TERA AND VI

By Steve Cook

The searchlight paused for a moment, barely a handsbreadth away from Tera's foot, and she held her breath. Vi's armour dug into her back as she leaned away from the light as far as she could. In response, the big cat slipped her tail around Tera's waist, drawing her closer. The searchlight's beam wobbled slightly, as though whoever was controlling it had changed hands, and continued on its measured sweep over the fractured ground.

Tera let her breath out slowly, condensation puffing off into the night air. "Bit close," she murmured.

"We should go back," Vi growled, gently moving Tera off her with one paw. "Something's not right."

Tera nodded. "I feel it too. More lights on than usual at the base. But if we don't get that Yellow, we're going to have bigger problems on our hands." She peered out from behind the ragged shard of rock they had been hiding behind. "Looks clear up to the bridge. Come on."

Ahead, the outpost walls reared up. Four main towers rose at its corners linking walls of sheer metal that seemed to emerge fully-formed from the stone plateau. They surrounded a much taller building that was speckled with lights, a few of them visible as balconies with open doorways. A dozen or so guards were visible only as silhouettes against the moonlit sky, lazily patrolling along the walls.

The bridge over the moat was lit by two more powerful lights but, across the small dribble of stagnant water that separated them from the outpost, the base of the wall was cast into deep shadow. Just visible was the outline of a door that led into the base. Vi stopped a short distance away and lowered herself to the ground.

Tera clambered up onto the cat's smooth metal torso, gripping onto the small handles that emerged automatically at the shoulders. She crouched low.

"Go for it," she muttered.

Vi exploded into movement, darting away from the bridge and covering the remaining twenty metres in a heartbeat. She leapt, soaring across the moat in a single bound and landed on the other side, metal claws digging furrows in the rock as she skidded to a halt.

Above them, the searchlights continued their pattern. No shouts of alarm were raised, and Tera slid from Vi's back.

Tera began to run her fingers over the wall. Up close, its surface wasn't as smooth as it appeared; it was made of panels of varying sizes, all made of the same dark metal, and she let out a little sound of satisfaction as she found one that was raised slightly above the others, low enough that she had to crouch. With her other hand, she groped in one of the pouches belted to her leg and fished out a metal shim and a bypass.

"Gently does it," Tera whispered, prying the panel open with the shim. It resisted for a moment before popping off and falling into her waiting hand. She set it down against the wall and put the shim behind her ear. Revealed beneath the panel was a neat array of circuitry surrounding a small grouping of access ports. Four red lights glowed next to the ports.

"I'm detecting some movement on the wall," Vi whispered. "Shift change, maybe. Hurry it up, eh?"

Tera combed through the tangle of ribbon cables connected to the bypass, plugging each one in to the wall as she unravelled it. One by one, the red lights turned green, then blinked off.

There was a dull thump as the locks on the huge door disengaged; red light spilled out onto the bridge as the door opened to reveal the garage beyond.

"Anyone?"

Vi's whiskery sensors twitched towards the opening, then shook her head. "All clear."

"Alright, let's do this."

The garage stretched under the entire base, a square room broken only by convoy trucks parked at irregular intervals and the detritus of a recent delivery. On one side and up a short concrete slope, two large rolling metal doors led to elevators. Next to the elevators, a much smaller pair of doors were labelled 'Stairs'. The red lights gave everything a grim caste, as though bathed in blood.

"There," Vi said. "That's the one Seneca said she saw coming in today."

The cat pointed towards one of the heavyset convoy vehicles. It was matt black, the body raised up on huge caterpillar tracks, still attached to the armoured trailer it had been pulling. The slitted yellow eye of the Priesthood emblazoned on the doors seemed to stare back at them, unblinking.

"Boost me up," Tera whispered, her words echoing uncomfortably far in the hollow space. Vi let Tera climb up onto her back, then stood up on her hind legs to allow the young woman to clamber onto the roof of the trailer.

"Ok. Just need to break the encryption, and-"

"People coming," Vi hissed, and Tera heard it a moment later. The unmistakable whine of the elevator descending. "Time to go."

Tera shook her head. "Not without the Yellow, not now we're so close." Adrenaline giving her wings, she fished a screwdriver out and undid a hatch on the trailer. As the last screw tinkled to the ground, the elevator slowed and stopped. Tera ignored it, flipping the hatch open to reveal a large lever.

She threw the lever, pushing herself off the back of the trailer in the same movement. Vi caught her, lowering her to the ground, and they both crept between the caterpillar tracks and under the convoy.

The elevator door opened, two guards emerging. Simultaneously, a large section of the side of the trailer Tera was hidden under popped open with a hiss.

One of the guards, the taller of the two, put up a hand. "Hey, you hear something?"

"No," the other said. "The gate's been left open though. Maybe a rat got in, or a squirrel or something."

"A squirrel?" The guard snorted, the sound distorted by the helmet. "Not likely round here. The sapes have pretty much killed everything bigger than a mouse. You hear what they did to that guy training them? Nothing left but an arm, I heard." The voices were coming closer, and Tera looked at Vi with wide eyes. The cat shook her head and drew a claw across her throat.

"Man, can't those idiots on requisitions finish any job? Look at the state of this place. Rubbish strewn all over the place, one of these vans is leaking..."

Their boots, the only thing visible from under the trailer, passed by, and Vi slipped out from under the trailer. The two guards were armed, narrow black slug-throwers held in casual grips. She prowled closer to the guards, and Tera rose up behind her, fists clenched.

"Close the gate and call it in, I guess," the tall guard said, putting one hand to his ear. "We've got a-"

Vi leapt, slamming into the back of both guards. With one wide paw on each, she pinned them to the ground, their slug-throwers rattling away across the concrete. From just below her shoulders, two thin tentacles whipped out, jabbing into the space between the guards' helmets and shoulder armour. One sank home, the tall guard barely even getting a gasp out, but the other scuffed off of black plasteel.

"Hey-" the short guard said, trying to twist around to see, but Tera darted around and brought her fists down on the back of his head. There was a crack, and he went limp, the only movement the rise and fall of his chest.

"This one's out like a light," Vi said, lifting her weight off both guards. "That was close."

There was a crackle from the tall guard's helmet that fuzzed into a tinny voice. "You've got a what? Say again, Patrol Ten-Fifteen, is there a problem?"

"Now can it be time to go?" Vi said, tail flicking.

Tera ran back to the trailer. The back had popped open to reveal a metal case, the length of her forearm. She flipped it open, and a yellow glow suffused her face. Inside were ten metal-capped vials of yellow liquid, each held snugly in hollows cut out of foam. She stared for a moment at more wealth than she could hope to make honestly in a year, more than most of the village could hope to make together, and then snapped the case shut.

"Let's go."

Clutching the case under her arm, she slung herself up onto Vi's back. With a skitter of claws, the cat bounded out through the gate, across the moat, and away into the night.

The sun was tinting the sky red as they crept back into the village, marked only by a few early-risers. Most houses were firmly shuttered, those that weren't boarded up, but in the front window of Seneca's place a single candle burned. Vi let Tera down at the door and padded a few paces away.

"I'll only be a moment," Tera said, tapping lightly on the door. She opened it without waiting for a response, slipping inside.

The room was uncomfortably cold, the heating element dark and dead. The walls were bedecked with pictures drawn by children, portraits, small mosaics made of pieces of scrap metal; fragments of a long life and a large family. The old woman herself was sitting in a rocking chair under a pile of blankets, eyes closed. Tera closed the door with a soft click and crept forward. If she left the box on the table, maybe she could avoid another conversation-

"I'm not asleep," Seneca said. "Just resting my eyes."

"Could have fooled me," Tera said. She held the box of Yellow out as Seneca opened her eyes and stretched. "Here, just like you said."

The Elder looked at the box for a moment before reluctantly taking it. "You risk too much, young one. Breaking into a facility just for a few ergs of Yellow..."

"These will keep everyone going for over a month," Tera said, as Seneca opened the box. "And besides, you're the one who tipped me off. It was much easier this time." The yellow glow, more sickly than gold, played over her face and cast flickering shadows behind her. As the Elder picked one of the vials up, the patterns on the wall twisted as though the shadows moved of their own volition.

"Here. I know you need one for Vi." Seneca held the metal-capped erg out, and Tera stowed it away in a pouch. "The rest, I'll see distributed throughout the villagers."

"Make sure you keep one for yourself, Seneca. The village can't have its Elder sat in the cold like this."

Seneca closed the case and laid her liver-spotted hands on it. "I will, dear. You've ensured warmth and warm meals for many tonight, Tera. Thank you. And please thank Vi too."

"I will."

Tera left, clicking her tongue to Vi. The cat came out from behind the house, stretched, yawned, and padded along beside her as they headed for home.

"She's getting old," Vi said.

"Shh! She'll hear you. Or someone will."

"Eh." Vi waved one paw in a shrug. "She knows it, we know it. Eventually they'll be looking for a new Elder. Or someone to lead, at least."

"Probably Simms. He has the ear of most of the farmers and the market folk, and he holds a lot of sway." Tera grimaced. "He's got contacts with the Priesthood, too."

"He's controlled by them, more like. Can't see Simms sending us on midnight raids to bring back Yellow; he's more likely to force people to tithe more." Vi shook her head. "You're right, though. I don't know who else."

They were through the village now, out to the familiar trails of the junkyard, moving around rusting hulks and old building materials. The wind whistled between the stacks of crushed metal, harmonies that seemed to make the scenery sing, and Tera whistled tunelessly along with it as they burrowed closer to home.

The immense war machine they lived in was balanced precariously at an angle, its long-decommissioned weapons driving like spindly legs into the ground. A ladder lashed together from metal framing and cables gave Tera access to the upper sections while the loading bay, big enough to hold three trucks, normally made for a roomy place for Vi to settle. Now, though, it was cold, the metal walls leaching the heat away.

Tera turned and put a hand on Vi. "Alright then. Let's do this." With her other hand, she drew out the vial of Yellow.

"Y'know, I was thinking," Vi said, her jewel-like eyes flicking nervously from the vial to their house. "It's getting cold - winter's coming on - and you're going to need to start reserving some of this for the heating. Can't have you getting cold, like you said to Seneca."

"Listening through walls again, huh?" Tera shook her head. "Kneel down. I know this hurts, but you'll feel better once I've installed it, hm?"

"...yeah," Vi murmured. She sat down, flattening herself to the ground. "Just... carefully, yeah?"

"Always." Tera climbed onto the cat's back, sliding back towards her tail. The tech that made up most of her body was scuffed, contrasting violently with the sleek smoothness of the biological components - the tail, the eyes, the ears. They were as slick as if they had been oiled, and only her own claws could leave a mark on them. Much more carefully than she had at the base, Tera slid a shim out and levered open a small panel, halfway down Vi's spine. Beneath, the cap of a Yellow erg was visible.

"On three, ok?"

Vi nodded, and without hesitation Tera slid the old erg out, slotting the new one in as the cat bucked and howled beneath her. Slamming the access panel closed, Tera rolled off Vi's back and landed on all fours.

The cat, her back bowed as though under some intense pressure, tore at the ground with her claws, chips of stone flying in all directions. A glowing pulse of energy, starting at her back and lighting up every readout and telltale on her body, ran through her and she shuddered in its wake. Panting, Vi rounded on Tera.

"*On three*, you said," she growled.

"Look, it's done. Would it have hurt less if I'd counted?" Tera snapped. "Are you... are you ok?"

Vi sighed out the last of her tension. "Yes. Yes, of course, I feel fine - better than I did. There wasn't much left in that one, was there?"

Tera held the drained erg up and shook it. Only a dribble of Yellow remained in it, barely enough to heat a meal. "No. I didn't realise you were getting so low." She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't tell me. What would you have done if you'd run out suddenly?"

"We'd have sorted something out," the cat muttered. "Probably. Besides, I used more than I might have normally tonight."

Frowning, Tera got to her feet. "You are playing fast and loose. What am I supposed to do if I don't have you any more?"

"Eh, we'd work something out, I'm sure. Listen," she went on, ignoring Tera's protests. "I need some time to recalibrate, apportion energy to the right places. Time to sleep, hm?" She turned and wandered into her sleep-space, turning round a few times in the pile of pieces of foam she had scavenged from the junk.

Tera scowled. The cat didn't look tired; the raw energy playing up and down her limbs had dimmed as she martialled the new erg. "You just don't want to talk about it," Tera muttered, but before she had even finished the thought, a fresh wave of tiredness washed over her. "But yeah, sleep first."

She climbed up the ladder and navigated the slanted top deck towards the command module. It was snug, the terminals pressing in on a space barely big enough for a camp bed and sleeping bag. Tera slid her boots off and climbed in, shutting the door against the growing dawn. In the suspended space, all light blotted out, she closed her eyes and slipped into sleep.

"Tera! Wake up!"

She started into wakefulness, jerking upright and fumbling for a weapon. Her fingers found the knife taped to the underside of the terminal just to her right before she was even really conscious.

"It's the village. Tera, wake up! The priests are attacking the village!"

She could hear it now, far off but still too close. The dull thumping of rotors and the occasional whine of a slug-thrower. "Are they looking for us?" She stood up, shoving the door open and squinting in the sunlight. It was maybe a little past noon.

Vi didn't reply, but her lashing tail said it all. A tall column of smoke was rising from the centre of the village, two rotorships hovering like dark talons to either side. Occasional shouts mixed with the staticky voices of the priests drifted on the wind.

Tera climbed out of the command module and half-slid down to the ladder. Vi all-but scooped her up into the saddle before she was tearing between the stacks, back towards the village fast enough to snatch the breath from Tera.

"They're here because of us," Tera hissed. "We have to fix this!"

"Fix it? How?" Vi slowed to a crawl as they reached the outskirts, the first few tumbledown buildings hiding them from the view of whoever was in the village square. "Those ships have probably brought two full patrols. Priests, confessors, the works. We're two people, Tera."

Sliding from the cat's back, Tera crept along a low concrete wall, heart pounding as the crackling voices of a priestess became audible.

"-someone in this village is to blame, old one, and you're hiding them."

"No, I swear," Seneca's voice came back, cracked and edged in pain. "We would never do anything to anger the Priesthood."

"We've been aware of the thefts for a while, crone. The last shipment had trackers in them. Now the trackers are here. Child's play, really."

"We trade for any ergs we have, trade crops and craftwares," Seneca protested weakly. Tera peered carefully around the end of the wall, holding her breath.

The priestess, her helmet open to reveal yellow eyes, was stood over Seneca's prone form. "You're lying," she said, crouching down and touching the Elder's chin in finger and thumb, almost tenderly. "I despise lying. It is often the province of those too weak to face the truth, too weak to stand in its light. You don't strike me as weak-willed, though, which means you're lying to protect someone." She held

Seneca's gaze for a moment more, then stood up, wiping her fingers off on her uniform. "If the thief is not given up, there will be retribution."

Quickly, Tera swept her gaze over the rest of the square. Several other villagers had gathered at the disturbance, but more than a dozen priests, slug-throwers up and batons ready, were keeping them at bay.

"We have to do something," she hissed, but Vi shook her head.

"There's too many of them. That's a death sentence-"

"It's a death sentence for Seneca if we don't! I can't stand by and watch this." Tera peered back around the corner and her breath caught in her throat. Seneca was looking right at her, from the ground, as though she had known where Tera would be. The Elder shook her head, so subtly. *Stay*, she seemed to say. *These people need you.*

"Last chance," the priestess said. "Or I take this one for more intense questioning. She doesn't look like she'll survive much, but I'm prepared to be surprised."

In dismay, Tera watched as two priests roughly pulled Seneca to her feet, her arms pulled tightly behind her body. "I'm going out there," she said, rising, but Vi's heavy paw pinned her back in place. "What are you doing?"

"Go out there and you die! Then what?" Vi's ears were right back, tail twitching angrily as she pushed Tera down.

"Then we fight for what's right! Seneca shouldn't have to go with them because of something I did - we did!" Tera twisted under Vi's iron grip, watching helplessly as the guards marched Seneca onto one of the ships that had landed for pickup. The last few armoured priests climbed in after them. One put a hand to his ear, then nodded. "Priestess Ophelia. Rotors up when you're ready."

The priestess took one last look around, voice ringing off the ramshackle buildings. "Enjoy your warmth, your hot meals, your stolen energy. Consider carefully where it comes from, for this village is by no means important or even worthy of consideration. You tithe, just enough, but don't think that will protect you. Next time there is even the faintest suspicion, we will simply send in the sapes. Then, only ash will remain." She let her words sink in as she walked to the ship, putting one foot up on the boarding platform. "For the Chimera!"

The soldiers echoed the shout, almost lost as the ship's rotors thrummed into high power. It took off vertically, lifting away from the village and away into the bright air.

Vi finally released Tera, who scuttled out into the open. She watched, powerless, as the ships became black dots that quickly vanished with speed and distance.

"What have we done?"

"Survived," Vi said. "Which is what Seneca wanted. We're more use to these people free and able to do what we did last night-"

"What we did last night is what caused this problem in the first place," Tera snapped. "We're getting her back."

"What?" The cat sat back on her haunches. "That's insane."

"I'm not leaving her to be killed. Or worse, reconditioned." Tera stared at the village square. The few villagers who had been nearby were looking around at each other, almost dazed, unwilling to even move into the centre. "Look at these people. They're cowed by the Priesthood. Well, I'm not. We're not afraid of them. Right?"

She looked at Vi, fists clenched and shaking with anger, seeing her own distorted reflection in the cat's marble-smooth eyes. Vi sighed, shaking her head. "If we get her out, she can't come back here. We're condemning her to a life of hiding. Have you thought of that?"

"Better than what they'll do to her." Tera as she straightened up. She tensed, forcing the words out. "I'm going, Vi, with or without you."

The cat nodded sadly. "Yeah, I know. We can try. It'll need planning, though. Can't just fumble our way in like we did last night."

"Thank you," Tera said, fighting not to let the relief she felt crowd everything else out. She climbed up onto Vi's back.

"Where first?"

"Back home. We'll need every trick we've got," Tera said.

The giant cat turned and scampered off in the direction of the junkyard, Tera hunched over and gripping the handles with white-knuckled fists.

Vi paced back and forth, her tail whipping the air, as Tera brought the last pieces of the command console outside. "That's the last of it," she said, setting it down alongside the rest. Removed from the module, the pieces seemed to take up a lot more room, laid out as they were over the ground. The bird's nest of wires that connected them only made the whole seem more complex.

"Good." Vi settled down, sending her tentacles out from under her shoulder panels to rest across the top of the nearest piece of the console. "Let's get on with it, then."

Tera sat down cross-legged but didn't turn the console on. "I know we want to save Seneca, but... this is dangerous, Vi. When I said every trick, I didn't mean this one."

"You were right though." Vi shook her head. "Seneca gave us the information, but we're the ones that acted on it. We're responsible, and Seneca's taking the fall for us. It doesn't sit right. The only reason I was against acting straight away was..."

"Was what?"

Vi sighed. "Was that if you went out there, you would get shot. Almost immediately. We're good, but we're not immortal, Tera. Or, at least, you're not. And if I take enough damage, I'll shut down too. And the thought of... that..." She lowered her head and rested it on her front paws. "It would be lonely, without you."

Tera stared at Vi, mouth slightly open. "You too," she blurted out, then lamely put a hand on Vi's shoulder. "I mean, I'd be lonely without you... too."

"So, yeah," Vi said, filling the awkward silence. "If we're doing this, it's at full capacity. We only put the new Yellow in this morning, so even burning through it at the rate I will be... it'll be fine. Maybe we can snag some more on the way through."

In answer, Tera thumbed the console into life. It whirred for a moment, clicking, and then the solar cells brought the little screen to life. Gently, she took one of Vi's tentacles and squeezed the tip, revealing a needle.

"Ok, here we go," Tera said. She slid the needle into one of the two input ports on the console, wincing as Vi stiffened slightly. The second one brought less of a reaction, but Vi's eyes went black.

Lines of writing, indecipherable, began to scroll up the blackness of those glassy orbs, and when Vi opened her mouth only static crackled out. Brightness burst from Vi's eyes, a grid of red light that scanned up and down Tera's body, then snapped off as abruptly as it had emerged. The blackness cleared, replaced by a yellow circle hovering in the centre of each eye, unsettlingly like an iris and pupil, and then Vi blinked.

"Sapient Unit Felis 6 Administrator access granted," she said, her voice flat and cold. "Primary settings override permitted."

Tera breathed out shakily. "I wish we knew why this worked," she muttered, then raised her voice so Vi could hear her. "Access combat schematics. Unlock..." she grasped for the words, always so familiar and yet just out of reach of her conscious mind. "Unlock advanced settings. Override safety parameters."

"Some programs require additional peripherals," Vi said tonelessly. "Current programs available: Climbing. Swimming. Fall Control. Boost. Personnel Suppression. Remote Vehicular -"

"All," Tera said, interrupting the litany. "Activate all advanced settings."

The command console clicked for a few seconds, the whirring of the tiny fans increasing.

"Warning: extended use of advanced settings may result in premature draining of energy reserves. Continue?"

"Yes," Tera said. "Confirm."

"Advanced settings now enabled. Do you require any further assistance?

"No, thank you," Tera said.

"Thank you for using Sapient OS version 15.6.2." Vi's mouth closed with a snap and, gently, Tera unplugged her from the console. After a moment, she retracted her tentacles and her eyes warmed back to their gentle orange glow. She shuddered, and Tera was at her side in a moment. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah," Vi said, flexing her claws and stretching. "This is... wow. This is what Priesthood sapes feel like all the time? It's like I had all these things that I had forgotten how to do, and now I've remembered."

"But you're ok?"

"I'm fine. I'll be fine." Vi bounded to her feet. "Come on, get your stuff together. If we're doing this, it had better be tonight."

Tera watched Vi for a few more moments as the cat pranced around in the clear space in front of their home. She seemed to move more smoothly, leap more sprily, and when she experimentally slashed her claws at a piece of sheet metal, it crumpled like paper. Her purrs reverberated off the junk, filling the space.

Pushing down her worries, Tera clambered back into the cool darkness of the war machine. Her gear was mostly hung up down in Vi's bay, the broad open space decorated with webbing containing all manner of scavenged riches. From the ground nearby, she slung a Priesthood-issue pack onto her back, then gathered her tools. Her stun baton had enough charge for at least three uses, and she clipped it onto the pack alongside a torch. Into the top of the pack, she threw a few of the bypass chips and the cables they needed, then fished out a small case of plastic cards.

"I should stop saving these for a rainy day," she muttered, taking two of them out. The words 'All Access' glistened on them, one of them warped by the heat of a fire. Pulling it from the wreck of the downed hovership had been tricky, but it might still work. She stowed the cards away, grabbed a metal bottle of water and a small ration pack marked with the yellow eye.

"Alright," she said, coming back out and hitting the button to close the door. "I think I'm there."

In three quick strides, Vi was next to her, skidding to a stop. She seemed to vibrate with unbound energy, ears twisting this way and that.

"We can get close by and then wait until nightfall," Vi said. "I can do some scouting that way." She raised a paw to help Tera up, then crouched in readiness. "Hold on tight."

Tera grabbed the handles only just in time, as the cat leapt away into the gathering twilight, every leaping pace throwing up a cloud of dust.

The outpost crouched, a darker presence against the night sky almost hidden behind the glare of searchlights. At the roof, one of the two rotorships was tethered by a thin cable, light pulsing up its length as it charged. Tera's gaze swept the area in front of the tower, the ridge on which they had made a temporary camp providing some cover.

"Anything?" She looked back at Vi, whose whiskers were in full sensor mode.

"Yeah. Plenty. I can't penetrate the walls, but there's a pair of HK sapes guarding the garage door we used yesterday, and another two on the other side. One, I could take no problem. Two… maybe."

"Priests?"

"Up on top, sure. There's maybe a dozen between the towers and walls. And then the rotorship, but where the other one is I can't tell you."

Tera cast around for something to scribe with, finding a small needle of scrap metal on the ground, and sketched out a rough map in the dust. "Ok. Easiest access is still through the garage. These places aren't meant for people to get in by foot. We might be able to climb…" She looked up at the tower doubtfully. "Long way, though."

"I could," Vi said. "You, less so. No, for you the best way in is definitely through the garage. I'll draw those sapes away while you open it up. I can climb up and over once I've shaken them off, or double back and in if the door's still open. Here." She held a paw up towards Tera. A small hatch opened in the paw to reveal a tiny bead of metal, perhaps the size of a marble. "Commlink."

Tera took the little receiver and pressed it into her ear. "You manufactured this just now? From what?"

"I'm really thinking we should have played with the advanced settings months ago," Vi said airily. "They're making things much easier. There's all sorts of things I can do now."

Tera narrowed her eyes. "And the Yellow situation?"

Vi didn't meet her eyes, looking off towards the outpost. "Enough for now."

"That's not good enough," Tera said. "If you run out, you'll shut down. Easy pickings."

"I'm not going to run out," Vi retorted. "Not before we're done here tonight, probably."

"Probably?"

Vi sighed. "We going or not?"

Tera looked from the cat to the tower. "This conversation isn't over," she said. "When we get back, we need to properly work out what you can do and what you can't." *And what takes too much energy,* she finished silently. "Give me a minute to get down there before you get their attention."

"You got it." Vi nodded once, turned and bounded away down the slope. Tera watched her go, then hopped over the side of the ridge and half-climbed, half-slid down the slope.

The way up to the moat was littered with spurs of rock big enough to hide behind, the shadows myriad thanks to the blinding patrol of the searchlights. From one rock to another, Tera crept closer, brief snatches of line-of-sight showing her the HK sapes on the bridge. The hunter-killers were smaller than Vi, sleek black panels of plasteel clinging to their compact bodies, and they stood silent sentinel in front of the garage door.

Tera checked the distance to the narrow moat and brought her finger to her ear. "Ready," she whispered.

There was no response, not from the commlink, but a high ululating sound echoed from further away. Tera peeked out again, pressing her cheek against the cold rock, in time to see the two sapes snap their heads around. Heart thudding in her chest, Tera leaned around further to follow the direction of their gaze.

Vi stood at the top of a rise, silhouetted against the moon. Lightning seemed to crackle around her whiskers as she posed, one paw raised in challenge. The strange cry came again, like nothing Tera had ever heard from the cat, but for the sapes on guard it was clearly a challenge. They looked at each other, arched their backs and leaped. Claws skittered on the ridged metal of the bridge and then they were

away, up the slope and towards Vi faster than thought. Tera opened her mouth to warn Vi, but the cat was quicker. The glowing energies around her seemed to swell and focus on her feet, outlining every joint, and she was away. Like a lightning bolt, she arced from rock to rock and off up the hill, the sapes giving chase almost as quickly.

Tera waited a moment for the frenzied chase to go out of sight, then slid down into the moat. It wasn't wide, but the oily water shone unpleasantly in the moonlight and moved only oozily as she slipped in, drenching her canvas trousers. She hunched her back to keep the bottom of her pack from dipping into the unpleasantly warm water. A few pieces of refuse floated sluggishly away from her as she scrambled up the other side and looked around.

"I'm at the wall," she muttered into the commlink. "Time to see if these cards work." She unhitched her bag and fumbled through it, sliding the warped plastic card out. "This one first, just to see if it-"

The door rumbled as it began to open, and for a split second Tera stared dumbly at the card in her hand. Then adrenaline spiked through her and she flattened herself back against the wall. Red light spilled out, and with it came three more sapes. Two of them bounded away across the bridge, following the others, but the third stopped for a moment. Its blunt head rocked back and forth, sensors tasting the air, and Tera shrank away as it padded a couple of steps towards her. She was still, too still for the sensors to pick up, surely, but -

Another howl echoed off in the hills and the sape turned, tearing away after Vi. Tera gasped out a half-sob and forced herself up on watery legs towards the garage.

Inside, all was quiet. The vehicles stood like silent sentinels, no movement visible. She raised a finger to the commlink. "I'm in. You've got three more on your tail."

Only the tiny static of a dead connection came back at her.

"Vi?"

The word vanished into the cool silence of the garage.

With one last look back out into the wasteland, Tera slung her bag back on and began to make her way between the trucks.

The elevator stood alluringly open and for a moment she considered it. There was nowhere to hide in there, though, and she continued on to the stairs. After listening for a moment and hearing nothing, Tera began the climb.

Knees burning, Tera leaned against the wall and gathered her energy. Several times she had ducked into a corner or behind a door when footsteps rang out, but each time they had passed by without checking the stairwell. The red lights of the lower floors had given way to white emergency lights, bathing everything in harsh shadows, and what surfaces weren't grey metal were concrete or glass.

One of the little glowing screens that every other level seemed to have was embedded in the wall nearby, and she wearily tapped on it. It lit up, displaying a map of the building.

"Sape storage," she murmured, scrolling up with two fingers. "Another three floors to... detention block. That must be where they're holding Seneca, unless they've got her at the very top." She sighed. "Better hope."

Her breath slowed to a more reasonable level, she crept up another flight of stairs, then another, even more slowly. The third one led to a short passageway with a door at the far end, the words 'DETENTION' printed above the door. Tera slipped her stun baton out of her bag, charging it with a barely-perceptible whine, and moved towards the door.

It slid open on her approach, revealing a square room beyond. A central console looked down upon three corridors of detention cells, each one with space enough for five doors. A single priest stood at the console, helmet off and head bent to the controls, but as the door opened he looked around. His eyes widened.

"Hey-!"

Tera bolted forward, stun baton out, and jabbed it into his neck, thumbing the activation stud. The guard spasmed, every muscle in his body contracting at the same moment, and, shuddering, slid to the ground in a clatter of armour panels. The room went quiet but for the climbing whine of the baton recharging. Tera stared down at her victim long enough to check that he was still breathing, then put the baton down on the console.

"Cell 14," she muttered, scrolling through the entries. She cleared her throat and pressed the vocal input. "Open cell 14."

The console whirred and, from the corridor in front of her, a sharp click sounded, followed by a hiss.

"Seneca?" Tera said, coming around the console and down towards the door. "You there?"

The cell was small, barely a bed and a commode. The remains of a meal tray sat on the floor, the grey protein cake untouched. At first, Tera took the bundle of cloth scraps on the bed to be nothing more than blankets, but then Seneca shifted. She blinked in the dim light.

"Tera?"

"Seneca, I'm here to get you out," Tera said, coming to the Elder's side. The woman seemed to have aged overnight, several cuts and weals visible where she wasn't swaddled in the tattered remains of her robes. "What have they done to you?"

Seneca moistened dry lips. "Tera, you shouldn't have come. It isn't safe."

"I'm here, and I'm getting you out. Come on," Tera said, sitting the old woman up and arranging herself under one bony shoulder. "Up you get."

"No," Seneca protested, trying to shrug off Tera's hand. "Don't. They said that if you came-"

Tera heard the hiss of the door opening even as Seneca's voice trailed away into fearful silence, bootsteps ringing on metal. She peered out into the corridor. In the centre of a semicircle of priests, all armed with slug-throwers, Priestess Ophelia stood with her hands on her hips, her eyes almost glowing yellow.

"Come out," she called. "Don't make us come in and get you, thief."

Tera looked at Seneca but the old woman was disconsolate, her eyes fogged by tears unshed.

"Come on," Ophelia said again, her voice strident. "There are no other exits; it would be a pretty flawed detention block if there were. Out."

Tera lowered the Elder to the ground and stepped out into the corridor, hands up.

"Good. At last, some sense." Ophelia stepped forward, blocking the end of the corridor.

"How did you know I was here?" Tera tried not to stare at the ends of the slug-throwers, focusing instead on Ophelia's sharp-featured face. "I didn't set any alarms off."

"Having the old woman meant that eventually, given any sort of conscience, the real thief might come and try to get her back. Or some other well-meaning soul from the village. Either way, we root out dissent. But I think you're the thief, aren't you?" Ophelia leaned back against the console. She wasn't wearing her armour but instead a uniform of blacks and greys, tall boots that covered her calves, and a small beret on brilliant ginger hair. "I have to say, I'm impressed. Whatever strategy you used to get past the sapes, we'll have to find a way around that. I didn't think the villages around here had access to anything technologically complex enough to fool a hunter-killer." She smiled, not a pleasant expression. "But I do enjoy being corrected. It's only through making mistakes that one can learn."

She doesn't know about Vi, Tera realised, fear keeping her expression blank. Her gaze darted to the stun baton, still uselessly resting on the console, and back to Ophelia.

"So what now? You torture me, like you tortured Seneca? You sick monster!"

"Good grief no," Ophelia said. She held a hand out and one of the priests handed his slug-thrower over. "I'm going to shoot you."

She raised the slug-thrower and pulled the trigger.

Tera had a split second to prepare for the impact, her lips already forming a shout to stop, to wait, and then something slammed into her side. She was thrown against the wall as the echoes of the slug-thrower going off rattled around the corridor, and she looked up to meet Seneca's wide eyes.

A red stain spread across the Elder's tattered robes and she stood for a moment, legs shaking, before collapsing to the ground.

"Tsk. A waste," Ophelia said. She gave the slug-thrower back to the guard and held her hand out for another one. "We would have reinstated her, probably. Ah well. Someone else will step up." She raised the second weapon, sighting down the barrel.

A dull thump rocked the building, an explosion far below, and another one. The lights flickered once, then went red as an alarm blared.

Ophelia's eyes narrowed. "Someone else is here," she muttered, then shook her head. "Clever girl. Seal the exits! Whoever they are, they've outrun five sapes. You, on the door. You two-"

Whatever the order was going to be, she didn't complete it. One entire wall of the detention block exploded inwards, concrete dust and shards of metal blasting towards them. Two priests screamed as they went down under the hail of shrapnel, and Ophelia ducked to the right with the other two, slug-throwers held ready.

Tera crouched, coughing as the dust billowed in. Her ears were ringing and, somewhere beyond the noise, someone was shouting her name.

"...era, Tera, you there? Tera?"

It was coming from the earpiece, and she coughed again before responding. "I'm here. Is that you, Vi?"

In answer, Vi bellowed and leapt into view, tearing the console to shreds as easily as she had the walls. Greenish blood was streaming from numerous rents in her armour, revealing blistered flesh beneath. Her tentacles flashed out, stabbing forwards, and the scream of another priest told Tera that they had hit home.

"How did you get through the-"

"No time," Vi said back in her ear. Ahead of Tera, Vi was thrashing around in the too-small space. "Get Seneca and get over here!"

Tera looked down at Seneca sadly. There wasn't any need to check her for life; blood had soaked through her robes and pooled on the ground around her. Tera laid a hand on the Elder's shoulder for a moment. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Tera, *now!*"

"It's just me. Seneca is... that priestess shot her."

"Damn... she's got cover; if I go in there they'll shoot me," Vi said in her earpiece. She looked down the corridor at Tera and gestured with one paw. "On my back, now!"

Tera took a deep breath and ran, the short distance up the corridor giving her enough momentum to throw herself up onto Vi's back. The damage was worse up here, armour plates crumpled like paper, but Vi didn't seem to be affected. She turned, shuddering slightly as two more slugs slammed into her, and leaped out of the huge hole she had created.

The ground fell out from under them for a moment and Tera gasped at how far the ground was. The rest of the facility seemed to be laid out like a child's playset. Gravity caught them, turning their leap into a tumble, Vi's voice barely audible over the rushing wind. "Hold on! Don't let go!"

Vi spread her paws and, with a snap, webbing shot out from back-leg to front. The sudden deceleration as their fall became a glide almost sent Tera over the side, scrabbling with fingers made numb with clenching. After a wobbling moment, the flight straightened out, and Tera looked back past Vi's tail to see Priestess Ophelia. She was leaning out of the hole Vi had blasted into the side of the tower, smoke pouring from it, but even that could not eclipse her shining yellow eyes. She stared for a moment, then turned and disappeared back into the building.

Tera tore her gaze away from the tower. "How can you do this?" she shouted against the wind, remembering only belatedly the earpiece.

"Skills," Vi replied. "I wasn't totally certain it would work-"

"And you jumped anyway?"

"Better that than get shot. After I dealt with those sapes, I knew you'd have found some sort of scrape to get into."

"You killed all five?"

"Nah. One of them I threw at the building - that's what made the hole. They chased me all the way out here, though. Long way."

In the distance, Tera could see the village. It was odd to see the place from so high up, Tera thought, so small seen from this angle. By comparison the junkyard, which had always seemed so small, spread much further. The view dipped alarmingly, though, as Vi began a dive.

Even through the earpiece, she sounded tired. "I'm going to bring us down, ok?"

She angled, bringing them in low over the plain aiming for a blank patch of ground, and the impact nearly threw Tera from the saddle again, but after skidding for a few metres they came to a stop in a cloud of dust.

"That was... amazing," Tera said, clambering wearily to her feet. "And terrifying. I'm not sure I want to do that *ever* again."

Vi didn't respond and, when Tera turned to check on her, she cracked one eye open. "Not sure I can," Vi said. "Bit low on... everything really."

The thrill of their escape vanished in a moment as Tera took in how badly injured Vi really was. The tip of her tail was missing, blood dribbling out, and much of her armour was destroyed or battered beyond use. One of her ears was torn and bloody and around her mouth was smeared with green.

"It's not all mine," Vi said, as Tera looked at the blood.

Tera pried open the access panel and brought up the Yellow readout. It blinked red, the little monitor showing empty, and she sat back in disbelief. "You burned through it all?"

"It seemed... worthwhile," Vi said, the words seeming to come only with difficulty. "To know what I'm truly capable of... I'm something different, Tera, something better than those sapes. I don't know what... maybe I never will."

"Stay here; there must be something I can do," Tera said, laying one hand on Vi's head. "Don't do anything."

"Can't," Vi said. "Stupid."

Tera got to her feet, every part of her protesting, but she was no good to anyone lying there. She looked around desperately. What was it Vi had said - the sapes had chased her this far? Leaving her bag, she sprinted for higher ground, climbing up, barely caring that the jagged rock tore at her fingers.

At the top of the short incline she paused, screwing her eyes up and staring out across the ruins. She saw a dozen likely shadows, discarding them one by one, until she alighted on one she thought might be right. She ran, hoping against hope, stumbling over rocks and scree, until she reached the shadow.

"By all that is good," she murmured. The corpse of one of the sapes lay there, almost literally torn limb from limb. A huge bite had been taken out of its back, through armour and spine both, and its head was at an angle that suggested its neck was badly broken. She wasted no time in running up to it and pulling at the plasteel around the wound on its back.

"Somewhere here," she muttered and, gritting her teeth, plunged her hand into the body cavity of the sape. It was warm still at its core, the unfamiliar organs bulgy and vile to the touch, but her heart leapt as she made contact with something hard and cylindrical. It was about the right size, and with a heave she wrenched it free.

Her arm was green to the shoulder and the thing in her hand dripped with gore, but beneath it all the glisten of Yellow could be seen. With the sape's erg in her hand, she ran back to Vi.

The big cat put up none of her usual fuss, barely able to do much other than let out bloodflecked breaths, but when the half-full erg slid home she shuddered under its influence. Tera stood back, giving her room to stretch.

"Ew," Vi said after a moment. "It feels... used, somehow." She grunted as Tera thumped her hard, and chuckled. "But thank you. Good thinking."

"I thought you were going to die," Tera said, thumping her again, then throwing her arms around Vi's neck. "Don't *do* that to me."

"Like I said, I'm not sure I can," Vi said. "Unlocking these abilities was good but... dangerous."

"You were incredible," Tera said. "The way you-"

From back in the direction of the distant outpost, a burst of noise rose as the rotorship took off. It hovered in the air for a moment before turning away from the village, heading north.

"Want to bet that's the priestess?" Vi said.

"At least she's not headed for the village. They're scared," Tera replied.

Vi frowned. "That's probably not good in the long-run. People do things when they're scared that they wouldn't otherwise do. Bad things."

"Yeah... or brave things," Tera said, her eyes focused not on the outpost but on Seneca's face, the determined look she had worn as she had taken the slug. "We can't stay in the village, but we have to let them know. About Seneca."

"I'm... sorry we couldn't get her back," Vi murmured.

Tera shook her head. "She was brave, even to the last. And I never would have forgiven myself if we hadn't at least tried, but... maybe this will show the villagers what the Priesthood is really capable of."

"They'll look for us in the village first," Vi said. "So where do we go from there?"

The question danced on the wind between them as they stood looking out over the endless view, and after a moment Tera rested a hand on Vi's head.

"Somewhere together," she said, and turned to go.