

Defeated

**Book One of
Darkness Among the Stars**

The Lost Chapters

**By
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*The following chapters were stripped from the original manuscript of **Defeated** in order to maintain a proper focus on the main characters and plot. However, they're also some of my personal favorites, so I'm happy to provide them as a free, supplemental story.*

These "lost chapters" provide a more detailed account of the struggle that General O'Connor and his marines faced during the ground invasion of Earth—events that were briefly presented when Jonathon experienced his induced visions prior to being taken captive.

The story follows the plight of two squads, and begins as the bombardment of Earth is ceasing. . .

Chapter 10

Ashes to Ashes

. . .The last of the gravitational warheads streaked through the blackened heavens and impacted against the side of the Statue of Liberty, one of mankind's greatest and longest-enduring symbols of freedom. The midsection of the statue buckled in several places before shattering inward, along its right side, leaving the top half of the towering figure to tip forward and fold awkwardly, almost apologetically, onto the island below. Lady Liberty had fallen.

Though the storm raged on, the bombardment of New York City ceased almost as quickly as it had begun. Its lofty buildings were gone, its economic might reduced to a cipher, and its population brutalized and decimated. The city had, in effect, been reduced to nothing more than a memory.

O'Connor crawled back up the hill and surveyed the damage. "We need to get emergency personnel in there to search for survivors," he yelled back to his stunned communications liaison, who was facing the horrors of war for the first time in his fledgling military career. "Sergeant, I gave you an order!"

"Huh?" Sergeant Frank Winters mumbled, snapping out of his trance. "Sorry, sir. I'll send in a request for medical aid ASAP."

Like his companions, O'Connor had known that the bombardment would happen, yet the outcome was still difficult to bear. The images of the devastation on Mars were still fresh in his mind, but even they paled in comparison to what he had just witnessed. Such utter destruction was overwhelming, almost debilitating. Even so, O'Connor knew he had to press on. His troops were depending on him for their survival, as was the rest of humanity.

After a moment of silence, O'Connor turned to face the others and said, "I doubt this is the end of the enemy's assault. If they're determined to extinguish our civilization, they'll have to deploy ground forces to hunt for survivors. And when they do, we'll be ready for them. Stay vigilant. I don't want any enemy units slipping through that cloud cover unnoticed."

Chapter 10-2

In the Shadows of Giants

Peculiar midnight-blue objects streaked through the rumbling skies of New Las Vegas, disappearing into the thick bellows of smoke that smothered the razed city. Most of the sprawling buildings had vanished from sight, either due to the gritty shroud of darkness or simply because they were no longer there. The rebuilt gambling capital had been destroyed for the second time in its colorful history, thanks in part to the city's high population count, which had always proved a tempting target to the cruelest of beings. The aliens were no different.

Lieutenant Douglas Hill and his ragtag squad of marines were hiding within a semi-collapsed building, safe from the unnatural electrical storm that continued to thunder overhead. Their desert-grade battle suits were covered in a thin blanket of ash, which was growing thicker by the minute. Most of their thoughts dwelt on revenge and ways to stay alive, the latter of which would no doubt become more important as the night wore on.

“Any word from our scout?” Hill inquired, irritated. “He should have been back from his recon patrol over an hour ago.”

“Nope,” said Private Todd Olsen while double-checking his datapad. His voice was muffled from speaking through the sealed air filter that covered his mouth and nose. “And I seriously doubt he'll be coming back either. He's been itching to find a way out of here since we first left base.”

“I should've known better than to send him out on his own. Well, we'll just have to make do without him. Post his name to the AWOL list. He can be the brass's problem now.”

“I think something’s landing, sir,” Olsen interrupted, peeking through a window. Fear-rimmed curiosity began to settle in as he peered through his helmet’s image-enhancing visor at the descending object.

“Whoa,” he exclaimed once the unidentified object came into focus through the clouds of dust and smoke that swirled around it. “The aliens are gigantic!”

“What?” There was a hint of doubt in Hill’s voice. “Move over.”

Turning off his shoulder-mounted light, the lieutenant moved beside the young private and took a peek for himself. This was done less for the sake of curiosity than because of the distrust he had for the perceptions and judgments of others, especially those of his subordinates. Yet at first glance it appeared that Olsen’s assessment was correct. Tapping an inset button on the side of his helmet, Hill increased the magnification of his visor until it had sufficiently zoomed in on the looming presence, which he studied with greater scrutiny.

Standing within the ruins of the city was an eighteen-meter-tall alien assault unit, which was every bit as extraordinary as the orbiting warships that had decimated Jonathon’s fleet. The shape of the assault unit vaguely resembled that of a man, albeit much larger and much more frightening. Its thick, black frame was almost completely covered with overlapping segments of bulky, organic armor, which were connected to each other and the frame through a complex system of interweaving tentacles. As with the other instruments of destruction that had been employed by the aliens, its dark-blue surface was masked by undulating patterns of shadows, slithering around the assortment of sharpened black spikes that had torn through its armor.

The lower arms of the giant resembled the barrels of wide cannons, with twin-pronged bayonet extensions along the rim. And around the base of its legs were rings of razor-sharp claws, digging into the asphalt with each crushing step. The head was also enclosed in organic armor, with four fang-like

protrusions curving in along the top and bottom of its otherwise featureless face. From the rear, the head draped down and split into a pair of tentacles, each straddling the giant's black serrated spine before connecting with the lower sides of the torso.

Resonant thumping followed the hulking invader as it patrolled the streets, leaving a trail of impressions in the ground and despair in the hearts of the few civilian survivors who fled from its daunting presence.

“That’s not the alien, genius,” Hill stated, turning off his visor’s magnification. “It’s some sort of mechanized battle suit. There’s probably a scrawny, green-skinned maggot with an inferiority complex hiding in the center of that thing.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better,” said Olsen, huddling against a half-crumbled wall. “How are we supposed to take that thing down? It’s freaking huge.”

Reaching up with one hand, Hill reactivated his shoulder-mounted light, shining its soft radiance into the opposite corner of the cramped room. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall, right, Tank?” he said.

Sergeant Willis “Tank” Hobbs was resting atop a pile of debris within the illuminated corner, taking up a considerable amount of space. The thirty-five-year-old kin of Dead Eye was the only soldier in the group not wearing any battle armor, considering it to be a sign of weakness. Instead, he was dressed in his usual scuffed black boots, camouflaged pants, and army-green tank top, which barely fit his Herculean frame. The deep-brown color of his skin had temporarily turned gray from the dust and ash that saturated the air. Glaring at Hill, Tank lowered the blue handkerchief that had served as a makeshift air filter for his mouth and said, “I wouldn’t know. I don’t fall down.”

“Right. Well, let’s get over there and see what kind of damage we can do. Travel light. We’ll double back for the rest of our supplies later. Olsen, contact Alpha One across the CCN and let them know we’ve confirmed the presence of enemy ground forces.”

“Sure thing, assuming the Hub wasn’t destroyed,” replied the private, reactivating his datapad.

“Oh, I seriously doubt it. That installation’s buried so frigging deep underground even a nuke can’t touch it. Nah, our communication system will be just fine. Let’s move.”

Between thunderous outbursts from the storm, O’Connor could hear the telltale hum of an unmanned dousing drone’s barely adequate antigravity engine drawing closer. A short way off in the distance, beyond the rolling sea of flames, he spotted the star-fighter-sized craft coming in low and steady. The drone’s artificial intelligence system had homed in on the rampant fire and O’Connor’s endangered squad. After crossing the fiery threshold, the drone began spraying dousing chemicals, creating a fire-retardant barrier that corralled the flames.

“General,” Winters called out, “Delta Nine is reporting confirmation of enemy ground forces in New Las Vegas. It appears to be some sort of large assault unit. His description was a little colorful. He said, and I quote, *it looks and moves just like a two-legged monster right out of a science-fiction vid.*”

“Send out a priority alert instructing all squads to actively scan for an enemy presence and engage at their own discretion,” O’Connor replied, “but remind them to use hit-and-run tactics, preferably coordinated with two or three other squads. Unless it’s absolutely necessary to group together in bigger numbers, they should avoid it. Otherwise, they risk drawing too much attention and could become a tempting target for the orbiting warships.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll get right on it.”

“Everyone stay alert and scan the perimeter for hostiles.”

Having never been the kind of leader to simply bark out orders and sit idly by while his subordinates fulfilled their duties, O'Connor joined his squad in optically scouring the area. Every shadow and wind-blown branch was probed with great suspicion. It was only a matter of time before Alpha One engaged their first target, and O'Connor was determined to make sure the battle started on his terms.

"Have we received the initial damage report on the bombardment?" Major Derek Redington inquired in his usual gruff voice.

"Actually, sir, it's coming through now."

Winters closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and prayed that the casualty report wouldn't be as bad as he knew it was. He then read aloud the disturbing assessment as it streamed across his datapad. "It appears we've suffered a total loss with respect to our bases. The aliens have also hit civilians just as hard, if not harder. All major cities and refugee camps around the planet are in ruins, with rough casualty estimates putting the death toll in . . . in the billions." As he digested the disheartening tally, Winters found himself cogitating about a word that he had never dreamed would be used to describe the future of humanity: extinction.

"Unbelievable," Redington huffed. "They've totally devastated the planet and practically bombed us back into the Stone Age. This is . . . *hopeless*." And there it was—the word that must have been resonating through the thoughts of every man and woman who wore the MPF uniform—hopeless. A description that every commander dreaded to hear. Even the major cringed as the word passed his lips, yet he couldn't help but feel as if the outcome of the war had already been decided in one crushing blow to humanity.

"Listen up," said O'Connor in a commanding voice. "I know our situation seems desperate, but you cannot give in to that despair. We're not engaged in a fight for land or any of the petty issues that have torn our society apart all too often. We're fighting for our very survival, and I, for one, intend to see to it that mankind stays off the endangered species list. There are a good number of men, women, and

children out there who are depending on us to protect them. If we fail, they fail. And contrary to what our enemy might think, the outcome of this war is yet to be decided. In fact, this conflict is just beginning. We've certainly got a long road ahead of us, but we are not traveling this road alone. All of mankind has become united for the first time in recorded history. And it's through that unity that we will repel the invading army, spreading fear and chaos through their ranks until they grow so tired of numbering their own dead they retreat from our home like the cowards they are! Now, who's with me?"

Cheering loudly, the emotionally rejuvenated soldiers raised their firearms into the air, signaling their support for their supreme commander. Winters began transmitting the general's impromptu speech across the CCN, hoping it would help bolster the resolve of the many troops who were scattered around the planet and who weren't fortunate enough to have O'Connor as their squad leader.

"All right, marines," interjected Redington, sounding more confident and authoritative than before. "It's high time we went on the offensive and showed these gutless aliens they've picked the wrong species to fight with. Stay alert and scan the perimeter for incoming hostiles. The sooner you spot them, the sooner we can trash them. Now get to it!"

O'Connor placed one hand firmly on Redington's shoulder and nodded his gratitude for the veteran's change of heart.

"Tell me, Sergeant," O'Connor continued, "what's the status of our armed forces?"

"One second, sir." Winters entered a sequence of commands into his datapad before continuing. "Um . . . close to one hundred squads have failed to report in. Fortunately, almost all of our soldiers were stationed beyond the outskirts of the cities that were hit, which helped minimize our casualties. And our hidden weapons caches still seem to be intact. All things considered, General, our ground forces are ready and able to engage the enemy."

"We've got incoming at twelve o'clock high," Redington warned, having caught a glimpse of an unnatural object as it pierced the clouds. He dropped to one knee and tapped a few buttons along his

wrist-worn control panel, activating the short-range Stormfire missile-launching system that was fastened atop the right shoulder of his battle suit. The compact, cube-shaped weapon tilted upward, following the motion of the major's eyes as he stared at the rumbling thunderheads through his night-vision visor. He continued tracking the streaking blue object and tried to acquire a missile lock, but was unsuccessful.

“The unidentified object appears to have stealth capabilities, General. It's not showing up on radar or thermal imaging. We'll have to target it manually.”

“Prep the artillery cannon,” O'Connor ordered. “Let's see what kind of damage we can inflict.”

Redington motioned for Lieutenant Jason Miller to join him and grabbed hold of one end of the camouflaged tarp covering the heavy artillery cannon. They swung the front of the tarp up enough to uncover the end of the cannon's long, dark barrel. Redington then hurried to the rear and flung away another corner of the tarp, exposing an inset command station. Stepping up onto the platform, he powered up the command console and adjusted the firing arc.

O'Connor turned his head toward Lieutenant Tina Davis and shouted further orders over the noise of the sporadic gusts. “Keep an eye out for enemy reinforcements, Lieutenant. I'm sure there are more on the way.”

“I'm already on it, Boss,” the slender, twenty-eight-year-old Brooklyn native hollered back.

“Nothin' gets by me unnoticed.”

“Sergeant,” continued O'Connor, “raise Alpha Two on the CCN. Instruct Colonel Schiffer to move his squad into position and prepare to attack the target from the rear after we draw its fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a battle imminent, the entire squad had shifted into an offensive mindset. The time for grieving had passed. They all knew that if they let their thoughts dwell on the dead, they risked joining them. It was time to fight.

The alien assault unit descended into the forest less than a kilometer beyond Alpha One's position. Moments after disappearing within the tall trees, the hostile invader started on the prowl. The quaking aspens near the landing site were quaking even harder, producing crackling sounds as they gave way to the might of the giant that was marching through them.

"Target acquired, General," reported Redington.

"Light it up, Major."

With a loud boom and a puff of smoke, the explosive shell arced toward the shrouded enemy. Bright flashes of yellow and blue light emanated from the treetops as the shell exploded against its target, shattering the adjacent trees and sending a thick column of smoke into the air. Several smaller explosions rang out soon after, once the plasma bomblets contained within the main shell scattered and detonated, illuminating the surrounding area with a colorful display of intermittent green and blue flashes of light as the plasma burned against the alien's shields. The brief destructive sequence resembled a spirited fireworks display.

"Direct hit," O'Connor announced. "Excellent aim, Major."

"Did we destroy it?" Redington inquired, having noticed no further signs of movement within the smoke-filled blast site.

"Unlikely. Their shielding technology's proven to be incredibly difficult to overcome. Fire a couple more rounds."

Another stentorian boom echoed through the valley as the second shell raced toward its stationary target. The trees began shaking again, revealing the movements of the assault unit as it lunged forward, trying to evade the approaching projectile. The exploding shell lit directly behind the enemy's position, producing the same loud series of explosions as before but generating smaller flashes of light from the rear shields of the intended target.

Firing yet again, the artillery cannon unleashed its potent projectile in the direction of the enemy's ever-changing position. The assault unit picked up speed and jumped partway above the treetops as the artillery shell exploded beneath its feet. With a heavy thud, the hulking presence lit atop a firm knoll, standing with its head above the forest. A series of loud cracks followed as the assault unit shattered and uprooted the obstructing trees in one mighty swing of its left arm, obtaining a clear line of sight to its attackers.

"We've been spotted!" Miller shouted, his eyes wide and panicked.

"Grab your gear and move," O'Connor commanded.

The marines snatched their camouflaged duffel bags and fled down the backside of the hill, en route to the more dense parts of the forest that hadn't yet been burned. The forearms of the assault unit rose until they were level with the terrain. Then, with their hollowed tips glowing brightly, they unleashed two glistening bursts of energy that shot toward the abandoned artillery cannon. A great, fiery explosion climbed above the hilltop as the enemy weapons fire hit its target precisely, releasing a shockwave that made Miller stumble and face plant at the base of the hill.

Davis sprinted back and grabbed hold of the armor around Miller's collar. "Come on," she grunted, yanking him back to his feet.

"Keep moving," O'Connor encouraged while rushing through the protective cover of the forest.

"We're going to double back and assist Alpha Two in bringing that thing down, so stay close and follow my lead."

The mechanized assault unit continued its offensive, firing one pair of searing projectiles after another in the direction of Alpha One. But the alien was soon on the defensive, coming under fire from Schiffer's squad. Four short-range, Stormfire mini-missiles had abruptly shot up out of the treetops and converged on the enemy's position, detonating against its rear shields. Halting its pursuit of O'Connor's squad, the alien turned to face its new assailants. White smoke trails from the missiles still lingered in

the air, revealing the origin of the attack. Without hesitation, the enemy unleashed multiple energy bursts into the darkness, shredding the trees that had kept the stealthy marines safely out of harm's way.

Two of Schiffer's men soared above the treetops a short distance behind the enemy's position, filling the air with the distinct hissing sound of their jetpacks. They held detonation charges in their hands and raced straightaway to their target, confident the element of surprise was theirs. They were mistaken. A thin purple laser beam burst out of the backside of the alien assault unit and struck one of the soldiers without warning. The defensive beam sliced through the marine's midsection, sending his lower half plummeting to the earth even as his upper body spiraled out of control and slammed into a nearby tree, triggering an explosion in the jetpack's fuel tank.

With the charred remains of his squad mate burning on the ground, the second marine landed on the shoulders of the giant as another salvo of missiles detonated against the shielding around its legs. The nervous marine frantically armed his detonation charge and wedged it against the head of the assault unit. But before he could escape, he found himself entangled by a tentacle that had grown out from the backside of the alien's organic armor. With a fierce snapping motion, the tentacle flung the startled soldier against a tree, knocking him unconscious. His body fell limp on the ground just before the detonation charge exploded. The blast illuminated the surrounding area in magnificent fashion, but the attack had failed to bring down the behemoth.

"Spread out and target its head," O'Connor ordered before taking up a defensive position behind a dense bundle of trees. "When I give the order, hit it with everything you've got."

"Locked and loaded," Redington replied, kneeling behind a thick cluster of rotted logs. His missile launcher followed the movements of his eyes as they tracked the enemy target.

Davis leaned against a tree, clutching her pulse rifle tightly. She peeked around the trunk for a moment and studied the enemy in vain, trying to identify potential weaknesses. Feeling a little

apprehensive about O'Connor's orders, she turned around and voiced her concerns. "With all do respect, Boss, I don't think our weapons are gonna make much of a dent in that thing."

"If we concentrate our firepower, we might be able to breach its shields. We'll also buy time for Colonel Schiffer and his squad to regroup. Just think of it as an opportunity to test your mettle, Lieutenant."

Though she took little comfort in O'Connor's reply, Davis raised her weapon and nodded her acceptance of the challenge. Miller, on the other hand, was less willing to comply. He was standing with his back against a quaking aspen, dreading the pending battle. His hands, which had spent more time repairing weapons than firing them, were trembling slightly, betraying the thirty-year-old lieutenant's attempts to hide the mounting fear and uncertainty. Each passing second brought more anxiety, more doubt. While searching his thoughts for anything that might help bolster his courage, the distinctly gruff voice of his first battle sergeant suddenly rose to the forefront of his memories, bellowing the only good advice Miller remembered him ever giving. "*You maggots cannot be fearsome if you're fearful! You cannot conquer the enemy before conquering yourselves.*" Taking a deep breath, Miller tried to control his fear in the only way he knew how: he rambled.

"I wish I had a hover tank at my disposal," he said to everyone within earshot. "I feel kind of naked without one, you know. If I could get a hold of one of those new Titan-class models, I can guarantee you I'd blast a hole right through that—"

"Pipe down, Lieutenant, and ready your weapon," Redington snapped, glaring at Miller.

"Fine, but I'm with Tina on this. I don't think my pulse rifle's going to do much good. Maybe we could—"

"I said pipe down. Now do as you're told and prep for battle."

With his squad in place, O'Connor detached a spherical scatter-pack grenade from the hip of his battle suit and thumbed the arming switch. "Time to blind the mighty Polyphemus," he muttered,

remembering the troublesome cyclops from ancient Greek mythology. O'Connor then stepped bravely into the open and hurled the sensor-disrupting grenade in the direction of the enemy before pivoting back to his defensive posture. "Three . . . two . . . one."

The grenade detonated right on cue, producing a raucous pop and a blinding flash of white light that temporarily removed the veil of darkness that had enshrouded the enemy.

"Now," O'Connor shouted, moving back into the open. He aimed his sniper rifle and fired the first shot, igniting the shields that encircled the head of the giant.

Winters and Davis opened fire as well, pounding their heavily shielded target with unrelenting bursts of radiant green plasma.

Inhaling deeply and exhaling a quick prayer, Miller spun around the base of the obscuring tree and squeezed the trigger of his pulse rifle. As his arms vibrated from the recoil, he screamed with a loud battle cry, venting all of his pent-up emotions.

Redington scowled at the looming alien presence and cursed it vehemently in his mind as he pressed his firing switch. A full spread of Stormfire mini-missiles burst away and streaked toward their target. But the alien instinctively fired its defensive lasers, striking down all four of the advancing warheads.

Angered by the repelled attack, Redington hurriedly detached another round of missiles from around his waist, cussing the alien all the while. And as the giant turned to face Alpha One, Redington thumbed the arming device on each of the small warheads and quickly placed them inside the adjoined launching tubes. "Block this," he snarled while punching the firing switch a second time. Three of the speedy missiles were eradicated before they could reach their target, granting the frustrated major only a diminutive amount of satisfaction as he watched the lone warhead explode with all its fury high atop the walking weapon.

With its shields still holding firm, the assault unit started to glow brightly at its base, prompting O'Connor to temporarily halt the offensive in order to assess the situation.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this,” Winters spoke up.

“You and me both,” said Miller, taking a few steps backwards.

Awe-stricken, the nervous soldiers watched the dazzling illumination surge up the armored body of the giant. The energy buildup was intense, even tangible to O’Connor and his squad as the air around them came alive with crackling electrical discharges.

“Fall back,” O’Connor shouted, his voice masked by the screeching ring of blue energy that erupted heavenward from the head of the assault unit.

Alpha One retreated as the energy ring penetrated the tempest. Chaotic flashes of light followed, burning within the thunderhead and casting an eerie blue radiance across the entire valley. A vociferous clap of thunder came next, shaking the ground ahead of the hundreds of bolts of lightning that lunged down and struck a wide area surrounding the assault unit. To O’Connor, it appeared as if Zeus himself had intervened on behalf of the alien.

With a heightened sense of self-preservation, the five marines continued their hurried exodus amidst a torrent of lightning bursts that set the trees near them ablaze. One of the searing bolts struck mere inches from Redington, prompting a re-evaluation of their current exit strategy. “We can clear the area faster if we use our jetpacks,” he suggested.

“Agreed,” O’Connor replied. “Everyone head up, but stay low and sharp.”

Hissing flames erupted from the exhaust ports along the underside of each marine’s jetpack, thrusting them airborne. O’Connor soared above the treetops and skimmed westward across the forest, leading his squad in the direction of the quaint town that was hidden within a clearing off in the distance.

The lightning strikes soon subsided. The attack against the alien had failed, instilling further doubt into the hearts of those soldiers who would inevitably have to face the daunting foe again.

Lieutenant Hill peeked around the corner of the demolished casino that he and his squad were using for cover. He could see the backside of the alien assault unit, which appeared to be searching for pockets of resistance amid the ruins. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to stage an ambush.

“Private, come over here,” he said, glancing back at one of his men.

“What is it, sir?” Private Jerald Lewis stuttered in a thick Southern accent while creeping nervously toward his commanding officer. The scrawny young man had only been in the military for two weeks, having joined because he had lost a bet with one of his friends—a decision he had since regretted.

“We need a diversion. Head out into the street and take a shot at that thing.”

The private was horrified by his trusted officer’s request. “Why don’t y’all just kill me right here? It’d be quicker and prob’ly less painful.”

Hill and the others chuckled at their jittery companion’s remarks. “I think you misunderstood me,” he said, still grinning. “I’m not ordering you to take on the alien alone. I just want you to get its attention and then run for cover. You can run fast, can’t you?”

“Well yeah, but why do I have to be the bait?” Lewis complained.

“Because I said so and because you’re the least experienced soldier here. I need the other guys to help me ambush that thing. No offense, kid, but they’re better in a firefight than you are.”

“You get that oversized freak show to come this way, and we’ll take care of the rest,” Tank added, trying to instill a little confidence in his squad mate. “We’ve got your back.”

Lewis sighed and sneaked out into the street, keeping his eyes fixed on the enemy the whole time. With each reluctant step he took, he felt all the more vulnerable. In fact, as far as he was concerned, Hill might as well have ordered him to strip naked and paint a bull’s-eye across his bare chest. He certainly felt like cannon fodder, standing out in the open by himself. Nevertheless, he continued to go through the motions of being a soldier, and raised his pulse rifle into a firing position. Taking aim at the broad

back of the prowling giant—which even he felt confident he could hit—he wrapped his finger around the trigger, and then hesitated.

“Well, go on, Private,” prodded Hill, peeking around the corner. “Take a shot. We don’t have all day.”

Several spurts of plasma shot forward, the force of the gun’s recoil knocking the unprepared private back a few steps. The weapons fire struck the rear of the alien battle unit, producing blue flickers of light as the shields deflected the ineffective harassment. Thumping sounds from the heavy movements of the assault unit stopped briefly before starting up again. It was turning about to face its reluctant attacker.

Lewis stood motionless, petrified by the sight of his approaching doom. And though he was fully aware of the brevity of his own life, which was flashing before his eyes, he seemed at a loss for a way to keep it from ending.

Sensing the panic in the inexperienced soldier, Hill hurriedly barked out further orders. “Don’t just stand there, run! Head down the street and circle around before it returns fire.”

Lewis had kicked up a trail of dust and disappeared down the debris-laden street before Hill finished talking.

A glistening ball of energy soared past the side of the building that the rest of Delta Nine was still hiding behind, prompting them to retreat a few meters. The ensuing explosion thundered through the area as the enemy counterattack demolished a corner convenience store that Lewis had fled behind. Quickly catching his breath, the reluctant mobile target sprinted toward a less conspicuous hiding spot.

Hill stepped out to his left and dropped to one knee, ready to make use of the Stormfire missile launching rack that was mounted atop his right shoulder. “Hold your fire until you see the target’s six, then hit it with full, steady bursts,” he advised. “Keep your sights low and focused on its nearest leg. Once the target’s down, we’ll move in and plant a compression charge near its head and finish it off quick and dirty.”

With a pronounced click, Tank loaded a fresh cartridge into his large, rapid-fire plasma gun. He had modified the heavy-grade weapon for his personal use after detaching it from the roof of one of the MPF's assault vehicles. Most men couldn't even lift the bulky weapon, yet Tank swung it around as if it were nothing more than a standard-issue pulse rifle. "Locked and loaded and ready to squash one alien bug," he announced with a rigid look of determination.

Olsen also stood bravely in a firing stance, ready to defend his squad and planet.

The rhythmic thumping of mechanized footsteps grew louder as the alien presence drew closer. It soon came into view and perambulated past the marines, impressing them with its speed and maneuverability. It even left Tank wishing that he were as agile.

"Light 'em up," Hill commanded while jamming the firing switch on his wrist-mounted control system. A full spread of missiles streaked toward their target, leaving four interweaving trails of white smoke in their wake. The alien's defensive lasers responded immediately and shot down two of the lethal warheads, leaving the remaining missiles to detonate against its left leg in swift succession.

Tank's arms were shaking from the tremendous recoil of his loud, unmatched weapon. The burly sergeant laughed maniacally as he unleashed a continuous stream of sizeable plasma bursts that struck the enemy unit, setting its shields ablaze. "That's right," he bellowed, "it's payback time!"

Olsen squeezed his trigger, adding his weapon's fire to the fray.

"Don't let up, men," Hill hollered energetically. "I think we've almost got him."

The undamaged assault unit abruptly halted and turned, eliciting a slew of profanity from the overconfident lieutenant.

"Uh . . . sir," Olsen stuttered while taking a few steps backwards, hoping that his commanding officer would issue the order to retreat.

"Change of plans," Hill advised. "Run!"

Having been placed on the defensive, the men of Delta Nine scattered down a narrow alleyway, leaping over the many carcasses that littered their path. Chunks of concrete and metal rained down behind them as several energy bursts slammed into the already damaged buildings the squad was fleeing between.

“Move, move, move,” Hill prodded before dodging around a corner, encouraging his men to follow.

“We didn’t even scratch that thing,” Olsen complained between gasps.

“Let’s fall back and regroup. We need to come up with a new plan.”

“Ya think?” Tank responded sarcastically. Their original strategy obviously hadn’t worked out too well.

Chapter 10-3

Risk Factor

O'Connor's squad descended on the quiet, obscured town that was, for the moment, untouched by the ravages of war. The frightened residents had locked themselves within their modest homes, which muted the distant sounds of battle to the point of providing a false sense of security. As the airborne soldiers landed, they drew the attention of the local population. O'Connor disengaged his jetpack and immediately surveyed his surroundings, taking notice of a few of the town's timid residents who were staring back at him from behind their dusky windows. "We've got to get these civilians out of here, Major," he instructed. "The activity in this region seems to be concentrated in the areas east of our current location, so see if you can locate the local law enforcement and have them round up the residents and escort them west into the forest. This town's likely to attract enemy forces, and I want it emptied before they arrive. Once we've secured the area, it'll be reasonably safe for them to return."

"I'll take care of it, General."

Redington reconned the area and promptly located a modest police station that was only a few blocks away. Kicking up a little dust, he jogged down the dark, ghostly streets. The town was without power—one of the many lingering effects of the bombing.

"Sergeant, how many aircraft do we have at our disposal?" asked O'Connor, heading eastward down a side street.

"One minute, sir," Winters replied while searching through the extensive memory banks of his CCN-enabled datapad. "It looks like we've got about four dozen aircraft available within quick striking range. Most of our air force was destroyed during the bombardment."

“Scramble three of the nearest fighters and have them converge on our location via combat AI. I don’t want any pilots in those planes. This storm’s too unpredictable and could prove hazardous to anyone trying to navigate in it. Besides, we may need their fresh bodies to bolster our troops later on.”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.”

“Get them here fast, Sergeant. I want an air strike on that alien before it can inflict further casualties.”

“Yes, sir, but, uh, do you really think an air strike will do any good?”

“I realize the aliens possess technology that’s superior to our own, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be stopped. Let’s keep in mind that our fleet managed to defeat several of their capital ships in battle.”

“Yeah, but the aliens still won,” Miller said pointedly, stepping between O’Connor and Winters.

“Only after overwhelming our forces with superior numbers. Admiral Quinn and his fleet were effective at frustrating the aliens’ plans, and we’re going to see to it those plans keep getting frustrated. I’m not about to back down simply because the odds aren’t in our favor. Every empire has its weakness, Lieutenant. Invincible enemies are a myth.”

“I suppose so, but is there any way we can gain access to some of our own armored units? I know I’d feel a lot better if we were fighting muscle to muscle.” Miller ducked his head after being startled by a dousing drone that seemed to appear out of nowhere and dipped uncomfortably close to the squad.

“Same here,” Davis added. “I like a good fight as much as the next ground pounder, but at this point I don’t feel like I’m even in the fight. Give me an armored exosuit and a rail gun, and I’ll bring down one of those friggin’ walkers.”

“Everything that’s usable has already been deployed,” O’Connor replied. “And even if by some twist of fate a few vehicles back at the base managed to survive the bombardment, it’d take too long to round them up. Besides, the requested air support should be sufficient for our immediate needs. Have a little faith.”

Raising his right hand, O'Connor signaled for his squad to stop. His eyes had been drawn to a nearby hotel. The three-story antiquated redbrick building stood along the eastern outskirts of town, overlooking the forest. As the tallest structure in the area, the hotel provided an ideal vantage point for scouting the enemy's movements. "Let's head up to the roof of that building," he ordered, pointing at the hotel. "We should be able to direct the air strike from there."

All four marines marched toward the designated structure, the exterior of which was occasionally lit up by random flashes of lightning. Pausing near the entrance, O'Connor activated his shoulder-mounted light and chased away the shadows from the glass entryway.

"Can't we fly up to the roof?" Miller pleaded in a tired, whiny voice.

"We need to conserve fuel," O'Connor responded, glancing back at the weary lieutenant. "And it's only a three-story climb. I think your legs can handle it, Lieutenant." He turned and marched through the rotating glass door, followed closely by Winters.

Davis ambled by her tired companion and gave him a friendly elbow in the ribs. "You heard the boss, hot shot. Get movin'."

Groaning in quiet protest, Miller trudged into the darkened building, dragging his equipment bag behind him.

The group maneuvered between the plush couches and oak tables that decorated the immaculate lobby. Neither a single patron nor employee was in sight, however, suggesting that the hotel had already been abandoned.

"Can we at least raid the kitchen while we're here?" asked Miller. "I'm starving."

"You haven't run out of rations, have you?" O'Connor inquired, mildly scornful.

"No, but I wouldn't exactly classify those meal packets as food. My stomach's still complaining about dinner." He held his rumbling midsection before continuing. "Man, what I wouldn't give for a

nice, juicy turkey sandwich. You know, the kind with all the toppings piled so high you can barely get your mouth around it. And a cold drink and a slice of apple pie for dessert. Ooh, and one of those—”

“Cut it out,” Davis interrupted. “I don’t like the meal packets anymore than you do, but your thinkin’ out loud about it ain’t helping any.”

“How can I not think about food? I love to eat.”

“Well, if my stomach growls again, I’m gonna hit ya. So keep your friggin’ food fantasies to yourself.”

“Fine, but I think we’re wasting a good opportunity here. Hotels like this are usually well stocked with some of the best delicacies that money can buy.”

Feeling her stomach rumble, Davis reached back with one hand and smacked her armored glove against Miller’s visor, pressing it in against his nose.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Hey, I warned ya. Now shut up.”

“All right, you two,” said O’Connor, shining his light back at his playfully sparring subordinates. “Let’s keep things orderly.”

“Sorry, sir,” they replied in unison, like children being scolded by their firm yet caring father.

“We’re lucky the major wasn’t here,” Miller said to Davis, speaking in a voice just louder than a whisper. “He probably would’ve busted both of us back down to sergeant. No offense, Frank.”

“None taken,” Winters replied, having been close enough to overhear the remark.

Upon reaching the stairway, the squad marched single file up the steps. At the halfway mark, a few faint beeps emanated from O’Connor’s helmet. “Communicator on,” he ordered to the microchip that governed his personal communication system. He then spoke to the person who was hailing him. “Go ahead.”

Redington's voice came across the comm link. "General, I've met with the local sheriff and devised a crude evacuation plan. He feels confident he can round up the town's citizens and evacuate without much difficulty. He also mentioned an abandoned mine that's a few clicks west of here. It might serve as a good shelter until we can secure the area. We doubt the enemy would notice it."

"That'll do nicely, Major. Let the sheriff take it from here and rejoin the squad. We're heading to the roof of a hotel near the eastern edge of town."

"Roger that, General."

O'Connor terminated the communication link and continued his march up the stairs. He could hear the door atop the stairwell rattling against the wind. "When we reach the roof, you can all take a well-deserved rest. Just don't get too comfortable."

"Hallelujah," Miller muttered. It had been a long time since the lab jockey had experienced the physical demands of combat duty, and his muscles were beginning to ache in rebellion.

After reaching the roof access door, O'Connor shoved it open and stepped out onto the gravel-laden surface. The crunching sounds of his footsteps could barely be heard over the hiss of the rushing wind and the smattering of isolated explosions that continued to ring out in the distance. He turned off his shoulder-mounted light, concerned that it might draw unwanted attention. Then, while safely masked in the shadows, he approached the eastern ridge of the building and dropped to one knee, resting his arms atop the stunted brick wall that ranged around the roof. His keen veteran eyes probed the sprawling forest in search of the enemy.

The other three marines trudged out onto the rooftop and moved toward the edge nearest O'Connor. There they discarded their gear and plopped down, resting their weary backs against the brick railing. It was a rare and precious moment of respite, and they savored it.

"Looks like we've got two hostiles incoming," O'Connor announced as he watched the alien assault units bulldoze their way through the forest. "There's a new one approximately three clicks to the north,

and it appears to be engaged in a firefight with some of our troops. The alien that we originally encountered is still approaching unchecked from the east and is less than two clicks from our current position.”

Turning his attention toward the burning trees back beyond the nearest foe, he searched for signs of Schiffer’s squad, but the forest was deathly still. “Sergeant, try raising Alpha Two on the CCN.”

“You got it, General.”

“These weapons sure could use an upgrade,” Miller thought out loud while examining his pulse rifle through the eyes of an engineer. “Hey Tina, would you be a dear and grab my tools for me? They’re right there in my bag.”

“First of all, I ain’t your little assistant. And secondly, if you ever call me *dear* again you’re gonna wake up in a full body cast at the nearest triage unit.”

Her comments earned a snicker from Winters.

“All right, you don’t have to get all moody about it. I’ll get the tools myself.”

Reaching into his bag with one hand, Miller retrieved a compact black box and laid it across his lap. He flipped open the lid, removed a self-powered electric screwdriver, and began disassembling the base of his pulse rifle. Tinkering with his weapon would allow him to step out of the war for a little while and settle into a more natural, more relaxed element.

“I’ll just take a peek inside and see what kind of improvements can be made,” he said while cocking his head toward Davis, even though she seemed to be ignoring him. “The engineers who created these weapons were way too conservative in their operating specs. And after what we just went through, I could certainly use a firearm that has a little more kick to it. How about you?”

“Don’t even think about touchin’ my weapon,” said Davis, moving her pulse rifle to her opposite side, away from Miller.

“Suit yourself, but it’s your loss.”

The rickety sounds of an old generator powering up suddenly drifted through the air, followed by a high-pitched ring as the town's emergency loudspeakers activated. "This is Sheriff Jameson. I need everyone to evacuate their homes immediately and meet in the park at the southwest corner of town. Take only what you can carry. You can return for the rest of your possessions later, after the area has been secured by our armed forces. We're going to temporarily relocate to the old mine near Begger's Creek. And please, folks, let's keep this orderly."

Families of every composition hustled out of their homes, carrying flashlights, blankets, and whatever items of food they could stuff into their pockets and knapsacks. Many individuals had also armed themselves with civilian-grade energy rifles and handguns, unwilling to leave their safety entirely in the hands of their police escorts.

"General, I can't seem to raise anyone from Alpha Two on the CCN," Winters announced, sounding discouraged.

"Do you think they got caught in that lightning storm the alien triggered?" asked Miller.

"Most likely," O'Connor sighed. "They were closer to the enemy than we were." Shaking his head in regret, he pined for his fallen comrades. "Colonel Schiffer was a great man and a good friend. He and I go way back—before the South African riots of '51. We even fought side-by-side during the Martian war. He was a model example of a dedicated soldier and a saint of a man. He'll be sorely missed . . . along with his men. They were all good soldiers."

"I know how you feel," said Davis. "I've lost more than my fair share of friends to combat."

On the heels of the lieutenant's remarks, a blinding flash of light unexpectedly lit up the entire valley, followed straightaway by a deafening boom that drowned out even the noisiest claps of thunder. A rapidly expanding dome of fire could clearly be seen rising above the northern outskirts of the forest, approximately three kilometers from O'Connor and his startled squad. The sizeable explosion disintegrated the surrounding trees and scorched the earth below. Its destructive tirade didn't end there,

however. A powerful shockwave had been unleashed and was stampeding through the region, shattering nearly every window within the forest town and causing even the sturdily built hotel to crack and tremble in its wake.

“Whoa,” Miller uttered reverently with his head ducked and cocked to the north. “*What was that?*”

“That, my friend, was a tactical AMB,” said Davis proudly. “Of course, the idiot who detonated it at full charge is about to get into a whole lotta trouble.”

“You’ve got that right,” O’Connor growled. “Sergeant, find out which squad was stationed in the vicinity of that new crater and patch me through immediately.”

“Yessir.”

Winters bowed his head and scanned the glowing screen of his datapad, hunting for the guilty party.

O’Connor stared intently at the smoldering blast site. Though he was thrilled that he could no longer see the alien battle unit that had previously dominated the now barren region, he was also irritated at the reckless usage of one of the MPF’s deadliest weapons.

“They’re using antimatter bombs out there?” said Miller excitedly. “Why don’t we have any?”

“Who says we don’t?” Davis grinned roguishly while gently patting one of the rounded lumps in her duffel bag.

“Well, let me see it.”

“They’re not toys, you moron.”

“I only want to see what they look like. I’ve never seen one before . . . or held one.”

“Hands off,” she said as she picked up her bag of munitions and moved it to her opposite side.

“You’re no fun,” said Miller, returning to his engineering project.

“General,” called Winters, “I’m patching through Sergeant Melenson from Alpha Seven. I’m pretty sure he’s your culprit.”

Out of respect for his squad, O'Connor turned further away from them before breaking from his usual calm demeanor and yelling into his helmet-embedded comm system. "What in the name of Hades do you think you're doing, Sergeant?"

"Uh . . . engaging the enemy, sir," the nervous marine stuttered back through the comm link. "I think we destroyed one of their walking battle units."

"Oh, I'm sure you did, soldier. And you also damaged a nearby town, which up until your careless decision had managed to remain unscathed. Now, can you explain to me what in the world possessed you to use a fully-charged AMB in such close proximity to civilians?"

"Um . . . it seemed like a good idea at the time, sir. I mean, we weren't having much luck inflicting damage with our standard firearms. I was frustrated and . . . I'm sorry, sir. It was a momentary lapse of judgment, and I can promise you it won't happen again."

"It better not, Sergeant. We've suffered enough civilian losses without having to worry about collateral damage from our own forces. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, sir."

O'Connor terminated the communication link and turned back around to face his squad.

"General," Winters said cautiously, hoping his superior was finished yelling. "I've received confirmation that three supersonic fighters will be en route shortly. They're prepping for launch from the *USS Thurgood*, which is anchored off the coast of Jersey."

"That'll do nicely," O'Connor replied in a voice that calmed progressively. "Lieutenant Davis, hand me the targeting laser. I want to see if I can paint the armor on that walking abomination and help our fighters hit their mark."

Davis pulled the rifle-like targeting laser out of one of the equipment bags and passed it along.

"Double check the lens, Boss. It might be a little dirty, but otherwise it should do the job."

Tapping a button on the side of his helmet, O'Connor retracted his visor back around his face. He then raised the black targeting scope in front of his right eye and peered through, waiting for the requested air support to arrive.

Winters glanced down at his datapad and read the battle reports that were uploading to his screen. "General, I'm receiving numerous updates of skirmishes between our forces and the aliens. The enemy's engaging our troops pretty much planet wide, sir."

"The ground invasion's fully underway then," said O'Connor. "Tell me, Sergeant, have all of the encounters involved these assault units?"

"No, not all of them. It looks like the enemy's using infantry as well. I'm showing multiple encounters with their foot soldiers. And on the brighter side, sir, we do seem to be holding our own. Or at least I'm not receiving many casualty reports. There's even one account of a downed enemy walker . . . near Mexico City. Your guerilla tactics seem to be working, General."

On the heels of Winters' report, the unmistakable rumble of distant fighter jets drifted through the air, augmenting the squad's resolve.

"Sounds like we're about to inflict some casualties of our own," said Davis enthusiastically before turning to face the forest.

O'Connor caught a few glimpses of the approaching assault unit and fired the infrared targeting laser, marking the enemy's armored surface in preparation for the air strike. At that moment, Redington soared up onto the rooftop, having used his jetpack to ascend the building. His sudden appearance startled the jumpy group of marines, prompting Davis to instinctively spin around and take aim with her pulse rifle.

"Stand down, Lieutenant," Redington ordered, unfazed by Davis's reaction.

"You're lucky I'm not trigger happy, Major," replied Davis, lowering her weapon.

"Oh sure," Miller began, "the major gets to use his jetpack to get up here."

“Don’t start that again,” said Davis.

“What’s the situation?” Redington inquired as he approached O’Connor.

“The general’s called in an air strike,” Winters answered, “and, from the sounds of it, they’re about to start their attack.”

Swooping toward the forest like birds of prey, the jet-black, triangular military fighters unloaded six Skyfire guided missiles apiece—three from each wing. The efficacious warheads streaked through the darkness, leaving dissipating trails of white smoke in their wake.

Having sensed the approaching threat, the alien assault unit responded defensively. Four violet laser beams shot out from between the trees that masked the alien and struck a few of the approaching missiles, triggering a sequence of premature detonations that lit up the gloomy sky. Once the four beams faded, they gave way to a thicker laser that lashed out at one of the heavily armed fighters. The offensive beam struck the fuselage and sliced clear through, resulting in a commanding explosion that sent charred debris raining down on a wide stretch of ground. A third round of lasers obliterated more of the advancing warheads, but a much larger explosion rumbled through the forest soon after, as the remaining ten missiles struck their target. The ground trembled, and an enormous ball of fire climbed high above the treetops, producing a thick column of black smoke that rose higher still. The pyrotechnic display culminated in a chorus of secondary explosions that produced iridescent flashes of light from within the new clearing that had formed. The alien assault unit was down.

“Woohoo!” Miller hollered, pumping his fist in celebration.

“They scored a direct hit,” O’Connor reported triumphantly. “Sergeant, contact the *Thurgood* and order them to recall and rearm the remaining fighters. I have a hunch there’s a much stronger alien presence in the area than we’re aware of.”

“Yes, sir,” said Winters. But as he tried to relay the orders, his countenance dimmed. “It’s gone,” he muttered.

“What are you talking about, Sergeant?” demanded Redington.

“The *Thurgood*. It’s been destroyed.”

O’Connor tapped a pair of inset buttons on the side of his helmet, and his visor slid back around his face and darkened as its night-vision mode was engaged. He tossed the targeting laser in Davis’s direction and retrieved his sniper rifle without uttering a single word, acting as if he hadn’t heard Winters’ grim report. But that wasn’t true. The news had sunk in. O’Connor simply chose to ignore it. He wasn’t going to permit the aliens’ latest aggression to overshadow his recent victory. And even though the destruction of one enemy assault unit meant little in the grand scheme of things, O’Connor felt he had properly avenged the loss of Alpha Two and his longtime friend. The task now was to try to alleviate the burdens of the rest of the MPF’s troops, who were depending on him for victory.

“Let’s head out,” he ordered. “I want to take a closer look at what’s left of that assault unit. We might be able to gain information from the wreckage that could prove useful to our war efforts.”

“You heard the general, marines, let’s move out,” Redington commanded.

“All done,” Miller boasted while reattaching the casing around the base of his pulse rifle. He put his tools back into their box and tossed it into his duffel bag. “Could I get a little help here?” he said, extending one hand. Winters obliged and pulled him upright before entering the stairwell.

“Hey, Tina, watch this,” said Miller, speaking with a confidence that teetered on the brink of arrogance. With his modified pulse rifle in hand, he aimed at a smattering of spare bricks on top of the northwest corner of the building. After Miller squeezed the trigger, the enhanced weapon recoiled with greater force than he had expected, knocking him a full step backwards. Several brilliant bursts of plasma had erupted from the barrel at a faster rate of discharge than before and shattered the spare bricks, in addition to a sizeable portion of the wall.

“Not bad, huh?”

Impressed by the display of firepower, Davis snatched the enhanced rifle out of the hands of its creator. “It’ll do,” she said, tossing her old rifle at Miller. She then disappeared into the stairwell.

“Hey, wait up,” shouted Miller, grabbing his duffel bag and scurrying toward the access door.

The evacuating citizens of the forest town had traveled a short distance into the lightless woods, following closely behind the sheriff and his three volunteer deputies. All four law enforcement officials were dressed in plain clothes and had small-arms sonic stun guns strapped to their right hips.

“Try to keep up the pace,” the sheriff urged the group, using his flashlight to part the darkness that covered their winding path. “We can’t stop until we reach the mine.”

The townsfolk continued moving forward until spooky crackling sounds encircled them. Raising his left hand, the sheriff motioned for the group to stop. He thrust his other hand into his leather holster, gripping the cold metal handle of his sonic firearm. As he unsheathed his non-lethal weapon, he encouraged his three volunteer deputies to do the same. They obliged and spread outward at a cautious, defensive pace, searching the area for potential threats.

“I think I see something over there,” one of the deputies reported, pointing at a shadowy image between a cluster of trees, unsure if his imagination was playing cruel tricks.

“Hold your positions while I—”

A concentrated burst of blue energy unexpectedly shot out from behind one of the trees, burning a hole through the sheriff’s chest before he could finish his statement. His lifeless body collapsed to the ground, leaving his three shocked companions to blindly fire their weapons in the direction of the attack. They sent an uninterrupted barrage of sonically distorted rings of energy screeching into the shadows.

Horrified by the murder of their chief protector, the convoy of men, women, and children screamed in panic and fled. Many shed their supplies, fearing the items would only slow them down. And with

their young held close, they raced back through the forest, chaotically casting the radiance of their flashlights among the trees.

The three civilian deputies who had stayed behind continued to swing their weapons around and fire at each snap of a twig and clap of thunder. Their defensive stance was bold, but they were ill prepared for military combat. A spread of energy bursts seemed to appear out of thin air before striking the three men, killing them instantly. The darkness was now free to hunt unchallenged.

Unaware of the new casualties, the townsfolk continued their frenzied retreat until several energy bursts hit the ground in front of them, which persuaded them to stop dead in their tracks. Those individuals who were carrying personal firearms raised them in preparation to shoot the first thing that moved, while the more timid members of the group could only huddle together and resume their hysterical outbursts.

Two particularly nervous young men decided to make a break for it, sprinting away from the crowd, one man behind the other, then diverging. For a moment it appeared as though they might flee to safety, having vanished unchallenged into the night. Yet as the tension built, as more individuals eyed the various escape routes that snaked into the distance, two distinctly different screams pierced the darkness, followed by an unnerving silence. The two young men had been slain.

Alien infantry began materializing from the shadows, fading into view like ghostly apparitions who were becoming whole again. They had disengaged some manner of personal cloaking device that had kept them unfairly hidden from their prey. Their sudden appearance prompted the petrified townsfolk to voluntarily disarm themselves out of fear of provoking further casualties.

Most of the civilians were surprised that their captors were humanoid in form. They had expected the aliens' appearance to be unusual, almost monster-like, since only a monster would engage in the savage acts that the aliens had perpetrated since the start of the war. Even still, the true appearance of the

aliens remained a mystery. Each soldier was enclosed in battle armor, with a shiny black faceplate that reflected the terrified expressions of their victims.

The dark underlayer of their ornate combat attire was composed of a sturdy, yet flexible thin metal mesh. Smooth armor plating with the luster of a black pearl was attached to the mesh and molded perfectly around ninety-five percent of their bodies. The armor afforded them a great deal of protection yet still allowed a surprising amount of agility. Its meticulous design and near-majestic sheen also magnified the haughty stature with which the aliens held themselves. But through the trembling eyes of their victims, the aliens looked more of malice than majesty. A limited assortment of small but menacing spikes protruded from between various armor segments around their bodies, spread out like blackened thorns on an otherwise slightly rose. And between the breastplates was an embedded jeweled insignia of a black dragon, rimmed in fire and glistening beneath the frequent bursts of lightning.

Two small blood-red ideograms decorated the left breastplate of each soldier, one symbol above the other. A third marking was found on the right breastplate. Collectively, they added a degree of distinction to a rather indistinguishable group of soldiers.

Slug-like weapons stretched along the backside of each soldier's right forearm, clinging tightly to their hosts via thin interwoven tentacles. The bizarre organic armaments looked more like symbiotic life forms than instruments of destruction, but their power was not to be questioned, or their hosts' intentions.

Another alien soldier decloaked behind the others, but this one was different. The armor plating around its shoulders was dark red, as if they had been dipped in blood. Even the flowing cape that draped its back was oozing red. Such prominent variations suggested an elevation in rank, which was confirmed by how quickly the other ten aliens moved out of the soldier's way when it approached. The alien commander stood toe to toe with one of the larger male civilians at the edge of the group and seized his throat with one hand. The alien's grip was so firm that the man couldn't even release the

tinest of whimpers. He tried to pry himself free, but was unsuccessful. Raising the man off the ground, the alien stared him up and down, as a child studies a newly discovered insect before squashing it. Seemingly unimpressed with what it saw, the alien shoved the man back into the crowd, sending him tumbling into two other people as he coughed and gasped for air.

Turning back around, the alien commander addressed its soldiers while marching back into the shadows. It spoke with such a contemptuous and disturbingly low voice that it startled many of the townsfolk. *“Jorshu con ra ish lash’menta torrok pa grasha’qui. Krey tali’may ton abren’ta.”*¹

The remaining aliens stood at attention and smacked their right fists against their left breastplates in what seemed to be a gesture of respect to their superior before it vanished. One of the remaining soldiers pointed in the direction its commander had traveled and issued an order to the frightened captives, speaking in an unusually low voice as well. *“Udrok tau vurloi.”*²

Unable to understand the words or intentions of their alien subjugators, the petrified civilians remained motionless, afraid of being harmed or, worse yet, executed.

Still pointing its finger, the alien repeated its demand, albeit in a much louder tone. *“Udrok tau vurloi!”*²

The response of the detained townsfolk remained the same, prompting action on the part of the alien. It moved toward the nearest human, latched one hand around the trembling man’s throat, and threw him forward, sending him stumbling to the ground. *“Udrok, peshtoy ekram!”*³ the alien growled with an edge of anger, even disgust, in its voice. The soldier resumed pointing in the direction it wanted the prisoners to move.

Huddled closely together, the townsfolk walked reluctantly back toward the ambush site. Occasional outbursts from an upset child drowned out the sounds of the rustling leaves and crackling twigs as the helpless civilians marched toward an uncertain fate.

¹ *“Bring them to the devolution chamber for processing. Kill anyone who resists.”*

² *“Move that way.”*

³ *“Move, wretched scum!”*

Alpha One approached the smoldering site of the air strike, where the alien assault unit was lying face down on the ground. The shadows that had once slithered across its fleshy armor had faded, leaving the extraterrestrial invader ostensibly lifeless. Its head and torso were heavily damaged, and one of its arms had been blown off, permitting a clear gelatinous fluid to ooze from the exposed shoulder socket. Occasional sparks of electricity arced between the torso and the pool of fluid that had collected on the ground, confirming that the giant was, at least to a certain degree, mechanical in nature.

“It’s beautiful,” Miller whispered to himself, his visor disengaged, unable to take his eyes off the peculiar alien technology. The opportunity to analyze such a creation was like a dream come true and helped him forget about the conflict for a moment.

“I want the surrounding area combed for survivors,” O’Connor ordered. “If the alien driver managed to eject from this thing, I want it found and detained before it can cause any more harm.”

“Yes, sir,” Davis replied before retrieving her motion sensor and heading back into the woods with Winters.

“It’s even more gruesome up close,” said Redington, scrutinizing the mangled debris. Though he recognized the importance of analyzing the enemy’s technology, he felt uneasy about tampering with something so bizarre, so alien. “Are you sure you want to go poking around inside that thing, General?”

“I share your concerns, Major, but we need to do this. Probing their technology could very well involve certain risks, but the potential rewards are far greater.”

“Logically that makes sense,” Redington continued while circling the wreckage, checking for signs of activity. “But my gut’s telling me this is a bad idea.”

“There’s only one way to know for sure.” Turning toward his awe-struck specialist, O’Connor asked, “Can you get inside that thing, Lieutenant?”

Miller remained pensive, his eyes wandering across the exotic surface of the fallen giant. “They must be thousands of years more advanced than we are,” he muttered.

“Lieutenant,” shouted Redington, snapping Miller out of his trance.

“Huh? Did you say something, sir?”

O’Connor posed his question again. “Do you think you can open that thing up?”

“There isn’t a piece of technology on this planet that I can’t take apart and analyze, sir.”

“That thing’s not from Earth,” said Redington pointedly, walking up beside O’Connor.

“True,” Miller replied, showing signs of a budding smirk. “But it’s on our planet now, and therefore I can take it apart.”

“Well, get to it then,” O’Connor ordered, smiling slightly at Miller’s remark. “If we can learn how this thing works, we might be able to find an easier way around their shielding. I’ll gladly take any advantage you can give us, Lieutenant.”

“You got it, sir,” said Miller with a big grin. “It might take a little time, but it’ll be worth the wait. Just watch my back. I tend to get a little preoccupied with my work, and I don’t want anything sneaking up on me. And it’d be nice if—”

“Get to it, Lieutenant,” Redington ordered. He had no tolerance for Miller’s rambling. “Time is of the essence, so let’s get this over with.”

“Right,” Miller acknowledged, turning back around to begin his work.

O’Connor and Redington stood guard along the perimeter as they watched their talented engineer carry out his duties.

Miller kneeled beside the torso of the assault unit and removed his gloves and helmet. Reaching up with both hands, he scratched his sandy blond hair and exhaled a breath of relief. “That’s better,” he sighed, having discarded enough military gear to feel more like a technician again and less like a soldier. This was his moment, his opportunity to make a difference, and he was eager to get underway. Using his

shoulder-mounted light, he rummaged through his duffel bag until he had located a compact laser welder. “Let’s have a little peek inside,” he said while powering up the sophisticated cutting tool. Leaning toward the wreckage, he rested his left hand against the clammy surface of the fleshy armor and prepared to make the first incision. Before he could begin cutting, however, he felt a sharp prick in his bare fingers. A quick examination of his left palm revealed a dark rash that had begun to form, as his hand itched and tingled with a mild burning sensation.

“Is there a problem, Lieutenant?” O’Connor called out, having noticed that his tech expert was examining his own hand instead of the alien technology.

With his eyes bulging from the sudden onset of pain, Miller could only respond with a blood-curdling scream as the skin on his contaminated hand turned black and started to bubble like hot tar. He collapsed onto his back, his outbursts intensifying as the discoloration spread up his wrist and forearm.

Redington ran to Miller’s aid and was about to grab hold of his squirming subordinate when he discovered the infected hand. “Good Lord,” he exclaimed, withdrawing his hands in a knee-jerk reaction. Acting swiftly to save Miller’s life, Redington snatched the laser welder and used it to slice through the lieutenant’s battle suit and infected arm, severing and partially cauterizing the limb above the elbow. Miller’s screams started to subside once Redington dragged him away from the wreckage.

O’Connor approached and kneeled beside the whimpering marine. “We’ll get that arm bandaged up and give you something for the pain,” he promised, studying the wounded stub, his eyes following the trail of blood back toward the severed appendage.

With his eyes glossed over, Miller tried to stutter an explanation, a warning about the alien bio-machine, but he had drifted into a state of shock and was losing consciousness.

Redington ensured that his gloves covered his hands snugly before attending to Miller’s wound. The last thing he wanted was to become contaminated and suffer a similar fate. “I’ve never seen anything like that, General. Whatever toxin infected his arm had to have come from that blasted wreckage.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Major. Fortunately, you were able to save his life. Good work.”

Redington simply nodded in acknowledgement, regretting that he couldn’t have done more. Despite his general dislike for Miller, the major took the incident personally, feeling that it was his own fault for not having done more to protect his subordinate.

“Stay with me, Lieutenant,” he commanded, rummaging through the medical kit. He retrieved a small, disc-shaped morphine injector and slapped it against the base of Miller’s exposed neck, diffusing a metered dosage of the potent painkiller into his bloodstream.

Davis came bursting back into the clearing, followed closely by Winters. They had heard the commotion and feared the worst. After observing that Miller was being attended to, they hurried toward him, astounded by the unexpected and grotesque scene. Like the others, they had assumed that because the enemy target had been destroyed, it no longer posed a threat—a reasonable assumption that had proved to be dead wrong.

“What happened?” Davis asked, crouching beside Miller. The familiar sound of her voice lured Miller back into consciousness, and upon seeing her face, he reached over with his good arm and clasped one of her hands. Davis squeezed back as a show of support.

“He just touched that thing, and it triggered some kind of defensive booby trap,” Redington explained.

“A real nasty one, too,” O’Connor added as he stepped toward Miller’s severed limb. The fleshy appendage continued to liquefy into a bubbling pool of black, viscous goo that had begun to dissolve the armored sleeve that contained it. Having caught a whiff of the awful stench that emanated from the disgusting site, O’Connor backed away, his gaze shooting toward the treacherous battle unit. Quietly, he cursed the aliens for finding a way to strike at his squad even in defeat.

“Are you fit to travel, soldier?” Redington inquired.

Miller gazed up at his superior officer, still disoriented. “Y-yes . . . sir,” he stuttered.

Redington finished applying a pressurized bandage to Miller's arm. "That should keep the bleeding under control," he said while assisting Davis in pulling Miller to his feet.

"There's a mobile triage unit to the northwest, about five clicks from here," said O'Connor. "I need someone to escort the lieutenant—"

"I'll do it," Davis volunteered, blurting out her offer before anyone else had the chance to open their mouths.

"All right. We'll call ahead and let them know to expect the two of you. Stay on foot within the forest and call for reinforcements at the first sign of hostiles. *Do not* try to engage the enemy by yourselves."

"Understood, Boss," she replied, retrieving her gear and modified pulse rifle. "Come on, Jason. Let's get you outta here." Carefully taking hold of Miller's uninjured arm, she led him out of the clearing.

"Thanks," Miller said in a weak voice.

"Don't mention it. I know you'd do the same for me."

"Does this mean we're going steady?" he joked, eliciting a smile from Davis.

"You know, I could always knock you unconscious and drag your body to the medics," she quipped.

"Oh, you probably say that to all the grunts."

Davis chuckled and continued walking arm-in-arm with Miller. Before long, they had disappeared beyond the trees.

"Well, the wreckage analysis is obviously a bust," said O'Connor regretfully. "Let's gear up and head back to town. Gather the lieutenant's equipment, Sergeant. We can't afford to leave anything behind."

"Uh, yes, sir."

Mustering his courage, Winters crept reluctantly toward the fallen giant, stepping over the sizzling puddle of ooze that remained as a staunch warning. He was still circumspect of the alien technology and

tried to keep a safe distance while collecting Miller's scattered equipment. Winters placed the items hurriedly into the duffel bag, but not without keeping a watchful eye on the giant in the process. After zipping the bag closed, he scurried back toward the group.

"Sergeant," said O'Connor, "notify the triage unit of Lieutenant Miller's pending arrival."

"We should also spread the word about the hazardous nature of the enemy's technology," Redington suggested.

"Agreed," O'Connor continued. "Advise all troops to observe strict biohazard protocols when encountering any alien technology. Then relay our coordinates to HQ and have them send a team of specialists to probe the wreckage. Perhaps we can still salvage some useful intel."

"I'll get right on it, sir."

Winters promptly transmitted the requested information across the CCN, but while staring down at his datapad he caught a glimpse of a soft flash of light out of the corner of his visor. Looking up, he didn't notice anything unusual so he resumed his duties. The flash appeared again, bringing an unnerving feeling that took hold of Winters as he stared at the assault unit, which appeared to be pulsating.

"Uh, sirs, I think we have a problem," Winters announced.

All eyes became fixed on the wreckage and the white flashes of light that streaked along its smooth surface, steadily increasing in frequency and intensity, even producing a faint hum.

"Get airborne now!" demanded O'Connor.

With their weapons and gear in hand, the three marines activated their jetpacks and soared above the treetops before veering swiftly away from the clearing.

Winters turned his head and watched the clearing become ever brighter, as if the sun was trying to rise. A thick mushroom cloud had erupted from the self-destructing wreckage, shooting high above the

forest. The deafening boom that followed rumbled through the valley, trailing the fierce shockwave that knocked the fleeing trio out of the air and sent them crashing through the trees, down onto the ground.

“Is everyone all right?” O’Connor called out, groaning from the jarring experience. He pushed himself upright and looked back, staring in amazement at the path of shredded, burning trees that remained between him and the expanded clearing.

“Aside from a few bruises and the ringing in my ears, I’m okay,” said Winters. He brushed the broken branches from his torso and rose to his feet before continuing. “I think my jetpack’s fried though.”

“I’m unharmed,” Redington replied while examining his armor to ensure that it was still intact. “What happened?”

Before O’Connor could respond, Davis’s voice blurted out across everyone’s helmet-embedded communicators, asking the same basic question.

O’Connor responded. “It would appear that Lieutenant Miller triggered a self-destruct sequence when he came in direct contact with the alien unit. I think it’s safe to say that the enemy’s determined to keep their technology out of our hands. Fortunately, we managed to escape before the explosion occurred. What’s your status, Lieutenant?”

“We got knocked off our feet, but we’re okay. It mostly spooked us. Uh, if it’s all right with you, Boss, I’d like permission to camp with the triage unit, given that this little trek’s gonna take a while. I can meet back up with the squad before sunrise.”

“Permission granted, Lieutenant. Expect to hear from me again at 0500. O’Connor out.”

“I suggest we go check on the local residents, General,” advised Redington. He was feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the notion of a group of civilians wandering through the forest, especially since the exact size and nature of the alien presence was still unknown.

“Agreed. Let’s head back through the town and make sure that it’s secure. If the area checks out, we’ll have them return and gather into defensible shelters.

“Sergeant, I want you to contact Alphas Four through Fifteen and have them converge on the town to establish a defensive perimeter along its borders, using the forest to conceal their numbers. I want that town well protected.”

“Understood, General.”

Enemy soldiers forced the captured townsfolk out of the forest and beyond an obtrusive hill, where an alien camp had been established. Two dozen soldiers were standing guard beside a cluster of shimmering black containers that were located off center of the grassy plain. The sizeable encampment was almost completely enclosed by a three-meter-tall energy fence, which was composed of multiple rows of thin violet laser beams that bridged the gaps between each of the black posts. An alien assault unit also patrolled the borders of the octagonal containment zone. The giant’s rhythmic thumping and overwhelming size worked to magnify the terror within the approaching captives.

Leading the way, the alien commander marched through the narrow opening at the front of the camp and barked out further orders. “*Kore ish quay pa ish lash’menta torrok.*”¹

All of the soldiers near the center of the secured zone spread out along the perimeter, beside the laser fence. Vibrations soon rolled across the ground as a low rumble drifted down on the gushing wind. A sizeable cylindrical object was approaching. The extraterrestrial tower had been deployed from one of the orbiting transports and was descending at a controlled rate toward the center of the camp, where it landed with a resounding thud, depressing the earth under the tremendous weight.

Having seen enough, one of the prisoners started screaming uncontrollably. She tried to flee back into the forest, but was swiftly apprehended by a nearby guard. With a firm grip around one of her arms,

¹ “*Clear the area for the devolution chamber.*”

the alien shoved her through the laser fence in a demonstration of superior strength, scattering her segmented body parts across the ground. Her gruesome death proved to be enough of a deterrent to discourage anyone else from entertaining thoughts of escape.

With a deep, sinister laugh, the enemy commander proclaimed its approval of the barbaric act, sending chills through the hearts of the remaining civilians. The dominant alien lingered for a moment, no doubt reveling in the peril of its captives. Then it resumed its march, progressing forward with a prideful swagger. As the alien approached the tower, a directive was spoken. “*Pahray ko.*”¹

Several rigid tentacles lunged out of the base of the tower and burrowed deep into the earth like noxious weeds. Once the unnatural edifice was secured, a vertical incision formed, tearing upward from the bottom of the tower until a doorway-sized opening had appeared. The loose tissue along the perimeter of the entryway rippled and retracted further as the belligerent commander stepped over the threshold, resuming its baleful laughter.

Bright flashes of blue light propagated up the surface of the fleshy structure, emitting a low hum with each pass. The pulsating illumination shone across the entire plain and provided a near-steady source of light for the encampment.

Huddling near the border, the townsfolk began wincing in pain. Severe headaches and muscle cramps had mysteriously appeared throughout the group, eliciting a chorus of moans and anguished cries as the pain intensified. Each pulse from the tower seemed to augment their misery and deepen their despair. When the pain reached debilitating levels, the prisoners began collapsing, lying motionless at the feet of their subjugators. The fear in the eyes of the captives suggested they were still cognizant of their situation even though their bodies had become paralyzed. Once the humans could no longer vocalize their trauma, two of the alien soldiers selected a pair of victims from the pile and dragged them into the tower, disappearing from view.

¹ “*System on.*”

Chapter 10-4

Rules of Engagement

Hill and his men had taken shelter deep inside the razed center of New Las Vegas. They were resting within a small, musty room in the unlit basement of a partially collapsed and desolate hospital, hoping to mask themselves from the aliens' sensors. For the moment, the soldiers appeared to be safe, despite the occasional rumble of explosions that kept their nerves on end and brought pockets of dust trickling down from the ceiling.

"I'm open to suggestions here, so speak freely," said Hill, removing his helmet. His rugged, sweaty face remained partially obscured at the edge of the light that projected from Olsen's shoulder. "Anybody got any ideas on how to deal with that thing out there?" Glancing around the room, he peered into each of his subordinates' faces. With the exception of Tank, they seemed much too young for war, leaving Hill feeling less than confident in the squad's chances for victory.

"I think taking out one of its legs is still a good idea, sir," Olsen spoke up. "But we obviously need more firepower."

"Let's hear what Sergeant Hobbs has to say," Lewis interjected, catching the attention of the commanding presence that stared back at him from across the room. "I bet you could figur' out how to take that thing down, Willis."

Tank's dirt-rimmed eyes widened, shining out from the dusty darkness. And as he leaned toward his naïve squad mate, he provoked a sudden spike in Lewis's heart rate. "Don't you ever call me by that name," he snarled. "I only respond to *Tank*. Got it?"

For a brief moment, Lewis wished he had remained outside with the alien.

"Ease up on him, Tank," Hill advised.

Tank leaned back and chuckled at the nervous expression on the private's pale face. The laughter enabled Lewis to breathe again, though he made a point of keeping his mouth shut.

“Getting back to the subject of firepower,” Hill continued, “do we have access to any heavy armor or aircraft in the area? I'd like to at least even the odds.”

“Give me a minute to look,” said Olsen. Wiping the dirt from his datapad, he entered the requested query before reporting. “The few fighter jets we have are currently out on other sorties. There's a small military supply depot about a klick to the north of our current position, though. We might be able to salvage some vehicles or weapons—”

“Are you sure about that, Private? I wasn't aware of any depots in this area.”

“Unless the information in the CCN's databanks is inaccurate, which I highly doubt, the depot is there. The data says . . . oh, sorry, sir. It's only an old war museum. There's nothing there but a collection of relics from a few centuries back—nothing of use.”

“Don't count it out just yet. Lewis, you're good at fixing old gas-powered engines, aren't you?”

“Well, yessir, but—”

“No buts. Take Olsen with you and head over to that museum and see what you can salvage. Try to scrounge up something that'll really pack a punch. Now get going.”

“Understood, sir,” the two privates replied in near unison. Both men readied themselves for a return visit to the remains of the city by reattaching their air filters and activating their visors. Neither was particularly thrilled about heading topside again, but Lewis seemed especially unmotivated. He vocalized his protest at the assignment with an occasional grumble that was loud enough for Hill to hear and ignore.

With their tan-colored duffel bags draped across their shoulders and their pulse rifles in hand, the two-man expedition marched single file up the stairwell and into the adjoined hallway. Lewis graciously allowed his companion to lead the way for no other reason than he despised having to be on point. In his

mind, the soldier in front was always the first to die. Olsen, on the other hand, enjoyed leadership opportunities, so their partnership was mutually beneficial.

“I sure hate hospitals,” Lewis mumbled, though his words were loud enough for Olsen to overhear.

“I know what you mean. It’s kind of creepy in here.”

“Yeah, well, try spendin’ the night locked in a hospital’s morgue when you’re nothin’ short of ten years old and then you’ll know what creepy is.”

“Whoa, no way. Did that really happen to you?”

“Yeah,” Lewis groaned. With his tension and paranoia mounting, he began peering into each of the rooms they passed, feeling certain they were being watched—a suspicion that was magnified by the sounds of their footsteps echoing through the grim corridors.

“No wonder you objected when the lieutenant suggested we take up shelter in here.”

“I don’t really wanna talk about it no more. Let’s just hurry and—” Lewis abruptly halted the conversation and his movement. Raising his pulse rifle, he studied the shadows that loomed beyond the reach of his shoulder-mounted light.

“What are you doing?” whispered Olsen, becoming increasingly nervous himself.

“I think I saw somethin’ movin’ over yonder,” Lewis whispered back.

“Where?”

“Down there, at the end of the hall, near those carts.”

“Well, let’s go check it out then. But hold your fire. Civilians may have taken up shelter in here, and I don’t think they’d appreciate being shot at.”

“Are you crazy?” Lewis hollered, then quickly lowered his voice back down to an agitated whisper.

“I’m not goin’ over there. Let’s find a different exit.”

“Suppose that what you saw was an alien. Do you really want to keep moving knowing that an enemy soldier might sneak up behind you?”

“Good point, but you go first.”

Gripping their weapons tightly, the two soldiers skulked forward, approaching the abandoned gurneys and supply racks that cluttered their path.

“You check the rooms on the left,” Olsen suggested, “and I’ll take the ones on the right.”

“Fair ’nough.”

Lewis headed for the adjacent room and hesitantly grabbed hold of the brass doorknob. His imagination was starting to get the better of him, and although he tried to block the images from his mind, he kept recalling many of the horror vids he had watched recently—scenes in which people were killed brutally for doing exactly what he was about to do. With a deep breath and a quick flick of his wrist, he tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. He exhaled a sigh of relief. “It’s locked.”

Olsen swung around the open doorway of the parallel room, dispersing the darkness with his small spotlight. “All clear in here,” he said, glancing back at his squad mate.

Lewis inched closer to the next room. He stopped beside the door and reached over with one trembling hand, hoping that his attempt to gain entrance would be denied yet again. “Locked,” he cheered quietly. Feeling more confident, as if luck were finally on his side, he leaned against one of the gurneys and waited for Olsen to complete his sweep. As Lewis stood motionless, a pale arm reached out from under the blanket that covered the stretcher and brushed against his leg. With an energetic scream, he leapt across the way, turned, fell back against the wall, and discharged his weapon into the ceiling. Glass and small chunks of tile rained down on top of him.

Olsen rushed back out into the hallway and swung his pulse rifle around, attempting to acquire a target, but all he saw was his petrified and partially buried companion. “What happened?”

“Somethin’ horrible tried to attack me,” Lewis responded between heavy breaths.

Noticing the corpse that continued to twitch atop the wheeled stretcher, Olsen lowered his weapon and laughed.

“What are you laughin’ at?” Lewis asked, irritated.

Olsen grabbed hold of the blanket that was draped across the gurney and uncovered the source of their troubles, eliciting another scream from Lewis. “It’s just a dead body that still has a little kick left in it,” he explained. “You had us chasing ghosts.”

Recognizing the humor in his mistake, Lewis started laughing as well. “Oh, man. All that fearin’ for nothin’.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” said Olsen, pulling his partner up from the rubble.

“I’m all for that.”

Lewis brushed himself off and followed closely behind Olsen, who was moving quickly toward the exit. After vacating the hospital, they deactivated their lights and dodged down the debris-littered alleyways, in and out of a few buildings that were structurally sound enough to move through. Even though they couldn’t confirm the presence of the hostile assault unit, neither man wanted to take any chances.

They eventually reached a wide intersection and halted their expedition, taking cover behind a rusted Dumpster. Olsen leaned out and scanned the hazy building across the street. “I think that’s it,” he reported. “Should we go for it?”

“Is it all clear?” Lewis asked. His question worked to remind himself that the enemy could be anywhere, so he promptly spun around to verify that the alleyway behind them was still void of activity.

“It sounds quiet enough,” Olsen replied.

“Well, can you take a look?” Lewis insisted, turning back around and peeking over Olsen’s shoulder to see if he could spot anything out of the ordinary.

“Fine. Just stay here.”

Olsen eased out beyond the Dumpster and peered into the street, carefully inspecting the area for signs of danger. Visibility was still poor, but soon improved when the headlights from a small convoy of

civilian hover transports pierced the granular darkness. Several vehicles roared through the intersection, further perturbing the smoke and ash that spun through the air. The civilian convoy appeared to be making a hasty exodus from the city, although signs of an immediate threat weren't readily apparent.

"It's all clear now," Olsen called back. "We run in three."

"All right."

"Three . . . two . . . one."

Running as fast as their legs could carry them, the two marines sprinted toward the undamaged side of the gray-brick museum. The area seemed secure enough, but they didn't want to push their luck by lingering out in the open. After reaching a safe location, Olsen stopped to catch his breath as Lewis flew right on by, having jumped into a diving position with his arms held out straight. He slid across the broken concrete and came to an abrupt stop.

"Ow!"

"What in the world are you doing?" Olsen inquired, amused.

Lewis stood up and brushed off his battle suit. Part of the material between armor segments on one of his forearms was torn, displaying the prominent scrape he had sustained. "I thought I saw somethin' off in the distance, so I sorta dove outta instinct."

"Well, whatever works for you, I guess," Olsen replied, patting his partner on the shoulder as he walked past him and toward the museum's rear lot. Lewis followed, staying so close to his companion they almost tangled their feet.

"You need to relax, man," urged Olsen, using one hand to motion for Lewis to give him a little space. "You're starting to make me nervous."

"It's kinda hard to relax when there are things out there huntin' us," Lewis retorted, glancing back to check that they weren't being followed.

"We're safe for now."

“That’s not the word I’d of used,” Lewis muttered.

As they reached the end of the alley, Olsen poked his head around the corner to recon the area. “It’s clear,” he reported. “Come on.”

Rounding the corner, they located the museum’s rear door. Lewis took hold of the scuffed doorknob and twisted his wrist. “It’s locked,” he complained, shaking the handle repeatedly.

“Stand clear,” Olsen advised. Moving a few steps back, he raised his pulse rifle and released two short bursts of plasma that blew right through the doorknob, even caused the heavy steel door to swing inward. “After you, Private,” he said, extending one hand forward.

Both men deactivated their visors and re-engaged their shoulder-mounted lights before entering the repository of wars long past. From the lobby, they could see that an entire wing of the sprawling building had collapsed, but the rest of the structure appeared to be stable. So they ambled around the dust-veiled exhibits, studying the various jeeps and small arms antiques that were on display. It wasn’t long before their search came to a fruitful end.

“That’ll do nicely,” Lewis uttered while staring into the opening of the sand-colored gun tube that protruded from a mint-condition M1A3 Abrams battle tank. Despite its age, the seventy-ton armored vehicle was still impressive and would most likely command the magnitude of firepower that Hill desired, assuming they could figure out how to operate it. “See if you can round up some munitions to load into this thing while I check out its innards.”

“What exactly am I looking for?” Olsen inquired. “I didn’t pay that much attention to this stuff in history class, you know.”

“Well, read the plaque right there and see what it uses for its main weapon. There’s gotta be some on display somewhere ’round here.”

Excited by the sight of the antiquated combat vehicle, Lewis climbed hurriedly up the tank’s depleted-uranium armor and began tugging at one of the sealed entry hatches above the turret.

Olsen moved a few steps further before halting. His face had suddenly become contorted with bewilderment. “Wait a minute,” he said, turning back around to face Lewis. “How in the world are we going to get that thing moving? I mean, almost everything runs on hydrogen these days, and if I’m not mistaken, that relic requires fossil fuels.”

“Sure ’nough,” Lewis grunted, continuing to struggle with the access hatch. “But if I’m rememb’rin’ right, the maintenance guys for these museums usually keep a special concoction in the fuel tanks, to keep ’em operational and whatnot. You know, in case they need to be moved about. With a little luck, this thing’ll still be gassed to go.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Well, I could prob’ly jury-rig a hydrogen converter by scrappin’ parts from those torn-up transports outside. ’Course, that’d take a long while, so keep your fingers crossed.”

Having become frustrated with the stubborn hatch, Lewis sat down and rested, rethinking his entry strategy. He reached over and tugged on the hatch along the right-hand side, and, as expected, he met the same resistance. Since giving up simply wasn’t an option, he surveyed the room for anything that could be used to force the hatch open. He eventually spotted a few broken pipes near the rubble of the museum’s collapsed wing. Hopping down from the tank, he hurried over to the mess of pipes. “This might work,” he muttered while liberating a meter-long steel fragment from the debris. He then hustled back to the Abrams and returned to his place atop the turret section, keeping a few profane words fresh in his mind in case his revised entry plan didn’t work. Using the pipe as a lever, he tried to pry open one of the obstinate hatches. The equally stubborn private turned several shades of red before the metal hatch finally popped open.

“Whew, that’s mighty stale air in there,” he said between coughs. But the odor lost all effect once Lewis caught a glimpse of the loader’s station directly beneath him. Dropping inside the tank, he grinned at its surprisingly sophisticated interior. “She’s a real beauty,” he said to himself, stroking one

of the many black display screens that ranged around him. For the moment, at least, he didn't seem bothered by the overwhelming number of controls and switches that cluttered the cramped interior of the Abrams. Across the way were the gunner's station and the elevated commander's post, the whole of which seemed foreign to him. Present tank designs were radically different from those of centuries past.

Once the novelty of his surroundings had worn off, Lewis spent several minutes crawling around the tank's interior, trying to make sense of each of the stations. After banging his helmet for the umpteenth time, he plopped down in the padded gunner's seat and shook his head. "I don't get it," he complained to himself. "I don't see nothin' in here that resembles a steerin' mechanism. How in the blazes am I supposed to drive this thing?" He pondered his dilemma for a moment before initiating a personal crusade to locate any documentation that would enlighten him on his newly acquired transportation. One compartment after another was rummaged through until he finally located a pair of worn-out operations manuals. Retrieving one of the thick black binders, he started skimming through its treasured contents.

"Figures," he mumbled while staring at a schematic. "I'm in the wrong part of the tank."

Climbing out of the turret section, he crawled toward the main gun tube. Beneath the long barrel was another hatch that granted access to the driver's station.

"If it's stuck shut like the last one, I'm gonna scream," he said as he climbed down beside the sealed entryway. Gripping the handle firmly and expecting to face stiff resistance, he yanked the hatch open and all but fell off the tank, soliciting a snicker from Olsen. "All right," Lewis mumbled, ignoring the cackles from his wandering comrade. "Let's have a look-see."

Pivoting the hatch out of the way, Lewis slithered down into the cozy compartment that composed the driver's section. His entry started gracefully enough, but ended with him stumbling back into the reclined seat, which was surprisingly comfortable. After readjusting his sitting posture, he examined the plethora of controls and devices that encircled him. It wasn't long before he noticed the fuel gauge. "Half full," he said, sounding relieved that his efforts to gain control of the tank hadn't been in vain.

“I’m not seeing any tank ammunition anywhere,” Olsen shouted during his extended tour of the museum. “Oh, wait . . . I think I found some.” Suddenly, a deafening throttling sound flooded the room, startling the private. Spinning around, he saw black exhaust spewing from the rear of the tank. His antique-loving companion had apparently found the ignition switch.

Up popped Lewis, beaming with excitement as he peered out from the open driver’s hatch. “Hurry up and let’s go,” he beckoned, sporting a broad grin and an old green army helmet. “I wanna head out before it decides to quit on me. It’s soundin’ a little rough, and it’s a miracle it even started in the first place.”

“Then get over here and help me carry these shells.”

“All right, I’m comin’.”

They transported ten 120-millimeter shells to the Abrams and lowered them into the turret section. The process went smoothly up until the last shell. As Lewis lowered it through the open hatch, the shell accidentally slipped out of his hands, bounced off a command console, and onto the metal floor, where it landed with a reverberating clang.

“Oops,” said Lewis, cringing.

“Good grief, man,” Olsen exclaimed, ducking for cover. “Are you trying to kill us?”

“No harm done. We got a friendly bounce. Now hop in. I think the gunner’s station is the one on the right. Just keep your comm link open so we can chat.”

“You realize this plan is nuts, right?” said Olsen as he climbed up the tank.

“Sure ’nough,” Lewis replied with a crooked grin, “but the aliens don’t know that.”

Olsen shook his head and chuckled as he descended through the open hatchway while Lewis returned to his driver’s station. Once inside, they sealed their respective hatches. Olsen then awkwardly attempted to move between the metal framework that stood between him and the gunner’s station.

“Who’s the idiot that designed this thing?” he groaned, banging almost every inch of his battle suit in

the process. After situating himself in the gunner's chair, he was instantly overwhelmed by the many complicated controls that surrounded him. "Good Lord! It's going to take me all night to figure out this equipment. How am I supposed to load the gun, let alone fire it?"

"Beats me. It's gonna take me a fair amount of time gettin' used to drivin' this beauty. There should be a spare operations manual restin' on the floor beside your chair. Flip through it and figur' it out yourself."

"Easy for you to say," Olsen replied, squinting at the miniature text and complex diagrams that populated the crinkled pages of the instruction book.

"Hold on tight," Lewis urged. "The ride might get a tad bumpy." Grabbing hold of the raised T-bar that steered the stalwart vehicle, he twisted the throttle.

The battle antique lunged forward, crushing several display cases before crashing through the main wall and barreling out into the open street. The tank continued a little further before jerking to a stop as its inexperienced driver tried to gain his bearings.

"We'd better radio Lieutenant Hill with an update," Olsen suggested. "Plus, I need some time to load these shells."

"Good idea. I'll park it b'tween those buildings straight ahead until we get further orders."

Lurching forward once again, the Abrams missed most of the open alleyway that had been the intended route and bulldozed through one of the adjacent buildings before coming to a hard stop. The maneuvering was far from graceful, but Lewis had managed to conceal the tank from view.

"Lieutenant Hill, come in," Lewis's muffled voice requested over Hill's communicator.

"What is it, Private?"

“We’ve acquired an old Abrams battle tank. It ain’t exactly high tech, but it should pack a good punch, as y’all requested . . . well, assumin’ we can control this thing good ’nough to actually hit the target.”

“Speaking of which,” Olsen interjected, “where is the alien?”

“Head back to our location, then head north along the main road. We think the enemy’s somewhere in that area. Tank and I are going to move out and investigate. The plan is to draw the frigging thing out into the open, keeping its attention on us while you boys come up and surprise it from behind. Try to aim for its legs, like before. I’m still betting its shielding is weaker there than on its midsection. Do you copy that?”

“Roger,” replied Lewis. “We’ll be there in a bit.”

The communication link terminated.

“Gear up, Tank,” ordered Hill, rising to his feet. He slid his helmet over his head and reattached his air filter, shielding his lungs from the abundant particles of dust and ash that still roamed the streets. He also hooked a few spare mini-missiles around his waist and slung his pulse rifle across one shoulder. But the bulk of his equipment was left behind, stashed in one corner and safely out of view. “Let’s get topside and see what kind of damage we can do.”

“With pleasure,” Tank replied while tying a sweat-stained handkerchief around his face, sufficiently covering his mouth and nose. “I don’t like all this sneakin’ around.” Raising his bulky assault gun from the floor, he rested it on his right shoulder and waited for Hill to lead the way.

With sufficient ammo for their needs, the marines trotted up the stairs and through the long hallway. After setting foot outside the hospital, Hill stopped and listened carefully to the sounds that drifted on the coattails of the rushing wind. The rhythmic thumping of the alien assault unit could be heard in the distance, along with a smattering of low-rumbling explosions.

“Sounds like it’s flushed out another squad,” he opined. “Wasn’t Delta Seven supposed to be stationed near here?”

“Don’t look at me,” Tank grunted. “I don’t keep track of that stuff.”

With no one else left to order around, Hill retrieved his datapad and tried to contact Delta Seven himself. “Hmm . . . Major Benton’s not responding to my hails.”

“Benton?” Tank snarled. “Isn’t he that pain-in-the-butt glory hog that got in my way during the last skills test?”

“One and the same. He’s supposed to be stationed out here, but who knows. He may have gone off on his own crusade somewhere.” Hill scanned the datapad further before continuing. “Well, according to the logistics report he is stationed in the general vicinity of that skirmish. And knowing Benton, he’s probably gotten himself into a tight fix. We’d better head over there and see if we can bail him out.”

“If you insist,” Tank grumbled.

The two soldiers progressed down the unlit street, staying close to the demolished buildings while following the distant sounds of battle. Hearing the hum of an approaching vehicle, Hill halted his advance at a nearby intersection. “That couldn’t possibly be our tank approaching. They should be coming from the other direction.” Leaning around the corner of the building, he attempted to spot whatever was advancing on their position. A colorful expletive immediately leapt from his lips, and he fell back against the immovable sergeant, ahead of the dented blue hover transport that cut swiftly across the sidewalk where Hill had been standing, narrowly missing him. The transport plowed through a metal street sign and lunged back out into the road, weaving haphazardly before its panicked driver regained control and fled the area.

“That was too frigging close,” Hill exclaimed, his heart pounding heavily against his chest.

Tank shoved his commanding officer back into an upright position and laughed. “You spend all this time worryin’ about an alien and you almost get run down by the locals instead. Now that’s funny.”

“Yeah, yeah. It ain’t that funny.”

Hill readjusted his battle armor and resumed his forward trek, stepping with more caution than before. On one hand, the city seemed as lifeless as a graveyard, complete with a host of corpses that lined the streets. But, on the other hand, the distant, sporadic explosions and overhead thunder made for a rather lively and tense environment, keeping Hill’s nerves on end. And as he moved alongside the city’s half-razed public library, he thought he heard a noise coming from inside. He slowed but continued moving, eventually disregarding the sound as nothing more than a figment of his overactive imagination. Yet as he passed a shattered window, he heard the noise again.

“Hold here for a second,” he whispered to Tank.

“Why? You hear somethin’?” Tank inquired, shifting his eyes around in hopes of finding a target to engage.

“Yeah. I think someone’s inside this building. It’s probably just a civy taking cover, but it’s possible we’ve got hostiles in there. We’d better check it out.”

“Fine with me,” said Tank, adjusting his grip on his weapon.

Hill moved around the corner of the building and down a narrow alleyway, toward a side entrance. “We bust in on three,” he ordered after taking up an assault position near the door, his pulse rifle drawn. “One . . .”

“Three!” shouted Tank, giving the door a swift kick and sending it crashing inward ahead of his advance. Aside from the sporadic splinters of soft light that trickled down from the fractured ceiling, the room was dark and appeared to be void of activity. Yet the air was thick with the odor of freshly incinerated paper and plastic.

“Don’t you ever follow orders?” Hill complained as he moved in quickly behind Tank.

“Depends on my mood. You sure you heard somethin’? This place is—”

“Too much knowledge,” came a jittery voice from inside the shadows between two distant bookshelves. A flash of light and a sizzling sound followed soon after. “Must destroy it all. The children of oblivion are not worthy of such knowledge. Burn it. Smash it. Destroy it.”

Without saying a word, Hill motioned for Tank to close in on the source of the voice while he approached from the opposite side. They crept around the row of shelves until they could see the outline of a man through a sparsely populated bookshelf. The mysterious figure was hunched over a smoldering pile of books and data cards. Hill glanced sideways at Tank and signaled for him to approach. They swung around the shelf in unison.

“Freeze,” demanded Hill, aiming his rifle directly at the frail, middle-aged man who was blanketed with a weave of soot and darkness. The man’s face was thin and his eyes were trembling, shifting suspiciously around the room like someone who was suffering from extreme paranoia. He looked more like a professor than a prowler, yet he stared furiously at Hill, as if he wished to kill him.

“You mustn’t interrupt me,” the man protested in a snarling voice. “I have to destroy it—all of this precious . . .” His stare became more intense as his eyes zeroed in on the datapad that was strapped to Hill’s hip. “. . . knowledge.”

The man lunged at Hill, though he seemed far more interested in obtaining the datapad than causing any real harm. He was obsessed, like a junkie addicted to a drug that was in short supply.

“Get him off me,” Hill shouted, falling backwards onto the floor during the struggle.

Tank rushed in, and as he seized the aggravated assailant, the man turned around and became even more enraged. He wrapped one hand around Tank’s forearm and gnashed his teeth as a fiery glow radiated beneath his palm, singeing Tank’s flesh. Hollering in pain, Tank shoved the man hard into the adjacent bookshelf, knocking both the shelf and the man down onto the floor. A stinging, branded imprint of a hand had been left behind on Tank’s forearm. Infuriated, he aimed the butt of his gun at the man’s head, intending to knock him unconscious and leave a mark of his own.

“Stand down,” Hill ordered, moving quickly to restrain the stunned man.

“That little creep burned me,” Tank growled, reluctantly lowering his weapon.

“Is he armed?” Hill inquired, checking the man’s pockets for concealed weapons.

“He had somethin’ in his right hand.”

Hill lifted the man’s offending hand out into a pocket of light and examined it. A web of dark wires and thin circuitry was etched into his palm and fingers, just beneath the skin. “What’ve we got here?”

“What is he, a tech thief?” asked Tank, rubbing his sore forearm.

“I don’t think so. This doesn’t look like any man-made technology I’ve ever seen.”

“You think the aliens tampered with ’im?”

“Possibly. It looks like this frigging stuff’s running through a good portion of his body.”

Hill followed the veined discoloration up the man’s arm and throat, searching for signs of a controlling mechanism. Protruding from the back of the man’s neck was a black, circular device fashioned from a peculiar metal. It appeared to have been fractured during the scuffle. Hill reached in to remove it, and as he did, it disintegrated, along with all of the circuitry that ran through the man’s body. With his face calming, like he had been set free from a nagging pain, the man’s eyes glossed over briefly while he settled back into reality.

“Please . . . don’t h-h-hurt me,” he pleaded as soon as he was able to focus on Hill’s rigid face. His eyes then shot from one corner of the room to the other, brimming with panic. “My wife. Where’s my wife? Where’s my son?”

“Calm down,” said Hill, still restraining the man, though more gently than before. “We’re on your side. Can you tell us what happened?”

“They . . . they appeared out of nowhere and took my family. I tried to stop them. I . . . I have to get back home . . . I have to find them.”

With an unexpected shove, the man knocked Hill out of the way and leapt to his feet before hightailing it down the isle.

“Wait,” shouted Hill as he and Tank gave pursuit. But the man had darted out of the building and disappeared into the alley.

“Forget about ’im,” Tank urged, stopping outside the library. “He’s gone.”

“Yeah, but the question is, was he alone? Better keep an eye out. There may be more freaks like him lurking around here.”

A loud boom suddenly shook the pavement, followed by a dark pillar of smoke entwined with bright flames that leapt into the sky from an adjacent street. The fiery display signaled the exact location of the conflict with Benton’s squad—a conflict that had since died down, bringing an unsettling silence that swept through the embattled neighborhood.

“Let’s pick up the pace and hustle over to Benton’s position,” said Hill. As he ran, he glanced back from time to time, growing impatient with his two missing soldiers.

A faint rumbling noise soon drifted across the wind, prompting Hill and Tank to stop and look back down the street. They could see the silhouette of the Abrams in the distance.

“Communicator on,” said Hill to his helmet-embedded comm system. “Link with Privates Lewis and Olsen.” After establishing a communication link with the Abrams’ occupants, he issued his orders.

“Hold your position in the next intersection, boys. We’ll try to draw the alien out from here. Fire as soon as it’s in view. I want to keep this short and simple.”

“Roger that, sir,” Olsen responded, rotating the Abram’s turret one direction then correcting partway back the other direction in an attempt to acquire an appropriate firing position.

After severing the communication link, Hill turned to face his companion. “Let’s head over to the next street and light that thing up. Once it’s identified us, fall back and take cover. Our new tank commander will do the rest.”

Tank raised his weapon and nodded in agreement. "Let's roll."

They darted down the spacious side street and out into the open, eyeing the menacing giant. The front of its armored exterior shimmered in the light of the roaring flames that fed off the charred remnants of the demolished building. The bodies of Major Benton and his squad were strewn amongst the rubble.

Shouting a deliberately loud battle cry, Hill opened fire, igniting the shielding around his target. Tank joined in as well, producing intermittent green and blue flashes of light as his heavy weapons fire struck the enemy's shields.

Undamaged by the diversionary tactic, the alien assault unit turned to face its new assailants.

"Fall back," Hill ordered, still firing at the enemy while moving backwards, then sideways. Both men turned and sprinted down the side street, removing themselves from the targeting sights of the alien. Two energy bursts streaked behind them and slammed into a broken-down transport, producing a glowing ball of fire that leapt high into the air. The force of the explosion knocked Hill face-first onto the pavement.

"Come on," Tank prodded while reaching down and yanking his fallen leader back to his feet.

"I see the alien," Lewis hollered with an edge of fear. "Hurry up and shoot!"

"I'm on it," said Olsen. "Firing now."

After Olsen thumbed the firing switch on his joystick control, the Abrams trembled from the recoil of the powerful gun. The discharge was clean, but the shell overshot its mark, gutting the second story of an office complex a block further down the road.

"You missed," Lewis bellowed through the comm link.

"I know, I know," Olsen replied, the sound of frustration apparent in his voice. "I've still got one more shell in the chamber."

“Then fire it already! It knows we’re here.”

Promptly adjusting the firing arc, Olsen discharged the second round. The volatile projectile collided almost instantly with the right leg of the assault unit, resulting in a substantial explosion. The enemy’s shields flared brightly before dimming a perceptible degree.

“Whoa! What a rush,” Olsen exclaimed, reveling in the plume of smoke that resulted from his precision strike.

“Nice shootin’,” said Lewis. “I think we actually softened it . . . uh, it’s heading this way. Shoot it again!”

“I’m out. I need to reload.”

Uttering a few expletives, Lewis quickly backed the tank down one of the connecting streets, using the buildings as a barrier. His swift action had denied the alien an opportunity to return fire, though it was now in hot pursuit. And as the giant drew closer, the vibrations from each of its heavy steps began to resonate through the tank, throttling Lewis’s nerves.

“Hurry,” he pleaded, backing the tank further down the street, trying to maintain a safe distance from the approaching assault unit.

“We’re loaded,” reported Olsen against a backdrop of muffled, metallic scrapes—the noisy result of his hasty movement between stations. “Get me back into firing range.”

“Great. Just let me . . .” Lewis’s voice trailed off after he spotted a target of opportunity.

“Is there a problem?” Olsen called out.

“I think I might’ve found us a better target.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We just passed an abandoned fuel tanker and it’s still loaded, judgin’ from the leak.”

“Oh, baby,” said Olsen, verifying the claim through his targeting sights. “Only in Vegas can you have that kind of luck. Keep backing up so I can get a clear shot at the tanker. Odds are the alien will move right past it.”

“And we’ll thump ’im good before he knows what hit ’im.” Twisting the throttle hard, Lewis accelerated the backward motion of the Abrams. “Here we go.”

“You want me to shoot at it again?” Tank asked as he watched the alien head further down the street.

“Hold on,” said Hill. “I think something’s wrong.”

Puzzled by the unexpected withdrawal of the armored vehicle, he promptly hailed the two AWOL privates on his communicator. “Get back here and fight!”

“One second, Lieutenant,” said Olsen. “We’ve picked up an extra passenger.”

“Come again, Private?”

“Lady Luck’s dropped in for a little visit. Watch this.”

The deafening boom of the Abrams’ main gun rang throughout the city once again as the alien moved past the stationary tanker. An earth-shattering explosion ripped through the cylindrical body of the grounded fuel transport, producing a massive fireball that consumed the neighboring buildings and engulfed the hostile enemy in flames. Seconds later, the upper portion of the alien unit appeared through the thick smoke and tilted forward. Its right leg had been blown clean off, causing the mighty giant to fall to the earth with a bone-crunching thud.

“Woohoo!” Olsen cheered through the comm link.

“Fantastic work, boys,” Hill responded. “Go ahead and park it where you’re at. We’ll head over to your location and see if we can scrounge up a couple of drinks to celebrate.”

“Sure thing, Lieutenant,” said Lewis.

The communication link terminated.

“Let’s go,” Hill ordered.

He led Tank back toward the wall of smoke and flames. They hustled past the searing heat and made their way to the idle Abrams, passing the alien wreckage. But as they did so, they heard a soft tearing sound, like flesh being forcefully separated. It was just loud and eerie enough to spook them into spinning around and raising their weapons.

An incision had appeared along the backside of the disfigured assault unit. The opening retracted slowly as the head of an alien soldier emerged. It struggled to push itself up onto the torso where it tumbled out onto the charred road, still disoriented from the attack. It was dressed in full battle armor and appeared unarmed as it staggered into an upright position, shaking its head.

Hill found himself staring at his own reflection in the alien’s concealing faceplate. And as his hatred of the extraterrestrial swelled, his trigger finger closed tighter. He knew full well that the MPF’s rules of engagement forbade him from pulling the trigger. The guidelines were especially strict on what they considered to be appropriate wartime conduct regarding captured enemy combatants. But to Hill this war was notably different. He was engaged in a bitter fight for survival against an invading force of alien origin, not against his fellow humans, for which the rules had been designed. This one key difference, combined with the fact that the aliens had demonstrated a total disregard for human life, had enabled the lieutenant to rationalize away the need for a moral code that would, in his opinion, unnecessarily restrict his actions. He was prepared to treat the alien soldier like the heartless animal that he thought it to be. His trigger finger tightened further.

“Hold on,” said Tank, lowering Hill’s pulse rifle. “I wanna have a little fun with it first.”

Hill smiled in approval of the sergeant’s suggestion. “Have at him, Tank. Show that little freak what it means to piss off a human.” Moving out of the way, he sat down against the wall of the adjacent building and waited for what he felt was sure to be an entertaining fight. Lewis and Olsen joined him.

Tank disarmed himself and passed his gun along to Olsen, who nearly fell over while struggling to prop the heavy weapon against the wall. Tank then lowered the dirty handkerchief from his face and stretched his neck and shoulders as if he was preparing for nothing more than a routine workout. After exhaling deeply, the overconfident marine took a few steps toward the alien soldier, who was no bigger than an average-sized man. The alien strutted forward as well, apparently unimpressed with the size of its opponent.

Flexing his muscles, Tank pointed at the enemy soldier and said, "I'm gonna tear you limb from limb, little bug."

The alien responded in a low-pitched voice, saying, "*Pesh ekram!*"¹ Even though the exact meaning of its words was unclear, the way in which the alien spoke them implied that it was an insult and the snarling marine took it as such.

Cocking his right fist, Tank threw a punch toward the alien, who promptly deflected it to the side and countered with a swift knee to the sergeant's stomach. He stumbled backwards with a sharp groan, stunned by the surprising strength of the alien, whom he had foolishly underestimated.

"Come on, Tank. Trash him!" Olsen yelled, subconsciously throwing a few short jabs out of excitement.

Eager to save face, Tank unleashed a flurry of punches, each of which was blocked. His opponent responded with a series of swift jabs to the ribs, which made Tank wince in pain. The alien then tried to connect with a vicious kick, but Tank grabbed its leg and swung the alien around, throwing it hard against a brick wall.

"Yeah," Olsen shouted, pumping his fist in the air. "Finish him off!"

Tank moved in to pummel his downed opponent, but he was caught off guard when the alien lunged upward and punched him in his throat. As he coughed and sputtered, the alien followed with a vigorous spinning kick to his midsection. The giant of a man released a bloodied exhale and a strained grunt

¹ "*Filthy scum!*"

before collapsing backwards onto the sooty pavement. He landed with a hollow thud that made his squad mates cringe.

Olsen started to rise to his feet, but he was promptly restrained by Hill. “Stay put, Private. This is Tank’s fight, not yours. He’s survived worse than this, so relax. This show ain’t over.”

With a nod, Olsen crouched back down and turned his attention toward his incapacitated comrade, mouthing the words, “Get up, Tank, get up.”

The alien soldier paced arrogantly in front of the struggling marine, uttering another taunting statement that was seething with contempt, “*Ishla hulty wist krey’et nox unar lorat xeka.*”¹ It then stepped closer and kicked dirt into Tank’s face while laughing in a mocking fashion.

“Now you’ve really pissed me off,” Tank growled. The veins in his tensing muscles became more pronounced as he pushed up onto his feet and lunged forward, employing the aid of gravity to easily overwhelm the smaller alien. He kneeled on top of his downed opponent and pummeled it, one heavy blow after the other. The faceplate of the alien’s helmet cracked from the unrelenting beating, and before long, the defeated soldier stopped squirming.

“That’s enough, Tank,” Hill ordered after he had achieved his own satisfaction from the thrashing. “I think it’s dead.”

The bruised and exhausted sergeant took a moment to catch his breath before rising from the enemy soldier. He glared furiously down at the motionless body that lay at his feet and sealed his victory by spitting his bloodied saliva across the alien’s fractured faceplate. “Another victim gets crushed by the Tank,” he bragged, pounding one of his fists against his chest. Then, after wiping his mouth with one arm, he turned and walked back to his squad, who received him with a standing ovation.

As the delighted marines reveled in their accomplishment, a scuffing sound came from behind them. They snapped their heads and attention back toward the area where the extraterrestrial had fallen, but it was gone.

¹ “*They should have killed you all long ago.*”

“He’s on top of that thing,” Olsen hollered while pointing at the enemy soldier, whose right arm was stretched down through the incision in the backside of the assault unit.

The men scrambled to collect their pulse rifles as the alien retracted its arm. It had retrieved its weapon, which was wrapping its tentacles around the forearm of the defiant soldier. Raising its symbiotic instrument of destruction into a firing position, the alien prepared to exact its revenge. But all of a sudden, a steady stream of plasma bursts slammed into the enemy soldier’s chest, rupturing its armor plating after several hits. The vanquished foe collapsed back against the wreckage.

Filled with surprise, everyone glanced over at Lewis, who was still aiming his smoking pulse rifle at the alien’s lifeless body. His teeth were gritted and his gun was shaking a little. Though terrified, the inexperienced recruit had fired out of instinct, venting all of the anger that had been boiling since the hostile invaders had arrived.

“Nicely done, Private,” said Hill, carefully lowering Lewis’s weapon. “We owe you our lives, soldier. Now come on, let’s go find you a drink. You’ve definitely earned it.”

Lewis nodded and walked quietly alongside his commanding officer. Though he still hated being in the marines, he was nonetheless grateful that he had been assigned to Hill’s squad. The young private was finally beginning to feel comfortable within the group.

“Can we take off its helmet and see what it looks like?” Olsen inquired, staring with morbid curiosity at the alien corpse.

“Don’t you remember the bulletin that came through a little while ago from the general?” Hill replied. “He said their stuff’s booby trapped. You pull off its helmet, and boom, there goes your arms. It ain’t worth it. We’ll find out more about them soon enough. In the meantime, just be satisfied with the kill. Now, let’s go find those drinks.” His one-track mind was focused on the bounty of synthetic alcohol that was waiting to be liberated from the remains of the city, and perhaps, he hoped, they might even find a few bottles of smuggled whiskey.

Having grown closer to one another through the strains of war, the tired band of marines continued chatting as they migrated into a casino, the rear portion of which had been leveled. Even though they were well aware of the battles that were still raging around the planet, they were going to take a moment to celebrate their hard-fought victory. Life was short, after all, and getting much shorter by the minute.

Chapter 10-5

Veiled Agenda

“Comb the area for survivors,” O’Connor ordered, almost yelled, to Winters after stumbling across the site of the four ambushed police officers. Few things in life infuriated him more than civilian casualties, especially while viewing the gruesome scene up close and in person. But even beyond the feelings of outrage, there was at least a small degree of guilt. Redington felt it, too, perhaps more. After all, he had met with the sheriff a short time ago and personally encouraged him to lead the townsfolk into the forest. It seemed the prudent thing to do at the time, but in hindsight, they viewed it as a tragic mistake.

“General,” called Winters, “several scouting patrols have reported sightings of enemy concentration camps. It appears as if the aliens are rounding up survivors, but the details are still a little sketchy. Intel’s promising an update once they’ve sorted out the conflicting data.” After relaying the report, he hurriedly commenced his patrol of the area.

“That must be what happened here,” said O’Connor to Redington. “The aliens must have eliminated the sheriff and his deputies before taking the civilians prisoner.”

“But why?” Redington replied with an edge of frustration. “Why the sudden change in tactics? They completely eradicated the Martian colony without any second thoughts, not to mention every space-faring vessel from here to the outer fringes. But when they assault the Earth, they stop short of wiping out the planet’s population and start rounding up survivors instead. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I wish I knew what the enemy was up to, Major, but regardless of what their agenda is for our missing civilians, we’ve got to put a stop to their activities. Try scanning the area for energy signatures. They might still be nearby.”

Redington detached a palm-sized sensor device from his left hip and punched in a command sequence. His eyes stayed fixed on the sensor readings while he scanned the area beyond the fallen officers. "I'm detecting strong energy readings coming from up ahead. I can't pinpoint the exact location, but something's definitely out there, General."

He lowered the device and peered out into the shadows, feeling more uneasy than before. Fighting alien ground forces was tricky enough without having to worry about freeing hostages.

"Round up the sergeant and let's move out," said O'Connor with renewed strength. His determination to rescue the captured civilians helped fend off some of the fatigue that had started to set in. He hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, and it'd most likely be a while longer before he'd permit himself to rest.

Redington sent out the return request over the comm link, prompting Winters to quickly fall in. "Step lively, Sergeant, we've got prisoners to rescue."

Onward they marched, following the path the local townsfolk had been forced to walk. The marines eventually approached the edge of the forest and slowed their movements upon hearing the telltale thumping sounds of a patrolling assault unit.

"Stay alert and silent," O'Connor ordered in a whisper. "We're going to sneak in and recon the area. I want to avoid contact with the enemy at all costs. If they spot us, it could jeopardize the safety of the civilians."

After clearing the last cluster of trees, they stopped near the base of a prominent hill, the top of which was illuminated by flashes of blue light. The upper portion of an alien tower was clearly in view.

"*What is that?*" Winters inquired as he stared at the unusual organic edifice and shuddered.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Sergeant," replied Redington, crouching down and continuing up the sloped terrain.

At the three-quarters mark, all three marines dropped onto their stomachs and slithered the rest of the way up the hill, until their eyes popped up above the waving blades of grass. Once on top, they were able to observe the secured enemy camp, which was uncomfortably close to their position. Pulsating flashes of light from the tower illuminated the region every few seconds, enabling the would-be rescuers to assess the situation.

“Looks like they’ve established a laser perimeter to prevent escape,” Redington said, speaking in a voice just louder than the wind. “And there’s a good-sized group of people down there. I couldn’t give you an exact number, General, but I’d estimate we’ve found all of our missing civilians. Their condition, however, is another story all together.”

O’Connor switched his visor to a thermal-imaging mode and scanned the trail of humans that covered the ground around the tower. “Their bodies are emitting heat, so they’re still alive.”

“Looks like they’re adding two more to the pile,” said Redington, shifting his eyes toward the tower.

A pair of alien soldiers had emerged, dragging two flaccid humans behind them. The aliens discarded their victims on the ground like useless garbage before returning to the tower.

“What’s wrong with them?” said Winters. “They all look brain dead, like zombies or something.”

“Zombies?” Redington scoffed. “Let’s keep the assessments within the bounds of reality, Sergeant.”

“All I’m saying is it looks like they’ve tampered with them somehow—fried their brains or something.”

“I think you may be right, Sergeant,” interjected O’Connor, “though we’ll have to rescue them before we can properly diagnose the full extent of their trauma. We’ll have to draw out that patrolling assault unit and most of those guards before . . .” He paused for a moment as a mild headache set in. “Before we can stage an assault.”

“Are you all right, General?” inquired Redington.

“It’s only a headache. I’ll be fine.” He tried to remain focused on the task at hand, but the pounding sensation in his head was growing exponentially stronger.

“I’ve got one, too,” said Winters.

“I’m starting to feel a little ill myself,” Redington added. “I seriously doubt these headaches are a coincidence, General. They may have something to do with our proximity to that tower.”

“I agree,” said O’Connor with a groan. “That tower may be emitting some sort of biological dampening field, similar to the alien device that disabled the Lionheart and Earth Dock. It must be suppressing our . . . ability . . . to function.” Unable to bear the pain any longer, he dropped his head and cringed.

“We’ve got to get out of here, sirs,” Winters pleaded in a moan while pressing his hands against the sides of his helmet, helpless to stave off the surging headache.

“Fall back,” Redington ordered, having noticed that O’Connor had become incapacitated. He grabbed the general by his feet and dragged him down the sloped terrain.

Winters followed closely behind, vocalizing his anguish along the way. Reaching the bottom of the hill, he stumbled to his knees, removed his helmet, and vomited as the effects from the alien tower started to wane.

“Let’s head back and regroup,” O’Connor ordered in a voice that strengthened gradually. With the major’s assistance, O’Connor staggered to his feet and back into the forest. “Alphas Four through Fifteen should be in position along the perimeter of the town by now. We can use their scouts to keep an eye on the enemy camp until we can devise a way to rescue those civilians.”

“Perhaps other squads have had more success,” Redington interjected.

“I hope so, Major.”

“I just hope things don’t get any worse,” Winters mumbled under his breath, glancing back one last time at the tower. The thought of being taken prisoner himself made him shudder and appreciate that he

was, at least for the moment, still in the fight—unlike Jonathon and his crew, whom everyone assumed had already been taken captive.

The following pages were removed from the final chapter of the original manuscript and were intended to provide a little closure regarding the fate of Lieutenant Hill and his squad. . .

Chapter 19

The Great Awakening

. . .Following the lead of his fellow soldiers, Mur'fadeen moved beyond the rim of his cocoon and soared up through one of the openings and out into space, where he started the descent toward his unsuspecting enemies. . .

A magnificent explosion rumbled through the southern outskirts of New Las Vegas, raining dust and small chunks of debris down on Lieutenant Hill and his men. Though they had been fortunate enough to have been victorious in their first encounter with the enemy, their luck had since changed drastically. Hunkered down in the storage basement of the collapsed ruins of a convenience store, the battle-weary squad sat motionless and dejected. Their armor was as scraped and worn as their faces were dirty and tired. They were low in ammo, morale, and numbers, having lost Olsen less than an hour ago.

Lewis squirmed in the corner of the debris-cluttered room, trying to shut out the sounds of each increasingly loud explosion. Reaching up with one hand, he wiped the lingering tears from his cheeks, adding another smudge of dirt in the process. A snuffle and a stuttered inhale could be heard from time to time as he dwelt on the memories of his former comrade, pausing only to pray for a miracle to deliver them from their enemies.

“Keep it together, Private,” ordered Hill in a firm, yet sympathetic tone. “There’s nothing you could’ve done for him. The turret section of that Abrams was blown clean off. Now try to put his death out of your mind. I need you here in the present, soldier. Got it?”

“Yessir,” Lewis replied, dejected. He wiped his sniffling nose against the back of his right hand and took a deep breath before retrieving his pulse rifle, as if to give the impression he was ready for more combat. But, in all honesty, he simply wanted to go home.

A deafening explosion brought part of the ceiling down on the group, burying Lewis. Tank immediately jumped up and started digging through the pile, hurling huge chunks of concrete off to the side as if they were nothing more than crumpled Styrofoam. Hill tried to move in and assist, but Tank was so vigorous in his rescue effort that he almost maimed his commanding officer with a stray piece of debris. Within a matter of seconds, Tank had uncovered Lewis and pulled him to safety.

“You’re gonna be all right,” said Tank, brushing the thick layer of cement particles from Lewis’s face and helmet. “Doesn’t look like anything’s broken.”

With a sputtering cough, Lewis opened his eyes and stared up at Tank. “Thanks,” he groaned.

“No problem.”

Though shaken, Lewis walked away under his own power and leaned back against the wall beside Hill, coughing all the while.

“That friggin’ thing’s gonna bury us alive if we don’t do something!” Tank growled. “I ain’t goin’ down like this.” He grabbed hold of his weapon and raised it before glaring at his commanding officer, waiting for his response.

“Well, this is it, Private,” Hill sighed. “This is where we part company. I want you to hightail it out of here as fast as you can. Tank and I will draw the alien’s fire and cover your six.”

“No way,” said Lewis, speaking with a level of bravery that even he didn’t realize he had. “This squad stays together. I’m not fixin’ to go anywhere . . . sir.” He certainly wanted to get out of there, but he wasn’t about to turn his back on his squad. He didn’t want any more deaths on his conscience.

“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Tank interjected with a serious yet satisfied expression. “Let’s get out there and give that freaking bug the fight of its life.”

“All right, men, load what ammo you’ve got left and let’s rush out there with guns a-blazing. If we’re going down, we might as well do it in style. Let’s roll.”

Hill stood up with his pulse rifle in hand and a heart full of pride. Though he knew he could very well be marching to his death, he wasn't afraid. He always knew that his time would come, and he was going to make certain that it was memorable. Marching up the stairwell, he leapt over the concrete fragments that blocked his path and paused once he reached the top.

"It's been a pleasure fighting alongside you both," he said, glancing back. "And if we don't make it, I'll look you up in the life to come, and we'll sit down for a drink or two. Now get out there and do me proud, marines. Semper Fi!"

With an adrenaline-boosted battle cry, the men of Delta Nine hustled out through the door and into the roofless remains of their breached safe haven. They opened fire immediately, illuminating their dusky surroundings with alternating bursts of green and blue light as their weapons fire struck the torso-shielding of a towering Voldrokian assault unit.

Raising both of its lethal arms, it prepared to deliver a final response that would end the conflict. But before it could unleash its fatal assault, a bone-crunching thud resonated through the surrounding area. Mur'fadeen had dropped from the sky and plunged his enforcer squarely into the rear shoulders of the enemy, knocking it face-forward to the ground with a satisfying thump.

"Death from above," the invigorated Kashanti soldier shouted aloud to himself, grinning in satisfaction of his perfect landing.

"What the hell?" Tank muttered.

Hill raised his right hand to the square, signaling the squad to hold fire.

"Either that's one clumsy pilot," he began, "or our luck's just improved. Either way, I'm not complaining. Let's fall back."

"Hold on," Tank insisted. "It's doing somethin'."

Two tentacles lashed out from the legs of Mur'fadeen's enforcer and attached to the back of the downed assault unit. Upon contacting its dark and shifting hull, the Kashanti soldier unleashed a supercharged EMP burst, bringing down the enemy's shields.

"Here's a little present for ya," Mur'fadeen gloated to the Voldrokian soldier, taking satisfaction in the fact that he'd be unable to respond. Pointing the right arm of his enforcer at the head of the enemy assault unit, Mur'fadeen fired his main weapon. A bright-white burst of energy immediately contacted its target, blowing the head of the beast clean off.

The Kashanti enforcer leapt back from the remains just before it exploded. The force of the blast knocked Delta Nine to the ground and plastered them with chunks of gooey debris, but they were uninjured. Mur'fadeen guided his assault unit around the burning wreckage, coming to a stop once he faced the downed squad. Projecting his voice through his enforcer, he spoke to the marines in English. "Greetings, humans. The cavalry has arrived!"

Hill rose to his feet and brushed himself off. "I don't know who or what you are, but right now you're my new best friend."

Appendix

Addendum

abren	<i>(ə-brĕn)</i> resist
ekram	<i>(ə-krām)</i> scum
hulty	<i>(hŭl-tĕ)</i> should
ishla	<i>(ĭsh-lă)</i> they
ko	<i>(kō)</i> on
kore	<i>(kōr)</i> clear
lorat	<i>(lō-răt)</i> long
pahray	<i>(pô-rā)</i> system
tali	<i>(tô-lĕ)</i> any
tali'may	<i>(tô-lĕ-mā)</i> anyone
ton	<i>(tōn)</i> who
torrok	<i>(tōr-rôk)</i> pod
udrok	<i>(ü-drŏm)</i> move
unar	<i>(ü-nār)</i> all
xeka	<i>(zhā-kə)</i> ago