender. "I see. A sensitive subject. But still, why wouldn't you find him? You both made it out, after all."

Hammond begins to snarl in response but stops. That has never occurred to him. He growls softly.

The mech translates: "He has new friends."

"And you've been hiding from the world in your little ball ever since. Just a frightened rodent."

He chitters flatly. "There was something to fear. But the hamster is no longer afraid."

To emphasize that he is done with this part of their conversation, Hammond changes to another feed. It shows Earth looming above, beyond a great glassine wall. It's a magnificent view, if you like such things; it was always Winston's favorite. Winston brought him there once. Hammond hated it. Too much space. Or too many memories.

But there's something different about this view than he remembers. He can't put his paw on why.

Why? He has wondered this for the last decade and more, and he has never come to a conclusive answer. He must know. He almost forgot that it is one of the main reasons he is here. He verbalizes.

"Why?" the mech demands.

Chao glances over at him, confused.

"He demands to know why you did this to him, to all of the subjects."

She contemplates the rodent for a long moment, then sighs. "Initially, hubris, frankly. We did it because we could. And then for the accolades . . . and the funding."

This does not surprise Hammond. Nearly every human he's met has been arrogant and overconfident . . . apart from the Junker Queen, the only human who has bested the Wrecking Ball in combat. And to be sure, the Queen *is* arrogant, but she's at least earned it.

"Why *hamsters*, orangutans, gorillas?" So much could go wrong. So much *did* go wrong. "Toying with life. Playing God."

She shrugs. "We were curious as to the limits of our ability, to see what we could accomplish with genetic manipulation. You'd be surprised at what we tried. You barely saw a portion of it. And I admit, our failures were . . . horrific. That's why we could only do it up there. Can you imagine if any had escaped down here? But our successes were wonderful. Just look at you!"

Hammond snorts and grumbles. "Your creations escaped their cages and killed your doctors," the mech intones. "New definition of 'success.'"

Then Chao surprises him. "You don't know what that work laid good ground for: the long-term effects of low gravity on animals, the viability of sustained life on the moon. We thought it was all about Earth, lunar ops, but then . . . the scope of our project changed. The apes—and you, if you lived long enough—would become part of a long-term space travel program."

"Big plans," the Wrecking Ball says. "The apes had different plans."

She chuckles bitterly. "You'd think they would be grateful for the gifts we bestowed on them."

Hammond is astonished; he chitters angrily.

The mech whirrs, processing: "None of the life-forms *asked* for what you did. Even if they became . . . better, they suffered for it. *You* are responsible. Thoughtless gods."

Hammond turns back to the feed that looks out at Earth and suddenly realizes what has thrown him off about the view. There is a structure outside that glassine wall that was not there all those years ago. It is only partially built, but it is not something the scientists made.

That is odd, he thinks.

His train of thought is interrupted by the unmistakable pitch of a laser saw cutting through plate metal down a distant corridor: the sound of security forces breaching the defenses he locked into place. A glance at the building security cameras confirms it. He clambers down into the waiting Wrecking Ball. Foolish. She's been stalling him.

Chao sees the monitors as well and smiles victoriously. "Well, it's been nice catching up,

IN A BURST OF FURY, HE LEANS OVER AND PUNCHES A SEQUENCE INTO THE CONTROL PADS. A SIGNAL TO THE LUNAR COLONY: YOU ARE BEING WATCHED

Specimen Eight," she wheezes. "But you're surrounded. There are guards above, below, and around. You see"—she smiles—"Winston may not be Lucheng property anymore . . . but you never had your day in court. And now, you never will."

Enraged, Hammond steps forward, pulls out a multitool, and plunges it repeatedly into the control panel on the right arm of her chair, which drops to the floor with a *bang*. He looms over her now, hissing angrily.

The mech translates: "He belongs to no one."

"Kill me if you like; it won't make any difference," she says with a wince. "As I said, I am an old woman, and I have built Lucheng to last. I am not afraid to die."

Hammond snarls. "Testing statement," the mech offers as it spins up its quad cannons. Dr. Chao closes her eyes tightly and cringes, waiting for the barrage that does not come. The quad cannons spin down, and she opens her eyes, confused. Hammond grunts. "Liar," the mech declares. Hammond is glad she did not tell him where the components were; she would certainly have led him into a trap.

Hammond fully deactivates his weapons systems. Off her smug look, he vocalizes a sequence of trills and chirps. "The mammal has decided not to kill you. He will make you watch as he dismantles the empire you have built to last," the mech declares.

In a burst of fury, he leans over and punches a sequence into the control pads. A signal to the lunar colony: YOU ARE BEING WATCHED.

The mech broadcasts Chao's voice: "*Hubris, frankly. We did it because we could.*"

Dr. Chao's eyes widen in alarm for a moment, then she grimaces. "Clever. But too late."

As her security forces burst into the room, Chao shouts, "Do not let it escape!"

The hamster growls and squeaks. "Escape is not the intent," voices the mech. "The hamster is finally going to get what he came for."

Hammond crouches into the Wrecking Ball, closes the hatch, and spins up his quad cannons, chattering as he does so. "Please try to stop him," the mech declares. "He will enjoy it." In response, the humans—each wearing antiballistic armor and wielding some type of rifle he's never seen—open fire.

"Surrender!" an officer commands. "You are outnumbered and surrounded."

Hammond barks defiant laughter.

"Amusement!" the mech enunciates. "Just how he likes it!"

He fires the guns just to make the guards twitch; as they blast at him, the mech warns: "Taking damage. Activating adaptive shield." Hammond withdraws the mech's limbs and activates its rolling function, plowing through the knot of guards with ease. He chuckles as it launches those too slow to jump out of the way.

"I need reinforcements!" their commander howls into his comm.

"Arriving now!" comes the reply.

The commander smiles as a dozen more guards rush out from the corridor. "Let's put this thing down!"

Hammond—no, he is Wrecking Ball—looks back, beady eyes gleaming with disdain; Chao looks withered and helpless to him now. "Lucheng cannot stop Hammond. Never could. Never will." He warbles with glee and launches a dozen antipersonnel mines into the crowd. They hit the ground, blinking ominously, and the humans have only moments to react, diving away in panic with a variety of surprisingly creative curses.

Hammond nods in approval as he triggers the mines.

From the street, one corner of the sixty-third story of the glass tower that houses Lucheng Interstellar blows out. Shards of glass catch the light of the exploding mines, showering the streets below like deadly fireworks. Hammond uses the security forces' moment of shock to dive the mech out the window. As he begins to fall, the grappling hook shoots out, latching on to a now-exposed I-beam, swinging him around the side just in time to avoid shots from guards who were savvy enough to evade the explosion. He swings back into the building three floors below, to the production lab he identified. There he soon finds what he needs: the crucial components for the antigravity thrusters the Queen has been seeking—next generation, no less. The guards try to regroup and chase him down.

The humans are too slow. Soon, Wrecking Ball has returned to street level. Sirens are approaching. Many, many sirens. As much as he loves a fight, now is a good time to retreat. He turns and rolls into the night.

Making his way through the abandoned streets of Lijiang, he ponders his experience. What started as a relatively straightforward supply mission turned into something . . . unexpected, but right. He has learned much, and what he has learned has raised questions. He thought it would be enough to get answers from Chao, *revenge* on Chao—to throw a monkey wrench (he can't help but smile) into her plans . . . but that's not enough.

He must make all of Lucheng pay for what they did. The apes may be stranded on the moon, but Hammond is not. He's got a shiny new toy and a powerful, maniacal friend who will do him a solid for the fun of it. He's not just going to survive Chao this time; he's going to finish what the apes started, tear it all down. Maybe he'll even let the apes help.

As the morning sun lights up the Outback, the Junker Queen, enjoying the view from an ancient corrugated tin roof, downs a steaming mug of coffee and rises from a dilapidated lawn chair scavenged from a long-abandoned township. "Nothing more metal than a sunrise," the Queen muses. "It's like a promise—of all the fun we're going to have." She turns to Meri and Geiger, who stand nearby. "How's our project coming?"

"No worries," Meri assures her. "Should be ready soon." She hesitates, then adds: "Pending getting the antigrav thrusters up and running, a'course."

Something approaches in the distance, raising a trail of dust behind it. The Queen squints yet can't make it out, but she'll brook no threats. "Geiger?"

The scavenger—as much machine as man—snaps out a telescope from some bodily compartment and holds it to his remaining eye, which widens in surprise. He tosses the telescope to the Queen, who snatches it effortlessly from the air and looks through it. In the scope, Wrecking Ball speeds toward her. The hint of a smile reaches her lips.

The mech finally reaches Junkertown's walls. The hatch opens and Hammond slowly emerges, stretching mightily. The hatch rattles just a bit. He barely notices it anymore. He gazes around at the open morning sky and the pale, waning moon so far away . . . and for the first time, it's beautiful.

"Well, well, well," the Queen smirks from the top of the wall. "The prodigal rodent returns. Y'look knackered. Been nailing heads to the floorboards again?"

Hammond shrugs. "The hamster never tells," says the mech.

She cocks her head. "Didja at least get what you went out for? Can we get going soon?"

He gives her a languid thumbs-up. "Mission successful," the mech states.

The Queen offers a crooked grin and motions with her jaw to the settlement entrance—her blessing to return.

Meri pulls her comms out and keys the mic. "Open the gates. The champ's back."

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