

Sergeant Drake hummed softly to himself a song from his youth as he mindlessly flipped switches on the instrument panel in front of him.

“Instrument checks complete. Fire Toad systems ready” a soft female voice filled the cockpit.

He looked up to the view screen and touched the insignia of the skull and crossed swords painted directly under it along with the number 04.

“I’m getting too old for this.” He muttered.

He pressed a button on the panel and spoke into his headset. “This is Drake. Status.” The reports from the other two Fire Toads at his right and left crackled their readiness into his headset. “Let’s move out.”

The three armored fighting vehicles lumbered forward, the wet snow crunching beneath their mechanized legs. They marched in unison at a steady pace, across a flat valley of ice and snow. As they approached the sheer face of a glacier, they could make out an ice cavern opening like a black mouth on a glass white face.

“That’s our objective.” Sergeant Drake spoke into his headset. “We lost contact with a unit of Shock Troopers on a routine scouting mission in this cavern. This is a search and rescue. It will be close quarters inside. Stay alert.”

The three Fire Toads paused at the entrance. “It’s too narrow for us to stay in formation. We’re going to have to take this single file.” Drake ordered. “Velasquez, take point, I’ll take the rear.”

The Fire Toad marked 06 moved forward and entered the cavern followed by 08 and 04.

The ice caverns darkness was split by the white lights on the mechanical walkers. The sounds of ice breaking echoed in the cave as the rhythmic cadence of footsteps moved the Fire Toads forward.

“The walls spread out up here further. I think that we can...” Velasquez’s voice trailed off as the sound of crackling ice was replaced by a metallic thud.

“Sir” he spoke again. “The floor here is metal. I think this is a base of some sort.”

“Communications to base have been cut off, sir.” Corporal Remington’s nervous voice cut in. “I think that explains the loss in communications with our troopers, sir. I suggest we head back and let command know this is an enemy base.”

“You suggest?” Sergeant Drake spoke harshly into his mic. “We have missing soldiers in this cave mister. And we’re not going to leave without them. Understood?”

“Yes sir.” A sheepish voice whispered.

“Form up tight on me, lets press forward.” Drake ordered and the three Fire Toads pressed on. “See if we can determine which faction this base belongs to. We need to know what we’re going to come up against before we do.”

The hallway was a mixture of ice and metal, with the clear ice showing the metal behind it in places.

“This doesn’t make sense sir.” Velasquez spoke up. “The metal wall is behind the ice in this section. Like the metal was here first.”

“This base must not belong to any army then. It must have been here for a very long time, before this planet’s current ice age.” Said Drake. “It’s going to make it harder to figure out what we’re up against.”

“Not that hard” whined Remington as they passed a Therian Nanogenerator unceremoniously planted in the ice along the far right wall. “It’s safe to assume we’re going to be out gunned. We should call in for reinforcements.”

“You might be right.” Sergeant Drake thoughtfully muttered. “Alright.” He said. “Here is…”

The unmistakable sound of a nucleus gun pierced the silence in the cavernous Therian base. An explosion followed instantly as the three Fire Toads wheeled around to face the sound of the attack. Three more shots rang out and two more explosions filled the frosty air as fire erupted from the metal frames of the Fire Toads.

“Move back the way we came in and fire everything you’ve got at the direction of those sounds!” Barked Sergeant Drake as he thumbed the fire suppression toggle switch on his instrument panel, instantly dowsing the fire that was smoldering the right side leg of his Fire Toad. “And give me your damage reports!”

The three walkers fired blue bursts of laser fire toward the dark hallway where the attack originated. Sergeant Drake watched his view screen as the unmistakable form of four Bane Goliaths appeared briefly illuminated as the blue streaks of light impacted on the walls behind them. He noticed one bane covered in red armor.

“Nina.” He said to himself as he pushed the throttle back on his controls.

The Fire Toads moved quickly to the narrowing ice hallway. Nucleus gun fire tore into Velasquez’s Fire Toad as he took the rear in the formation. The metal legs of his AFV groaned under the stress of the repeated hits and seized completely.

“I’m immobilized!” Velasquez shouted into his headset.

“Eject!” Sergeant Drake barked in reply.

Velasquez pressed flipped a clear plastic cover protecting a red button surrounded by yellow and black caution stripes. He mashed his finger into the red flashing button as four Nucleus cannon shots tore into the stationary Fire Toad. It burst into an echoing cacophony of sound and fire as it exploded.

Sergeant Drake grinded his teeth together in frustration at the loss of a pilot. “Keep moving.” He ordered Corporal Remington.

The sounds of the pincer, bladed legs of the Banes could be heard scratching down the hallway approaching the smoldering Fire Toad as its frame blocked their access to the fleeing, damaged Fire Toads still moving. They fired their guns in between the cracks in the obstacle toward the survivors. The

Fire Toad marked 04 returned fire as he continued moving for the exit. Two of the four Banes crumbled to the ground with smoking, molten hot holes in their armor.

They were almost out of the cavern base. The wall on the left of the fleeing fighters disintegrated revealing a shiny black Wraith Golgoth. The human like face buried in the front of the new enemy smiled at the sight of the adversary.

“On our left sir!” Screamed Corporal Remington as he griped the trigger of his two laser cannons. His Fire Toad turned to face the new opponent. Instantly the Wraith darted forward on its spider like legs and opened fire with its Sonic Cannon. The sound of a banshee scream flooded the cavern as a wave of sonic fire smashed into Corporal Remington’s Fire Toad. The twin laser cannons on the front of his unit began to smoke and burst into flames.

“My weapons are gone!” Remington shouted into his communication system. “I’m running for it!”

“No!” Ordered Drake. “Stay with me, that’s an order! I’ll take be able to cover you.”

Corporal Remington ignored his order and turned his Toad toward the exit and began a desperate sprint. The Wraith mechanically turned and fired with its two Nucleus Cannons ripping into the frame of the fleeing Remington. The smoking Fire Toad skidded to a halt and stood motionless.

“Remington!” Sergeant Drake yelled. “Remington!” He screamed again in desperation. He mashed more buttons on his console and his Fire Toad began running toward the light of the day at the end of the corridor. More screams of sonic fire swirled in the air as Sergeant Drake pressed forward. In a desperate move, he swung his Toad around to face the Wraith and fired both Laser Cannons. The shots hit the Wraith in the black metal legs, cutting them almost completely in half leaving them useless. Drake spun back around and pushed forward.

His Fire Toad cleared the cavern as his view screen was filled with the brilliant light of day. His communications light blinked green and a voice sounded in his ear.

“This is base. Sergeant Drake, I thought we lost you. Report.” A voice from command spoke.

“Command this is Drake. The cavern in question is a Therian base. I repeat, a Therian base.” Drake replied.

“What’s your status?”

“I’ve lost Remington and Velasquez. I sustained hits as well.” Drake somberly responded.

“We’ll send a convoy your way to retrieve you.” Command said.

“Negative.” Said Sergeant Drake. “I’m not going to be around much longer.”

Drake looked at his view screen and the three Wraith Golgoths and two bladed Hekats standing in the snow in front of him.

“Just blanket my current location with artillery. Drake out.”