

Pain is the Fuel

by Travis Taylor, 1968-

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“Move your ass, Navy!” Deanna shouted as loud as she could. Granted at the moment that was probably not very loud, considering she was upside down with her FM-13X transfigurible fighter mecha pinned against a bulkhead of an alien megaship by a Chiata porcupine fighter, with the alien’s green glowing expanding tendrils speared through most of her fighter and her left thigh.

“Apple1, Ares squadron is several moments out!” the voice on the tac-net alerted her. “We are seeing much more resistance than expected.”

“Resistance, hell, this is suicide! We should flash out of here now!” another, younger, and much more frightened voice said. The icon in Deanna’s direct to

mind, or DTM, display told her it was a fresh out Navy aviator that had yet to be inside a Chiata Horde's megaship during a grab-and-go mission.

"Stow that shit, Ensign. Ares squadron keep pressing forward!!" their squadron leader ordered.

"Are you fucking kidding me!" Deanna realized that the Archangels' backup wasn't coming anytime soon. If she didn't already know that the best pilot in the universe was Navy she'd be cursing the entire branch of the military. But her wingman had split off into Team A and left her to lead Team B. She had no idea what had happened to DeathRay since he flashed out with his half of the Archangels to the second target ship. Oh, she could see his icon in her Blue Force tracker on the mindview of the battlescape, but he was thousands of kilometers away on another alien ship.

"Shit, we're on our own, Skippy," she muttered to the little alien beetle bot that was holding on to her armored shoulder as though it required no effort at all. She thought her father had been a bit overzealous in attempting to take two Chiata megaships in one attack. But on the other hand, it blessed her with plenty of Chiata to kill. "Team B, looks like we're alone in here. I hope DeathRay is doing a bit better."

"Apple1, it is really thick down here. What are your plans?" Lieutenant Tina "FreeMason" Barkley, one of the newest Archangels, asked. Dee could tell from her mindview of the battlescape that the new pilot was holding her own, but was in some thick shit with her wingman "Monopoly," who was a deck below and a few hundred meters back.

"We don't let the fuck up!" Dee grunted as she used her left armored hand to partially extend the suit's sword blade. She swiped the blade through the tendril in her leg and yanked it free. Green, glowing alien blood squirted from the armored mechanized alien appendage like a firehose spraying the cockpit. "Fuck that hurt!"

Deanna didn't have time to watch her armored suit seal the wound or to bitch about the pain and blood loss. Her team was getting hammered and they had yet to complete their mission: to secure the bridge of the alien megaship. She felt the entire ship suddenly jerk as if it had been pounded by gluonium bombs. The bulkheads vibrated so hard that her teeth chattered against her mouthpiece. She accidentally bit down on the block that released stimulants and pure oxygen into her helmet. She probably needed the stims anyway.

"Shit! We have to move, Archangels!"

"Warning, multiple systems failures are imminent. Warning structural integrity fields are at nine percent and failing," the Bitchin' Betty chimed.

Dee, this mecha is toast. We should flash out to the MADIRA, her artificial intelligence counterpart—or AIC—Bree, who was embedded in her head just behind her left ear, told her in her direct-to-mind voice.

No goddamned way! I promised Davy I was killing ten of these alien bastards today and I've yet to kill but three! Dee's mindvoice screamed at her AIC.

Major, we must abandon this mecha. It is reaching critical status, Bree warned her again.

You're right about this mecha though, Bree. Dee toggled the canopy eject cycle and the explosive bolts fired the transparent metal into the porcupine mecha that was wrapping its tendrils around her upside-down bot mode fighter. The flying

canopy bounded into the cockpit of the alien craft, knocking it backwards just enough to loosen its grip on her mecha's torso. Dee pulled the ejection handle. *This mecha is history. Blow it when I'm clear!*

Holy shit, Dee!

The ejection seat fired, slamming Dee helpless against the couch from the extreme gee loading. As the seat rocketed away from the alien bulkhead and her crushed mecha, the tip of the headrest caught against the alien fighter. This induced a crazy, mad, spinning tumble, on her. Fortunately for Dee, the interior of the upper deck of the alien megaship was immense, and there was plenty of room to flail about.

The ejection had startled the one alien that had her, but the porcupine's wingman was hot on her trail, firing green plasma bolts across her trajectory. Dee held on for dear life, hoping the gods of crazy assed U.S. Marines were smiling on her at the moment. She looked at targeting Xs about her in her mindview of the battlescape as she spun across the chasm that led to the final upwell to the bridge of the ship, hoping she could turn her misfortune into a plan. Just as the green plasma from the alien's wingman looked like it was going to track into her path, Bree exploded her damaged mecha.

The quantum generators of the FM-13X her grandmother had made for her became a fireball of orange and white plasma and high velocity shrapnel that skittered across the vast alien room into several of the Chiata that were closing in on her. Two of the Chiata were knocked backward off their feet. The one that was octopus-hugging her mecha burst into glowing green and red liquids, liquid metal, and plasma across the deck plating.

That's four, Davy! she thought.

The hardpoints of Dee's armored suit disconnected from the spinning ejection chair allowing her to engage her jumpboots against the base of the chair flinging her free. As she somersaulted and rolled across the deck to bleed off the energy of her trajectory, she expanded the sword on her left arm and pulled the hypervelocity automatic rifle up with her right, firing it as one of the targeting Xs turned red. Dee brought herself to a control trajectory by sliding across the deck on both knees. The armored environment suit screeched against the alien metal on the floor with a deafening high pitch that only added to the cacophony of plasma fire, mecha pounding, and explosions all about her. As she slid through the momentum she had to lean backwards until the back of her head rubbed the floor and her knees almost snapped in order to limbo beneath the tendril of one of the now extremely pissed off aliens. Dee watched as the tendril passed within millimeters of her helmet's visor.

She rose swiftly, using the momentum of her fall to add to the strength of her blade swing. The sword ripped through the alien mecha's lower right leg, throwing sparks in every direction. Dee spun to face the mecha with her rifle and went full auto with the hypervelocity armor piercing rounds into it. The shields on the mecha flashed out and plasma vented from it. The mecha slumped on its severed leg and fell with a *kachunk* to the deck. Quickly she bounded to her feet and did a back tuck onto the top of the canopy firing the rifle into the alien pilot, splattering the glowing green alien blood all over her armor. As she let herself take pleasure in the death of the alien, another Chiata, this one in body armor and not mecha,

slipped in behind her, attempting to get the drop on her. Dee caught a glimpse of the alien's glowing eyes on the broken alien canopy glass just as the Red Force tracker alerted her. She managed to duck as one of the alien's tendrils darted in and out at her head.

Dee rolled to the side grabbing the tendril with her left hand. Before she could raise her rifle, the little alien beetle jumped from its perch on her shoulder in a blur and penetrated the Chiata infantryman's faceplate. The Chiata immediately began to flail at its helmet and writhe on the floor. It quickly went limp. In a blur, the beetle was back on Dee's shoulder.

"Damn good boy, Skippy!"

That's six, she thought.

Technically you have five. Skippy got the last one, Bree corrected.

Okay then, if that's how you're gonna play it. Dee rolled to her feet in full sprint toward the ladderwell, bringing the hypervelocity automatic rifle up and firing the hypersonic rounds in the direction of what she could only assume were porcupines put in place to guard the entrance that led up to the bridge of the ship.

"Team B, keep pressing and cover my backside. I'm pushing up to the bridge deck!" She bounced her jumpboots against the deck and covered the thirty meters across the chasm to the entrance. The last two ships they had taken had a freight elevator there. Dee wondered if this was an older model, or if the aliens just hadn't gotten around to putting in the elevator yet. At any rate, there were stairs instead of an elevator.

"Apple1, you're out of your mecha. You should wait for us!" Monopoly suggested.

"No time, Monopoly! The longer we wait to take the bridge the more pilots outside in the ball are getting hammered!" Dee looked at the rest of Team B in her mindview and realized that she was a good hundred meters laterally from them and more than a deck up. She'd have to get on them about dragging their asses later if they survived. "Move your asses and get up here!"

Dee! What are you doing? her father's mindvoice rang in her head.

I'm taking this fucking ship, sir! she replied. *Now's not a good time for a father daughter chat.*

You're spread out too thin from your team. You should wait.

I owe Davy and Nancy five more dead Chiata.

You can get them another day. You are overrun and out of your mecha—now snap back to the ship!

With all due respect, sir, I don't second guess you in the middle of a big battleship fight! And I'm kinda busy right now.

I could order you, Dee.

Then either do it or get out of my head. I'm in the thick of the shit right now!

Dee, I uh, damnit—then, that's an order.

What's that, Daddy? General? Did you say something? Something must have happened to the connection, 'cause I can't hear you. Bree get him back . . .

You know short of a damping field, jamming the QM connection is impossible.

Daddy, are you there...?

For shit's sake, Dee! General Moore said, sounding even more frustrated with her.

Dee dropped, rolled, and bounced up with her back slammed against a bulkhead as alien plasma fire pitted the metal above her throwing green and white hot sparks into her visor. She flinched slightly, but kept her calm. The two alien porcupines in the entrance had her pinned down and she couldn't press further without a better plan.

They've got me pinned down, Bree. Suggestions?

Wait for backup.

Any other suggestions?

What would DeathRay or your father do? Bree asked rhetorically.

DeathRay would go in there and kill those motherfuckers.

And your father?

He'd break a bunch a shit, blow stuff up, and kill those motherfuckers.

Deanna Moore, Apple1-that-didn't-fall-far-from-the-tree, what are you going to do?

Right!

"Okay Skippy, I could use a diversion." She patted the little beetle bot on the back with her armored hand. Instantly the alien bug shot from her shoulder like a missile, but it moved so swiftly it was almost imperceptible. "Damn!"

The beetle bot slammed into the leg of the porcupine on the left, then came out the back side and crawled up the mecha toward the cockpit. The Chiata within it must have panicked. Tendrils darted out curved back inward and started jabbing at itself. The second porcupine turned as if it was expressing the Chiata version of "what the fuck?"

"Good boy!" She bounded from her cover position on full auto with her rifle. The armor-piercing railgun rounds vaporized into the alien's shields causing them to flicker. She continued the charge until the shields fritzed out and the rounds started punching into the mecha's armor plating.

The alien fired a tendril outward at Dee but she was expecting it. She slipped slightly sideways and grabbed the tendril in her right hand, then yanked with all her suit's might. The mecha was far too heavy for an armored suit to pull down, but the pull sling-shotted Dee forward into the torso of the Chiata pilot. As she made contact, she extended the blade from her left hand—through the already weakened armor and into the alien creature inside. More of the green glowing blood sprayed onto her suit as the mecha slumped over backwards with her momentum. She rolled forward and back around firing her rifle into the already writhing alien next to it to finish it off. Skippy blurred back onto its perch on her armored shoulder.

"Great job, buddy," she said affectionately to the alien robot.

I'm counting that one! That's seven, Davy.

Bree didn't respond.

Three bounces with her jumpboots and she was at the upper deck level just outside the topside dome that was the bridge of the alien ship. They had to know she was coming. But if past experience held true there shouldn't be any mecha in the bridge. Dee had taken on multiple Chiata infantry by herself before and won. Well, kind of. She had killed all the aliens but had ended up paralyzed for a significant part of the day.

Dee pulled up the Red Force tracker screen in her mindview and could see three red dots on the other side of the bulkhead and through the hatch into the large transparent dome that was the Chiata megaship's bridge.

"Just three of them. Not so bad." She looked at the hatch controls and wasn't exactly sure what her next play was going to be.

Bree, can you hack the door, or do I blow it? she thought.

I'm having no luck handshaking with it, Dee. I think this is an old school kind of entry.

So much for surprise, huh?

Yes.

"Skippy, you got any ideas?" she said jokingly and then was shocked when the beetle jumped from her shoulder and attached itself to the control panel for the doorway. "What the...?"

The alien beetle bot's multiple legs seemed to phase in and out of reality and passed through the control panel cover and into the innards of the circuitry underneath. A couple of seconds passed, and then suddenly Dee felt as if she had been told to get ready. A vision of the door sliding open popped into her mind.

"Got it, Skippy. Go!" She nodded as she opened the grenade launcher tubes on her back. The tubes rose over each shoulder and she brought her blade and rifle up to ready. The door slid open.

Thwoomp, thwoomp, thwoomp. The grenade tubes sounded as she let three of them go into the room. She ducked back behind the hatch and let them detonate. Immediately following the three explosions Dee dropped low and dove into the room in a roll. Green bolts of alien plasma fire zipped through the air just above her head—where her torso would have been had she been standing in the doorway.

The inside of the dome room was like being inside a small basketball arena. It was at least twenty meters across and again that high to the ceiling. There were alien consoles and screens spread about the room with multiple stations, but there were only three Chiata manning them. Outside Dee could see Colonel Delilah "Jawbone" Strong's mecha squadron, the Maniacs, mixing it up with the alien porcupines in one hell of a furball.

Dee flinched as one of the Maniacs in bot mode was tossed by a Chiata porcupine against the wall of the dome. The mecha burst into a fireball almost as soon as it hit. She hoped the pilot managed to flash out in time.

No time for sightseeing, Marine! Bree shouted in her head.

Right! She stood and did a forward flip over the console. She looked for the three alien red dots to coincide with red targeting Xs in her mindview.

An alien tendril suddenly wrapped itself around her throat, catching her unaware, and yanked her hard backwards and up to the captain's chair. Dee was stunned briefly, which was long enough for the Chiata to drop from the captain's station that floated overhead and drag her down. It slammed her into the deck plating, hard.

"Motherfucker!" she shouted in pain. Quickly she bit on her mouthpiece to get a new shot of stimulants, pain killers, and oxygen. The immediate burst of energy and strength enabled her to pull herself up to all fours and then to her knees wrapping the tendril around her left forearm.

“Let... me... the fuck... go!” she shouted. Then as the alien pulled her closer, Dee managed to bring her blade down across the tendril, freeing her throat. But just as quickly, another set of tendrils darted at her. One wrapped up her left leg and the other darted through her armor on her left bicep and out the back side. The alien tossed her about, ripping her arm off just above the elbow. Dee screamed in pain and anger, and went full auto with her rifle whether it was targeting anything or not.

Skippy jumped free into the fray and Dee lost track of where he was as the Chiata tossed her about like a rag doll. The muzzle flashes from her rifle lit the room and the faint purple ion trails of the hypervelocity rounds left small sparks and explosions where they impacted against the dome or equipment or consoles. The next five or ten seconds was a mad whirlwind of Dee firing her rifle, cursing the aliens, and being shoved about. She also fought against the random flinging with her jumpboots but that was only somewhat effective. Had she been in her mecha this would have been a much easier fight.

“Shit!” she screamed. “Shit, shit, shit!”

Finally one of her rounds hit home on the alien’s midsection, knocking it backwards and off balance. Dee went to swing her blade and then saw the stump the suit had sealed off where her arm used to be. A tendril darted in at her faceplate and her pilot’s reflexes enabled her to catch it with her right hand just as it pushed into the transparent armor and into her cheek below her left eye. She squeezed at the tendril with all the strength in her suit and it burst, squirting the glowing alien blood into the wound and all over her face.

“Fuck this!” she said as she popped her grenade tubes.

Thwoomp, thwoomp, thwoomp!

“Your move, asshole!”

The Chiata realized what she had just done, and flung her across the room against the dome in the general direction the grenades had gone. The alien did its best to run in the opposite direction. And finally, Dee’s targeting Xs locked to the three Chiata in the room. She rolled up and released her rifle trigger filling the room with the *spittapping* of automatic rifle fire. It was quickly drowned out by three very loud and very close explosions.

Dee felt what must have been thirty scalding hot knives rip through her body and something slammed against her so hard it felt like she’d been slapped by a hovertank in botmode. The personal health status emergency screen popped up in her mindview and she could see before her the likeness of herself with no left arm, no legs, and several trauma spots across her torso. There was also a spot underneath her left eye that was marked as trauma.

“Warning, life signs are critical. Immunoboost and stimulants are being administered,” her suit told no one in particular.

Dee! Major Moore! You need to snap back to the MADIRA med bay! Bree told her.

Not till we have the ship!

Then out of her periphery she could see the tuning forks of the alien megaship that jutted out like giant snail antennae above the dome began to arc lightning bolts across from one to the other. The blue beam zig-zagged out into space and across to one of the alien ships tearing a hole in it. The targeted ship was so far in

the distance that Dee could barely make it out even with the zoom of her busted suit at full.

She looked over at the command console and saw Skippy flickering in and out of reality space and attached to the weapon controls. Skippy had hacked the ship. The deck vibrated against her suit from mecha pounding in her direction. Company was coming and she was done. Maybe it *was* time to flash out.

“Boss! Apple1! You are a mess!” USMC Captain Jose “Monopoly” Rayes stood over her in his FM-13X in bot mode. “*MADIRA!* Apple1 is down. Initiating emergency snap-back routine.”

“Wait! Monopoly! Captain! Do we have the ship?”

“Yes, ma’am. The Buckley-Freeman superweapon is about to go online!” Monopoly told her. “We need to get you out of here, ma’am. I wish you would have waited on us.”

“I did. See, here you are.” She did her best to smile.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Skippy, you coming?” Dee could barely manage a whisper, but the little bot suddenly was crawling into place. Dee rolled her head to the right and could see the remnants of a Chiata’s tendril dripping onto the deck. With her remaining hand she clutched the severed appendage just as the sound of bacon frying filled her ears and there was a flash of light and then she was looking up at the inside of the U.S.S. SIENNA MADIRA II’s med bay.

“What the hell is that?!”

“It’s an alien tendril, or at least it’s part of one.” Deanna told the young female tattoo artist as she sat back in the chair. It was Spring Break and Miracle Strip outside the window was covered with college kids in their minimalist beach attire and there was one hell of a party going on. Dee was enjoying being back on Earth, even if it was just for a weekend pass. Her father had her grounded until she had been cycled through post traumatic stress counseling. So, she had a couple weeks to get her shit straight. She looked down at her new toes sticking out of her flip-flops and approved of them.

I should paint them. Black. Fingernails too, she thought to her AIC. And maybe I’m gonna shave my head on the sides.

Your father would love that, Bree replied in her mindvoice.

I’m not going to ask him.

Like they say, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

Stop that. I’ve had enough of that apple shit. Apple1 died with Davy Rackman and Nancy Penzington. It’s time for me to be reborn.

Dee looked over at her friend and fellow Armored E-suit Marine Rhondi Howser and smiled. “That hurt Gunny?”

“Can’t hurt as much as having your legs blown off, but it has to be close!” Rhondi was lying face down with her naked rear face up. The tattoo artist had her cheeks spread apart and was touching up or adding details—Dee wasn’t sure which, and was too drunk to care—to the snake that curled about her body. The needle was very near Rhondi’s very sensitive spots. Dee imagined it hurt like a

mother. But Rhondi had insisted that the only painkillers they could use was tequila. Dee had accepted the challenge. And now both of them were shit-faced.

“Uh, ma’am, it’s really not optimal for me to tattoo you while you’re drunk.”

“But not illegal?”

“Well, no.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

The tattoo artist hesitated a moment, then nodded. “Ma’am, what do you want me to do with this alien thingy?”

“See how it still glows?” She shrugged, pointing at the Chiata tendril chunk.

“Uh huh.” The young lady acted as if she didn’t want to touch the disgusting looking thing.

“I want you to grind it up in some green and red ink. And I want you to put four vertical tick marks with a diagonal fifth—one like keeping score—just under my left eye here. Then I want another set of five just like that beside it,” Dee explained.

“I um, I see. You know this stuff might wear off some day. I can add some nano fluorescent spheres to the ink so it will glow forever if you’d like. You really don’t even need this nasty alien thing in there,” the tattoo artist told her.

“The alien thing goes in. Keep that ink set aside for me and me alone. I’ll pay you whatever you need to do that.” Dee said. “I plan to be back. Often.”

“Here.” Rhondi passed the bottle back over to her. “Don’t eat the worm. Its mine.”

“We can always get another bottle,” Dee accepted it and killed a significant portion of what was left in the liter container.

“Jesus, you Marines are fucking nuts. You know the ink doesn’t take as well when you’re drunk?” The man working on Rhondi’s sensitive areas laughed, as he went over them again.

“Ooh-fuckin’-rah,” Rhondi grunted through the pain. Dee could see tears running down her cheeks, but at the same time her friend was laughing.

“What are these tick marks keeping score of?” The girl getting ready to work on Dee asked.

“Those fucking glowing green motherfuckers killed the man I love and they killed my big sister.” Dee swigged from the bottle until it was empty, sucking the worm at the bottom into her mouth. She bit down on it, tasting the gooey slime as it squirted from it without hesitation. “Each mark is for an alien I killed. Keep that ink ready, ’cause, I’m gonna kill every goddamned one of them.”

“And there’s a lot of them,” Rhondi added. “You’ll have to beat me to some of them, Major!”

“You sure you don’t want some pain meds, ma’am? I mean, right under the eye right there is gonna hurt.”

“Not as much as a tat up the crack of your ass!” Rhondi snorted.

“No, thanks. Me and pain, well, that’s all I’ve got left.” Dee tried but couldn’t keep the tears from forming in the corner of her eyes. She choked them back as best she could but they were coming out. “The tank is empty, except for the pain. I’ll just have to run on that for now.”

“I, uh, I am sorry for your loss,” was all the girl could manage to say.

Dee just nodded and laid her head back against the headrest of the tattoo chair while she waited. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a poster of a young punk

guy with blue glowing eyes. She forced herself to focus on the writing. It was an advertisement for eye lens implants.

“Hey, can you get those to look like fire?” Dee asked.
