

Hoenikker paused to catch his breath. Had that really happened? Had that dumb shit really opened one of the containment rooms? The one that contained Leon-895?

A scream sounded from behind him.

Hoenikker spun and watched in terrible fascination as a specialist had his throat ripped out by the Leon. The only parts of the creature he could discern were those covered in blood. For one brief dreadful instant, the creature materialized. No longer did it blend into the background. Now it was merely the horrific creature Cruz had helped create. Almost the size of a human, with four legs, the center one propelling it forward while the outside legs helped it to maintain balance. It began to move toward Hoenikker with a slow, steady gait. "Shoo," he said. "Shoo!" He batted the air with his hands as he backed away. Why was it following him? What had he done to deserve its attention?

"Out of the way!" A security guard ran up and pushed him aside.

The woman held up a pistol.

She fired but missed.

The Leon winked out of sight.

Hoenikker could track it because of the blood, but the security guard didn't know what had happened. She straightened and looked around.

"Where did it go?"

She flew against one wall.

Then the other.

Then the ceiling.

Then the floor.

Her face condensed upon itself as a great muscular weight was applied and the head was crushed into a parody of itself.

The smell of her death hit Hoenikker in the face, the distilled essence of blood and offal and brains. His back arched as he retched. Just the sight of her face being crushed was enough to change him. But he had to get away. Hoenikker turned to run, and crashed into a group of people.

"Hey, now."

"Watch where you're going."

He picked himself up off the floor and tried to push past, but they held him firm.

"Looks like he's running from the devil," one said, laughing.

"Let me go," Hoenikker begged. "It's coming."

All eyes turned to stare down the corridor.

"There's nothing th—" The speaker was snatched forward, then slammed into the wall.

Suddenly the alarm sounded.

"I don't see it," someone said. Then he too was thrown back.

Hoenikker managed to push past, then was knocked into the side of the corridor as the others turned and fled, jostling him with their urgent need to survive. He fell to one knee, but hurriedly struggled to his feet. He had his own urgent need to survive.

Another security specialist appeared. This one was a man carrying a pulse rifle. As deadly as the weapon seemed, Hoenikker knew it wouldn't be enough.

"Run," he said, voice cracking.

"I got this," the man said, suicidally obtuse.

But there was nothing to get.

No target.

Only a corridor with dead people.

Still, Hoenikker backed away.

The Leon materialized above the security specialist.

Hoenikker was about to shout for the man to look up, but it was too late. The Leon grabbed the man by the neck, lifted him up, and snapped a bite out of the top of his skull, the brain bleeding like it was the top of a man-size ice cream cone.

The smell hit Hoenikker again. He was so used to the disinfectant aroma of a lab. Even outside of the work area, the station had a clean metallic smell, despite the rats and the close proximity of humans. It was the air scrubbers and the filters that did the job. But here, next to a hunter, the smell of the dying combined with the new scents of internal organs and sweetbreads made him want to vent everything that was inside of him.

Another alarm sounded, this one higher pitched. This one was matched by the sound of running feet.

Five guards turned the corner, only they looked different. Their faces, all identical, were devoid of emotion. Their bodies were the color of the walls and floor—their own form of chameleonism, he supposed. Each held a pistol in his right hand. Their movements were too fluid. Too neat.

*Synths.*

One grabbed him and put its arms around him. Like a hug, but one he couldn't escape.

Hoenikker wasn't sure if the gesture was meant to protect him or detain him. He struggled briefly, but found it almost impossible to even move. The synth spun and pinned him against the wall, shielding him with its back. Hoenikker craned his head to watch.

The remaining four synths fanned out in the corridor, looking back and forth, trying to find a target.

"Switch to infrared," he shouted. "It's invisible to the naked eye."

All heads swiveled to him, then each other, then to a spot near the corner of wall and the ceiling. Hoenikker saw the swatch of red just as the synths opened fire.

The Leon materialized like static, as each round found a home. It backed away and they chased after it, around a corner in the corridor. Now was the time Hoenikker should have been trying to run, but he wanted to know what was happening. The science part of his brain fought with his need to survive.

Two synths crashed back into sight, against the wall, as if thrown. The synth that was holding him let go and rushed around the corner, immediately opening fire with its pistol. Hoenikker heard a dozen shots as he crept forward.

He was about ready to turn the corner when a great invisible beast rushed past him, knocking him to the ground. It held him there, its terrible maw and gnashing teeth mere feet from his face. All the creature had to do was lean down and take a bite, and Hoenikker's life would be ended.

Three synths turned the corner, raised their pistols, and fired.

Leon-895 took off.

They ran after it, chasing it down the corridor and around the corner.