

The klaxons blared while red lights flashed in Marcus's bedroom, waking him up. He sat there in bed, motionless for a second, hoping that some miracle would shut them off. He'd only been asleep a few hours. Maybe the problem would just go away on its own.

Marcus sat up, sheets falling off his grey uniform. *Of course it won't*, he thought. *I'm the one who makes the problems go away.*

Marcus got out of bed, slipping into a pair of simple shoes. He put on his navy jacket, symbol of the ARCHANGEL Project emblazoned in silver on the back: six angelic wings, extending radially out from a central light. Most personnel with the Project had much more ornate uniforms, with hats and pins and belts and all sorts of things, but the uniform of a Pilot was simple. It had to be, as it all had to be stripped off in a moment once the time came.

That time was now, as Marcus hurried down the cramped steel hallways towards his hangar. Every corridor on board the *Vitality* was tight: spaceships aren't exactly designed with resort-like conditions in mind. Columns of armed soldiers, sporting body armor and loaded assault rifles, ran past Marcus. He always felt the mobilization of the normal soldiers was silly: it wasn't like there was much they could do.

Marcus made a left turn around a corner, to see his commander standing there. Commander Jacobs was a physically intimidating man, standing six foot four, and built like a boxer. The man could scream like no other, and the five stars pinned to the front of his uniform meant he could scream at whoever he wanted. The Commander wasn't screaming right now, however, and was instead looking down at a datapad, brow furrowed.

"What's it like, Commander?" Marcus said, stopping to stand at attention.

"Stand down, Pilot." Commander Jacobs ordered. Marcus relaxed. "It's big, we know that. Estimates have it at 300 meters. It's a little over 5 miles out from the city outskirts, so we need to deploy now. Walk with me."

The Commander began walking down the hallway towards the hangar, pace increasing. Marcus followed close behind.

"Offensive capability, sir?" Marcus inquired.

"No idea," Commander Jacobs replied. "We haven't tried to engage it yet. At 3 miles, local military is set to engage it, try to buy you some time."

"They'll get slaughtered." Marcus said quietly.

"Yep," the Commander responded, his legendary hearing having picked up Marcus's comment. "But so will everyone down there if that thing isn't stopped. Few for the many." Marcus silently nodded. "The thing's been officially given the name Laran."

"Laran?" Marcus questioned.

"Etruscan god of war." the Commander simply responded.

The two men reached the end of the hallway, a big steel door labeled "HANGAR 1 ACCESS" in stark, red letters. The Commander stopped and gestured towards the door.

"Mission's same as always: kill the Demigod with minimal collateral. The rest is yours, Marcus."

Marcus nodded and entered the door silently. Inside was the annex for the Hangar, sort of resembling a locker room for one. A pair of small lockers, a bench, and a small shower in the corner were the only notable features of the cramped room. Marcus wasn't sure why the shower was there: if this room was in use, there wasn't really time to get a good clean shower.

Once he heard the *swoosh* of the door sliding closed behind him, Marcus tossed away his jacket, and began to strip. A few of the personnel bitched at Marcus every time for not using the lockers and generally making a mess of the place, but Marcus didn't really care. Every second counts.

Once Marcus was fully nude, he walked towards the second door in the room, opposite the one he came in from. This door, in equally large and red text as the last, said "PRIMING CHAMBER". The Priming Chamber was Marcus's least favorite part.

Marcus walked through the door, to meet the gaze of two scientists. Their cold glare reached Marcus through their protective goggles. Behind the goggles and the layers of protective environmental gear they wore, Marcus couldn't tell which two members of the *Vitality's* science team were there, only that they seemed inhuman in all of that gear. In their hands they held various implements. The scientist on the left sported a large gun-like object with a big metal cannister affixed to the back. The other held a smaller device, only the size of a flashlight or so, with a metal needle sticking out of the top.

"Top of the morning, boys" Marcus said, hoping to lighten the mood. The scientists didn't respond as they approached him. The gun-sporting scientist aimed his device at Marcus and pulled the trigger, releasing a spray of orange fluid onto Marcus. Someone had explained to Marcus what this stuff was during training, but he didn't remember. All he remembered is that it smelled foul, and protected his skin from the more acidic qualities of the liquid that filled the cockpit.

It was the other scientist, though, that Marcus particularly disliked. The scientist circled around to Marcus's back, out of view. Marcus closed his eyes and gritted his teeth in anticipation. It seemed like the scientist was just standing there, waiting forever before finally doing it.

The sharp pain in Marcus's neck broke the anticipation, causing him to scream in pain. No matter how many times he did it, the surprise of the probe's needle being shoved into his neck never failed to surprise him.

"Neural probe secured," the scientist said, no sense of emotion in his voice. The other scientist nodded, having just finished spraying Marcus with the pungent liquid. "Go ahead, Pilot, you're clear."

Marcus walked towards the next door, which, in the biggest and reddest text of them all, said "HANGAR". He debated giving the scientists the finger, but wrote it off as a waste of time. They wouldn't care. They're just doing their jobs. Marcus walked through the door.

The room he entered was the smallest of them all, maybe six by six at max. The room was featureless except for a circular panel at the center of the floor.

"I thought hangars were supposed to be big," Marcus grumbled, door *swooshing* behind him. He approached the circular panel, and it automatically opened, revealing a pool of purple liquid. The hole was barely big enough for one person to get in, but that was OK: only one person had to get in.

Marcus held his breath and jumped into the liquid. He didn't have to: the liquid was oxygenated, and he'd be able to breathe in it just fine, but it seemed like ritual for jumping into water, a holdover from his childhood days at the pool.

Water this was not, however. The liquid was less dense than water, and Marcus began to sink like a stone, descending through the claustrophobic steel pipe. Despite the layer of protective whatever that had been sprayed on him, the purple fluid still tingled, the acidic mix reacting to the foreign agent that had just entered it. Sparse lights illuminated the pipe, allowing Marcus to track his descent.

This stuff is disgusting, Marcus thought. I'm basically sinking in a pool of blood. Actually, I wish it was blood. I have no idea what the hell this shit is. It's just whatever's running through this thing's veins.

Marcus saw himself descend past the heavy black line in the pipe, indicating he was now officially in his "cockpit". Shortly after, his feet hit the bottom of the pipe. Instinctually, Marcus reached for the heavy cable behind him, plugging the prongs into the receiving ends on the probe in his neck.

“Neural link created. Communications check.” Marcus gurgled in the purple liquid. He realized he was never told if this stuff was poisonous or not, but with the number of mouthfuls he’d swallowed of it when making that declaration time and again, he figured if it was, he would’ve died by now.

Communications normal, Marcus heard in his mind. Neural communication was a weird thing. Instead of relying on a visual or auditory means of communication, the leadership on board the *Vitality* used a system which projected their messages into his mind, like foreign ideas which were thought in someone else’s voice. *Cockpit closing now*.

Marcus saw the shadow of the hatch closing above him, then the secondary panel closing overhead, where that black line was.

Orbital drop in three. Two. One. Orbital drop successful. Vehuel is in freefall to the planet’s surface.

Vehuel. The name of Marcus’s Archangel. It was protocol for the Project: all Archangels would be designated the name of a Biblical angel. Marcus thought the theming was cute. Vehuel specifically meant “The Great and Exalted God”. Marcus could see how that was a fitting name for the war machine.

Neural link ready. Pilot, are you ready?

Marcus hesitated. The neural link was the crux of the ARCHANGEL Project. It was basically a hitchhiker on Marcus’s brain. Once activated, it would disconnect the connections to Marcus’s senses: his eyes, his ears, his mouth. He would no longer be able to move his arms, his legs, or any part of his body. With the exception of critical bodily systems, like the heart and lungs, and the brain, Marcus would basically become comatose. This freed up mental space for the neural link to create new connections.

“Ready” Marcus gurgled. He didn’t have to speak. Once the communications system was in place, he’d be able to simply think to his commanders. Marcus just liked the final gesture of control over his own body, an expression of the control Marcus was about to lose.

Control shifting to Vehuel in three. Two. One.

Marcus opened his eyes. Well, not his eyes. He saw a planet, surface a gradient of reds and greens and blues, covered with the whites and greys of clouds. Around it, the black void of space, with the blinking twinkles of a million stars splattered over the cosmos. The planet was rapidly growing larger. Marcus was falling.

Marcus moved his left arm. It was incredibly muscular, and plated in stark white armor, steel plates shifting and contorting as he stretched his arm. The hand at the end was tipped in ivory claws, sharp and pointed. They were probably eight inches long.

No they aren’t, Marcus corrected himself. His sense of scale was off now that he’d shifted perspective. Those claws were probably a dozen meters long. He could easily palm a city bus like this.

Marcus moved his right arm, before checking his legs. The legs were one of the things that took Marcus the longest to get used to in training. Unlike human legs, these legs were reverse-jointed, with the thighs going back to the joint, only for the bottom of the leg to jut forward. Marcus thought it was as though someone had put the thing’s legs on backwards. Like the arms, the legs were covered in steel plates, all a sort of hospital white. In fact, Marcus knew his whole body was covered with the things. The plates were partially for defense, to provide some protection from the more vulnerable interior. They mostly for distinction purposes, though. Without them, he’d look like a monster. He’d scare the civilians just as much as any Demigod.

Marcus reached behind and felt the rifle magnetically attached to his back. Big enough to be mounted on a spaceship, that Thermal Rifle was Marcus’s main handheld weapon.

Marcus moved his hand down, to the sword sheathed horizontally across his lower back. Marcus was a worse swordsman than he was a marksman, but sometimes he needed to defend himself when things got close-ranged.

The thud of a soft impact and a slowing in the descent clued in Marcus that he had entered the planet's atmosphere. In a few minutes, he'd hit the ground, hopefully pretty close to the Demigod. Lauren, or whatever it was called.

Laran, Commander Jacobs's voice echoed in Marcus's mind. Unfortunately, the communications link remained even while Marcus was piloting.

Sorry sir, Marcus thought back. *I've never liked the whole 'Naming monsters after gods' thing. Seems like glorifying the enemy.*

Do you know why we've never named a Demigod 'God' or 'Yahweh', Marcus? Commander Jacobs asked sternly. *It's because we as a civilization haven't discredited that particular deity yet. We only name Demigods after deities we have abandoned. False gods. Myths.*

I sure fucking wish that these things were myths, Marcus thought back. Myths didn't interrupt Marcus's sleep.

As Marcus fell, the ground became more clear. It was a grassland, with sporadic trees dotting the landscape, surely planted by colonists hoping for reminders of Earth. There was a large mountain in the distance, snowy peak and all. There was a small herd of some native animal, probably quadruped from the looks of it, running frantically. Marcus looked in the opposite of the direction they were running. Sure enough, there it was. Laran.

Marcus struck the planet's surface with a massive impact. Planetfall always hurt, but the Archangel body was built to take it. It was sort of like running into a brick wall, only to break through it. At least, Marcus assumed that was what it was like. He'd never broken through a brick wall before. At least, not while piloting.

He stood up in the crater he had created, getting used to the pull of gravity on his massive body. He reached back and grabbed his rifle, holding it in his hands, massive claw on the trigger.

How's the neural link, Marcus? Commander Jacobs said in Marcus's mind.

Fine, he responded plainly. It was always weird, having the senses of his own body replaced with that of the Archangel's. Basically, the neural link transplanted his own mind into the Archangel, allowing him to control and feel the Archangel, instead of his own body. The feeling was weird, like driving one car for twenty something years, only having to hop in the driver's seat of a friend's car. Only, it was more primal than that. Marcus had to relearn walking in this thing. Seeing. Running. Fighting.

Marcus looked up and got a good look at Laran. It was a massive fucking thing, lumbering towards a city in the distance. It was humanoid, almost unnervingly similar to a human. It's skin was a sort of dark grey, with purple veins visible underneath the thick, leathery skin. It swayed its big, bulging arms while it walked. It had a bit of a slouch, so Marcus couldn't see the thing's head from his perspective, only the ridges running down the thing's back.

Marcus took aim with his rifle. He put the Demigod in his sights as it lumbered, either unaware or uncaring of Marcus's presence. Marcus pulled the trigger.

A beam of red heat burst forth from the barrel towards the monster. The vented hot air pushed the rifle up, like the recoil of a rifle. Marcus remembered a scientist mentioning that the rifles could be designed to vent heat in such a way that it caused no recoil, but forcing the rifle to mimic a normal, human-sized rifle increased the amount of basic soldier training that translated to piloting the Archangel.

The beam shot forward and pierced the back of the Demigod. It didn't wince or even really react with any indication of pain. It simply turned around slowly, locking eyes with Marcus. It had four glowing, red eyes, and a mouth that stretched from ear-to-ear, or at least where ears would be

on a normal human head. It's mouth was slightly agape, revealing rows upon rows of needle-like teeth.

Ugly son of a bitch, Marcus thought.

Laran began turning and walking towards Marcus. Drool, or something equivalent to it, began dripping from its mouth. Marcus lined up another shot, and placed his claw on the trigger-
WHERE THE FUCK DID THAT THING GO, Marcus thought in fury. It was gone. Just like that. Disappeared in the blink of an eye. *Son of a bitch!* Marcus screamed internally. Marcus frantically spun around, looking for the monster. Demigods always had some sort of stupid trick up their sleeve, some edge they had over the Archangels.

We lost it too, Marcus, the Commander reassured. *No heat signature, no visual, nothing. It's just gone. Stay alert. Demigods don't retreat.*

Marcus stood there, rifle ready to shoot. The Commander was right, no Demigod in history had ever retreated from a fight. The second anything engaged a Demigod, it was always a fight to the death. They never retreated. They never gave up. They just killed and killed until they died.

MARCUS WATCH OUT!

Marcus felt a sharp pain in his abdomen, a screaming, burning pain. He looked down. A long grey spike was now protruding from his body, purple liquid gushing from the exit wound. The thing got behind him. He had no idea how, but it was right behind him, and it'd stabbed him with some sort of spike.

Instinctually Marcus dropped his rifle to the ground, a massive *thud* resulting when it landed, leveling some nearby trees. With both hands, Marcus grabbed the spike extending from his body. He had no idea how the Demigod disappeared, but he had no desire to try and figure it out.

The Demigod behind him roared. Marcus watched a flock of birds get spooked and fly off about a mile away. Marcus couldn't retreat, though.

Target is held in place, Marcus thought to his commander. *Launch Orbital Lance.*

Confidence degree for the Lance is only 97%, Commander Jacobs responded. *Confirm acknowledgement of risk.*

I KNOW THE DAMN THING MIGHT HIT ME JUST LAUNCH IT, Marcus barked.

Simple 'yes' would have sufficed, the Commander retorted.

Marcus knew he just had to try and hold the thing in place. He could feel the pain of the spike buried into his abdomen. Purple fluid continued to gush forth from his body onto the ground, sizzling as it corroded away the foliage and dirt beneath him. The Demigod roared again, as it attempted to pull the spike out of Marcus's chest.

As if, Marcus thought, and he pulled the opposite direction, yanking the spike even further through his own body. He winced.

Suddenly, Marcus felt a massive pain in his right shoulder, like a thousand knives penetrating him. He looked over, to see the monster had bitten through his plate armor, and was starting to try and tear away a chunk of his shoulder flesh. Marcus tried to scream, but the faceplate his Archangel was wearing had its mouth forced shut.

Ten more seconds to Lancefall, Marcus, the Commander reassured Marcus. *Hold on.*

The pain was excruciating. Marcus could feel individual sinews being torn apart, as the mass of flesh was being ripped from his body. Marcus had to scream. With all of his force, he focused on snapping the metal plates holding his mouth shut.

Eight seconds.

Marcus felt the plates begin to shatter. His lower jaw began to move downwards, his faceplate cracking.

Five seconds.

Marcus felt his faceplate break in half, all of the metal plates holding his mouth closed shattering. Marcus clenched his razor-sharp jaws.

Three seconds.

Marcus screamed. But it wasn't his voice. He was silent, drifting asleep in the veins of this monster. Instead, he roared with the voice of this monster, louder and ever more bestial than the Demigod. Nothing in his voice was recognizable as human. He sounded like a wounded beast.

The Demigod gave a mighty pull, and ripped off Marcus's right shoulder. A gush of purple blood fell to the ground. Marcus passed out.

THUD.

The Demigod stopped moving. A massive white lance had fallen straight through it. It had struck the top of its head, sliding down through its neck, then penetrating most of the way down its torso before finally exiting through its abdomen, the lance's bladed tip soaked in viscous purple blood. The creature gurgled and spat up purple blood. The spear had penetrated many of its major organs. The beast's jaws slowly fell open, allowing the chunk of Archangel flesh it held to fall to the ground.

Commander Jacobs looked on the scene from the feed in the *Vitality's* situation room, a crowd of silent scientists and engineers looking on behind him. His face was stern and silent. Everyone looked at him expectantly.

"How far are those two from the city?" Jacobs quietly asked.

"Four miles." One engineer responded.

"Marcus's vitals?" Jacobs asked, looking to the scientist intently focused on the display in front of him. The scientist stayed quiet for a moment.

"Silent" he finally said. The Commander, in response, was silent.

"Trigger the contingency." the Commander quietly ordered. A few people closed their eyes in solemn acceptance, another person began to cry.

"Yes sir." A scientist to the Commander's left responded, as he began to type.

"Contact the Project Directors. We need a new pilot, and a new Angel." Jacobs continued.

"Yes sir." Someone behind him quietly responded.

On the planet's surface, Vehuel's chest began to glow white. The light of the glow started to grow more and more intense. Suddenly

BAM.

Vehuel's body exploded in white light, consuming the Archangel, the Pilot, the Demigod, and everything within two miles. Trees were flattened and disintegrated. Lakes and rivers evaporated. The windows of every building in the city shattered from the shockwave, and citizens were deafened, even from inside their bunkers.

As the light faded, nothing remained but a massive burn mark in the ground. Vegetation wouldn't return in that area for decades.

Commander Jacobs got up and turned around. He began to walk towards the door, never letting an ounce of emotion slip from his face. All of his men looked at him, each distraught to a varying degree. As Jacobs reached the door, he turned to address his men.

"Marcus knew what he was getting into, and he was one of the best Pilots in the program. He killed twelve of those bastards, and saved an estimated 500 million lives."

The Commander turned around, and walked through the door. As he left, he turned his head back one last time.

"Make sure the next one's even better."